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Beth Simon

CLEAN

At six A.M., I was down on Dashashvamed Ghat, waiting for Suresh, my sometime research assistant. Suresh was so hard up, he'd begged for a morning's work. "My rent," he'd said. I nodded. Okay. "And Krishnanath's sister's daughter's marriage," he added, but when I still didn't reach into my *jolla* and hand him money outright, he grabbed the whole of Indian culture and slapped it down in front of me like a river fish. "Little Sister," he said, "why remind you what you know? My duty is to perform wedding music. My duty is to redeem my instrument from Thakur landlord. My duty is to pay Master Ji the tailor for silk *kurta*. Ask yourself, which of us has money? Now ask, which of us needs it? Little Sister, perform your duty."

I didn't mind waiting. From five A.M. on, Dashashvamed Ghat is the most popular bathing dock in Banaras, and I come down at least once a week just to watch. The concrete apron above the River Ganges and the concrete steps descending into it are jammed with Hindu priests leading devotees through the elaborate rice offerings and Sanskrit prayers that purify karma and placate the dead. Pilgrims and hawkers haggle over brass *lotas*, bone bowls, secret mantras on onion skin. Destitute widows plead for one paper rupee, lepers, for one tin coin. I easily identify those like me, anthropologists and linguists who wear dark sunglasses and flit through the crowds with cassette recorders and laptops, pretending to be unobtrusive. On the periphery, tourists jostle for sight lines and at first, I thought that the Japanese man, maybe twenty years old, maybe thirty, hi-tech walking shoes, tangerine cashmere cardigan, bulging camera bag slung over one shoulder, was a tourist like the others, but then Suresh showed up with the latest tea shop gossip about Koji Yoshida.

Yoshida didn't qualify as a tourist because in Banaras, tourists travel in groups. They cruise town in full-sized taxis, peering through fogged back windows, and retreat to air-conditioned hotels for planned meals and naps. Unlike them, Koji Yoshida arrived alone and strolled the river front by himself at dawn. Compared to the French and Swiss junkies with their translucent skin, their confusion and indifference, their mildewed satchels of paraphernalia and maps, Yoshida was startlingly healthy and clean and orderly. In contrast to the handsome, arrogant Italians who commissioned *sitars* and *sindhurs*

while anticipating complicated and unlikely inheritances, Koji Yoshida's wallet was full of cash. What he bought, he paid for.

At the time, the best-known Japanese resident was a woman named Miho Sato, an ascetic who had been living in Banaras for years. Her hair was matted, her face, crosshatched by lines of darkness. Her only clothing was a length of gray cotton tied with a string. Each morning, Sato paid a boy ten *pice* to bring her a glass of the hashish-churned milk called *bhang*. Each afternoon, she smoked one hand-rolled *beedi*. No one had ever seen her eat.

Anneke Bakker, a Dutch woman who alternated weeks of abstinence with weekend binges, believed that Sato had freed herself from the cycle of rebirth. "She remains here in order to help us," Anneke said. "For instance, yesterday, she grabbed my hand and said, 'Your body is a torture chamber.' These words, they were a drum beat, tap tap tap, inside my brain. They drowned out everything." Anneke rolled another in her chain of cigarettes, then looked at her hand, at the fingers curled around the thin cylinder. "Sato's right. I am a big sack of wants. Cigarettes, schnapps. Sex. So. I have decided to go into retreat. Meditate. Get rid of these wants." She exhaled smoke through her nose, and laughed. "What I want now is someone to pay for me."

At that time, I drank my tea in a tea shop between the *sari* factory and the Tamil coffee sellers behind Kedara Ghat. At daybreak, neighborhood men in bathrobes and slippers shuffled in to sip at clay cups while at home, their wives and daughters-in-law lit coal *chulhas*, ground *chapatti* flour, fried vegetables in spice. Mid-morning, Americans practiced Hindi by chatting up Indian customers about the Janata Party's political gambles. In the late afternoon, the expatriates appeared, former teachers, would-be artists, almost exporters, Westerners with a taste for lethargy and the verbal talents to reword insolvency as nonattachment. They ricocheted from nude Goan beaches to Shaivite ashrams to Himalayan caves where they took instruction from famous saints. They called themselves *seekers*, talked of merging the ego with the One, and competed successfully with local beggars for alms.

Yoshida's arrival gave us all new fields of speculation. We wondered about his age, luggage costs, his aura of ease and independence, his line of credit. Suresh said that Yoshida had offered to hire as a guide. "He say he want to place his feet on the true diamond ground of Banaras. I say, Sure, man. Pay me 300 rupees a day, snacks, tea, and also, no walking. Rickshaw only. And, can you believe it? He say yes!"

I was stunned, not at Suresh's greed, but at his acting on it. The Suresh I knew could recite every grant agency acronym in North America and Europe. "Your grant," he would say, "AIIS. NSF. That's how many dollars U.S.?" He quit me during a sour squabble over definitions of *borrow*, but now, how dynamic he had been, how faultless, his stepping forward, crossing from possible to actual, translating desire into the form of Koji Yoshida.

Suresh wasn't the only one who breathed personal yearning into Koji Yoshida's name. After hearing that Yoshida had paid Suresh 500 rupees for a tour of three temples and tea with an antique dealer, my housekeeper, Munni, stomped into my room while I was still in bed. "Sleep finished," she said. "Get up and go Singapore, go Hong Kong. Bring me good bags." I said I couldn't afford Louis Vuitton and she didn't need matched luggage. "Huh!" Munni said. She locked the room with the refrigerator, and for the next week, I drank my breakfast tea black.

I began seeing Yoshida every morning on the ghats taking photographs. He'd position a tourist tout, mouth stained red with betel, next to a stall of *kum kum* powders, crimson, sienna, ochre. He'd set a one-legged leper against a pile of river weeds, the fingerless hand patting a one-eyed dog. His equipment was marvelous: a good Leica, an antique Nikkormat, a professional Hasselbad. He had a 50mm lens, an 80-200, a 150mm, a 300mm. He had gels and meters, and one device that sounded like a semiautomatic allowed him to shoot at lightning speed, and he was always shooting, a ragged man with a goiter, a scarred widow, a laundryman beating shirts to shreds against a concrete wall. He followed naked ascetics, misshaped children, grieving mothers, the ecstatic and crazy, whoever walked down the ghat steps into the sacred River Ganges, whoever stood breast deep in the swirling brown water. I saw him gun through three rolls, snapping adolescent brides as they entered the river, unwrapped their *saris* and wrapped clean ones about their bodies without ever revealing themselves. I don't think it occurred to him that he was not invisible, that, as he squinted into the viewfinder, others looked at him and saw their own images. I never decided how much of his innocence was willed.

The first time I saw Owen Powell, he was standing in the tea shop doorway, backlit by sun, a dark, wavery S-shape surrounded by a nimbus of gold, presenting himself, his body, his availability. After a minute, he came directly to me as if he recognized me, as if we had an appointment. He sat down and

signaled for two cups of tea. "I'm Owen," he said. "I'm a stringer for a couple of wire services. Got a room nearby." He leaned over to rub the calf of his leg and looked up at me. "What's your story?"

He had two commercial cigarettes loose in his shirt pocket. His shirt cuffs were ragged, his boots, cracked. Later I noticed how his adventures as a Welsh nationalist lacked specific dates. When he got jacked on tea or beer, he talked knowledgeably about Bangkok tourist murders or WHO encephalitis initiatives, but even in that, Owen stood out only by being better versed than the other Westerners who slept in the airless rooms between Bengali Tola and Asi.

To prove her sincerity, Anneke took Yoshida to see Miho Sato, and after that, he stopped photographing everything but her. He shot her in the long clear light of early morning, under the harsh flat sky of noon, in swirling dust at dusk. He rented flares and shot her at midnight. He used the Hasselbad for portraits, the medium wide-angle for panoramics. He tried a zoom from the half-submerged doorway of Sitala Ma. Sometimes he arranged backdrops, and sometimes he shot without focusing, as if she were a fashion model striding a runway instead of a grizzled ascetic motionless on an algae green dock.

At the tea shop, we needled him, called him obsessed, until he told us that one morning, as he set up his first photo, he felt a sharp pain, as if he were ripping open, splitting in two. He put his camera down and knelt beside her. A voice, his voice, told her he was frightened. He was bored. Nothing seemed real yet he feared death. He asked her, over and over, What should he do? He said that she called him *Koochan*, an endearing, diminutive form of his name, as if he were a child. "All that time," he said. "She was right there, waiting for me." He said she forgave him the photographs, and he'd gone back to his room and destroyed them.

That same day, Yoshida paid three months advance rent at the Kumiko Guest House, a pension that overlooked the river just north of Kedara Ghat. Named for the Japanese wife of the Bengali owner, it was favored by Japanese tourists on a budget. At the tea shop, no one understood it. Now that he was *here*, now that he knew what was what, why the Kumiko? Why not the spacious Vishnu Guest House, or the Ganga Guest House where, for sixty rupees, one could have a private bath. Why not the quiet elegance of Shiva House, with its dining on the roof.

Owen took it personally. "What's Yoshida's problem? The boyo's rich. He could have air-conditioning, teenage girls every night. Christ! He could give us all air-conditioning." Owen had run into Yoshida outside the Sarasvati Electric Shoppe. "He'd bought a hot plate. Expensive piece of goods. Said he was going to cook for himself, eliminate 'black' foods. I said, 'If I had a hot plate, I'd eliminate black foods. I'd be a better man.' But the boyo wouldn't take the hint." Owen pretended to spit. "What a miser. Where I'm from, that kind of hoarding won't go."

Anneke invited Yoshida to her room to soften him up. "I made a good Dutch meal, but he wouldn't eat it. He said meat and onions cause emotion. I said, Ja, okay, no emotion. Sex instead. He says no. Sex disturbed his concentration." Anneke lit a cigarette. "With all his money, a good time won't disturb his concentration."

The following week, Dilip and V. J., two young Indian men who hung out at the tea shop, swaggered in wearing Yoshida's clothing. V. J. had the walking shoes, Nike socks and sweatband, Dilip, the Bahama Mama T-shirt and the Hiroshima Carp baseball jacket. "I don't know," Dilip said. "These things too good, nah? Koji Bhai *Brother Koji* say he finished with these. He get Master Ji the tailor make him cheap stuff like rickshawallah wear, like boatman."

"Koji Bhai gonna look like poor man," V. J. whispered sadly.

"This tops it!" Owen punched the table. "Yoshida knows I follow Japanese baseball. That jacket's mine." Suddenly Owen moved faster than I'd have thought possible, grabbing Dilip, hugging him like a bear, and for a moment, absolutely still, chest to chest, they stared into each other's eyes, competitive, aroused, dancers posed for the opening bar. Then Owen raised his hand and delicately stroked the jacket zipper, and Dilip said carefully, "Please get off, Saheb."

Owen dropped his hand. "Watch your back," he said and left.

We bought Dilip tea and teased him about his lucky escape. He laughed. "My karma too good. Yesterday, Koji Bhai want photos at cremation ghat. He hand me many rupees. Tell me, give to Doms, people with cremation fire. I give some rupees to Doms. Tell them what do to. Fire must be just so, bones, just so, ash, just so. Koji Bhai, he give something to everyone."

The alleys of the Banarsi poor are ripe with small shrines. Spirit guardians live in these shrines, and neighbors stop frequently during the day to visit with them. They tell the spirit about their debts and illnesses, they offer their

desperation, and unlike the self-absorbed gods of the Hindu pantheon, unlike the national politicians who give nothing but speeches, unlike the district administrators, with open pockets and closed hands, spirit guardians pay attention. They show up. They know the value of the small, sure act. They keep a virtuous woman safe in a dark alley. They help a laborer carry his load of bricks.

Just when we'd gotten used to his cheap baggy shorts, the thin yellow singlet, the rayon shawl printed with smeary mantras, when we'd stopped trying to avoid staring at the sheer fact of his body newly revealed, Yoshida surprised us by lugging into the tea shop a statue of Hanuman, the monkey god, the supreme Hindu guardian, the hero of wrestlers and laborers, the one whose sole desire is to protect. Two-and-a-half feet tall, a raised ax in one hand, a mace in the other, Yoshida's Hanuman looked impressively unreasonable. From the hoofed feet to the oddly erotic tail to the child-like crown, the entire figure was wrapped in silver foil. Yoshida said he'd found an old medallion with traces of bas relief near the cremation ghat. That very night, a guardian spirit came to him. The guardian said he had lived long ago, that he had been like Yoshida, a strong man getting stronger, someone whose body and mind were increasingly pure. The spirit told Yoshida to emulate Hanuman, to develop his courage, ignore his fears, and protect others. "I did not call this spirit," Yoshida said. "He came to me by his own will. And he knew my name. So you see how powerful he is."

"You had this made?" Owen ran his hand over the statue. "Real silver, isn't it? That must have cost a few yen."

Yoshida brushed his wide hand across the area Owen had touched. "All guardians are Hanuman, so I take Hanuman as my guardian," Yoshida said. "To please him, I train to protect the weak. And I offer him this form of gratitude." Yoshida's cameras and lenses hung from his shoulders like armaments on long canvas straps. In the dark tea shop, the statue gleaming against him, Yoshida embodied health, effortless authority, senseless good luck. He seemed more alive than anyone else. He seemed ready for joy. I think he knew he had arrived at that unexpected right turn, where he could walk away from himself, choose the unknown, the undetermined, the unimagined but imaginable, and when he invited people to watch him practice, Owen and I went.

We walked to a square of ground under a *bodhi* tree near the Hanuman Temple. Yoshida said *namaste* to several men there, addressing them as *cousin-*

brothers. Some men were wrestling. Some carved the air with ritual swords. Yoshida selected a pair of hefty sticks and began swinging them in figure eights. He worked through exercises that looked like a combination of yoga and Air Force training. He took a turn wrestling, and after an hour he lay down while another man massaged him with oil until his skin glowed.

That night, Owen turned up at my house, drunk and weaving, but still on his feet, cursing the British consulate, the Indian government, bureaucrats who insisted on passports and visas and national boundaries. I laughed at him, said, Sweetheart, you complain about everything, you need a new script, and that's when he leapt at me with that surprising speed. He shoved me against the courtyard wall, his hand spread at the base of my throat. "Everyone says you're so smart," he breathed. "So, tell me, why the fuck I'm here?"

After a second, he stepped away, and because a fuss would frighten Munni, asleep in the next room, and outrage the neighbors, whose good will I needed, I went into the kitchen and made coffee while Owen squatted against the wall, muttering about enemies. With his second cup, he began a complicated story about currency deals gone wrong, about the director of the Foreigner's Office and a failed scheme to smuggle Japanese camcorders past customs. The director now held Owen's passport. "For collateral," Owen said. "I owe."

Owen was probably telling the truth, but he was wrong to see his thrall to an extortionist as exceptional. Most of us staying on in Banaras masqueraded our evasions as long term plans. We were tranced by the painless round of tea and silk and tailor-made clothing, by coal flecks and wheat swimming through air. Strangers cooked our food and did our laundry. Vultures bloomed in dead trees; bright green parrots castellated a bright blue sky. Time was water, and most of us did nothing all day but lie back and talk, but the night Owen showed up, trying in the only way he knew how to make me help him, I'd been thinking about Koji Yoshida. He was our vanishing point. Draw near him, and desires came into focus, like stones lifted from clear water, striations sharp, beautiful, breathtaking, almost at hand. When Owen slammed me against the wall, pressing me against brick that didn't give, I remembered real power. I thought that if I could lay my hand against Yoshida's chest, press my palm into the curve of his ribs, feel his pulse against my fingers, hold, for one moment, his heart, there would be stillness, then iridescence, then change. I would wake up completely and get out.

At this time, everyone, even local politicians, openly discussed the pollution of the River Ganges. Factories released industrial refuse into it. The municipal water works dumped raw sewage five yards from thousands of bathers immersed in it. Excrement, rags, rotting dead animals, rushed downstream past people rinsing their mouths, washing their bodies, filling brass bottles with water for home.

At the tea shop, we argued endlessly, stupidly, religion versus science, faith versus bacteria, until finally Yoshida said, "What I think is, we go into the river equally dirty, but those who believe come out clean." He stood up, and we followed him to the Kedara Ghat. Without breaking stride, Yoshida walked down the steps into the water. I could see he was biting his lip, but he went all the way, submerged, surfaced, filled his mouth, swirled it around, and spat. He splashed water over his arms, rubbed his chest, squatted, and submerged a second time. He stood up, shook his head like a spaniel. After that, he bathed regularly in the Ganges.

One night, Owen announced that he'd sniffed out Yoshida's money source. "India's dropping her isolation policy. New policy's 'mutual cooperation,' and Japan is ready. Yamaha's already producing Indian motorcycles. Suzuki's got an agreement to build an auto factory. Izusu'd kill for some action. Labor costs will be cheap. In the States, even women get what, fifteen an hour? In India, pay the workers squat and they're thrilled." Owen said American Airlines moved their billing office to Barbados and saved four million dollars.

"What's this have to do with Koji Yoshida?"

"Our Koji Bhai is the first wave of Japanese venture capital. I figure him for a younger son, industrial family, sent to reconnoiter, but didn't Mother India fool him. Yoshida's turned out just like the rest of us. The walking dead."

I came down with intestinal flu and didn't see anyone for several days until I ran into Owen outside the tea shop. The first words out of his mouth were, "Stopped by the Kumiko. Yoshida's gone. Probably got bored with his statue and cameras. Our Koji's beat it."

"Just like that? He didn't say good-bye to anyone?"

"Forget him." He sneered at me. "Of course Dilip and V. J., they say Yoshida's around, that he wouldn't leave without telling them, as if they

matter, and anyway, they've been in Faizabad for a wedding, so what do they know? He's skipped." Owen began cursing Yoshida, implicating him in fraud, hinting at investments scuttled at the last minute. Owen's voice, the steady cadence, the vocabulary of intrigue, the enervating, hypnotic music of it, washed us from the street through the tea shop doorway.

Inside the tea shop, Dilip was insisting to everyone that Yoshida was still in Banaras. "Just last week, he pay rent for three more months. I asked. And his room, nah? It still all full of his things. His bed unmade, his clothes on bench. And toothbrush!" Dilip shook his head. "He wouldn't leave toothbrush!"

Owen pushed into the room. "What were you snooping around for?"

"We have appointment. Koji Bhai want us do work. He say come today. Why he say 'come' if he going to leave? Tell me that, Saheb?"

We all stared at Owen. Everyone recognized Dilip's colonial, mocking "saheb" as an insult.

Owen's face was suffused with blood. "I'm telling you this: you didn't see Koji Bhai. You didn't see anything." Owen sat down and tipped his chair back on two legs. "I say our boyo here's lying." He pulled his lips back, showing all his teeth, and Dilip ran out.

An American couple, senior researchers who had flown into Banaras loaded with fellowships and dictionaries and introductions and travelers checks, were at the next table. The woman said, "I bet your Mr. Yoshida has gone to Bodh Gaya. His Holiness the Dalai Lama starts two weeks of teachings this Friday. Rare teachings, on selflessness, on emptiness. Everyone's going. This young man you're discussing, what do you bet he's gone to Bodh Gaya. We go on Friday. Join us. Think of it. In just two weeks. Bingo, freedom."

Owen lit a cigarette and blew a smoke ring. "Koji Yoshida is not in Banaras. Dilip doesn't know what he's talking about. And he's not in Bodh Gaya. So," Owen dropped his cigarette on the floor and turned to face the Americans, "Lady, you can put a cork in it. As far as I'm concerned, he never existed." He crushed out the cigarette tip. "Got that?"

The American woman said, "My friend, one day you realize that companions, enemies, your own self, these are nothing but weight. You realize you're drowning and there isn't much time. You decide to act, break free, go. I suggest that's what your Mr. Yoshida has done."

One of the Swiss junkies closed his eyes. Yes, he remembered seeing Yoshida near the train station. "I think he bought a ticket for the mountains," he said and sighed beatifically. "See him?" The other junkies closed their eyes and

agreed. Yoshida forgot to get off the train, one said, and traveled on and on and on. Another said, When he woke up, he was in Switzerland. He saw mountains. He thought, Here I am. The junkies loved this version. Yoshida in the Alps, in a cave, looking for truth. One snickered. "If he's lucky, he'll lose his mind." They all started snickering. Then, quite pleased with themselves, they floated outside.

Owen said, "Good idea. Let's make up new stories for brother Koji Yoshida. Let's give him a future. Try this one. Yoshida's in Manali, drinking Tibetan beer, sleeping all day, and not alone. He's got the Tibetan kiddies catching swallowtail butterflies for him. Collectors pay 300 dollars U.S. for a swallowtail." Owen rubbed his index finger and thumb together. "A little *baksheesh* to the local officials, and you're in business. You like that version? Yoshida in Manali."

When the American researchers returned from Bodh Gaya, they admitted they hadn't seen him. "But he was there," the man said. "Must have been."

"Fifty thousand people," the woman said. "Everyone was there."

The tea shop regulars said the real issue was Yoshida's stuff.

The American woman dismissed them. "Stuff is the rope that ties us to suffering. Let us finish with acquisition, with ownership, with craving to *have*. I think Mr. Yoshida would want us to give his possessions to the Hanuman Temple, or to the boatmen on the docks, or to the Tibetan Children's Re-settlement Project."

This line of reasoning infuriated Anneke. "You don't want *Mr. Yoshida's* possessions? Ja, okay. Give them to me."

After that, only the junkies ever claimed to see Yoshida again. I spotted his Nikkormat for sale at a stall near Dashashvamed but who should I tell, and did it even mean anything? Owen had stopped coming around, and we heard that he'd moved into a clean, expensive set of rooms on the far north side of town. In the tea shop, Suresh asked how hard you'd have to hit someone to knock them out, but no one bothered to answer him, and outside, no distraught father or inquisitive brother or belligerent investigator wrote or called or rapped on a door. No one asked questions. No one said "disappearance" or "body" out loud.

Once I was walking up Nai Sarak with Owen when Dilip came over to us. He was wearing the Hiroshima Carp baseball jacket. "Koji Bhai Japan returned," he said. "I receive letter. Tokyo postmark."

Owen physically staggered, and I thought, Yes, now, he'll have to say something, admit to something, whatever that is, but then he recovered and demanded to see the envelope.

Dilip brushed him off. "Not addressed to you, Saheb," he said.