So Fantastically Innocent

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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss2/16
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Abstract
In New Delhi, people eat and breathe anything. The pollution at night is surreal: neon lights blurred in a filthy mist. It is an alien world of docile cows and loud traffic in an atmosphere of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon monoxide. Visibility is often down to three hundred metres. There is an overwhelming sense of decay. Pockets of stench enter the nostrils in the rickshaw wind. The stars are blocked out by the gaseous mess. There is the continual presence of eccentric noise. Vehicles bleat like ducks and camels. Magnificent historical monuments rise out of smoky slums. A fingerless, grimy beggar waits at the traffic-lights for donations to a cause that I will never know. A legless man, semi-clothed, drags himself along on a trolley. Camel-drawn carts trot through the streets. The idle cow wanders free. Cows are littered everywhere like dozing cats. I know I'm going to be amused by actions foreign to myself, but by whom? Almost crushed at forty miles an hour between a car and an elephant. Staggering nonchalance of those using the roads. Occasional sights of people defecating and urinating in public. Stagnant pools of murky water. Liquid death beneath smoggy filth.

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In New Delhi, people eat and breathe anything. The pollution at night is surreal: neon lights blurred in a filthy mist. It is an alien world of docile cows and loud traffic in an atmosphere of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon monoxide. Visibility is often down to three hundred metres. There is an overwhelming sense of decay. Pockets of stench enter the nostrils in the rickshaw wind. The stars are blocked out by the gaseous mess. There is the continual presence of eccentric noise. Vehicles bleat like ducks and camels. Magnificent historical monuments rise out of smoky slums. A fingerless, grimy beggar waits at the traffic-lights for donations to a cause that I will never know. A legless man, semi-clothed, drags himself along on a trolley. Camel-drawn carts trot through the streets. The idle cow wanders free. Cows are littered everywhere like dozing cats. I know I’m going to be amused by actions foreign to myself, but by whom? Almost crushed at forty miles an hour between a car and an elephant. Staggering nonchalance of those using the roads. Occasional sights of people defecating and urinating in public. Stagnant pools of murky water. Liquid death beneath smoggy filth. The strange sensation of Westerners being the ones who look abnormal.

Night-time at Kamal’s place: can hear neighbourhood watchers bashing iron gates with metal rods. Three holy men, arm-in-arm, bellow out a mysterious chant. The lemon, iridescent glow of light illuminates the interior of a tent housing two families who live on the street across the road. Tim snores nearby on the other side of the room. Have already had to deal with false preconceptions, like taxi drivers who know where they’re going, and the existence of shops being obvious to the naked eye.

Next morning I meet Kamal. Paunchy, fresh-faced, helpful, talkative, cheerful. Over from Switzerland to see his family for Christmas. Keeps referring to his Vietnamese-American girlfriend as ‘baby’.

‘Oh baby,’ he keeps saying, ‘you know you can’t do that.’

It seems as if Kamal is not too impressed with many of Baby’s suggestions. Baby was born in Saigon. At the age of seven she went with her mother to Los Angeles. She met Kamal in Switzerland. Her boyfriend’s admonishments are expressed with amused fatherliness. He seems to be touched by her angelic innocence. He is happy to play the role of sensitive, insistent mentor, of concerned criticizer, of intrigued guide. Tim knows him from university. I know Tim from a German class in London. Our first day
in New Delhi was spent at the lotus-leafed temple of a religious sect. Met a lot of strange people from around the world who cannot be bothered experiencing the mental effort required to display commonsense. A lot of ad hoc modifications produced to support a belief system whose ramifications have not been thought through. Chi – better known as Baby – continues the theme. She decided to spend the day parting with three-and-a-half thousand US dollars; all went on carpets. After she, Tim and I have agreed to go early the following day to Agra, I say to her: ‘How do you know that those carpets are going to arrive in the States?’

Immediate panic followed by relief as she says ‘I can get Kamal’s family to follow it up.’

‘What if,’ I then tentatively surmise, ‘they go there and they find that the carpet shop no longer exists?’

Chi then begins insisting that Kamal should go there the next day ‘and pick the carpets up’.

This is bothersome for Kamal who’s come home for both business and personal reasons. Eventually, he says, ‘Okay baby, okay, I will.’ Kamal has come to India to set up a software company. Time is short for him. He knows that Baby will be badly hurt if he pursues far more important matters and neglects her carpets. Too bad about his business. It’s difficult to understand how someone who’s spent the first seven years of her life in a war-besieged city can be so syrupy and naive; then I discover that Baby’s mother worked in the U.S. embassy. An image of burly Americans giving Baby candy and patting her insincerely on the head filled my mind. Constant, undeserved, unconditional adoration, delivered for being so sweet and innocent. A different experience from those napalmed kids in the paddy fields. A different experience endured by those through the window of the bus on our way to Agra. I see steam and smoke emerging from mud-filled slums in depressions beside the road. I find it incongruous seeing beautiful women in gorgeous fabrics emerging from the entrances of these mud-grey hovels that populate the ground. Bodies are strewn all over the ground besides the road in the early morning; they are waking from another uncomfortable night in the open to begin another tiresome day of hunger. They shuffle and blink. They all seem to be wearing the same variety of rag. No unconditional approbation for them.

That night in Agra, Tim, Chi and I are having a discussion in a restaurant. Later, Tim was to say, ‘There was one point where I thought that there may have been some hope for her, but the obituaries killed it.’

Chi was astounded that I read the obituary sections of newspapers. She was oblivious as to why I wished to take such an interest in people’s lives. She found it morbid that I ‘wanted to read about dead people’. Didn’t I know that life consists of radiance, and pleasure, and beauty, and butterflies, and little girly things, and nothing else? What was wrong with me?

It dawned on me that she was so accustomed to receiving eulogies without justification that she could not understand why I was inspired to read about
the lives of people who had struggled to succeed, who had been motivated to conceive of miraculous ideas that had changed the course of history. She was completely ignorant of the fact that the future emerges from the past. She even said that 'the past has had no effect' on her 'life'. Tim and I were glad that she was going to be going back to New Delhi in a few days time, for this was an individual who had been patted on the head so severely for no apparent reason that it was impossible to judge to what extent she was prepared to go to next to be treated like a sweet, little girl. Whether we liked it or not, we were going to find out.

Agra is near a well-kept, deserted, medieval city called Fatehpur Sikri. On the busride out there, we saw a bear in chains. I could see something in the middle of the road in the distance. At first, I thought it was a woman fully-clothed from head to foot. Then I realized that it was a bear with a chain around its neck being held by a man carrying a very threatening-looking stick. Tim and I groaned. We assumed that the bear was forced to dance so that the man could make a living. It was really an appalling sight. I noticed that Chi seemed unmoved by it all.

Inside the ornate gates of the city we came upon a large courtyard surrounded by light-crimson-coloured buildings joined by colonnaded walkways. A small bridge went over a pond in front of that building where the original owner used to live. At equidistant spaces along the walls were towers topped by slanting roofs. Local women in saris made striking contrasts of colour against the clay, pastel walls. Several of them took photographs of their relatives amidst the sumptuous remnants of this now departed world.

As we walked in through the gates, a litter of puppies sniffed and leapt about. The mother of these creatures was on the other side of the courtyard lying contentedly in the shade. In comparison to what I had seen so far in India, these dogs were in animal heaven. Chi sighed adoringly and sat down and deposited one of them on her lap. I gave the puppy a pat, then Tim and I wandered off to explore.

We found it a touch unreal walking around this walled town that was once, effectively, a maharaja's palace. We visited the sleeping chamber of the great man and contemplated how wonderful it would have been to have lived in such splendour in a town where every member of the closely-knit community assumed that your being had been showered by serene light. Such magnificence is only afforded by fate to a few. At that moment, Chi was showering it upon an innocent puppy.

When the journey through this easy, opulent, medieval world ended, and the bus was ready to take us back into the real world, the world of overpopulation, struggle, treachery, and despair, we discovered that she had been with the dog all day. I was the last one onto the bus. Chi was sitting behind Tim. I sat next to Tim. He and I had not seen Chi all day in the deserted city, for she had spent the entire day at the entrance, where she had first come across the puppy. When we realized this, Tim turned around
and joked: 'I thought that you were going to bring it with you.'

Chi smiled and said: 'I did.'

We glanced down at her lap. It was there. Tim and I looked at each other in astonishment. If Chi was under the impression that we were going to say, 'Oh, how sweet, ' and smile serenely, then she was seriously mistaken. When Tim and I glanced at each other, we found it difficult to contain our cynical delight. Intelligent cynics adore watching idiots making fools of themselves, and Tim and I were no exception.

Back in Agra, we were sitting in the courtyard of our hotel having lunch. The puppy was asleep on Chi’s lap. There was no question that the dog was better off with its mother in the opulent place that we had just been in. The mother, who looked in good shape, and who was probably being fed by the employees of the walled city, was described by Chi, by way of rationalization, as being 'too skinny to produce milk'. This excuse for her absurd behaviour did not explain why the puppy looked in such excellent health. To substantiate her observations she tried to feed the puppy some hot milk. When the already-satiated dog (Chi was under the illusion that it was 'starving'), showed no interest in its meal, she shoved the puppy’s snout into the liquid, causing the tiny creature to unleash a high-pitched yelp of intense pain. Most beings usually respond this way when their faces have been deposited into boiling fluid. Tim and I looked at each other and metaphysically shook our heads. The puppy’s behaviour deteriorated from there. It was once a happy, contented fluffpot, living with its mother in a wealthy place, and now it was having force-feeding techniques applied to it by a stranger keen to prove an unprovable point. Then Tim asked her what she ‘intended to do with it?’ She then said that ‘Kamal’s family’ll look after it. They’ll adore it.’ Tim and I smiled at each other ruefully.

As it was not possible to convince her that not everyone on earth indulges in unwarranted adoration – as Tim put it later, ‘That dog will represent nothing more to Kamal’s family than an extra mouth to feed – they’ll get rid of it as soon as her back’s turned’ – we decided to get up and head off to the Taj Mahal. Chi couldn’t join us because she had been squabbling over the price of a ticket back to Delhi, and was waiting to find out if she had managed to get the ticket that she wanted. She said she would join us later in the Taj Mahal, once she had organized her return trip.

In the rickshaw on the way over to the Taj Mahal, Tim and I expressed our bewilderment at her irresponsible naivety. She did not comprehend the mentality of the country she was in.

‘Imagine,’ I said, ‘being in a situation where the friend of a relative dumps a dog on you – particularly in a place like this.’

‘Right about now,’ Tim replied, ‘it’s probably pissing on her.’

‘It’s inevitable,’ I said, ‘that something will.’

Tim burst out laughing.

Chuckling, we dashed through the dusty mayhem of the dilapidated streets. Several men on foot were carrying ridiculously awkward and heavy
loads on their heads. Their grim expressions of resignation to the inevitability of their desperate lot was in stark contrast to our arrogant hilarity. Piles of rotting garbage had been crushed underfoot. Packs of homeless animals fought over the scraps that the beggars could not be bothered touching. An atmosphere of already pungent humidity was made even more redolent by the stench of frying fat. I would have been sick had I been forced to eat the ‘fat cakes’ that these roadside chefs created on their portable hot-plates; but for many here, they were a common snack. No succulent seafoods in garlic and butter for them.

The inside of the Taj Mahal complex is kept from view by high, clay-red walls. A security check at the gates made it obvious to Tim and I that no pets – if such a thing actually exists in India – were allowed to enter. My first glimpse of the famous monument confirmed to me that its reputation as one of the world’s premier architectural wonders is more than justified. It is one of the great buildings of any era. In the distance, past a series of rectangular ponds and patches of immaculately cut lawn, it sits, from the entrance, like an exquisitely carved sculpture of perfectly symmetrical marble. The imperious magnificence of its four corner-towers is in perfect harmony with the voluptuous curvature of the central dome. The fact that it is a mausoleum built by an emperor in despair, grieving at the loss of his deceased wife, imparts upon it an emotion, and a beauty, that only love can impart. We wandered towards it past the ponds whose smooth surfaces reflect the tops of the domed towers. A point was reached where we had to remove our shoes. Up a flight of steps we went, over a surface of inlaid marble, towards the stunningly-patterned walls. The remarkable magnitude of the place becomes apparent at the top of the stairs, where things spread out so amply, you get the impression that you have just stepped out onto a vast, frozen sea of creamy marble. We walked down one side of the central dome and reached a waist-height wall that overlooks an enormous plain at the rear of the building. You discover that you are elevated above the world at the top of a cliff. Ribbons of mist were threaded through the plain’s distant trees. A lone figure was meandering along the bank on the far side of the river, at the base of the cliff, the only figure in sight in the immense silence of the breathless plain. I wondered how incredible this building, caught in the peachy serenity of late-afternoon light, showered by orange radiance, must have looked to him down there, all alone; then I turned and marvelled at how the Taj Mahal’s brilliance is increased by the presence of hundreds of local women in striking dress. How bland Westerners look in comparison!

We observed the translucent precious stones and marble, heard the perfect acoustics that were elongated to a perfect pitch, saw all the indigenous flowers of India engraved into the walls, then we sat down and enjoyed the pleasures of the twilight; free from the irrepresible touts, we talked about Chi. I said that I was ‘fascinated by her total lack of common sense. She’s so concerned about being perceived as a sweet, harmless, innocent, little thing
that she’s got no regard whatsoever for pragmatics. I’ve never come across an ego like hers before.’

As we were talking about her, she suddenly appeared, without the dog. She was happy that her train ticket had been sorted out to her satisfaction. Tim asked her about the puppy. She said that she had to ‘leave it, as they don’t allow animals in here.’ ‘Surprise, surprise. Her justification for this was as follows, ‘There are more tourists here, so someone will look after it.’ It was as simple as that. She had left the dog, all by its defenceless self, in the garden outside the inner walls; it was now not her problem. Someone else could deal with it.

She left us to go and look at the building; Tim said: ‘She’s obviously never had any bad shocks. She can’t connect her absurd actions to her actions in general. She’ll only learn that it’s not feasible to pick up stray puppies, and try to take them into public places. She’s still just a little girl.’

I was fascinated by her massive failure of judgement. She believed, without question, that her actions had been reasonable and morally sound. She was clueless as to the danger that she represented to an ordered society. In New Delhi, I had been absorbed by the way that she always went into childish degeneration, like a floppy doll, every time Kamal indulged in his affectionate recriminations. Every time Kamal said, ‘Baby, you know you can’t do that,’ she would tilt her head to one side, and drop her shoulders, secretly pleased with the sweet amusement generated by her naive ways.

In the dimness of early dusk, we left the grounds of the great building and re-entered the real, contemporaneous world. A tidal wave of touts, restaurateurs, rickshaw drivers, and general scumbags were waiting to use us for pecuniary means. Their methods of expanding their wallets by reducing the sizes of ours – amateurish methods done with an insincere smile were really no different to the methods employed by Chi. The dog had only been a device to enable her to be patted sweetly on the head; but the plan had backfired, and now that dog, the true victim, was alone, in this unforgiving place, where the uncaring masses scoff rice from banana leaves, and drop the remnants of their meals onto the greasy roads, so that the stray animals and the multitudinous beggars can fight for the scraps that remain.

Six hours previously, that sweet puppy had been with its mother in a privileged position in a beautiful, unusually-well-preserved, historical town, and now it was cast into the tortuous realities of this desperate place by someone whose egotistical innocence was so dangerous, that she was as oblivious of the damage that she had just reeked upon that innocent creature, as she was to the damage that she was inevitably going to reek upon herself.

We found out later that the carpet-shop owners had disappeared.