

RENZO SAMARITANI

TRIP TO INDIA



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Translated by: Eva Melisa Mastroianni

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

American primitive tribes believed in dreams, on which they based their life... hunting, fishing, trading and other activities. To dreaming they sacrificed everything, so they would obtain omens from them.

To these people dreams were the source and the basis of spirituality.

A Jesuit who lived in 1600 claimed that while dreaming he presided at parties, dances, chants, games and he was the major God of indigenous people.

The Indians were firmly convinced that during the dream the soul lived in another world, a realm that's independent from the body.

My stories often come into existence from daydreaming and I'm not entirely convinced that they're fairytales... from some point of view, in an immaterial kind of way Stefania, for example, really exists.

We are eternal spiritual souls, independent from our material body which we use as a gown, which allows us to move and operate in this world and gives us a gender. We are boys and girls in terms of personality that we pick and in this direction the transformation of Stefania in the first book, A man named Stefania, is also very symbolic and concerns energies. It's the essence that changes, more than the body. It's an interior mutation that goes through a conscious psychological and physical change.

RS

Spring 2011

To Sofia Mehiel

â##If the facts don't fit the theory, change the factsâ##

Albert Einstein

OCTOBER 1996

At Bologna's airport we found Nirvanananda and Max waiting for us.

â###Right on time, as always!â### I said to them, as they started to help JosÃ´ arrange his baggage on the trolleys.

While we walked on the inside to do the check-in, JosÃ´ pulled out our two tickets and he turned to Maximilian.

â###Max, is it okay to you, if you and I do it for everyone? Nirva could keep company to Stefi in a dining area. She's still a little too weak with her legs, it would be better to let her avoid the unnecessary queue...â###

Everyone agreed; Nirvanananda took me dearly arm in arm. He was still a little overweight, but slightly. Rounded face, brown hair worn really short. He was wearing an intense blue jumper and a dark blue colored jumpsuit in flannels, even though we were at the beginning of autumn. He constantly suffered the cold.

He pointed out a dining area inside the hall to the others and we set off.

â###I'm so excited for this trip, and you?â### I told him.

â###It doesn't seem real...â### he answered.

â###Maximilian seems radiant as well!â### I observed.

â###Yes, he is. And it's our first journey together. He's very grateful to have let us meet and so am I. I love you...â###

He squeezed me in a hug that filled me with beautiful energies.

â###Are you crying?â### I asked him. I noticed he had watery eyes.

He looked at me in silence. He saw the Stefania of all time, auburn hair of hennÃ© shorter than usual, hazel eyes, not so tall but slim, narrow hips and small breasts. I was wearing a kind of tunic with wide trousers, low heels to walk better (especially after the accident).

â###It seems like starting a new life,â### said afterwards. â###I'm sure that this trip will be a great â###honeymoonâ### to me and Max but also a spiritual experience that will affect us. And there's not a night that goes by that I don't think about the words that the monk wrote... what do you think about it?â###

â###Even for JosÃ´ this is more than a 'romantic' journey, but by now you know me enough... I agree with you. Besides the shock of the devotion that Govindananda made to me and you on the booklet, I'm starting to think that chance doesn't really exist. I feel something will happen. I often thought that I'd like to be a witch, you know?â###

â###Well, they say that in India there are still witches and they use brooms to move from one place to another. Maybe they sell them and I'll buy you one!â###

We both burst out laughing.

We choose a table large enough, since the other two would come to keep us company. Nirva asked me what I wanted and walked up to the cash register.

He came back with a huge glass of orange juice with ice for me and a diet coke with a slice of lemon for him. We would have ordered later for the others.

He sat and looked at me.

â###Stefi, all of a sudden you look... distracted, I'd say.â###

I shook my head, a little impatient. â###While you were paying the orders at the cash register, a person that I felt to know walked by... just a weird feeling. I can't explain the reason. Anyway, cheers to our trip!â###

â###Can we do it with two soft drinks?â### Nirvanananda wondered making a funny face.

â###Why not?â### I answered. And we had a toast.

Soon enough we saw JosÃ and Maximilian arriving, who waved the four boarding passes in coming closer. They only had their hand luggage and the wheelchair folded up.

The handsome JosÃ with dark skin and black, curly hair was taller than me and lately, thanks to home gym, also well-built. He didn't have nice features, but instead they were strong and regular with a pronounced jaw, Roman nose and bushy eyebrows. He was wearing a jeans and a bottle-green hoodie, on which stood up Atari's logo. The hoodie's color made his black eyes even deeper.

â##Ready to get on board?â## Max said happily, standing next to Nirva. Maximilian's slim and good-looking figure didn't go unnoticed; strong arms and legs, big hands, long blonde hair, blue eyes. Big nose and not so evident cheekbones. Overgrown beard as it was his habit. He was wearing a polo shirt with white cuff and neck that, together with his black trousers, made him look like a waiter (but no one had the heart to tell him).

Max looked at the time. "It's just eleven, the plane leaves in exactly forty-five minutes. We still have a great ten minutes, before the queue at the security control thins out. Letâ##s have a coffee.â##

JosÃ nodded and proceeded to the cash register with him, coming back with two barley coffees, one normal for Maximilian and a savory croissant for me. I was feeling peckish and wanted to fill my empty stomach. Maybe it was stress-eating: I always suffered of claustrophobia and the idea of traveling in a plane gave me anxiety.

JosÃâ##s influence was also positive on this fear of mine. Recently I took the lift a couple times, always in his company. He held my hand and told me a joke- unlike me; he was very good at telling them. I burst out laughing, he kissed me and, without me noticing, we already arrived at our destination. Of course a plane is not a lift, but I was sure I could make it. And so it was.

At the check-in Max and JosÃ asked for seats away from the windows, in the middle row and they obtained them without too many difficulties. They shoved the hand-luggage in the appropriate compartment and we all settled for the flight. An elegant hostess came by with a tray of candies and a cart of ready-made drinks.

From the speaker a professional voice welcomed the passengers, inviting them to fasten up their seatbelt and switch off their phones. We were taking off!

JosÃ took my hand and I squeezed it hard. The engines started to rumble and the big vehicle moved. â##It's not that different from a big bus, which travels not in two but in three dimensionsâ## he said smiling. â##Not only far and wide, but also in height. And it's only a one-hour-flight, honey.â##

The plane was now rolling on the runway at a good speed. I glanced worried at the line of windows, trying to see something of the outside world, but they were too little and distant. All of a sudden I felt a sort of lift upwards - the vehicle was now up in the air, in the third dimension... An unintentional little whimper slipped out of my mouth and JosÃ squeezed my hand smiling. It was joke-time!

â##A man is walking along the Californian shore when he trips over an old lamp. He picks it up, rubs it and out pops the genie that, with a quite bored look, says: Okay, okay. You've freed me from the lamp, blah blah blah. It's the fourth time in a month and all these wishes are starting to annoy me. So you can forget the classic three wishes, you only have one.

The man sits and tries to think. Then he says: I'm scared of flying and suffer seasickness. Can you build a bridge to Hawaii so I can go by car?

The genius laughs and replies: It's impossible! Think of the logistics. How could the piles reach the bottom of the ocean? Think about how much reinforced concrete and steel would be needed. No, think of another wish.

The man tries to think. In the end he says: I've been married and divorced four times. My wives always said I did not give them enough attention and that I am insensitive. So I wish to understand women... to know how they feel and what they think when they don't talk to me... why they cry... what they really want when they say no, it's nothing... and to know how to make them really happy...

The genius: That bridge, do you want it two or three lanes? ...â##

Despite the fear and tension, I burst out laughing. Even the people in the row next to us giggled and the atmosphere cheered up.

A few minutes later the plane stabilized at its cruising altitude and the passengers relaxed, unfastening their seatbelt, reading newspapers and magazines, or getting out diaries and books from their hand-luggage.

Time passed quickly, thanks to JosÃ's loving and funny conversation and we landed right on time at the national terminal of Leonardo Da Vinci's airport, in Fiumicino.

Our plane for India was leaving at 3:26 pm, flight EK0098 of the company Emirates Airline. Just one stopover in Dubai for shorthall passengers and refuel, then late-night boarding for Delhi. Overall about twenty hours travel... but JosÃ explained to me that three of them were just due to jet-lagging and at least another four were spent waiting for the connecting flight in Dubai, so we would have stayed in the air for only about ten hours, of which we would have spent mostly sleeping.

The check-in for the international flight opened two hours before the departure, so we organized with trolleys and had lunch in a diner at the airport. At 2 pm Maximilian's phone started ringing - he had set the alarm to avoid risks - and all of us headed to the hell of international departure's acceptance. A friend suggested to book two separate tickets, so two check-ins, one in Bologna for the national flight and one in Rome for the international departure, because when you change flight and especially airlines during a trip, there's the serious risk that the luggage doesn't arrive in the right place at the right time.

I was quite tired so I sat down on my trusting wheelchair, letting JosÃ push me up to the departure's queue.

Again Max took care of everybody's check-in, asking for seats near the middle row and for vegetarian food. I noticed that our luggage was light, especially in comparison to other travelers, with somatic Indian features, who seemed to have been shopping in Italy.

At the security check the agents examined carefully our hand-luggage and our passports. Luckily the travel agency had informed us on current legislation, therefore there were no complications.

At 3 pm we were sat in the waiting area at the gate with other passengers, waiting to get on the little bus that was going to take us to the aircraft on the runway.

It was then that I recognized the guy that I'd spotted in Bologna airport whom looked familiar. It was doctor Giuliano, sat a couple of rows away with a tall and heavysset bloke with olive skin. He seemed to realize that someone was staring at him: he turned his head, saw me and smiled even if a little surprised.

We greeted from a distance and then he went back to his intense discussion with his friend.

The big doors of the departure hall opened and the passengers neatly got on two small buses, finally reaching the plane parked on the runway.

One by one we climbed the outside stairs and as soon as we were on board JosÃ gave my foldable wheelchair to a hostess, who put it in the service area.

Again we shoved the hand-luggage in the over head compartment and we took the seats that were assigned to us.

Soon enough all the passengers sat down and fastened their seatbelt and the stewards gave us a demonstration on how to use them, on oxygen masks for eventual pressure drops in the cabin and on emergency exits. I noticed that almost nobody was taking this information seriously and JosÃ recommended me saying that plane crashes were far fewer than car crashes. So there was no reason to be anxious.

The take-off went perfectly again, the motors of the vehicle rumbled more and more louder and the plane speeded up, until the push of the thrust took away the ground and the sense of gravity, handing the craft over to the air and then to the sky.

Within a few minutes we were at the cruising altitude. The most experienced passengers casually unfastened their seatbelt, some of them stood up to get objects from the hand-luggage's compartment.

The stewardess started a tour with drink trolleys: tea and coffee in thermoses, water, cans of coke and sprite, fruit juices. Together with drinks, they handed out packets of peanuts and crackers to munch on.

From the seat at our backs, Maximilian commented: «On long flights they give you food and drinks every three hours and you can even ask for some extra soft drinks. I know they serve alcohol in first class but here, if you want it, you have to pay separately.»

I pulled a face. «No, thank you Max. I'm not bothered.»

Our conversation was interrupted by doctor Giuliano, who came closer to say hi.

«Hello, doc!» I preceded him, with a big smile. «Do you remember me?»

He smiled back. «Yes, you're a friend of father Sandro... Miss...»

«Stefania...» I fixed his visible amnesia. Then again it's been a while and I was already surprised he recognized my face. I remembered his name because it was related to a very particular day...

«Please, take a seat», I said. There were a couple of empty seats in our line and JosÃ moved so Giuliano could sit next to me and we could talk better.

«In India on holiday?» he asked casually. «With friends?»

«Yes. This is JosÃ, my boyfriend,» I answered, while he smiled and raised his hand in the spirit of greeting. Clearly he decided that shaking hands would have invaded too much my personal space and Giuliano instantly understood, replying in the same way.

I introduced the rest of the company to the doctor: Nirvanananda and Maximilian were sat in the row behind us and they decided to stand up to greet him. The encounter was a pleasing distraction from the boredom of the flight that presented itself as very long and they all were obviously willing to show themselves friendly and open to socialize.

«So, what's new with you, Miss Stefi? It's been a while since our last meeting...»

«Oh,» I said «yes, it's true. So much has happened.» I stopped and considered. What could I tell him? It was a complicated story.

«Maybe you don't know it, but father Sandro left the church,» he said. «About one year ago he had a fight with the bishop and was relocated. In Calcutta, India... where he worked for a while with the missionaries of Mother Theresa's charity.»

I was surprised, but not that much. A character such as father Sandro made undoubtedly a big fuss in the little village in the province of Milano. «I guess he might be better in India, right?» I commented, maybe slightly bitter.

Giuliano looked at me with a curious face. «Oh, sure,» he said laconically. Then he smiled and added, «In the end he followed his true calling and officially became a disciple of Sai Baba. Now his name is Hridaya and lives in Puttaparthi's ashram. He's finally free from all the conflicts and I'm sure that some of his friends will be happy for him.»

I felt a bit uncomfortable. I was sort of ashamed of showing so little tolerance and compassion in father Sandro's regards... after all he did nothing wrong. If I was disappointed, he had indeed no fault: he never promised me anything.

The doctor seemed to read correctly all my thoughts. «Father Sandro was everyone's friend, but he didn't truly bind with many people.»

I sharply raised my head, because I realized I unconsciously bowed it. Yes, I could be honest with Giuliano; I had to give him an explanation. Maybe not him, but I had very few chances to provide my reasons directly to father Sandro. Talking with the doctor would be the best I could do at that point.

«You should know...» I started uncertain but I stopped straight away. He smiled and nodded, encouraging me to go on.

Father Sandro was for me more an acquaintance than a friend, but I was very fond of him. We met in a club where I worked in those days, I added with a smile almost as an apology, but the doctor didn't give me any sign of shock from my revelation. So I kept going.

In that period I was searching for answers to better understand the direction I wanted to give to my life and it seemed like father Sandro could help me to combine the need of a spiritual life with the natural demands of a material life...

I see, Giuliano said with a more serious look. But you didn't expect that Sandro's solution was so unconventional...

Yes, exactly. That he accepted an Indian swami, Sai Baba, as his master, while remaining in the Catholic Church.

Giuliano patted me gently on the hand. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy...

I looked at him questioningly. He apologized, Oh, yeah, Shakespeare, Hamlet... one of my favorite quotes... I tend to forget that Shakespeare in Italy is basically unknown.

No, no, I hurried to recommended him, It's a brilliant quote. I like it; I'm going to steal it from you.

He put on a big smile and change subject. So, where are you going in India? To see the Taj Mahal in Agra? To the beach in Goa? Or all over the villages?

Actually we intend to go to Nepal to visit an old friend, monk Govindananda. Five years ago I have been in Kathmandu's ashram where he lives and I really enjoyed the stay...

Doctor Giuliano seemed impressed. What a coincidence, he smiled. I'm going to Nepal too! Maybe we could travel together...

It was pretty incredible. It couldn't be an eventuality. Just a few days before the departure I bought a book really interesting, The Celestine Prophecy, and I developed a passion in reading it and in its plot, which stressed how nothing happens by chance and how events in our life are organized in a way that let us spiritually evolve when we're ready and we accept to pursue the journey.

After a few minutes of friendly conversation, doctor Giuliano went back to his seat, some rows behind us; and he apparently explained the circumstances to his comrade, because the guy smiled and waved when he noticed that I was looking at them.

I decided to get my book out of my bag and continue the reading. I wasn't too interested in the movie projected on the screen, to be honest it was quite far from our seats and it wasn't easy to follow the story. JosÃ¨ pulled out the book from the over head compartment for me and then kissed me on my forehead. I can tell that you're doing fine, honey. I think I'll go and stretch my legs and maybe see what condition the toilet is in.

Alright, dear, thank you, I smiled and then I dived into my book.

Despite my fears, the flight turned out rather comfy. It was easy to imagine being on a very big bus, that was traveling on some motorway and I panicked just a couple times, when due to air turbulence the craft all of a sudden dropped in altitude. JosÃ¨ hugged me immediately and consoled telling me that the bus got a hole on the road...

Around 7 pm the hostesses brought the trays with dinner. In economy class there wasn't a menu to choose from, besides the vegetarian or non-vegetarian option had to be ordered at the check-in. JosÃ¨ showed how to drop down the table from the back of the seat in front of mine and I got a transparent hard-plastic tray with a series of similar tiny bowls, covered with a transparent plastic wrap, and a throw-away plateau in aluminum closed with a cardboard lid and a glass of water from the refrigerated jug on the trolley.

The little tray was quite warm: it clearly had been just warmed up. I opened it up with a kind of interest and found myself contemplating a trio of preparations: plain white boiled rice, chickpea stew and a mixture of vegetables apparently pan-cooked green beans, potatoes and tomatoes. The taste wasn't bad, but it wasn't anything to get excited about.

I turned to the bowl of salad: lettuce, julienne carrots and one lonely olive. There wasn't any condiment, but JosÃ found a packet of salad dressing which contained oil, vinegar and packets of salt and pepper. Another bowl contained a fruit salad: a slice of pineapple in syrup and some slices of banana. I accompanied them with a soft bread roll (in a foil sachet) spread with some butter.

JosÃ squinted at me, amused by my disappointed and perplexed look in front of my first meal on an airplane. "Don't worry, little monkey," he said affectionately. "We'll eat properly when we arrive at our destination. Airlines have a restricted budget for what concerns food service. In first class they have better food, but we shouldn't forget that the main service is the transport of the passenger and his luggage, and no one is promised a gastronomic experience."

I smiled. He was right, as always. When the flight assistant came to pick the trays up, JosÃ asked for two cans of Coke. He said they would help us to digest.

Seeing as in Coke there was enough caffeine we refused coffee and tea that the next trolley offered us, and then we organized to lay down a bit taking advantage of the empty seats near us. Raising the armrest and making it fit into the space between the two seats was enough to obtain a big enough space to stretch out. Not a sleeper, but it would do for a couple of hours.

At 9 pm the lights went on again in the cabin and the loudspeaker announced that we would be landing in Dubai within half hour, 11 pm local time. We all were stiff and sleepy, but we managed not to leave anything on board, not even my wheelchair that the flight attendant seemed to have forgotten. We got off at Dubai airport where some passengers went towards the customs - they had arrived at their destination - while our group trotted quite together, following the transit signs.

JosÃ and Nirva convinced me to use the wheelchair, so not to slow them down and I took their bags on my knees.

The transit passenger's assistance desk checked our tickets and took the voucher for the Dubai-Delhi tract, giving to us our boarding cards: the next flight was leaving at 2 am, local time. We settled somehow in the waiting area to spend those three hours... some Indian passengers took out some colored blankets from their hand-luggage; they spread them on the floor and casually laid down on them. It seemed an excellent idea, even though in Italy no one would think of it. Unfortunately in our luggage we had nothing that could serve the purpose, so we made do with sleeping sat on the available armchairs.

About twenty minutes before the departure a ground hostess came to call us and the group walked again towards the gate, this time it was attached to the fuselage of the plane through a metal tunnel that looked as if it was not so sturdy.

There wasn't much choice of seating, therefore JosÃ and I found ourselves on the left of the aircraft, with Nirvanananda and Max three rows behind, while Giuliano and his friend were further in front. JosÃ went to speak to a flight assistant and managed to get us moved near the tail of the plane. It was near the toilets and there were also some free seats so we were able to lie down again as soon as the aircraft got up to a stable quote and we got permission to unbuckle our seatbelt. After all it wasn't that bad. We received tiny cushions and a light blanket each and, in no time at all, I fell asleep again.

I woke up around 8 am, Dubai time - I have adjusted my watch during the wait for the second boarding. The light in the cabin was certainly stronger and I felt stiff and groggy. I sat up, trying to straighten up my hair and not feeling very elegant in my creased up clothes.

Looking around, I saw that other passengers were more or less in the same condition as me. A couple of Italians were prowling around the narrow corridor in between the seats in their socks, probably waiting for the toilet. I decided it was better to stay sat down until the situation cleared up, it still wasn't urgent.

The doctor's traveling companion was sat nearby, sideways on his seat and was watching the two toilet doors. One of them opened and a stocky guy came out, in his shirtsleeves. Giuliano's friend clumsily got up while the man passed by him and seemed to lose his balance. To hold himself up he

grabbed the stranger's arm and the sleeve of the shirt, which was unbuttoned slipped up uncovering the wrist on which was tattooed a strange symbol. The man became annoyed but you could see he was trying not to show it. He hurriedly buttoned up his cuff whilst the doctor's friend apologized profusely and moved back into his seat to let him pass along the corridor.

When the stocky man passed, Giuliano's friend got up again, perfectly stable on his legs, and seeing that I had curiously observed the scene, he smiled at me with an air of complicity.

There was without doubt some kind of mystery in that story, that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Half an hour later there was not a queue for the toilets anymore so I took advantage to powder my nose. The cubicle was little but well-equipped, there was enough water for the sink and throw-away paper protections for the loo.

When I got back to my seat, Josã asked for a breakfast tray for both of us and two cups of lattes, so I sat down cheered up. The tray contained the usual soft bread roll, small packets of butter and jam and a yogurt pot.

I grabbed another cup of latte at the trolley's second ride and relaxed on my seat quite pleased. After all those hours traveling by airplane without particular problems of claustrophobia, I felt like a worldly globe-trotter.

Actually, the plane inside was wide enough not to be overwhelming. Surely there were the support of Josã and the others, Nirva and Maximilian, the excitement for the tour of India and the surprise for meeting doctor Giuliano and his friend.

The mystery that seemed to enfold their trip was another occasion to distract my attention from the possible anxiety due to the closed space...

The screen in front of us started to transmit the Disney movie Hocus Pocus, one of my favorites, so I hurried up to find the headphones and dive into the movie to take my mind off it.

After the film, I napped a little, because I still felt tired.

My watch showed 11am when the flight assistants served lunch. Luckily there were enough vegetarian meals to satisfy everyone in the group. Even this time the plastic tray contained a tinfoil container with hot food - mashed potatoes, strange unrecognizable vegetable nuggets and a thick spicy sauce that seemed to be made out of beans. I used the soft bread roll to soak up the sauce, that wasn't that bad and I left the butter in its packet. The salad was unattractive, but Josã asked the flight attendant if there was any plain yogurt pot left from breakfast and, with that and some extra salt, the side dish became more agreeable.

The trays were collected after about twenty minutes and immediately the loudspeaker of the cabin announced that we were going to land. I learned that it already was 2:30 pm, according to Delhi's local time, in which we entered. In ten minutes time we would have started the way down to the runway of the international airport of Indira Gandhi's terminal, in the Indian capital.

My excitement went straight up to my head. â###India, I'm coming!â##

Josã noticed it and squeezed my hand, smiling. We fastened our belts and I tried to relax as much as possible in the flight's last minutes, maybe the harder ones.

The plane touched the ground with a little tremor and I felt the aircraft underneath me rolling on the runway, while it gradually decelerates. In the end it went round a corner and then aligned in the prescribed area.

We were asked to wait until the plane stopped completely to unfasten our belts and get up, but some passengers were obviously looking forward to get off because they started to move restless. As soon as the aircraft stopped many jumped up to their feet to get their hand-luggage from the overhead compartment and queued towards the two exits.

Josã suggested waiting for the corridors to be free and it was in fact a good idea. Doctor Giuliano and his friend rushed with the others, at a short distance from the stocky man with a tattoo on his wrist. Nirva went and picked up the wheelchair that we gave to the staff on board and they

carefully helped me go down the stairs. My legs were quite stiff and painful after all those hours of travel.

As soon as the bus dropped us off in front of the arrival's hall, JosÃ© and Nirvanananda helped me to sit down on my wheelchair and I was really grateful. I couldn't make it to walk on my own. We overcame the immigration checks without problems - the employee checked our passports and tourist visa and put the stamps on.

Afterwards Maximilian and Nirva got two trolleys and we met at our luggage conveyor belt. Our suitcases were all there and in good condition.

We looked around tired but satisfied: we arrived safe and sound in India!

Now we needed to look for a hotel to freshen up and rest properly. The travel agency in Italy suggested the Clark Surya, in Saraswati Marg, in the downtown of the touristic and commercial center Karol Bagh, at almost sixteen kilometers away from the airport. We got out looking for a cab and we found Giuliano and his friend doing the same.

The doctor nodded and came closer, leaving his friend to negotiate with the taxi-drivers. "Do you already know in which hotel you're going to stay?"

"Yes," I answered. "It was suggested to us a three star hotel downtown, the Clark Surya. Do you know it?"

"Great choice," he said. "For the next part of the journey shall we go together? It's better if we sleep in the same hotel, don't you think?"

"Sure," JosÃ© agreed.

"So let's get organized with the cabs," Giuliano said and made a gesture to his friend, who nodded. Nirvanananda and Max came closer and the doctor explained to them that we were going to call three cabs to be comfy and the vehicles would have driven together.

With Giuliano's help, who seemed to be an expert traveler, the luggage was uploaded carefully and the three taxi-drivers confabulated for a while deciding the road to the hotel, then we all took off together in the reasonable afternoon traffic.

A SECRET MISSION

The traffic increased progressively as we got deeper into the city.

The hotel was very elegant, on an international level. We got three deluxe rooms and immediately the doctor suggested we sent our clothes to the launderette, with next-morning urgent delivery.

After a long hot shower with the hotel's perfumed shower gel, I put on a comfy long shirt and I threw myself on the bed, which was very comfortable. The room had a minibar and a large TV with many cable channels, but my priority was to have at least a couple of hours of good sleep.

It was nine o' clock in the evening and it was already getting dark when JosÃ" called me for dinner. I was still numb from the trip and the jet-lag, but I felt better.

After a quick freshen up, I put on a nice dress and suitable shoes, touched up my make up and went to the ground floor with JosÃ", where the restaurant was.

In the waiting room Nirva, Maximilian and also Giuliano and his friend, who was introduced to us as Riccardo, were waiting for us. We went to sit down in the restaurant at a table for six and with the doctor's help we ordered a sumptuous meal that largely repaid us from the gastronomic austerity of the flight.

The food was served in serving dishes and the waiters that hung around started to give out individual plates, until Max and JosÃ" stepped in explaining to them that we'd rather do it on our own.

Fifteen types of vegetables stewed in spicy sauce were gobbled up in no time at all, with the help of many different varieties of local breads, some like thin wraps of whole-wheat flour, some like slightly risen baps, and some like fried teacakes.

There also were three types of pureed pulses, various fried appetizers and pots of thick plain yogurt. To drink we choose huge yogurt shakes and we finished our meal with typical Indian tea, boiled with milk and aromatized with spices.

After dinner we went to the hotel lounge to chatter.

Everyone briefly told his story, and then JosÃ" and Maximilian ordered a Mojito and a strawberry Caipiroska. Riccardo and Giuliano asked for two Blue Lagoons, Nirvanananda and I had a Cranberry Crush each, a soft drink with cranberry and orange juice, water, ginger, spices and sugar. We sat around a large short table, covered in black glaze, with a central basis in stainless steel and a column in wormwood.

At midnight the lounge was already desert, but because of the time change no one of us seemed to be very tired.

I found myself thinking more and more of the guy with the mysterious tattoo on the wrist from the plane and at Riccardo's weird behavior. During a moment of silence from the conversation, in which we were picking into the bowl of savories, I showed some guts and hazarded the question.

â##On the plane I noticed a strange thing...â##

I looked around: JosÃ", Nirva and Max were surprised, the doctor and his friend seemed cautious and tense, as if they expected to face a dangerous or rough subject. Riccardo stared at me with an intense look, and then he got into the heart of the matter:

â##I think you noticed the tattoo on the wrist of a passenger... and asked to yourself if it had a deeper and important meaning of the single aesthetics.â##

â##Exactly!â## I answered, relieved by the idea of not being forced to express such a vague suspect.

Giuliano and Riccardo exchanged a knowing look. I could tell they already talked between them about both me and the little tattoo incident.

â##I knew you were watching, Stefania,â## the doctor's friend said, â##and that you're a discreet and intelligent chick.â##

Giuliano smiled. "Before that Hridaya left, I had a long talk with him and, thereafter, out of curiosity and habit, we followed from a distance you and your adventures... In our job a little paranoia is always good."

José, Nirvanananda and Maximilian seemed confused and I had the impression that I was on the edge of a revelation of huge importance, which would have implied serious risks. Could the doctor and Riccardo have been two secret agents that worked for the government? What about father Sandro?

And why did they seem so willing to reveal their mystery to us now? What was the real catch?

We kept silent for a while, letting the doctor's friend find the best way to tell us what he wanted to say.

"Have you ever heard of the Reptilians?" he asked at point-blank range.

I almost wanted to laugh. But no! ... What kind of story was that? Science-fiction?

Neither Riccardo nor the doctor were laughing, Nirva looked thoughtful and frowned. José was uncertain and Max opened his blue eyes wide.

Suddenly I remembered a joke I told Licia about one year earlier in a restaurant... the day I met José for the first time often came back to memory, in detail. During that period I was a fan of the TV show Visitors - transmitted in Italy in 1986 and replicated in many occasions. The plot was about a war between the human race and an alien reptile race, and to me it was just a good sci-fi show...

While we were having lunch in the naturist restaurant, Licia opened up to me about the difficulties of her recent marriage and she declared she was contemplating the idea of going back to be single again: she wanted to mutate. So, to defuse the situation, I made fun of her, "in what? A Reptilian?"

In front of Riccardo's serious expression, the best thing that came to mind was "Well, yeah... I've watched the show Visitors on TV..."

Giuliano stepped in. "It was a good sci-fi show, but in many incredible stories sometimes there's a kernel of truth."

The idea seemed actually crazy, but those two were so serious and calm, reasonable and kind, which made me dismiss the assumption that they were crazy. And, after all, us four came to India to follow an idea that would have seemed at least strange to many people.

"Alright," I said with a sigh. "That passenger on the plane was a Reptilian in disguise?"

Unexpectedly the doctor and his friend laughed. "No. The Reptilians on Earth are very few and they keep well hidden. There are many hybrids that exist, that have quite a human look if you look at them from a distance and generally they are in a position of great power in our society, so they don't need to mix with common people or travel in economy class."

Giuliano got up. "I think this discussion needs some more drinks. I will go and order them at the bar. I shall leave you in the capable hands of Riccardo, who for many years and full time takes care of these things. I'll be back soon."

He took mental note of our preferences and went quickly away. All eyes were turned to his friend. He smiled calmly and continued to talk.

"The passenger with the tattoo on his wrist was a 'familiar', that is a human enslaved to the Reptilians. The small differences in the points and lines of design identify the Reptilian or hybrid for which he works or, better still, of whom he belongs - the tattoo is a kind of tag for the livestock..."

I was horrified. "Could you better explain what a 'familiar' means?"

"In European folklore tradition that was created around the belief of the existence of witches, the familiars were minor demons that act as the witches' servants and they could take the shape of an animal... from this idea came superstitious fear and contempt that some people have for black cats and owls, but also for crows and magpies and ferrets. They believed that those familiars were bought

or inherited, or received as a gift. In the Middle Age there was real slaughter of cats, which brought to the uncontrolled multiplication of rats and, as a consequence, to the Black Plague.â##

Riccardo realized this information was both new and shocking to us and smiled before continuing. â##The Christian superstition didn't take root everywhere in the same way and in some areas, especially in Germany where the Antic Religion was still respected, familiars were considered benevolent genies who protected villages, forests and listened to the requests of wiser and powerful humans, showing up when they were evoked and even accepting to live in everyday objects, like stones, rings, vases or things like them. They often answered questions, diagnosing illness, warning of dangers and enemies.â##

Giuliano arrived with a waiter; we suspended the discussion until the waiter finished putting down our glasses and went away.

Nirvanananda came closer and held my hand, physically outstretched with interest toward our guests. He seemed hypnotized. JosÃ and Maximilian seemed skeptical, but were willing to listen.

â##That man that you saw on the airplane... we've been observing for months. We were almost sure that he was the familiar of a powerful Reptilian that lived in Rome and we know that he was organizing a meeting in Nepal. In Rome we have a small team that keeps an eye on the ones we know, especially those who hang around the government.â##

Giuliano stepped in. Giuliano stepped in: â##As you might know, in various areas they talk about the New Moral Order, an occult force that is manipulating and controlling more and more governments and human beings in general. When Riccardo and his group knew that the familiar was leaving, we organized and found two places on the same flight, hoping that this casual closeness would allow us to finally obtain the proof we've been waiting for a long time.â##

â##And in fact so it was,â## Riccardo said with a big smile. â##It isn't easy for a stranger to come so close to a familiar to see his nude wrist, because they always dress formally and they pay attention to the social relationships. They don't have any connections out of their cluster; even sexually they choose a partner who belongs to the same Reptilian master. But I hoped that in the right circumstances we could catch him with his guard down or, in this case, his cuff unfastened...â##

He allowed himself a clever smile and the doctor copied him. I was still astonished, but the story started to make sense.

â##I still don't understand why you're telling us all of this,â## Max commented. â##I can believe you've done some research on Stefi, but what about the rest of us? We could be not worthy of all this trust... I seem to understand that your job is extremely risky and just a little indiscretion could put you in danger.â##

Riccardo and Giuliano exchanged a look. It was clear that they had their answer ready.

â##It's true,â## the doctor said. â##But if you want to obtain something in life you have to accept some risk. In our case, meeting you on the plane and finding out that you're going to Nepal to meet your friend the monk Kathmandu seemed too much of a good chance not to take advantage of it.â##

â##Yes,â## said Riccardo. â##To us it could be helpful to come to Nepal with you... It would mislead any eventual suspect that the familiar could have after our meeting on the plane.â##

I looked around. Everyone nodded. â##That's no problem,â## Maximilian said.

Nirva seemed still anxious. I encouraged him to speak.

â##See,â## he said, after throwing back a sip of his drink, â##I have read many things about Reptilians and aliens that could be in contact with the inhabitants of Earth.â##

Giuliano and his friend looked at him carefully.

â##They're very dangerous,â## Nirvanananda spoke again. â##They belong to another dimension, but can also perfectly live in this as long as they feed on negative vibes, suffering, fear, and despair of the living beings that they love to dominate.â##

â##True,â## Riccardo commented. The doctor just nodded.

â##Recently I read a very interesting article, which connected the various ufological current to the European folklore stories and in particular to Indian tradition...â##

Everyone was really careful. Nirva drank another sip and kept talking.

â##According to this last one, there are various humanoid bloodlines that are genetically more powerful than human beings, which throughout history have created outposts and settlements on our planet. The three most famous races are called Rakshasa, Naga e Yaksha. All three of them are biologically compatible with humans and can generate hybrids, which inherit the powers even if on a smaller scale.

While Naga and Yaksha have limited powers and can be quite benevolent with humans, Rakshasa have terrifying faculties with which they're capable of modifying matter only with their thought and they gladly use it to dominate humans. One of the most common examples is the fact that they're able to change their body's aspect. They're called Shapeshifters.â##

â##Yes! I heard about those Shapeshifters a few weeks ago on the show X-Files!â## JosÃ´ said. And he nodded to Nirvanananda to continue.

â##The ploy comes better when there's less light, so all these groups prefer to take action at night, even though the most powerful ones are perfectly capable of doing this in full daylight. The look that adapts best to their nature and can be considered their true form is terrifying - because what the Rakshasa like the most, more than the physical taste of human or animal flesh, is the emotional energy their preys' emit. Fear, horror, despair, helplessness, humiliation and degradation of their victims are delicious tastes to those creatures, which sometimes are described as ogres or vampires. They're also compared to snakes because they have a hypnotic power on human beings and they love to take these forms that can be defined as reptilians, even though it's known that according to their victims' mind they can take the form of other creepy beasts or composite aspects that remind us of different kinds of animals.â##

Total silence came over our group.

Max was deep in his thoughts, probably he was making mental and cultural connections, but didn't show any sign of skepticism anymore.

Now it was JosÃ´ turn to hold my hand and he had a worried look.

The doctor and Riccardo were nodding, very seriously.

Nirva kept talking. â##Historically our planet had alien outposts almost everywhere, although the principal settlements seem how have been in Sri Lanka for Rakshasa, China for Naga and the Caucasian region just in the north of mount Himalaya for Yaksha.â##

Giuliano's friend raised a hand to interrupt him. â##Let's not forget about the colonies in Mexico, Mesopotamia, upper Egypt, Cambodia, Israel, Rome, New Orleans and New York.â##

â##Of course,â## Nirvanananda said, â##but I'm talking about what Vedic books say, written over five-thousand years ago. Since then, there have been several movements. According to my research, in 1,000 BC a small group of Rakshasa allied with a 'rebel' group of Yaksha, giving birth to a migration from the Caucasian region to Middle East which changed radically the life of the human populations in the entire region, profoundly transforming social relationships and creating new mythologies, which spoke of cruelties and demons, giants of enormous physical power and monsters - that required rituals and blood sacrifices. To those superhuman beings were given different names - both collective like Elohim, Annunaki and Titans, and individual such as Marduk, Aryaman and so on.

The new religion overthrew the matriarchal cultures and introduced rape as a weapon of control, punishment and intimidation over women and the whole social group. Slavery and body modifications as a mark of recognition and belonging: circumcision, extension of the skull, tattooing, teeth reduction, deformation of various body parts such as lips, earlobes and so on, through the insertion of foreign objects. Domestic animals became private property, closed in fences or cages or fastened up and butchered as it pleased. The Sumerian tradition affirms that genetic experiments

were made, to create animals and humans for the dominators' purposes. Both human and animal sacrifice rituals were introduced, providing a caste of privileged priests that served as intermediaries between ordinary human beings and their dominators.

The ancient tradition of the alpha-male, chosen every year as tribal leader after a demonstration of physical and mental strength was transformed into absolutist hereditary monarchy, in which the hybrid descendants of the dominators, raised to the rank of demigods, were crossbred between them to maintain as much as possible the superhuman genetic heritage.

To protect them a caste of sired warriors was created, denied of any kind of independence and organized hierarchically in an identical form to that of the armies that we know today. They developed more efficient and cruel weapons; they organized military expeditions to conquer a larger territory to gather fresh resources, slaves, animals and tributes of various natures.###

Riccardo and Giuliano nodded. ###Yes, fundamentally this coincides with our information.###

Maximilian went pale. ###So these familiars are also trained to use weapons!###

The doctor's friend smiled. ###Not all of them are experts as you fear... And we train too!###

JosÃ¨ intervened. ###What is the link with extraterrestrials? From what you have said so far these races are terrestrials even if not human.###

###They have their own planets too,### Riccardo replied, ###with little natural resources, so they migrate only to raid on different worlds and to obtain what they need - sand for silicon, gold and ###livestock### human and animal. They have spaceships even very big, but their technology is so forward that they can virtually make them invisible. From them the American government got the idea of stealth crafts and others like microwaves, silicon chips and things that have not been released to the masses.###

JosÃ¨ seemed to be hit by a thought. ###In south America they talk about a monster that many consider extraterrestrial...###

Riccardo quickly beat him. ###The chupacabra... yes, they're Reptilians.###

He looked around and decided that it was necessary to explain better. ###For some decades in the area there have been reports about attacks on livestock, especially horses, cattle and goats. The animals are strangely mutilated surgically, as no beast of prey could do and only certain organs are missing: usually genitals, rectum, or udders or eyes. Often they're completely bled but there's no trace of blood around the body. Just one or three holes generally on the neck or the chest of the victim, more or less as large as a human finger; sometimes marks on the back legs that make you think that the animal has been transported from a different place relative to the place where it was found. There aren't other signs neither of violence that could explain in which way the animal was slaughtered and there aren't human footprints, or predatory beasts, nor of vehicles and no sign from the animals of resistance, but there have been measured high levels of radioactivity and traces found of fluorescent substances.###

Taking advantage of Riccardo's pause, Giuliano intervened. "In the areas affected by these mysterious and macabre events, often there have been seen unidentified flying objects and strange beings that looked like enormous lizards that walk like kangaroos. All witnesses described a strong scent of sulfur, red shiny eyes and an acute hissing sound that causes nausea and might have hypnotic effects.###

I looked at my watch. It was nearly two in the morning.

###Okay, you've been creeping me out enough for today,### I concluded with a pulled smile. The spell broke and everyone looked immediately more relaxed.

###Right,### Nirva said. ###I think we all should go to bed... and let's hope not to have nightmares!###

We all laughed and emptied our glasses before we got up and went back to our rooms.

“I suggest we all take it easy tomorrow, and maybe visit the city...” the doctor said. “Not only we need it after a long flight, but it will also give the impression that we're just common tourists to whoever may watch us.”

“Sure,” JosÃ´ said. “This is our holiday and even though we also have a mission in Nepal - find Govindananda and make him explain his mysterious dedication - we have all the time to relax and have a look around the place. It would be a pity to waste the chance.”

Riccardo nodded. “We'll be happy to be your tour guide; I have been to India many times. And if you want we could check the tiny book the monk gave you and maybe we could help you solve the mystery...”

“God knows!” It seemed quite a good idea, after all.

Contrary to what I feared, I didn't have any problem falling asleep and I didn't have any nightmares about red eyes or big vampire lizards that smelled like sulfur.

But I had a strange dream anyway. It felt like the sequel of the one I had during my first visit in Nepal, in 1991.

I was again lying naked sunbathing in a cornfield, on a carpet made of rose petals. Suddenly a woman's voice started to sing Hindu songs and I sat up straight with my legs crossed, my hands leaning on my knees in a yoga position... palms up, thumb and index finger united.

This time, just one man came in my presence: he looked like the boy I met in the Good Food restaurant in Kathmandu. He gave me a letter and disappeared. In the dream, I opened immediately the letter and read it, You were a butterfly, I looked for you, I found you. We flew together, for a long time, do you remember?! Our lives pass quickly, but we can still fly.

I woke up startled, all sweaty. The sun was rising. JosÃ´ heard me moving and opened one eye. “Is everything fine, little monkey?”

“Yes, my love, just a dream...”

He turned his back to me and I fell asleep again, cuddling up to him.

THE DISCOVERY OF DELHI

We got up quite late that morning; we were on holiday and didn't want to rush.

We met Nirvanananda and Max at the restaurant, for a quick brunch... We couldn't call it breakfast, quite after 11:30 am. A kind and smiling waiter brought us a menu in English and we studied it for several minutes before ordering. There were three sections - Indian, Chinese and Continental. JosÃ and Maximilian confabulated for a while and laughed a little. In the end we ordered French toasts with apples and vanilla, Double-decker sandwich that unfortunately resulted non-vegetarian, Cheese bread rolls, Tossed salad and Vegetable stew. We excluded the Breakfast sausage casserole (the dish that raised the most irony in JosÃ), the Pasta 'all'arabiatta', with one r, one b and two t to compensate, the English pickled onions and the Mushroom with tomato and white wine sauce, which didn't sound that good. The Lasagna in the menu wasn't available so we didn't insist further, but we asked for an assortment of fresh fruit juice, tea and milk served separately and a big thermos of hot black American coffee.

While we were trying different pseudo-occidental specialties, Riccardo and Giuliano joined us.

'We talked to the travel agency of the hotel,' the doctor said. 'A private hotel car will drive us around to visit the most interesting places of the city and then tomorrow we can calmly go to the internal flight airport; there are direct flights from Delhi to Kathmandu every day, at 7:30 am and 1:40 pm with Indian Airlines. They arrive respectively at 9:10 am and 3:25 pm, with enough time to complete the formalities of the local visa and settle down in the hotel before visiting the city.'

'Great,' JosÃ said. 'We'll be very glad to let you accompany us.'

Giuliano got the menu; he quickly scrolled it, and then ordered a 'Masala dosa' for both, with chai and Plain dahi and Jalebi for dessert.

The waiter understood immediately, smiled and hurried to the kitchen. In less than five minutes later he came back with two colleagues, bringing with him two huge crispy rolls filled with potatoes with an appetizing look, two small plates with strange golden hoops soaked in syrup, various bowls of what looked like sauces and cups of steaming hot Indian tea.

I had already finished my French Toast - sliced bread dipped beaten egg and pan-fried - with cooked apples, but I left the sweetish round sandwiches filled with cheese spread, the unidentified vegetables and the withered salad to order 'what they had ordered', followed by the rest of the group.

The doctor and Riccardo smiled. 'When you go abroad, it's always better to choose the local dishes from the menu. At least you hope they can cook them... few Indians go abroad and the cooks often adapt recipes from books according to their imagination, the available ingredients and according to the taste of the majority of their customers... which are Indians.'

I watched them whilst they were eating their gigantic rolls using their hands without embarrassment and I realized that it really was the easiest way to do it. We found out that the Masala Dosa was served with two accompanying bowls, containing a delicious coconut Chatni and a quite liquid pulse soup called Sambar. The local Anglo-Indian name of the thick plain yogurt was Plain Dahi.

I was tempted to have second helpings, but I held back. I moved on to the Jalebi: the syrup was sweet in an inebriating way and tasted of saffron and butter... the golden hoops were crispy light twists made of fried pastry that still contained warm syrup. I licked my fingers without shame... then I rinsed them in the small bowls of tepid water that in the meantime had arrived and that I had seen our friends using just before.

At the end of the meal we got up satisfied and we left full of enthusiasm to explore the capital... The Tata Sumo of the hotel was waiting for us at the entrance: it was more like a minibus than a car. Giuliano took leave from us saying that he needed to make some phone calls, Riccardo got on the large

front seat next to the driver, JosÃ and I got comfy on the back seat that was large enough for four people. Nirva and Max took their places at the back, where there were two more seats, one opposite the other and room for eventual baggage, where they placed my trustworthy folded wheelchair.

The first stop was Jama Masjid, the main mosque in Delhi, which we saw only from the outside. Carrying on towards north, within the city, after we overcame the labyrinth of alleys of the bazaar around the mosque we arrived at the famous Red Fort, an enormous complex made of red stone faded through time and too many stairs for my legs. JosÃ stayed in the car and kept me company while Nirvanananda, Maximilian and Riccardo ventured on the inside. When they came back, they talked enthusiastically about the huge backyard and showed us the photos that they took with the Polaroid.

Then the chauffeur went back in direction of the hotel but we proceeded towards the Lotus Temple, inaugurated in 1986 as the worship center for the Bahai Faith but open to everyone. Built in the shape of a gigantic lotus flower, it's one of the principal tourist attractions of Delhi... and in fact there were a lot of people visiting it. Since it was easily accessible for my wheelchair I decided to take a tour too, pushed by JosÃ and Nirva in turns, while Riccardo was talking about this religious movement founded in Persia from a certain BahÃullÃh around 1848 to reconcile all the traditional faiths of the world. In the Lotus temple everyone can enter and read or recite their own holy Scriptures, but musical instruments aren't allowed, you can't give speeches or sermons and there aren't rituals nor holy images or altars.

The next stop was the Qutab Minar, the most famous minaret in Delhi. Riccardo showed us how it was built with the pieces of several Hindu temples that Muslims have destroyed. I was tired and started to feel unwell and there was a question popping in my mind with growing insistence. I decided to drag it out.

â##Sorry, Riccardo, but I thought that India had a majority of Hindus. Where are all the temples? Or maybe we can't visit them because we're tourists?â##

He looked at me with a sad smile and shook his head. â##No, Stefania, there are no ancient Hindu temples in Delhi. Actually there used to be so many, but they were consistently destroyed during the Muslim domination, from which India never recovered completely. And according to their system, as they knocked down a temple they built a mosque or some other building on the ruins, so that Hindus couldn't access even in the future. The same thing that Christians did in Italy with the majority of pagan temples...

The only Hindu temples that you can find in Delhi were built after the English took the city from the Muslims.â##

My expression must have said it all, because Riccardo quickly added: â##But there's a really small Hindu temple that survived, because it has always been hidden. It's in the downtown, in Connaught Place: I'll take you to visit it.â##

We left the minaret without regrets and since it was on the way for Connaught Place we passed by India Gate, the enormous local arc of triumph that, judging from our driver's enthusiasm, it seemed to be a very important touristic attraction. I imagine it worked especially for Indian tourists that came to visit the capital from other states.

I refused to visit Gandhi's mausoleum and the presidential palace so we made it to Connaught Place around five in the afternoon. Riccardo brought us straight away to the little Hanuman temple, in Baba Karak Singh Road, at almost 300 yards from the main square. He explained to us that this was one of the only five ancient temples that survived - the others were the one of Kali in south Delhi, the one of Yogamaya nearby Kutub Minar, the temple of Bhairava in Purana Qila and the Nili Chatri Mahadev temple in Nigambodh Ghat out of the city's wall. The one in Baba Karak Singh Road survived because during the Muslim domination the believers put the Islamic half-moon on the dome... giving the impression that it was a building used by the Muhammadan fanatics. The picture of baby Hanuman, to whom it's dedicated, is only partially visible from the entrance of the structure and this, I thought, must have been another useful factor.

While Riccardo told us the story of the temple, some old men sat in the principal room kept singing Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram. When I turned to watch, one of them smiled at me toothless.

â##The song is going on interrupted from the first august 1964,â## Riccardo said. â##It also is on the Guinness World Records' book.â##

Nirvanananda went to kneel before the image of the God and promised us that in the car he would give us more clarifications about the character.

The peaceful and devotional atmosphere in the temple lifted my soul and, when we got back in the square half an hour later, I felt better.

Connaught Place was the most famous square of Delhi, full of stores and restaurants. Walking slowly and carefully, on JosÃ`â##s arm on the right and supported by Nirva on the left, I was able to visit the whole area. Then we got into a brasserie in a sub-basement shopping center.

It was already 6 pm, several hours from our brunch and I felt definitely hungry. This time I let Riccardo deal with the orders and I did not regret it. The table at which we were sat almost immediately filled up with many plates of various dimensions, containing a variety of delights. With pen and paper in hand he made a list copying from the plasticized menu. Paratha - grilled wraps filled with potatoes, Puri - thin crunchy spheres completely empty, Naan - bread slightly risen filled with fresh cheese, Pakora - fritters of beer-battered vegetables, Tikka - potatoes and peas nuggets, Palak Panir - diced curd in a spinach puree, Samosa - pastry puffs filled with spiced potatoes, Dahi Vada - fried salted bagels with yogurt sauce, Dal Kachori - round puffs filled with a creamed beans, and a series of assorted vegetables with various sauces and spices.

We went back to the hotel tired but satisfied, at about nine pm, ready to go to bed: the day after we had to leave early.

NEPAL

Riccardo explained to us that from Delhi to Kathmandu there were more than one thousand kilometers, of hills and mountains with rock-sliding and dangerous roads. By bus it would have taken forty-eight hours of exhausting travel. Renting a cab it would have taken *only* twelve hours, to which had to be added the unspecified time of waiting at the border between India and Nepal, because the gates opened only in certain hours. In addition, you had to wait at least two hours to get the visa.

The day before we paid the hotel check and made the photo ID for the visa while we were at Connaught Place, so we just had to get on the 7:30 am plane from the national flights terminal of the Indira Gandhi International Airport. It took less than twenty minutes to get to the airport, because the streets were completely deserted. At ten to seven we were at the check-in and we got on board without any problem. By now I felt like a veteran of flights...

Unfortunately that feeling didn't last long. The craft that should have taken us from Delhi to Kathmandu was much smaller and my claustrophobia returned overbearingly.

The flight lasted less than two hours but was harder to bear than the one from Italy to India. It took all of *José's* commitment and Nirvanananda's help, who also sat next to me, to distract me and helped me relax. When the plane landed at the Tribhuvan International Airport, at 9:15 am, only five minutes late on the schedule, my companions ran out of all the jokes they could remember. In the moment we got down the stairs of the plane I thanked my lucky stars for my wheelchair because I felt that my legs were very weak.

At the immigration office of the airport we filled the paperwork for the visa, we added the two ID photos we had ready and we paid in dollars as the local legislation required. Everything was smooth as silk and the cops were kind, so little by little I got over my crisis. Friendly chatting with the guards at the airport, Riccardo explained to them that during our trip in Kathmandu we had to meet a famous local Hindu saint, Baba Pasupathinath who, according to our friends who'd visited him recently during their journey, had healing powers. I raised a shy, sad smile and the policemen were moved. They detached one of their agents to escort us to Vaikuntha Ashram and make sure that everything worked properly.

The monks of the ashram were glad to see me again. They remembered me and told me there was room for everyone. But Govindananda had left... for Puri! Yes, they had an ashram there too, not far from the beach, near Konark. No, they didn't know when he would come back.

I consulted my group and we decided to stay the night at the Hyatt Regency Kathmandu. The purpose of my permanence in Nepal faded and even though the monks of the ashram were nice to me, this time I have a specific mission to accomplish.

We visited the temple, socialized with a couple of foreign guests of the ashram, took advantage of the great breakfast that was offered to us and around noon we rented a small rickshaw caravan, headed to the Hyatt Regency Kathmandu, a five star hotel where, like good tourists, we basked in the luxury. Riccardo and Giuliano insisted to pay for our stay in the hotel, claiming that we were in some kind of way working for their cause and in the city there weren't decent hotels: the choice was between luxury and hovels. There was no middle ground. I must say that our protests were really weak and lasted for a really short time... We inquired about the return flights for the next day to Delhi and we all booked, including the doctor and his friend, Indian Airlines 4:15 pm flight with arrival at 5:30 pm. While we paid our tickets with various credit cards, Riccardo winked at me with a smile and I returned it right back. A great stratagem, if someone did a research on our movements.

It was a nice day. The first visit was at the Buddhanath Stupa, a few minutes away from the hotel - the most famous sacred Lamaist place out of actual Tibet. Then we went to visit the temple of Pashupatinath, where unfortunately we weren't allowed to enter, the Sayambhunath Stupa and the

house of Devi Kumri, in Durbar Square. A kid that presented himself as a local tour guide told us to put some rupees in the specific box, so that the living baby goddess would show up at the window of the first door to bless us. After a few minutes in fact the girl appeared: a small sweet and serious face girl surrounded by an elaborate and high red crown and wreath of colored flowers, the eyes enlarged and elongated by a heavy black outline, the lips red and all of the forehead completely covered in red and yellow, with a third eye applied in the middle.

Riccardo took us around the market stalls and various alleyways, which looked somehow familiar from my last stay. We visited a series of places that I had never seen before; I wrote the names which I can't connect anymore to the photos we took: Guhesvari, Akasha Bhairava, Hanuman Dhoka, Kashtamandap, Ashoka Vinayak, Jaishi Deval, Balaju Budhanikantha, Changu Narayana, and Shekha Narayana. But I recognized a little temple dedicated to Shiva that I visited the first time and the temple of Durga, I learned it was called Dakshinakali now.

Nirva had got rid of the sad expression he'd had over the disappointment of not finding Govindananda, Max and Josã were super busy taking pictures and commenting amused by every smart and naughty move of the monkeys in every corner. One of them seemed in love with my boyfriend and didn't leave him alone! Clearly at one point my look must have been so wicked that when I screamed "I'm jealous!" the poor monkey ran away with its tail between its legs, after stealing two bananas from Maximilian's backpack. We burst out laughing seeing his face because the fruit was closed with the zipper and not one of us had noticed anything! It was hilarious.

"Now we have two less bananas and I'm very hungry little monkey... where will you take us to eat?" started Josã.

"In a chic place!" I smiled maliciously. And took them to the Good Food.

Actually the Good Food was a clean place, I have always eaten well and it was quiet, but you couldn't define it as an elegant restaurant. I gladly noticed that in five years the management hadn't changed, the woman of the place clearly had a great memory and greeted me as if time had never passed. She'd lost weight and seemed in really good shape, happy and full of energy. Something good must have happened to her... who knows!

Even this time she tried to speak in our language: "Italiani simpatici!" and showed us two tables of four, adjacent, that with a small effort could be brought even closer. Riccardo and Giuliano said that, if we didn't mind, they had work to do and pulled out a file with a pack of papers with sketches and charts. They chose a table for two at the bottom of the room, ordered a local vegetarian menu and soon enough were profoundly soaked in a conversation in whispers.

We let them discuss freely and we focused on our food. Even the menu was quite the same as five years ago and I ordered wraps with cheese and soup of beans. Max and Josã pepperoni pasta and fried chicken - maybe tired of vegetarian food - Nirvanananda a kind of fried rice with vegetables and diced fried curd of milk, pan-fried vegetables and chickpeas and wraps made of wholegrain flour.

We ordered one bottle of red Kamasutra wine for the two meat-eaters and a jug of a salty Indian drink called 'Lassi' made of yogurt, very smooth and refreshing, for me and Nirva; it also had seeds of cumin and a little bit of lemon juice and mint leaves. Josã convinced me to taste a bit of wine, after that I already felt tipsy! Everyone made fun of me and I acted offended. I wanted to get my own back and, because I was tipsy, I started mocking Josã and Maximilian out loud about the fact that they didn't completely take a break from their murderous diet. It was a topic that Nirvanananda and I touched once in a while, without putting too much pressure on, because after all we wanted them to reach that solution in a natural way and not by choice. We didn't want to nag them nor to seem fanatics and I liked to think that in life giving a good example was usually the best way to assert ourselves and make people listen, not just hear.

Josã realized he'd made a mistake to insist with the wine and Max rolled his eyes upwards - afterwards I realized I'd not made a respectable spectacle of myself.

When the waitress came back with the second courses, JosÃ© and Nirva made her bring a coffee for me. It worked rather well because, when the others finished their seconds and the mango dessert arrived, I had a clear head.

When we were paying the check, the owner of the diner remembered about a letter that she had put aside for me... I couldn't believe it. I opened it with my heart pounding, imagining who could have left it. Inside there was a note with an Indian phone number and signed: Pedro.

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