

Escape from Toronto

*Should guilty seek asylum here,
Like one pardoned, he becomes free from sin.
Should a sinner make his way to this mansion,
All his past sins are to be washed away.
The sight of this mansion creates sorrowing sighs;
And the sun and the moon shed tears from their eyes.
In this world this edifice has been made;
To display thereby the creator's glory.*

Emperor Shah Jahan

Chapter 1

Sunday, India

She's never felt so white before. Standing in the middle of a dirt side street, with her maternity business suit and shiny leather briefcase, thousands of brown-skinned people moving past and around her. She is thirty weeks pregnant and her large belly is hidden under her stylishly cut grey business suit. She's been alternating this and another maternity suit for the past two weeks of her pregnancy. She is hot in these clothes, in this temperature. It's still only ten in the morning, but the temperature has already risen to around 28°C. Bikes and rickshaws, a camel, two oxen, and whining motorbikes that whip in and around the constantly shifting mass of brown-skinned humanity. A bead of sweat runs from between her shoulder blades, the length of her spine, before being absorbed by the elastic waistband of her skirt. She had stopped to buy a bottle of water. The guide had told her not to stop, told them all not to go off on their own. But she'd been followed, handled and guided since the moment she got off the plane and driven to her opulent hotel. The hotel where a year earlier, masked men and teenaged boys walked into the lobby, restaurant and upper floors and started shooting white people. A simultaneous attack to increase the body count before its inevitable and brutal suppression, carried out at several hotels, nightclubs and public locations. An attack targeting people like her, people doing what she is currently doing: business. The hotel that costs 11,581 rupees a night, the equivalent of \$C300. A bargain by Canadian standards, given the splendour of the hotel, the services provided, cloth not paper towels in the marble bathrooms, the attention to detail at every turn. But this is where the division of the country becomes clear. The average person in India makes 20,000 rupees. The average person working on the call centre systems integration project she is here to lead makes about 600,000 rupees. As her Indian counterpart on the project had explained it, "India is not a poor country, it just has a lot of poor people in it." She is currently

carrying 15,000 rupees in the leather briefcase that she has clutched against her side, along with her passport, Visa, laptop, Blackberry, iPod and hand sanitizer.

She tries to swallow the panic that is rising in her. She is white and rich and pregnant and lost and completely dependent on her tour guide remembering her, having counted heads, like taking children onto public transportation for a school trip. She volunteered recently to be a parent on her daughter's class trip to a local heritage museum. Took the day off work to be a good parent. She and the other parents were responsible for three children each, getting them on and off the subway, keeping them close crossing the street. The trip had left her exhausted, amazed at what teachers do every day. The whole trip she was terrified that she would lose one. Even then, she had brought along her Blackberry. At one point she found herself reading a message and when she looked up, two of the children were gone. She started to turn, was about to call out, when she heard the giggles from behind the fence they were standing next to. "Don't you ever do that again!" she'd said, suppressing the guilt, vowing to turn off the Blackberry, to pay better attention to the things that really matter. What she hadn't said, was "Don't you know that at any second you die? You could be shot? Run over, abducted? Don't you understand how vulnerable you are?" She doesn't want to pass her fear onto her daughter.

And now here she is. Standing somewhere in Agra. Lost and vulnerable. One breath away from being kidnapped, killed. She could simply vanish and it wouldn't matter.

"Excuse me, madam?" The voice behind her is impossibly polite, with the extra peaks and valleys of the Indian intonation. "You are looking lost. I am guessing you are looking for the Taj Mahal."

"Yes. I managed to get myself separated from my group. I can't remember the name of the tour company."

"It is okay. Please, let me show you the way."

She is hesitant, suspicious. She has heard too many stories: people swindled, framed with drugs by the police, drugged and waking up in a bathtub of ice with their kidneys or ovaries removed. Trying to compare the risk of being on her own with the risk of trusting this man standing in front of her, with loose white dhoti wrapped around his waist, cotton kurta open at the side, leather sandals, mustache, clear brown eyes, smile, hands clasped behind back.

“Thank you. That's a very kind offer.”

“I am practicing speaking with foreigners. I hope to leave this place someday. Please, follow me.”

He walks quickly, several feet ahead of her. She has to walk quickly to keep up as he darts around people, avoiding collisions effortlessly while she waits for the ox cart, or group of people, or motorcycle, or canvas-covered truck, or group of children, or gangly pack of rusting bicycles that never seem to collide, to pass, before rushing to catch up with him. Her ankles throb, she holds her belly as she hustles after the man who is able to remain impossibly white in the midst of the dust and animal shit. Her own shoes are dusty and scuffed. She is breathing heavy, her gait erratic as she tries to contain her fear.

She loses sight of her guide as an old man leading four oxen crosses her path. When the way is clear again, she has lost sight of the man, no sense of where he has gone. None of the streets are straight, no grid system here. Her chest is starting to tighten when she sees the man waving from next to a building. She smiles, and hurries quickly after him as he once more disappears around the corner. She is becoming irritated, in spite of the generosity, and is about to call out to the man to slow down, please, when she turns the corner onto a larger street and is suddenly confronted with, bowled over by, the front gate of the Taj Mahal. The noise and chaos of the Agra street falls away as the white and brown marble building rises above.

“It is very beautiful, is it not?”

She is speechless for a moment. Unable to cut through the moment of pure, genuine awe, in order to reach out and grasp, then form, words that might in some way relay the incredible experience of taking in such crystalline, sparkling, aesthetic perfection.

“I don't know if I have ever seen something so beautiful. It takes your breath away.”

“Yes, it takes your breath away.” He is repeating the phrase, turning it over in his mouth as if to taste the meaning.

They share a moment, side by side, looking at the magnificent building, he in traditional Indian garb, her in

classic business suit.

She snaps out of the moment, looks at her guide. "I'm sorry, I think I see my group up ahead." She pulls her wallet out of her shoulder-strap briefcase and unsnaps the lid. "I can't thank you enough", she says, pulling out 100 rupees, wondering if 100 rupees is enough. She hesitates, sees the picture of Mahatma Gandhi's smiling face, then pulls out another 100 rupee note.

The man holds up both hands and shakes them at her vigorously, "No, no, no, missus. I am happy to bring you to this place."

"Please. I don't know what I would have done without you." She holds out the two 100 rupee bills between them.

The man smiles, sadly maybe, and shakes head. "No, thank you missus. I am practicing my English."

"Well. Thank you. I didn't even ask your name."

"My name is Hardeep. And what is yours?"

"Karen. My name is Karen."

"It is a pleasure to meet you Karen."

"You too, Hardeep."

They turn from each other, the Indian man back into the dense jungle of diesel fumes and street stalls, the business woman towards the pristine lines of the Taj Mahal. Suddenly she turns and calls to the man.

"Hardeep?"

“Yes, Karen.”

“Have you ever worked in a call centre? Answering phones?”

“I have studied to provide in-depth IT support to challenged end-user groups.” He smiles.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Could you write your name and a way of getting hold of you on the back of one of my business cards?” She is fumbling in her briefcase, trying to find a card, a pen, worried about losing her group once again. “I’m sorry, I can’t find a pen.”

“Perhaps I could e-mail it to you?”

When she looks up, a Blackberry has appeared from the folds of his clothing.

“Yes, why don’t you do that.” She hands him a business card. He smiles. She grimaces, feeling stupid, Western. “I’ll look forward to hearing from you, Hardeep.”

They turn away from each other. By the time she looks over her shoulder in the direction he went, he has disappeared, reabsorbed by the life of the street. She stops for a moment, looks at her hair in the mirror in her wallet, pops a mint into her mouth and hurries to rejoin her tour group standing on the steps of the main building, about to enter the mausoleum. She leans over to a colleague, the Accenture consultant helping to structure the outsourcing deal.

“What did I miss?”

“Oh, not much, just a bunch of history and dates and stuff. Where’d you go?”

“Oh, nowhere. Just discovering a bit of the off-the-beaten-track India.”

“Yeah, well, I’d watch that. It’s not always all that safe here. It’s not like back home.”

“Right. Thanks.”

They both turn their heads to the front again, where the tour guide is speaking.

“... an architectural expression of eternal love. When his second wife died in childbirth, The Shah was so overwrought at the loss that he built this building, so that he, and others would always remember the purity of their love. Some say that when you enter the building that you can actually feel the power of that love. Marriages have been saved and families re-united by the beauty of this monument ...”

Karen looks up at the perfect white cupola, tilts her head a little to the side, then smiles to herself. She takes out her Blackberry, does a quick mental calculation for time difference, then hesitates with her thumb over the dial button. Instead she pushes a different button and keys in the following message.

At Taj Mahal. Amazing. Thinking of you building house for us. Love and miss you. Please kiss Robin. See you soon. Karen/Mom

When she looks up, she has fallen behind again, the group having moved into the inside of the building. Karen puts away her device and hurries after them.

Sunday, Huron County

“Dad! Dad!”

Robin is the first awake, as always. Just like her name.

Their bed is a foam mattress on the plywood subfloor. They tried an air mattress, but it sprang a leak the first night they used it. They woke up in the middle of the night flat on the hard ground.

“Dad!”

Sleeping with his daughter is one of the pleasures of these weekends in the country. He knows this is probably the last year before she no longer wants to sleep in the same bed as her dad. She already wants privacy in the bath. He'd been shocked the first time she covered up when he'd walked in on her changing for bed.

“Come here! You gotta see this.”

He understands that there is something outside, that is why she is whispering so urgently. He rolls off the mattress and crawls on his hands and knees over to where Robin is looking out the window.

“Look!”

He peeks his head above the bottom of the window ledge – the wall of windows for passive solar heating that went in last week, finally completing the shell of the house – and sees, not ten feet from the house, eight wild turkeys, walking around the place as if they owned it. There is some low-lying mist hovering about six inches above the ground, so that all they can see are the feet of the turkeys, and then the upper parts of their bodies, heads and necks sticking above the fog.

“What are they?”

“Those are wild turkeys.”

“There's no such thing!”

“Okay, they’re red-chinned dallywappers.”

“Da-a-ad.” The exasperated voice.

“You asked.”

“They look so weird!”

“Yes. Yes, they do.” Long stick legs, bare heads and bright red wattles hanging down. When they hear Brian and Robin, they startle, walking quickly away in zigzags, leading with their strange bare heads. Within seconds, they have disappeared into the mist and undergrowth. Amazing that such huge, awkward birds could disappear so completely, so quickly. Amazing they’ve survived evolution.

“My coffee ready yet?”

“Da-a-ad.”

He and his daughter are at the country house. Brian finished putting up the bales a week ago and he and Robin are working on the adobe stucco. Mostly he is working on the stucco while she reads, plays her Nintendo DS, or goes crawling around looking for bugs or cool sticks or fossils. She has yet to find a legitimate fossil, but Brian hasn’t had the heart to tell her that what she finds are probably nothing more than funny shaped rocks. She had wanted to take the last specimen to the ROM, because it was shaped like an arrowhead. He’s just been stalling on that one, coming up with lame excuses not to go, without flat out refusing. And what does he know, maybe it is an arrowhead and he’s just cynical grown-up. This is where he usually stops the train of thought and focuses his attention on something else.

This is the first weekend that the electrical system is fully up and working. The propane stove got hooked up the week before and the tank filled. There had been a bill for \$1000 worth of propane slid under the front door. There’s a composting toilet and woodstove for additional heat. It’s the May long weekend and the two are

celebrating. They've gone up while Karen is away in India. The nights are still cold, but the days are warming up and there's a loosening, a feeling of ease that comes with the warmth.

“Can I have some hot chocolate?”

“Sure thing, Beaner. We're living in the lap of luxury now. What do you want for breakfast? I have cereal, toast, bacon and eggs, you name it.”

“Can I have pasta?”

“Sure. You can have pasta. Why don't you go get some wood from outside and we'll fire up the woodstove?”

“Okay!”

Robin skips out the side door. Brian watches her as she goes. Tries to remember what it feels like to skip. Then turns his attention to the stove. He fills his only pot with water from the water cooler he had delivered from Culligan, puts it on the stove and turns the knob to the right. The stove clicks several times before the blue flame flares from the burner and spreads out across the bottom of the pot as he puts it down. He goes into one of the back rooms of the house, the cold storage which he has already stocked with Mr. Noodles, pasta and sauce and giant Costco containers of salt, oregano, olives and other staples. The back rooms are away from the wall of windows. When he sat down with the architect to design the house, one of the things he'd said was, “I want this house to run itself.” The design had used the heat of the sun as the main energy source. Facing south on the side of a hill, they'd built it to absorb every last ray of heat in the summer when the sun was low, with an overhang that provided shade when the sun was high in summer. The rooms at the back, away from the windows were for laundry, cold storage, and one guest bedroom they could close off in winter.

When he returns with the pasta, the water is boiling on the stove. This simple thing, water boiling, gives Brian enormous pleasure. Water boiling on the stove he put in, in the house he is building, on the land he chose. He can't wait to put in the garden – it's his surprise for Robin this weekend. In his bag he has several packets of seeds: lettuce, carrots, beans and peas. They've never had a garden in the city. He's always been afraid of what's in the ground, what toxic substances might have been leaching into the soil. Here, he and Robin can plant a garden and watch it grow. What could be better than that?

It's been a long journey getting here. Brian is a Water Infrastructure engineer for the city of Toronto. Was. He still forgets that he no longer works for the City. Holding together the leaking pipes, keeping the water pumping and the shit flowing for a city of 2.5 million people. It was a frustrating job. He spent more time finding ways to cut budgets than to do what he was actually trained for. For years he raised the alarms about the state of the sewer infrastructure. By the models he ran, more than half the water pumped at source escaped through cracks and leaks in the pipes. Fugitive losses, they're called. Which is significant given that a full third of the City's power bill goes directly towards keeping those pumps running. The entire underground system is held together with binder twine and duct tape, but nobody wants to hear that. Nobody wants to hear that we'll all be wading in our own shit within five years if we don't invest in infrastructure. And that's in a Business as Usual scenario, never mind that every time there's a major rain storm it overflows capacity and we dump raw sewage into the lake, never mind that the number of severe rainstorms has been rising steadily over the past few years, never mind that we have an aging population and a shrinking tax base, never mind that the fastest growing source of water pollution is pharmaceuticals, including estrogen from birth control pills being peed into the water and that while we have water treatments for harmful bacteria, we don't have treatments for pharmaceuticals, we don't even measure that, never mind all that. He often thinks of Cassandra. In his degree program, he was forced to take one humanities course, and he had chosen Greek Mythology. Cassandra's punishment for having offended Apollo was to be able to foresee the future, but never have anyone believe her when she would raise the alarm about her premonitions. That's what working for the city was like.

Six months ago he took a package. He had seen the writing on the wall and it spelled collapse. The new mayor planned to save hundreds of millions of dollars through attrition – encouraging people to retire and not hiring anyone to replace them. Smart.

It seemed fair. He had held up his end of the bargain, working a job he hated for the good of the family. At first, when Karen was home for the year after Robin was born, her company topped up the first six months, but after that, only what the government provided. And then daycare, which was close to \$1200 a month. On top of their mortgage. After her first year back, his wife decided she wanted to do her Executive MBA. It was a huge commitment. They'd decided on a live-in nanny, while Karen studied. She promised to finish it in two years, but in the end it was four years. At one point she'd threatened to quit the program, because she hated what it was doing to them. It was the only time he really lost his temper. "You'd better finish that fucking degree, because I am never doing this for you again." He instantly regretted the words, but there it was. Robin was six by the time she finished. Halfway through grade one. She and her father had taken to fishing to pass the time. Weekends when Karen was in a classroom, running the numbers on financial models and studying case studies of strategic

mergers and acquisitions, Brian and Robin would head out into countryside surrounding the city. At first, they would visit the local streams and rivers that dotted the countryside north of the city where he grew up. He knew that each of these streams funneled into the various rivers that flow through, and in many cases under, the City of Toronto, where they eventually emptied themselves into Lake Ontario, where each particle of water could spend up to fifty years before eventually making its way to the Atlantic. When she was four, they would look at flowers and collect smooth rocks in the water, or look for frogs, or spend the afternoon flipping over larger rocks to look for crayfish. When she was five, he bought Robin her own fishing rod. It was a plastic Spongebob rod that got hopelessly tangled the first time she tried to cast it. The next day they went to Canadian Tire and bought an inexpensive collapsible rod with a pushbutton reel. That day, she caught her first fish, a nice-sized small mouth bass. When she saw the fish, she shrieked and dropped the rod into the water, Brian having to run out up to his thighs to catch it in time before the bass dragged the whole rod and reel down under. They spent the summer packing up first thing on a Saturday and heading out to fish the day away. The next spring, Brian planned a weekend fishing trip. He rented a canoe from an outfitter, went to the local Canadian Tire for some supplies and headed out for the opening of trout season. It rained the whole time. Couldn't light a fire. Didn't catch fish. So, he went back and bought proper gear. A campstove, a proper 120 litre canoe pack, Gore-tex everything, an emergency kit, even a little backpack for Robin to carry on portages. He bought a used canoe off Craigslist. The next trip he planned for the whole family. At the last minute, there was a network outage at the contact centre and Karen had been forced to stay behind. So he and Robin went on their own.

Every trip they took, they would drive down a different side road to get home. In the back of his mind, he was dreaming of an escape. Looking at houses, looking at land, imagining what it would be like to wake up in the country, drink his coffee looking over a rolling landscape, watching Robin be picked up by the schoolbus at the end of the road. At the very least a weekend place. Robin's job kept her tied to the city, and frankly so did his. So he dreamt of a piece of land. He tried not to let Robin in on it. Tried to hide that her mother's dreams and her father's dreams were growing farther and farther apart. So, of course she knew.

"Daddy, if we move to the country, I'm coming with you." She was six when she said that.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't want to stay in the city with mom."

A pause to assess. He is caught off-guard, feels foolish that he doesn't give his daughter credit for her intelligence. He always tries to treat her like a full person, not like a kid, but then something like this happens

and he realizes that she has continued to grow and he's barely keeping up.

“We're a family, Beaner. Whatever we do, we're going to do it together.”

“Okay.” They spent the next fifteen minutes driving in silence, staring out their respective windows at all the land passing them by.

One weekend, they stayed out an extra day. He managed to get a signal in the park and sent two text messages: one to his wife, the other to work. Both said the same thing. “Extending absence. Unavoidable. Back tomorrow.”

When he got home, there was an offer waiting for him at work. Six months salary, lump sum payment with a little extra for accrued vacation pay and whatnot. He took the package. Formed his plan on the way home, shaped the arguments, thought through what he would say. He would take the cash and use it to buy land. Then he would take a year to build the house. He'd been researching straw bale houses and felt confident he could build one. The six month's pay and letting the nanny go would cover the costs. In one year they could have what they always wanted – a country place, clear of debt, off-grid, so very little maintenance costs, and a chance for him to spend more time with Robin, spend a little time thinking about what he really wanted to do with his life. How could she refuse, after he'd supported her through the EMBA?

She wasn't happy about it. Joked about his midlife crisis, that it was better than becoming a coke addict and buying a sports car. But underneath there was an uneasiness. A feeling that the tectonic plates of their marriage were shifting. She started to feel judged, as if the things she believed in no longer fit his view of the world. He got into an environmental kick. Started researching how to go off-grid using wind turbines and solar panels and micro-turbines for run of the river power generation. All he things that made him want to be an engineer in the first place. They fought more often than not.

He found the perfect land. Two hours from the city, 20 acres at the headwaters of one of the major tributaries to the Lake Ontario. Perfect for fishing. Conservation land on two sides, farmland on another and a bushlot on the fourth. Just far enough away from the city as to be affordable. And if he did much of the labour himself, they could just afford it.

Of course, he was away more and more. At first he would drop Robin off at school, drive the two hours to the

property, work until three and then drive back in time to pick her up from afterschool care and make dinner for the family. But eventually he started spending more and more nights on the land. The winter was mild, so he was able to work most days. Once the foundation was in, and the in-floor radiant heating in place, he and a friend did the framing and laid the subfloor. He put the wiring in himself, the plumbing, too. He was happy up there. And then he'd come home and things were hard. The freedom, the forgetfulness of the day up north was replaced by stress: stress from traffic, stress about picking up Robin before 6:00, after which they charge a dollar for every minute you're late, stress about dinner, stress about stress. No wonder he wanted to be up north. But the more he went up north, the worse it got.

Until she discovered she was pregnant. Seven years after Robin was born. After they'd decided they were through, that one was enough, that they couldn't imagine loving another child as much as they loved Robin. They discussed terminating the pregnancy. Karen was almost forty-four. Did they want to risk a Downs baby? Who was going to work if she took a year off again? How would it affect her career? Three months into his year off. Which put a hard deadline to the project. Because he wasn't going to be running off to some unheated grass hut once the new baby arrived. Her words. They had just poured the foundation when she found out. The road had gone in the month before. He started to think about the gestation of the house in parallel to the gestation of the baby. He was running out of time.

Now, thirty weeks pregnant. The shell completed, the windows in, the grey water system in place, the solar and wind hooked into the batteries that are wired into the outlets and switches. Now it's the final touches. The floor, the kitchen, the cabinets, the fixtures, the paint, the furniture. He's way behind and he knows it.

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He's disturbed by a loud thumping by the side of the house. When he opens the door, he finds Robin standing there with a load of logs in her arms so high that her chin rests on top. She is kicking the door.

"For God's sake, don't kick the door!"

"My arms were full"

She walks in and dumps the four logs next to the woodstove.

“I don’t care if your arms were full, I don’t want you kicking the door of our brand new house!” Sometimes he thinks all he does is give his daughter shit for not picking up, not saying please, not listening, not...

“Okay, fine. Is my pasta ready?”

“Not yet.”

“Your phone’s blinking. Can I read it?” She has already picked up the phone when he snatches it away from her.

“Just let me, okay?” He is still irritated. And feeling guilty for being irritated.

“It’s a message from your mom. She says to give you a hug and a kiss and say she misses you.”

“Where is she?”

“India, remember?”

“Oh, right.”

They’re like this. They bicker constantly, father and daughter. A displacement of roles, maybe, or just their way.

“Water’s boiling.”

“I know.”

“Can I play my DS?”

“Sure.”

She opens her video game and a cheerful sound greets them. She is drawn into Mario Kart.

“Could you turn off the sound?”

He dumps in the spiral pasta, then turns back to the phone. Closes his eyes for a second, then keys a message back.

Beautiful morning. Mist and wild turkeys. Hope the trip is going well. We're good. Robin sends kisses back. See you at the airport. B.