

# THE MONK, THE WOODCARVER, AND THE SAGE

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## 1. THE HOTEL

The Parisians are smoking hash again and playing guitar on the terrace. I decide it's a good time to walk to the top of the hill, where a white temple perches among the pines. I'm feeling a bit lonely today, a bit lost on this subcontinent. I can't even remember why I've come to India, but I know it wasn't to eat hummus and pita and get high.

The dog at the hotel follows me, as he has for the past few days when I've walked down the hill to Green's Cafe. Now he leads the way up the rocky footpath beside the stream. Many paths converge onto this one, and all manner of characters are said to wander these foothills. There are rumors of bandits, of criminals on the run, of drug dealers, and of misguided American hippies. But I feel safe with the dog at my side. He growls at everyone who crosses our path: a young shepherdess, a Japanese photographer, a lone horse.

The dog stops to drink from a pool beneath a small waterfall, and I sit on the rocks and watch the butterflies. My companion stops in midgulf, looks up, and unfurls his ears to their mangy tips. Then he trots off the main path. I follow, mostly because I don't really have a choice: I've lost track of all the turns we made to get here. The white temple has disappeared. Strings of multicolored prayer flags stretch from one pine crown to another.

I soon realize that we're following someone. I see a flash of brick red robes, a bald head nicked with shaving cuts. A monk. The words of the hotel owner come to mind: "Never trust a monk. Anyone could be hiding beneath those robes."

The path grows steeper, rockier. The monk crosses the stream up ahead and then looks down toward us. He smiles and turns to shimmy across a shale ridge. The dog follows, and

I shuffle behind, sending loose rock clattering down the hillside. Finally I stand before an adobe hut, trying to catch my breath. The old monk appears, breathing easily. "Chai?" he asks and holds up a teacup. I smile and nod. The dog wags his tail. The monk points to a thin cushion on a stone bench, then stoops to pass through a wooden door frame carved with symbols.

I sit with the sun on my face and look out across the foothills. A flock of sheep, shepherded by women in bright saris, zigzags across the terraced hillside. The monk returns with the *chai*. I take a sip, and he waits for my reaction. "Delicious," I say, and I mean it. From gaps in the wall he retrieves an onion, half a cabbage, a tomato. Then he disappears inside again.

I drink my *chai*, close my eyes, and listen to the soft hiss of a gas flame from the hut. When I open my eyes, the dog has gone. I panic for a moment, wondering how I'll find my way back. But then I realize it's OK. Suddenly everything is OK. I even begin to remember why I came to this country: a man from Ohio told me, "Going to India is like taking your head off and putting it back on in the opposite direction: you have to learn how to see again."

Soon a bowl filled with fragrant rice arrives. The monk smiles and ducks back into the hut. From the other side of the door, I hear the scrape of spoon against bowl. I eat, too.

## 2. THE HOUSEBOAT

The women come every morning, perched on the prows of wooden boats with scarves tied around their heads. They dip long oars into the lake and glide toward the marsh. I open the shutters of my room and watch them disappear into the reeds, calling to one another like songbirds. They are collecting lotus leaves to feed the cows, to keep the milk sweet. I hear the slap of giant leaves on water as they shake mud from the roots.

The sun breaches the mountains. Rafique should be here soon with my breakfast, and I am not dressed. I'm the only guest staying on Shangri-La Houseboat, the only person who has stayed here in quite some time. Tourism has been almost nonexistent since six Western hikers were kidnapped by insurgents in 1995 and one of them was found beheaded, the others presumed dead. The Canadian government regularly issues a red-alert travel warning to those considering a trip to this northern region of India, which is plagued by grenade attacks, land mines, and bombings. The Indian government has designated Kashmir, a predominantly Muslim state in a predominantly Hindu nation, a "disturbed area." But a travel agent in Delhi assured me not to worry about coming here. "Governments like to exaggerate," he told me. And for some reason I believed him. "Rafique will meet you at the airport," he promised me. "You'll be perfectly safe."

Rafique is the eldest son of the Shallah family, the owners of Shangri-La. He has spent all of his thirty-five years on this lake and learned to speak several languages fluently during the days when Kashmir was touted as "paradise on earth." You wouldn't know from the condition of the houseboat that tourists are rare. The crystal chandeliers sparkle, the mahogany tabletops gleam, and the inside air is as fresh as the afternoon breeze. It's as though the boat's original inhabitants, members

of the British Raj of the 1800s, were expected at any moment. Politics and strife seem to have disappeared into the marsh, like the women collecting lotus leaves.

Every morning Rafique delivers my breakfast on a silver tray: a boiled egg, toast, marmalade, and a pot of cardamom tea. His mother, whom I've yet to meet, prepares these in a small house on the tiny island to which the boat is moored.

I hear Rafique lower the gangplank and slide open the houseboat door, then the clatter of china in the dining room. I'd prefer to eat on the veranda and look at Dal Lake through the ornately carved screens of cedar. But Rafique insists I eat in the dining room, sitting at a table for ten with my feet on a finely woven Kashmiri carpet. He will sit in the corner of the room and watch me, ready to attend to my every need. His dark eyes are bordered by dark brows, and he rarely smiles.

I sit down and take a sip of tea. The slap of lotus leaves drifts in through the windows.

*(end of excerpt)*