## Decelerating

On my first night in Kovalam, I learned that several weeks' worth of searching was about to end. I was headed northwards, and I discovered, after eating broiled pomfret with a French insomniac, that not far from where I was headed there was a town in which I could find a certain semi-precious stone: an uncut two-carat almond-colored tourmaline.

I had already spent several weeks in southern India, searching for a pale brown tourmaline of the correct size and shape. If cut from the rough on a certain auspicious day of the year, a tourmaline amulet was supposed to bring good luck upon its wearer. This stone had become for me, however, a poisonous, wraithlike talisman: as I pursued even the slightest rumor of it, misfortune had guided me deep into the labyrinth of a feverish illness. As a result, I had decided to rest for a while--to forget about treasure-hunting--and recuperate in the coastal town of Kovalam.

At Kovalam, not far from Cape Comorin at the southern tip of the subcontinent, the pale waters of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal collide and spill, spraying warm mists over the lush Kerala coast. The beach is flat and dark as ashes; the water is rough and pale. Beyond the beach, a mosaic of rice-fields make up a plain that ends at the edge of serrated, palm-covered hills. In the evenings the fishermen carry their nets across a maze of paths through the rice fields and into the hills. From between tall jackfruit trees, thin columns of smoke from dozens of cooking fires rise up to darken the already rich sunsets. On the beach small thatched-roof restaurants serve broiled pomfret or prawns; in these restaurants, all the tables face the sea.

In one such restaurant I met Marc, a Frenchman whose nightmares kept him up quite late each night. A blue-white fluorescent bulb swung on the other side of the restaurant, above a group of men playing cards. The waiter stood off to one side, watching, arms folded. Where we sat there were no walls, nor a floor, just a table with the food that we had forgotten. Black ants swarmed over the table, eating from our plates and drinking from our glasses, as Marc and I talked about books and movies, and sipped coconut liquor.

Tall, in his thirties, Marc was trying to go home. He had been in the south of India for three months, looking for a passage by sea back to Marseilles. Yet few ships made such a voyage from the Kerala coast, and certainly none from the rocky shores at Kovalam. He did not want to fly back. He described to me the photos he had seen of recent plane crashes. No one ever survived, he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a matchbox. Into his callused fingertips he gathered a bunch of wax matches and lit them with a flick of his wrist. He flung them smoking into the sand by the table, their vapor trails mimicking the trajectory of a deteriorating Boeing 747. He pointed at the burnt match sticks as if they were why he would never fly back to France. "Ships never explode," he reminded me, staring into his drink.

I was remarking upon how unfortunate he must feel when I noticed on the middle finger of his right hand, the one shakily holding his tumbler full of alcohol, a ring. Or rather, many rings that were of such a fashion that they could be assembled into one single ring. Once assembled, this puzzle ring had on its face a circle made of semi-precious stones, pink, pale green: tourmalines.

I excitedly pointed out his ring. He looked startled, for a moment, realizing perhaps that I had not heard much of what he had said. He explained that the ring was made for him in a city to the north. I lent him a pen and he wrote the address of the jeweler on the back of his box of matches.

Stray dogs had come out and were roaming in groups of two and three, their fur mottled and gray in the dark of the moonlit night. The waves crashed not far away, against the rocks of Kovalam. It was late, nearing midnight. I sipped my drink and dug my toes into the sand under the table and listened as Marc talked. He was trying to describe the similarities between theories of reincarnation in Hinduism and Orphism. I didn't care. I was already far, far away, on my way to a town called Jaipur. I interrupted Marc, and explaining that I was not well, excused myself and paid my bill.

The poker-game nearby broke up when one of the men began coughing violently. He spat out the liquid in his mouth and grabbed a bottle. He stood up, dropping the chair into the sand behind him, and made his way over to the waiter. The waiter, who was reading a magazine, looked up after the customer started shouting at him. The customer waved the bottle at the waiter, who then blushed angrily and began

to shout back. The two men argued in loud voices. The stray dogs stood and watched with curiosity. I, on the other hand, returned to my room.

Black dragonflies ushered me through the paths over the rice fields, towards the southern part of the beach. The room I had rented was a cubicle that looked as if it had been dropped and had cracked into a thousand pieces, only to be glued together again. The walls looked like lace, with plaster cracks and ant trails. I retrieved a small package from my blue travel bag and brought it to the bed. I created within the folds of the bed sheets a tiny nest. I opened the package, lifting away oily brown wrapping paper to reveal a small box made of sandalwood, shaped like a small book. I opened the box and from it I poured a collection of tiny jewels, amethyst, peridots, aquamarines, coral discs and carnelians. I shined my flashlight on them: they scintillated in tiny prismatic asterisks so that each one seemed to correspond to a different musical note. The prize was a blood-red ruby, like a seed of a pomegranate. My eyes burned from the fever and the alcohol so that the jewels took on an almost phosphorescent glow.

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Six days later, on board a train to Jaipur, I learned of certain of the risks involved in my somewhat haphazard approach to jewel hunting.

From Kovalam I had traveled by boat to nearby Quilon, following barges laden with raw cashews through the backwaters of Kerala. From Quilon, the Vritradevi Express began its lengthy transcontinental journey towards Calcutta. Two hissing diesel engines pulled the train first inland, then northwards towards the center of the subcontinent. By the second evening, several hundred kilometers' worth of dust covered the emerald-lacquered train and everything within it.

I stood in the doorway of the first-class car and watched the fields pass by. Outside, the pale greens of Kerala had turned into the saffron-colored jaundice of the Deccan plateau. The summer months had not brought enough of the monsoon rains to the plains; plains that in another year might have been thick with vegetation. Still, farmers persistently led their gray oxen through thirsty fields, growing what they could. Others populated the sparse banks of the railroad tracks: drivers waiting at the

crossroads, children returning home from school, women in saris carrying bundles of sticks balanced on their heads. Everyone at every crossing watched with the same patience and resignation as the tumultuous Vritradevi passed through. Grasping the two support poles on either side of the door, I leaned out into the air so that I was almost suspended over nothing. The ground spun by in a muddy, nebulous blur. At one point the earth beneath me seemed to fall away, and I saw, through the rattling lattice-work of a trellis bridge, the waters of some stygian river far below me. From its tawny silt banks a smoky helix rose out of a burning cremation pile.

I headed back into the car. The corridor smelled like smoke and was full of people talking and laughing--full of people trying to escape the claustrophobia of their rooms. At the door to my compartment, I abruptly stumbled against the car attendant, a gaunt and elderly man. He stopped me with one hand, as if to steady me. He watched me carefully from behind small round eyeglasses and a trimmed mustache. After a moment's hesitation, he quietly stepped aside to let me enter, coolly brushing off his uniform. He shut the door behind me.

Inside, a young couple was clumsily trying to hush a crying infant. The compartment itself was low and square, painted pale blue. Four humming black fans on the ceiling pushed the air around the room, but did nothing to assuage the heat. The father brought the corners of a small blanket together into a sling and tied it to a fixture between the fans. He gingerly placed the baby inside. The motion of the train gently rocked the sling, and the child eventually grew silent.

The father returned to his seat across from me. He sat rigidly in his seat, tapping at the window, looking about at the fans on the ceiling, looking over my bags, and on occasion, at me. Together we sat by the window, watching the gentle hills rise and subside far in the distance, frowning at our own reflections in the cloudy glass of the window. For the entire first day of the journey he had been completely immersed in a book of some sort (on its cover was a picture of a man pushing a rock up a hill)--so we had said little to each other. Now he seemed weary and restless, and willing to chat, and I learned that he was a engineer enlisted in the Indian army, doing survey work in Kerala. He could barely sit still; his wife, however, showed little animation. She had not spoken a word to me or even to the engineer during the entire trip. She remained mute,

as if in mourning, watching me from behind a black and gold silk veil--her only voice the slight laughing noise of the bells on her silver anklets.

I pulled the matchbox out of my shirt pocket to check the address once again: Ravana Jewelers, Fifty-Six M.G. Road, Jaipur. I brought down a large map from my bag and spread it noisily over the seat beside me. The engineer watched as I traced possible routes with my finger on the map, straining to see more clearly. After a few minutes, he got up to slightly adjust one of the ceiling fans, then sat beside me. He set about studying the map as if important plans were being drawn up.

"Where are you going?" he asked without looking at me.

"To Jaipur," I replied, brushing something off my foot. "Have you ever been there?"

"You are a tourist?"

"I have business there."

The engineer's eyes scanned the map from an awkward angle. "No. I have never been to Jaipur. I have heard that it is a very well designed city, and a very old city. All the buildings within a certain perimeter were built completely out of pink sandstone."

He paused and looked over at his wife, who sat in silence, her hand guarding the movements of the sling.

"The city is known for its market-place," he continued. "You go to Jaipur to buy jewels. You go to Jaipur to buy hand-made miniature paintings, to buy Benares silk. I have no need of these things, silk or jewels." With each mention of 'Jaipur' he jabbed his finger at the map, pointing randomly somewhere between Kabul and Kathmandu.

He raised one finger in an afterthought: "You must be careful of what you buy, however."

"I am going to buy gems while I'm there."

He frowned. "Wouldn't you prefer to purchase a painting? Paintings serve the same purpose. In both cases you pay money for something beautiful that you can keep near you. A jewel is a thing someone wears and forgets, it is something for others to see and admire. A painting, however, is for your pleasure as well as for others."

"Wouldn't a jewel be worth more? I certainly hope so--I have quite a collection already."

"How do you measure what these things are worth? There is more to these items than their monetary value. Paintings can tell you stories. They can teach you about the world. I have some, if you would like to see?"

"No, I'm sure they are quite nice."

"Yes, they are. They are very nice. Long ago paintings had more than a decorative purpose. I heard of one they found hidden in the Chittor fortress. They discovered that the brush strokes were actually the letters of tiny words--Persian calligraphy that described recipes for sixty different poisons." He paused to scratch his leg. "Recipes which taught you how to make a perfume that kills in six hours. How to make a poison that works after several years have elapsed. A recipe for poisons of delusion. The formulas for poisonous phrases, poisonous hand gestures, lethal songs, unimaginable poisons. One recipe was for a painting that killed the viewer before he understood the painting's message. This applied to the Chittor painting; many people have passed away since the painting's discovery."

He saw my skeptical look and added: "There is another painting, I have heard, that teaches the viewer to do something even more peculiar. Again, this painting (I don't know where it is from) described poisons, but this time two poisons only. They say that a toxin does not kill you; it merely speeds up your life so that you die sooner. This painting described two toxins--one that sped you up , and one that slowed you down. The poison of deceleration would instantly freeze your life into a single moment--and you would become a part of the painting itself. The other poison, the poison of acceleration, would pull you out of the painting. Or, if you are already out, it would kill you.

"Such paintings can be useful sometimes. Are you sure you wouldn't like to see one?" He sat still for a moment. "I'm not trying to sell you anything, if that is what you are thinking. I can see that you are thinking that." I shrugged in reply. His eyes lit up again: "Look at this," he said, getting up suddenly. He lifted a suitcase out from under his seat. He opened it and pulled out a cardboard tube, no more than six inches long and an inch wide. With a twist of his hand he pulled off the top of the tube and carefully

removed two fibrous sheets of cloth. “You can buy these in Jaipur. My wife’s family is from Jaipur, you know.” He smiled at her. Her head bowed slightly. He took one of the paintings and gave it to me. The other he returned to the tube.

One side of the painting was blank, and showed the smooth texture of the cloth. The other side depicted a bedroom. The painting seemed to have no depth--I thought it looked more like a map than a depiction. Amid the backdrop of a stormy sky, the painting showed a bed surrounded by jasmine plants and creeping vines, candles and platters of fruit. Rose petals from the corners of the room fly about in the strong breeze. The bed itself appears to be occupied by an invisible couple as the sheets that cover the bed float in mid-air, billowing energetically. A candlestick stands frozen still, tilted at an impossible angle, falling over. The wind sweeps the muslin curtains and the trees outside the room, and oddly shaped birds, which look like dark green falcons, fly frantically for cover. In the corner of the painting, almost obscured by a large tapestry, a basilisk looks out and at the viewer. I returned the painting to the engineer. Was he trying to sell it to me?

“Now tell me these paintings are not more interesting than your jewels. Why buy a jewel? You might misplace it; you might think later that you have invested too much of your money in such a tiny thing. You might lose interest and find it boring after a while.” He returned the painting to the suitcase. He sat down again, and waited for an answer. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think I’m going to lose interest in jewels.”

“ Perhaps not.” He fell silent, sullen, and returned to his own seat. His wife slid closer to the sling and looked in on her child. I tried to see what her face looked like behind her veil. I couldn’t see anything at all.

The sky outside had grown dark and gray as we were talking; the air in the cabin seemed almost sticky. I felt my temperature rising again. I rested my head against the window and shut my eyes. I wondered what was wrong.

I tried reading a letter that I had received a while ago, but the thought kept returning to me: something is wrong with me. A train passed on the opposite tracks.

The faces of a hundred translucent people passed by our eyes with a roar and loud whistle. I wondered if my double was among them, nurturing little obsessions of his own. I wondered if he was sated, if he was healthy and content--perhaps he had just finished a large meal. I, on the other hand, had eaten nothing, and felt slightly queasy.

Nourished on these empty thoughts, I tried to sleep.

I abruptly opened my eyes again to see the engineer angrily slapping his legs and stomping the ground with his leather shoes. Small ants swarmed all over the floor. His wife's foot had several large, swelling bites on it. I saw my foot had some as well. We searched the compartment and discovered that the ants were coming from my bag. "There must be some food in your bag." There was a hint of anger in the engineer's voice. I took the bag outside and looked inside. The ants had crept into the bag from my room in Kovalam. They seemed to be following me.

I examined the bag and found that the sandalwood box had fallen open, its precious contents spilled inside my bag. With my trembling hand I reached to the bottom of the bag and pulled up a handful of jewels and ants. The engineer came up from behind me. He grabbed my hand, and said, "You see, the ants came after the jewels, which are hard and stale. When they were young and fresh, they were soft and tender, and could be eaten, even by us. They used the nectar of these jewels as the pigments in the paints that were used in the miniature paintings of Jaipur. You do not need jewels."

A stabbing pain erupted from my abdomen, and I fell to the floor. My hand was red from ant bites. I looked up and saw the engineer reach into my bag, I thought I saw him take the jewels from my bag and place them in his mouth. With my ear to the ground I heard the grinding of wheels. I heard the clatter of the tracks. I heard the high-pitched sounds of glass being crushed, and with that I fell unconscious.

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When I awoke, some hours later, I heard only the dripping of water.

"Where are we?" I asked, sensing someone in the room.

"We are almost there."

I tried to look around. The car attendant stood above me, smoking a cigarette in the doorway of my compartment. There was no one else with me; the engineer and his family were gone. Also was one of my bags, and with it the jewels and the ants. I raised myself up and looked out the window. The Vritradevi Express had stopped at a station. A yellow sign read, in three languages, "Parbhani Junction." A woman near the platform held her sari above her ankles to keep the silk out of the mud as she walked. Water dripped from the corrugated overhanging on a cement building.

"It has been raining," I said. I tried to open the window. It would not budge.

"Yes."

"Are we in Jaipur?"

"No. You missed the connection to Jaipur, two hundred kilometers back."

I tried to think. What could I do?

"Is there another train will take me in that direction?"

Smoke filled the compartment as he exhaled. He gestured vaguely with a long, bony hand and said, "Perhaps you should get off here."

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The Parbhani Junction superintendent informed to me, in halting English, that only thirty kilometers away there was another station, at which I could catch an evening train towards Jaipur. He kept a polite distance as he talked, and nervously recommended that I see a doctor soon. My skin and the whites of my eyes were jaundiced, and a fever that had been tolerable to this point was becoming troublesome. Yet I felt fit enough to walk, so I thanked the superintendant for his advice and went on my way.

A path led me behind the station to a large road--a pandemonium of villagers headed in both directions, walking barefoot or pulling carts, laughing and yelling. Occasionally large trucks passed by, as did antiquated Ambassador cars and buzzing scooters. Colonnades of teak trees lined both sides of the road which separated the endless wheat fields that stretched away from either side. Each tree's trunk was painted with a white band and numbered in red. As I walked, I watched the numbers decrease according to some strange logic.

A young Sikh stood by his van on the side of the road, watching as I dragged my bag along in the mud. I asked him to let me get a ride with him by pointing repeatedly at the van, and at me, and then back at the van again. He shrugged, got in the car and slammed the door. He started the van and unlocked the passenger door. I climbed in, and he immediately rushed off. He drove straight down the center of the road, or when that was too muddy, on whichever side of the road was clearer, swerving from left to right, dodging scooters and ox-carts, pedestrians and cyclists, keeping one hand on the horn and the other on the wheel. He stuck his head out the window and yelled at the people he passed by.

A yellow lorry loomed in front of us, with large white headlights and a deafening air-horn that sounded like a train wreck. The young Sikh looked frightened for a second, then drove the van quickly out of the way. As we came to a stop in the grass to the side, I caught sight of three heads in the cabin of the lorry as it sped past. The young Sikh sat motionless for a moment, then turned the van around and went after the lorry. People shouted as we stormed past, splashing muddy water, and the Sikh yelled back. The lorry saw us coming and slowed to a halt. Our van passed the lorry on the right, turned around and came face to face with the stationary truck. From my seat I was looking into the center of a saucer-shaped eye.

With a flushed face, the Sikh got out and began to chastise the driver of the lorry. Two others climbed down and began to taunt the Sikh; people gathered around and began to take sides. Nausea welled up in me again--I gagged and climbed out of the van with my bag and sat on the grass to the side. The Sikh pushed one of the men, and soon they were all fighting. Others saw chaos erupt and ran to see what was happening. I had a train to catch.

I climbed to my feet and kept walking; the trees continued their numerical descent toward zero. Further ahead along the road another crowd had gathered. A black lorry carrying rosewood timber had swerved too quickly, falling over and crushing an oxcart. Gasoline began to flood out of a large tank on its side, soaking fallen hay and the ground beneath. Thick vapour distorted the air. Stray dogs tried to navigate between the encroaching tide of fuel and the onlooking crowd of people, who stood and waited for an explosion.

I followed the dogs across the fuel spill and down the road. My body was growing weaker and weaker--Kovalam liquor and a blow to the abdomen were taking their toll. I noticed that the numbers painted on the trees had at some point reached zero and were now past; they were now increasing according some equally strange rule as before. Behind the trees I could see thatched huts; further along, the huts turned into houses, and with the houses, the trees ceased to be numbered. Trees and houses alike ended at a large black arch made of stone, the part of some larger wall or building. A sign nearby proclaimed: Daulatabad Citadel. A guide, young and handsome, ushered me through with a great welcoming smile. Around his neck he wore, tied to the end of a leather thong, a small metal box.

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The minute you forsake fortune, it finds you again. Without medical attention I would not be able to make it to Jaipur, the city of jewels and poison. Yet I had come by chance across a fortress in which I would find exactly what I had come looking for.

Near the end of the fourteenth century, the sultan Tugluq--who many thought had gone insane--had commissioned the Daulatabad fortress to be built, not knowing that the site of construction did not have an adequate water supply. He had wanted the fortress to be impregnable: seven walls, each a thickness of twenty feet, enclosing an area that would become the home of the entire population of Delhi. After almost two decades of construction, the fortress was completed. He marched the population of Delhi to Daulatabad, their numbers decimated by the grueling trek. Upon his arrival he learned that the water supply was inadequate and undrinkable. He marched his people back to Delhi, where he was seized and imprisoned. Now the fortress stood empty and unused, a monument to folly. The only ones living on the fortress grounds were the cows that roamed in the wide spaces within the citadel's thick walls.

The innermost wall had two gates, one large and one concealed; any army foolish enough to enter the large gate would find itself trapped in a corridor surrounded by archers. Winding passageways led from the true entrance (the more modest of the two) past rows of cannon and various false entrances--all designed to discourage and confuse the unwelcome visitor--to a large field and a great, empty reservoir.

With the help of a guide I navigated the first seven gates, walking in the shade of the wall. We walked past most of the fortress' outer defenses and made it to the corner of the reservoir. From this field, I could see the fortress in its entirety, halfway up the side of a tall rocky outcropping. My guide motioned with my hands for me to wait. I wanted him to stay--I did not want to be left alone. He started to leave, and I followed as well as I could.

I stumbled along a path that sloped gradually downwards until it came to the opening of some dark building. Inside, stairs led down to a large antechamber with a high ceiling. The entire room seemed to be carved out of rock. Near the top of the ceiling small windows had been cut, letting in air and light. A doorway stood opposite, but I caught sight of the guide entering a small, dark passageway instead. I hurried after him. The deeper I followed him into the maze of the fortress complex, the more I needed to stay with him.

Inside I could see absolutely nothing. I reached out with my hands and found cold wet stone. Keeping my fingers on the wall, I walked for a few steps until I reached some stairs leading down even further. I stepped slowly down, listening to water dripping off the ceiling into some nearby pool. The last step ended at nothing--a chasm of some sort. I sat and stared and tried to see in the dark.

A hissing wax match flared and I saw a man light a torch. I was halfway down the stairs, which turned at an angle away from the wall to face a rounded room. The torch-bearer spoke English, and asked if I needed help. I stared up at him but said nothing. He took me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. We walked through a series of rooms, corridors and passages, which all seemed a blur. I had slipped deep into delirium.

We entered finally a well lit room; a ladder leading down from the high platform on which we stood led to a workspace. Leathery-skinned men stood at intervals against the back wall, sitting on stools, cutting at the wall with small knives. The guide was here as well, picking up some tools from a large white blanket in the center of the room. A design was painted on the wall, showing arches covered with creeping vines and birds flying towards fruit trees. The torch-bearer seemed to be in charge. He climbed down and spoke with the guide for a while, looking over occasionally.

"I need jewels," I remembered, mumbling aloud.

The men looked at each other, then back at me. Some of the workers turned around to look, startled.

"You think there are jewels in here?" the torch-bearer asked. My guide pointed at the men carving the wall; the torch-bearer nodded.

"I need to find a tourmaline."

"Would you like some food? That will help you feel better. You should sit down." They stepped closer to the platform.

"No, I do not need food."

"You need a jewel."

"Yes--it will help me feel better." All the stone carvers had stopped their work to watch us. Some stepped closer, to see what I was doing, standing like a performer on a stage.

"What color is it?" one of the workers asked, winking.

I pulled out my wallet and found a small photograph. "See this?" They brought the torch closer to the photograph. "The tourmaline I want is the color of her eyes. It is a gift for her." Soon everyone was talking, passing the photograph around. The torch-bearer grew angry and sent them back to work. He climbed up to me and said:

"Here--take this--this is what you need. You take this and leave. When you leave you will feel better. But do not look at your treasure until you have left. Otherwise you will lose it. Don't look at what I'm giving you." He placed a small steel box in my hand and walked out of the room. I followed him to a set of stairs that led up to an opening above. He sent me up the stairs, and walked away, muttering to himself.

I held tightly onto the box and began my climb. I imagined the tourmaline in my hand polished and cut like a diamond, a bezeled prism splitting light into tiny rainbow arcs. I imagined the jewel set in a pendant at the bottom of a necklace on a bare neck, and was happy.

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This change came about after a poison had begun to work on me, months before, as I'd read and re-read a letter sent to me from far away. I felt the viper's poison in me,

like a toxin from the viper that bit Eurydice, her life taken away from her on the very night of her wedding.

I live and relive these events from a hospital bed in London, where I lie impotent with cirrhosis and my spidery skin. My urine is black as obsidian, my eyes are topaz cabochons, and my heart flaccid and withered as wet leather. By my bed is a small tin dish cradling tiny translucent red and yellow pills, with little words printed on their side; they are sleeping pills. I swallow these, and close my eyes, and again I am surrounded by the tendrils of jasmine plants and creeping vines. I imagine myself on a platform surrounded by candles and platters of Keralan jackfruit and papayas. The wind sweeps the muslin curtains and the trees outside the room--I hear their broad, fan-like leaves rustling--and oddly shaped birds like parrots with fat beaks fly about, looking for cover in an approaching storm. In the corner of the room, almost obscured by a large curtain, a horned basilisk looks into the room, watching me, measuring the movements of my chest as I very slowly turn into stone.