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Subject: THE KILLER'S GUIDE TO BOMBAY

Bombay, or Mumbai as it has been known since the replacement of its colonial name in 1996, is India's largest and most progressive city. This is a place where fortunes are made and dreams are shattered. It is a city of stark contrasts, home to both the Bollywood film industry and to the many poor who stumble in from rural villages in search of a living. These uncomplaining 'wallahs' teeter on the very edge of subsistence as they ply their various trades. It is their hardscrabble lives that fuel the city's roaring street economy.

I had read that the best way to see Mumbai is to hire a taxi wallah and there were no shortage of eager candidates as I swapped the cool marble of the Taj Mahal hotel for the sultry air of the harbour outside it. A little under £200 had secured me two nights in the Taj, a five star hotel overlooking the Gateway of India. It was supposed to be a treat, a place where I could enjoy my newfound liberty, but after five years of confinement, the hotel's vast rooms, broad corridors and unbroken sea views felt badly agoraphobic. My first compulsion was to hide, to lose myself in the minutiae of the city, to become part of the dirt under its fingernails.

Ichbal Varma, a short man with moist brown eyes embedded in his face like two gooey dates in a scone, was the most persuasive of the drivers who harangued me on the hotel steps. His shirt unbuttoned to the belly, he shepherded me into his black and yellow Oxford cab with colourful promises of dancing girls and opium dens. He boasted that he had access to parts of the city that tourists rarely see. He would be my wallah, my fixer, my guide.

I liked Ichbal. He had pluck. I was in two minds whether to kill him.

A pot-bellied Ganesh suspended on glass beads danced under the rear-view mirror of Ichbal's cab as he nudged us through a rabble of buses, trucks, auto-rickshaws, cycles, tuk-tuks, pushcarts, stray dogs and livestock. You had to question why the cab was equipped with a rear-view mirror at all, as Ichbal refused to consult it. He used his horn to force impossible gaps in the traffic and each time we overtook a vehicle I feared that our cab would be opened up like a sardine tin.

Ichbal claimed that in his twenty years driving he had never been involved in an accident. Given the number of marginal judgments that he was making in even this routine journey – and you haven't really done Mumbai until you have gone two-wheeled round a blind bend while squeezing between a sacred cow and an oncoming cyclist with a tiffin basket on his head – his boast seemed rather fanciful.

We drove through Colaba, Mumbai's genteel neo-Gothic central district, its grassy squares click-clacking with cricketers. At every traffic light the cab was attacked by swarms of young hawkers attempting to sell jewellery catalogues, travel brochures or year-old copies of *Marie Claire* and *Vogue*. Many of the kids had facial disfigurements made even more grotesque when seen in close juxtaposition with the airbrushed cover girls that they pressed on to my window. Ichbal assured me that it is not advisable to give money to hawkers as it only reinforces this form of begging as a way of life. He was not the richest man, he said, but he was proud that he worked for what little he had.

'Yes, I live in a slum shack, but I have all I need ... a table fan, a charpoy to sleep on, dhal and roti to eat, two shirts, two trousers and even a pair of sandals. I have running water that I siphon off illegally from the main supply and my friend has a TV that we watch together. I sometimes think what hardship all those rich people must be suffering, always worrying about their big-big investments and afraid of thieves taking their watches. Me? I have nothing and everything.'

We sped along Marine Drive and the curve of the bay known as The Queen's Necklace. Ichbal pointed out the fortified beachfront apartment belonging to a top Bollywood star who had recently escaped a prison sentence despite drunkenly driving his car over four sleeping beggars, killing them all.

Killer Travel Tip: Murder is easy where life is cheap.

We headed north of the city and into a less salubrious district bordered by a river that was no more than a swollen drain. The thin ribbon of water lapped wearily against two muddy banks, its sparkle derived solely from the silvery skins of the dead fish that floated in it. Bright plastic bags blew across the surface and cans added colour. Children dangled their bottoms over the edge of the exposed riverbed and defecated into the sucking mud. Upstream, clean brightly dressed women washed pots in the water while others stood and bathed in it, their severed torsos soaping themselves in the fecal heat. They scrubbed their teeth with twigs.

'Where are we going?' I asked Ichbal.

'To the dhobi ghat at Saat Rasta, the biggest laundry in Mumbai. Then you will know this city, her blood, her shit and her stains.'

We parked opposite Mahalaxmi rail station under a dilapidated billboard advertising Anchor toothpaste. Ichbal introduced me to the many wallahs that lined the pavement. He seemed to know every one of the city's two million street vendors.

We met Jamal, who squatted behind a kerosene-fuelled stove on which sat a dented aluminium pot bubbling with chana bhatura (deep-fried chickpeas) that reeked of ginger and ghee. For rush hour commuters flooding out of the station, Jamal's stall provided a cheap and ready breakfast on their way to work.

We stopped at a chai stand that dispensed sickly sweet glasses of Indian tea for five rupees a go. I declined the stale glucose biscuits that were displayed inside a dim glass case alive with flies. I opted instead for a lemon soda that was sold in a tall bottle with a blue marble stopper to keep the fizz in. The stall owner presented my change between wrists that finished as stumps. Ichbal said that this man had lost his hands in the war with Pakistan.

Ichbal then introduced me to a 'kaan-saaf-wallah', a man in a red turban who probed a bamboo rod into my ears. The rod was tipped with a wad of cotton that he had soaked in glycerine. As it was a straightforward job of clearing out my earwax he would charge

only ten rupees, explained Ichbal. But if I had an infection, the kaan-saaf-wallah would need to use mercurochrome or other ointments for which he would charge double.

A different kind of medicine man operated out of a makeshift tent on the traffic-choked bridge that overlooked the laundry. Kunal was a 'hakim' who practiced alternative healing. Spread out on a mat in front of him was an arsenal of cloudy glass bottles and rusty tins containing powdered pearls, gnarled roots and extracts of crushed belladonna and wild indigo. I asked Kunal to prescribe something for my sore throat. It had been ravaged by dust on the drive across town (the air-conditioning in Ichbal's cab was achieved by winding the windows down). The hakim felt the pulse at the base of my neck, examined the soles of my feet. At no point did he look into my throat. He quickly compounded a mixture that set me back Rs.25.

I considered asking him to concoct something more lethal. He looked like he might if the money was right. But Ichbal was always within earshot, a growth on my shoulder that even a hakim couldn't eradicate. I had to get rid of him.

Mumbai's street activity runs the whole gamut from the whimsical to the horrific and Ichbal catapulted me from one to the other without warning. Not a hundred yards from the medicine man, I found myself watching a family of street acrobats. The father raised his baby son into the air on a bamboo pole and, while his wife beat a small drum, the child walked a rope strung between two struts a good fifteen feet above the concrete pavement. Onlookers clapped and coins were tossed into a bowl. The expressionless father lit a cigarette. He stared into the middle distance, picking tobacco from his tongue, while his child flirted with death.

It occurred to me that every day in Mumbai, millions of people perform this balancing act between life and death. I only had to be patient and the opportunity to upset the equilibrium would surely present itself.

Before venturing down to the dhobi ghat, Ichbal insisted on walking me further along the bridge to see a street barber or 'nai'. I was shown into a seat that appeared to have been salvaged from a burnt-out bus. The nai handed a vicious looking cutthroat razor to a passing 'churi-wallah' who had been pedalling a portable knife-sharpening machine. The

bedlam of the traffic was drowned out by the scream of steel against steel as the churi narrowed the blade. The ancient barber slathered my face in a soap that smelt of ammonia. His sharpened razor was returned and he went to work on my face, flick-flacking the blade about my cheeks, neck and chin like he was conducting the Indian Orchestra. His touch was so dextrous and sure that he even managed to slice off my offending nostril hair. This was truly the king of shaves, a snip at Rs.15. I handed the nai an Rs.50 note and told him to keep the change. It lessened the guilt as I walked away with one of his razors secreted in my back pocket.

A parapet on the bridge afforded Ichbal and I a stunning view over the Saat Rasta dhobi ghat. The open-air laundry that spread out beneath us looked more like a shantytown. It just went on and on. Thousands of garments had been laid out to dry on the corrugated roofs of the densely crowded shacks, creating a vast patchwork of oranges, violets, yellows, blues, greens and scarlets. Long lines of clothes criss-crossed a sky that had turned a mucky orange, diffused by the pollution from the shuddering city below. Wherever you looked, shirts and saris gesticulated wildly like crowds at a tickertape parade.

The bridge had filled with tourists all keen to take long-lens shots of the laundry. Ichbal explained that outsiders are not allowed into the ghat itself, unless they have express permission, or 'unless they are with Ichbal'. He said this loudly, prostituting his services to a group of Japanese holidaymakers that had disgorged itself from a tour bus. Beggar children buzzed around them, settling like flies and taking off again when the tourists brushed them away. Some of the kids nipped their baby brothers and sisters to make them cry, hoping for a sympathetic coin or a piece of food to pacify them. Ichbal knew one of the young girls as Laxhmi. She was a pretty thing with haunting blue eyes, her slight frame supported on two wooden crutches. One of her feet had been amputated. 'Laxhmi's father cut it off when she was a baby so that she would be able to make people sad for her,' said Ichbal. 'With only one foot she will be able to beg more money.'

A train rollicked across the horizon with passengers hanging off it like billowing laundry. Ichbal informed me that fifteen people a day die on Mumbai's trains and tracks. I asked him if many died in the ghats and he nodded. He said that his father had been a 'dobhi-wallah' or laundryman. He had been born on a ghat and he had died there after washing

clothes every day of his life. Almost two hundred dhobis and their families worked together in what has always been a hereditary occupation, but Ichbal had left his ghat to pursue different work on the day they burnt his father's body.

'I needed to earn the money to pay back the debt of his funeral,' Ichbal explained. 'A dobhi does not earn so much. It cost me four hundred rupees to buy enough hardwood to burn my father's body so that the dogs would not find anything left when they dug around in his cold ashes. When you visit a ghat, you will see many skinny dogs scrounging around in the ash pits. This is because many families cannot afford enough wood to burn their dead properly. The dogs are left with chompy chunks to chew on. But I was determined that they would not get fat on my father. I have seen many deaths in the ghat and I have seen many pyres being lit, but none were as impressive as the one that took my father. I could smell the smoke on my skin three days later, even after I had washed myself with Lifebuoy many times. The tourists like to watch our funerals. They don't know when to put their cameras away. I have seen them turn and be sick while the dry-eyed sons of the dead watch their fathers and mothers being eaten by flames, without their faces even stirring.'

Ichbal told me this as we walked down to the laundry. That's when I noticed the smell. The sweet perfume of the cashew trees was hastily covered by a claggy blanket of shit that had been thrown out of the ghat. I rolled my lips up to my nostrils and breathed through my clenched teeth.

The sound of splashing grew louder as we approached the entrance. Ichbal folded a note into the palm of a shrivelled sadhu and he admitted us through.

The ghat itself was a huge dhal-pot of sound and smell, simmering with all the scents and echoes of India. It teemed with bare-chested men standing ankle-deep in water and soapsuds, scrubbing and thrashing garments on stone slabs and rinsing them out in square tanks. We passed row upon row of these concrete wash pens, each fitted with its own flogging stone. Every day Mumbai's dirty laundry is slapped around on these concrete blocks. There were no labour-saving devices here (there was no electricity). Salwars and dhotis were being beaten threadbare, leaving button and zip entrails all over the rocks. The dhobi-wallahs swung the wet clothes in heavy circles, releasing arcs

of bright droplets that sparkled in the air. The muscles on their backs wriggled like snakes under a sari.

Many workers washed themselves in the laundry water. They seemed immune to its uterine odour.

Once the clothes had been thrashed on the flogging stones, they were tossed into huge vats of boiling starch and hung up to dry or laid out on the corrugated roofs. I watched a tall, thin, anglepoise man ironing knife-edge creases into a pile of dry shirts. He used an old-fashioned flat iron that had been heated over coals. He set the warm shirts into a neat stack and wrapped them in paper.

Ichbal explained that the dhobi-wallahs collect, wash, dry, iron and hand deliver a bundle of neatly pressed garments to your home or hotel, wherever you reside in the city. It is nothing short of a miracle. If this were Britain, your clothes would be hopelessly lost or you'd need a barcode to keep track of them. Ichbal proudly explained that the dhobis invented the barcode. For centuries they have used a cryptic, yet virtually foolproof system of marking laundry to ensure that it is returned to its rightful owner. A thin cloth tag with identifying black dots and dashes is sewn into the edge of each garment. While buttons often go missing due to the beating process, the clothes themselves are invariably returned to the correct address. The police and missing person's bureau often rely on the dhobis to help them solve crimes, explained Ichbal. The dhobis can accurately identify a person by the markings on their clothes, markings that are inscrutable to outsiders.

Ichbal led me to a quiet corner of the ghat where lunch was being cooked. A boy no older than ten was stoking a furnace. A decapitated goat lay at his feet. The stone ground around the animal was stained by dark splatters. The source of these markings was soon revealed as two teenage boys engaged in a spitting contest. The boys were standing some distance from the dead goat, a distance I judged as six Ichbals lying end to end. They chewed on betel nuts and took it in turns to try and clear the goat with the oily globules of betel juice that they jettisoned from their mouths. The game was over when one of them managed the distance without one speck touching the goat's bloated belly. They cackled like mad chickens and drifted back to their work, leaving Ichbal and I in the quiet company of the young boy, a dead goat and an open furnace.

Ichbal asked me if I was hungry. I nodded and he babbled something at the boy. The kid responded by pulling a long metal skewer from the fire and presenting me with the charred goat's head impaled on the end of it. Pigtail curls of smoke wound out of its eye sockets and bright sparks of singed hair danced into the air. I gave the goat a miss but the stench of burnt flesh had fuelled my appetite ... my appetite for murder. The opportunity that I had been waiting for had presented itself on a white-hot skewer.

I handed Ichbal one hundred rupees and dispatched him to the railway station to persuade his friend Jamal to cook us some fresh garlic roti. I asked him to stop at the chai stall and pick up a couple bottles of cold lemonade to wash the roti down. I told him that I would hang back and pay a dobhi to launder my shirt (it had been marinated in a masala of sweat and street dust). I offered to meet Ichbal back at the washing troughs.

I had no motive for killing the furnace boy. That was the way it had to be. I had made the mistake of having a motive the last time I killed someone and look where that got me: a shitty cell in a soulless prison. Motives are the intellectual equivalent of throwing down a trail of bread, a trail that starts at the body of your victim and ends at your front door.

Killer Travel Tip: Kill without reason. Kill because you can.

I waited until the boy had turned to stoke the goat head back in the furnace before I removed the razor from my back pocket. I placed one hand on his forehead and pulled his head back, exposing his neck and the whites of his eyes. I sliced his throat open. It was a lot like shelling an oyster, a fresh one plucked straight from Loch Fyne, though it was blood and not seawater that spilled from the incision.

The boy made no sound as he hit the ground. His malnourished body weighed little more than the rags that clothed it. He was a bag of sticks. I decided that he would make good tinder and threw him headfirst into the furnace. I used the goat skewer to prod the body in as far as it would go. I jabbed at the legs and arms, forcing them on to the whitest coals. I made certain that there would be no 'chompy chunks' for the dogs to chew on.

I made my way back to the slap and swoosh of the ghat, feeling very pleased with myself. It was all rather perfect. The body would soon be reduced to ash. And even if someone pulled him prematurely from the fire, the boy had kindly kept the heat at a level

that would already make his body unidentifiable. In a city as poor as Mumbai, few people can afford to have their teeth catalogued. Dental records were not an option.

Not that anyone would bother to request them. In a city so vast, who was going to make a fuss over another dead street orphan? I had merely done my bit to ease the overcrowding. In the unlikely event that the police were called to investigate, they would find a blade in the ashes. I had tossed it in with the body. If they were going to pursue anyone, they could go after a murdering street barber. I would come out of this with no blood on my hands.

Or so I thought. I hit sunlight and noticed that a constellation of blood had formed on my shirt. A few of the bloodspots had started to harden into the fabric. I didn't panic. Why would I? I was standing in the largest laundry in Bombay.

I removed the shirt, folded it inside out and handed it to a dobhi. He dunked it in suds and beat it so hard that he not only got rid of the bloodstains, he broke down the constituent DNA.

The shirt had dried in the time it takes to eat a roti and lose three games of poker dice to an over-eager taxi driver. I was mindful that Ichbal had said that criminals could be traced by the telltale dobhi marks on their clothes. I whipped my shirt off the hot tin roof on which it was drying and threw it over my head before the dobhi attached his fingerprint.

Settling into the sand on Chowpatty Beach later that evening, I was surrounded by relaxed couples, frolicking beggar children, and stalls selling spicy bhelpuri snacks. I watched the sun turn red over Malabar Hill and felt a welcome sense of peace amid the chaos.

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