

THE PULL OF GRAVITY

(In a rural area visiting young Indian men who wished to become Brothers. A “lungi” is a sarong-like wrap-around worn by men in India.)

I needed a brief getaway, not only from the ashram itself, but from the crushing heat that built up each day by noon. A forest with a shaded pond, Barto said, was just a twenty-minute walk away. He showed me a path that would take me past a small village and led to that cool and pleasant place. It sounded like a good plan.

My umbrella helped ward off the afternoon sun, and I felt relatively comfortable in the lungi I had wrapped around my waist. Within a few minutes I came alongside the village where the men, resting during the heat of the day, sat on logs in front of their homes. Anticipating that as a foreigner I would receive silent stares, I waved to show I was friendly.

I suppose it was my quick movements that caused my lungi to come loose and fall off. The men stared. I froze. When I could move, I placed the umbrella on the ground and made furtive efforts to retie the lungi securely, a skill I thought I had mastered. A few children laughed as I hurried away to the jungle.

I wondered what I would say to Barto when he asked about my walk , but surprisingly he didn't ask me anything. The following morning, however, he invited me to accompany him to purchase rice. Assuming we were going to the bazaar, I headed toward the main road outside the ashram gate, but Barto explained we were going the opposite direction. “We buy rice from the village just down the path, the one you passed yesterday on your walk.”

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I had already agreed to go, so I swallowed hard and followed Barto. As we wound our way to the center of the village, a group of chattering boys clustered around us. One of the boys feigned a tug at my lungi, an act for which he was scolded by Barto. I said nothing. Since it was Sunday, the men were not in the fields but had gathered near the village well, talking, while the women languidly sifted rice and chatted among themselves off to one side.

Barto approached two of the men and asked about rice. The men looked at him, then at me, and motioned us toward a hut where the transaction would be held. Several other men joined us, glanced at me, then spoke animatedly with Barto. I began to smile, guessing what was being said. Barto looked back at me, started to laugh, and soon the men joined in.

“Brother Jim,” Barto said a few moments later, “they want us to take tea, and they have told me I must give you lessons on how to properly tie a lungi. And they said to be sure to tell you they are honored to have you visit their village. They even gave us extra rice because you came back.”

Later, I sat reading under a tree at the ashram gate, a slight breeze seemingly my only companion, when a young man appeared. Not more than eighteen or nineteen, the lad carried a sickle in his rough hands and stopped directly in front of me to stare. I stood to acknowledge him, and took note of the gray string that crossed his chest diagonally and indicated that he had observed a “coming of age” ritual. A small patch of skin under the cord had lost pigmentation, and his hair was freshly wet and slicked back, making me imagine he had just cooled himself at a local well.

He eyed me steadily and smiled in response to my own hesitant smile. *Shall I speak to him? Or is it better to say nothing than have a frustrating half-conversation?*

“Namaste,” I said, and he repeated the greeting. He unabashedly looked me up and down, staring intently wherever my light skin was exposed. No Westerners visited that remote region and I must have been a curiosity to him. Uncomfortable with my body being an object of scrutiny, I decided to speak. “What is your name?” I asked in Hindi and he replied with the name of the village down the road. Evidently my pronunciation left a lot to be desired. “What are you doing?” I asked and was pleased that I understood his response. “Cutting grass for the cows.”

We stood silently for several minutes not saying anything else. He continued to stare at me and I found myself doing the same in return. In fact, I wanted to reach out and touch him and find out if his brown skin actually was softer—as I imagined—than my own pale covering. But I didn’t. It would be presumptuous of me to touch him, maybe defiling his caste.

He gracefully shifted his weight to his other leg, then said something animatedly and laughed—so I laughed also. After another moment or two, he nodded in my direction and took off down the road. As I watched him walk away, his bare feet adjusting to the contours of the road, his arms swinging at his side and his whole body fluidly moving through space, I was simultaneously in awe of him and jealous of him.

That night I lay on my cot, tossing in the still, hot air inside the mosquito net. At midnight, sleep still had eluded me. Slowly, the moon slid out from behind clouds and its light seeped through the bamboo wall, creating jail-bar patterns on the mosquito net. I counted as many bars as I could, hoping to drift off to sleep, but it didn’t work. Village

sounds floated into the room from across the watery rice paddies—muffled conversation interrupted with laughter, a woman singing softly, the periodic tap-tap of pipes being cleaned of tobacco by banging them against a log. I had seen the men in the village do that. The villagers apparently weren't sleeping either.

A bath would help, so I pushed back the mosquito net and headed for the well. Someone had left a kerosene lamp by the door but lighting it would give off too much heat, so I counted on moonlight to illuminate the path. I headed down the dirt path, past the banana trees, and came upon the well in a small clearing. Frogs croaked in the well, but were momentarily silent when I dropped the bucket. I pulled up cool water, and took my time cascading it over my chest and each limb—slow-motion ablutions. I poured a second bucketful solely on my head, feeling the rivulets snake their way down my body. The water made my shorts cling to me, but I would change into a dry pair. On the way back to my room, a slight breeze that I didn't know was astir cooled me.

Sliding out of my wet shorts and fumbling in the dark for dry ones, for a fraction of a second I saw myself in suit and tie teaching mathematics. Not much more than a year ago that was the only life I knew, a very different one from the present. Then, I was someone not yet introduced to mosquito nets and bathing by moonlight, someone who didn't know the pleasure of an evening breeze against his chest, who knew of cobras and monkeys only from visits to the zoo. In short, someone out of touch with his body and removed from nature. Trussed up in my white shirt and tie, I had had the security of knowing what my task was each day, but I hadn't been connected to the earth. I had solved quadratic equations in my mind but not felt my bare feet walking a dirt path to the well. India,

however, was changing that. She was forcing me into my body more and more each day—
and it felt good. Gravity, it seemed, pulled harder in India.