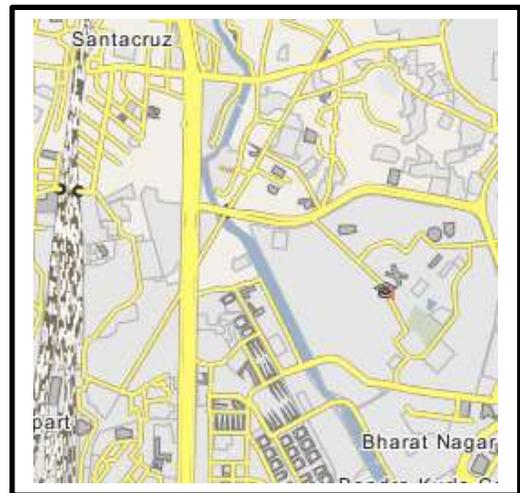


## University Guesthouse

The aircraft comes to a stop and on leaving the cabin I'm given a hand-written message:

*Welcome to India. So sorry I'm unable to meet you. My driver will take you to the hostel. He will be holding a sign with your name, after customs.*

*Lakshmi.*



After baggage collection I exit through glass doors; an animated Indian crowd, three or four deep, calling and gesticulating madly. Fortunately, one holds a placard aloft bearing my name.

Inside the car, the driver hands me another message, along with a sealed bottle of water; even at midnight it's hot and steamy.

*Your stay is arranged at university guest house - a small single room, unfortunately not air-conditioned. The driver (Ranjan) will wait till you are settled.*

*Best regards, Lakshmi*



It's 1.00 a.m. as our wheels crunch along the gravel drive and come to a standstill outside the hostel. The watchman is asleep; curled in front of the reception desk. I notice my name chalked on a board, and a sign that reads: *'Basic Single Room 25 rupees'* (less than \$1 per day). Alarm bells are ringing. There must be a catch.

Ranjan coughs and the watchman stirs into disgruntled life, rubbing his dark mat of tousled hair and grimacing as if to say: *'Why the hell should anyone have the cheek to wake me at this God-forsaken hour?'*

The three of us troop up two flights of echoing concrete stairwell and along a dimly lit corridor, metal doors on either side, closed. We reach the furthest door and wait as the watchman releases the padlock, sliding the bolt back and pushing the door open with a bare foot. It squeals like a forlorn creature in the night, banging against the wall, causing a small shower of plaster. He flicks on the light: a stark bulb hanging from a central cable.

I survey the Kafkaesque scene: small room, one window with cracked windowpane, single bed, bedside table, wardrobe. The furnishings all painted metal, the same as the grey door, rusted with age. An off-white, slightly torn sheet covers a thin mattress and solitary pillow. The floor is grey concrete and the walls a grubby cream colour, with maroon stains I recognise: squashed mosquitos. Not what I had imagined!

*'What did you expect, The Taj?'* I mutter to myself.

Ranjan drops my bag on the floor by the wardrobe.

*“You OK here sah?”* He enquires, with what seems a rather malicious smile. *“You like eat or drink?”*

*“No, Shukran Ranjan, I’m fine. I have water from the car.”*

Soon after, their footsteps echo along the corridor, and I push the door, which closes with a loud clang! It felt like I had won a prison cell, not a hostel room!

I was lonely and it was too hot to sleep. My first night away from the comforts of home and family and I parachute into something which resembles my worst nightmare.

An ashtray sits on the small metal table; white plastic, pitted by snuffed-out cigarettes. I sit on the edge of the bed, staring at my feet, chain smoking and wishing for something considerably stronger to drink than tepid water.

A couple of hours later, half-dreaming of re-booking my flight out, I fall asleep.

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*Duncan Gregory*

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