

An excerpt from

Shanti Bloody Shanti

by Aaron Smith

“We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars”

Oscar Wilde

Chapter 1.

The Green Men of Calcutta

“Just drive man.” I say leaning over to Garuda from the back seat of the white Ambassador taxi, the archetypical Indian vehicle. I reach past his ear, brushing the edge of his Sergio Leone spaghetti western bad guy moustache. Stretching my green arm, I point to the horizon. It’s shimmering seductively, sweet, wet - sirens and mermaids beckon to a cruel mirage. I shake my head and blink - this requires focus. It’s hot and dry, no mermaids, damn the subconscious. I stare at the bitumen road, the black sticky river, oily and undulating like a great serpent. So close to Garuda now I can smell the masala in his sweat and the beeswax in his hair. I whisper into his ear, spraying white spittle, “Just drive man, like the wind... Go man, go.”

Hot dusty air rushes in through the window as the Ambassador picks up speed. It’s gritty, pungent and thick with the aromas of diesel, incense, raw sewage and rotting vegetables. A bouquet to the initiated - an acquired taste, it smells comforting. To the uninitiated or newly arrived from the sanitized west it’s a stench that rapes your nostrils. My heightened senses are aware of every minuscule detail, nothing escapes my distorted perception. Total awareness and omnipotent understanding. Totally alive, I shout, “We’re free. Free to be whatever we wish, as long as we stay present in the eternal moment. *Sabh kuch milega*” (Hindi expression for, ‘everything is possible’)

The car speaker blares out a mix of radio static, sitars and someone singing mantras. It could be between two radio stations, a beat mixed by the gods. It works - it’s funky. The crackling of the speaker blends with the white noise hissing in my brain.

The music seems to crescendo and drop away in unison with the Ambassador as it

accelerates and weaves through the traffic. It slows in tempo as Garuda brakes hard behind an entourage of motorbikes and cars circa 1950, stopping at the lights in time with the music. Suspended in an infinite moment, the lights then flick to green, as the music again builds up and we lurch away from the traffic. Garuda is at one with the purpose of our mission, a mission from God maybe, if there is a god, or gods. Whatever it is, he knows the intensity of our burning ambition, even though not a word other than the direction to travel is uttered. We're communicating on a whole heap of higher levels.

Outside the world flashes past, accelerating into a mosaic of colors, merging and morphing. The crumbling architectural remnants of the British Raj are encrusted in same black soot you scrape out of your nostrils every few hours, the fallout of progress. Its sweet, metallic taste hits your tongue each time you inhale. But through this grey tinge, vibrant color is interspersed, every color under the rainbow, it's tantalizing. Every street corner is dancing in a spasmodic array of rainbows. My perceptual field bleeds, colors start to run, the periphery of my senses melting. I smile harder. Smile lines grow to my ears, cracking the salty film of dried tears at the edges of my eyes; tears of hysteria, laughter and pure joy.

The intersection we fly across is splattered on the left with silver, and on the right with purple. On the left side all the people are silver from head to toe, and on the right, purple, submerged in bright color except for the whites of their eyes and teeth, exposed by big smiles. Everyone is laughing, jumping up and down and waving to us. I meekly give the Royal Wave as the Ambassador hurls past. This is definitely reality and it's definitely a little strange.

Everything is shimmering, like an over-exposed aperture of a camera lens. The Ambassador is gliding; I can't even feel the road anymore. Through the window I see a motorbike. On the back sits a yellow man, driving, a blue man – they go fast, keeping up with

the Ambassador. They both look at us and not the road, smiling, wobbling their heads from side to side. They accept us, entwining us into the fabric of this experience, without speaking they say - *Mother India welcomes you.*

We're flying now - nobody speaks, no need, everything is apparent, everything's been said and anything now would be a cliché. We are the Green Men of Calcutta. On the Ambassador's dash sits a plastic effigy of Shiva, adorned with white and orange flowers and a mandarin speared with incense sticks. Its LED lights flash on and off highlighting the beauty and kitschiness of everything. We have a mission; to go in a direction, any direction - this direction. Why? Why not? Because it's there.

Looking ahead to the pot-holed road, two overloaded Tata trucks approach, one overtaking the other. Both lanes of the road now occupied, our path is blocked. There is nowhere for us to go. The Hindi music kicks up a notch, tempo increasing. I laugh heartily, "Now this is living."

Garuda grinds the Ambassador back a gear and accelerates, hurtling us forward even faster, towards the oncoming impenetrable wall of truck. His fingers on one hand wrap tightly around the steering wheel while the other squeezes the butt of his cigarette. There is still one more drag left which he fully intends smoking. Unflinching, he steels his gaze ahead to our impeding fate.

The exquisite moment, in all its infinite detail, stops for eternity in the glorious 'now'. Atoms of everything splendidly vibrate. Yes, we are all here in the beautiful 'now'. We are free and we are green, except for Redman. No, he's red, but same same but different.

Or as they say here, "*Shanti shanti.*" (Hindu expression for peaceful or peace)

Blackness envelops my senses.

* * *

I awaken uneasily - it's hot, almost too hot to breathe. It's the same heat every day, but something has changed to draw me out of a restless sleep. Outside it's still dark except for the ghoulish hue of the waning full moon. I stare up through my mosquito net at the ceiling and see the overhead fan spin, its mechanical whirl slows. Another power failure, they occur daily.

Sweat glistens over my body, beading and trickling into the thin hemp mattress. God knows how much sweat has seeped into it, years of countless, restless, sweaty travelers. The first light of dawn fingers its way across the now only slightly undulating walls, the effects of yesterday's acid, charis and beer. It all seemed like a good idea at the time. My skin crawls and itches. It's either the bed bugs or the poisons in my blood. The temperature continues to rise. During the peak of yesterday's LSD in the back of an Ambassador Taxi I'd had an epiphany. I was free as long as I lived in the moment, the proverbial 'now'.

Today however, I'm still a thirty-six year old, recently divorced, slightly depressed guy on the rebound who is unable to pick up a shag. Despite countless attempts to appear as a wise, ruggedly good looking, adventurous, scuba diving, yoga practicing, bronzed Aussie that can wrestle crocodiles. But despite this I no longer feel desperately lonely, more like happily alone as I lie here in my YMCA bed in downtown Calcutta. Today my life doesn't feel as much as an ordeal as it has done recently. Over the hump so to speak.

A new sweat forms, a cold sweat. Sharp pain strikes my stomach. I feel the need to fart, badly, but it is only brave men and fools that fart in India. You never know when you are going to follow through with a shart. Groaning and clutching my stomach, I sit up on the edge of my cast iron bed. The bed springs creak as I hunch over my knees. A flurry of mosquitoes manifest around my ankles. Too weak to move I watch them gorge thinking, fuck them and the twenty

two diseases they carry. I figure I have enough toxins to ward off the black plague. Sweat droplets run down my forehead, through my eyebrows and down the bridge of my nose. Glancing over to Dangerous Dave who snores in his partially collapsed bed, I feel jealous of his ability to sleep apparently so soundly.

Now it feels like someone is turning a knife in my stomach. My lower intestine starts to spasm. Dizzy, I wait for oxygenated blood to reach my brain, as black splotches fill my vision. Nausea rises inside. I only have moments before everything turns very messy. Lurching off the bed, grabbing my lungi, I stagger out of my room towards the toilet. My cloud of mosquitoes trails behind me, no doubt now stoned to the gills - damn junkie, disease-ridden mozzies.

Gastric juices wash over my tonsils, a wave of vomit presses against the back of my teeth and seeps out of my nostrils - the gag reflex can no longer be repressed, I hurl. Clutching the edge of the bowl, my thumbs sink in the foul custard, I moan. Relieved I dare a glance into the mirror. Usually not a good idea while tripping, you never quite know who you'll see staring back at you. I have a suspicion that you never actually come down from acid, you just learn to cope with it.

I'm not surprised to see my eyes are still dilated and bloodshot, but my long tangled hair and skin is a deep forest green. More than just hung-over, it's the aftermath of one of India's least religious and most popular Hindu holidays. Holi, or the Festival of Colors. I'm apparently green from head to toe - it has even soaked through my thin cotton clothing staining my heavily tattooed body.

Holi, celebrated all over India, is an excuse to run amok and cut loose from the usually strict social norms. It unites rich and poor, man and woman, and all the castes. The legend commemorated by the festival involves Lord Shiva, god of destruction, (one of the big cheeses

of Indian mythology) and Madana, the goddess of love. Madana decided to see if she could tempt Shiva by appearing before him as a beautiful nymph. Shiva, who was trying to meditate, (he did a lot of this) was mightily pissed off at the distraction, so he blasted her with a ball of fire from his third eye, reducing her to ashes - obviously he wasn't feeling amorous. This, and the onset of spring, is the basis of the festival. So to celebrate spring and the Spanish Inquisitionesque stake burning, Indians cover each other with brightly colored dyes, build bonfires in the street to clear away evil spirits and act a little ribald.

Even with this knowledge at hand I still felt a little uncomfortable yesterday seeing a man with rotten teeth running around with no pants on. His family jewels flapped in the breeze as he danced around a bonfire in the middle of the road, shouting, "*Bura na mano Holi hai.*" This apparently meant, please don't be offended, it's Holi.

It had been a long day; sun-stroked after staggering around the beautiful yet ostentatious grounds of Victoria Monument, from the height of the British Raj. A marble palace fronted by a grumpy looking, pigeon-shit encrusted bronze Queen Victoria, surrounded by acres of English gardens wilting under the Indian sun. We had been under the Banyan trees making lurid gestures to her majesty, totally off chops asking, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Our motley crew consisted of Ian, nicknamed Plastic Bottle Munted Yoga Master, or Munty for short. On any other day he was a fairly respectable Englishman from Bath, balding, slightly overweight, thirty-five years old and vaguely well to do in some IT career. However under the influence of LSD, he developed a unique balancing act involving a plastic water bottle and standing in an awkward one-footed position. This is how he earned his new moniker. Then there was Dangerous Dave, another Englishman, painter and decorator, cricket fanatic, slim build, late 20's early 30's. Only ever a danger unto himself, especially in our all night poker

sessions, Dangerous Dave always got cleaned out, always bought back in to just consistently lose again. Great for me, it funded my last month or so in India. We asked every night if he had a gambling problem, smiling like a naughty schoolboy he always replied with a definitive, “Yes, I have a gambling problem.”

A small fortune for the Indians but only loose change for an Englishman - well that's what Dave kept saying. But Dave is a likable character, bright blue eyes, sporting a toothy grin with a crop of short brown hair. The sort of guy mothers like. Lastly - Redman, whose name we could never remember, a Czech Republic tour guide operator, tall, late 20's, too thin, with a blonde ponytail. He spoke poor English in an accent that kind of sounded a bit like Count Dracula -definitely a man of few words.

Tripping hard since the morning, staggering around Calcutta - Ian, with his T-shirt tied as a bandana around his head exposing his paunch, crawled on all fours and hid behind what little foliage he could find. He thought the green dye smeared all over his body camouflaged him. Dave wore his shoes on his hands because he said they fitted him better that way, also green with pink rubbed in his hair. He constantly grinned like some escaped mental patient. And Redman - doused in red, mouth agape with a gormless expression, limped along with only one thong. The other unexplainably lost somewhere. Then the taxi-ride through the backstreets, where we made Garuda drive for half an hour in one direction, only to turn around and drive back again. A cross-section of a city of nearly fourteen million people. An endless sprawl of dilapidated streets. Beautiful in its state of decomposition and amazing in its overwhelming enormity.

After falling out of the taxi back where we started, I had found a card in the gutter - the ace of spades. It seemed an omen, so I put it in my pocket for safe keeping. Then trying to buy a Sprite, no mean feat in that condition, the stall owner kept morphing into the 330 million

different Hindu gods in front of our very eyes. We couldn't understand what he said or how to complete the translation, so we just threw money at him and ran away in hysterics. Then giggling like virgin schoolgirls on prom night, we rambled through the expansive Victoria Park where hundreds of Hindus played cricket. A different game every thirty meters or so. At first they encouraged us to play, honored to have such revered nations represented in their presence, particularly an Australian. A smiling Bengali man shook my hand, "Yes Ricky Ponting, Australian captain very, very good, world champion number one. Very much excellent, you must definitely be playing with us."

Considered gods of cricket, the locals were awestruck. But after Dave bowled three wides, I dropped an easy catch and Ian couldn't stop weeping hysterically, we were shunned from all the games in the park. They all looked at us with disdain - like the village idiots. So smirking to ourselves we crossed the grounds, inadvertently walking through several games and disrupting play. We constantly apologized profusely for the general public disturbance and Ian's inability to stop crying. Dehydrated we walked into the setting sun, back to Sudder Street the backpacker's haven. We craved the sanctuary of our temporary home, the Salvation Army YMCA. At that point we were all in dire need of a little salvation.

Dark by the time we made it to Sudder Street, the whole road had been closed off with bonfires. When we reached the naked crazy dancing man, accompanied by a giant yellow goat, I had tired of the surreal. I had two things on my mind - Rizzla, (giant cigarette rolling papers) and a cup of hot chai tea.

Naked-man took a shine to Ian and did a little dance around him, circling him, each circumference getting a little closer. He grunted and apparently in a state of semi-arousal, stamped his feet and wiggled his fingers. Ian stopped laughing and went rather quiet. Procuring

some rolling papers, Dave, Redman and I left Ian and the naked man, who by that time rocked from side to side - only a foot or so in front of him. Like a giant praying mantis, he seemingly hypnotized Ian. An old lady approached them and tried to sell Ian a bunch of roses. We ducked into a side alley and sat relieved, resting our aching bodies on the wooden crate bench of the chaiwalla's stall.

Traveler's note.

The chaiwalla is a cornerstone of Indian culture. You want anything, drugs, transport, information, directions, anything at all; you just ask the nearest chaiwalla. Chai is the sweet milk tea served by the walla or tea maker on nearly every street corner in every city or village in India. Walla is used to describe anybody with a profession, chaiwalla, taxiwalla hotelwalla, etc. Chai is nothing short of an institution in India.

Dave rolled a joint as I ordered tea from the chaiwalla. He couldn't have been more than eight years old and already looked world weary and wise, but smiling none the less. He told me how his grandfather and his father had made tea at this same spot for many years and in the future his yet unborn son would do the same. Beaming he puffed out his chest, "I am chaiwalla, this is my duty in this life and I will do it the very best I can and with pride. This is my place in the world."

I smiled - his humility and pleasure refreshed me. Back home in the west his equivalent no doubt would have told me this was just something he was doing until bigger, more grandiose dreams were fulfilled. No, this young but wizened Bengali boy already realized the importance of the journey rather than the final destination. He was streets ahead of me.

The aroma of charis filled the air as Dave passed me the joint. Sipping on my sweet chai tea, I considered the madness of the day. The naked man ran past down the street, arms

outstretched, chasing the yellow goat - apparently he had tired of Ian's lack of affection. Maybe he figured he had more chance of getting lucky with the goat. A pale and quiet Ian joined our entourage and other multi-colored exhausted festival goers. He silently accepted a glass of chai and the joint. Sitting there, finally on the other side of the wave, the acid had begun its decline into a subdued finale.

Grinning I remembered three months earlier, when I first flew from Sydney to Mumbai the day before Christmas. I wanted to spend Christmas in Bollywood. Why? Because it was the hell out of Australia. Freshly divorced from Stella, the high maintenance nightclub diva, I figured the whole cliché: *go find myself in India* seemed as good an option as any. Also it was cheap - Stella had cleaned me out in the divorce. So I sold what worldly possessions I had left on EBay and did the 'sketchy bail' (colloquial Australian expression - to leave somewhere in a hurry and for uncertain reasons). On the flight from Australia I struck up a conversation with an old Indian woman. I told her I was going to India to study yoga in the holy town of Rishikesh, bathe in the Ganges River, try to get a break in a Bollywood film and party New Year's Eve in Goa. She smiled and replied, "Mother India is bottomless, you can go as deep as you like and there will always be more."

Those words resonated to me sitting there on that bench in the back alley in Calcutta. Sipping chai, smoking charis, watching the world go by, I wondered how much deeper I could go. A homeless teenager, filthy, with no shoes and wearing plastic bags as clothes silently approached everyone at the chai stand. Stooping low he methodically touched everyone's feet and then left.

I mutter to myself now. "Mother India is bottomless,"

Staring at the apocalypse in the mirror of the YMCA bathroom, I wipe vomit from my

lips with my green arm. Suddenly the knife in my stomach twists another notch, shooting pain down into my colon. One hand clutching my stomach, the other steadying myself on the bathroom wall, I shuffle along to the toilet. It's a western sit down model, not the usual squat over a porcelain hole variety. I'm grateful for the seat as my legs buckle. I exhale slowly, cautiously releasing my sphincter muscles. What feels like my liquefied internal organs fall out my ass. My stomach turns again. Looking over to a bucket next to the toilet, I grab it in the nick of time. Sitting here, periodically expelling vile fluids from both ends, I have time to contemplate, as one often does on the porcelain throne. I suspect my current condition is as much to do with yesterday's drugs as it is with the consumption of pizza in a little establishment called the 'Super Bar' at the opposite end of Sudder Street. I've been developing a saying in India, when someone asks me if my food is good or not, I now reply, "Good meal, ha, ask me tomorrow!"

Last night's dinner has obviously not been a good meal despite it tasting nice. Appetites rekindled by the joints in the chaiwalla's alley and a dire need to wet our whistles, saw us drawn to Super Bar's flashing neon sign. It looked like some provincial amusement park ride. Instead of 'Ghost Train', we entered 'West World' complete with maroon-clad waiters, cold beer, western food and TVs that blared out a game of cricket.

It was packed with both western travelers and rich Bengali Indians dripping with cheap gold bling-bling. All overweight, double-chinned with paunches overhanging their belts. To be overweight or at least of generous proportions is considered a sign of high social status and not shunned as in the anorexic waif, oppressed west. No, a belly was a sign of wealth, health and prosperity. Bollywood movie starlets are always on the chunky side from our diet-addicted perspective. A round belly and some thunder on the thighs are considered positively sexy in India.

It was the closing minutes of a legendary game. Australia vainly tried to quash the South Africans, who bridged the gap on Australia's earlier considered impossible lead. The South Africans had fire in their eyes as did the excited Indians watching. Soon enveloped into the group, being Australian automatically qualified me to be the ambassador of Australian cricket. Each time the South Africans smacked the ball around the field our party of Indians turned to me with bated breath to gauge my reaction. A large Indian hugged me with his ample arm, his sweaty armpit pressed against my shoulder as he jeered, "Yes, yes, Australia is most definitely being in trouble. Do you think you can possibly win? You are the world champions, what must your captain be feeling at this very moment?"

"Yes, yes Ricky Ponting, Australia's captain," proclaimed another Indian. As he jumped up and down, spilling half the contents of his beer onto the floor.

Hitting a boundary on the second last ball, South Africa stole victory from Australia, the highest scoring game in one-day international cricket history.

As plates of pizza and pitchers of the popular Indian beer Kingfisher arrived at our table, Ian was still quiet and not enjoying the frivolities of the festivities. He looked acutely disturbed as he glanced at me with a furrowed brow. "Can I speak to you, in private, outside?"

I escorted Ian with a piece of pizza in one hand and a half-full pitcher of beer in the other. "Step into my office." Attempting to lighten Ian's sober mood, I gestured to the street outside as the smiling waiter opened the door.

Standing there in the street as a rickshaw rattled past behind him, Ian, limp shouldered and green, looked like a sad clown. Staring at the ground he shuffled his feet and stammered, "Look this may sound a little strange, but I keep having déjà vu's and their frequency is accelerating."

Definitely left of field, I hadn't expected this. I attempted to put on my sincere listening face of council, whilst I munched on my pizza. He continued, looking more perplexed. "The taxi ride, the yellow goat, the naked crazy man, the cricket on TV and even that rickshaw that just passed - I knew it would all happen. At first it was only every now and again, so I thought nothing of it. But then every few minutes and now every few seconds. What's next? What happens when the points of time unite, when the moment before joins with the moment later?"

Ok, this could've been a potentially a dicey situation. A possible acid freak-out casualty. Was Ian about to become part of the flotsam and jetsam in the gutters of India, left by the receding tide of his own mind? He certainly wouldn't be the first or the last victim of such a process. He also fitted the profile - an escapee from a high stress job - a string of failed relationships and in dire need of spiritual growth, to find something to fill the void inside. Like myself and many other earnest travelers to the subcontinent - drawn here like moths to a light, or flies to shit, all in search of something - anything. We were soldiers of misfortune in search of truth, armed only with our Lonely Planet guidebooks, backpacks of rags and credit cards. Jet-set vagabonds with nothing to our names but a wealth of experience, an airline ticket and travel insurance self-assurance.

However, every battle had its casualties and Ian edged dangerously close to the precipice of the abyss. Already more than halfway there - painted green, sweating profusely, with his T-Shirt still tied around his head, his Buddha belly hanging over his tattered Thai fisherman pants and on the wrong end of an acid trip. On this back street of Calcutta he could've slipped into a black hole. I had to act fast. Finishing the last of my beer, I passed the glass to the doorman. Putting my arm around Ian's shoulders I gently started to walk him down Sudder Street, "Munty, my good man, do you know what a déjà vu actually is; in scientific terms?"

He looked at me, his bottom lip quivered, “No, not really.”

“Ok.” I said, trying to sound like a respected authority of psychoanalysis, “It’s to do with the two hemispheres of the brain, the right and the left - the creative and the analytical. Memory is stored in the left, analytical half, whilst new experience is dealt with by the creative right side.”

Ian hung onto my every word, I continued, trying not to slur. “Now, within normal experience, information from our senses first goes to the right side of the brain, sounds, sights, smells, taste and touch. The right side then sends this data to the left side where it is stored as memory.” I stopped walking and turned to face Ian for extra impact. “Are you following me so far Muntty?”

Looking like a scared child, he replied. “I think so.”

I continued. “Alright then, now what happens when a déjà vu occurs is that this incoming information goes to the left, memory side of the brain, a millisecond before the right side sends the information across. So, when the left side receives the data from the right side, it goes 'hey, we already have a recorded memory of this.' So therefore, our mind is tricked into believing it happened before, so that's all it is, just a trick of the mind.”

Ian paused, trying to gain his composure, his voice wavered. “Thing is see, I am positive that when the two points of time finally meet, the near past with the near future, I will die. This is my death. I am witnessing my own end.”

I sighed, he obviously hadn’t heard a single word I said, he continued. “It’s like what you keep saying about being in the ‘now’. That there is only the ‘now’ and all that, well this is my ‘now’ and I fear I’m only moments away from my death. This is the last day of my life.”

Was this the aftermath of me reading too many self-help books big on being present in

the moment? I'd been fervently digesting this material to keep at bay feelings of self-destruction and lift myself from a pit of depression. Consequently I'd been pontificating a lot about the 'now' during our all-night poker games.

I decided to try a different approach, I smiled, "Ian, you're just tripping mate, OK? Your mind has been temporarily re-wired. The chemical synapses in your brain have been re-aligned. As your doctor and as your friend I recommend you go home, take two Valium and hit the hay. I personally guarantee you won't die and that you'll be fine in the morning."

For the first time since the episode with the naked dancing man, Ian smiled. He inhaled deeply and straightened up. "Right, yes. OK, will do, thanks for that little pep talk. Look sorry. Um, can we keep this under wraps, wouldn't want the lads getting the wrong impression and all. I just needed to touch base so to speak."

"No worries Munty." Relieved, I gave Ian a big brotherly hug. He froze up – rigid - obviously uncomfortable with my physical contact. Maybe because of the episode with the naked dancing man or maybe just because of his stiff upper lip, anal, British-ness.

He stepped backwards away from me mumbling. "Really, I am fine now, honestly. Think I'll go and sleep it off. Right then, I'm off, see you in the morning then."

Sitting here now on the YMCA toilet, I stare into the bucket. I see pieces of what looks like carrot, but I haven't eaten carrot for months. Spitting out the last of my bile is a temporary relief. Reflecting on why I get myself into these situations, some would say, it's my karma. Others would probably just say it serves me right, the price of my over indulgence. This is actually the first time I've been ill in India. Until now I believed I had an iron stomach while my fellow travelers fell by the wayside. Ian especially has been complaining of stomach upsets for the whole time that I've known him over the past month.

It's amazing, only somewhere like India are you able to meet a fellow traveler, who you have never known previously and within minutes be talking in detail of your bowel movements - its consistency, color and looseness. This is a country where it's considered lascivious for a woman to show an ankle or a belly button, or for couples to hold hands. It is, however, completely OK to defecate and urinate in public. This, a country where some Indian men never actually see their own wives completely naked, where Indian couples go steady for five years without kissing, where foreigners have been extradited or even jailed for showing affection in public and yet it is the home of Tantric sex. But people don't bat an eyelid at someone dropping their drawers and defecating on the footpath, on the beach, or anywhere the urge takes them. That's completely fine. India is definitely a country of paradox and obsessed with expelling all wastes from the body at every available minute.

Indians see the body as a temple for the soul and there is no place for feces, urine and even phlegm in this shrine. It's all part of the nirvanic purification every Indian is encouraged to aspire to. As a consequence it's common to see bright-eyed children beaming proud smiles whilst they make Mr. Whippy soft-serve poos directly in the street. Quite a sight - especially before breakfast. Seeing mothers hold naked babies in outstretched arms as their offspring urinate all over the ground becomes commonplace. Let alone on the beaches in Southern India in the mornings or the rice paddies along railway lines in the evenings. Here the whole village bear asses and strain towards purification. It is a social act that many Indians seem to revel in. I on the other hand (call me a bit of a prude) like to strain towards my nirvana in private and without an audience.

Cradling my head in my hands, which is aching from dehydration, the question 'why trip' enters my head again and in Calcutta of all places. However, I did not seek the drug. It found me,

delivered by the gods of random fortuity the day before Holi by a strange Lithuanian chemist at the chai stall. We had struck up a conversation, deliberately avoiding the usual, “where do you come from”, “where are you going”, “how long have you been travelling”, etc. Conversations I have had ad-nauseam. No, we started our conversation on the subject of shamanism and the use of drugs as rites of passage. The Lithuanian finished his chai, smashed the disposable clay cup on the ground and lit a cigarette. “I need to get out of this fucking city, ze pollution, ze crowds; it’s too fucking much man. I need somewhere fucking ‘shanti shanti’. I’m thinking of going to ze Andaman Islands.”

My eyes lit up, having only just arrived from the Andaman Islands the previous day with Ian, Dave, Redman and other newly made travel friends. “My man, get your little black book out and start taking notes, I’m about to give you a wealth of information that will make your trip easy.”

The Andaman Islands, once a British Raj penal colony, is some thousand kilometers off the east coast of India. Many of the islands are uninhabited, while others are sparsely populated by indigenous tribes that have never seen white people. Remote and underdeveloped - it’s a paradise. Diving every day and poker every night. I had at last been able to enjoy my trip and make friends, many of whom were also in Calcutta.

I told him about the best guesthouses and the best beaches. Afterwards the Lithuanian rummaged through a leather pouch and handed me a small package wrapped in silver foil. “Energy for energy man, this is special fucking recipe, very fucking strong, I make myself.”

Grinning, I pocketed it. I knew exactly its contents. Obviously a sign, my old friend Frankie was due to turn up for Holi and this dose of acid was perfect for our reunion.

Originally I met Frankie when we were both eighteen. We had been working in an

orchard in rural Australia. A real gypsy then, he grew up in an old school bus travelling around Australia with his mum, little brother and ex-biker step-father. When Frankie got sacked for arguing with the farmer, I got sacked for being his friend. So we bought a clapped out 1970 Holden sedan and set off to drive around Australia with nothing but a dole cheque, a bag of weed and a guitar. A real coming of age journey both of us eighteen years old, now eighteen years later we planned to meet in India and do it all again.

Now Frankie, to say the least, is an eccentric character, same height as me, 6'2', wiry build, short black hair and a moustache-less beard that often gets him mistaken for a Muslim and occasionally even Osama Bin Laden. He encouraged this with his blatant disregard of authority and contempt for suburban middle Australia. An artist, a painter and musician who is convinced he's not from this galaxy, but in fact from the Pleiades constellation. When he was eighteen he said that he wasn't going to live past the age of thirty - convinced life wouldn't be worth living then.

Now at thirty-six he didn't appreciate my ribbing him. I think he had reconsidered the 'if you haven't made it by thirty, life isn't worth living' scenario. Our relationship has at times been a bit contentious, sometimes not seeing eye-to-eye but always managing to stay friends. We had even been at times black market business partners. I had sometimes outsourced him as a drug courier for my employers - pizza shop mafia dons and biker gangs - moving their 'product' around the country. Frankie often returned without all the cash I needed to pay my employers, but instead with an array of 'bargains' that were too good to resist. Like a 'Jack and the Beanstalk' with his magic beans. One time he returned with - and I quote. "A classic vintage 1970 Hang Glider."

Not to mention the dune buggy that only needed a bit of work, a variety of obscure

musical instruments or an extremely rare and exotic breed of cats. However in more recent years we had gone from drug trafficking to working demeaning jobs or just rotting on the dole. But our philosophical conversations remained stimulating and developed into content that would have given Jung or Descartes a run for their money - well on one of their bad days maybe.

But Frankie never showed up. Every day he sent emails saying he'd be there for Holi, but never appeared. So I got the backup entourage Andaman crew together, the Fabulous Four - Munty, Dave, Redman and the rest is history.

My stomach no longer convulsing, I actually feel better now, like I've expelled whatever it is my body took a disliking to. Weak and drained I shower, watching green dye run down the plughole. Now only a lighter shade of pale I crawl back into my bed. Turning on my MP3 player, I put on my headphones and listen to The Doors. As the opening bars of *Break on Through* kick in, I drift off to sleep...