

## The Difference between Us

By Louise Henry

Children with hands out bump around me. I am walking down a street of crumbling buildings falling into one another. Barefoot, scrounged hand-me-down rags, unwashed, rough hands and old eyes. Coins in my pocket. One goes to each. Snatch and they run off to hoard and hide. Another child appears, claims my last coin as the next pulls up, hand out. No more. Small hands delve into my pockets, searching, unbelieving. Runs off yelling, after the lucky winners, tackling the last and stealing the dull coin. I shout. Futile. The victor is gone. Leaving the plundered in the dirt. She unsticks herself from the ground. I squat to eye level and pull the cheap bracelet from my wrist, a trinket bright and jangly, I hold it out. The child smiles shyly. Wait. In my bag some peanuts, an apple. Namaste.

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In South Africa I walk into a cafe that could be in any Australian city, a devotee of healthy-eating philosophy and gourmet ingredients. Customers are the urban Durban cool; young, hip. I order and settle in, opening my guidebook for something to do while I wait. Where I sit near the entrance there is a walkway leading into an alcove serving several shops, off from the street. The alcove ends at the door of an independent music



store. My order arrives, a salad extraordinaire. How I have missed a good vegetable-rich salad. I dig in, sweetness, saltiness, clean.

“Missss,” drawn out, hushed. “Missss.”

I look around. A black man half-crouches in the walkway near the entrance. His clothes are clean, he wears shoes. He flicks a glance over at the counter where a waitress and the music shop proprietor chat loudly. They don’t notice him.

“Could you spare me a few rand?”

I shake my head. No. I am eating. I am in an establishment. I am not in the street. My eyes find

the guidebook; I look at the pictures, impala, kudu, a cheetah. Food has lost its flavour. Words on the page run together. I think about what's in my wallet—only large denominations. I'm a backpacker on a budget.

“Miss? Miss?”

Shaking my head again, I glance up at his clay-modelled face, ridges and pillows, healthy. The staff don't notice him—or choose not to. No one looks this way. Other customers are in groups, talking, laughing—baby pram varieties, the latest scandal from the government, share prices.

“A few rand, Miss.”

Head lowered, confused. I refuse to look, I refuse to engage, I continue to eat. Turn a page. Powerful African dancers in traditional dress, colour, movement, mid-leap, smiling, high. He withdraws, as have I. The cafe continues on, familiar wafts of coffee, blasts from a blender, the clink of glasses. I am alert for the man, he doesn't return. The salad mechanically eaten, I pay, shove the guidebook into my small backpack and stand to go. Outside I look up and down the street. He has disappeared. I shove the twenty-rand change in my hand back into my pocket. The street isn't busy; it could be any street, in any large town.

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The man on the street in Cairns wavers gently, a shifting shadow at the edge of the footpath. He looks unwell and sets flitting through my mind all the possibilities as to why. He hasn't slept, or eaten? He is drunk or stoned? He could be sick—who knows? It's rude to stare so I avert my gaze to the concrete underfoot, keeping my pace

steady. I don't want to appear phased by him or concerned by his state. I don't wish to offend. I don't want him to think that I think anything is out of the ordinary. I can't help it. I look up briefly as I pass, and our eyes meet. Automatically I smile. He nods in return; there is no falter in my step.

“Excuse me?”

His voice is quiet, raspy, confiding.

I can't ignore him, so I stop and half-turn.

“Yes?”

“How're you?”

“I'm good thanks.”

“Don't s'pose you've got a spare coupla' coins, hey?”

His face is prematurely old, the skin sagging and loose. He has few teeth remaining and a yellow tinge to the whites of his eyes. His clothes end in tattered refrains, unravelling. I scramble in my bag for my wallet. I feel indecent, with my almost new leather bag, my clean neat clothes, my worn but intact shoes. I tip out the change into my hand and pass it over. My fingers brush his cracked palm.

“Thank you.” He emphasises the first word.

“Thank you very much.”

“You look after yourself.”

“Course.”

We turn away, our transaction over. I walk. I imagine him buying food. I risk a last look and he is back to standing on the edge of the footpath. He sees me, nods his head, gives me a wave and calls out.

“You take care now.”

“No worries.”

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The Pyramids. THE PYRAMIDS! One of the ancient wonders of the world. Studied in history at high school and now we are here. My sister and I compete to catch the first glimpse through the taxi windows. We barely notice the abrupt change from the green, fertile strip that runs along the banks of the Nile to the desert that presses up against it, brilliant frog-green against the muted dusty, tan skin. The pyramids concertina up from the floor of the desert, solid, real, extracted from our imaginations. I'm not prepared for the size and depth of each gigantic stone step—much taller than me. We walk with faces lifted in rapture, the same thrill that has run through me every time I visit somewhere long imagined. *I can't believe I'm here, I can't believe I'm here.*

My sister and I join the cue to enter the inner sanctum of the largest pyramid. Inside, the chamber is cramped, hot and smells of pee. At school my sister and I had both taken Ancient History and made models of significant historical structures when studying Egypt; me the Temple of Hatshepsut, my sister the Great Sphinx guarding Khafre's tomb. Exiting the pyramid built by the Pharaoh Khufu we set course for the Sphinx but are waylaid by a man and his camel. Bright red pom-pom's threaded with blue, yellow and green hang from the animal's bridle and saddle. A saddle-blanket with geometric designs in dense colours draw the eye from the beige background of sand, rock and camel hide. I have been on a camel in the Northern Territory. I

don't feel the need to repeat the experience. My mind is on the Sphinx.

“Come, come,” the camel driver says.

“No thank you.”

“Yes, you must come. Ride the camel.” His voice enthusiastic, but his eyes devoid of expression.

“No. Thank you anyway. We're going to see the Sphinx.”

“Come, come. You must ride the camel at the pyramid.”

My sister stops to consider.

“We're in Egypt after all.”

“Well, if you want to do it you should,” I say.

“How much?” she asks the camel driver.

He gives a high price as is normal. They bargain until a mutually agreed price is accepted and a deal struck. The camel kneels slowly and my sister climbs onto its back. The man walks the camel around in a rough circle. It inelegantly plods along, tipping its passenger from side to side, bells tinkling. The circuit finishes back where I'm standing.

My sister pays and waits for the camel driver to instruct the camel to kneel, so she can get off. Instead, he changes the price. He refuses to let her down unless she gives him the money he wants. They argue. I'm unsure of what to do. Should I give him the balance and be done with it? He can't keep her up there forever. My vacillation is moot when I catch the expression on her face. I see my sister's stubborn streak strike its stake into the ground. The camel driver is not aware of the battle he now has on his

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hands. A deal was struck in good faith. There is no way my sister will accept his new terms.

“Let me down.”

“You have not paid.”

“I paid what we agreed.”

“You give me the money.”

I flap about uselessly. The man keeps the camel moving and us off-balance.

“Should I go see if there’s a security guard or something?” I say pointlessly. I can’t see anyone fitting that description anywhere close by. We keep walking.

“He’s not getting any more money from me!” she hollers, swaying with the animal’s gait.

“I can’t believe this.” I am astonished. His behaviour is so unexpected. At home, prices are fixed, fair.

“Stuff this. I’m jumping down. Catch my bag.” My sister throws her bag down to me and I snatch it from the air.

“Be careful not to twist your ankle or anything.”

Swinging her leg over and turning round she slides down the side of the beast, belly to belly, before dropping the last few feet to the ground. The camel driver follows us as we walk off in haste towards the Sphinx, complaining loudly. My sister has given up defending her position and refuses to answer him. There is a note of

desperation in his protests. I look back at the distressed state of his sandals, his thin wrists protruding from fraying robes, the balding patches on the camel’s fur. I stop and give him some money.

“Shukrun,” he murmurs as we leave him behind.

“Can you believe that? He flat out lied,” she says.

“He mustn’t be getting a lot of work,” I say.

“I can see why. If he wasn’t happy with the price he shouldn’t have agreed to it. You shouldn’t be giving him money; it’s just rewarding bad behaviour.”

“We might have been the only customer he’s had all day. How much would it cost to feed a camel, d’you reckon?”

The area around the pyramids is dotted with tourists and camel drivers following them. Many of the tourists do not even acknowledge the camel drivers when they speak. Some shake their heads, careful not to make eye contact. One or two cheerily refuse their services. I put away my coin purse.

“Maybe you should be more careful with your money,” replies my sister.

“You were always much better at budgeting than me.”

“You’ll just have to stop buying souvenirs.”

“Buying souvenirs contributes to the local economy.”

“And if I weren’t here to give you the option of borrowing money?”

“I have always paid you back, dear sister.” I smile. “But, if that were to happen it would probably just mean that I’d have to leave early if I ran out.”

“You can’t do that if you run out of money, can you? You’re stuck.”

“Don’t be silly. I would never go travelling without a return ticket.”

“Just as well.”

The wind picks up, flinging towards us sheets of sand that sting our eyes and send us sheltering behind the wall of a nearby building. I squint up at the familiar form of the Sphinx and try to pull its ravaged face into focus.

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At the large bus station in Aurangabad a young brother and sister—same heavy eyebrows and delicate sweep of the jaw—do the rounds, picking out targets. Some ignore them, some shoo them away. Some find a miscellaneous coin or two. They bounce deliberately down the lines and into the milling crowd. I know they will come to ask me, so I prepare. The waifs approach, their faces calibrated to abjection. Hands out, mewling words.

“Namaste, Namaste. Rupee. Rupee.”

I point to the street stall selling pakoras. Their faces dismissive, the siblings shake their heads and stretch out their arms.

“Rupee. Rupee.”

“Pakora. Chapati? Roti?”

I point again to the food stand. Heads shake vigorously. They mewl. They wait. I fold my arms as I watch them work. They glance back every so often at a man squatting against the wall of the station. Giving up on me with a scowl, they move on. I see them go to the squatting man and empty their pockets. He takes everything they have earned. I shake my head.

Later, I feel a tap on my arm. The waifs are back.

“Pakora?”

We walk together to the street stall.

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An insistent hum vibrates along the train platform in Delhi where hundreds of people wait. I weave my way further along to where the crowd appears to thin and where I have room to manoeuvre. Shrugging off my small backpack, I transfer it to my front and thread my arms through it like a baby harness. A man steps up beside me; his eyes meet mine directly, differently from the way men typically look at me in India. Often, I am an object, a curiosity, a foreigner with the inexplicable position of being alone, female and—heaven forbid—unmarried. An alien creature no bridge could cross to understanding. Unnatural. I stop. Expectant. What does he want? The scum of pollution feels tacky on the surface of my striped cotton shirt.

The man approaches me with an apologetic expression and says, with what sounds like a London accent, “Hello, is this your first time in India?”

He is dressed in the drab garb many of the men on the platform wear. Dirt so ingrained that the pelting meted out by the washerwomen of India cannot shift it entirely. The material worn thin, darned in parts, but neat and well kept. He wears a knitted hat on his head even though it isn't cold. We stand side-by-side, part of the moving masses that surround us here along the platform and out in the streets, the markets, the towns and the cities of India.

“Yes.”

The train track curves right beyond the platform where we are standing, to fringe a crouching hill in the otherwise flat landscape.

“I'm not Indian you know, I'm English. At least, I was born and grew up in England,” he says.

He smiles then and holds out his hand to shake, it is cool, dry to touch. The chai brewing at a nearby stall—cinnamon, cloves, fenugreek—makes my mouth water. Tea. What else is he missing from England? Digestive biscuits, crisps, curry with chips? Devilled eggs?

Carriages stagger as they shunt in on the opposite tracks, steel striking against steel, shuddering to a standstill.

“Do you live here now?” I say for want of something better.

He stands facing the tracks, his arms crossed, turning his head when speaking to me. Others on the platform stare at us benignly.

“Yes, I came out ten years ago, or so. I was hoping to start a business, but . . . well businesses are run differently here. I lost all my money and

haven't been able to afford the ticket to go back. My passport's out of date now and it would cost a lot of money to buy a new one.”

“What about your family back in England?”

He shakes his head, holding something back.

“I lost contact,” he says shortly. He coughs, turning his head away as he does so. I wait for him to finish.

“I'm sorry to hear it.” I say as he stares ahead at the disembarking train opposite. “What are you doing now?”

“I work in a small hotel doing accounts. I would like to go back—home, that is. But I think now it's impossible for me.”

I nod sympathetically, pathetically. The crowd stand or shuffle about, there is constant movement and constant noise. I am reminded of scenes in wildlife documentaries, vision of hundreds upon hundreds of animals like penguins carpeting a beach, or flamingos at a waterhole. The Englishman comes into focus; he is lean like many others here. He is poor, like so many others. He is a drop of need in an ocean of want. But he is speaking to me. I put my hand in my pocket and feel for the money I know I shoved in there earlier. Keeping my hand turned so the notes are concealed from curious eyes, I hold it out.

“Here. It's not a plane ticket—“

His face appears to flush, as much as a brown face can, and he looks away from me and then down at his feet. He shakes his head, frowning, eyes averted, mouth twisting. I lower my hand and return the money to my pocket.

“I didn’t come and talk to you to ask for money.”

“I’m sorry, it’s—”

“I just wanted to talk to somebody about home.”

I too look down and feel my face flush.

“You must miss it,” I say. “England is vastly different from here.”

He smiles again and gestures towards the platform edge.

“Mind the Gap,” he says.

I smile in return.

“Keep Calm and Carry On,” I reply.

He almost giggles, but instead he is racked by another coughing fit.

“You should see a doctor for that.”

“Right you are.” A fleeting grin, he breathes slowly in and out.

“I should confess,” I say. “I’m actually Australian.”

He nods in recognition. “I’ve been here so long I can’t place accents all that well anymore.”

“I did travel to Britain a few years ago though. It was interesting, matching the reality to what I imagined it would be like, y’know, after reading books, seeing films, TV and all that.”

He is curious. “Did you find it very different to how you thought it would be?”

“In some ways—not in others. I liked it a lot, though it felt foreign in many ways.”

“All countries are foreign if you don’t grow up in them.”

I nod. “It’s weird,” I say. “But some of the

landscapes in India remind me of home; the dry centre with its heat and dust, the sugar cane crop on the way to Calcutta. In some ways India feels more familiar than Britain ever did.”

A train whistle hoots and we stand back as the carriages’ vibrating clatter fills the empty track and its roar the air between us. We are pushed together and apart in the jostle of the crowd rearranging, surging, ready to move on.

“Hey! Thanks.” He shouts and holds out his hand, up high above the crowd to shake, a last connection.

I reach up too, our hands meet, money pressed between, it hurts to look in his bruised eyes, but I do. People press in and the jostle for position, working to separate us. I want him to take it, I will him to take it, and as the crush pulls us in opposite directions, reluctantly he does.

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