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Godless in India

A thousand tons of rust growled across the Indian desert, no faster than a man could run. Jostling and lurching in unison, a soldier, a saint, and an atheist shared the train compartment's motion. The soldier endured the dusty clatter with a straight back and an air of discipline, his eyes intently focused on the wall. His olive uniform was crisp compared to the disheveled garb of the other passengers and his boots gleamed like the eyes of a rat. The saint had a face all pockmarks and roughness, set with wet, gentle eyes. Comic and ageless. He cracked many jokes and with a cigarette for a scepter traced delicate patterns in the air.

"You see him?" The soldier, a captain just back from the Pakistani border near Jaisalmer, pointed. "He's a saint. A holy man. He's traveling on what you call a..." The captain scowled and asked someone in the corridor a question in Hindi. He turned back. "A pilgrim." "A pilgrimage?" "Pilgrimage, yes. He has no home, just travel." The saint looked as if he had traveled through some very dirty places, perhaps on his hands and knees. When the *chai* sellers came into the car, someone bought the saint some tea; he lit another smoke and held the tiny green glass with the swagger of Sinatra toasting a whiskey. The atheist, an American tourist venturing north to Agra from the blue city of Jodhpur, was glad to be back on the rails. The roads were dangerous and the flow of army vehicles to the border disconcerting. Two days before, a busload of schoolgirls had been killed west of Jodhpur in a collision with a petrol truck. Thirty little bodies were strewn burning across the road. The mess had been mostly cleaned up by the time his own bus had crossed the scene, but hysterical onlookers still clogged the road and wept. The parched earth of Rajasthan was accustomed to soaking up such tragedies.

The train took him away from all this. He huddled in the corner away from the boisterous chatter of the others; people were poking their heads into the compartment to catch a glimpse of the saint's antics. The captain elbowed the tourist to initiate conversation, "English?" "American." "Are you Christian?" "No." "Jew?" "No, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God." Recoiling for a moment, the sol-

dier's eyebrows raised quizzically, as if he were talking to a fool. The American changed the subject and they spoke of military matters. The captain shrugged at the idea of war. "Pakistan, what is Pakistan? If we wanted to crush them, we could do it in a few days. A week, maybe." His expression became as arrogant as is possible without turning into a sneer. "The Indian army is ten times that of Pakistan. No, we don't worry about them...."

Black smoke thick as flies spilled off the train, in through the windows, and onto the atheist. His eyes became wet like the saint's and he kept his face firmly in both hands. The poison fumes and the Hindi pushed through his ears and nostrils, fueling the brutal throbbing in his temples. He feared his head would crumble from the pain and once he even eyed the captain's revolver in rash suicidal desperation. Meanwhile, the train made every stop and then some, bleeding a trail of passengers and dust for fourteen hours.

The atheist begged for aspirin. The soldier had none, but he translated to the others. Grimacing, the atheist implored everyone nearby except the saint, who now smoked aloofly across the compartment. Staring at the ceiling, he lolled on his sole belonging, a filthy blanket. Soon the whole drugless coach echoed with the request for aspirin. The atheist waited futilely for awhile, then collapsed in silent spasms and stared out the window. The scrub slithered by nondescriptly. Occasionally, some frail people appeared on the horizon and hacked at the dust with tools.

Later, when the headache was verging on delirium, the soldier tapped the dazed American and pointed to the saint, who held their gazes for a long moment, as if he were about to perform a magical rite. He pulled from his robe's only pocket an array of pills—Western painkillers—and in a truly saintly gesture offered them to the atheist. Fussing over this, the soldier did not want the saint desecrated by contact with an "untouchable," so he intervened and made the transfer. Aspirin, ibuprofen, acetaminophen, even codeine; they were all there in different brands and colors, hiding in a grubby saint's pocket like holy beads.

The sampling began and the tiny pharmacy grew tinier. The saint's worldly possessions were soon reduced by half and then consumed by a godless American. But the saint didn't seem to mind. Content with the impressive absurdity of his miracle, his face

remained a wry smile. His vivacity was infectious and the atheist laughed and laughed.

The headache went with the desert, away, and dawn met the train at Agra. Calm fire was the sky, the Taj Mahal arose stupendous. India was orange and glorious and atrociously beautiful. The atheist haggled for a cheap taxi and crawled into the backseat. An inquiry was shrieked at him, "Where you going?!" He calmly told the driver to head into the flame.