

Agra

House, Richard

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
House, R 2013, *Agra*. Prosp Publishing Limited.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:
author / Prospect Magazine UK

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Richard House: Agra

Day 1

A businessman (not unhandsome) joins our train at Gwalior // European. Grey eyes. Smart summer lightweight suit // he sits opposite Buzz, by the window and says nothing, but his eye is on us // The windows are tinted. Even so, nothing holds back the mid-day heat // he's sweating... but cute (I know?)

Buzz (for the record) sits with his arms folded, silent, unmoved // Not sure what's brought on his mood // he's stewing - giving the businessman the evil eye // Sunshine - red rock - India // day 7: Kolkata > Gaya > Varanasi > next... Agra // When Buzz first asked I wasn't sure. India? Three weeks? Buzz? // not counting Chicago (and definitely not counting Tel Aviv) this is our first joint trip // Buzz has a house to sell, and a house to buy. He's constantly online - 'brokering' // t e d i o u s - I'm deliberately not thinking about the UK

When the guard comes to the carriage, Buzz asks: // wait for it... // 'when does the filth express get into sh*t station?' // Don't think the businessman heard // his attention doesn't veer from the hard landscape // red dust and scrub, a few bald outcrops, mounted with palaces // all distant, in silhouette // He doesn't know what to do with his hands

Some idiocy on arrival at Agra // Buzz is determined not to use pre-pay booths // he jumps in and out of rickshaws to find the cheapest deal // I'm too tired to disagree // We should go to the booth like everyone else // buy a ticket, give the receipt to the rickshaw driver, who'll take us to our hotel // Instead, we wander the parking lot trying to pick our ride // a gang of touts wheel about us, grab our luggage, sit us in a cab, and demand an unrealistic fee // we argue with the drivers, with each other, then switch rickshaws // Our businessman buys his ticket from the booth. No problem // he rides by while we haul luggage across an open square // For the first time he turns to watch // Buzz blanks him // I manage a smile and feel the pang of a missed opportunity // // After 5 attempts Buzz gets a price he can live with // I should be happy we're on our way // Problem 1: our rickshaw is a bicycle without a motor or gears // (the other rickshaws were motorized, hence the higher price) // to get us to move the driver has to stand to pedal // Problem 2: you can't drive to Hotel Sheela - concrete barriers block the road // no taxis, no rickshaws - access by foot only // Plus: I weigh 71 kilos, and Buzz around 76+ // our combined luggage weighs, at least, another 100 // all of which has to be peddled 5 or 8 miles // the driver must weigh 55 kilos, tops

I don't watch as Buzz pays // I don't want to become annoyed // The driver stays with us, we won't get our hotel discount until he leaves // he's keen to secure work for tomorrow, but not too insistent // he doesn't smile, doesn't banter or hassle for money // hadn't noticed before: his hair is parted and slicked back, close-shaved. Stylish // his body is staggeringly lean, but he's stronger than I imagined // Buzz shushes him away - a grown man, an adult, shushed away like a pest

Agra looks cleaner than other cities. Completely unexpected // Buzz doesn't want to see the Taj Mahal until tomorrow // The whole point is that first view from the gatehouse // that one vantage point // // He wants to eat at a rooftop restaurant in Taj Gange, right in the neighbourhood // has me go up first – and bang: there's the Taj // remarkable, improbable, huge. So white it doesn't look real // I find a table, manage Buzz up the stairs then to his seat (with his back to the Taj) // all without him getting a peek // As the sun sets the Taj appears to grow // brighter, bigger than every other building, it stands forward and softens from pink to mauve to grey // a proposition, a verb, ready to do something: spin, light up, launch // I'm here with the wrong person // I should be with a lover, not a friend

At sunset boys come to the rooftops - pigeon racers // can't be older than 8 or 9 // they stand high on tatty walls and roofs // They release their birds and swirl rags and ends of rope // conduct their flocks with gestures and whistles // the birds gather, swing over the city, are sent away, called back // they morph, more of a swarm than a flock, and wheel above Taj Mahal // the sound of their wings makes an applause-like report // seriously spectacular: a powder-blue sky specked with birds and neon kites // The idea is: one flock will mob another, send it down // sometimes these mobbings end in brawls // good money is made from who wins and who loses

At ten o' clock the electricity fails for the neighbourhood for the night.

Day 2

Through the night our room throbbed to the noise from the generator // I didn't sleep well // Buzz burned a mosquito coil which filled the room with smoke and made him snore // my dreams were disturbed,

fractured: men on trains, men in rickshaws, men who continuously turn away // Both of us woken by the early call to prayer // three calls, all slightly off-key, two were the usual thin tinny wail // the loudest, soft and mellow, sweetened the air // Buzz won't shut up about his house // he's technically homeless, he says, until the money comes through // he doesn't trust Barclays... who does?

Waiting for breakfast. An international crowd at Hotel Sheela – so many tourists // can't figure out the nationality of table next to us // keep switching from French to Spanish to Italian // the mother threatens to slap her child. Dirty, she says, dirty // they saw the Taj yesterday and disagree on what to visit today // Buzz is busy. Organizing. Ready to go before I've even had coffee // I know exactly what he's thinking // The Taj opened at six. There will be a queue // (we checked with the guards outside the westgate last night) // Buzz gave each of the guards a jolly 'night night' // you could see active dislike in the soldiers' non-response // I'm not ready for a day of Buzz's enthusiasm, or the attentions of hawkers and traders

The tickets cost 25 rupees for Indian nationals, and 750 for 'non-Indians' // A European woman in a sari has taken exception to the difference // She calls the price divisory and racist // I'm too hot to be bothered and Buzz is too bothered about the delay she's causing // Ordinarily he'd weigh in there with her // After travelling half-way across the globe, the fee is irrelevant // anyway, 750 rupees for half-a-day of not being pestered is well worth the price // (hawkers and touts aren't allowed into the complex) // // Walking to the gate we're invited to buy cards, t-shirts, marble chess pieces // variously scaled models of the Taj. Some, strangely, modeled from cow turds (!?) // // The merchants are actively aggressive // one keeps slipping small alabaster models of the Taj into Buzz's pocket, has hold of his arm - won't let go // and becomes offended when Buzz finally marches off // Buzz says he doesn't (or won't) understand the word 'no' // on cue, there's a woman outside the westgate – same as all the others we've seen // she stands, absolutely static. A sign about her neck, black paint on cardboard, that says 'NO'

First view of the Taj is through the portal of the main gatehouse // Everything here is presumed, devised, calculated // Buzz stands dead-centre, silent // Behind and before us are people - more and more people // each vie for the same spot, the same vantage point: that first full view // // Buzz is too amazed to smile // // Infinitely satisfied // The view stretches before him grander than he could have imagined // // a petite lawn, a channel of water, light and balanced fountains // the monument is raised on a platform,

absolutely massive // astoundingly delicate as if crafted from sugar // // It doesn't matter how many people crowd the pathways and lawns // above anything else, it is intimate

When Buzz finally turns to me, he asks, 'Why didn't we ever get together?' // This is too casual to be unpremeditated. Buzz doesn't do casual // we're in Buzz's universe // his heart's favourite home // the most singular monument to devotion // and he's asking me why I don't love him // // My inability to answer is his answer // // Buzz nods to himself, walks down the steps. Fine, whatever, written all over him // // I'm done. I won't participate in this // So I'm leaving

Back at the westgate I have to work against the flow of the crowd // Out of the compound there's another commotion // there are three women with the 'NO' signs, and a whole mob of men about them // It's ugly. The women keep their eyes shut. The men holler and threaten, wild with rage // I squeeze through and find myself face to face with the businessman from the train. The man from Gwalior // I break away from the crowd. The businessman follows after // Once free, we both check our pockets for our wallets. He says: I genuinely don't know what that was about // then introduces himself. Steven // Steven has a slight stutter, and he asks what I've done with my friend // I point back at the compound, and he touches my arm, perhaps by accident // We both smile, because we both know that this is going to be easy

Steven has a room at the Sheraton // despite his stutter, he moves business along // He doesn't want to drink, he says, and he doesn't want to talk // Within five minutes I'm shucking off his polo shirt // Down to his shorts. I ask him what he wants. What he likes // This, he says, is fine // We kiss a little // I suggest that we lay on the bed. Instead he sits in a chair // I keep standing // He's a little rougher than I like

Long story short // just when it matters, I lose concentration // what I hear in my head is Buzz whispering // *ask the guard when the filth express gets into sh*t station?* // I'm hearing house prices, mortgage negotiations, complaints about Barclays // That's it. The moment's lost

Steven asks for the time, he has some kind of business meeting // If I like I could wait, and he would be back in two hours // He's suddenly awkward, back to stuttering // Nice, he says. N-n-n-n-nice. Fuh-fuh-

fine // Nice? Fine? I'm used to the clichés, 'hot' maybe, but nice? Fine? // I tell him that this is tempting, but I have business of my own at my hotel // I squeeze his shoulder as I leave and we say the usual things

By the time I'm in the auto-rickshaw I'm in a bad mood and forget to haggle // a thirty-rupee drive becomes a fifty-rupee rip-off // It's only pennies, but then it always is only pennies // I'm beginning to feel short changed

Buzz is in full irritation mode by the time I make it back // He's been waiting, he says. He needs to check his emails. What if the bank need to get hold of him? // he has a bad feeling – today is when the deal closes, the money is transferred // he sells his house, he buys another. Blah-di-blah // // After the Taj he'd returned to the hotel for a nap // his gentle hour of recovery was spoiled by a monkey // which sat on the hut's tin roof, jumping and hammering // It wasn't made easier by two hotel staff waggling sticks and throwing rocks who stirred the animal into a rage // I have to listen to this twice // He stretches out and tips his toes together // He says: what I said earlier wasn't serious. It was just a question // He wants to know where I was // It's this place, he says by way of an apology. Being here // I should leave it alone but I can't // I'm busy changing. I disagree // You can't ask a question like that without meaning it, I tell him // I've been hijacked // the whole trip is a dumb plan to corner me - and what for? // If anything was going to happen between us wouldn't it have happened already? // How can he not see this? // I know, even as I speak that what I'm saying will be a source of deep and great regret // But I don't shut up: it was blackmail, I tell him. The whole trip. Blackmail // The impact of this statement is immediate, and more awful than I could have imagined // Buzz immediately hardens, switches off

We agree to travel separately for a while. It's nothing big. Buzz's suggestion, in fact // It's hard to figure out exactly what to do // Buzz wants more time in Agra. I'm for moving on to Jodhpur // He's keener to see Jaipur // Even as we talk we confuse the cities: Jodhpur. Jaipur

Our arrangement is efficient // Jodhpur is an overnight train ride beyond Jaipur // so we agree to meet in three days times in Jaipur, outside the Hawa Mahal – a big pink palace // If there's need to change the plan we'll be in touch by email // we'll stop in Jaipur for a couple of days, then head on to Mumbai // This seems watertight // Buzz, who has been dependent thus far, is happy with the arrangement // I'm surprised. This has been relatively easy. I'm trying not to jump at the break // Time apart is a good idea. We're tetchy with each other, intolerant // Once you start behaving like that it's hard to stop. I'm just as culpable as Buzz // A break will be good; we're too much in each other's pockets // So it's agreed. We'll go and check our email // then head to the station to arrange our travel

The chairs at the internet shop are so unsteady it's an effort to sit and type // Buzz checks on his house. I browse on-line newspapers, weather reports // // Buzz perches forward, focused // he types fast, a little snappy as if the person he is writing to annoys him // The connection isn't secure and occasionally drops // Buzz huffs at the slightest provocation and complains // I've one message from Tom, a mutual friend // I've just opened it when Buzz pushes himself away from the keyboard // He's done. Am I ready? Let's go to the station // I quickly read Mark's message. There isn't much to it // Just to ask how I'm getting along with Buzz // Mark is a mutual friend who couldn't quite see the point in the trip // Buzz, Mark reports, has sent him an odd email. There's no time to look into this // I pay. Buzz stands at the door. As the man takes the money Buzz steps into the street // just as two auto-rickshaws pass in opposite direction // It happens too quickly for me to do anything // struck by one rickshaw Buzz is knocked into the path of the other // Everything stops and focuses down to this one small spot // // I have to push through people standing in the doorway to get out // The rickshaws have stopped – horns blurt along the street // One of the rickshaws blocks my view // When I step round it I find Buzz on his back, knees up, hands up // dazed, blinking at the sky, dust settling about him // I squat by his side // He blinks. Lifts up his head // I tell him not to move // Buzz chuckles: I'm fine // He rolls to his side then struggles to sit upright // Me: Don't move // Buzz: I'm fine. I'm alright // I check his head, his neck, arms, legs. Insist that he remains

still until I'm satisfied he's all right // It's hard to tell but he appears undamaged // I bounced, he says.
Christ, I'm so fat I bounced. My hip hit the rickshaw

The rickshaw is screwed. The driver tugs at a loose front panel // I'm immediately on my feet, finger right
in his face warning him to say something // anything // go on, ask us for money // The drivers, people in
the street, the manager of the internet shop are all shouting // hands up and waving, outraged // Buzz,
now upright, wants to know what I'm doing // I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. Everything is OK // He holds
his hands above his head, which somehow quells the disagreement // // inexplicably, he offers to pay both
rickshaw drivers for the fares they've lost

Eventually the police arrive // Up and down the street rickshaws and motorbikes are caught up and horns
continue to sound // In the spaces between the vehicles people stand to watch // I head Buzz back into the
shop and make him sit down. Someone kindly offers him water // Once again I check his arms and legs //
I have him stand, twist his torso, tell him to put his wallet away // It's impossible that nothing can be
damaged

In the street one of the policemen is accepting money // // When he comes into the shop he's folding bills
away // first words out of his mouth are that there is a fine // Your friend, he says, in perfect English, has
damaged both of the vehicles

Back at the hotel I make him strip off and inspect him again // There is a red blotch reaching from his
right buttock to his hip. He hit meat, but not the bone // Both elbows are a little scuffed and dirty // more
amazing than this his scars are gone // all of the welts and lesions // the karposi – gone. Completely gone
// He knows - it's the new drug - it's working // the only issue is numbness in his fingers and toes

I tell him there's no way I'm leaving now // Him: That's stupid. Me: You don't know. You could be in
shock // You might have fractured something but don't know it yet // Him: I'm fine // Me: I saw you
flying. You were horizontal before you hit the ground // Buzz looks pleased. Horizontal? // I sweep my
hand out. As good as. Flat as a pancake // and then it occurs to me – I don't know why. This wasn't an
accident // Buzz deliberately stepped into the road. Probably to stop me going to the station

Day 3

We take the day easy. Stick to the hotel compound // Everything back to normal, except I still want to go to Jodhpur // Buzz sits with his notebooks, me with my book // he wants to know what Mark was asking in his email

In the late afternoon a yellow cloud blows through the compound // a squall throws up sand, leaves, and seeds, rattles the tin awnings and chases dogs to cover // We are sitting with a woman from Seattle, and take cover together // She chats with Buzz, although he's uncharacteristically quiet // She asks if we've seen the women with the 'NO' signs // It's amazing, she says. Courageous and inspiring, because the men here are unbelievable // Her guide, she says, is a little fresh. She's worried // I warned him not to fall in love with me, she says // It's happened three times already. Once in Nepal, and twice here // I don't want to go with him today. Yesterday he was all touchy-feely // I told him my boyfriend would be unhappy // and he said he would take me somewhere my boyfriend would never find me // I told him: how am I supposed to feel good now you've told me that? // How am I supposed to feel comfortable? // I suggest we go with her on the trip today // // Once the guide arrives, I change my mind // He's a boy, honestly, nothing more than a child // He might be harassing her, but it's nothing a smart slap wouldn't sort out // anyway, there's a suggestion that this is a game

Buzz won't talk to me when I say I'm still going to Jodhpur

I leave Buzz at the compound // It's a cold farewell, uncomfortable for both of us // But we're assured to meet in three days in Jaipur as agreed // // Agra Fort Station is even more decrepit than Gaya Station // Dogs wander about the platform and become excited as people gather for the trains // The floor is shattered in the ticket hall, and on the footbridge, high up and wired in, I'm confronted by a monkey //

Grey, dirty, the animal saunters along the middle of the walkway // It's tail broken, a bald stub // It sits and watches as I walk by. I'm convinced it will attack

After an hour and a half delay the train comes in // A boy with a cleft upper lip follows me the length of the platform // something wrong with his hip, so it's not too hard to out-stride him // I give him a packet of biscuits and he still waits for money // I remember what the American woman was saying earlier // she said she's used to seeing everything, 'and I mean everything' // But in most places people know how to say thank you - whatever their circumstances // It doesn't happen here. Someone will take what you offer and demand more // She's right. The boy is thin. I can see the bones in his arms, the veins. I can see sores on his skin // I've given him a pack of biscuits and I want him to say thank you // His clothes are truly wretched, torn and gritted with oil and dirt // and the thing is, this isn't unusual // he isn't the only unfed, diseased, physically challenged child on the platform // but the worst thought is that I'm completely indifferent // I'm not troubled by this and I should be. My money does nothing but sustain misery // I try not to ask myself what justifies this? How bad does something have to be for this to become so normal? // // The boy is soon forgotten in the hurry to find my berth // Once again, someone has taken my seat: a fat business man who pretends to sleep // A woman in the lower bunk indicates the bunk above her // I don't think so // Unwilling to be nice I shake the man's leg, and make him move

As I lay, covered with 2 blankets, the man sleeps on the floor // his belly: big fat bladder, lolls onto the linoleum // In his sleep he pinches himself through his trousers // You could cut the fat from his gut // feed the poor at Agra station for a comfortable month

When I wake, I'm alone. I check my bags are ok, straighten the bedclothes, sit up // it's strange not to have Buzz's company // Outside, the land is flat and red. Desert, pretty much // Trees look like they've been pruned. From the stubs flourish a pompom of leaves // There's no trash. No plastic bags // The first peacock I see I mistake for a bush

A break of two days

Day 3:

Back to meet Buzz. Jaipur is a huge sprawl, low lying, grotty India in full assault // In each city the rickshaw drivers have their own little speech // ignoring them doesn't work // walking by a pee-stinking wall, a smiling rickshaw driver blocks my path // The man is well-spoken, speaks good English // He says he's a decent Muslim boy who just needs work: where do I want to go? // I can't see Buzz navigating this on his own – not good to imagine // My guess is, when we meet, he's going to be mightily out of sorts // My guess is all the romance will be beaten out of him // it isn't a good thought, and I'm not proud of my part in this // If Buzz is high maintenance, then that's how it is // You take people as they come // all of Buzz's tantrums, all of the hard work are just part of the package // The rickshaw drivers I could do without

Jaipur has shopping malls which skirt the main centre // These malls are empty, half-built, with scrubby forecourts: mostly designer clothes and jewellery stores // and always men with mops cleaning up // Those elusive monied classes are here somewhere – even if only to shop // There are rats in the street, alongside 4 x 4's, Levi stores with doormen // It's the first time I've not been pressured to buy something // and the first time in India I've felt a little too travel-worn to enter anywhere I'd like

The hotel is funky. In a good way // Behind the check-in desk, a sign: 'keep our customers happy, they keep us in business. Mr. Singh' // The sign faces the customer not the clerk // There are no rooms available in the hotel // there is an option to stay in Mr. Singh's house // The room is large. The bed is a foam mattress with no top sheet // The walls are ringed with white fitted wardrobes with gold fittings // a small votive with a statue of Ganesha // Above the bed, leaning forward, the portrait of a guru, a furry plastic lay hangs from the frame // I've an hour before I meet Buzz // I pick the shirt he bought me for the trip, and checking myself in the mirror I try not to dislike it // it will please him and it seems that some effort needs to be made // As I lock the room the bearded Mr. Singh asks me not to smoke in the house, if this is alright // My room is where they keep the Holy Book // His daughter has a sweet smile // She waves as I say goodbye

The rickshaw driver is a little fruity, and clocks me as soon as I'm outside // He asks if I have a girlfriend, many girlfriends // looks at me a little too long (and not the road) // I've bought the tickets to Udaipur // an upgrade to second class, and pre-booked a hotel overlooking the floating palace // I will tell Buzz that Jodhpur was interesting, and say it so he'll guess I've not enjoyed my time alone // In Udaipur we will dress smartly. We will have dinner above the lake // we will begin our last week gently, without hassle // I run through what would be good to do, and give myself a little talking to // I need to be easy on Buzz, less abrasive. I should be nicer // The fruity rickshaw driver drops me at the gate to the old town, beside the government shop // As I get out it begins to rain. Better than walking in the heat, he says // The walk to the Mahal is short, if I remember the map right // The city is a simple grid. Up one block, over two

It's a long walk, made more difficult by a sudden flurry of rain // People run for cover and crowd under a covered walkway // Row upon row of booths set in groups. Metal workers hang aluminium pots in rows // men with sacks of powdered gypsum, tables with tabs and crystals // Turning left takes me past shops not booths: glass doors, tables, blankets and bedcovers // handsewn pillows, stores with bright rows of printed and tie-dyed saris - bright, shiny reds and yellows // Finally the palace itself // The Mahal has been repainted. Gold tips on ornate windows. Walls, a pink wash detailed with white lines // On the corner a shrine // People shelter from the rain and lightening which comes in bright cracks // The pavement in front of the palace is cordoned off // Standing close to the temple I can't see Buzz // When the rain breaks I run to the opposite side of the road

It's unusual for Buzz to be late // He's a stickler. Always on time. Promptness is important // If you're late for an evening with Buzz it can upset the whole night

Still no show, but no worries. This is India // As I walk off a vendor calls to me, he guesses where I'm from // Why do you look German when you are English? // I tell him it isn't deliberate, and he laughs // It's the beard. If you shave you will look English // And further down, another vendor - You are French! // Another: you have an Indian mother? (Because my hair is short, my skin is dark)

Back at the Mahal // // Behind me, a handsome man, one of a number sat at a booth // behind him, elephant designs stitched onto a blanket, vibrant dyed scarves // silk, all richly coloured and embroidered // You are back, he says. You should come in the morning // At eight o'clock in the sun it is nice. Now there is no colour // He waves his hand, dismissing the building. It is drab in this light... // // Buzz is still not here // // The building is nothing more than a façade // fancy as an iced cake // one small room behind the windows at the upper levels. A place to watch the street // the seats of power are gracefully decorated // I ask the vendor if he has seen anyone waiting? // No one waits. Everyone comes and takes a picture // He asks if I want my photograph taken. I say no, and laughing, he asks if I trust him // Do you think I will run away with your camera? // I explain I'm waiting for a friend. He was supposed to be here an hour ago. He is English // The man shrugs. If I like I could come into his shop, wait, and maybe look // It crosses my mind that this is a seduction // It would be interesting to take up his offer, to sit and look at material I do not want // It would be interesting to seduce this man, to see how possible, how sincere this exchange might be

Another hour // nothing

My final return // The vendor comes out of the stall, his hand stroking his belly // And so no friend? You will wait in my shop? His question is more of a command // I walk away, cross the roundabout to police whistles // I imagine that Buzz would be irritated to see me flirting with a young man // A man who is probably his type

I take a rickshaw back // The man is so skinny, so undernourished, he has to stand to pedal // It's taking so much effort that he gets out to push // I'm too tall anyway, and have to crouch under the plastic hood, which does nothing to stop the rain // I'm irritated with Buzz, irritated at India – for whatever has caused

him to be late // We will not make our train tonight // That's a loss of £30. Rebooking is going to be impossible

There's no word from him by email // No message either. No SMS. Nothing // Instead there's a message from Mark // Buzz has sent some strange emails // Little letters to people, which just isn't like him // In the email to Mark, he'd written about how jealous he'd been of our friendship // and said 'he forgave him' // the bank are calling. They are 'concerned' not to have heard from him either // These aren't big things, Mark concludes, just worrisome // it isn't like Buzz to be like this. I agree. This is worrying

I wait in the manager's office for the phone // A young German boy is asking about the hospitals // He heard they are good here // A woman, American, talks to one of the staff, a boy hosing the floor // She says: how are you? Are you happy? Are you tired? Are you sad? // The man appears puzzled // he stops what he is doing to shrug

I call the hotel in Agra // // It takes three attempts // the manager in Agra is unhelpful // I offer the phone to the clerk and explain // My friend was supposed to meet me today. In Jaipur. // I'm worried because he has not arrived // The clerk listens, then smiles // He holds up the phone and speaks directly in Hindi // after a brief exchange he holds the phone away from his ear // Buzz, according to their records, never stopped at Hotel Sheela // I insist: Buzz's name will be in the register, right under mine // his name and his passport details // Another short chat // the clerk says that there is no such name in his directory // The manager from Agra hangs up // The Jaipur clerk holds the receiver out to me // Would I like him to speak to the police? // I've no idea what kind of mess this will cause // It is, after all, only one day's delay // Buzz will be here tomorrow // The clerk takes the details and says that he will call Hotel Sheela in the morning // Sometimes, everything is a little easier in the morning // Sometimes someone different answers the phone

I email Mark again to ask if Buzz has been in touch // and if so, what he might have said about his travel plans // It will take a day to hear back, by which time Buzz should be here // We'll need to adjust our plans to get to Udaipur

Day 4

No messages this morning

I woke with an idea: Buzz has gone to Udaipur // It's just like the twit to make a mistake like that // all Buzz has to do is mess up one detail. It's entirely possible // There is no doubt. It's a typical Buzz error // The only place that would make sense is the floating palace at Udaipur, out in the lake // I lie in bed and listen to the movements of the Singh household as they go about their day // Mr. Singh, also in bed, shouts directions while his wife discusses business with him // Today, your friend will arrive. Today. I am certain.

If Buzz has gone to Udaipur I would have certainly heard about it // such a mistake would somehow be my fault // Buzz's rage would be incandescent // the email would burn its way through // the internet would righteously shudder at my folly

No Buzz at the Mahal

I'm tired of waiting // tired with the hassle associated with walking, the unending 'hello's' // the stops and starts, the stuttering flow // the young vendor asks if I am still looking for my friend? // I tell him yes, and ask if he has seen anyone waiting. A man about my age, very tall, very pale, an Englishman // He would look uneasy, I say // The vendor shakes his head. No one has been here waiting // People come, take their photographs and people go.

He's not here

Still not here

No Buzz // bloody hell

After a while no one speaks to me // My presence makes people uncomfortable // The vendor comes out to charm the other tourists // sometimes I see him watching, sometimes he nods // It's hard to know at what point this becomes an issue // One night? To nights? A week? // At what point do I make an official report?

At night the ornate façade of Muti Mahal recedes

Back at the hotel I check my email again // Mark has contacted Martin, who heard from Buzz just after I left Agra // In his message Buzz mentioned only that our plans were to move on to Udaipur // There are no other messages // No reply from Buzz // I send another message to Buzz, this time attaching a tag so I will be notified when the message is received // and when the message is opened // The receipt saying that it has been successfully delivered arrives immediately // I think this is deliberate. This is punishment. It is pure spite // so Buzz is out there collecting his email, but not answering

Day 5

No answer from the stream of emails I sent last night

...back at the Mahal // Walking through the west gate I buy a packet of biscuits // On the cover a rosy-faced child holds up her monkey-like hands (no thumbs) // from her mouth comes a speech-bubble: lower taxes = more biscuits // This culture is unreadable // The vendor greets me with a hand on my shoulder // We stand side by side facing the Mahal sharing my biscuits // He asks: This friend is a special friend? // I answer: Yes. But he's a putz // A putz? // It's Yiddish. I think it means he's an idiot // He doesn't understand. I attempt to mimic a fool. // He is a clown, I say, and he seems to understand. // Him: How many years this friend? // Me: A long time // Him: Is he an underpants friend? // Now it's my turn not to understand. Underpants? // Underpants. From when you were a boy, running around? // At home we speak every day. // I think you are his brother. // I think sometimes I am.

Even if Buzz shows up I will think of this place as a miserable place // The palace as a backdrop to a sorry place to a pitiful drama.

nothing

nothing

nothing

no show

I've finally had enough

I check my email and find I only have messages from England // Others are alarmed // Buzz has not written in a week // such silence is remarkable for a man who must always have the last word // In four messages the same question: has something happened to Buzz? // worse news, the bank have contacted Mark. The money has been transferred out of his account // I'm not sure I understand // Closing down the application I decide to ask the manager to contact the police

The manager arranges for the police to come to the hotel // We meet at the rooftop restaurant // There are no other tourists about // Two men clean, one hosing the other sweeping with a squeegee, both curious about our small group // It's much simpler than I had imagined. The police have checked with the hotel in Agra // Both Buzz and I appear on the register // According to the register Buzz left the same day as me. There's no destination noted // I ask if it is possible to check with other hotels? // he was interested in visiting the Taj Mahal again // The officer shrugs, sits further forward // This happens a lot, he says. People miss each other all the time // The police officer takes all of my details // Arrival, departure, plans of where we were going, where we have been // My passport, date of issue, the visa - when it expires and how long it is valid // I give a full description of Buzz, which he repeats to me // He takes contact details and says that he will be in touch with a crime number // no matter what happens // Procedure, procedure

I'm woken by a call from England. Mark says there is an investigation into Buzz's absence // the bank are concerned about fraud // I tell Mark that this would be typical. Buzz gets kidnapped and ripped off // Mark says I have this all wrong // the bank are investigating Buzz – he is the one they suspect of fraud

I speak directly to the consulate's attaché // The man sounds young. His voice is impeccably English, with a clear radio definition // Have you reported this to the police? I say yes // the hotel brought an officer directly to the hotel to speak to me // He took me to the Mahal and we waited in his jeep // Did he give you a copy of his report? // the man doesn't believe that I've spoken with the police. He wants a crime number // He asks about Buzz. About money. About how we've managed on our holiday // I can tell he doesn't trust me. He's sending another police officer. I am to wait // The officer will take down my details

I dream of Buzz's parents: they sit at a table // Their feebleness is sickening // I'm woken by a call from Mark. It's in the papers // Buzz has disappeared with a good deal of money (how?) // the report says that I have been detained for questioning // // the police have arrived // // I know he's gone // // // But I don't know why

