

## Stick People

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Hurtling towards southern India in a hot tin can, the deadweight of a rucksack digging into my back, isn't how I imagined spending Millennium Eve<sup>1</sup>. They say a computer bug is going to grind the world to a halt at midnight, civilisation as we know it will end, and to be honest I just want to be curled up on the sofa back home in Dublin. Adam thinks I've been watching too much doom-and-gloom. He says I've gone all  
5 *Armageddon*<sup>2</sup> on him. Shit film. I was more freaked out by *The Matrix*<sup>3</sup>. That's why he's brought me here. He thinks the mystical landscapes of India are just the tonic I need to rediscover myself.

He's ahead of me, the back of his white Nirvana<sup>4</sup> T-shirt stained grey with sweat, making his way through the tangle of travellers on the night train to Goa<sup>5</sup>. Couples with young children, men with baskets of nuts, hawkers with bundles of sarongs destined for palm-fringed beaches. I hurry to keep up with him. Coming  
10 here seemed like a good idea at the time – you know? And at least me being away will give everyone a break from calling around with those fucking aromatherapy candles.

Rickety ceiling fans run the length of the aisle but do nothing to cool the air. They rattle like demented sewing machines top-stitching all of us into a pocket of humidity. My tank top is stuck to my skin. We were late leaving the guest house in Mumbai<sup>6</sup> (my fault, I was still too wrecked after flying long haul to get my  
15 act together), and so we had to make a dash for the train as it rolled out of Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, and now we aren't in the air-conditioned tourist car like we're supposed to be. I rub my chest; my breasts feel so tender inside my bra. It's not because of losing the baby eight weeks ago; my insides don't feel right after eating a spicy thali for dinner earlier.

At the far end of the carriage Adam stalls beside an empty four-berth compartment next to a grilled  
20 window. His face is flushed underneath all the hairy insulation. This past while he's taken to growing a feral beard and letting his usual short-back-and-sides go wild. He unstraps his backpack from his front and pushes it underneath one of the bottom bunks, a bench covered in faded blue vinyl.

I drop my bag on the floor, flex my spine. A man and woman are sitting on the bed in the cubicle across the way. In their twenties like us but more grown-up. The man, pristine in a white shirt, is packing multi-tier,  
25 steel tiffin boxes<sup>7</sup> into a carpetbag. The woman is sitting in a lotus position with her back to the aisle, her salwar-kameez<sup>8</sup> trouser suit a chilli red despite the pallid whiteness of the train's fluorescent lighting. She turns around and I notice a tiny bundle of muslin in her arms, a tuft of black hair sticking out from one end. I stare a little too intensely at this new mother holding her baby and we share an intimate moment. She smiles, her kohl-rimmed eyes embracing mine like she really sees who I am, and for one stupid second I am

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<sup>1</sup> *Millennium Eve*: New Year's Eve 1999. Some people believed that the change from 1999 to 2000 would cause computer chips to crash.

<sup>2</sup> American disaster film from 1998

<sup>3</sup> *The Matrix*: American science fiction film from 1999

<sup>4</sup> American band

<sup>5</sup> state in India

<sup>6</sup> city in India

<sup>7</sup> *tiffin boxes*: lunch boxes

<sup>8</sup> traditional clothing

30 sure she senses what I lost. I hunker down to speak to Adam. Beads of sweat are running down his forehead. He looks like an extra from *Waterworld*<sup>9</sup>.

"Let's find other seats."

Adam glances over at the couple. He takes my bag anyway and slides it under the bed next to his. Either he doesn't see the baby, or he's dense. "We're lucky these beds are free, and it'll be nice to have a window to  
35 see the sunrise."

"The sunrise? That's very Kumbaya<sup>10</sup> of you," I say, raging. "I'm going to check out the next carriage." He's actually making us sit next to a newborn.

"You can't. We caught the last car and there's no through access to the rest of the train."

I look towards the door and see a warning sign depicting stick people falling between train carriages.

40 Adam sits down, and I slump on the bed opposite him. The exterior of the train looks like the rusting corpse of something that was once new and shiny and the interior is no better. The heavy steel frame of the bed is a tarnished brown and the brackets attaching it to the wall are brittle. Yep, I'll definitely rediscover myself here. While I brush dirt from my combats<sup>11</sup>, Adam retrieves *The Lonely Planet*<sup>12</sup> from the outer sleeve of his backpack. He turns the pages carefully like they might crumble at any minute until he finds the chapter for  
45 Goa.

"Our guest house is called Furtado's." He wipes his eye with the back of his hand. "It's right on the beach in Benaulim."

"Is that so?"

Adam tilts his head to one side; a sad little puppy whose paw has been stepped on. He's desperate for me  
50 to be as enthusiastic as I was this time last year when I badgered him to take leave from our graphic design jobs to backpack around India. I got hooked on the idea after overseeing the design for *Discover your Inner Temple*, a tourism brochure promoting southern India as a chill out destination. The promise of *tranquil shorelines* and *otherworldly temples* completely seduced me, as did the country's colour palette of turmeric yellows and saffron oranges. Of course, when I got pregnant everything got shelved; but we still talked  
55 excitedly about going in the future with our baba in tow. Back then I dog-eared every chapter of the same guide he's holding now. This time round, even though I agreed that India might provide solace, I couldn't be arsed to open it and Adam eventually stopped offering it to me.

In the compartment opposite, the mother nestles her baby between her and the wall. The man cocoons them in a blue cotton sheet, slips off his leather sandals and climbs up onto the top bunk.

60 "I'm getting tired," I say.

The book slips from Adam's grip and falls open on the floor between us. I go to pick it up but he pushes my hand aside and grabs it. Flicking through the pages as if checking that the words are still there, he snaps the book closed and slips it into his backpack.

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<sup>9</sup> American film from 1995

<sup>10</sup> naively optimistic

<sup>11</sup> military style boots or trousers

<sup>12</sup> *The Lonely Planet*: travel book

65 “There are two stops less than an hour apart at Veer and Khed stations. After that it’s non-stop to Goa,” he says quickly.

I want to ask, “What was all that about?” but I say nothing.

Adam leans forward and touches my knee. “So – I think it was the right decision to be away for the New Year. Don’t you?”

I nod obligingly.

70 “Are you excited about finally seeing India?”

“I’m excited that I’m not on an airplane about to fall from the sky when all the computers flip out. They’re predicting chaos.”

“You’re not still thinking about that, are you? Nothing will happen. They’ve made contingency plans.”

“Like they can plan for an event that’s never happened before.”

75 “That’s exactly what a contingency plan is about. Look, can we enjoy this experience without worrying that something bad is going to happen?”

I want to go over to Adam’s bunk, and to be honest I just want him to hug me, but I stay where I am and wrap my arms around my waist instead. We sit in prolonged silence, Adam reading, me tapping my foot to the pulse-like beat of the wheels on the track, my eyes closing, until the sudden squeal of metal signals that the train is braking. Adam stands in the aisle twirling his beard. “You want to try and get a bed in the air-conditioned carriage?”

80 “No. I’m too tired to move.”

He checks his watch and smacks his palms together loudly in that way he often does when he’s excited.

“It’s nearly midnight. I’m going to have a nose out the window when we pull into Veer.”

85 “Jesus, would you be quiet.”

“What? I’m not being loud.”

“Just be more considerate.” I gesture towards the baby.

Adam bends down and plants a kiss on the top of my head. “Okay, okay.”

90 I try to smile like I mean it when he looks at me before leaving the carriage. There is a muffled cry and the mother begins to discreetly breastfeed her baby. I lie down, my back against the partition wall, the fans zipping overhead; and surrendering to sleep, I imagine neat seams being sewn across my eyes and ears. Distant whistles, swirling in the ether. A faint mechanical screech, then a violent jolt, and my eyes blink open – the train has shunted into motion.

95 My gaze drifts from Adam’s empty bench to the walkway, back to his bench. Where the—? I jump up, the train gathering speed, and walk to the exit, expecting to find him by the door in the passageway, but instead: a sleeping man with a tray of figs on his lap. My jaw begins to quiver. I scramble to the window; but all I see is the diminishing platform, its lights dimming in the gloating darkness.

Back inside I check under our beds. God knows why. No sign. For fuck’s sake, Adam. The mother and baby are motionless. Not going to wake them. I walk half-way down the aisle. Nothing but bare feet sticking out

100 from the cubicles on either side of me. In our compartment, I sit down, I stand on the spot, I sit down. Various scenarios involving Adam's lifeless body play out in my mind. I glance at the stick people. Did he trip and fall? Another thought: I've been so afraid of something bad happening, but now that it has it is almost satisfying. I feel vindicated, my expectation of catastrophe confirmed. Embarrassment, or perhaps shame, washes over me. A sensation of heat scalds my face. I inhale. Stay calm. My instinct is to act like  
105 nothing has happened. Nope, nothing to see here folks; I haven't just lost my husband.

And suddenly I remember feeling like this before: two months ago in the toilet at work, after I discovered a slash of bright red in my pants. The shock of it. I hadn't even felt the blood leak out of me. How could I have failed to sense such a huge event? Afterwards, instead of asking for help, I acted normal, like my world wasn't ending, calmly collecting my denim jacket from the back of my leather swivel chair and lying to my  
110 boss that I had to leave for a forgotten dental appointment. Nobody in the office knew that I was pregnant, and it was too much of a mind-fuck to have to say, "By the way, I've been drinking decaf since August because there's a baby in my belly, but it's too late to congratulate me, 'coz I've just realised the baby's dead."

I reach for the *Lonely Planet* in Adam's backpack. What did he say about the second stop? When I open the  
115 guide, a white square of paper floats out from the pages and lands faceup on my lap. It's a black-and-white picture of a little kidney bean, its outline bumpy and blurred, my baby's twelve-week scan. The paper is faded and creased, the four corners curled inwards like little fists. My shoulders slacken. We had decided to bury the scan in an envelope under daffodil bulbs in the garden because it was too ridiculously sad to keep staring at it. Yet here it is. Adam had kept it. For an age I sit cradling our print-out baby, my mind so bullied  
120 by competing thoughts – alerting a guard, doubling back to Mumbai – that I am unable to decide on anything. And just when I think I might scream, the train begins to slow down.

On the platform, I stand with my rucksack slung over my shoulder, Adam's pack on the ground between my legs. A yellow station sign says KHED in block capitals. To my left, the track from Mumbai in infinite blackness; and to my right, the length of the train in an amber haze beneath the canopy's lighting. Two  
125 carriages up, a guard wearing a brown uniform and holding a green flag is leaving the train. I catch my breath. Help is at hand. I grab the second bag, and when I look up I see him: Adam emerging from the train and descending the steps behind the guard. "Adam!" My voice is a shrill siren. He sees me immediately, and his expression inflates like a balloon, his smile stretching across his face. Holding his palms in the air like a suppliant, he laughs at his predicament. "Sorry, Josie, I got stuck next door." I offload the bags, and  
130 at that moment I notice the big station clock, the insects fluttering in the air around its face. It is over an hour into the year 2000, and to be honest I could kill Adam for putting me through all this, but that's for another day, and so I laugh with him and then I cry.

(2022)