



New Delhi, 1970, Connaught Circus. The high today is forecast to be 44 degrees celsius. I am standing on the sidewalk outside an upscale restaurant at about 2pm, wishing I had enough money to venture inside and purchase a fine meal in an air-conditioned dining room, perhaps with a glass of sweetened iced tea condensing on a tablecloth before me. I don't, and I shrug. I do have enough for a mango lassi from a vendor down the road, and that will have to do.

The restaurant's smoked glass doors swing open and two portly businessmen emerge, one in a navy blue suit, the other in a pin-striped grey suit, both squinting in the bright sunlight. Blue offers Grey a cigarette from a silver cigarette box, showing off as he snaps it open with a flourish, and they light up beneath the maroon awning that shades the entrance. I spot a beggar sitting cross-legged on the pavement nearby, leaning against the wall a few feet from the threadbare carpet that leads into the restaurant. The beggar is painfully thin, burned dark from the sun, dressed in absolute rags, barefoot, his single possession a small begging cup sitting empty on a square of faded yellow cloth. Blue is telling Grey an off-colour joke, giggling like a child as he works his way to the biologically improbable punchline. They pay no heed to me

listening to them from three metres away, and they are entirely oblivious to the beggar as the joke unfolds. I notice that the beggar is listening to them intently, his black eyes gleaming in hollow folds of skin and bone. Blue delivers the punchline with a guffaw, and Grey roars with approval, slapping his friend on the back. I look at the beggar. He too is doubled over in laughter, tears of hilarity streaming down his face.

I shake my head, unable to fathom this place. I drop my last few rupees into the beggar's cup and wend my way through the crowds and exhaust fumes to my seedy room at the Crown Hotel. No mango lassi for me today.