

Bigger Than It Seems

By Andrea Grieb

India

Chapter One

My friend Edith is seventy-six. She is under five feet tall, has bad knees, and wears dentures. We first met in India. I was sixteen; Edie was seventy-two. I started working with her right from the beginning, helping her distribute the cleanest, purest LSD in the world. I just didn't know it for a while.

I had left my life and family behind in North Dakota to travel alone in India through Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh when I met Edie on a train from Delhi to Hyderabad. It was the end of September. I boarded the train at New Delhi station in Kamla Market, stuck between busy families gathering luggage and children while everyone tried to find seats.

The train was light blue on the outside with paint peeling away from the metal in flakes; its color washed out from exposure to the sun. As I stepped through carriages in between people and livestock, I looked for the female-only compartment where I had reserved a bed. Actual free-range chickens roamed the walkways together with multi-generational families squeezing past train employees stocking food trolleys.

I found my compartment where two women sat chatting on one side.

'Hi.'

I waved at them, and they smiled, greeting me in Hindi. Their earrings clinked in time to the movement of their heads. They sat on the lower bed with the upper bunk tucked away behind straps that looked like the seatbelt in an old car.

'I'm Nola. I think I have the upper bunk,' I said, showing them my ticket.

'I am Shreya. This is Jayshree,' she replied, smiling warmly. 'Let's have a look. Oh no, you are forty-three C. This bunk is forty-three A,' she said, pointing to the bunk above her head. 'You must be across from us,' she finished, handing the ticket back to me, still smiling, and pointing to the bunk opposite. She was in her mid-thirties, and her sari exposed a soft midriff. I noticed a small roll of skin popping out from under the fabric around her ribcage.

'Yes, I am sleeping here,' the other woman said. She was slightly older, or it could have been the reading glasses she wore on the tip of her nose that made her seem that way.

'Thanks.'

'Most welcome,' both women said, chiming one after the other.

My bunk was fastened to the wall with straps above where another woman sat cross-legged. She was much older and typed with one finger on a cell phone that didn't have a touchscreen. She had salt and pepper hair in a crew cut, and twice as many freckles as I did on her tanned face. Above the wrinkled lines of her knees were linen cargo shorts and a purple t-shirt that read 'Never not working' in bright green letters.

'Hey,' I greeted her.

She stopped typing, squinting up at me from behind her bifocals.

'I'm Nola,' I said.

She stared.

'I think I have the bunk above you?'

'Hi,' she said, sliding over on her bench to make room.

'I'm Nola,' I repeated, putting my hand out to her. 'Nola - I'm; I mean, that's my name. What's yours?'

She looked at my outstretched hand.

'Edie.' She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, remaining cross-legged while the two Indian women stayed deep in conversation in their language that sounded like a song to me.

We moved for several hours through chaotic traffic, and layers of Delhi suburbs. Though I had already visited several Indian cities, the energy and crowds of people still overwhelmed me; I had come from the space of a North Dakota covered mostly in wheat and barley fields. The warmth of the day slipped away together with the stacked concrete buildings of the city behind us. Everything outside was muted by a thin haze that hung in the air. I peered through the narrow bars of the compartment window to see dust ahead of us hovering over the tracks. As the train glided through it, the front carriage kicked the dust up in swirls of floating sand that I watched until it was too dark to see.

After I settled into the top bunk, I fell asleep reading about advanced data encryption. I woke later to Edie's English accent, and her fingers digging into my shoulder.

'I don't know how many times you've woken me up now,' she stood on tiptoe to reach my bunk, hissing at me through her false teeth.

'What?'

'I said you keep waking me up.'

'Was I snoring?'

'You're not snoring. You've been moaning in your sleep. You won't fancy sharing this tin with me all day tomorrow if you keep me awake.'

‘I’ll lie on my stomach,’ I said, rubbing my eyes and turning over to face the wall. ‘My sister always said that helped when I snore. I’m really sorry,’

‘You’re not listening to me. You’re not snoring. You’re talking, or crying, or something. Just be quiet.’

‘Ok. I’m sorry.’

‘Stop apologising. Sort yourself out.’

I sat up straight and looked at her face while my eyes adjusted to the dark. The glass of her bifocals was as thick as the bottom of an old soda bottle.

‘I said I was sorry.’

Eddie banged her fist on the metal of my bed frame. ‘What are you so miserable about? Hours going through miles of slums. Neighbourhoods with thousands, probably millions of people sharing a filthy little floor and not much else. You’re white. You’re American. You had enough resources to get you all the way over here. Get over yourself.’

I tried to respond, but I could feel my throat constricting. I wasn’t expecting another panic attack because I had had one the day before in Delhi. Usually, there were a few days in between them, but they had been happening more frequently since travelling. She kept talking, but I couldn’t hear Eddie anymore; I could only hear the other voice coming and going:

All the world be a funeral for us.

Dunno to follow the magpies or be by the by.

Take the feathers for tar and go black.

And go back.

Go back.

That voice had been creeping through more and more during the panic attacks and moments when I felt scared. With it came images of my father, what he had done to me and my little sister, Ruthie. And what I had done to make him stop before I left. Pushing it all away to some distant place in my mind, I also tried to move words out of my mouth, but it felt like my throat was full of cotton. Keeping my eyes closed I focused on my breathing. A familiar pressure pushed on my chest. Pins and needles spread to a numbness all over my body. I started counting down from one hundred, a trick that sometimes helped if I could remember to do it before the panic attack really set in. When I got down to five, my breathing slowly came back, and I could move my toes again. I would feel normal in a few hours; when I had a bad one, I could lose an entire day.

Inhaling as deep as my I could, I opened my eyes. I wasn't sure how much time had gone by when I could just make out the word 'dramatic' from Edie's lips. Then I realised she had been trying to ask me something. I answered by raising one hand three times, then holding up one finger.

'You're not sixteen,' she said, her voice softer than before.

I rubbed the sides of my temples where my head was sore.

'Seriously? Where are your parents? How are you not in school?'

I raised a finger to my lips.

'Still don't fancy chatting?' she asked, puffing with effort while climbing up to my bunk and sitting next to me.

Edie sat with me for what felt like hours, until the compartment began to grow lighter from the morning outside. By the time the sky was bright, an Indian man with grey hair and matching grey uniform came in with breakfast.

'Vegetable cutlets and masala chai,' he said, offering a parcel wrapped in aluminium to Edie.

'Perfect. She'll have the same,' she replied to him. I looked for my wallet, but my hands were too shaky to grasp its zipper. Edie took it, opened it and gave the man a fifty rupee note.

Edie slid off the bunk on her belly, legs dangling down in search of the bed beneath her. 'Where is that bloody ledge,' she muttered, feet swinging back and forth.

'Here you are,' Shreya said, standing up to guide Edie's foot to the lower bed before she jumped down to the floor, wincing and rubbing her knees. I joined Edie as another uniformed man came in, carrying dented thermos flasks of Nescafe and spiced tea he poured into little glasses on a tray for us.

'Thank you, thank you.'

'No, thank you, sir.' Edie raised her glass to him, and he bowed out of our compartment. The two Indian women stopped their chatting over packed breakfasts to stare at Edie. She got up off the bed, raising her glass to them and clinking the thermos flask they had brought.

'Cheers, ladies.'

'Cheers.' They both giggled and smiled at Edie.

'Where you ladies from then?'

One swallowed politely behind a hand before responding. 'We are both from Delhi,' she answered.

'I'm from London. My dad was from Liverpool though, and mum was from India. Jaipur, in fact,' Edie explained.

'Jaipur is very beautiful!'

‘Indeed it is,’ Edie agreed. ‘Right then; need my HP,’ she mumbled, taking out a small blue sachet that looked like a packaged condiment, while I rubbed hand sanitiser through my fingers and hands until it evaporated.

‘Ugh, that’s so toxic,’ she commented. I fiddled with my own ketchup, squeezing a blob onto my plate, playing with it and licking my finger. The texture was too thin and syrupy; the flavour too sweet.

‘So, when did your mom move to England?’ I asked.

‘When she got engaged to my dad. She must have been your age. She never talked about India much. I was meant to be seeing my auntie, actually, up in the north. But I had to postpone that. I have to see an old mate down in Kerala now.’

‘That’s too bad.’

‘Ach, next time. Always good to have an excuse to come back, eh.’

We finished our breakfasts in silence except for the sound of Edie’s clamping dentures.

After we stacked our plates, she asked me why I was in India. I told her how I was supposed to be working as a missionary through my family’s church, explaining my parents didn’t know I had been working as an online security controller to save up money so I could leave. How my dad and I had a fight before I got on the shuttle to the airport, and how I never boarded the flight to Africa for the missionary exchange project; that I booked a last minute flight to Delhi instead, and left my mom a voicemail not to worry.

Edie discovered a line of sauce that must have dripped from the fried vegetables along the back of her forearm. She licked it clean with her tongue.

‘Tell me how a sixteen-year-old gets into online security stuff?’

‘It was a visiting teacher we had at our bible school for a couple of weeks. He talked to me once, after class. Said I had scored unusually high on the tests and gave me some links for programs online where I could get the basics in coding.’

‘Gifted, then?’

‘I don’t know about that. He told me to stay in touch, let him know how I was getting on with the programs. They wanted to help me with college classes in junior year, said they’d pay for it if I would sign a contract to work for them.’

‘Sounds like a good deal.’

‘I thought so. But my parents wouldn’t let me take the classes. Nothing extra outside bible studies.’

‘How’d you end up working at your age though?’

‘You can do it all online remotely. It was easy to fake their signatures on email for the Employment Age Certificate I needed.’

‘And then did you forge the consent forms to travel alone?’

I rubbed sanitiser into my hands again slowly, watching the gel disappear between my palms.

‘Well, you’re starting to look better,’ she said, breaking the silence a moment later. ‘A walk would do you good; fancy going to find me a coffee? That tea didn’t have enough in it.’

‘Ok,’ I replied. I checked I had my cash, cards and passport in my money belt, and tucked it under my shirt. My bare feet hit the warped synthetic of the compartment’s linoleum floor. The two Indian women paused to watch me slip into flip-flops.

‘Do you guys want anything?’

Their heads shook no. ‘But thank you very much.’

‘I take it with milk and two sugars,’ Edie ordered.

I entered the gangway and turned left. I passed compartments with families having breakfast, the sound of silverware clinking from different directions through the train. The passageway was narrow, and I tripped over a chicken that popped out and caught me off guard. There was a small space divided by sliding doors where a family sat on the floor. The mother dished up dal to her husband and three children while they chatted and scooped lentils and rice from metal dishes with their hands.

‘Hello!’ the little girl called to me. Her older brother and sister smiled at me, too.

‘Hi,’ I replied, returning their smiles.

The mother looked at me waving. I noticed her watch because it reminded me of my mom’s; her watch had a plastic snakeskin wristband like this woman’s, the imitation leather peeling off in the same way.

I could spot the man with the thermos flasks slipping through a doorway ahead.

‘I’m looking for a, for my friend - coffee. She wanted a coffee,’ I said.

Following the man with the thermos, I shimmied between a huge mound of rice in mesh bags and a stack of wooden crates that nearly reached the roof of the train. The crates were filled with onions, okra, and potatoes. On the other side, the man arranged flasks and paper cups on a cart.

‘Nescafe?’ he said, glancing at me as I stumbled from behind the vegetables, losing a few okra and an onion to the floor. I picked them up, running my fingers along the fuzzy spines of the okra before returning them to their crates.

‘Coffee, yes, please. With milk.’

‘Of course, madam. Sugar?’ He dropped the ‘r’ from the end of sugar a bit like Edie did.

‘Can you give me two?’

‘Two sugar.’ He poured pale coffee from a thermos and shook sugar from a glass pourer before dropping in a stir stick.

‘Forty rupees, madam,’ he said, handing me the cup.

‘Forty? Are you sure?’ I asked.

‘Forty is normal price, yes.’

We held eye contact briefly while I kept my hand poised above my wallet; then his face broke into a toothy grin before he said, ‘Ok, for you twenty rupees. Special price.’

I gave him a note and turned back, dripping coffee on the bags of rice before returning to find Edie cleaning her gums with a little brush. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and smacked her lips together in one big kissing motion before she started to talk again.

‘Cheers, love.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Oh, looks like there’s a floaty in here,’ she said, peering closely into the cup.

‘Is there? Oh gosh, sorry.’

‘No worries. Can’t tell if it’s a bug or just some fabric fuzz, you know?’

‘Disgusting. I can go get another one for you?’ I offered.

‘Not to bother, don’t mind either of them really, but I’d feel a bit bad if it was a... yep, it’s a little fruit fly. Let’s see if I can dry him out.’ She laid the tiny coffee-covered insect on the bedrail while she sipped the hot drink.

I sat next to Edie amongst clothes and books, watching the scenery outside. We passed villages and dirt roads lined with foliage. The leaves were covered in orange dust, and the ground was dotted with old pieces of garbage sinking away in the grass. There were people pedalling bikes and riding scooters, and just like in the north, no one wore a helmet.

‘Aren’t your parents worried sick then?’ Edie asked me later.

‘I don’t know what they think.’

‘What do you mean you don’t know?’

‘I haven’t spoken to them,’ I said, as I could feel my chest start to tense again, my breath threatening to slip away.

‘What happened to you?’

‘I really don’t want to talk about it,’ I told her, the cotton sensation returning to my mouth.

She stared at me for a moment, softening again before speaking. ‘Take some deep breaths again. You’re alright.’

After I caught my breath, I asked Edie, ‘Are you a travel journalist or something?’

‘Been meaning to write a book for ages. But, no. I’m in sales.’

‘What sort?’

‘Doesn’t matter. Why you going to Hyderabad, anyway?’ she asked me.

‘Just liked the name, I guess. Wait, sales?’

Edie put her headphones in again. In the clacking of the compartment, I tried to keep my mind from my family, and everything that had happened in North Dakota by reading. The lines of program formulas disappeared on the page. My phone read 11:47 am; we were a few hours from Hyderabad. I put my book away and took the travel guide from of the layers in my backpack instead. In the front fold-out flap of the guidebook was a map of India. Forcing myself to concentrate, I traced my finger along the map where the bottom part of the country was divided into two states: Kerala on the west and Tamil Nadu on the east; their names reminding me of places from a fairy-tale. They made up a southern tip of land in the shape of a blunt arrow that jutted down into the ocean past the western side of Sri Lanka. The Arabian Sea bordered its western coast. I moved my finger to the outline of Kerala on the thick paper of the book cover, picturing jungles overflowing with green onto highways, and dirt roads.

I flipped to the back of the book and found the empty page where I kept track of my budget. I had around three hundred USD. I made a list of things to do when I got to Hyderabad to keep my anxiety about running out of money and having to go back home under control.

‘Hey, do you have any idea if there’ll be an internet cafe at the station?’ I asked Edie. She couldn’t hear through her music. I tapped one of her knees.

‘I actually just wanted to ask you? If there’s a place to get online at the station?’

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘I need to do some job hunting.’

‘Bollocks to job hunting; you’re in India. You should really get away,’ she looked at me, trying to see if she could figure out what I was trying to get away from, ‘and come with me to Kerala instead. More remote. Jungles so green you feel like you’re in a cartoon. You could get a boat to take you out on the backwaters. Get stuck into the India of the south. Nice and quiet.’

‘You’d be ok if I went with you?’

‘Sure,’ she answered.

It had long been dark when I noticed Jayshree and Shreya packing up their things.

‘Are we almost there?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes. Hyderabad is the next city.’ Shreya’s earrings made more tinkling sounds when she moved her head. They matched the many bangles of different sizes that covered both of her lower arms.

I packed my bag, watching Edie, and noticed what seemed to be festival bands on her wrists.

‘We’re there,’ I called down.

‘Not even that late,’ she said as she stood up to stretch.

We shuffled out amongst the other passengers. Edie stood in front of the board with train times and destinations, looking up and squinting behind her glasses.

‘I’m going to go find a taxi stand,’ I told her.

‘Why would you do that?’

‘Because I don’t want to wander around on my own in a city I don’t know.’

‘You’re not going to. There, that’s our train - we’ve twenty minutes. They’ll announce the platform soon.’

‘I don’t have a ticket.’

‘Not difficult to arrange.’

‘But I can’t afford another train ticket, and I already paid for my hotel here.’

‘You can get your money back, don’t worry. And a new train ticket should only cost you five or six hundred rupees. Surely you’ve got that much?’

‘Yeah, but I don’t want to spend it, and I really need to check my email, and...’

‘That’ll do then,’ she said, interrupting me. ‘Don’t worry about what happens after we get to Kerala; we’ll sort that out later. Let’s get your ticket and something to eat.’

She gave me her shoulder bag and marched off to the ticket desk.

Edie was right about the ticket price. For a few rupees, we bought fresh samosas and pakora to eat from oily brown sheets of paper while we sat on our stacked bags, waiting for the next train.

‘Is your one veggie?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, definitely.’

‘It looks different to my one, though.’

‘You mean your samosa’s different to mine?’

‘I reckon so.’ Edie took mine, biting some off.

‘I guess... go ahead then?’

‘Ta.’ She handed it back to me, nibbling a green pea that had dropped onto her shorts. ‘You were right; yours is veggie. Same as mine.’

Edie told me more about how she grew up in London, the daughter of an English father and an Indian mother. She said that her mother never spoke about her home country, or the family she left behind. They celebrated all of the Christian holidays, and never ate Indian food. She had always wondered where her mother's family had come from, all she knew was they were somewhere outside Jaipur. Edie had gotten a letter from an aunt, and wondered why her mother never stayed in touch with her family, never brought Edie to meet her aunts, uncles and cousins in India before falling silent again; folding the greasy wrapper into a near-perfect square.

'Wish I had another one,' she said, after going quiet about her family.

'Want one of mine? I bought a bunch,' I said, offering her the bag.

'Cheers.'

We had eaten our way through all the samosas when the train arrived. Even in the dimly lit station, I could see this train was nearly empty. I helped Edie put our bags into the first carriage.

'I guess we can sit anywhere?' I wondered, looking at the ticket for an assigned carriage number. 'Wait. How long is this journey going to take?' I noticed the date on the ticket was marked Wednesday. It was a Monday that day.

'A little over two days.'

'What? That can't be right; they must have got our tickets wrong. Or we're on the wrong train.'

'India's a big place.'

'I'll try to get some work done, then. I really need to do some freelancing soon, or I'll have to go back home.' I read, enjoying the distraction of people chatting in the background in a foreign language. Some of the people boarding in the smaller villages had made their own sort of handmade luggage from cardboard boxes, tape, and nylon string. I noticed it was the same kind of nylon string we used to wrap up hay bales with back home.

We had left Hyderabad late that evening. When I woke up the next morning, the greenery was thicker than ever. The trees were closer to a jungle than the flat grasslands covering most of North Dakota back home. Here, they flourished in fields that slipped by in the rural landscape, framed by low mountains in the distance. Unlike the soft green in the north of India, the color here was almost fluorescent. The air was still dusty, but instead of the brown I had seen so much of in and around Delhi, it was a clay color that reminded me of French tennis courts I had seen on TV.

The next day we reached an unmarked station somewhere a few hours south of Kurnool. There was a single platform, but I couldn't see a station sign or much else.

‘Any idea where we are?’ I asked Edie. She stood up and peered back and forth out the window.

‘Nope.’

After the train stood still a few minutes, the motor and electricity switched off. We joined people slowly milling around the platform, and wandering over the road to the shade of the trees opposite. From both directions, people arrived on foot selling savoury and sweet things to those of us passing through, their goods handed over to patrons wrapped in old newspaper. Several unattended cows wandered the fields and road next to the platform, chewing grass and obstructing the rare passing car or truck who waited for the animals to move out of the way at their own pace.

‘Why don’t they just honk for the cows to move?’

‘A lot of Indians view cows as holy creatures. They don’t want to disturb them. I’m sure that’s not an easy idea for you to get your American head around. You probably just see a cheeseburger.’

‘I can’t lie. I do like a good cheeseburger.’

I bought us colas from a boy passing by with a cooler on the back of his bicycle as Edie had left her wallet on the train. We made space to sit between abandoned litter of all ages on the roadside; chip bags and soda cans nestled in the green grass covered in varying amounts of orange dust. Edie rolled her own cigarette, and I noticed the tobacco stains on her forefingers and thumbs. Patches of her skin were a similar color to the dust that covered the grass and shrubs where we sat. Edie smoked, we drank our colas, and she told me her mother had died the previous year. She said her mother never wanted her to go to India, would never tell her stories of where she was from or names of relatives to look up.

‘I really wanted to meet my aunt this trip,’ she told me, stubbing a cigarette out with the heel of her sandal.

‘Can’t you go back?’ I asked.

‘There won’t be enough time. I have to get to Goa in the next week or so, then Morocco.’

I asked what she was going to do in Morocco, but Edie didn’t answer.

She was on her fifth cigarette when the train’s engine started coughing back to life. Dusk had also begun to settle in around us. People collected belongings, put smaller children on hips and boarded again. Edie and I sat across from each other in the compartment as we left the little platform behind, continuing south in the dark and stopping at stations all throughout the night, into the second day of the journey.

Trivandrum station was much bigger than those we had seen since we left Hyderabad.

‘Now it’s time for a taxi,’ Edie announced.

I nodded. 'Where are you going next?'

'I've just got a friend to see. I'll be back this way in a couple of days. If you want, I can drop you off somewhere on the way?'

'I might just walk around a bit; I don't know what I'm doing next.'

'I'll drop you off in Poovar. It's a bit of a drive, but I can help you book a boat from there to take you out on the backwaters for a day. We can meet up somewhere after that. How does that sound?'

'Yeah, thanks. That sounds good.'

In the taxi, Edie made a few calls on her Indian cell phone while my mind drifted to thoughts of where we were going, who the driver was, and what would happen the next day. Through the warm air and my body's sweat, my legs and back stuck to the synthetic seat cover.

'We're there.' Edie's elbow was nudging my ribcage. I looked through the open car window and out to a row of ten or twelve little wooden huts situated on a small stretch of beach.

'A guy called Rajesh will find you here in a bit,' Edie explained.

'How will he know where to find me? And where are you going to be?'

'With a friend. Don't worry. I'll get in touch. Have fun.'

They drove off when I realised I didn't have her number. Standing alone in the dark, I slapped mosquitoes on my sweaty skin while the grogginess quickly left me. I walked up a porch hoping to find an empty hut. The doorknob opened in my hands, though they were slippery with sweat. I brought my things inside before bolting the door behind me, to spend the night awake in my clothes, reading or focusing on my breath to stop my grandfather's voice creeping back.