

Vagabond Zoo

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Chapter 1

Presumably Drugged

The mad rush of vehicles and people finally thinned to a slow trickle, a dripping faucet of faces and sounds. The pulsating waves of humanity, the madness, the chaos, the fucking insanity all went home to sleep for the night. The air was still thick, putrid, suffocating the lungs and inflaming the throat. Only the strongest of stars fought through the midnight cancer.

Milky orange shadows angled along dusty roads dotted with battered pavement. Laundry hung off balconies, while down below an anorexic cow wandered under a streetlamp. Beasts screaming, barking, moaning in pitch black shadows, trying to survive another moonless night. The *brum rum rum* of cars in the distance, the faint sounds of horns, bells and whistles, the lawnmower twang of a single auto rickshaw as it screamed down the road. A woman coughed. Generators boomed, shut down, then boomed again. The concrete jungle was catching its breath for another sunrise filled with seething madness. I climbed to the roof of my hotel and smoked an unfiltered Indian cigarette.

It was the spring of 2001 and George W. had just stolen the presidency from an almost-lifelike Al Gore then began following the Republican handbook verbatim. There was talk of drilling for oil in Alaska and instituting a domestic tax plan that would rob from the poor and reward the rich. The two-year anniversary of Columbine was nearing in the wake of other school shootings, and our teenagers were becoming more stupid according to national test scores. There was turmoil in the Middle East, but there's always turmoil in the Middle East, and to no one's surprise it would soon get much worse. The world was suffering through many problems, but they mostly went unnoticed *here*. No way could real problems on the dark side of the globe affect us – the fortress nation. God's favorite!

As for me, I felt little connection to the everyday Americans flittering around me. Always on the go go go, gotta be somewhere, gotta meet somebody. Always someone to blow, always so properly displayed. Ladders to climb and people to grease and all to get ahead, you see. But I couldn't play that game. The rules are too rigid. The prizes ... what are the damn prizes? So I did the opposite. I was as unmotivated as a person could be. A fantastic flounderer. Nothing meant more to me than getting high and drunk and laid. And this I did quite well. But something changes inside a person when they spend their 30th birthday delivering pizzas. So in 1998 I returned to college, my fifth one, in fact. I majored in business for absolutely no reason but then switched it to journalism because an English professor wrote a comment on a research paper that I should be a writer. That one seemingly innocuous comment planted in me a seed that would eventually grow to include world travel, teaching abroad and writing books of my adventures. Without that comment I'd probably be married with children, dying in the suburbs, sitting in a constipated office all day and slowly, methodically, and eventually, *anxiously* losing

the will to live. Yes, indeed. Suicidal as a midget in a room full of giraffes. So basically everything in this book, including the book itself, would not *be* without a simple 10 cent comment on a ridiculous research paper by a woman whose name I have long forgotten. And the title of this life-changing paper? “Aliens: Taste Great or Less Filling?”

I was a good student. But being good at college wasn't helping me decide what to do *after* college. Most of my fellow journalism students had career goals, a planned path with timelines and dates. Many had jobs lined up well before graduation. And many had job experience to go with that fresh new degree. And they all knew what they wanted. Or at least acted like they knew. But not me. I had none of that. Furthermore, I had no desire for a career. So as graduation neared, the question emerged that taunted me relentlessly: What now?

Then came along the first presidential election I gave any damn about – the Bush vs. Gore debacle. And the results of it sent me reeling. That was it for me. Whatever faint intentions I had of settling down and settling in quickly disappeared. I couldn't smile and pretend I didn't smell the stench. It was too awful to ignore. But when I looked around, everyone else seemed unaffected, unaware that they had been violated. And that's what really sent me off my nut. Surely the rest of the world isn't as fucked up, I thought, its people as mindless. So I packed some clothes, along with my disgust and shame, and went looking for *something*. *Anything!* All my negative feelings were morphing into one single entity – indifference. Which isn't a feeling at all. Like saying you're favorite color is clear. Nothing made sense, this much I was sure of.

I left the States with a few questions that needed answering. My life had no direction. And I just couldn't be that person that I was expected to become. Career? Marriage? Kids? I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my life, but I sure as hell knew what I *didn't* want to do. And rather than do something impulsively sensible, I went to India.

I arrived at the New Delhi airport around 1am to find a little man with a big mustache holding up a sign that read, “Mr. Miscrella.” “Close enough,” I said. He grinned and nodded his approval and off we went. The streets were still crowded, but no one seemed to be going anywhere or doing anything. Just a lot of standing around. We drove quickly, crossing recklessly from lane to lane, around people and cars, carts and animals, motor scooters ... you name it and we ran it off the road. The city smelled of stale feet and fresh shit. My eyes burned as dirty air rushed through the open window. At a stoplight a beggar struggled over to the car, dragging a horribly twisted leg. He had a long gone expression on his face I had never seen before. The driver yelled and threw up his hands. I struggled between hysteria and shock, trying to find the right balance. But shock won in a knockout, and it wouldn't be until morning that I came to fully realize where I was. What I had done.

While checking-in, a man at my hotel gave me a cup of coffee in broken English. I drank it fast and handed back the empty cup. Does he work for the hotel, I remember thinking? I followed another man into an antique elevator and up to my room. A few minutes later my room began to dance. A wave of red and blue jigsaw diamonds bounced off the walls as a sea of carpet stains swirled around my toes. I had trouble with my footing and splashed back and forth looking for my cigarettes. “Surely I was drugged,” I mumbled. I grabbed my smokes and tripped up the stairs toward the roof. (Later I would discover that this feeling is common after long flights.)

So that's how I found myself on top of Hotel Third World at 3am. Presumably drugged, wearing a lost gaze and mumbling softly. Just another washout that didn't make the cut back home. Another freak with more curiosity than common sense. India was as far away as I could get.