

## THE FACE READER

*You couldn't possibly* guess what it is like to fly into that country (or is it a continent? I always get it confused, like with Africa). The streets are all akimbo! I mean, it's like seeing a cheerleader girl thrown up and then dropped – her arms and legs go *spraying* out in lines they were never meant to. It's as though an earthquake has picked up all the neighbourhood streets and flung them back down – like a *salad*. I get all bothered thinking about it. The aeroplane dipped down into the blue of that ugly city and skidded its wheels over the shanty houses (however do residents of those homes sleep? I wonder how much the market value of them would go up if they moved the airport) and onto the tarmac and bobs-your-uncle, I was landed.

But not so fast. Because I stepped off the aeroplane – as I had at Heathrow, for example, or Tegel, or Charles de Gaulle: in an ordinary fashion – and then I was hit by it. The *stench*, I mean – a terrific, hot, sticky, grubby, mucilaginous stench that seemed to grab me and rough-house me like a two-bit thug in the underground. But unlike a mugger, it *stayed*. It stayed *on me*. I was like a man wading through a pool of algae, but there was no way of scooping this duckweed up. Good *God*, it was horrendous. Stepping out of that air-freshened cabin and into the funk of that repugnant city, I felt a little out of my depth, *already*. My chest began to tighten somewhat. I could feel my famous heart beating upon my ribs. It reminded me of a man locked in a freezer, begging to get out. Or rather – an analogy more appropriate comes to me now – I remember that I once was locked in a bathroom, after having made my business with the porcelain and the paper and finding that the water supply had been shut off (this was in the office of my second or third workplace, the one that struggled to make ends meet and that I quit being in arrears of some hundred quid or more). The doorknob was loosened and couldn't create the necessary friction to turn the latch, or cogs, or whatever it is that makes the door *normally* operate successfully. I banged on that door for half-an-hour till Mariana the receptionist came over and let me out with a dry roll of the eyes. So, you see, was my heart in my chest as I stepped off the plane.

It was 2:40a.m., give or take some few minutes – the aeroplane had arrived admirably on time. Despite the dreadful *aroma* of the place, it was nice to stretch my legs. I was worried that the baggage would arrive onto the carousel before I passed through customs and got to the thing – who knows but that it would all be stolen, at this first play of the game. But the customs process was laughably unprofessional. For such a major country-continent, they were very *lax* about the whole procedure. I was waved through queue after queue with only a cursory glance at my passport given.

There were plenty of security officials around, of course, and they all carried guns. God, what a lot of guns. *Big* guns. But I didn't feel threatened at all by them. It seemed they were happy to laze about with their hands folded on their paunches, those maleficent weapons tucked in their armpits. I did not complain or give them any advice otherwise. Let me pass through quickly to guard my belongings from the sly hands of beggars and thieves.

Now, it was time to co-ordinate a taxi. I had been advised by the company that there was a service at the airport for booking and pre-paying for this transportation. *Well*, there was, but as poorly signed as it was, it probably took me a good twenty minutes to find it – and with all the noise and that wicked *stench* and there being a hubbub all around me, it was a wonder I ever made it at all. And then, the line moved so slowly, and yet the clerk behind the desk (who asked all your particulars, where you were going and such, and then took your money) was so curt (how did it take so long to get to the desk, when each individual interaction seemed to pass by in a matter of ten or so words?) – it was all a bit unpleasant. I may write to the airport itself to air my concerns with their process. Perhaps they could de-odorise the areas outside too?

So I waited. Some light rain began to fall, putting speckles in the puddles by my feet. *Filthy* puddles, I might add, for the sake of description. After all, I had little else to do there but describe, in my head, all that I was seeing and hearing. (I will later attempt a description of the smell: at that time, I couldn't even begin to trace its various ingredients.) Murky yellow lights marked out the carpark; a few sickly-looking dark trees hung around the borders of the different lots; rusty trolleys, for carrying luggage, stood strewn and forlorn everywhere. Even in the fatal hour upon which I'd arrived, there were cars and motorbikes and funny three-wheeled vehicles whizzing to and fro, people getting in and out; there was a pretty steady stream of movement, which, if you squinted your eyes, almost seemed to have some semblance of order to it all. But I assure you, it did not.

I'd been told to look for Taxi 1034. None of the taxis, however, were numbered. There were a few other people waiting there – *natives* to the place, I could see – but I simply picked my spot at the front of the line and when the first taxi arrived after some minutes, handed over my receipt, and said my destination loudly and clearly to the driver, because although it had been written on the receipt, I didn't want to risk that the driver might not be able to read English. I was grateful to hear him repeat it back to me: Hotel New International. "Very well," I said, and had him put my suitcase in his boot (watching him carefully) and then jumped in the backseat.

It was not a well-kept vehicle. The upholstery in the back was in very poor condition – and yet, I could see that, rather incredibly, it was in a worse state up front. The engine seemed to scrape at its own bowels in order to start, as if it were achieving some monumental athletic achievement in simply *going*. And then, to watch the bonnet bob and sway, like the heaving chest of an elderly gentleman in the last stages of his life, labouring over every breath – I doubted immediately that we would arrive at the Hotel New International at any point in this lifetime. I certainly didn't panic, my friends, but to say that I was *uneasy* would not be an exaggeration. Unease would soon develop into mild distress, and that would exacerbate too before the night was through. But it ought to be noted that I did not panic.

So: I was now in the taxi, and we were moving. I recall looking at my watch, and it was

3:56a.m. as we reached the first set of traffic lights by the airport. A number of realisations struck me in quick succession. Firstly, I was astounded by the number of vehicles on the road at this hour. I couldn't explain it. Why were there so many people moving about at this time? Yes, even back home, there will be people coming and going in the few hours preceding dawn – bakers and mailmen and the like – but never in such an unimaginable quantity. It was a traffic jam, for God's sake, at 4 o'clock in the morning.

Secondly, I observed that *everyone* was honking their horn. Now, I've said it was a traffic jam, but this is not *exactly* so. The traffic had not stopped completely. Movement was at all moments possible. It was a slow nudging along of cars (the motorbikes snuck haphazardly through any gaps in the traffic, in a way that not even the most reckless young people back home would attempt) through a series of bottlenecks. Even still, they all beeped, honked and hooted endlessly and *inexplicably*. It achieved nothing other than creating an unhelpful sense of urgency and, I'm sure, a number of splitting headaches.

Thirdly, I saw that *no-one* heeded the red light, or any traffic signals of any kind. It was complete lawlessness on the road.

Now, one would surely *suspect* that a taxi driver, especially one assigned his customers at the airport, would know where to find the major hotels in a city – even one of as provocatively wretched as this. But my man did not know where the Hotel New International was. I could ignore the fact that he did not speak English – *fine* – and even things such as the tacky decorum of his vehicle or the fact that he had no teeth. But the man could not even do his job properly. I *sensed* straightaway that he was lost. He veered, drifted, edged and vacillated his way through the flood of traffic, going in a *general* direction. But he did not seem to know where he was going. “Far off now?” I asked, tapping him on the shoulder, and he moved his head neither up nor down, but all around – it looked like an oddly-shaped, walnut-brown baby was wriggling on his shoulders. Understandably, this was not, to me, a gesture that answered in the affirmative. The bottlenecks were getting tighter and tighter until it came to a rather altogether stop. (The racket of horns did not, of course.) Then – would you believe! – my driver *got out of the vehicle*, wandered over to a ramshackle vendor on the side of the road, and bought a tiny plastic cup of milk tea! I urge you to visualise my body language at this point: hands askance, eyebrows knit, forehead flexed. He'd not shut the engine off, mind you – probably, I could have stolen his taxi, but that I'd want to manage such a dump of a car is another matter. More poignantly, I might have been kidnapped. But nevertheless. The flow of traffic resumed, eked out in portions of inches, like the slices of cake my stingy Aunt Flo used to dish up. *Still* my driver lingered by the tea stall. I banged on the window. He did not respond. I saw him chatting to the vendor – both men were pointing in directions. My suspicions were fully aroused by this point. Finally, by his own volition, the driver returned.

But now, at every intersection, or at every point the traffic slowed to a halt, or else simply whenever he felt like stopping, the driver would lean his head out the window and shout to someone a query in that toothy language of theirs – doubtlessly a question as to the directions. I could even hear him say *Hotel New International*, chewing the words as he was. Conflicting responses abounded, but he would follow them all, naïve as a waif. Or was he? Now, I began to fear that he

was a shrewd snake – a cobra conjured up by the implacable flute of this abysmal part of the world. What else could explain his incompetence? He stopped again for another tiny shot of tea, and I worried it was of the opiate variety. At this time, a big cantankerous bus had pulled up beside us, shooting diesel smoke through the taxi's window and into my face via a dirty and poorly-fitted exhaust pipe jutting out its side.

I also had to fight sleep. Don't forget, it was an ungodly hour – the birds of dawn, which in that country or continent are ugly reptilian crows rather than dainty sparrows or what have you, had begun their song, although they had to raise their voices to even compete with the din of the streets. I'd had a long flight; nary do I sleep a wink on aeroplanes, whether the transit was an hour or a week. But should I submit myself to slumber, would I not also be submitting myself to this devil? So I forced the old peepers wide. The passage of our hour of need resembled our transport through the city – both appeared to stretch forth into infinity.

*Forthwith*, we arrived, just upon daybreak. I saw it first: a gay red sign proclaiming the name of my accommodation. I pointed the dear taxi driver to it, as he had still somehow missed it. He repeated its name and seemed puzzled. Then, he tried to put himself at ease, laughing gently, gesturing towards it, breathing a comic sigh of relief. I humoured him a little also. We pulled up, and the driver took my baggage from the back of the vehicle and gave it to me; at which point, he put out a wizened hand and said, "Tip?" (Now, of course, English came to him naturally.) I tried to refuse but he was as a persistent widow. I gave him a green note of their currency, uncaring of its value, and hurried off into the hotel.

There, I slept. But barely had the dreams began to swirl in my head when I was awoken with a knock at the door. Perhaps it was good fortune that the dreams weren't given a foothold – I didn't like where they were going. Nevertheless, I was most upset with the lack of *courtesy*. Couldn't a guest be left to his sleep? I upbraided the young porter at the door with comments to this effect. He commendably had English enough to understand my anger. "Sorry, sir," he said meekly. "I am just taking the breakfast orders now."

Well! What could I say? I was *hungry* after all. The boy presented me with a menu card. I didn't understand most of the offerings. "Which currency are these prices in?" I had to ask. The *local* currency, I was assured. I asked him to bring me a *normal* breakfast. He appeared to wince, but did not have to be told twice, thank God. Off he shuffled. I dozed again, for what must have been half a minute – then, there arrived a different fellow, with a cheap aluminium platter on which sat my breakfast. It looked ghastly. I had been given:

- A shallow metal dish of potatoes, stained yellow and littered with spices
- A porcelain plate with three pieces of flat bread upon it, oilier than you could possibly imagine
- A miniature porcelain mug, with a milky tea in it, and
- A banana.

This was the order I tested my food in. Without tasting it, I could tell I would not like the

yellow potatoes – notwithstanding this, curiosity got the better of me. How could an honest potato be destroyed so unrepentantly? The flavour of potato was completely buried beneath whatever strange ingredients the dish had been spiked with. It was hot as Hades – both in temperature, and with regards to spice. Suffice to say, I didn't get more than half a bite in, before discarding of the potatoes as a possible breakfast.

How does one even attempt to eat bread so laden with grease that one could work the chains of a hundred bicycles with it? I must have forgotten to mention that there was *no cutlery*. None. I cannot believe God gave us fingers to eat with – but what else was I to do? I attempted to pick it up with both hands and eat it, perhaps in the manner that some cretins eat a fast-food hamburger. My moustache was immediately thick with butter. My lips – I swear, I felt the oil on my lips for days afterwards. Why not simple, toasted white bread? Why not, I ask?

In tea, of course, I could trust – or *so you would think*. But this sweet, milky concoction I'd been given ought not be called tea. Now, I don't mind a dash of milk in my tea under *ordinary circumstances*, so don't think I was perturbed by that addition to it, although it was altogether far too milky for any adult consumer of the beverage to be satisfied with. Nor was it the sugar that had me thus appalled, but I will say, I believed at once that the cook must have knocked over a sack of sugar while brewing my drink, much of which had fallen into my mug, for it was sweeter than a child's goodie-bag. No, ladies and gentlemen, it was this: even the *tea* had spices in it. The tea! God knows what they were – I forget half their names or uses, only remembering a few from childhood classes on the spice trade from some years ago, but there must have been cinnamon or vanilla or mace or marjoram or something in it. I mean, really, I could not speak for most of them – chilli, maybe, for it had a *kick* to it like the potato did, as unexpected and undesired as a mule's – but I can tell you I certainly detected the presence of *ginger* in my tea. I was utterly bewildered. Had tea only recently been introduced to this place? Or had children taken over the kitchens of this land? Was this what addled my taxi driver and left him so bereft? (A quick thought as to his teeth: yes.) I began to feel feverish.

Thank heavens that bananas are sealed in their skin, and that little tampering can be done with them in that state.

Now, I slept for two hours. More discombobulating dreams ensued. I woke up in something of a terror. Still, I could hear those *blasted* horns, blasting. Some birds, too, and occasional snippets of uninterpretable conversation. It was daytime by now, and I had a chance to look around my room clearly. Or is it too generous to call it a room? It was a *hovel*, that's what it was. The thought of bedbugs in the sheets struck me. I could envisage them now crawling in the carpets. Now up the walls. *Oh God*, I thought. I had to get out. Quickly I leaped up and skidded down the stairs, into the lobby. But even there, in the lobby of the Hotel New International, it was as though all sorts of translucent creepy-crawlies (to say nothing of the *bacteria*) had taken root in the furniture and curtains.

“Can I help you, sir?” a voice asked behind the desk. It was the boy who'd taken my breakfast order – he was wrestling with the oily bread I'd passed up, dipping into the remnants of radioactive potato, sipping on the dwarf mug of poisoned tea. Maybe I looked lost or alarmed. I

certainly *was*.

“No,” I answered back coolly, and moved towards the exit. “Just thinking of getting some fresh air.”

*Ha!* Fresh air! What a great *joke!* The air was positively *brown* with that mortifying smell. Nevertheless, I began to amble. What else was there to do? It was a circus on those streets. The same intricate sortie was going on between the traffic, and now, the footpaths were clogged with pedestrian matter, moving along the same invisible blueprint, as if motivated by some abstract mathematical concept rather than any grim practical purpose. Vendors’ stalls had sprung up like mushrooms overnight, blocking access routes; to fully essay their wares would require maybe ten or twelve of my notebooks. Very little of it tempted me. Some fruit, perhaps – the watermelons were like giant pearls, cast, needless to say, before swine – but fruit is too acidic for my stomach at the best of times. One tiny grey-haired man, as sinewy as a lamb, dragged a trailer of sweet slices, none of them recognisable, most of the melting in the morning heat, all of them glistening with sugar and God-knows-what-more. He was positively *inundated* by flies. The sod didn’t seem to mind.

Others had set up their unsanitary kitchens on the roadside and sold slops and fried breads to game passers-by. I quickly noted that thrice-cooked oil was one of the critical ingredients for the scent of the streets. The traffic fumes must be another. Perhaps there was a dash of those diabolical spices in the air too. It must be said, however, that the true driving force behind the whiff of that country was too unsavoury to be said. I mean to say, it was *effluent*.

Certainly, my appetite was lost at this point, and there was no sauce that could reel it back in. I doubt even a second banana would have gone into my gullet then, things as they were.

Now I didn’t notice it at first, but it soon became apparent that the *locals* had noticed me. I suppose it was my stature – they are a little people, in height at least, and I must have cut an impressive figure, leering, if not exactly towering, over them as I was. Perhaps it was my grooming and deportment that so interested them as well; I’m not exactly sure. They certainly weren’t shy about staring, whatever the case. I don’t just mean one or two ill-mannered people, or only the children – men and women of whatever social function had their brown eyes almost popping out of their sockets. I wanted to dissuade them, but what do you do in such a situation? I averred my own glances to the crinkled bitumen.

Turning a corner, a portly older gentleman began to shout at me in the native tongue. This came much to my surprise – *unwelcome* surprise at that. I couldn’t tell what he was spouting off. Was it a shout of warning? A shout of welcome? Had he confused me with someone else – perhaps a character from the colonial days in this land? Was he simply off his rocker? Again, my response was clumsy – what do you *expect?* I wanted to understand, but I also wanted to shamle off quickly, if possible. No help was forthcoming from my fellow bystanders. I couldn’t even detect a facial expression that could clue me into what was going on. In the end, I offered some conciliatory hand gestures, a gentle nod, and a smile that was neither docile nor hostile, and turned to move on. And, with the luck of Job’s poor turkey, I turned and immediately crashed into a woman wrapped in colourful veils.

Let us take a precious moment to recall that these are my first few hours here. Oh, I'm well-enough travelled – you speak not with a downy-faced novice on his first sojourn abroad – but I was *incredulous*, at this point, with the way events had turned out. Is this the experience of all who travel to the sultry continent (or whatever) in which I had barely touched down? I was there simply to conduct a little business on behalf of an executive – business that I doubted the necessity of, given how out-of-the-way I'd been sent, and how tawdry the conditions (I saw barbers, tailors, shoe-menders, butchers, priests and all sorts of loafers, but few businessmen on those morning streets). I would only be there for a few days. But I was beginning to wonder: will it all be this *unbearable*?

It reminded me of an afternoon back in the *motherland*: I had seen one of *their* people (I mean, someone from the continent I am describing in this account) sauntering around the capital with a big grin on his face. We were walking towards each other and turned almost simultaneously to enter an eating establishment. His order was nothing surprising: a minced-meat pie and boiled peas. But the vigour with which he ate them showed me just how truly wonderful it must be to make a new life for oneself in my homeland.

More so, as I endured the day I am recounting for you, I was beginning to understand just why that would be.

So I ran into the woman with the colourful veils. She fell, in a heap, to the ground; like a striker in the penalty box during a World Cup match. *Well*, I thought, *this isn't good*. I tried to help the poor dear up, but she resisted my aid. "Don't touch me," she said, in passable English. So I hovered around her, without touching, while she sorted herself out. Now, a few stray passers-by decided to join us, obviously with nothing better to do. I apologised profusely to the lady.

"It's my first morning in this city," I said, by way of explanation. "I arrived *very early* this morning. Only a couple of hours ago. I've barely slept."

She tried to wave off my discourse, but I needed to continue.

"I'm practically dizzy with sleep-deprivation. And then, *this gentleman*" (I jerked a thumb back at the fat guru who had yelled at me on the corner) "got me further into a dither by way of some sort of abuse. It's all very unsettling, you see, and so I wasn't looking where I was going. Again, I am sorry."

The lady had by now returned to her feet, and swept her veils up into a more comfortable positioning around her. Although you would not say she was entirely comely, what you could see of her face was *not unpretty*. Her state of disarray at having been knocked over was now dissolving into a more mellow temperament, which did wonders for her appearance. I started to relax somewhat, sensing that this might all be over soon, and that I would be able to retreat to the hotel and rest there some more until my business was required of me. But now the lady began to speak.

"I can see that you are flummoxed," she began. "I can see that this morning has been one morning very difficult for you. I can see that you are not comfortable among us, on our streets. This I can tell without you saying one word to me. This, and much more."

I was taken aback by the woman's confidence and her strange management of the English tongue. It almost galloped out of her mouth, and although everything was more or less correct in a technical sense, it was very close to being nonsensical to me. She went on:

"You see, I am a face-reader. Have you heard of my profession before? I am able to simply look upon the face of any man in the street, and tell him what his character is like, what his passions are, and even what are the secrets that he hides."

I was still, as she said, *flummoxed*.

"So, for you, I can see that you do not like so much new experiences. You prefer that which is tried and tested, no? You do not want to be surprised. You yourself are an unsurprising gentleman – I can see this as well. You are consistent, reliable and very sturdy. You are fixed where you stand, no? And therefore you expect that the world around you ought to deliver such qualities as well, and when it does not, this makes you very upset." She paused. "Shall I go on, Mister – Mister whom?" Now she implored me for a surname.

"Mister Simons," I answered. The small crowd gathered nodded appreciatively.

"A very fine name. It suits you."

"Well," I stammered. "Thank-you."

"You are an intelligent man, Mister Simons," the swathed lady continued, studying my face. "I mean, book-smarts. You are one of those very well-educated people who can remember the dates of historical battles and the names of certain scientific processes. Things beyond me, Mister Simons. And you are generous, are you not? Willing to give, although you want to know what is going to happen to your money, I sense. It is as though your generosity is an investment into the society around you. You maybe suspect that it will give you good fortune.

"And you are a fine family man. Instructive, but tolerant. Patient, but attentive. Well, wherever it is possible to be attentive. An important man like you is not able to be present always. But *quality* time, no? – that is what you have to give. How many children do you have, Mister Simons?"

"Ah, three," I said. My throat, I noticed suddenly, was a little dry. Where would one get water from around here? "Yes, three, although they are hardly children anymore." I was attempting a little joke here.

"But I see also that despite the sum of intelligence, generosity and family values that your face presents, you are lacking understanding. There is something missing, Mister Simons. Do not get upset. We are all imperfect beings, no? I tell you only for your own good. Please, do not squint your eyes that way, Mister Simons – it makes it hard to read your face. Although, if I read from your face as it is now, all bothered and so, probably I can tell you some more things about yourself..."

I felt that the game had gone a little too far now. I tried to thank my *face reader* and move on. I raised my hands to express that I was moving on, but she patted them down gently.

"In the times when you should be going somewhere else, Mister Simons, you tend to stay. And in the times when you should be staying, you are going."

Well, what *sage* advice from an uneducated *gypsy* of the street!

I turned on my heels, and she turned soothsayer.

“Mister Simons, don’t go,” she said. “I have not yet finished your reading. There is more yet to tell you. Why, I can tell you some of your grand future, just from what I see in your face. I can tell you, for example, your fate in this country.”

“I don’t wish to hear it.”

“Be not so stubborn. You are always this stubborn. It is one of your great vices.”

“Listen, ma’am – I shall not put up with this disparagement any longer. I’m leaving.”

“You must not be so stubborn here, in our country. It will only bring you trouble. And do not keep looking at your watch either. Only anxiety will come from this.”

It was as if I was a cedar of Lebanon, rooted to the spot. How desperately I wanted to get away! But I was disoriented. I mean, the *traffic* – and all this on an empty stomach. What I wouldn’t have given for a bowl of muesli!

“This country will wear away your obstinacy,” my reader went on. “It will hone your instincts. Suffering will bring you closer to a state of maturity...”

Well, at this point I was so confounded that I began to lose my wherewithal. Perhaps a great wave of that *stench* wafted into my nostrils in one big gulp. I suddenly crouched down on my haunches, as if I was going to vomit. A band of minstrels walked past with hand-drums and bells. I think I saw an elephant in the distance. Mendicants appeared from nowhere with hands out. A fellow tried to sell me balloons. My face reader stood over me, incanting my future. Grotesque like one of their gods, she chanted; she seemed to be veering in and out of a trance. Or was that *me*? Motorcycles and scooters zipped around me. A couple of dogs approached me, and they wore their mange with the same pride that their city did. Delirium had set in. I was having a panic attack. Who was this eight-armed elephant in front of me?

Above all else, before I passed out, there was another dose of that *smell*.