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Opening extract from

The Stranger

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Charlotte

The train slowed, brakes screeching, as it drew into the station. The perfume of diesel drifted into the carriage through windows open in the heat. Then other smells too – spicy food cooking on stalls, musky pink blossoms heaped on a wooden handcart, decaying refuse and underneath, the faint odour of old urine. It was still early. Beyond the village, rice fields spread away. As the train halted, the quiet platform stirred, coming to life, as a dozen vendors emerged from the shadows, descending on the train with rice-cakes, hard-boiled eggs, cups of tea, newspapers. Voices clamoured, announcing what was offered. The men – for they were mostly men - brandished their wares beyond the train windows, fighting for attention.

Charlotte rubbed her eyes. She was still half asleep. The carriage was tatty and old-fashioned, divided into compartments. She rose from the hard wooden seat, clambered over her fellow passengers and their baggage, out of her compartment to the carriage door, to overlook the throng on the platform. Ahead, a slender woman in a saffron-yellow sari walked across the tracks, a basket resting elegantly on her head. Charlotte took a deep breath, drawing it all inside, feasting on it, the colour, the babble, the complex scent, the clarity of the morning air, the curl of steam and cinnamon rising from the teacup a man thrust under her nose – and felt emotion swelling inside her chest, thrill and contentment together, to be in India, this strange, beautiful, intriguing place.

Passengers embarked and disembarked. Some bought a breakfast through the window. Charlotte stepped down onto the platform and bought curry and rice in a foil dish, along with a large chapatti folded like a piece of cloth, and a copy of the Times of India. A large reddish monkey, a baby clinging to her front, scampered over the platform roof. A whistle blew and the doors to the carriages began to slam shut. Charlotte, clutching her breakfast, hopped back onto the train just in time. She scrambled back into her seat as the train started to move, juggling newspaper, breakfast, the leather bag hanging over her shoulder.

A fat Indian man in a tight suit, nursing a briefcase on his lap, sniffed with an air of disapproval, but said in English, friendly enough:

"Where are you going?"

"The Golden Tiger Reserve. I'm working there." She dropped her bag at her feet, stuffed the newspaper down the side of the seat and opened the foil dish. The curry, which had cost only a few rupees, was rich and delicious. The smell of it filled the compartment so the woman sitting next to Charlotte twitched her nose and briefly woke up. Charlotte dunked the end of her chapatti into the curry and took a big, satisfying bite.

The man in the suit – a businessman he seemed – nodded with interest and eyed her breakfast.

"Ah. I wondered what you were doing on this little branch line. I've visited the reserve," he said. Then, waxing philosophical: "It is very beautiful. You know, sometimes we need to step away from modern life, all its demands, and connect with the natural world."

Charlotte nodded. "Would you like some?" She held out the foil dish but the man waved politely waved it away.

"Thank you, no. I have eaten already, and," he tapped the briefcase with affectionate fingers, "I have my lunch in here." He leaned forward, as though honouring her with a secret. "My wife made it for me." He beamed – a big, satisfied smile, then leaned back in his seat, eyes closed, perhaps enjoying the prospect of this lunch or else congratulating himself on having such a thoughtful wife. Charlotte smiled too, glancing at the other passengers in the compartment: the sleeping woman next to her; the young couple sitting opposite each other, all loved up judging by the affectionate little smiles and glances they kept giving each other; an old woman with a long, grey plait holding a basket of oranges, and a mother with a

daughter of about twelve, sitting side by side. The mother was brushing the girl's curtain of long, long, glossy black hair, talking to her in a low, kind voice.

Charlotte settled back into her seat, eating happily. In another hour she'd get off the train, and drive back to the reserve headquarters. She'd spent the previous night at Yercaud, after delivering plant samples to the Horticultural Research Station – part of her job as a volunteer at the Golden Tiger Reserve. She was eight weeks into her three-month placement, and the reserve, India itself, had started to feel like home.

The mother plaited the girl's lavish hair, creating a gleaming black rope down her back. The young couple exchanged looks, and smiled. Beyond the window, the lush, sumptuous landscape of Tamil Nadu flowed past, little villages amid undulating stretches of verdant meadow and emerald-green rice fields.

The compartment door opened. A white man, probably in his early twenties, lugging a battered blue backpack, stared in. He glanced around. His eyes settled on Charlotte.

"Any seats free?" He was English, had longish red-brown hair, a sunburnt face and thin, bare limbs.

"Sorry, no," Charlotte said. The answer was evident. Still the young man waited, as though hoping one of the passengers might sacrifice their seat for him. Why on earth should they, Charlotte thought, with a ripple of annoyance.

"Where are you heading for?" he asked. Ah, that was it. She was a European, another young adventurer in India, and he had assumed on the camaraderie that existed between such travellers. He wanted to talk.

"I'm going to the Golden Tiger Reserve. I'm working there – I've got a volunteer placement. What about you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm just travelling, you know?"

"Great." Charlotte didn't feel inclined to talk. She wanted to read her newspaper and anyway, something about the young man irritated her. The way he'd ignored everyone else in the compartment, as though they were invisible, speaking only to her, a complete stranger, just because she was another young European. She picked up the Times and glanced at the front page. The Englishman waited another few moments on the threshold, moving his weight from one foot to the other, shifting the heavy backpack.

"You're English, right? How long've you been in India?"

Really, couldn't he take the hint? Charlotte sighed, looking up from the paper.

"Yes, I'm English. I've been here a couple of months. You?"

"Oh, it's nearly ten months now," he said with some pride. "I'm here for the long haul. Love the place." He looked around the compartment again, as though an empty seat might magically appear and he could sit down, and harangue Charlotte with his trove of traveller's tales. Fortunately, Charlotte thought, that wasn't going to happen. She turned her attention back to the newspaper, and finally, with an audible sigh, the man drew back, closed the compartment door and wandered off along the corridor outside. When she glanced up from the newspaper the businessman caught her eye and gave a quick, warm smile. She sensed he hadn't been impressed by the Englishman either.

The sun rose higher, throwing heat through the train window. Charlotte's thighs began to burn, even through her cotton trousers. Beyond the window, a water buffalo with its crescent of horns wallowed in the shallows of a wide brown river. Half a dozen children scampered along a dirt path, on their way to school judging by the uniform and satchels, the girls' hair bound up in neat pigtails.

The train was approaching the reserve now. The cultivated land gave way to wilder places, to the forest, with its teak and rosewood trees, the pillars of the natural cathedral where deer wandered.

Charlotte's attention drifted between the window view and the newspaper spread on her lap. A story about relations with China, soldiers missing in Kashmir, some scandal involving a famous cricket player, lifestyle features about keeping a marriage alive… not so different from the news at home, except that the names were Indian instead of English. She turned the page – and an article jumped out - a picture of a tiger by a pool of mahogany-coloured water, the fierce, striped face repeated in its reflection. The headline: Rescue Effort for Golden Tiger Reserve – then a subtitle: Sanctuary in line for international support. Charlotte narrowed her eyes as sunlight flashed into her face. She glanced at her fellow travellers. How sweet the young couple were. They hadn't touched each once during the length of the journey but the connection between them was palpable, in looks and quiet smiles, the way their bodies seemed to mirror each other, yearning across the space between the facing seats. The sleeping woman woke, and rummaged in the large bag at her feet. The young girl read from an English storybook to her mother, while the old woman with the oranges glanced over her shoulder and nodded encouragement.

The train plunged into darker shade, galloping through a dense clump of trees. The whistle shrieked, once, twice - then brilliant sunlight washed over them again, the sticky golden heat of it filling the carriage. Charlotte stretched out her legs and wriggled on the hard seat.

A crash, the scream of metal.

The carriage bucked, leaping from the rail. Charlotte flew from her seat into the air, slammed against the businessman and the compartment wall, then against the window as the entire world turned upside down.

How long did it take? A few moments. Yet it seemed to last an eternity, every instant stretched out, every detail etching itself on her mind as though in a slow, vivid, terrifying dream.

The carriage jumped into the air, flung itself against the preceding carriage, and was struck in turn at the rear by the one behind. A moment of cataclysmic collisions, carriages barging and crashing one against another. Terrible sounds – metal warping, wood smashed and ripped apart. Inside, helpless passengers were thrown against each other, smashed into compartment walls, windows, luggage racks. Bags, baskets and cases tumbled and bounced, fell open, discharging cargos of clothes and fruit. For one insane, lucid moment Charlotte's stunned brain caught a snapshot – the eight of them seemingly afloat in the compartment like Alice falling down the rabbit hole to Wonderland. The girl was upside down, plait aloft, mouth open, the storybook still in her hand. The old woman had her hands in the air, amid an impossible cloud of oranges. The young lovers were tossed over each other; the businessman and his briefcase loomed over Charlotte, horribly large, threatening to crush her to smithereens. Her body instinctively recoiled but the momentum of the train, the impact, held her in place, the compartment a drum in which they bounced like helpless peas.

The noise was deafening, overwhelming, the crash and slam and scream as wood, glass and metal broke, smashed and exploded. The businessman was sucked back against the wall and Charlotte thrown against him, the briefcase thumping into her stomach. People, luggage, possessions, oranges, dropped to the floor as though released from a spell. The carriage lurched to one side. For a long, horrible moment it teetered, giant and ungainly. Then it leaned and toppled, and they were thrown again, the eight of them, against each other and the window, helpless to protect themselves. The track ran along the top of an embankment, and the carriage crashed onto its steep side and slid down.

Crushed, obliterated by shock and the weight of the other passengers, Charlotte waited for the final impact. Was she going to die? The thought flashed through her mind, and on its tail, dismay in a brilliant blaze. How could that be it? But calm followed, like a cool, white mist in her mind. Scenes from her life flashed before her - playing in a summer garden

as a child, walking along a winter beach hand in hand with her mother under striped thunder clouds – each tableau curiously brilliant, charged with intensity. Well, perhaps she would die. She let it go, the thought, the fear. Far away, the screeching carriage ground to a halt. Something, or someone, fell against her with enormous force. Charlotte shut her eyes, and the world blacked out.

Cries, moans, and the thin, wavering screams that went on and on, as though Charlotte had woken in hell, among thousands of tormented souls. She didn't move, in the darkness, for an indefinable length of time, unable to think clearly who or where she might be. Only the terrible sounds existed, the cries that filled her ears, grated on her nerves, kept her from sinking back into unconsciousness.

At first her body was remote. She couldn't feel it or make it move, but gradually she became aware of a generalised pain, a weight pressing down on her legs, needles of pain in her knees and hips. Her mouth tasted strange and she couldn't swallow.

The wailing went on, unbearably.

Charlotte's mind came into focus, second by second. She opened her eyes. Why couldn't she see? Where was she? She concentrated on moving, lifted her hands to touch her face, and discovered something had covered it. In a panic she pushed it aside, whatever it was. Charlotte tried to sit up but her knees and hips refused to move. The joints hurt more than ever. Looking around nothing made sense – the proportions and orientation of the carriage, the position of the window. She reached for her legs and realised she couldn't move because someone was lying on top of them. A heavy, unconscious someone. She tried to wriggle her legs free, to push the someone off. Pain screamed in her legs, agonising stabs in her knees which were bent at a strange angle, crushed beneath her fellow passenger. She pushed again with all her strength, dragged out her legs, the pain almost overcoming her as bones seemed to crack in her feet, and her knees finally straightened. The ligaments in her legs burned as though red hot. A sob escaped her, a long hiss of pain. But at last, she was free.

Charlotte looked around her, trying to make sense of the scene. The carriage lay on its side on the embankment, sloping, the ceiling downwards. The carriage window, seen through the compartment door, showed an oblong of brilliant blue sky, fringed with foliage. Inside – a catastrophe of people and luggage. The businessman lay at her feet, unconscious but muttering. He was the one who had crushed her legs. A random jacket lay beside her; this had been covering her face. The other passengers were beginning to stir. She scanned them, the other seven, heaped against each other like broken dolls. Dust floated in the air, agitated, spinning in the sunlight.

The infernal screaming went on, the backdrop to everything. The sound came from outside the carriage – some other passenger.

Inside Charlotte's compartment, the mother sat up and cried out for her daughter. The girl was raised her head, and said in English:

"Mother? Here I am. Here!"

Something about the woman's arm didn't look right. Charlotte suspected it was broken. The other passengers struggled away from each other, tried to sit up. The old woman had a vivid red gash on her forehead, the skin sagging open. The young couple were trying to stand up and neither appeared to be seriously injured. Everyone was shocked, bruised and bewildered.

The worst case, the most worrying, was the businessman lying at Charlotte's feet, still unconscious though his lips were moving. It was hard to say how he was hurt, except that he looked wrong. The big body lay heavily, wedged between the carriage wall and the roof. Internal injuries perhaps?

“Are you hurt?” Someone was speaking. Charlotte turned round. The young man was studying her.

“Yes, I’m okay,” she said.

“You have blood all over your face.”

“Do I?” she said, wondering. Charlotte put her hand to her cheek. Blood made the skin slick; her fingers came away a dark red. She ran her tongue over her teeth, noticing for the first time how much they ached, feeling loose in her gums, and the strange taste in her mouth, that was blood too.

“I think I bit my lip. And my nose is bleeding,” she said. “How about you? Are you okay?” Still the screaming went on outside. Charlotte couldn’t filter it out. Like a needle it pushed into her brain.

“Yes I’m fine, and so is my wife, thank God.”

“He’s the one I’m worried about,” she gestured to the businessman. “I think he’s badly hurt.”

The young man nodded. “We have to get everyone out of here,” he said.

“How are we going to do that?”

He looked around. “We climb out of the compartment door and either smash the window or crawl along the corridor, to the main carriage door.”

Charlotte looked up. The carriage lay on its side, roof downwards, so they would have to climb up through the compartment door and then sideways along the corridor. That might be easier and safer than trying to break the window. The young man briefed the others.

“I’ll go first, to check we can get through, and then I’ll come back and help everyone out,” he said. The compartment door was already open, hanging down, so he wriggled through and crawled away along the sideways corridor. The rest of them looked at one another, shocked and bloodied. Charlotte felt a sudden, whelming urge to cry but swallowed it back – this was no time to lose control – turning to the businessman instead. She folded up the jacket and placed it under his head. Shouldn’t she try to place him in the recovery position? But what if he’d hurt his back, or had internal injuries? Wouldn’t that make it worse?

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, helpless. “What should I do?” The other passengers stared at her, also at a loss. Charlotte longed for help to come, for someone to take over, professionals – police, paramedics, air ambulance. But they were out in the middle of nowhere. How long till the emergency services reached them?

The young man returned, out of breath and sweating. They looked at him expectantly. He said something in Hindi. Then, in English:

“It’s okay, we can get through. The carriage door was jammed but I managed to kick it open.” He gestured to the young girl and her mother.

“Come on, you first,” he said. The mother winced, cradling her broken arm, but spoke encouraging words to her daughter. The mother struggled to climb out with her injury but the young man helped. The old woman followed, then the young man’s wife, and finally the woman who had slept in the seat beside Charlotte. When only she and the businessman remained, Charlotte said to the young man:

“What shall we do with him?”

“I don’t know. He looks serious to me, but we have no way of moving him. He looks very heavy. Besides, we might make his injuries worse.”

“But we can’t just leave him!”

The young man shook his head. Charlotte noticed tiny freckles of blood on his smooth, handsome face. He had blood on the back of his hands, too. Where had that come from? He wrinkled his brow.

“I’ll stay with him for now,” he said. “You must get out, see what needs to be done.”

“I’ll tell them you’re in here, and I’ll come back,” she nodded, wondering who ‘they’ were, the rescuers, how long it would take for them to come. Inwardly she breathed a prayer of relief, that she didn’t have to stay in the compartment with the injured man. The young man had taken the burden from her. But she’d come back and take her turn, once she’d got outside, escaped this carriage tomb, breathed fresh air.

Her legs quivered with pain as she climbed up through the compartment door and into the slanted corridor. Her knees – worse now– hurt with a constant, distracting throb. Shouts and cries filled the corridor. Further along she could see other people trying to get out of the carriage through the door at the other end. Charlotte crawled along, slowly, slowly. The closest door was open, and she emerged through it into the sunshine.

What a scene awaited her. The train, derailed, rested on its side like a fallen animal. Broken carriages lay concertina-ed, tumbled down the embankment. The black, iron wheels poked towards the sky, the filthy undersides of the carriages indecently exposed in the sunlight. Passengers in ones and two, and small, huddled groups, sat on the embankment nursing themselves.

And the screaming went on. It hadn’t stopped. Who was it? Why didn’t they shut up? The banshee sound of extreme, intolerable pain, horrible to hear. Someone in another carriage, closer to the engine she thought. The smell of diesel and burning hung in the air. For the first time, Charlotte had room in her mind to wonder, what had caused the crash? Why had the train derailed?

“Do you need a hand?” The voice, English, male, came from beneath her. Charlotte was standing on top of the fallen carriage, gazing along the length of the devastated train. The wild landscape spread around it, open grassland, stands of tropical hardwoods.

Charlotte looked down. It took her a moment to work out why she recognised the speaker. He was the backpacker who’d spoken to her earlier (how long ago that seemed now).

“No it’s okay, thanks. I can manage.” She clambered to the edge of the train and jumped over the wheels to the embankment. The impact was agony for her knees; she cried out and her legs buckled so she sprawled on the ground amid the dry, yellow grass. The man ran over.

“You’re hurt? Here let me help you.” He put his arm around her, lifted her into a sitting position on the sloping bank.

“What about you? Are you hurt?” she said.

“No. Bruises, that’s all.”

“Has anyone called the emergency services, do you know? Is anyone in charge?”

The man shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve only just got out of the train myself.” He looked at her intently. “I’m Jack, by the way.”

“Charlotte. Charlie,” she said.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Your teeth are chattering.” He was staring at her, with small, brown eyes.

“Shock, that’s all. Look, we’ve got to do something – find out what’s going on. People have been badly hurt. There’s a man in my compartment – he’s in a bad way I think. We have to get moving.”

“Look, why don’t you just sit for a few minutes – get your breath back.”

Charlotte shook her head. “No time,” she said. “Do you have some water? I’m very thirsty.”

“In my bag. Hold on.” Jack stood up and ran over to his backpack, discarded on the grass. He fished in a side pocket and returned seconds later with a plastic bottle. Charlotte took it gratefully, unscrewed the top and gulped down three large mouthfuls of water. She left a smear of blood on the bottle mouth. At first the water made her mouth sting, and the cut on

her lip began to bleed anew, but it was such a relief to drink and wash away the bad taste. She took another mouthful, wiped the bottle neck and handed it back.

"Thanks Jack. Now, we have work to do." She clambered to her feet, climbed the embankment, and began to walk along, looking for someone from the railway company – someone who should know an emergency procedure and take charge. Did such a person exist? Jack came hurrying after her.

Towards the front of the train the concertina effect of the carriages grew more dramatic, the damage more extreme. Then she saw the locomotive itself, and the reason for the crash became evident. To the east, the land had been cleared of trees and a large gash in the vegetation revealed the existence of a makeshift quarry, one of several illegal and unregulated small-scale quarrying operations that had sprung up on the reserve.

The embankment had subsided. A quantity of soil, stone and its binding layer of scrub grass, had slid away from under the rails, downhill, towards the wound created by the quarry. A stretch of rail, several metres long, was exposed and unsupported, and the train had tumbled off.

"This bloody country. What are they like?" Jack said. "We could have been killed."

Charlotte flashed him a look of dislike. "There are train crashes in England too. We have to find out what we can do, to help."

Jack looked distinctly restless, as though what he'd like to do most of all was walk away and leave the horrible mess behind.

"Surely the emergency services will be here soon. What can we do?"

"We don't know how long it will take for help to come. We're in the middle of nowhere. You go off, if you like. I'm going to see what I can do." Her teeth were still chattering despite the heat, but she continued to walk the length of the train. People were clambering out, others were sitting or lying on the embankment. A man carried a little girl with blood all over her white dress. Was she still alive? Charlotte looked away, afraid to see. An old man sitting on the grass cradled his wife in his arms, while she cried with her hands over her face. The smell of burning diesel grew stronger as she drew closer. Burning fuel had spilled out onto the grass.

"Stay where you are!" A man in a uniform stepped forward, holding out his arm.

"What? Who are you?" She was rude, abrupt even. The accident had taken away her instinctive politeness.

"You don't want to see," the man said. "The driver's dead. He was thrown out of the cab and the locomotive crushed him when it fell."

Charlotte saw the man properly. He had a deep cut along his cheek and blood on his scalp, visible at the roots of his hair, and on his forehead. He was wild-eyed, in a state of shock, as she was.

"Who are you? Do you work for the railway?" she said more gently.

"He's the co-driver." Another, older, man in a uniform had appeared beside Charlotte. He said something in Tamil, and put his hand out to the co-driver, a gesture of comfort.

"Does anyone know what has happened yet? Has anyone called the emergency services?"

"Yes. Rescue and medical teams are on their way from Coimbatore."

"How far is that? How long will it take?"

"They'll be here soon - it's about fifty miles." He drew out a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, lit one, and then passed the packet to the co-driver, Charlotte and Jack, who was hovering behind her. They all declined.

"Is that a good idea? What about the spilled fuel?" she said. The man continued to smoke but he did at least move further from the train.

Charlotte shook her head. "Fifty miles? That's a long way! People are dying!"

A throng of other passengers, many of them cut and bruised, were moving towards them, seeking help and reassurance, wanting to know what was going on. Variously angry, worried, agitated they began to harangue the co-driver and the smoking employee. Charlotte couldn't understand what they were saying but the gist was obvious enough. Someone started shouting and the smoking man tried to calm them down. He raised his voice above the clamour, no doubt appealing for order.

"Look, there are people coming," Jack said, tapping Charlotte on the shoulder. She turned round. Half a dozen men were running towards the train. Others were following.