AIR MAIL

Through the bamboo Mitchell watched the German woman, his fellow invalid, making another trip to the outhouse. She came out onto the porch of her hut, holding a hand over her eyes—it was murderously sunny out—while her other, somnambulistic hand searched for the beach towel hanging over the railing. Finding it, she draped the towel loosely, only just extenuatingly, over her otherwise unclothed body, and staggered out into the sun. She came right by Mitchell's hut. Through the slats her skin looked a sickly, chicken-soup color. She was wearing only one flip-flop. Every few steps she had to stop and lift her bare foot out of the blazing sand. Then she rested, flamingo style, breathing hard. She looked as if she might collapse. But she didn't. She made it across the sand to the edge of the scrubby jungle. When she reached the outhouse, she opened the door and peered into the darkness. Then she consigned herself to it.

Mitchell dropped his head back to the floor. He was lying on a straw mat, with a plaid L.L.Bean bathing suit for a pillow. It was cool in the hut and he didn't want to get up himself. Unfortunately, his stomach was erupting. All night his insides had been quiet, but that morning Larry had persuaded him to eat an egg, and now the amoebas had something to feed

on. "I told you I didn't want an egg," he said now, and only then remembered that Larry wasn't there. Larry was off down the beach, partying with the Australians.

So as not to get angry, Mitchell closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths. After only a few, the ringing started up. He listened, breathing in and out, trying to pay attention to nothing else. When the ringing got even louder, he rose on one elbow and searched for the letter he was writing to his parents. The most recent letter. He found it tucked into Ephesians, in his pocket New Testament. The front of the aerogram was already covered with handwriting. Without bothering to reread what he'd written, he grabbed the ballpoint pen—wedged at the ready in the bamboo—and began:

Do you remember my old English teacher, Mr. Dudar? When I was in tenth grade, he came down with cancer of the esophagus. It turned out he was a Christian Scientist, which we never knew. He refused to have chemotherapy even. And guess what happened? Absolute and total remission.

The tin door of the outhouse rattled shut and the German woman emerged into the sun again. Her towel had a wet stain. Mitchell put down his letter and crawled to the door of his hut. As soon as he stuck out his head, he could feel the heat. The sky was the filtered blue of a souvenir postcard, the ocean one shade darker. The white sand was like a tanning reflector. He squinted at the silhouette hobbling toward him.

"How are you feeling?"

The German woman didn't answer until she reached a stripe of shade between the huts. She lifted her foot and scowled at it. "When I go, it is just brown water."

"It'll go away. Just keep fasting."

"I am fasting three days now."

"You have to starve the amoebas out."

"*Ja*, but I think the amoebas are maybe starving me out."

Except for the towel she was still naked, but naked like a sick person. Mitchell didn't feel anything. She waved and started walking away.

When she was gone, he crawled back into his hut and lay on the mat again. He picked up the pen and wrote, *Mohandas K. Gandhi used to sleep with his grandnieces, one on either side, to test his vow of chastity—i.e., saints are always fanatics.*

He laid his head on the bathing suit and closed his eyes. In a moment, the ringing started again.

It was interrupted some time later by the floor shaking. The bamboo bounced under Mitchell's head and he sat up. In the doorway, his traveling companion's face hung like a harvest moon. Larry was wearing a Burmese lungi and an Indian silk scarf. His chest, hairier than you expected on a little guy, was bare, and sunburned as pink as his face. His scarf had metallic gold and silver threads and was thrown dramatically over one shoulder. He was smoking a bidi, half bent over, looking at Mitchell.

"Diarrhea update," he said.

"I'm fine."

"You're fine?"

"I'm OK."

Larry seemed disappointed. The pinkish, sunburned skin on his forehead wrinkled. He held up a small glass bottle. "I brought you some pills. For the shits."

"Pills plug you up," Mitchell said. "Then the amoebas stay in you."

"Gwendolyn gave them to me. You should try them. Fasting would have worked by now. It's been what? Almost a week?"

"Fasting doesn't include being force-fed eggs."

"One egg," said Larry, waving this away.

"I was all right before I ate that egg. Now my stomach hurts."

"I thought you said you were fine."

"I am fine," said Mitchell, and his stomach erupted. He felt a series of pops in his lower abdomen, followed by an easing, as of liquid being siphoned off; then from his bowels came the familiar insistent pressure. He turned his head away, closing his eyes, and began to breathe deeply again.

Larry took a few more drags on the bidi and said, "You don't look so good to me."

"You," said Mitchell, still with his eyes closed, "are stoned."

"You betcha" was Larry's response. "Which reminds me. We ran out of papers." He stepped over Mitchell, and the array of aerograms, finished and unfinished, and the tiny New Testament, into his—that is, Larry's—half of the hut. He crouched and began searching through his bag. Larry's bag was made of a rainbow-colored burlap. So far, it had never passed through customs without being exhaustively searched. It was the kind of bag that announced, "I am carrying drugs." Larry found his chillum, removed the stone bowl, and knocked out the ashes.

"Don't do that on the floor."

"Relax. They fall right through." He rubbed his fingers back and forth. "See? All tidy."

He put the chillum to his mouth to make sure that it was drawing. As he did so he looked sideways at Mitchell. "Do you think you'll be able to travel soon?"

"I think so."

"Because we should probably be getting back to Bangkok. I mean, eventually. I'm up for Bali. You up?"

"As soon as I'm up," said Mitchell.

Larry nodded, once, as though satisfied. He removed the chillum from his mouth and reinserted the bidi. He stood, hunching over beneath the roof, and stared at the floor.

"The mail boat comes tomorrow."

"What?"

"The mail boat. For your letters." Larry pushed a few around with his foot. "You want me to mail them for you? You have to go down to the beach."

"I can do it. I'll be up tomorrow."

Larry raised one eyebrow but said nothing. Then he started for the door. "I'll leave these pills in case you change your mind."

As soon as he was gone, Mitchell got up. There was no putting it off any longer. He retied his lungi and stepped out on the porch, covering his eyes. He kicked around for his flip-flops. Beyond, he was aware of the beach and the shuffling waves. He came down the steps and started walking. He didn't look up. He saw only his feet and the sand rolling past. The German woman's footprints were still visible, along with pieces of litter, shredded packages of Nescafé or balled-up paper napkins that blew from the cook tent. He could smell fish grilling. It didn't make him hungry.

The outhouse was a shack of corrugated tin. Outside sat a rusted oil drum of water and a small plastic bucket. Mitchell filled the bucket and took it inside. Before closing the door, while there was still light to see, he positioned his feet on the platform to either side of the hole. Then he closed the door and everything became dark. He undid his lungi and pulled it up, hanging the fabric around his neck. Using Asian toilets had made him limber: he could squat for ten minutes without strain. As for the smell, he hardly noticed it anymore. He held the door closed so that no one would barge in on him.

The sheer volume of liquid that rushed out of him still

surprised him, but it always came as a relief. He imagined the amoebas being swept away in the flood, swirling down the drain of himself and out of his body. The dysentery had made him intimate with his insides; he had a clear sense of his stomach, of his colon; he felt the smooth muscular piping that constituted him. The combustion began high in his intestines. Then it worked its way along, like an egg swallowed by a snake, expanding, stretching the tissue, until, with a series of shudders, it dropped, and he exploded into water.

He'd been sick not for a week but for thirteen days. He hadn't said anything to Larry at first. One morning in a guesthouse in Bangkok, Mitchell had awoken with a queasy stomach. Once up and out of his mosquito netting, though, he'd felt better. Then that night after dinner, there'd come a series of taps, like fingers drumming on the inside of his abdomen. The next morning the diarrhea started. That was no big deal. He'd had it before in India, but it had gone away after a few days. This didn't. Instead, it got worse, sending him to the bathroom a few times after every meal. Soon he started to feel fatigued. He got dizzy when he stood up. His stomach burned after eating. But he kept on traveling. He didn't think it was anything serious. From Bangkok, he and Larry took a bus to the coast, where they boarded a ferry to the island. The boat puttered into the small cove, shutting off its engine in the shallow water. They had to wade to shore. Just that—jumping in—had confirmed something. The sloshing of the sea mimicked the sloshing in Mitchell's gut. As soon as they got settled, Mitchell had begun to fast. For a week now he'd consumed nothing but black tea, leaving the hut only for the outhouse. Coming out one day, he'd run into the German woman and had persuaded her to start fasting, too. Otherwise, he lay on his mat, thinking and writing letters home.

Greetings from paradise. Larry and I are currently staying on a tropical island in the Gulf of Siam (check the world atlas). We have our own hut right on the beach, for which we pay the princely sum of five dollars per night. This island hasn't been discovered yet so there's almost nobody here. He went on, describing the island (or as much as he could glimpse through the bamboo), but soon returned to more important preoccupations. *Eastern religion teaches that all matter is illusory. That includes everything, our house, every one of Dad's suits, even Mom's plant hangers—all* maya, *according to the Buddha. That category also includes, of course, the body. One of the reasons I decided to take this grand tour was that our frame of reference back in Detroit seemed a little cramped. And there are a few things I've come to believe in. And to test. One of which is that we can control our bodies with our minds. They have monks in Tibet who can mentally regulate their physiologies. They play a game called "melting snowballs." They put a snowball in one hand and then meditate, sending all their internal heat to that hand. The one who melts the snowball fastest wins.*

From time to time, he stopped writing to sit with his eyes closed, as though waiting for inspiration. And that was exactly how he'd been sitting two months earlier—eyes closed, spine straight, head lifted, nose somehow alert—when the ringing started. It had happened in a pale green Indian hotel room in Mahabalipuram. Mitchell had been sitting on his bed, in the half-lotus position. His inflexible left, Western knee stuck way up in the air. Larry was off exploring the streets. Mitchell was all alone. He hadn't even been waiting for anything to happen. He was just sitting there, trying to meditate, his mind wandering to all sorts of things. For instance, he was thinking about his old girlfriend, Christine Woodhouse, and her amazing red pubic hair, which he'd never get to see again. He was thinking about food. He was hoping they had something in this town besides *idli sambar.* Every so often he'd become aware of how much his mind was wandering, and

then he'd try to direct it back to his breathing. Then, sometime in the middle of all this, when he least expected it, when he'd stopped even trying or waiting for anything to happen (which was exactly when all the mystics *said* it would happen), Mitchell's ears had begun to ring. Very softly. It wasn't an unfamiliar ringing. In fact, he recognized it. He could remember standing in the front yard one day as a little kid and suddenly hearing this ringing in his ears, and asking his older brothers, "Do you hear that ringing?" They said they didn't but knew what he was talking about. In the pale green hotel room, after almost twenty years, Mitchell heard it again. He thought maybe this ringing was what they meant by the Cosmic Om. Or the music of the spheres. He kept trying to hear it after that. Wherever he went, he listened for the ringing, and after a while he got pretty good at hearing it. He heard it in the middle of Sudder Street in Calcutta, with cabs honking and street urchins shouting for baksheesh. He heard it on the train up to Chiang Mai. It was the sound of the universal energy, of all the atoms linking up to create the colors before his eyes. It had been right there the whole time. All he had to do was wake up and listen to it.

He wrote home, at first tentatively, then with growing confidence, about what was happening to him. *The energy flow of the universe is capable of being appercepted. We are, each of us, finely tuned radios. We just have to blow the dust off our tubes.* He sent his parents a few letters each week. He sent letters to his brothers, too. And to his friends. Whatever he was thinking, he wrote down. He didn't consider people's reactions. He was seized by a need to analyze his intuitions, to describe what he saw and felt. *Dear Mom and Dad, I watched a woman being cremated this afternoon. You can tell if it's a woman by the color of the shroud. Hers was red. It burned off first. Then her skin did. While I was watching, her intestines filled up with hot gas, like a great big balloon. They got bigger and bigger until they finally popped.*

Then all this fluid came out. I tried to find something similar on a postcard for you but no such luck.

Or else: *Dear Petie, Does it ever occur to you that this world of earwax remover and embarrassing jock itch might not be the whole megillah? Sometimes it looks that way to me. Blake believed in angelic recitation. And who knows? His poems back him up. Sometimes at night, though, when the moon gets that very pale thing going, I swear I feel a flutter of wings against the three-day growth on my cheeks.*

Mitchell had called home only once, from Calcutta. The connection had been bad. It was the first time Mitchell and his parents had experienced the transatlantic delay. His father answered. Mitchell said hello, hearing nothing until his last syllable, the *o*, echoed in his ears. After that, the static changed registers, and his father's voice came through. Traveling over half the globe, it lost some of its characteristic force. "Now listen, your mother and I want you to get on a plane and get yourself back home."

"I just got to India."

"You've been gone six months. That's long enough. We don't care what it costs. Use that credit card we gave you and buy yourself a ticket back home."

"I'll be home in two months or so."

"What the hell are you doing over there?" his father shouted, as best he could, against the satellite. "What is this about dead bodies in the Ganges? You're liable to come down with some disease."

"No, I won't. I feel fine."

"Well, your mother doesn't feel fine. She's worried half to death."

"Dad, this is the best part of the trip so far. Europe was great and everything, but it's still the West."

"And what's wrong with the West?"

"Nothing. Only it's more exciting to get away from your own culture."

"Speak to your mother," his father said.

And then his mother's voice, almost a whimper, had come over the line. "Mitchell, are you OK?"

"I'm fine."

"We're worried about you."

"Don't worry. I'm *fine*."

"You don't sound right in your letters. What's going on with you?"

Mitchell wondered if he could tell her. But there was no way to say it. You couldn't say, I've found the truth. People didn't like that.

"You sound like one of those Hare Krishnas."

"I haven't joined up yet, Mom. So far, all I've done is shave my head."

"You shaved your head, Mitchell!"

"No," he told her; though in fact it was true: he had shaved his head.

Then his father was back on the line. His voice was strictly business now, a gutter voice Mitchell hadn't heard before. "Listen, stop cocking around over there in India and get your butt back home. Six months is enough traveling. We gave you that credit card for emergencies and we want you . . ." Just then, a divine stroke, the line had gone dead. Mitchell had been left holding the receiver, with a queue of Bengalis waiting behind him. He'd decided to let them have their turns. He hung up the receiver, thinking that he shouldn't call home again. They couldn't possibly understand what he was going through or what this marvelous place had taught him. He'd tone down his letters, too. From now on, he'd stick to scenery.

But, of course, he hadn't. No more than five days had passed before he was writing home again, describing the incorruptible body of Saint Francis Xavier and how it had been carried through the streets of Goa for four hundred years until

an overzealous pilgrim had bitten off the saint's finger. Mitchell couldn't help himself. Everything he saw—the fantastical banyan trees, the painted cows—made him start writing, and after he described the sights, he talked about their effect on him, and from the colors of the visible world he moved straightaway into the darkness and ringing of the invisible. When he got sick, he'd written home about that, too. *Dear Mom and Dad, I think I have a touch of amoebic dysentery.* He'd gone on to describe the symptoms, the remedies the other travelers used. *Everybody gets it sooner or later. I'm just going to fast and meditate until I get better. I've lost a little weight, but not much. Soon as I'm better, Larry and I are off to Bali.*

He was right about one thing: sooner or later, everybody did get it. Besides his German neighbor, two other travelers on the island had been suffering from stomach complaints. One, a Frenchman, laid low by a salad, had taken to his hut, from which he'd groaned and called for help like a dying emperor. But just yesterday Mitchell had seen him restored to health, rising out of the shallow bay with a parrotfish impaled on the end of his spear gun. The other victim had been a Swedish woman. Mitchell had last seen her being carried out, limp and exhausted, to the ferry. The Thai boatmen had pulled her aboard with the empty soda bottles and fuel containers. They were used to the sight of languishing foreigners. As soon as they'd stowed the woman on deck, they'd started smiling and waving. Then the boat had kicked into reverse, taking the woman back to the clinic on the mainland.

If it came to that, Mitchell knew he could always be evacuated. He didn't, however, expect it to come to that. Once he'd gotten the egg out of his system, he felt better. The pain in his stomach went away. Four or five times a day he had Larry bring him black tea. He refused to give the amoebas so much as a drop of milk to feed on. Contrary to what he would've expected, his mental energy didn't diminish but

actually increased. *It's incredible how much energy is taken up with the act of digestion. Rather than being some weird penance, fasting is actually a very sane and scientific method of quieting the body, of turning the body* off. *And when the body turns off, the mind turns on. The Sanskrit for this is* moksa*, which means total liberation from the body.*

The strange thing was that here, in the hut, verifiably sick, Mitchell had never felt so good, so tranquil, or so brilliant in his life. He felt secure and watched over in a way he couldn't explain. He felt *happy.* This wasn't the case with the German woman. She looked worse and worse. She hardly spoke when they passed now. Her skin was paler, splotchier. After a while Mitchell stopped encouraging her to keep fasting. He lay on his back, with the bathing suit over his eyes now, and paid no attention to her trips to the outhouse. He listened instead to the sounds of the island, people swimming and shouting on the beach, somebody learning to play a wooden flute a few huts down. Waves lapped, and occasionally a dead palm leaf or coconut fell to the ground. At night, the wild dogs began howling in the jungle. When he went to the outhouse, Mitchell could hear them moving around outside, coming up and sniffing him, the flow of his waste, through the holes in the walls. Most people banged flashlights against the tin door to scare the dogs away. Mitchell didn't even bring a flashlight along. He stood listening to the dogs gather in the vegetation. With sharp muzzles they pushed stalks aside until their red eyes appeared in the moonlight. Mitchell faced them down, serenely. He spread out his arms, offering himself, and when they didn't attack, he turned and walked back to his hut.

One night as he was coming back, he heard an Australian voice say, "Here comes the patient now." He looked up to see Larry and an older woman sitting on the porch of the hut. Larry was rolling a joint on his *Let's Go: Asia.* The woman

was smoking a cigarette and looking straight at Mitchell. "Hello, Mitchell, I'm Gwendolyn," she said. "I hear you've been sick."

"Somewhat."

"Larry says you haven't been taking the pills I sent over."

Mitchell didn't answer right away. He hadn't talked to another human being all day. Or for a couple of days. He had to get reacclimated. Solitude had sensitized him to the roughness of other people. Gwendolyn's loud whiskey baritone, for instance, seemed to rake right across his chest. She was wearing some kind of batik headdress that looked like a bandage. Lots of tribal jewelry, too, bones and shells, hanging around her neck and from her wrists. In the middle of all this was her pinched, oversunned face, with the red coil of the cigarette in the center blinking on and off. Larry was just a halo of blond hair in the moonlight.

"I had a terrible case of the trots myself," Gwendolyn continued. "Truly epic. In Irian Jaya. Those pills were a godsend."

Larry gave a finishing lick to the joint and lit it. He inhaled, looking up at Mitchell, then said in a smoke-tightened voice, "We're here to make you take your medicine."

"That's right. Fasting is all well and good, but after—what has it been?"

"Two weeks almost."

"After two weeks, it's time to stop." She looked stern, but then the joint came her way, and she said, "Oh, lovely." She took a hit, held it, smiled at both of them, and then launched into a fit of coughing. It went on for about thirty seconds. Finally she drank some beer, holding her hand over her chest. Then she resumed smoking her cigarette.

Mitchell was looking at a big stripe of moon on the ocean. Suddenly he said, "You just got divorced. Is why you're taking this trip."

Gwendolyn stiffened. "Almost right. Not divorced but separated. Is it that obvious?"

"You're a hairdresser," Mitchell said, still looking out to sea.

"You didn't tell me your friend was a clairvoyant, Larry."

"I must have told him. Did I tell you?"

Mitchell didn't answer.

"Well, Mr. Nostradamus, I have a prediction for you. If you don't take those pills right now, you are going to be hauled away on the ferry *one very sick boy*. You don't want that, do you?"

Mitchell looked into Gwendolyn's eyes for the first time. He was struck by the irony: she thought *he* was the sick one. Whereas it looked to him the other way around. Already she was lighting another cigarette. She was forty-three years old, getting stoned on an island off the coast of Thailand while wearing a piece of coral reef in each earlobe. Her unhappiness rose off her like a wind. It wasn't that he was clairvoyant. It was just obvious.

She looked away. "Larry, where are my pills now?"

"Inside the hut."

"Could you get them for me?"

Larry turned on his flashlight and bent through the doorway. The beam crossed the floor. "You still haven't mailed your letters."

"I forgot. Soon as I finish them, I feel like I've sent them already."

Larry reappeared with the bottle of pills and announced, "It's starting to smell in there." He handed the bottle to Gwendolyn.

"All right, you stubborn man, open up."

She held out a pill.

"That's OK. Really. I'm fine."

"Take your medicine," Gwendolyn said.

"Come on, Mitch, you look like shit. Do it. Take a goddamn pill."

For a moment there was silence, as they stared at him. Mitchell wanted to explain his position, but it was pretty obvious that no amount of explanation would convince them that what he was doing made any sense. Everything he thought to say didn't quite cover it. Everything he thought to say cheapened how he felt. So he decided on the course of least resistance. He opened his mouth.

"Your tongue is bright yellow," Gwendolyn said. "I've never seen such a yellow except on a bird. Go on. Wash it down with a little beer." She handed him her bottle.

"Bravo. Now take these four times a day for a week. Larry, I'm leaving you in charge of seeing that he does it."

"I think I need to go to sleep now," Mitchell said.

"All right," said Gwendolyn. "We'll move the party down to my hut."

When they were gone, Mitchell crawled back inside and lay down. Without otherwise moving, he spat out the pill, which he'd kept under his tongue. It clattered against the bamboo, then fell through to the sand underneath. Just like Jack Nicholson in *Cuckoo's Nest*, he thought, smiling to himself, but was too genuinely exhausted to write it down.

With the bathing suit over his eyes, the days were more perfect, more obliterated. He slept in snatches, whenever he felt like it, and stopped paying attention to time. The rhythms of the island reached him: the sleep-thickened voices of people breakfasting on banana pancakes and coffee; later, shouts on the beach; and in the evening, the grill smoking, and the Chinese cook scraping her wok with a long metal spatula. Beer bottles popped open; the cook tent filled with voices; then the various small parties bloomed in neighboring huts. At some

point Larry would come back, smelling of beer, smoke, and suntan lotion. Mitchell would pretend to be asleep. Sometimes he was awake all night while Larry slept. Through his back, he could feel the floor, then the island itself, then the circulation of the ocean. The moon became full and, on rising, lit up the hut. Mitchell got up and walked down to the silver edge of the water. He waded out and floated on his back, staring up at the moon and the stars. The bay was a warm bath; the island floated in it, too. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing. After a while, he felt all sense of outside and inside disappearing. He wasn't breathing so much as *being* breathed. The state would last only a few seconds, then he'd come out, then he'd get it again.

His skin began to taste of salt. The wind carried it through the bamboo, coating him as he lay on his back, or blew over him as he made his way to the outhouse. While he squatted, he sucked the salt from his bare shoulders. It was his only food. Sometimes he had an urge to go into the cook tent and order an entire grilled fish or a stack of pancakes. But stabs of hunger were rare, and in their wake he felt only a deeper, more complete peace. The floods continued to rush out of him, with less violence now but rawly, as though from a wound. He opened the drum and filled the water bucket, washed himself with his left hand. A few times he fell asleep, crouching over the hole, and came awake only when someone knocked on the metal door.

He wrote more letters. *Did I ever tell you about the leper mother and son I saw in Bangalore? I was coming down this street and there they were, crouching by the curb. I was pretty used to seeing lepers by this point, but not ones like this. They were almost all the way gone. Their fingers weren't even stubs anymore. Their hands were just balls at the ends of their arms. And their faces were sliding off, as if they were made of wax and were melting. The mother's left eye*

was all filmy and gray and stared up at the sky. But when I gave her 50 paise she looked at me with her good eye and it was full of intelligence. She touched her arm-knobs together, to thank me. Right then my coin hit the cup, and her son, who couldn't see, said "Atcha." He smiled, I think, though it was hard to tell because of his disfigurement. But what happened right then was this: I saw that they were people, not beggars or unfortunates—just a mother and her kid. I could see them back before they got leprosy, back when they used to just go out for a walk. And then I had another revelation. I had a hunch that the kid was a nut for mango lassi. And this seemed a very profound revelation to me at the time. It was as big a revelation as I think I ever need or deserve. When my coin hit the cup and the boy said, "Atcha," I just knew that he was thinking about a nice cold mango lassi. Mitchell put down his pen, remembering. Then he went outside to watch the sunset. He sat on the porch cross-legged. His left knee no longer stuck up. When he closed his eyes, the ringing began at once, louder, more intimate, more ravishing than ever.

So much seemed funny viewed from this distance. His worries about choosing a major. His refusal to leave his dorm room when afflicted with glaring facial pimples. Even the searing despair of the time he'd called Christine Woodhouse's room and she hadn't come in all night was sort of funny now. You could waste your life. He *had*, pretty much, until the day he'd boarded that airplane with Larry, inoculated against typhus and cholera, and had escaped. Only now, with no one watching, could Mitchell find out who he was. It was as though riding in all those buses, over all those bumps, had dislodged his old self bit by bit, so that it just rose up one day and vaporized into the Indian air. He didn't want to go back to the world of college and clove cigarettes. He was lying on

his back, waiting for the moment when the body touched against enlightenment, or when nothing happened at all, which would be the same thing.

Meanwhile, next door, the German woman was on the move again. Mitchell heard her rustling around. She came down her steps, but instead of heading for the outhouse, she climbed the steps to Mitchell's hut. He removed the bathing suit from his eyes.

"I am going to the clinic. In the boat."

"I figured you might."

"I am going to get an injection. Stay one night. Then come back." She paused a moment. "You want to come with me? Get an injection?"

"No, thanks."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm better. I'm feeling a lot better."

"Come to the clinic. To be safe. We go together."

"I'm fine." He stood up, smiling, to indicate this. Out in the bay, the boat blew its horn.

Mitchell came out onto the porch to send her off. "I'll see you when you get back," he said. The German woman waded out to the boat and climbed aboard. She stood on deck, not waving, but looking in his direction. Mitchell watched her recede, growing smaller and smaller. When she disappeared at last, he realized that he'd been telling the truth: he *was* better.

His stomach was quiet. He put a hand over his belly, as though to register what was inside. His stomach felt hollowed out. And he wasn't dizzy anymore. He had to find a whole new aerogram, and in the light from the sunset he wrote, *On this day in I think November, I would like to announce that the gastrointestinal system of Mitchell B. Grammaticus has hereby been cured by purely spiritual means. I want especially to thank my greatest supporter, who stuck with me through it all, Mary Baker Eddy.*

The next solid shit I take is really for her. He was still writing when Larry came in.

"Wow. You're awake."

"I'm better."

"You are?"

"And guess what else?"

"What?"

Mitchell put down his pen and gave Larry a big smile. "I'm really hungry."

Everyone on the island had heard about Mitchell's Gandhian fast by this point. His arrival in the cook tent brought applause and cheers. Also gasps from some of the women, who couldn't bear to see how skinny he was. They got all maternal and made him sit down and felt his forehead for lingering fever. The tent was full of picnic tables, the counters stacked with pineapples and watermelons, beans, onions, potatoes, and lettuce. Long blue fish lay on chopping blocks. Coffee thermoses lined one wall, full of hot water or tea, and in the back was another room containing a crib and the Chinese cook's baby. Mitchell looked around at all the new faces. The dirt under the picnic table felt surprisingly cool against his bare feet.

The medical advice started up right away. Most people had fasted for a day or two during their Asian travels, after which they'd gone back to eating full meals. But Mitchell's fast had been so prolonged that one American traveler, a former medical student, said it was dangerous for Mitchell to eat too much too quickly. He advised having only liquids at first. The Chinese cook scoffed at this idea. After taking one look at Mitchell, she sent out a sea bass, a plate of fried rice, and an onion omelet. Most everyone else advocated pure gluttony, too. Mitchell struck a compromise. First he drank a glass

of papaya juice. He waited a few minutes and then began, slowly, to eat the fried rice. After that, still feeling fine, he moved cautiously to the sea bass. After every few bites, the former medical student said, "OK, that's enough," but this was greeted by a chorus of other people saying, "Look at him. He's a skeleton. Go on, eat. Eat!"

It was nice to be around people again. Mitchell hadn't become quite as ascetic as he'd thought. He missed socializing. All the girls were wearing sarongs. They had truly accomplished suntans and fetching accents. They kept touching Mitchell, patting his ribs or encircling his wrists with their fingers. "I'd die for cheekbones like yours," one girl said. Then she made him eat some fried bananas.

Night fell. Somebody announced a party in hut number six. Before Mitchell knew what was happening, two Dutch girls were escorting him down the beach. They waited tables in Amsterdam five months of the year and spent the rest traveling. Apparently, Mitchell looked exactly like a Van Honthorst Christ in the Rijksmuseum. The Dutch girls found the resemblance both awe-inspiring and hilarious. Mitchell wondered if he'd made a mistake by staying in the hut so much. A kind of tribal life had sprouted up here on the island. No wonder Larry had been having such a good time. Everyone was so friendly. It wasn't even sexual so much as just warm and intimate. One of the Dutch girls had a nasty rash on her back. She turned around to show him.

The moon was rising over the bay, casting a long swath of light to shore. It lit up the trunks of palm trees and gave the sand a lunar phosphorescence. Everything had a bluish tint except for the orange, glowing huts. Mitchell felt the air rinsing his face and flowing through his legs as he walked behind Larry. There was a lightness inside him, a helium balloon around his heart. There was nothing a person needed beyond this beach.

He called out, "Hey, Larry."

"What?"

"We've gone everywhere, man."

"Not everywhere. Next stop Bali."

"Then home. After Bali, home. Before my parents have a nervous breakdown."

He stopped walking and held the Dutch girls back. He thought he heard the ringing—louder than ever—but then realized that it was just the music coming from hut number six. Right out front, people were sitting in a circle in the sand. They made room for Mitchell and the new arrivals.

"What do you say, doctor? Can we give him a beer?"

"Very funny," the medical student said. "I suggest one. No more."

In due course, the beer was passed along the fire brigade and into Mitchell's hands. Then the person to Mitchell's right put her hand on his knee. It was Gwendolyn. He hadn't recognized her in the darkness. She took a long drag on her cigarette. She turned her face away, to exhale primarily, but also with the suggestion of hurt feelings, and said, "You haven't thanked me."

"For what?"

"For the pills."

"Oh, right. That was really thoughtful of you."

She smiled for a few seconds and then started coughing. It was a smoker's cough, deep-seated and guttural. She tried to suppress it by leaning forward and covering her mouth, but the coughing only grew more violent, as if ripping holes in her lungs. When it finally subsided, Gwendolyn wiped her eyes. "Oh, I'm dying." She looked around the circle of people. Everyone was talking and laughing. "Nobody cares."

All this time Mitchell had been examining Gwendolyn closely. It seemed clear to him that if she didn't have cancer already, she was going to get it soon.

"Do you want to know how I knew you were separated?" he said.

"Well, I think I might."

"It's because of this glow you have. Women who get divorced or separated always have this glow. I've noticed it before. It's like they get younger."

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed," said Mitchell.

Gwendolyn smiled. "I am feeling rather restored."

Mitchell held out his beer and they clinked bottles.

"Cheers," she said.

"Cheers." He took a sip of beer. It tasted like the best beer he'd ever had. He felt ecstatically happy, suddenly. They weren't sitting around a campfire, but it felt like that, everyone glowing and centrally warmed. Mitchell squinted at the different faces in the circle and then looked out at the bay. He was thinking about his trip. He tried to remember all the places he and Larry had gone, the smelly pensions, the baroque cities, the hill stations. If he didn't think about any single place, he could sense them all, kaleidoscopically shifting around inside his head. He felt complete and satisfied. At some point the ringing had started up again; he was concentrating on that, too, so that at first he didn't notice the twinge in his intestines. Then, from far off, piercing his consciousness, came another twinge, still so delicate that he might have imagined it. In another moment it came again, more insistently. He felt a valve open inside him, and a trickle of hot liquid, like acid, begin burning its way toward the outside. He wasn't alarmed. He felt too good. He just stood up again and said, "I'm going down to the water a minute."

"I'll go with you," said Larry.

The moon was higher now. As they approached, it lit the bay up like a mirror. Away from the music, Mitchell could hear the wild dogs barking in the jungle. He led Larry straight

down to the water's edge. Then, without pausing, he let his lungi drop and stepped out of it. He waded into the sea.

"Skinny-dip?"

Mitchell didn't answer.

"What's the water temp?"

"Cold," said Mitchell, though this wasn't true: the water was warm. It was just that he wanted to be alone in it. He waded out until the water was waist deep. Cupping both hands, he sprinkled water over his face. Then he dropped into the water and began to float on his back.

His ears plugged up. He heard water rushing, then the silence of the sea, then the ringing again. It was clearer than ever. It wasn't a ringing so much as a beacon penetrating his body.

He lifted his head and said, "Larry."

"What?"

"Thanks for taking care of me."

"No problem."

Now that he was in the water, he felt better again. He sensed the pull of the tide out in the bay, retreating with the night wind and the rising moon. A small hot stream came out of him, and he paddled away from it and continued to float. He stared up at the sky. He didn't have his pen or aerograms with him, so he began to dictate silently: *Dear Mom and Dad, The earth itself is all the evidence we need. Its rhythms, its perpetual regeneration, the rising and falling of the moon, the tide flowing in to land and out again to the sea, all this is a lesson for that very slow learner, the human race. The earth keeps repeating the drill, over and over, until we get it right.*

"Nobody would believe this place," Larry said on the beach. "It's a total fucking paradise."

The ringing grew louder. A minute passed, or a few minutes. Finally he heard Larry say, "Hey, Mitch, I'm going back to the party now. You OK?" He sounded far away.

Mitchell stretched out his arms, which allowed him to float a little higher in the water. He couldn't tell if Larry had gone or not. He was looking at the moon. He'd begun to notice something about the moon that he'd never noticed before. He could make out the wavelengths of the moonlight. He'd managed to slow his mind down enough to perceive that. The moonlight would speed up a second, growing brighter, then it would slow down, becoming dim. It *pulsed*. The moonlight was a kind of ringing itself. He lay undulating in the warm water, observing the correspondence of moonlight and ringing, how they increased together, diminished together. After a while, he began to be aware that he, too, was like that. His blood pulsed with the moonlight, with the ringing. Something was coming out of him, far away. He felt his insides emptying out. The sensation of water leaving him was no longer painful or explosive; it had become a steady flow of his essence into nature. In the next second, Mitchell felt as though he were dropping through the water, and then he had no sense of himself at all. He wasn't the one looking at the moon or hearing the ringing. And yet he was aware of them. For a moment, he thought he should send word to his parents, to tell them not to worry. He'd found the paradise beyond the island. He was trying to gather himself to dictate this last message, but soon he realized that there was nothing left of him to do it—nothing at all—no person left to hold a pen or to send word to the people he loved, who would never understand.

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