

HELEN DINMORE

## *Counting the Dead*

Liesl thought she saw a dead man once, in the streets of Madurai near the temple. The man was lying on his back on the pavement in the daylight. His eyes were closed. She had paused to look, with a little trip of missed steps. "Is that man dead?"

"No", said Justin, always so sure, so soon. "He's asleep."

But the man's wrists were half-furled above his chest, spastic, and too still. "He looks dead", she said.

"He's *not* dead. Come on."

Justin got her moving the way a parent does a distracted, reluctant child. It annoyed her, but tackling him was always so exhausting. He was right this time, anyway. Not about whether the man was dead – Liesl still thought he might have been – but that they should walk on, not involve themselves. Indian police and corpses in streets and foreign tourists – the books all said it was a bad combination.

She had never seen a dead person before, and it dismayed her that now she might have but couldn't be sure. It was a significant transition, from being someone who hasn't to someone who has seen the dead. Of course there were the bodies on the funeral ghats at Varanasi, but they were charcoal and bone, stick figures in flames. A blackened scarecrow foot here, finger-bones there. Lacking wholeness, they didn't seem to count either.

She could say she had *smelt* the dead. The burning bodies gave off a smell exactly like barbeque, not at all unpleasant unless you dwelt on its origin. Varanasi was a holy city, and the pyres burnt around the clock. The aroma pervaded the whole district, floating up as far as the barred window of their six-storey hostel. No one could climb that high; the bars were there to obstruct light-

fingering monkeys. The hostel itself was a death-trap, a vertical maze of solid concrete, cell-like rooms and only one staircase down, but it was cheap, so Justin chose not to worry about all of that, and Liesl had to live with it.

One night, naked astride him, Liesl straightened her back and looked past the bars towards the pyres. She watched the flames while they fucked. It was tawdry and symbolic and the kind of thing that happened to her now, everywhere she looked the universe reflecting back to her some poetic interpretation of her own human drama. And the worst and the best thing about it was that the poetry could only be lived, not retold. Everything was lost in the retelling, all the good and bad magic that held it together crumbling away, leaving all the joints and mechanisms of the tale but nothing to animate it, just a fragile, improbable shell.

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Liesl followed Justin through the jungle. They didn't know how far there was to go but because they didn't have a torch and they doubted anyone else did either, they needed to reach the beach before sunset. They had already been searching for the party for three hours, first by vehicle and now on foot, and Liesl was hungry and weary and losing her enthusiasm for it. The first thing she would do when they got to the party was buy food and water. She carried her empty plastic water bottle, not wanting to discard it in the jungle as others had theirs, along with empty cigarette packets and spent lighters and plastic bags. There were hundreds of people filing through the jungle, all of them assuming that the person ahead of them knew where he or she was going. From time to time one or two dusty scooters bumped past them, tyres nosing the sand, skidding on rocks.

The first thing Justin would do when he got to the party was take acid. Liesl wasn't sure when she'd take hers. In truth, she wasn't sure she had it in her tonight. But there was nothing to do at a trance party if she didn't take something. Perhaps she'd go home early, follow another line of people back to the road and take a rickshaw to the beach where they were staying, smoke a joint and go to bed.

The jungle path delivered them to a tiny bay, walled by rocks at both ends. Liesl struggled through the deep sand, and as her eyes swept between the rocks, she was dismayed to see not a single chai stall, nor any boys hawking fruit or

icecream or samosas, not even a pani wallah. The DJ's decks were set up, and huge canvases were stretched between standing poles, hand-painted with fluorescent omis and third eyes and eddying patterns. The sun hadn't set yet and no one was dancing, but the beats were already pulsing, their spacey crescendos drowning out the restrained little breakers that skimmed onto the sand.

Justin had wandered ahead of her and was talking to two girls, both of them thinner and browner than Liesl. She caught him up, her tired feet faltering in the sand, and nodded to the two girls once she reached his side. Several minutes seemed to pass before Justin stopped talking and acknowledged her, before he so much as glanced in her direction. And then he didn't introduce her as his girlfriend – Liesl had to do that. The girls looked her over from out of their bony faces, out from under their sun-kissed hair, and Liesl felt like a fool. Flustered, she said: "Have you seen anyone selling water?"

No one had seen anyone selling water, and no one but Liesl appeared to care. She had the feeling of having elbowed her way into a conversation and ruined it. The girls said goodbye and traipsed away across the sand. Liesl dangled her empty water bottle from her fingertips. "I'm thirsty." She smiled at Justin. But he didn't acknowledge her statement, or her smile, or her thirst. There was a look in his eyes that Liesl knew. It was hard, and wicked, the same glitter that had made him alluring in the first place, though now she knew what it meant: that he was in a hostile and solitary mood. When she told him she wasn't going to trip, he'd enjoy making it into some kind of betrayal. She contemplated pretending. "When were you thinking of dropping your tab?"

"I took it about an hour ago."

"What? Where was that?"

"Back at the road." He laughed, as though she were excluded from a great joke by virtue of her own naivety. He knew she'd be hurt, and she was. They had been "back at the road" over an hour ago. So there was more to the glitter in his eye. She would give him one last chance. "I'm going to look for a drink. Are you coming?"

"No", he said, and the fact that she expected this, and the disappointment she felt despite that, swirled together like two sad colours towards a drain. And since that was all he offered, since he didn't bother to mention what he would be doing instead, or where they might find each other later, she wandered away in silence.

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The day was a distant smear on the horizon and the beach had filled with people. There was sand, jungle, rocks and sea; whoever had organised the party had thought to bring only music. That, and the psychedelic decorations which were coming to life in the dark. Liesl moved through the crowd, raising her voice over the music to ask if anyone knew where to buy drinking water. Nobody did, and they were slow to answer the question, as though surfacing; as though she were spiritually under-evolved, and looking for something quaint and pre-millennial.

Someone had made a fire of driftwood and jungle debris near the shoreline. Liesl thought she could make out Justin in its unsteady light. She was footsore and parched, and couldn't see any way out of the bay. The day had been hot and cloudless and the damp would come in off the ocean after midnight, laying itself over her. Since she hardly felt like dancing, the fire was the only thing that might keep her warm while she died of thirst. Justin was with a girl, of course, their heads nodding close together. Well, if he didn't want Liesl around, he could freeze somewhere else.

She settled across the fire from Justin and pretended she hadn't seen him, although it was hard not to watch her own boyfriend in full-flight flirtation with another girl. The girl in question wasn't that gorgeous but it didn't matter any more. It made it worse in a way. Anyone but Liesl. She gave up her pretence and stared right at them, her insides writhing, her eyes smarting.

"Want some of this?"

The boy next to her was offering his water bottle, two litres of clear elixir, and almost full.

"You're a life-saver!" she said. She drank, and lurched forward, spluttering. "Jesus! That's not water."

"Never said it was."

Her coughing had drawn Justin's attention. Their eyes met, flames between them. She managed to look away before he did, a petty triumph.

The boy who had offered her the drink was shaven-headed, tattooed and severally pierced. "Coconut fenny and lemonade", he said, swishing the bottle towards her in a one-sided cheers.

"Not much lemonade", said Liesl, preparing to turn the bottle down this time, then changing her mind. At least she knew now not to guzzle. It was fiery, and washed the grit out of her throat. She looked her benefactor over. For all the metal and skin and subcutaneous artwork, there was something soft about him, kind. He had heavy lashes and round green eyes, the sun was fresh on his skin, he wasn't weather-beaten. She forgot about Justin and smiled.

They drank and spoke of the usual things: where they had been, where they were going, and for how long. Dan had flown in alone just before Christmas. He showed her a picture – shyly, proudly – of his pre-Christmas self. A boy in jeans and a plain jumper, standing by a gate in an English field. Short brown hair and ruddy cheeks. He detailed his transformation for her, where and when he had acquired each tattoo, each piercing. You could have most of it done at the Anjuna flea market, sitting on a little stool in the dust while a leathery-skinned hippie went at you with a needle.

It was odd, even suspect, that he carried this picture and showed it to her, not to mention the swiftness and completeness of the transformation itself. But Liesl liked him, and she could overlook things – small vanities, small weaknesses – for the sake of that. Justin would have laughed at him, she thought, and felt glad he was not there to put Dan on the spot. She helped herself to another gulp from the bottle and looked Dan over in his too-clean, too quickly-assembled costume. At least she felt adequate in his company. She wondered if she might take her acid after all.

But Dan's face fell when she unfolded the little square of foil and suggested tearing the tab in two.

"You don't trip?" she asked, disappointed, somehow feeling the fool again.

He looked apologetic. "There's a story", he said.

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It went like this. Dan had fallen in with a lad he met on the bus from Bombay. When they got to Anjuna they decided to room together, to save money. The guy was young, not even twenty, still lived with his mum and dad back in London. But now he began to notch up a string of firsts: first overseas holiday, first love affair – with some delectable French girl – and first acid trip, in that order. The acid changed his life, he said at the time. He was high for days afterwards, as though he had opened up a vein of happiness and couldn't staunch the flow.

But when the French girl called it off, it was like she turned the lights out in him. He became irrational overnight, started muttering, seeing things. One day Dan found him walking through the village naked and had to persuade him to wrap a towel around himself, and coax him back to their room. That was when Dan's tattooist mentioned intervention. There were avenues, she said, psychiatric units, ways to get people home. Did he think his friend was the first foreigner to lose his mind in India?

But Dan's friend vanished from the beach the next day. Last seen wading into the sea.

Liesl wondered how true it was, this tale, or if it was a little dressed up, like Dan himself. "Did they ever find him?"

"It was only eleven days ago."

"Oh."

"I've still got all his stuff in my room."

Liesl took another drink.

"So you can see why I'm not that up for tripping right now."

"I'm sorry."

Dan put on a grin. "I've got a pre-rolled spliff, though. But fuck this lot – " he cast a look at all the people gathered around the fire – "if we light up here, we'll have to share." He clambered to his feet and held out a hand to Liesl.

She stole a glance at Justin, enough to see him steal a glance at her and then look away, as though he wasn't interested in the fact that she was about to

wander off, hand in hand, with another boy. She thrilled with the trouble it would cause, not a wholly pleasurable feeling. Their relationship was premised on her avoidance of that kind of trouble, she knew; the day she faced up to it, all would be over between them.

Perhaps today was the day.

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They made for the shadow of the rocks at the northern end of the beach. It was cold away from the fire, a perfect excuse for Dan to make a move, if that was his intention. And what would she do if it was? She wanted him to want her; that was all she knew.

They sat on the cold sand in the darkness and cupped their hands together around the end of the joint. The studs in his eyebrow and lip glinted in the brief warm fizz of the lighter. From a distance the party looked unearthly, how it wanted to look, she supposed – alive with spirited nymphs and bearded satyrs, the fire shooting tiny orange stars. The beats were dulled this far from the speakers and the melodies snaked loose across the sand. Liesl smoked, and wanted to rest her head on Dan's shoulder. He was propped back on his hands, and his arm was right behind her, almost touching her skin. But not quite.

And then he moved forward very slightly, to point to something, and they were leaning into one another. That was all it took in life to make before and after, to change direction. When they kissed he was the newest thing she had ever tasted. He put his hand on the skin of her stomach, and though he held it almost still, she thought it would turn her inside out.

Justin surely couldn't see them from over by the fire, but she began to panic all the same. "Let's move", she said.

"What's wrong with here?"

The thing was, she hadn't mentioned Justin to Dan. "I want to know what you can see from up there." She gestured behind them and upwards, to the rocks. "Come on."

The rearrangement of arms and legs, and cold air on skin-warmed skin broke the moment, but as they climbed Dan hooked his fingers into hers. They found a

path up easily enough – the moonlight was bright enough to see colours by – but at the top of the rocks were treacherous patches of fine gravel. They were above the party now, and could see another sandy inlet to their north. A string of fishing boat lanterns blinked on the horizon. The rocks jutted out towards the sea before they gave way to the next bay. A perfect place to forget about Justin again, and the rest of the world. "Let's sit there, on the edge", she said, and stepped forward.

When she opened her eyes, she heard Dan's voice. It seemed to be floating down to her. He was calling her name, over and over. She heard water lapping, so loud it might have been inside her head. Her cheek was wet, and so was her neck. It *was* inside her head. Cold water was sloshing into her ear. She tried to sit up but whatever she was lying on gave way and tumbled around her. She tried to call Dan, but all she heard was moaning.

And then Dan wasn't just a voice, he was feet and knees, and arms trying to lift her up. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Did I fall?"

"You fell head-first off the bloody cliff. Hang on, there's blood."

Searing pain above her eyebrow.

"That'll need stitches."

"I must've landed on my head."

"You landed on these." He was waving something in front of her. An empty water bottle. She looked around. She was half-buried in a pile of them.

"Am I in the sea?"

"Some of you is in the sea. God, that was fucking terrifying."

She saw it then, a white shape nudging the shallows.

"What's that?"

"What?"

"There." But when she pointed, it was gone. She struggled into an upright position. "I thought..."



What would a drowned body look like after eleven days, anyway? Just a white shape, bloated with seawater, parts missing. She could have sworn it.

"I don't know what I'm seeing. It doesn't matter."

She let Dan help her up. He had jumped down after her; it was hard to pick a way back over the rocks, but she needed to get back to where she could see clearly, back to the fire to warm up, to wash her wounds.