

The Pagoda in his Mind

The straggle of limping, orange-clad westerners shuffle to a standstill at the squatting monk's bark. Edgar and Jasper Leslie-Gower huddle together, struggling to compensate for their lack of suitable attire, gulp down two handfuls of melted snow from their tin cups, and peer through the sleet at the shrine ahead. Edgar ruffles his brother's sodden curls. 'Are you telling me that giant tinfoil bell suspended from a rickety bamboo scaffold was sculpted out of an asteroid?'

'Says so on the slab.'

'Brother, you are as lettuce-brained as batty Belinda. Didn't you cop the hoi polloi giggling when you coughed up twenty quid for a tone-deaf singing bowl made from scrunched-up oven paper? Extra-planetary, my aunt Jemima.'

'Whatever. Anyway, you vowed on grandmother's ashes not to bring up you-know-who.'

'Sorry. Crossed two blessed continents to get Belinda off my tail. Keep expecting the cash-hoovering gold digger and her ever-extended hand to pop up, like a bad guinea. Still, only four more uphill hikes to go.'

'That last twenty-three-hour trek damn near fused my toes together.'

'Couldn't they have slung these two gongs, five prayer cylinders and our bags over this useless yak here instead of us carrying them?'

'Didn't you read the course handout on the plane? They're sacred. Logic doesn't operate here. Mind you, neither do foot-stamping, sobbing tantrums like the spectacle you put on after breakfast. The priests thought it was some new-fangled breakdance.'

‘Poppycock. I was just peeved at the five o’clock wake-up call. Trust you, my dopey brother, to misread the webpage. *Spiritual Retreat for the sternest soul heroes only*. I pictured a Buddhist Gospel singing course, not memorising endless prayers in a language I can't even order a Pimm’s in.’

‘Give it time. You needed to get away from Belinda tout suite after she maxed your card. Besides, you always fancied yourself as an English Sam Cooke.’

‘Smacking a set of drumskins round a fire in a stoned singsong with skinny hippies is cool, but this is one peculiar band of messed-up pilgrims. The friars are like East end hard men.’

‘Up at blasted dawn, mixing plaster for the stupa builders. At least, what’s-her-name’s not bending my ear. Doesn’t even know we’re-’

‘Howdy, stranger.’

‘Good grief, Belinda? What on earth are you doing here?’

Dalai Everly directs boot camp or ‘sandal camp’ as the brothers dub it. This dairy farmer from Devon gobbled down one too many acid tabs at Glastonbury festival and is every inch the guru; cuddly, hairless, mouthed nothing you could follow, a ladies’ man. The zoned-out friars adore him.

Just as Edgar is chanting the fourth twenty-minute mantra of the morning, his ex-girlfriend and bane of his life nudges him from the neighbouring stool.

‘In case you’re interested. I didn’t get the job.’

‘So, I suppose you reckon everything turned out like that for a nobler purpose?’

‘Wasn’t meant to be.’

‘Belinda, there is no preordained cosmic scheme. They didn’t give you the position because you weren’t prepared. Full stop.’

‘Ok. Great knower of all known things, how come you are still in your dead-end job?’

‘Dead-end? I’m a senior University professor. You mop up kid’s vomit in a school.’

‘Cleaning is a pure action, creating a pleasant habitat for our children. Increases positive power and buffs up my karma.’

‘You make a pittance.’

‘All the better.’

‘Hard to believe you picked up a Master's in Linguistics.’

‘Why don't you respect my beliefs?’

‘Beliefs? A mishmash stew of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and God knows what else.’

‘Goddess, please.’

‘What religion has a goddess?’

‘The Old Religion. Celtic theology.’

‘Celtic? But you’re from Hackney.’

‘What's wrong with improving myself?’

‘On the one hand, it's the Universe's predetermined plan. On another hand, karma and you're at fault. On the third hand, you visualise what you require and grab it, ergo, free will.’

‘So?’

‘Three self-conflicting beliefs for the price of one. Most of the participants in the courses you and your friends waste your cash on are women. The masters or whatever you call them are men.’

‘How about Margaret who runs the retreat on macrobiotic cooking ...’

‘In her husband’s centre. It’s a business, Belinda. Feeds off female vulnerabilities.’

‘What does a rich dick like you understand about insecurities?’

‘Isn’t money just energy for you lot? Shouldn’t you revere my inherited prosperity?’

‘Slagging off others makes you tough, eh? Bet you won’t last two days on this program.’

Jasper and Edgar pull their blankets tightly round their shoulders, their legs tucked up under their bodies, their breath drawing a cloud in front of their eyes. ‘Last meditation session before getting back to Oxford. Have you phoned Mum?’

‘No, you? Not sure if I can put up with these tedious prayer sessions much longer anyway. They’re messing with my neurones.’

‘Tomorrow’s the final challenge. The four-hundred and two stepped pagoda. First to the top lights some prayer bonfire.’

‘Did you bring the marshmallows?’

‘Are you and, you know, talking again?’

‘What a bind, won’t let me go. Even here. Such a bore. There she goes with her mop, like a -.’

‘Ssh. We’re starting.’

... no future, no past, all present... loom out of darkness... your choices, yourself...

‘10... 9... 8... 7... breathe in. Exhale my tensions. 6... 5... this T-shirt smells ... damn thought! 10... 9... 8... breathe in... damn, a fly...’

... the lumps of time become smaller ... a continuum... face your enemy... Use the pen to write your bank details... The moments speed up till...

‘10... 9... Not moving for a fly on my nose, on my lip... on my lip... 10... 9... 8... fly’s gone.’

... observing tributaries leading to great rivers... Half million pounds to the account at the bottom... one five and five zeros... A rivulet goes one way, and changes direction...

‘10... 9... 8... I need a shit... How can I relax? ... Here comes Dalai Everly... clench that sphincter.’

... sweet-smelling stopovers do no harm nor hinder ... Remember to sign the form... riverbeds fill traces of futures...

‘If I start at 5? Get to 0 quicker. What happens when you finish counting down...’

... your life will wear off soon... feel generous... Sign the form... first threshold is getting away from ...

‘He’s coming up to me. Shit! That was close. 5... 4... 3...

... lofty altitudes... sign, sign, sign... as the path of your life went different ways...

‘After this weekend, I’ll be able to get shot of Belinda. ... Halfway gong...10... 9... 8... breathe in... 6... breathe out... 5... 4... nearly there. Nearly finished.

*... observe the troughs as peaks, the higher the peak... Pass the forms forward...
They lose no energy. Energy is never lost...*

Edgar’s eyes snap open. ‘Get that cheque out of your soft teat-tweaking mitts.’

The ex-dairy farmer claps his hands and whispers in Edgar’s ear. ‘You’ve won.’

Dalai Everly thrashes Edgar’s back with the ceremonial barbed palm leaves for coming out top on the test and throws sacred Himalayan salt on the welts. First to climb. The pagoda is in darkness except for four candles every twenty steps. Edgar takes the torch, dripping with spurting yak’s lard, and climbs the stairs. The others are behind him. Edgar can’t shake off the attempt to rob them even though his brother doesn’t remember anything about the meditation and Everly extolled his spiritual warrior strength.

‘Three hundred and ninety-eight.

Three hundred and ninety-nine.

Would not catch me scaling these blasted stairs every morning to light no goddam beacon. My knees are trembling more than nanny’s blancmange. Thank God it’s only for one day. Fancy me getting to ignite the stupa’s bonfire.

Hey, you're lagging. Get a load of this phony brochure. Preserved yeti's pizzle, spectres of wrecked spaceships, my Aunt Jemima. Phantoms of the ice, trapped for centuries? This rubbish joint wouldn't even spook a Himalayan mouse.

Jasper! Come and see this.

No lift, though. That's a drag for starters. Couldn't handle more than an hour of having no Wi-Fi either. A quick selfie or five from the top before popping down for my winner's champagne. There will be something more to drink than fermented mountain goat's milk, won't there?

Four hundred and two steps. At last.

Let's see, then. Wow! Look at the layer of grime on this telescope. What does *Stupa closing-down ceremony, March 1965*, mean?

You can make out Everest. Bleak view, right enough. Check out those mental clouds. Lethal or what, eh? Wouldn't like to end up stranded here, would you?

Hello?

Hey! You're not very chatty down there. Nobody else for clambering up? It's worth it just for... Come on, say something. I'm getting well hoarse shouting down with all this dust.

Hello!

Where is everybody? Where's the -?

Hoy! Switch the bloody light back on.

Who's there?

It's n

o

t

funny.'

Morning sunlight squeezes into the whitewashed room as Dalai Everly inches the shutter open. On the mesh woven cot on the floor, Edgar rubs his eyes. The woman at his side takes his lacerated hand and squeezes hard on the flesh between his thumb and forefinger. 'Howdy stranger, well done. I reckoned we had lost you.'

'What, where, I..? Belinda? The pagoda-'

'There never was a pagoda, Edgar. It was all inside your head.'

'But every morning there was meat and rice wine on the stairs. A voice told me to write my name to get out, but there wasn't anything to scribble -.'

'Breathe. It was a meditation.'

'I begged and cried for them to leave a pen. But they kept saying I had to sign and -.'

'You're safe now.'

'The tower kept swaying; the walls went spongy. Belinda. It felt so real.'

‘The Land Rover is here to take you to the airport where Jasper is waiting. I must hang on here and tidy up after the course. I’m proud of you for lasting. Remember to pick up your ‘Soul Warrior’ diploma, first class.’

Edgar struggles to his feet, drags his already packed rucksack across the floor and stumbles out to the truck. Belinda glances over at the bald man. ‘Everyone gone now?’

‘Yes, master. I mean, mistress, I mean Boss. They all coughed up. Even that posh grockle.’

‘I suspected he would. Once Edgar Lennox-hyphen-whatever comes to, the tight-fisted nose wipe will have learned what karma is.’

‘I’ll start deflating the tower. Where to next, boss?’

‘I was thinking Bali.’