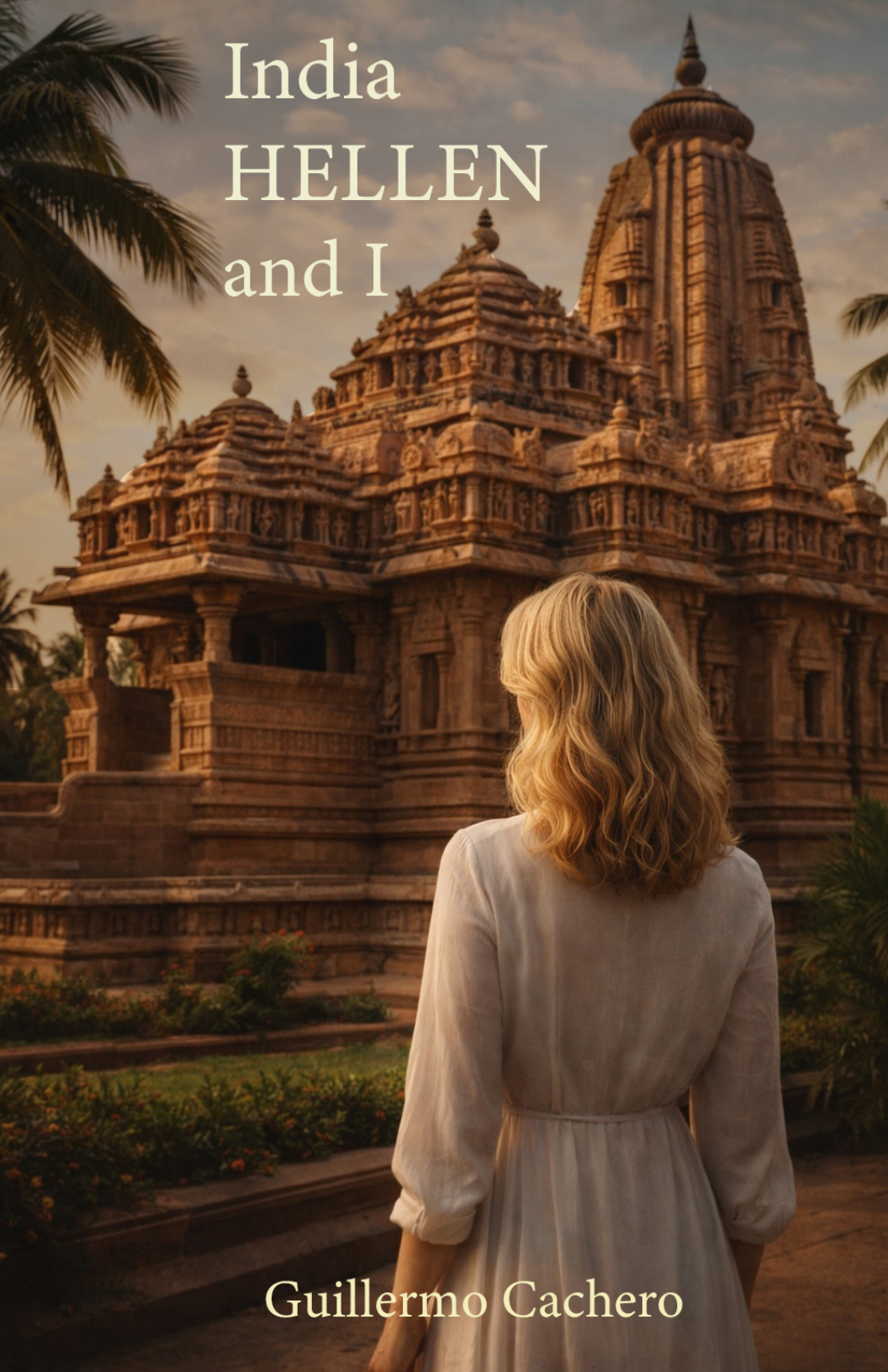
India
HELLEN
and I
Guillermo Cachero

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By Guillermo Cachero Martínez

Dedication

To those who seek new horizons, and to those who discover in the cultures of other peoples their own learning.

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CHAPTER 1

DELHI

I returned to Delhi after several years, intent on rediscovering the country's evolution across its many states.

The airport doors slid open, and the heat met me like an old memory — dense, persistent, unmistakable. Outside, the city was already awake. The horns — that inescapable soundtrack of any Indian city — formed the pulse of a country one eventually grows accustomed to without ever noticing when it happens.

I had returned many times over the years, always believing I understood what awaited me. This was, I told myself, simply another professional assignment.

Everything was planned. Three months travelling through northern India and Rajasthan, then southwards to Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu — states I had visited before and was now revisiting on commission. As a travel journalist, my task was to update my perspective, measure change, and observe what time had altered.

I assumed it would be a technical return, almost methodical. Just another job.

I was mistaken.

This journey would prove unlike the others. It began in a car-hire office with driver service beside the bus station. The afternoon was descending in that carmine haze that stains the capital's sky, while the usual commotion settled into a dense orchestra of voices, engines, and street vendors offering everything from scalding tea to roasted nuts folded into sheets of newspaper.

It was there that my plans shifted entirely.

I was negotiating the route and the cost with the agency when a woman's voice — steady, self-possessed — cut through the noise.

"Excuse me… does this bus go to Jaipur?"

She was pointing at one of the buses parked outside.

I turned.

I saw her for the first time.

She carried herself with quiet assurance, a backpack slung over one shoulder, and the kind of determination in her eyes that belongs to those who travel alone and have no intention of seeking permission from the world.

My English has never been particularly fluent.

"Sorry… I'm not sure," I replied. "I'm arranging a car with a driver."

She held my gaze for a brief moment.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I thought you were looking at the buses."

She smiled — a mixture of courtesy and reserve.

I gestured towards the ticket office, where they would be better able to assist her. She thanked me with a fleeting smile before walking away, and I resumed negotiating with the rental agency.

The manager outlined the price, the stages of the route, and the particular logistics of the journey: I would not have a single driver for the entire trip; they would change in different cities.

I was still reviewing the details when she returned.

"There aren't any buses to Jaipur for another two days," she said, visibly disappointed.

"You could try the airport," I suggested. "I believe there are daily flights."

“I didn’t realise. But you said you were hiring a car…”

“Yes. That’s another option. You could ask at that counter.”

She studied me carefully.

“What sort of journey are you planning?”

I explained that I intended to travel for nearly three months, moving from north to south, revisiting states I already knew and others I wanted to see again with fresh eyes.

“Really? That sounds fascinating. I was only planning to travel around Rajasthan.”

“In that case, hiring a car might suit you,” I said. “It’s economical and flexible. You can stop wherever you wish and have it at your disposal — not just for long distances, but within the cities as well.”

“Interesting…” she murmured. “Though I have a problem.”

“What problem?”

“I don’t know anything about Rajasthan. I know one must go to Jaipur, but I wouldn’t know what to tell the driver — where to stop, what to see.”

“There are drivers who can act as guides,” I replied.

She considered this for a moment.

“And what if we shared your car?”

“I won’t be going to Rajasthan for another ten days. I have other towns to visit first.”

“That wouldn’t be an issue for me. I have a full month,” she said with quiet assurance.

I regarded her cautiously. Travelling for hours in a car with a stranger is a trial by fire. I took her in — measured, self-possessed — and she held my gaze, waiting.

“I’m reluctant to travel with someone I don’t know,” I said.

“Well… could you at least drop me in Jaipur?” she asked.

“That would be no different from hiring it yourself. You’ve just told me you wouldn’t know what to ask of the driver.”

She fell silent for a moment.

“I understand,” she said at last. “I’m sorry if I’ve inconvenienced you.”

“I don’t travel easily with people I don’t know,” I replied. “And sometimes not even with those I do.”

She nodded, turned, and walked away to try her luck with another agency.

I watched her from a distance. For a moment it seemed she had reached an agreement. Then she emerged again — this time visibly irritated.

“What happened?” I asked.

“They won’t hire me the car,” she replied. “They say they don’t accept a woman travelling alone with a driver. They don’t want any trouble.”

“Is this your first time travelling alone?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And you chose India to begin with?”

A faint flush rose to her cheeks.

“It’s… a long story.”

I watched her for a few seconds. She did not seem reckless. Only unprepared.

“Very well,” I said at last. “Let’s do this. We can share the car — on one condition.”

She looked up, surprise carefully contained.

“What condition?”

“It’s fifty euros a day. Twenty-five each, for the vehicle only. Hotels and meals are separate — we each arrange our own. There’s no need to stay in the same place. Everyone travels according to their own budget.”

She did not hesitate.

“That sounds perfectly reasonable.”

“And as I mentioned, I won’t be heading to Jaipur straight away. I have other towns to visit first.”

“All the better,” she said. “I’ll see more than I intended… and I won’t be travelling alone.”

“There’s something you should know,” I added. “I’m a photojournalist. I stop frequently. Sometimes more than people expect.”

She smiled, this time with a trace of complicity.

“I’m a journalist,” she replied. “I understand what it means to follow a story. As I said — the idea appeals to me.”

It was time to formalise the arrangement. The agency required payment for the first ten days in advance — five hundred euros in total — after which the rental could be renewed in similar increments.

“If you’re agreed,” I said, “we’ll need to pay two hundred and fifty each now.”

A flicker of surprise crossed her face.

“I don’t have that much cash on me… Can I pay by card?” she asked, a note of uncertainty in her voice.

“No,” the manager replied. “Cash only.”

She drew a slow breath.

“I can find a cash machine and come back,” she said quietly.

I studied her for a moment and, without giving myself too much time to reconsider, said, “I’ll pay it now. You can settle up with me later. Where are you staying?”

“I’m not,” she answered. “I was planning to leave for Jaipur today.”

I couldn’t help smiling at her candour. Something told me this journey — improvised though it was — would be anything but predictable.

“And where are you staying?” she asked.

“I’m at a hotel,” I replied. “Not particularly expensive, and not right in the centre.”

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “I understand. With such a long journey ahead, it makes sense to manage your expenses.”

“Do you know if they might have a room available for me?” she asked, cautiously.

“I can’t say. We’ll go and ask. It’s reasonably priced — thirty euros a room. Clean, decent, with its own shower.”

“It’s not central,” I added, “but not too far out either. From tomorrow, once we have the car, location won’t matter much. There are restaurants nearby — even a McDonald’s — so it’s fairly well situated.”

She smiled, visibly relieved.

“Perfect. I’ll find a cash machine and settle up with you for the car.”

“One more thing,” she added. “Can the hotel be paid by card?”

“At this level, yes,” I said, knowing that in more modest places cash still reigns.

We arrived at the hotel and, fortunately, they had rooms available. She didn't need to search for a cash machine in the evening chaos: the manager, efficient in the way of someone eager to close a deal, handed over the cash after charging the two hundred and fifty euros to her card. The exchange was swift — receipts, signatures, the soft beep of the terminal.

After leaving her backpack in the room and freshening up, she came back down to reception.

"Would you like something to eat?" I asked, nodding towards the street.

She agreed at once. We walked to a nearby restaurant that looked clean and relatively quiet — a small refuge from Delhi's clamour.

We sat before a menu filled with photographs and names she struggled to decipher. I attempted to explain a few dishes in English, but it quickly became clear that my command of the language was limited.

She smiled.

"Do you speak Spanish?"

I looked at her, surprised. "Yes. Do you?"

"I do. I lived in Spain for a few years. I learned the language there. I never expected to use it in India."

I felt the tension ease at once. The revelation dissolved the awkwardness of my functional English. Over a vivid red tandoori chicken and a fragrant biryani that perfumed the table, the conversation began to flow.

She told me she was a journalist, specialising in fashion and culture. Her fascination with India had begun a year earlier, after listening to a friend's stories about Rajasthan.

“So on the strength of those stories you set off alone?” I asked, studying her.

“There was more to it than that,” she said lightly. “But I’d rather not go into it… not yet. Tell me something instead. Why do you prefer travelling alone? Why the resistance to sharing the road?”

“For example,” I said, “I might spend hours wandering through a temple or a market. Not everyone enjoys that. Taking a photograph isn’t simply pressing a button. Sometimes it’s waiting — for the light to change, for the crowd to part, for the moment to fall into place. Other times the frame fails and demands another attempt. The person beside you grows impatient. I, on the other hand, am working.”

She listened thoughtfully.

“And even then,” I added, “even with colleagues in the same profession, perspectives rarely align. In the end, it comes down to temperament. I’ve reached a simple conclusion: I only truly understand a country when I travel through it alone.”

“Sometimes,” she replied, “another pair of eyes helps you see what professionalism makes you overlook.”

I set my cutlery down.

“When you travel to photograph, your only master must be the light. If I’m with someone, I feel obliged to talk, to eat when they’re hungry, or to keep moving when I’d rather sit on a street corner for three hours, waiting for a shaft of sunlight to strike a façade or cast a particular shadow. Travelling alone isn’t about solitude — it’s about creative freedom. In my work, company can become a distraction.”

She gave a faint smile.

“I hope you won’t regret sharing the journey with me.”

“I hope not,” I replied. “I’ve told you how I travel. I believe you understand — and I don’t think we’ll have any difficulties.”

“I think we’ll understand each other,” she said.

“How long have you been working as a journalist?” she asked. “Has it always been travel?”

“We have a month,” I said. “There’ll be time.”

I smiled.

“It’s a long story. It began when I was very young — here, in this country.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty-three.”

She studied me.

“I would have guessed younger.”

I didn’t ask her age; she offered it without hesitation.

“I’m thirty-nine,” she said. “And I hope this first journey to India awakens something in me — something like what my friend experienced.”

“You’ll see far more than tourist Rajasthan,” I replied. “You’ll see another India.”

“That’s precisely why I’m glad you agreed,” she said. “Travelling with someone experienced is reassuring.”

“Not experienced,” I corrected gently. “Just someone who has been here before.”

“This is my fourth trip,” I continued. “For me, it’s about comparison — observing how places change over time.”

“Have you travelled only in India?”

“No. Much of Asia. Parts of Africa. Central and South America. North America. Europe. The Middle East.”

She laughed softly.

“Then you really are a travel journalist.”

“I’ve travelled widely in Africa, and occasionally in South America,” she said, “but for pleasure — never professionally.”

Between spice, laughter, and the persistent rhythm of Delhi, something began that evening — not merely a journey across a country, but the opening of a shared narrative.

We finished dinner without grand declarations.

We agreed to meet at nine the following morning. The driver would collect us for the first stage of the journey.

The alarm rang with irritating punctuality, yet excitement dissolved any lingering trace of sleep.

When I reached the dining room, she was already there.

“Good morning,” I said. “I see you’re punctual.”

“I can’t wait,” she replied with an eager smile.

Over coffee and warm bread, I outlined the route for the day: temples, markets, and those hidden corners that never appear on maps yet define a city more truthfully than any monument.

As we stepped outside, Delhi received us with its characteristic intensity: a sea of horns, motorbikes weaving between cars and cyclists, and street vendors offering everything from fresh fruit to incense and clay figurines. Every street seemed to vibrate with an energy that made one feel both lost and strangely exhilarated.

Our first stop was the Jama Masjid — the Great Mosque of Delhi.

As we drew nearer, the roar of the city softened, as though a veil of solemnity had been lowered over the surrounding streets. The structure rose before us — majestic, composed — an enduring witness to history and to the faith of those who pray within its walls. Simply crossing its courtyard again stirred the memory of the emotion that had overwhelmed me years earlier.

We approached the entrance with measured steps. I noticed her attentive gaze, absorbing every detail with quiet concentration. I understood then that this would not merely be a physical journey across India; it would also be a journey of discovery for her — an open space for dialogue, and perhaps for the small frictions that often sharpen shared experience.

Standing before the mosque, India began to unfold once more in all its magnitude: beauty, history, spirituality and everyday life intertwined in a single suspended moment.

I explained that the imposing structure before us was the Jama Masjid, commissioned in 1644 by Shah Jahan — the same emperor who built the Taj Mahal. I pointed to its domes, rising with that same aspiration towards perfection that defines Agra's great mausoleum.

"Look," I said as we climbed the staircase leading to the vast courtyard, gesturing towards the surrounding panorama, "everything here is part of the Mughal legacy. In the time of Aurangzeb, towards the end of the seventeenth century, this area was a vibrant marketplace — horses were traded here, and jugglers performed for the crowds."

She looked around, astonished.

"It's difficult to imagine that kind of bustle—animals and performers —in a place of such solemnity."

I smiled, then added something that unsettled her slightly.

“On my first visit, it was very different. There were no horses. No performers. Instead, rows of makeshift shelters where dozens of families lived. The harshest forms of life unfolded at the very foot of the mosque.”

She stopped and turned to me.

“And when was that first visit?”

“1997.”

Her surprise escaped her in a quiet gasp.

“I can’t believe that was still happening at the end of the twentieth century.”

“It was,” I replied. “Fortunately, much has changed. Those shelters are gone now, and although there are still unpaved areas and children asking for alms, nothing compares to what I witnessed back then.”

I reminded her that, out of respect, appropriate dress was essential. Since we were entering a mosque, she needed to cover her hair with a headscarf, wear long sleeves, and ensure her legs were fully covered—something I had not mentioned beforehand. Fortunately, she was already dressed appropriately; she only needed to cover her head.

We removed our shoes. As a man, I also ensured my arms and legs were fully covered. We walked discreetly among the faithful: some in absolute silence, others murmuring prayers that blended with the wind and the distant hum of Delhi’s traffic.

We entered barefoot. The cool stone beneath our feet induced an immediate and unexpected humility.

Inside, the mosque revealed itself as a refuge of stillness against the chaos beyond its walls: an architecture of minarets and domes contained within a reverent hush, as though the space itself absorbed every sound the world could offer.

She turned towards me.

“It must be difficult,” she said softly, “to reconcile this spirituality with the poverty that remains outside.”

“It is,” I replied. “But it also teaches resilience. The faithful concentrate on their prayer and, even in hardship, retain their dignity. Here you learn to look beyond the surface—to sense the strength of tradition and the faith that sustains so many lives.”

We crossed the immense courtyard, vast enough to hold tens of thousands of worshippers. I pointed out the ablution tank and explained that in earlier times a second reader would repeat the imam’s words so the entire congregation could hear. Today, loudspeakers perform that task.

“It’s considered one of the most sacred mosques in Islam,” I added. “They say it preserves relics attributed to the Prophet Muhammad —a hair, a sandal, and the imprint of his foot.”

She listened with a mixture of admiration and disbelief.

Once outside, we had barely taken a few steps when she smiled and said lightly:

“By the way—your English is quite good, considering you told me you don’t really speak it.”

I laughed.

“Thank you. With you, I can practise. I learned English by travelling, not in school. It’s all experience.”

“What surprises me,” I added, “is that you speak Spanish. It relaxes me. If I get stuck in English, I know you’ll understand.”

She smiled.

“And it seems,” she said, half curious, half amused, “that your first trip marked you in a way you can’t undo.”

“It did,” I admitted. “Every step I take now, I try to show you what I saw then—so you can sense the difference, the evolution of the

country. Travelling through it with you brings everything back to the surface."

I realised that, for me, this was not tourism at all. It was an encounter between memory and history. In her, I could see the discovery of a new world—a different rhythm of life—and, through her eyes, I glimpsed my younger self.

As we approached the car, a group of children had already gathered around us, ready to beg or sell small souvenirs.

"Wow," she whispered. "That's a lot of children."

Instinctively, she reached into her bag for coins.

"Do you have enough for all of them?" I asked gently.

She looked at me, confused.

"If you give to one, you'll have to give to all," I explained. "With the best intentions in the world, you can't help one and exclude the others. If you try, they'll surround you. If you want to give something, wait for a moment when a child is alone—or when there are only a few—so you can include everyone."

She hesitated, unsettled.

"So what do we do now?"

"Nothing," I said calmly. "Just listen while they try to sell you something, then get into the car. That's usually the simplest way."

She lowered her hand slowly.

"For many tourists," I continued, "this becomes a recurring scene in India. The country has changed enormously, but begging remains intertwined with tourism. Around temples, squares, and bus stations, you'll find entire informal networks. Some sell trinkets. Some offer to guide you. Others simply ask for money. It isn't always easy to know whether their need is immediate—or whether it has become a way of life shaped by the constant presence of visitors."

I paused—not out of resignation, but with that mixture of clarity and nostalgia that only this country awakens in me.

“Tourism has strengthened the economy,” I said quietly, “but it also casts shadows. When I first came here, even in extreme poverty, if you dropped a rupee—or even a wallet—someone would run after you shouting ‘Mister! Mister!’ with a shy smile. That doesn’t always happen now. Need—and sometimes opportunism—have created a different reality. Scams and uncomfortable situations are no longer uncommon. Sometimes born of desperation. Sometimes of calculation.”

She listened without interrupting, absorbing every word.

The children continued speaking around us, their voices overlapping in a chorus of insistence. Then, as I had suggested, we moved calmly towards the car and closed the doors.

Inside, the noise softened into distance.

Delhi resumed its rhythm beyond the glass.

“India is not a poor country,” I continued. “It never has been. Its tragedy lies elsewhere—in the weight of certain traditions and in a deeply unequal social order, where many among the comfortable classes look upon the poor with a quiet contempt, as though deprivation were nothing more than the natural consequence of being born into a lower caste.”

“And how exactly does the caste system work?” she asked, her curiosity unfeigned.

“I’ll explain it later,” I said. “It’s complex—an inheritance woven so tightly into the fabric of the country that it resists being unraveled.”

“In truth,” I went on, “one still cannot speak of a fully formed middle class, though it is slowly emerging. The country remains suspended between extremes: dazzling opulence and the most elemental poverty. It is difficult to reconcile the contrast—a nation capable of developing nuclear weapons and launching satellites into space, yet

still unable to resolve something as basic as drainage or the paving of its streets."

She interrupted, gesturing at our surroundings.

"But here there are drains. The streets are paved."

"Of course," I replied. "We are in the capital and in a relatively privileged district. Yet even within this same city, you will find entire neighborhoods where asphalt disappears and grey water flows openly along the corners. You cannot imagine what it is like to walk there when the monsoon arrives. You will see buildings laced with electric cables hanging in chaotic bundles—a dangerous snarl that could ignite at any moment."

Her eyes widened.

"And what they call 'highways,'" I added, "are often little more than long-distance roads, many of them toll routes. The fee is collected at small booths where a barrier is raised by hand, as if time itself had paused. And countless stretches are so badly eroded that potholes become open traps. Drive without caution, and you may find yourself stranded on fractured asphalt, miles from anywhere."

She said nothing, as though India had begun to disclose itself to her within those first few minutes—layered in contradictions: dazzling yet abrasive, sacred yet chaotic, disarming in its candor and quietly unsettling all at once.

When we reached the car—bound for the Red Fort and Chandni Chowk—she noticed how the children and vendors had drawn closer. Our driver, however, with the quiet assurance of someone attuned to the city's pulse, eased them back with a few measured words in Hindi. There was no friction in the gesture—only the choreography Delhi performs daily, almost by instinct.

"By the way," I said as we slipped into the car, "we've been talking for a day and a half. You've joined my journey so naturally I scarcely noticed the moment it happened—and yet you still don't know my name… and I don't know yours."

She turned toward me—surprised at first, then amused.

"You're right," she laughed. "Though I feel as if I've known you all my life."

"I'm Marc," I said, offering my hand with an unforced, open smile.

She took it as though affirming an unspoken understanding.

"And I'm Hellen."

We both laughed—perhaps at the oddity of having shared so much before exchanging the simplest of details. The driver, observing us through the rear-view mirror, allowed himself a discreet, knowing smile, as if he had grasped the significance of the moment without needing to understand a single word.

The doors closed, and the car moved forward with quiet steadiness. Outside, Delhi continued to vibrate—horns, street vendors, distant prayers, motorbikes threading through the throng. Inside, a small enclave of calm seemed to settle around us, as though speaking our names aloud had anchored everything in something tangible.

The journey resumed, yet something imperceptible had shifted.

We were no longer two strangers sharing an itinerary. We were Marc and Hellen—two lives that, by chance or by the subtle geometry of destiny, had converged in India, prepared to discover not only a country, but also the story that was beginning, almost without our noticing, to weave itself between us.

The Red Fort was, without question, indispensable. Yet before crossing its monumental gates, I wanted to lead Hellen somewhere many travelers pass without noticing: the Jain temple Sri Digambar Jain Mandir Lal, standing directly opposite, observing the avenue like a silent sentinel of another age.

"This temple belongs to a faith distinct from Hinduism," I explained as we approached its red façade.

Hellen glanced at me with quiet assurance.

“Buddhist, then?”

I shook my head, a restrained smile softening the correction.

“No—Jain. One of the oldest religions born on this soil.”

I saw her curiosity stir—almost childlike—the same awakening I had felt on my first journeys through India.

The sanctuary began as a modest structure raised by the Jain community, among whom were even officers serving in the Mughal army. It was consolidated during the reign of Aurangzeb in 1657, though the form we see today dates from 1878, after the empire’s decline. Its red sandstone commands the scene, rising from the surrounding tumult as though each block had absorbed centuries of breath and prayer.

The moment we crossed the threshold, the clamor outside seemed to recede, as if sound itself respected the boundary.

Inside, beauty unfolded in meticulous detail: carved reliefs recounting ancient devotions; finely wrought paintings that seemed to lift the gaze; subtle gilded accents glowing beneath the softened light of oil lamps. It felt like an island of composure, sheltered from Delhi’s restless vibration.

“In fact,” I continued in a lower voice, “this is a complex of shrines. The principal one is dedicated to a Tirthankara — one of the enlightened beings who attained liberation and who, through their example, guide others towards spiritual perfection.”

Hellen listened, increasingly absorbed.

“Jains do not believe in a personal god,” I added. “They speak instead of an eternal energy that permeates all matter. From that conviction arises ahimsa — the principle of absolute nonviolence and reverence for every living being.”

We moved through the hushed corridors until we reached the small bird hospital within the temple complex. There, volunteers tended

to injured and ailing birds — crows, pigeons, mynas, city parrots, even a few exotic species wounded by traffic or sudden storms.

Hellen observed in silence, her expression poised between tenderness and astonishment.

In that modest room — where the faint flutter of wings seemed louder than the distant roar of the city — she grasped the core of the philosophy before her: every life, however small, merits protection.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

She was right.

Within that humble sanctuary, the vastness of Jain thought seemed distilled into a single luminous principle: harmony, compassion, and an uncompromising reverence for all beings — without distinction, without hierarchy.

A short while later, we crossed the broad avenue separating the temple from the Red Fort. As soon as it emerged before us, Hellen’s gaze fixed on the immense walls rising in silent command.

“Is it a military fortress?” she asked, her eyes tracing the austere lines of the stone façade.

“It was,” I replied. “But wait until you see what lies inside. It may surprise you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she said with a soft smile. “Everything I’ve encountered so far has surprised me. I feel incredibly fortunate to have met you, Marc. First, because this wasn’t even the region I had planned to visit. And second, because had I come here alone, I would have spent hours researching whether it was truly worth seeing. Instead… you present it to me fully formed — and explain it with such care.”

I let out a quiet laugh, easing the weight of her praise.

“Don’t elevate me so quickly. An official guide would explain all this with far greater precision — they are the true specialists. They’ve studied every stone and every date. I’m only speaking from what

I've learned through travel and what the years have allowed me to gather. At best, I know the essentials."

"Perhaps it's 'the essentials,'" Hellen insisted gently, "but I'm benefiting from everything you know. I feel as though I'm discovering this country in a way I never could have alone."

"Well, that's precisely what guides and agencies are for," I replied.

"Yes — but I don't like travelling that way," she said, almost decisively.

As we approached the main gate, I began outlining the story of the place we were about to enter.

"Construction began in 1638, when Shah Jahan transferred the Mughal capital from Agra to Delhi and founded Shahjahanabad — the seventh city of Delhi."

"The seventh city?" Hellen repeated, her brow furrowing slightly.

"Don't worry," I said with a faint smile. "I'll come back to that."

The works were completed nine years later, and for more than two centuries — until 1857 — the complex served as the heart of imperial authority. Its name, the Red Fort, derives from the immense walls of red sandstone so emblematic of Agra and of the great Mughal monuments.

We passed through the Lahore Gate, one of the original entrances that still stands. At the ticket office, we paid the foreigner's fee — six hundred rupees.

"For years, this place has opened and closed intermittently for restoration," I told her. "In 2001, for instance, I found it shut and couldn't see it at all."

No sooner had we crossed the threshold than a long vaulted passage drew us towards Chatta Chowk, the old covered bazaar commissioned by Shah Jahan and inspired by Persian markets such as those of Isfahan. In its golden age, it was renowned for carpets,

fine pashminas, and sumptuous brocades destined for the imperial court.

Hellen came to an abrupt halt, visibly surprised.

“I didn’t expect this,” she said with a light laugh. “A market inside a fort… I imagined barracks, armouries — something far more military.”

“Then prepare yourself,” I replied. “This is only the beginning.”

She lowered her gaze, considering the question seriously.

“I’d think it was a shame,” she admitted. “And I’d be angry. Of course.”

“That’s exactly how I feel,” I said. “I can only hope the entrance fees genuinely go towards preserving this legacy — rather than lining the pockets of a few corrupt officials.”

She gave a soft laugh, touched with resignation.

“You’re right, Marc. Fortunately, this is my first visit… so I’ll keep the image I’m taking with me today.”

I smiled in return, sharing her optimism — if only briefly.

“That’s your advantage, Hellen. Now,” I added as we made our way back to the car, “we’re going to visit a very special mausoleum: Humayun’s Tomb. Have you ever heard of it?”

She shook her head, her expression open and expectant.

“No, Marc. My original plan was to visit Rajasthan, so I only researched that region. I knew very little about Delhi. But I’m discovering a capital that genuinely excites me. And I keep thinking how fortunate I was that the bus to Jaipur wasn’t leaving for another two days… and, above all, that I met you at the station while you were arranging your car.”

I let out a quiet laugh at her unfiltered enthusiasm.

“By the way, Marc — now that I finally know your name… I know you’re Spanish, but I don’t know where you’re from.”

“I was born in Barcelona,” I replied. “That’s where I live when I’m not travelling. And you, Hellen?”

“In London,” she said. “That’s home.”

A brief silence followed — the kind that feels natural rather than awkward, the kind that quietly invites deeper questions. She was the one who eventually broke it.

“Are you married, Marc? Do you have a partner?”

“No, Hellen,” I answered simply. “I did, but I’ve been living alone for a couple of years now. My work — my constant travelling — gradually cooled the relationship. After that experience, I decided I wouldn’t live with anyone again.”

She studied me with a gentle, almost conspiratorial look.

“Did she leave you?”

“In part, yes,” I admitted. “I’d been away for four months on assignment. When I returned, she told me she loved me — but she couldn’t continue in a relationship like that. She was deeply family-oriented. She dreamed of a home, children, a husband who was present. And I…” I allowed myself a faint smile. “I was the man who came back every few months with new stories and a different suitcase.”

“We’re still on good terms. She now has a partner who wants the same things she does, and I’m genuinely glad she found her happiness.”

I paused.

“She understood something important — that my way of being, my vocation, even my sense of happiness, are bound up with this profession I care so deeply about.”

I turned slightly towards her.

“Since then, I’ve realised that unless I find someone who shares this instinct for freedom — this desire to see the world and tell its stories — any relationship will eventually collide with the same wall.”

Hellen nodded slowly.

“I understand,” she said quietly.

“And you?” I asked more gently. “Do you have — or have you had — a partner?”

She hesitated, weighing whether to speak or remain silent. Sensing it, I softened my voice.

“You don’t have to answer if you’d rather not.”

“No, it’s not that,” she replied quickly. “Yes, I was with someone… but I ended it to make this trip.”

I paused, genuinely surprised.

“Really?”

“Yes,” she said, exhaling as though releasing a year’s weight. “He didn’t want to come with me. Like I told you, a friend infected me with her enthusiasm — that’s how the longing began. For a whole year I lived with that excitement. He seemed supportive at first, but when the moment finally came…” She shook her head. “He said he wasn’t ready to visit this country. That he didn’t understand why I was so determined to go.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“It left me completely unmoored,” she continued. “I never saw it coming. We’d spoken about the trip so many times. And when my parents discovered I was travelling alone, they were fiercely opposed. The mixture of disappointment and guilt was suffocating. I asked him one last time to come — if only to ease their fears — but he refused outright.”

She fell silent for a moment.

“So I bought a ticket to Delhi without thinking too much,” she said, her eyes flashing. “I didn’t even know exactly where I was going. I had only one thought: to run. That ticket became my escape.”

She smiled.

“And here I am, travelling through India. And by some twist of fate, I’m not alone. I met a man from Barcelona who is showing me this city — and, I hope, much of the country.”

“Now I understand why you were so determined to share the car,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. “I arrived carrying a great deal of anger. All year we planned the places we would visit. I spoke about them with excitement, and he pretended to share it. But a week before the trip, he told me — quite coldly — that he wasn’t coming. That he had no intention of spending his holiday in a country that didn’t interest him.”

“For years we travelled to Africa because that was his choice. I followed, year after year. But when it finally came to something I had chosen…” She shook her head. “He kept me in the dark until the last moment. He never intended to come.”

She paused.

“That’s why I came alone, knowing almost nothing. It actually made me laugh when you suggested flying to Jaipur — it never even crossed my mind. And I’ve only been here two days, and I already understand something essential: I was in a relationship that kept me confined.”

She lifted her gaze.

“When I woke up this morning, I felt an indescribable sense of freedom. I wanted to wander without a plan, to get lost, to discover a world that now feels as though it belongs to me. It’s not only about India anymore — it’s about me.”

Her smile was unrestrained now.

“I don’t have to force a smile when something disappoints me. I don’t have to conceal my admiration when I genuinely feel it. I think, for the first time, I’ve found myself. That journey had quietly become my exit — the way out of a gilded cage.”

She fell silent.

“What worries me now,” she added softly, “is how to tell my parents I’ll be staying an entire month.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If I’d known from the beginning, I wouldn’t have been so reluctant.”

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” she replied. “I was determined to go with you.”

She held my gaze.

“When I saw you, I realised how reckless I could have been. My anger could easily have led me somewhere dangerous. And I understood that no one had ever truly let go of my hand… and that I hadn’t known how to let go either.”

She exhaled slowly.

“When I saw you, I thought you were my salvation. And now I know I wasn’t mistaken.”

I shook my head.

“You don’t owe me thanks. But I’m glad you told me the truth. I only hope this freedom becomes your beginning — not just a reaction.”

I paused.

“You did throw yourself into the deep end without checking whether there was water.”

She smiled.

“And I suppose you could be a dangerous man.”

“Or you,” I replied, “could be planning to charm me and rob me.”

We both laughed.

“And besides,” she added mischievously, “I’ll have to ask my parents to transfer more money. My original plan was only fifteen days.”

“Don’t you work?”

“Of course. But my savings have dwindled. My parents are very wealthy. My father is a lord.” She laughed lightly. “Money isn’t the issue. Convincing them is.”

“A lord’s daughter travelling with a second-rate reporter,” I said.

She laughed.

“Second-rate or not, to me you were the lifebuoy in the middle of my shipwreck.”

The car moved steadily through the traffic. For a moment I felt that this journey — improvised for one of us and accidental for the other — had found its own direction.

I felt a quiet pride in having helped a woman who had just demonstrated something rare: the courage to step away from a life that no longer fit her — and to listen, at last, to the voice that demanded to be lived.

“We’ve arrived at Humayun’s Tomb,” the driver announced.

We stepped out and walked to the ticket office. After buying our tickets, we passed through the monumental gateway. As we crossed the threshold, the mausoleum revealed itself in all its grandeur, as though emerging from silence.

“Oh…” Hellen breathed, unable to contain her awe. “It has a dome like the mosque’s… and the sandstone reminds me of the Red Fort.”

“Exactly,” I replied. “Humayun was the second Mughal emperor of India. The Mughals left an extraordinary architectural legacy across this region, and this monument is one of its foundations.”

We continued along the central path, flanked by perfectly symmetrical gardens. The warm air carried a faint scent of earth and freshly cut grass. Hellen walked in silence, visibly captivated.

“This mausoleum was commissioned by his widow, Haji Begum,” I went on. “Construction began in 1572 — fourteen years after the emperor’s death.”

She glanced at me, inviting me to continue.

“Humayun’s life was marked by adversity,” I said. “He endured exile, defeat, and the loss of his empire. Forced out of India, he fled with a small group of loyal followers to Persia. There, the Shah granted him military support to reclaim his throne. After years of sieges and battles, Humayun returned triumphantly to Delhi in 1555 — not only recovering his empire, but expanding it beyond its former boundaries.”

“And how did he die?” Hellen asked, her curiosity sharpened.

“Tragically, only a year after regaining the throne,” I said. “In a twist of fate, he stumbled while descending the stairs of his library, his arms full of books, and fell to his death. An emperor who had survived wars, betrayals, and exile was undone by a single misstep.”

Hellen shook her head slowly, struck by the irony.

“This was the first great Mughal mausoleum,” I added. “The direct precursor to the Taj Mahal. This is where it all began: red sandstone, white marble inlays, geometric gardens, reflecting pools… and that immense dome — over forty metres high — crowned by chhatris, those small pavilions so characteristic of Mughal design.”

We paused to watch the late-afternoon light glide across the reddish walls.

“And incidentally,” I continued, “unlike the Red Fort, this monument did undergo a major restoration. It was closed between 1999 and 2003. After UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site in 1993, the authorities took conservation more seriously.”

“It’s beautiful,” Hellen whispered, absorbed by the symmetry.

“When we reach Agra,” I said, “and you see the Taj Mahal, you’ll recognise how its architecture grows out of this. The dome, the arches, the balance… there’s a clear lineage.”

She offered me a long, knowing smile — one of those that conveys more than words ever could. The sun was beginning to sink behind the treetops, casting a golden hue over the dome, and for a few quiet moments we said nothing, letting the place settle around us.

“Come,” I said at last. “Before we leave, I want to show you another treasure that often goes unnoticed.”

“Another one?” she asked, smiling.

“A very special one: Isa Khan’s Tomb. It’s tucked away behind a wall to the right of the main entrance. Few visitors stop there — and that’s a real pity.”

We followed a narrow path bordered by trees, their lengthening shadows stretching across the ground. A few metres on, a low wall appeared, and behind it a small, tranquil enclosure — almost intimate in scale.

“And who was Isa Khan?” she asked, adjusting the strap of her bag.

“A nobleman at the court of Sher Shah Suri,” I explained — the Afghan ruler who overthrew Humayun in 1540. “He was appointed lieutenant and granted the governorship of Multan.”

“So his tomb is older than Humayun’s?”

“Yes. He commissioned it during his lifetime, around 1547, and died that same year. There’s something striking about that — arranging your resting place before history decides your fate.”

We stepped into the enclosed garden. The tomb, octagonal in plan, rose with restrained strength — solemn, self-contained, free of excess ornament.

“It’s not large,” Hellen observed quietly.

“No, but it has a distinct presence. Pure Afghan style. You won’t find Humayun’s grandeur here, but you will sense a different spirituality — more austere, more grounded. Look — there’s even a small mosque beside it, carved entirely in stone.”

We moved slowly through the enclosure, pausing to observe the dome, the pointed arches, and the shifting light filtering through the stone lattice screens.

“Walking through this complex,” I said, “is like seeing the early foundations of Mughal architecture. Even though Isa Khan was an Afghan nobleman, many of the elements you see here — the octagonal plan, the bulbous dome, the balance of proportion — were later adopted and amplified by the Mughal emperors. In a sense, this is a prototype of the grandeur that followed.”

She nodded slowly and drew a deep breath, as though trying to hold on to the stillness before returning to the city’s noise.

“And there’s more,” I added as we made our way back to the car. “On the way to the hotel, we’ll pass near Safdarjung’s Tomb. We could stop briefly, if you like.”

“Is that Mughal as well?” she asked as we climbed back into the car.

“Yes, though from a much later period. You’ll notice the dome bears a resemblance to the Taj Mahal — though, of course, without the marble. Here it’s red sandstone, with detailing in pale stone. Many people compare it to Humayun’s because of its symmetry and Persian-style gardens. But Safdarjung was built when the empire was already in steep decline.”

“And can you feel that?” she asked.

“Inevitably. It isn’t designed to dazzle, like the palaces we saw earlier. There, everything was splendour — marble surfaces and courtyards that multiplied the light. At Safdarjung, the beauty is more restrained, almost wistful. The light filters through the lattice screens, and the galleries seem to breathe a quiet melancholy… like the final sigh of Mughal grandeur.”

Hellen looked at me with a mixture of curiosity and admiration.

“I had no idea Delhi held so many places steeped in history,” she admitted at last.

“Most of the city’s great historic structures are Mughal legacies,” I replied. “Few capitals in the world can claim such an extraordinary heritage in so compact an area.”

“You see, Marc…” she said with a playful smile, “I suspected travelling with this ‘second-rate reporter’ might allow me to see the real India. I’m glad I extended the trip — Delhi is captivating me far more than I ever expected.”

“Delhi never reveals all its secrets at first glance,” I said. “And we’ve barely begun.”

After such an intense day immersed in imperial architecture, it was time to return. The sky was beginning to darken, and Delhi’s traffic roared as though the city, rather than tiring, were waking anew with electric energy. It was seven in the evening when we stepped out of the car, carrying that pleasant fatigue that comes from absorbing too much history in a single day.

“Are you planning to have dinner later?” I asked as we walked towards the lobby.

“Of course,” Hellen replied with a smile. “But I need a shower first, or I’ll fall asleep over my plate. Shall we meet here at nine?”

“Perfect.”

We parted in the lift. Each of us went up to our room, and for a moment the corridor’s silence felt almost unreal after the day’s clamour. I replayed the places we had seen, the conversations, the laughter… and found myself wanting to continue sharing the journey with her.

At precisely nine, I went down to the lobby. She arrived moments later in a light dress, her hair still slightly damp from the shower.

There was nothing calculated about it; she simply carried the freshness of someone who had washed away the dust of the day.

“Shall we?” she asked.

“Of course. Would you prefer dinner in the hotel restaurant, or shall we go out?”

“Tonight, I surrender,” she smiled. “If I venture back into Delhi traffic, I won’t wake up tomorrow.”

We chose a table by the window. From there, the city lights stretched out — vibrant, seemingly endless. We ordered two thalis — one vegetarian for her, one mixed for me. When they arrived, the dishes looked like a small festival of colour.

“You have no idea how much I needed this,” Hellen said as she tasted a mild curry. “Between the history, the heat, and your explanations, my head is full… but in a good way.”

“In a good way?” I teased.

“Yes,” she said, holding my gaze. “When someone makes you appreciate something you didn’t even know you’d enjoy, your mind fills up — but it doesn’t feel heavy.”

Her words caught me slightly off guard. It wasn’t courtesy; there was quiet sincerity in the way she spoke.

“Delhi captivated you today,” I said.

“And you played no small part in that,” she replied, without looking away.

“Me? How?”

“You told me you knew India because you’d travelled here several times, and that alone made me feel safe. But what truly surprised me was the depth of your knowledge — every corner, every detail.”

“Well, as you said, it’s my job to inform. I’ve written reports on these places and, whether I like it or not, the details stay with me.”

“Exactly. That’s why I say you’ve surprised me. I haven’t just found a travel companion — I’ve found the ideal guide.”

“Good heavens…” I said lightly. “I thought Spaniards were the only ones inclined to exaggeration, but it seems Englishwomen are just as generous.”

We both laughed again, easily and without restraint.

Dinner drifted on with anecdotes from the day and laughter that surfaced unexpectedly. Curiously, the fatigue began to lift, as though sharing the table were a kind of rest in itself. In the lift afterwards, the silence felt more natural than any conversation.

She stepped out on her floor and turned back with a serene smile.

“Tomorrow — another day of adventures, Marc.”

“Tomorrow, more,” I replied.

In that simple exchange, I realised the journey was no longer solely about monuments and history. I knew I wouldn’t regret sharing this experience with Hellen; in her I recognised someone who absorbed everything the road offered with the quiet hunger of a sponge.

When I reached my room, I followed the small ritual that accompanies me on every journey. I replayed the day in my mind, put the camera batteries on charge, and downloaded each photograph onto the hard drive, organising them into folders by date and location. Then I cleaned the equipment carefully. It’s an almost obsessive routine, but a necessary one: with so many kilometres still ahead, it’s the only way to keep both images and memories in order — faithful to what my eyes have captured. On particularly intense days, that process can easily steal a couple of hours before I finally allow myself to sleep.

Even so, I tend to wake early. After a quick shower, I went down to the dining room expecting to be the first — and, to my surprise, Hellen was already there. She sat with a cup of tea, gazing out of the window as though she had been awake for some time.

“Good morning,” I said as I approached. “How are you up so early?”

She looked up and smiled.

“Early? Not for me. I usually wake at dawn to write about the previous day. That way, everything is recorded on my laptop — impressions, places, sensations…”

I laughed at the coincidence.

“Well, I tend to do the same, but at night. Before sleeping, I write everything down so I don’t lose a single detail.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but last night I was exhausted. I preferred to sleep and do it now, with a clearer mind.”

I nodded as I poured myself a coffee.

“You see,” I added, “people say travel journalists live in perpetual paradise. No one sees how little we sleep. It may not be an office job, but it’s far less restful than most imagine.”

“Definitely,” she laughed. “Travel is wonderful… but it exhausts you.”

We fell silent for a few moments, sharing that quiet complicity born of understanding what most people overlook: that beauty, when it becomes work, carries its own weight.

The driver was waiting for us, as always, punctually outside the hotel. He never failed: at the agreed time, he was already at the wheel, ready to set off.

“Today we’ll begin with the Qutb Minar,” I said as we climbed into the car. “After that, we’ll visit Gandhi’s memorial.”

“Very good, sir,” he replied, with a calm composure that seemed impervious to Delhi’s chaos. “Let’s hope there isn’t too much congestion.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “We have the whole day. Until seven this evening, we can go wherever we like.”

We had barely driven a few metres when Hellen turned towards me from the back seat.

“What exactly are we going to see?” she asked, with the same alert curiosity she’d had since arriving in India.

“Delhi,” I told her, “is no ordinary city. It’s more like a palimpsest.”

“A what?”

“A palimpsest,” I repeated, smiling. “A city written and rewritten over itself again and again. Each empire built its world on the ruins of the one before. That’s why historians speak of seven — sometimes even eight — different cities within the same Delhi. When you walk here, you feel those layers of time still alive, superimposed like strata of memory.”

“And is the Qutb Minar in one of those ‘cities’?” she asked.

“Exactly. We’re heading to Mehrauli, the first stable seat of the Delhi Sultanate. That’s where it began. Among quiet gardens and ancient stone pathways rises the Qutb complex: a remarkable tower that ascends like a spear towards the sky.”

Hellen nodded thoughtfully, glancing out at the swirl of motorcycles, rickshaws, and buses weaving past one another.

“The tower,” I continued, “began construction in 1193, and it remains the tallest minaret in India — over seventy metres, as though determined to pierce the clouds. The original upper storey was struck by lightning in the fourteenth century. It was later rebuilt with additional levels, which is why you see that mix of red and buff sandstone, with bands of white marble.”

“It must be extraordinary up close,” she murmured.

“It is. And the tower is only part of it. The Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque stands there as well, built over the remains of earlier Hindu and Jain temples. In its columns, you can still see carved motifs from those original structures — as though each stone carries two histories at once.”

“Didn’t that cause conflict?” Hellen asked.

“Of course. The invasions led to the destruction of many temples, but their fragments were incorporated into the new Islamic architecture. It’s a perfect illustration of what I was telling you: Delhi isn’t simply visited — it must be deciphered.”

She seemed to file the thought away; I was beginning to understand how her mind worked. Each idea connected to the next, like a map gradually illuminating itself.

“Within the complex,” I went on, “you’ll also find the famous Iron Pillar, dating from the fourth century. It’s over sixteen hundred years old and has never rusted — one of those enduring mysteries that fascinates travellers.”

“Does it really not rust?” she asked, smiling in disbelief.

“Not a trace. Modern engineers still study it. Ancient Indian metallurgists were remarkably advanced.”

I paused before adding, “But what makes it truly fascinating isn’t only its resistance — it’s what it represents. The pillar bears a Sanskrit inscription dedicated to the god Vishnu, in honour of a king named Chandra. It’s a remnant of the Gupta era — the fourth century — long before the sultans arrived.”

Hellen looked at me, trying to piece together the chronology.

“So the pillar had already stood there for eight hundred years when they began building the tower,” she said.

“Exactly. The ultimate survivor. The mosque’s builders chose to leave it where it stood — perhaps as a trophy, perhaps out of respect for something not even time had managed to erode. It’s tangible proof that in India the past never entirely vanishes; it is simply covered by a new layer.”

Hellen fell silent, gazing out of the window as though she were beginning to see Delhi’s streets differently — not as chaos, but as parchment we were trying to decipher.

The car pushed on as the city's noise enveloped us. As we moved deeper into Mehrauli, the streets widened, ancient trees appeared, weathered walls emerged; Delhi's frantic rhythm seemed, at last, to grant us a moment's reprieve.

"But the Minar is only part of it," I continued. "The surrounding archaeological park is filled with hidden treasures — mausoleums, fragments of palaces, mosques half-concealed by vegetation… like the tomb of Jamali and Kamali."

"Who were they?" Hellen asked, intrigued by the pairing of names.

"Jamali was a Sufi poet of considerable influence during the transition between the Lodi dynasty and the early Mughal period. His tomb is modest in scale but exquisitely crafted — stucco work, painted tiles, verses inscribed along the walls. Beside him lies Kamali, whose identity remains uncertain. There are countless legends about their relationship."

"It sounds fascinating," she said, with a look I was already beginning to recognise — the one that signalled an imminent cascade of questions and another flurry of photographs.

"This area," I added, "was once Rajput territory before the conquest of 1193. Over the centuries, it became home to shrines, Mughal hunting grounds, and, later, British residences seeking relief from the oppressive heat of the city centre. Today, it remains an exclusive district, but to me, it retains something singular: the sense that the past still breathes along its pathways."

The car began to slow. In the distance, partially veiled by foliage, the silhouette of the Qutb Minar rose sharply against the sky.

"You know," Hellen said, her gaze fixed on the ancient walls emerging between the trees, "everything you tell me feels almost… intangible. As though every corner of Delhi were a story nested inside another story."

“That’s precisely what captivates you about this city,” I replied. “Nothing stands alone. There is always something behind it — a dynasty, a battle, a legend.”

She turned back towards me with a faint smile.

“And you speak about it as though you lived here in another life.”

“I wish,” I said lightly. “I’m only trying to follow the thread. Delhi never hands you the entire skein; it forces you to draw it out, strand by strand.”

The driver spoke up with discreet politeness.

“Sir, we’ve reached the entrance to the complex.”

I thanked him with a nod and turned to Hellen.

“When we step out, you’ll see how it all comes together. Words can only take you so far.”

“Is there anything I should know before we go in?” she asked.

“Yes. You’re not standing before a mere monument. This marks the first great political and cultural shift in northern India.”

The car turned onto a broader avenue, and the tower finally came fully into view — an immense needle stitching the sky.

“There it is. The Qutb Minar. I promise you, no photograph does it justice.”

Hellen fell silent, her eyes widening.

“It’s… far larger than I imagined,” she managed.

“And more beautiful,” I added. “Wait until you’re standing at its base.”

We stepped out of the car, greeted by Delhi’s familiar scent — a blend of dust, damp earth and distant spices. Hellen moved forward almost entranced, photographing the tower and the surrounding ruins. After a few minutes she paused, lowered her camera, and looked at me.

“You were right, Marc. Standing here, it doesn’t just grow in scale — it possesses a beauty that overwhelms.”

She walked on slowly, her gaze shifting between the viewfinder and the red sandstone rising above us. A few metres from the base — where the tower seems to widen as though rooting itself in the earth — she reached out and ran her fingers lightly across the carved surface.

“Marc, you didn’t mention this,” she said, studying the stone closely. “These reliefs… they’re not merely decorative, are they? They’re letters.”

I stepped beside her. The sunlight struck the sandstone at an angle, illuminating the raised calligraphy spiralling around the tower in horizontal bands.

“You have a keen eye,” I replied. “They’re Kufic inscriptions — verses from the Qur’an. Notice how the artisans integrated the script with floral motifs. The word of God becomes part of the architecture of triumph.”

Hellen nodded, captivated by the precision of the carving despite eight centuries of exposure.

“It’s extraordinary that something so monumental is filled with such delicate detail,” she murmured, lowering her camera. “You were right: at its base, it’s not just grand — it’s deeply moving.”

We remained there for a moment in silence, diminished beneath the shadow of that stone giant still defying Delhi’s sky.

“Ramesh, we can head to Raj Ghat now,” I said as we left Mehrauli behind.

“Very good, sir,” he replied calmly.

“And what exactly is that place?” Hellen asked as we settled once more into the car’s cool interior.

“It’s Gandhi’s memorial,” I explained. “I’m glad we’re going today — it’s an essential stop. Have you read much about him?”

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “I’m incredibly fortunate to be travelling with you — you don’t leave a single corner unexplored. I’m fascinated.”

I smiled at her enthusiasm. Before long, Ramesh spoke again.

“Sir, this is as far as I can drive. Access beyond this point is restricted.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

“You simply need to follow that path straight ahead, and you’ll reach Raj Ghat,” he added kindly.

We began walking along the path leading to the memorial. The surroundings were green and open, as though the city had paused to observe silence. When we reached the central enclosure, Hellen stopped, visibly moved.

“Oh…” she whispered. “After the opulence of the Mughal mausoleums, I expected something imposing — a grand structure. And this… it’s so simple, yet so powerful.”

I nodded. Gandhi’s memorial is not lavish, nor designed to overwhelm. It is a simple platform of black granite, engraved with the words Hey Ram — “Oh God” — the final words he is believed to have uttered before he fell, assassinated.

“Look,” I said quietly, “the power of this place lies not in grandeur, but in purity. Gandhi was small in stature, yet immense in humanity.”

Hellen lowered her gaze, visibly moved.

“I’m English,” she murmured, “and even so, I can’t help feeling deep admiration for him. He freed his country from the British Empire without firing a single shot. If there was blood, it was the blood of his own sacrifice… and I feel a profound regret for the role my country played in that history.”

We stepped closer until we stood beside the platform. The memorial stands on the very spot where he was cremated on 31 January 1948. The black stone, the eternal flame flickering at its centre, and the stillness around it create an atmosphere of almost mystical reverence.

“The first time I came here,” I told her, “it was on 15 August — Independence Day. A crowd had gathered to pay tribute. The silence was dense, broken only by the brush of bare feet and the murmur of the wind. People stood with their hands pressed together, tears in their eyes. Each seemed to be speaking directly, from the heart, to the Father of the Nation — that slight figure in a white tunic, walking stick in hand, who altered the course of history.”

Hellen exhaled softly and inclined her head towards the platform.

“Namaste, Mahatma Gandhi,” she whispered, with genuine reverence.

We remained there for a few moments, allowing the stillness to settle over us before turning back. That simplicity became the day’s final lesson: that true greatness requires neither marble nor precious stone — only the weight of a life devoted to justice.

“Well, Marc,” Hellen said as we walked away from Raj Ghat, “after this, I can’t imagine anything in this city being more powerful.”

“Perhaps not more powerful,” I replied, “but there is still much to discover. Delhi keeps surprises that can still leave you speechless.”

“If you say so…” she smiled. “I’m enjoying this journey far more than I expected. You may think I’m repeating myself, but I’ll say it again: thank you for accepting me as your travel companion.”

“There’s no need, Hellen. It’s a pleasure to travel with someone who truly engages with what she sees. As I told you when I hesitated about sharing the journey, one of the risks is spending twenty-four hours a day together. It doesn’t always end well — friction creeps in, disagreements… and often pride prevents people from allowing themselves to be guided.”

She listened in silence, absorbing my words.

“These are still the early days,” I continued. “I hope the ones ahead are just as harmonious. But there will come a moment when fatigue begins to make itself felt. Travel is extraordinary — but exhausting. Entire days in motion, constantly learning.”

“I hope you won’t regret bringing me along,” she said, a trace of concern in her voice.

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “I’m patient by nature, but I’ll ask one thing of you: honesty. If one day a place doesn’t interest you, or you simply lack the energy, tell me plainly. It won’t be a problem — I can continue on my own. We’re fortunate to be travelling privately, not with a tour group. We set the rhythm.”

Hellen nodded, and for a moment her eyes reflected relief.

The day moved on, the heat thickening as the city shifted around us in a swirl of colour and sound, as though Delhi itself were participating in our conversation.

“Where are you taking me now, Marc? Sorry… where are we going?” she corrected herself with a smile.

“Now we’re going to discover New Delhi,” I said.

“New?” she echoed.

“Yes. Everything we’ve seen so far belongs to Old Delhi and its ancient layers. As I mentioned, historians speak of seven earlier cities; the one we’re about to explore would be the eighth.”

“Ah, yes, I remember. Though it’s hardly surprising if I forget — there are so many new impressions that I may need to carry a recorder just to keep up with everything you tell me.”

“Don’t worry,” I replied. “If questions come to you while you’re writing your notes, just ask.”

As we entered the broad avenues of the governmental district, the city's physiognomy shifted abruptly. Hellen murmured, almost as though reluctant to disturb the atmosphere:

"Well… it's no longer mausoleums, forts, and the ruins of ancient civilisations."

"No," I said. "This is the contemporary city — the Delhi of its inhabitants, where markets hum and life unfolds in real time. Here, sorrow and joy are etched into faces; poverty and opulence intersect without shame. The past merges quietly with the present: colonial buildings beside glass-fronted offices, ministries alongside designer cafés. Everything appears measured, orderly — yet no less compelling."

"It's another vision of the city," Hellen said softly, her forehead almost resting against the window. "And to me, perhaps a more authentic one."

"Yes," I agreed. "But New Delhi demands patience. It isn't only about admiring architecture; it's about sensing the city as a living organism. Every avenue, every roundabout, every improvised market tells a story of power and daily endurance. Here, contrasts aren't concealed — they are simply lived."

As we approached the administrative heart of the capital, the buildings grew increasingly monumental. Kartavya Path — the former Rajpath — unfolded before us like a grand ceremonial axis conceived during the British Raj. At one end stood Rashtrapati Bhavan, the official residence of the President of India; flanking it with near-symmetrical precision were the North and South Blocks, housing the central ministries; and closing the perspective rose India Gate, the memorial to Indian soldiers who fell during the First World War. The entire ensemble had been designed as a stage of imperial authority — later reinterpreted as the symbolic core of modern India.

“And yet,” I added, gesturing towards the immaculate lawns, “even here — where everything seems controlled — you can still sense the essence of India: resilient, vibrant, impossible to domesticate entirely.”

Hellen exhaled slowly, caught between admiration and reflection. She seemed to understand that the Delhi we were crossing was not merely a destination, but a continent compressed into a single city: a constant encounter between history, humanity, and modernity.

“Let’s step out,” I said. “This part has to be walked — pounding the pavement, as I like to call it. This is where you feel the city’s pulse.”

We entered the bustle, breathing in that dense mixture of smoke, perfume, and spices suspended in the air. We made our way towards the commercial centre, where Connaught Place spreads out — a vast circular complex inaugurated in 1931 by the British and named in honour of the Duke of Connaught. Its purpose was unmistakable: to create an orderly refuge from the congestion, odours, and clamour of the old bazaars. That ring of neoclassical colonnades, which on my first visits had felt like the city’s distant, refined heart, has officially been renamed Rajiv Chowk — though for most locals it will always remain simply “CP”.

“It’s enormous,” Hellen murmured, turning slowly to take in the uniform façades, the arches, the endless white colonnades. “I never imagined one place could hold so much history and so much commerce at once.”

“Yes,” I replied. “Here, shoe shiners and newspaper kiosks coexist with global brands and restaurants offering everything from traditional cuisine to experimental international fare. It’s no longer the city’s most exclusive district, but its pedigree is undeniable.”

We moved with the crowd, weaving past cyclists, rickshaws, and slightly bewildered tourists. The blare of horns merged with conversations in Hindi, English, and countless regional dialects.

Hellen paused beneath one of the arcades, in front of an old establishment whose lettering still carried a distinctly British air.

“It feels as though time has paused here,” she said, “and yet everything pulses with modern urgency.”

“Exactly. New malls and corporate districts may have eclipsed some of its former prominence, but Connaught Place’s colonial geometry endures. It remains an unmistakable emblem of New Delhi.”

We walked beneath the colonnades, sensing the contrast at every step: polished shop windows beside piles of fruit, impeccably dressed executives brushing past street performers. For me, this is the city’s true everyday rhythm — the place where Delhi reveals itself unfiltered, in all its vitality and contradiction.

“I love it,” Hellen whispered. “It feels ancient and young at the same time.”

“And the only way to understand it,” I added, “is like this — on foot. Observing. Allowing yourself to be absorbed. No guidebook explains India better than the sensation of it beneath your soles. Let’s slow our pace; we have time.”

“All right,” she nodded, adjusting the strap of her backpack. “Where to next?”

“We’re about to encounter another face of Delhi,” I replied. “The one that beats in its deepest arteries — among bazaars, temples, and the constant murmur of daily life. The one many visitors avoid, out of apprehension or convenience.”

The shift on entering Paharganj was immediate, almost jarring. The bustle struck the senses at once: the sharp honking of auto-rickshaws, the clatter of handcarts, conversations overlapping in a Babel of languages and accents. Colour detonated around us — silks gleaming like gemstones, fruit arranged in improbable pyramids, hand-painted signs clamouring for attention.

The air was thick with scent: freshly brewed chai, the sweet heat of spices, incense mingling with charcoal smoke in an aroma that clung to the skin.

Hellen leaned forward as she walked, inhaling deeply, her gaze darting from one detail to another in open fascination. Auto-rickshaws manoeuvred with improbable precision around cows crossing the road with sacred indifference; backpackers carried their packs like banners of a wandering homeland; shopkeepers threw their voices above the street's symphony in pursuit of customers. Every gesture seemed part of a single pulse.

"This — this is India," Hellen murmured, smiling at the perfectly imperfect chaos. "It's exactly what I imagined — but intensified."

Further on, we entered Chandni Chowk, the commercial heart of the Mughal era. The "Moonlight Avenue", once said to reflect silver light in its canals, now throbbed with crowds and neon signs jostling with history. Each alley — each gali — held a surprise: silks shimmering beneath filtered sunlight, spices that seemed to ignite the senses, sweets glistening like syrup-soaked jewels.

"It's like a human river," Hellen observed, watching the crowd flow and fold around every obstacle. "And yet there's a strange order within the disorder."

As evening descended, the city did not lose momentum — it transformed. Shop lights and rickshaw lanterns traced luminous pathways through dust and commotion. Street-food stalls flickered into life, revealing their offerings: paneer tikka sizzling over heat, golden jalebis gleaming with fresh syrup, masala chai perfuming the air as it warmed the hands — and spirits — of passers-by.

Hellen stepped towards a stall, closed her eyes to breathe it in, then tasted one of the sweets with the curiosity of someone beginning to decipher a secret language.

Temples hidden within the labyrinth of lanes offered sudden refuge. There, the murmur of prayer and the tremble of oil lamps created intimate pauses in which the traveller becomes a silent witness to the sacred. No one stared at us; if anything, we were quietly absorbed into the scene — observers of something that transcended the ordinary.

When we returned to the main thoroughfare, every night market and garland-lit stall reminded us that Delhi never truly sleeps. Connaught Place displays its colonial geometry and curated modernity; the older quarters beat with a different heart — restless, vibrant, untamed.

“I never imagined a city could be so contradictory and yet so coherent,” Hellen whispered, capturing each flicker of light with her eyes.

“That’s Delhi,” I replied. “It isn’t merely visited — it’s lived. To understand it, you have to walk it, listen to it, and above all, taste it. The city reveals itself in the daily pulse of its people — beyond anything written in history books.”

We paused, letting the noise surround us, allowing the colours and the scent of sandalwood and spices to settle into memory. In that vast mosaic of wealth and poverty, modernity and tradition, we understood that travel is not simply observation — it is surrendering to what passes through you.

Still absorbing the torrent of impressions, Hellen touched my arm lightly.

“Marc, could we stop for a moment? I need to sit down and take this in. I’d love a coffee — and simply to linger over what we’ve just experienced.”

“You’re right — we’ve earned it,” I said, scanning the street. “There’s a place just there that looks decent. Let’s try it.”

We found a small terrace overlooking the street, with wrought-iron tables and sun-faded umbrellas. A cup of hot tea warmed our hands

as Hellen leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes briefly, and allowed the city's roar to reach her unfiltered.

"I can't quite believe what I'm experiencing," she said softly, almost afraid to disturb the moment. "All that chaos, those markets, the tide of people… and yet there's something harmonious beneath it."

"That's Delhi," I replied. "The streets, the bazaars, the handcarts, the cows, the mausoleums — taken together, they create this accumulation of emotion you're feeling now."

She nodded, smiling as she watched the steady flow of passersby: some balancing vast bundles on their heads; others moving with the unhurried assurance of those who have belonged to that place all their lives. Her eyes carried a new kind of light. I realised she was storing every gesture, every sound, every scent — determined not to lose a single detail.

"In this part of the city," I told her, "you could sit down for tea every afternoon and discover that no two days are ever the same. Every street, every market carries its own story. That's why, even if you walk through Delhi a hundred times, you'll always notice something you missed before."

As we sipped our tea, we let time loosen its grip. Voices, horns, layered aromas blended into a sensory tapestry that made the city feel like a living organism. Hellen smiled, and I smiled in return — not because of us, but because of Delhi's generosity in allowing us, however briefly, into its world.

"You know," she said at last, "I think I could write an entire book about what I've felt today. Not about what I've seen — about what I've felt."

"That's what matters most," I replied. "The history of this city doesn't live only in its stones. It lives in its people, in its disorder, in the trace of its aromas, and in the silences that sometimes surface between the vendors' cries. If you can capture that, you'll have grasped its essence."

We lingered a while longer, watching life move steadily around us. Each glance, each sound became another lesson about this capital that, despite its vastness, has a way of making you feel you are somewhere utterly singular.

“Well, Marc, it’s half past five. Is there still somewhere left to explore?” Hellen asked, her voice carrying that mixture of curiosity and fatigue that only a full day in Delhi can produce.

“Of course,” I replied. “We’re near one of the most important spiritual centres of the Sikh faith — and I assure you it’s well worth visiting.”

“Perfect,” she said. “Everything so far has surpassed my expectations.”

I led Hellen along the avenue until the imposing golden dome of Bangla Sahib rose before us. The late-afternoon sun caught its surface, making it gleam like a beacon. Amid the modern structures of New Delhi, it stood as an oasis of calm — a reminder that behind its walls time moved to a different rhythm.

As we crossed the gates, Hellen instinctively fell silent. The vast white marble courtyard stretched before us, polished and luminous, radiating a serenity that softened the distant hum of the city.

While we walked, I explained that the site had once been the palace of Raja Jai Singh in the seventeenth century, and that history seemed embedded in every stone.

“The Sikh faith,” I told her, “began with Guru Nanak — a man who preached tirelessly against injustice, hypocrisy, and the caste system. Here, everything centres on service and humility. There are no hierarchies — only devotion.”

Hellen nodded, absorbing the atmosphere of respect that permeated the place.

Before proceeding further, we went to the visitors' area to observe the required customs.

"We must remove our shoes," I said, "and we must cover our heads. In Sikhism, covering the hair is a sign of respect and humility before the divine; no one — believer or foreigner — enters bareheaded."

Hellen chose a bright orange scarf and carefully arranged it over her hair, ensuring no strand escaped. I did the same. Standing barefoot on the cool marble, our heads wrapped in that flame-coloured cloth, we felt as though we had stepped across an invisible threshold, leaving the ordinary world behind.

Together we walked towards the Sarovar, the great sacred pool whose waters reflected the fading light of evening. The faithful dipped their hands into it with gestures that seemed to cleanse more than the skin. I told her the story of the cholera epidemic and how the eighth Guru, still a child, had distributed water from this well to comfort and heal the afflicted.

Hellen listened in silence as ripples fractured the reflection of the golden dome.

Soon the scent of the langar — the community kitchen — reached us: the comforting aroma of lentils, rice, and freshly baked bread. I explained that free meals are served there every day to thousands of people, regardless of religion or social standing. Volunteers moved with disciplined energy — the younger ones in blue turbans, the elders in austere white.

"They're so different…" Hellen murmured. "It isn't only faith. It's as though every gesture carries a purpose beyond simply existing."

I nodded as I observed the Nihang — the warrior guardians in deep blue robes and imposing turbans who protect the complex. They carried their traditional weapons with natural dignity, free of arrogance. They were heirs to the Khalsa: saint-soldiers whose ancestral duty was to defend the vulnerable and uphold justice. Hellen regarded them with quiet admiration.

As we moved among the faithful, the city itself seemed to dissolve: no horns, no bargaining, no urgency. Only the harmony of a space suspended outside ordinary time. Sikh history — its discipline, resilience, and devotion — revealed itself in every composed gesture.

“Marc,” Hellen whispered, “this is another Delhi. Each temple, each palace feels like a page in a book. And every time you turn it, it offers a completely different emotion.”

She was right.

We entered the central hall where the Guru Granth Sahib rests. Beneath a canopy embroidered in silk and gold lay the sacred scripture, revered by Sikhs as the living Guru. Hellen remained silent, allowing the soft murmur of the kirtan — devotional singing — to become the only necessary sound.

We sat on the floor and let the cadence of the chants settle around us.

“They aren’t merely prayers,” I whispered. “They’re a dialogue with life itself.”

When we left the main hall, we made our way towards the langar. Volunteers in white aprons stirred enormous pots and served with remarkable efficiency.

“They truly offer this to everyone?” Hellen asked.

“To everyone,” I replied. “Sitting together to eat is the ultimate expression of equality. It’s Sikhism in practice.”

We joined one of the rows on the carpeted floor and were served a simple meal: lentils, vegetables, and a chapati fresh from the griddle. The modesty of the food felt entirely in harmony with the dignity of the place.

Hellen took a bite and closed her eyes briefly.

“I’ve never tasted something so simple and yet so complete,” she said softly.

The true power of Bangla Sahib did not lie in its golden dome, but in the way it embodied equality — not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived reality, transforming the ordinary — eating, serving, listening — into something quietly sacred.

When we rose to leave, she rested a hand lightly on my arm.

“I loved this visit,” she said. “I’m astonished… by the chanting, by the unity you feel even while sharing a simple meal.”

“Now you understand why I keep returning to this country,” I replied. “Delhi is only the prologue.”

We left the gurdwara as the sun set, the dome aflame in gold. Fatigue settled into our muscles as we walked back to the car. The city had offered us its chaos, its spirituality, and its history; now our minds needed space to absorb it.

“Marc, I don’t know if I’ll be able to write about this,” she confessed. “Perhaps tomorrow at dawn I’ll find the words — but I’m not sure I can convey what I’ve felt.”

“Let it settle,” I said. “Tomorrow we leave for Agra — but first I’d like to show you Akshardham. It will surprise you.”

“I trust you,” she replied.

“You don’t have much choice,” I smiled.

We both laughed.

The restaurant we chose was quiet, discreetly lit, the kind of place where conversation can unfold without haste. Outside, the street still glistened from recent rain.

Hellen seemed lighter at first, but the shadow returned to her expression.

“When I went up to my room,” she said quietly, “I called my parents.”

She told me about George's accusations, the lies, the call filled with anger. She spoke calmly now, but the tension in her hands betrayed what it had cost her.

"And you?" I asked gently.

"I ended it," she said. "Clearly. Without doubt. Whatever narrative he needs to invent, that's his burden. Mine ended the moment I boarded that plane."

Silence followed — not uncomfortable, but dense.

"Thank you for listening," she added.

"You don't need to thank me," I replied. "You're allowed to begin again."

Her shoulders relaxed. Something in her had shifted from agitation to resolution.

We ordered something light: lentil soup scented with cumin, cucumber salad with coriander, gently spiced vegetables. We shared chapatis and finished with kheer, delicately sweet with cardamom.

Halfway through dinner, she looked at me differently — not with gratitude, not with dependence — but with recognition.

"Today," she said quietly, "I think I truly arrived."

"Not in Delhi," I replied.

"No," she smiled. "In myself."

Outside, the city roared on, indifferent and immense. But inside that small restaurant, something had found its axis.

And for the first time since she had stepped off that plane, Hellen seemed entirely at peace.

As we ate, the silence between us filled not with awkwardness but with reflection — temples, markets, that untameable vitality pulsing through every street. Hellen tasted each dish as though it were another discovery. For a moment, the tensions of the day dissolved

into the softness of the Delhi night and the quiet complicity of two travellers sharing wonder.

“Tomorrow,” I said, lifting my glass, “Agra awaits. But tonight, let’s allow Delhi to hold us a little longer.”

Hellen touched her glass lightly to mine. In that simple gesture, I sensed a fragile promise — that nothing would disturb what the day had given us.

We returned to the hotel at an unhurried pace. The night air had cooled; the city’s murmur reached us softened by distance. As we walked, Hellen briefly rested her head against my shoulder.

“I’m exhausted,” she murmured, “but it’s the kind of exhaustion I welcome.”

“So am I,” I replied. “A day like this stays with you.”

We said goodnight in the lobby with a natural, almost instinctive gesture and went up to our rooms. I intended to review the memory cards and charge the batteries, but fatigue claimed me first. I fell onto the bed and slept without interruption until sunlight filtered through the curtains at seven.

Time was already pressing. Ramesh would be waiting at nine.

When I reached the dining room, Hellen was there, seated with a steaming cup of coffee. The morning light softened her features — still faintly tired, yet unmistakably serene.

“How did you sleep?” I asked.

“Like a log,” she smiled. “And most importantly, I feel free of that man’s lies.”

Rest had done more than restore her body; it had sealed something within her.

We ate unhurriedly, masala chai perfuming the air, with the quiet certainty that the day ahead carried the same promise of discovery.

Ramesh, punctual as ever, waited outside. We loaded our luggage.

“Before we leave for Agra,” I told him, “one last stop. Akshardham.”

Hellen turned towards me as the car pulled away.

“Is it a town?”

“No. A temple complex.”

“And what does ‘Akshardham’ mean?”

“‘The divine abode of God.’”

When the pink sandstone silhouette rose against the sky, she stopped mid-step.

“Marc… is this even real?”

“It is. Inaugurated in 2005. Entry is free — but you must leave everything behind. No phones, no cameras, no watches. Only yourself.”

“It’s recent,” she observed.

“Yes. And yet it feels timeless.”

Barefoot on the cool marble, we entered a world of measured stillness. Inside, golden light filtered through domes carved with impossible delicacy.

“The elephants at the base symbolise stability,” I murmured. “The lions, strength. And those figures above — vigilance. Every element carries meaning.”

She moved slowly, fingertips grazing the stone, as though walking through a living manuscript.

Outside, a breeze from the Yamuna softened the morning heat.

“It’s like walking through a poem,” she said.

“It is.”

We could not stay until nightfall, when illumination transforms the complex into something almost ethereal. But even in daylight, it held its own gravity.

Soon we were back in the car, Delhi receding behind us.

For Hellen, this was her first real encounter with Indian highways beyond the capital. In the city, she had witnessed choreography; on the open road, she discovered improvisation.

A painted truck drifted across lanes with alarming confidence.

“How do they come so close?” she asked, instinctively leaning away from the window.

“Because distance here is negotiated at the last second,” I replied calmly. “What looks chaotic has its own logic.”

As we moved further south, the air changed. The city thinned. Fields opened wide.

Clusters of earthen homes appeared between patches of cultivated land. Men gathered at roadside stalls, drinking tea beneath faded tarpaulins.

“And the women?” Hellen asked quietly as we passed a group walking towards a well, metal pots balanced on their heads.

“In many villages,” I said, “water still isn’t piped into homes. Someone has to fetch it. And it’s rarely the men.”

A woman bent beneath a bundle of firewood nearly her own size passed by the roadside. Two girls followed behind her, imitating her steps with solemn determination.

“It feels like a film,” Hellen murmured. “But without a script.”

“Because it isn’t staged. Rural India doesn’t conceal itself. It simply unfolds.”

She watched silently, absorbing scenes that required no commentary.

“I know inequality exists everywhere,” she said at last. “But here it feels exposed.”

“It often becomes more visible where poverty is deeper,” I replied. “Daily survival shapes roles in ways that are difficult to soften.”

The road grew uneven. Ramesh swerved around a crater in the asphalt without slowing.

“I still can’t believe this works,” Hellen said, gripping the handle lightly.

“You grow accustomed to the rhythm beneath the disorder,” I smiled.

Beyond the windshield, the land stretched wide and unadorned. Delhi was already memory. Agra lay ahead — but something in both of us had shifted long before the Taj Mahal entered the horizon.