The long train jolted past the long platform. All the Indians surged forward to jump for the doors. Brice stood back with his reservation ticket in his fist, watching for the First Class carriage. He found his place by the window in a six-seat compartment. An Indian in a long white shirt was sitting there already. Four of the other seats were empty.

Brice hoisted his frame pack to the luggage shelf. "I'm afraid that's my seat you're in," he said.

The Indian hunched his shoulders. He looked away, out the window. He had thick lips and a thick beaky nose, and he hadn't shaved lately. The other passenger was a very old Indian in a baggy pyjama suit, with a trim white beard and wire-rimmed spectacles, watching from a corner seat by the door.

"That's my seat," Brice said to the unshaven man. "I have to sit there."

The unshaven man scowled. "Sit, sit, anywhere sit," he said.

"No, because then I'd have to move for somebody else."

The unshaven man shook his head. He was staring out the window again.

Brice had been in India a while. He saw a Gladstone bag at the unshaven man's feet. "Is this yours?" he asked.

"Mine, it is mine, yes."

Brice dropped suddenly and snatched the bag. The unshaven man jerked back, as if he'd expected to be hit, and it was gone before he could recover.

"Right," Brice said. "Now, I sit there, or this bag goes out, out the door there."

The unshaven man came up out of his seat. His mouth fell open. He grabbed at the bag, and Brice stepped back.

"That's it," Brice said. "Now, all the way."

He could hear people coming and going in the corridor behind him, and he hoped nobody was coming in just yet. He didn't want to argue with a crowd. It didn't come to that, however. The unshaven man changed
his mind, and shifted quickly to the other window seat. His mouth was
twisting.

Brice smiled and gave him the bag. “There you are,” he said.  
“Now, that’s your seat, this is my seat, okay?”

The unshaven man lifted his shoulder and stared out the window,  
as if he didn’t understand the words. Brice smiled again. The old man in  
pyjamas was smiling too.

Then somebody else was coming in. Two young men in green  
cotton shirts and smart grey slacks were lifting canvas holdalls through the  
doorway. A tall grey man in a striped shirt and horn-rimmed spectacles was  
coming in behind them. He sat between Brice and the old man, and the two  
young men took the other seats opposite. The carriage jolted then, and the  
faces on the platform outside started to slip past the windows.

Somebody else was at the compartment’s door. A white girl was  
looking in. She was tall and pale and red-haired, with a heavy pack and  
shoulder-bag. She had a ticket like Brice’s in her hand.

“This one,” she said. “What are these numbers?” She had an  
American voice.

She was reading the seat numbers. Brice saw the unshaven man  
glance at her. “Try that one,” Brice suggested.

The girl looked at her ticket again. The unshaven man was staring  
out the window. He’d gone back to looking as if he didn’t speak English.  
“Excuse me, please,” she said. “Please, this is my seat.”

He paid no attention. The girl stared round the compartment. The  
other Indians looked away. The old man in pyjamas was smiling again.

“Let’s see your ticket,” Brice said. “Okay, this is it. This is your  
seat here.”

“But this person is here.”

“This is her seat,” Brice said to the unshaven man. “Her seat,  
okay?”

“He doesn’t speak English,” the American girl said. “He’s made a  
mistake.”

“No, he speaks English. You speak English, don’t you?”

The unshaven man shifted in his seat. He kept looking out the  
window.

“You’ve got to move again, sorry,” Brice said. “You’ve got to  
move or your bag goes out, same as before.”

The unshaven man looked round at his fellow Indians. He hugged  
his bag against his chest.

2
"No, they won't help you. They can see what you’re doing. Now, move."

The American girl looked uneasy. Before she could speak, Brice seized the Gladstone bag and tugged hard. The unshaven man jerked forward, and Brice grabbed his collar and pulled him up and out.

"Okay, there’s your seat," he said. "Get in there."

She was slow to move. Then she edged forward, past the unshaven man, apparently trying not to touch him. Brice towed him clear, and the other Indians shifted to make room.

"Now you can try somewhere else," he suggested.

The unshaven man looked round again at the other passengers. He saw no sympathy. He spoke to them in another language, and they looked away. He threw aside the door to the corridor then, and lurched out. The young Indian next to the door pushed it shut again.

"Sorry about that," Brice said. "He was in my seat when I got in."

"He didn’t have a reservation," she said.

"I don’t think he even had a ticket."

"Why would he do that? He must have known."

"I don’t know. They do it all the time. They see a white face, they think they can push you around."

She stared at him. "I think European would be a better word," she said.

"Well, I’m an Australian. So it’s a bit different."

"It doesn’t make any difference. And you really didn’t have to be so brutal with him, either."

"You didn’t have to sit down," Brice said.

"Yeah, well, I did think twice about it."

Brice considered reminding her she was free to think a third time. He didn’t want to go on arguing, however.

"So," he said. "Well. How far are you going, anyway?"

"This train goes to Bangalore," she said.

"Is that where you’re going?"

"Yes."

She didn’t ask him where he was going. Apparently she thought he’d be there all the way. Actually he was getting off at Vellore. The train was supposed to reach Bangalore at eight in the evening. He expected to be at Vellore in the middle of the afternoon.

He’d noticed she hadn’t got around to thanking him for helping with her seat. He realised she was confused. Now she owed the comfort of
her seat, such as it was, to somebody whose attitude she disliked. She didn't like to appear a hypocrite. Still, he thought, a nicer girl might have forced herself to say thanks. He decided not to mention Vellore. He couldn't see any need to give her something to look forward to.

Now she was staring out at the south Indian scenery, flat brown fields and brown trees along a dusty road. Brice considered trying to be civil to her again, just to be difficult. He couldn't think where to start. He shut his eyes while he thought more about it.

He opened his eyes some time later. He checked his watch. He was much closer to Vellore. Now the American girl was reading a thick paperback book. He saw she knew he was awake again. She kept her eyes on the page.

Brice thought, try again. "What's that you're reading?" he asked. She held up the book, without speaking, so he could read the cover.

"Margaret Atwood," he said. "I've heard of her."
"She's a leading Canadian woman writer," the girl said.
"What's it like?"
"Good."
"I mean, what's it about?"
"I really don't think you'd be interested."
He thought, keep trying. "Why not?" he said.
"Well, I said, she's a woman writer."
He thought again. "Well, I like some women writers," he said.
"I've read some of them."
"Oh, yeah? Who?"
"Well, there's Agatha Christie. There's um. Well, there're probably some others."
He saw her face twist. He did his best not to smile. The two Indian boys next to her had been listening, and he wondered how much they'd understood, and he wondered if the old man in pyjamas was smiling again. Now he saw she was scowling out the window again. Well, he thought, not long to Vellore. He shut his eyes.

He opened them again. Somebody else had spoken. The Indian boy sitting beside the American girl was leaning forward, smiling round at her.

"Excuse me," he said again. "You people are married? You are together?"
He was asking the girl. She looked shocked. "No, no way," she said.

The Indian boy smiled again. "So, you are travelling alone," he said. "You are happy to travel alone in India?"

He spoke as if he was admiring her daring. She smiled back. "Yes, of course," she said. "Why wouldn't I?"

"But I think, no Indian women would travel in this way. Only few, very few."

"Well, maybe they're not yet aware that they can do this."

The Indian boy nodded seriously. "But you," he said. "What is your opinion of India?"

"It's very good," she said. "It's a wonderful country. The cultural richness and diversity are amazing. The people are wonderful."

Brice shut his eyes. He thought he hadn't missed much when she'd refused to talk.

"Wonderful," the Indian boy said.

"Except for a few things. The role of the women in this society, for instance. They could be a little less subservient."

"But in your country, the women must not be servants. Because you are rich and you have this freedom, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't put it exactly like that," the American girl said.

"But my father is also quite rich. He is a very big man in business, you see. He has many, many business interests in Bombay and also in Bangalore. So many different things, you have no idea."

"He's a lucky man."

"Yes, he is very lucky. But also he has to work quite hard. When you have so much money, so many interests, then you must keep on making money, just to make enough money to keep on. Otherwise you are stagnant, you are losing momentum, you are falling back, you see."

"I see."

"So this business requires a great deal of mental effort, you see."

"I guess it must."

She looked uncomfortable. Brice guessed she was still getting over being called rich. The second Indian boy nudged the boy speaking. He spoke quietly in their own language, and the first boy smiled again.

"But also I think you must have an occupation," he said. "Can I ask, what is your profession, please?"
"I'm a social worker," she said. "I mean, it's my job to look after people who are socially disadvantaged. I mean, poor people and sick people."

"People with no money."
"Well, that's part of it."
"But in your country the people are so rich, isn't it, that very very few people are not having any money?"
"No, there are quite a few. Western society isn't as great as some people try to make out."
"In India, you know, also, we are having quite a number of poor people. We are always giving, giving to the poor. This is also our charity, you see."
"No, what I do is not charity. This was a government program."
"But my friend and I are not actually rich ourselves. I was once a student, I studied economics. But now I must work for my father. And he is telling me, you must learn the business before you can run the business."

He looked round for approval. "That's very good," the American girl said.

They were all ignoring Brice. He looked at his watch. He wished he could watch more of this seduction, but Vellore would be coming up soon.

"My friend and I have been in Madras for very important business. We are staying at the Ashoka Hotel. You know the Ashoka Hotel?"
"I'm afraid not."
"This is one of the best hotels in Madras, very very expensive to stay. But my father is saying, this is necessary to conclude the deal with satisfaction. Because in business, you must always be showing that you are used to only the best."
"I guess you must," she said.

Brice was looking outside. The railway line had been following a river. Now they were in the dusty outskirts of a town, passing trucks and cars, ox-carts and bicycles. It looked big enough to be Vellore. He felt the train slowing.

"And in Bangalore also we stay in the best hotel," the Indian boy said. "This is the International Hotel. But maybe you are staying there yourself?"

The girl was looking out the window too. "What place is this?" she said.
"This place? No, not Bangalore. I don’t know."
"My stop here," Brice said to the girl. He lifted down his pack.
The Indian boy was still talking. "So, you are staying where at Bangalore?" he said to her. "The International is very good."
She was still looking out the window. "I don’t know yet," she said.

"Well, so long," Brice told her. "Have a good trip."
She didn’t answer. Brice saw her mouth tighten. The train was still slowing and the station wasn’t in sight. He had a minute or two in hand.
"You think she’s okay, do you?" he said to the Indian boy.
The boy looked surprised. Then he smiled. "I think she is quite nice," he said. "She’s quite cute, you know?"
She was still looking out the window. Brice saw her roll her eyes.
"Well, she is," he said. "But you’re on the wrong track, just now."

"Wrong, you mean?"
"No, it won’t work if you’re talking to her. You’ve got to get her talking to you. You’ve got to look as if you’re listening."
"Listening?" the boy said. It appeared to be a new idea.
"Ask her things. Ask her about women’s stuff. Get her talking about women’s lib, women’s rights, women’s books, women’s movement, women’s anything. Then you just say, right, right, all the time. Just agree with everything she says."
"Agree, agree."
"Then buy her dinner in Bangalore, and then give her a thousand rupees, and she’s yours."
The Indian boy raised his eyebrows and smiled. The American girl was gaping. Brice smiled at them both. The train’s brakes were coming on.
"But anyway," he said, "good luck. Have fun."

He saw a platform moving past the window as he backed out the door. The little old man in pyjamas was laughing. He pushed past all the porters and passengers getting on. He saw the red-haired girl in her window, and he smiled back at her, and she made a face and looked away. The Indian boy was still talking to her. Brice saw her shake her head and shut her eyes.