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About 1,200 words

Drinking Beer at Café Military

by

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It's a good question why I was spending my first days in Mumbai, India sitting in cafés and reading *Istanbul*, Orhan Pamuk's love letter to his home city. I had been in Istanbul myself about a year earlier. I'd made my trips to Spain, France, Iceland, even Romania in the past and Istanbul was certainly a different place than all of them. Was it that fabled "East"? At the time it could have seemed so with its minarets and bazaars. Now that I had arrived in Mumbai I could see just how European Istanbul was, and being in a city more distinctly "Eastern" I understood better the Turkish conflict and spirit that Pamuk describes so well which he says arises from whether Istanbul wants to be a part of the East or West. Having learned that lesson, I was soon to learn a new one about India, only independent for so many decades from its colonial past and

rapidly—very rapidly—dealing with innumerable elements which were trying to carve out an identity with a conflict and spirit all their own.

I put my book into the bag slung over my shoulder and finished off my Thum's Up, India's cola of choice (sweet with a little ginger bite to it). It was easily 100 degrees if not 110 that day in October, one of the hottest months of the year after the cooling monsoon tapers off and the sun goes to work to dry up all the water as quickly as possible. A "coldrinks" store was the best refuge, a seat where I could watch the motorbikes weave through crowds while sitting in range of a huge whirring ceiling fan muting out their blaring horns.

I had been ambling around the old Fort district for hours taking in the architecture. Beautiful, massive constructs of Gothic stone and sagging wood looking as if they'd been fixed-up thousands of times but never repaired, the earth and trees and weather trying to reclaim their precious resources yearning to pull them back into the ground or sweep them into the Arabian Sea; silver-feathered crows, the little commanders, squawking orders and directing nature's reconquista. Out of the windows of even the most stately building, colorful sheets and fabrics and saris wave in the sun, glorious flags proclaim the divinity of

the nation of Life-Absolutely-Everywhere and declare in defiance that there will be some resistance to nature's recursion.

One street of lovely homes has a posted notice, "No hawkers! We will not let our block become a fish market!" The next street of lovely homes, a fish market. Down the way and around the corner a goat sits at the top of a staircase, and somehow in a way that I had expected to be exaggerated and romanticized in other accounts, he looks beautiful, proud and holy, before the patriarch of the family chases him away to descend the stairs and get himself onto a bright red motorcycle with three children sandwiched between him and his wife sitting side-saddle.

I had gotten hungry quickly, as you do covering those unthinkable distances as you first discover a city, mapping out its streets and finding the places of future memories. I came to one Café Military, a more-or-less empty corner restaurant, walked in and took a seat. Welcomed immediately by the host, he points to the menu which is tucked under the table glass. I realize that I've made my way into one of the few "non-veg" restaurants, unsuitable for my diet, as explained by a menu with such items as: Fry Fish, 20 Rupees; Omlet (2 eggs), Rs. 25; Fry Fish, Rs. 45; Fish Fry, Rs. 55; Brain Fry, Rs. 45.

"Do you have anything to drink?"

"Foster's, Kingfisher, Budweiser, Tiger..."

Earlier I surveyed the room, Tiger beer ads on the wall, under the table mat. I hadn't tried Tiger before. "Okay. Tiger, please."

"What?"

"Tiger."

He flashed a confused look, as I glanced back at the poster and table mat he says, "What? No."

"Kingfisher?"

"Achha, yes yes!"

I opened the tremendous bottle of Kingfisher and took out my book, *Istanbul* once again. Pamuk describes a concept of *hüzün*—a collective melancholy about living in a place declining from a grand past—while another glance around the room shows that Café Military is adorned with fading wall posters of Venetian canals, Swiss mountains, Paris, placed between similarly-sized mirrors reflecting back out into the streets of Fort.

The Shiv Sena, a right-wing nativist political party with great sway in Mumbai and its state of Maharashtra in general, renamed the city (from Bombay) and many of its great sites (including my next stop after the Kingfisher): Victoria Terminus became Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus named after the recently

exalted 17<sup>th</sup> century Marathi empire-builder; Sahar International Airport and the Prince of Wales Museum similarly renamed after Shivaji; other sites and streets renamed after revolutionary figures who fought in wars distant from and unassociated with Bombay. By declaring that South Indians and, later, Muslims were job thieves, the Shiv Sena rose to power among the local Marathi population and countered any argument with claims of persecution. In doing so, they stoked ethnic tensions and riots and chased out businesses.

Victoria Terminus stands as a piece of joint heritage, both Indian and British. An Indian friend of mine who had walked me through the area days before said about this, "when one culture tries to seduce another, there is something beautiful to it." Victoria no longer stood as the name of a long-dead monarch, but of the beloved and iconic train station. When India became independent, Victoria Terminus became a piece of heritage that belonged to India; when it became Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, it was colonized from within.

For a little while I wonder if it is anything like Pamuk's *hüzün* that most people here still call it "VT" 12 years after it was renamed, or if it is a force of habit, or as a casual revolution against racism in a cosmopolitan city, or if it is

something that I cannot yet understand since I haven't been here the necessary thousands of years to understand such a vast and complicated network of cultures.

By now my mind is joyfully clouded by the beer, and I make my way back up to VT, one of many hundreds of thousands who cross its entry every day wearing deep indentations into its marble steps. Running alongside the red metal husk of a rattling train car, I reach out my hand and I'm pulled in by a mustachioed gentleman who disappears as quickly as I do into the impossible mass of bodies returning home to see their families, together sweating as one in the heat.