

The Master Director

EXCERPT No. 1

THE MEETING

(from Chapter 1)

Having fled to Sikkim in the violent aftermath of the assassination attempt on Subash Ghising, the leader of the Darjeeling Hills, I am struck by the peace of Sikkim and the natural beauty of the place. I simply start wandering with no aim or destination. I follow a Tibetan monk I don't share a language with on a shortcut through a jungle to a place I do not know. Skirting cliffs and cascading waterfalls, we come upon fields and finally a village. I am lingering in front of the house which was his destination when a man comes out and in response to my question of whether there is a town somewhere nearby, somewhere where I can spend the night, informs me that a high incarnate lama is coming to that very house and that it is my good luck that I can stay there and meet him. The village is buzzing with excitement at his coming. The following excerpt takes place late that afternoon.

I am led into the presence of the man the entire village has been filling my ears about, telling me he isn't really a human being but a god. He is clad in the burgundy robes of a Tibetan lama and his large head is shaved, its shape reminiscent not so much of a god, but of a Hollywood alien. The smile on his face is at once friendly, intense, and infectious. In the few hours I've been in this tea-pluckers' village on the slopes of Sikkim's sacred Tendong Hill, I have heard stories of his divine childhood, his miracles, and his ability to be in two places at the same time. Let me introduce myself. My name is Thomas and, like the Thomas of the Bible, I am a doubter.

They call him Gurudev, and he motions for me to sit on the little couch opposite him. It is a bedroom done up especially for his visit, the other furniture having been taken out. Flowers are strewn all around and the bed is adorned like a throne, a woven Tibetan rug spread over it. The walls are made of planks and there are gaps between them, chinks open to the night.

A barefoot woman, dressed in a green sari with the end draped over her head, enters the room, a look of rapture upon her face. She is carrying Gurudev's tea, the cup held at the level of her forehead as a sign of respect. After offering it to him, she backs out of the room with palms pressed together and head bowed, as if he were a king. People are massed outside, peering in through the open door, observing

Gurudev's every move. And though the night is cool and it has been raining, his attendant, a young man with large glasses named Dawa, is fanning him with a piece of cardboard.



Dawa often put a piece of leaf on bridge of nose to steady his glasses

Gurudev is regarding me silently, the smile on his face so self-assured, the choreography of the scene around him so perfect, that I begin to wonder whether I *have* just entered the court of a king. Yet something seems absurd, if not an illusion altogether, for the fan is made of cardboard and not peacock feathers, as would befit a potentate; his throne is but a rug on a bed; his subjects are tea pluckers gathered from the surrounding wood-plank houses. The word 'surreal' surfaces in my mind.

Gurudev has a look of sheer delight on his face as he reaches for a cloth sack. Dawa puts down the piece of cardboard he has been fanning him with and holds the sack open. Gurudev reaches into the sack and takes out an ornate ceremonial lamp made of copper and brass, which he hands to me. It is suddenly a solemn moment.

I look to Dawa for guidance. He motions that I am to receive it. So I lean forward and, with bowed head, receive the lamp. A murmur arises from the people crowded at the door.

Dawa can see my confusion. 'Take it home,' he whispers. 'It is a present.'

Gurudev reaches into his bag again and takes out a block of Tibetan tea pressed into the shape of a bell. He holds it out to me. Again, I lean forward and receive it in what I hope is the culturally appropriate

manner. In this part of the world, if one has to hand something to someone or to receive, one does so with the right hand. One places one's left fingertips gently on one's right forearm.

When I look up, he is holding out a handful of the juniper needles used as incense. I take them and stuff them in my shirt pocket. Then he hands me a bar of scented soap. A moment later he hands me a bottle of germicidal liquid, two metal tea strainers, a plastic soap container, a bag of rice, two handfuls of brown Tibetan rock salt, a bag of table salt, a handful of litchi nuts, an apple, and a hat.

He goes on to open a cloth sack filled with rocks that he has picked up somewhere along the road, and gives me one. All this is done with the utmost of courtly ceremony, heads bowed, palms pressed. It is as if these are holy relics, gifts offered to an emissary of a distant land. While he has been giving these things to me, the people at the door have quietly come in and taken their seats on the floor, trying to get as close to him as possible, their eyes gazing intently at everything he does as if at any moment a miracle might occur or a mystery be revealed. With over thirty people watching, he reaches into the folds of his robes and takes out a wad of money. With a finger to his lips, he hands it to me and indicates that I should pocket it discreetly.

Someone produces two bamboo baskets and fills them with my presents. I had wandered into this village on foot. Am I now supposed to start walking in the mountains with baskets containing blocks of rock salt and stones?

The woman with the tea returns, her head bowed, another cup held at the level of her forehead. She presents it to me as if it were a jewelled crown on a velvet pillow. I take the cup and Gurudev lifts his. He has been waiting for mine to arrive. He takes a sip, looks me in the eye, winks, and bursts out laughing.



The woman who brought me tea

Gurudev breaks a piece of a flowering branch from a vase on the low table before him. He holds it up and, with Dawa interpreting, tells me how it cures headaches and brings down a fever. He breaks off a sprig and holds it out to me. As I take the dripping sprig, he motions that I am to put it in my shirt pocket. So I stuff it in with the juniper needles. He explains the medicinal qualities of a few other flowers. Soon, my pockets are all bulging and soggy with medicinal herbs.

Gurudev puts his hand on Dawa's shoulder and pulls him closer. With their heads bent close together in a conspiratorial way, their hands covering their mouths for privacy, Gurudev gives Dawa instructions. As he does so, Dawa looks at me, his eyes sparkling. Then, Dawa dashes from the room and runs out of the house barefoot, without a jacket, into the rainy night. He returns drenched some minutes later, holding a flowering plant, mud dripping from its ball of roots. It was for this that Gurudev had sent him into the night. Dawa has the most delightful smile as a puddle forms beneath him, his glasses fogged and dripping. He gives the plant to Gurudev. Gurudev speaks, and Dawa interprets: 'He is saying if you cut yourself, you can use this plant to stop the bleeding.' Gurudev takes a leaf, crushes it between his fingers, rubs it on an imaginary cut and wags his head to emphasize its potency. He tells me what it's called and then gestures for me to write it down, which I do in my pocket notebook. He is pleased I have a notebook; and from that time onward, he often indicates that I write something down—the name of a plant or a place, a date, a word in Nepali or a Buddhist term. It is as if he already knows I am a writer, and knows—even before I know it myself—that I will be writing about him and should start keeping notes.

The entire time, an impossible number of people are entering the room with gifts for Gurudev—ceremonial scarves, sacks of rice, envelopes containing money, a stack of wooden bowls, washing powder, a tightly bound bundle of hand towels—things exactly as varied, incongruous, and random as the things Gurudev had given me. They lay them on the low table before him and bow, some touching their foreheads to the table's edge.

An old man comes in and prostrates himself on the wooden floor before Gurudev with tremendous fervour. Gurudev yawns in an almost exaggerated manner, raises a great ball of phlegm with a horrendous, gurgling sound and spits it into a white plastic bucket that has been put beside him expressly for the purpose. The man gets to his feet and proceeds to prostrate himself two more times. As he does so, Gurudev lets his gaze pass over the heads of the people packed together on the floor and looks into my eyes with an intense and intimate look, at once ironic and above it all, edging on bemusement. It is as if he is taking me into his confidence, offering me a glimpse behind the role he is playing. I have the distinct impression he is inviting me to witness the show with detachment—as he apparently must, in the face of such devotion.

Before stepping into this room, I had never been in the presence of someone shown such a royal respect. We can all imagine what it might be like for, say, the queen of England or for the Pope or maybe

some African dictator. But we don't meet these people, certainly not up close, and have tea with them. I feel deeply honoured to be granted the intimacy he seems to be offering.

A young man in black dungarees comes in. His hair is falling over his eyes and he is wearing a tricoloured T-shirt with an image of Bob Marley superimposed on a cannabis leaf. He bows before Gurudev in a perfunctory way. Gurudev grabs him by the shirt and wraps a ceremonial scarf around his head as if it were a bandanna. He picks up a large red flower, tucks it into the scarf over his right temple, and laughs as if somebody's tickled his belly. The laughter soon spreads through the room. He sends the young man out for a large clay bowl of water, which the man then places on the floor in front of Gurudev's throne. A mound of flowers has accumulated on either side of Gurudev, and now he throws them into the water one by one, delighted each time one goes 'plop'. He reminds me of a baby playing in its bath. I look around, and the room is full of looks of enchantment and wonder.

Gurudev breaks into song. Everyone starts clapping and making room as the man with the Bob Marley T-shirt stands up and does a traditional Nepali dance. Thick incense wafts in from the other room where Tibetan Buddhist monks are chanting, blowing horns, banging drums, and crashing cymbals like long rolls of thunder. The rain is pounding the corrugated metal roof and cascading down the windows in thick furrows. The village is enshrouded in the thickest cloud, accentuating my feeling that I have entered a world whose coordinates cannot be found on any map.

When the song is over, at some signal I don't see, everybody gets up to leave, bowing, touching their heads to the edge of Gurudev's bed and backing out of the room so as not to turn their backs to him. I too get up to leave, but Dawa indicates for me to stay. When everyone else has left, Dawa closes the door. It is just Dawa, Gurudev and I in the room. Gurudev speaks in Nepali to Dawa, and Dawa interprets. 'He is saying that you have come very far to get here. There are so many foreigners, and millions of Americans. He is asking how is it that you out of all of them have come to this village this night and to this very house.'