

**ADJJA
CENT
LAND**

**RABINDRANATH
MAHARAJ**

AUTHOR OF THE AMAZING ABSORBING BOY

ADJACENT LAND

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RABINDRANATH MAHARAJ



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In memory of my parents

*We can make no distinction between the man who
eats little and sees heaven and the man
who drinks much and sees snakes.*
– Bertrand Russell

STAGE ONE

1 THE UNSTABLE WORLD

Nine days ago, I awoke with a hum in my left ear that sounded like the steady strum of a bass guitar. I must have lain still for half an hour, fearfully watching the door and the jalousie, trying to establish some familiarity with my environment, passing my fingers along the two tiny bumps at the base of my skull, wondering at my situation. My neck and limbs felt as if I had been pressed into a tiny box. When I got up, I immediately fell to the floor and it was another half an hour before I was stable enough to fully appraise my surroundings. I noticed an unevenly stained closet stocked with clothes and a sum of money in the slim drawer of an escritoire with teeth marks on the right corner. Beneath the escritoire, I discovered two wicker baskets, one with an assortment of fountain pens, well-used pencils and some sort of boomerang-shaped bamboo totem nestling in a circle of incomplete illustrations and the other stacked with spiral notebooks and hard-bound sketchbooks with oilcloth covers. Between the books were three envelopes, each stuffed with onion-skin pages.

When I first opened the envelopes, I saw that the pages were

filled with scratchy charcoal drawings of men and women frozen in a moment of action or just standing with their arms folded over their muscular chests and gazing heroically at the silhouettes of devastated cities. On one of the sketches I saw the word *Adjacentland*. I cannot say if this is a real place and if, in fact, these illustrations are representative of actual cities. Nor have I been able to confirm their authenticity from the inked versions of these sketches, some of them framed, on each wall. Beneath every illustration was the same phrase: *Today is a new day but yesterday was the same day*. On one of the odder drawings situated above a locked cast-iron safe with a sturdy knuckle-shaped handle in the middle of a spiral of fingers was the declaration: *Nothing exists until we deliver our verdict*. This sketch, in watercolour, seemed out of place in that it depicted a scene that, on the surface, appeared serene and normal. A mother is holding a child in her arms. The child, a girl of around three or four, is frightened and the mother, well, her expression – and her gaze – changes from day to day. I have tried to understand what is so terrifying in the foreground but all I can see are fallen leaves that are so detailed I can count all the nested loops. Each day I have returned to the vaguely familiar patterns on the leaves before I turn to the scribbles at the bottom of the sketches. So far, I have been able to distinguish just one; this, attached to a watercolour painting of a child, her back turned, gazing at the air. At either side of the drawing, which seems to be cropped, are two pairs of feet and beneath, a scribbled line that is also cut off: *The child* –

I will add here that although there is some familiarity about the drawings and their subjects, I can feel no real connection with either. Nor, initially, with the clutch of letters I discovered hidden in a jacket hanging in the closet. They all instruct me to record my impressions and “my range of emotions” but there was one that described a relationship characterized by manipulation, bullying, jealousy and, not

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surprisingly, betrayal. The tenuous relationship, I worked out, was between a writer and an artist. It took a full week before I worked out the identity of the artist and that of the writer and decided to record what I have learned. This may sound desperate but a man with little to remember is forced to remember everything.

But you, my friend, already know all of this.

Are you disappointed that I am, here, referring to you? If so, you will be even more distraught to know that I have determined – from your manner of evoking accusations in an abstract and indirect way – that you are secretive and sly. Here is this sentence from one of your letters, for instance: “Once we shared the same thoughts and beliefs, complimented each other’s views, made fractions whole but all of that was ripped in half. We each went our separate ways, walking away from ourselves, never looking back.” In another letter torn into six pieces and scattered within the inner lining of my jacket were these cryptic instructions. “Look to the drawings. I have disguised my writing and it is my hope that by the time you determine my identity you would have understood enough to forgive me. We are the only ones left. Trust no one. Least of all yourself.”

I have gone over that last injunction several times, trying to understand your meaning. Did you leave me here? Will you soon return and explain everything, elongating my recollections beyond the nine days since I have found myself in this place; beyond my only memory of the unstable world outside? Or maybe it’s the memory that is unstable. I am in a single-carriage train. Or perhaps it’s a bus with a high, sloping roof, I can’t be certain. In this reconstruction, I am gazing through the oval window of the vehicle. The clouds are lower than usual, forming a latticed ceiling that resembles a drooping cobweb. I feel I can touch it if I stick my hand outside. The vehicle comes upon a row of derelict buildings – theatres, casinos and an abattoir – with billboards turned the wrong

way. A flock of iridescent birds with scabbed wings have perched on all the eaves and they seem to follow us into the night, which falls suddenly. The moonlit night sky is a mellow greyish-brown and this tint, repeated in the fields beneath, makes it look as if the melting sky is rippling downward. We pass a child standing alone and when she shrinks from the vehicle I hear a shuffling behind me and realize there is another passenger.

Now there is a town ahead. In the front yards of the stuccoed mansions are alabaster statues haloed with rings of dull light. The hands of the figures are raised to the sky and from the bus, the scene looks like a conjuration of frozen ghosts. There is an odd intimacy to the positions of the statues and I think of a city destroyed so swiftly its residents were preserved in their last acts. The trees seem to be afflicted with an infestation that renders the leaves cottony and pale. In the distance, the headlights illuminate a black speck. We get closer and I see it is a child, dressed in dark green, standing alone. She is holding a bow-shaped toy with which she swings as if to strike the vehicle.

I hear a low, melodious chuckle at the back that eases into words I only decipher as we enter a tunnel, its sides glistening like freshly cut tissue. "Let it be known, brethren, that the unknown is simply a place not yet visited." The walls of the tunnel seem to be closing in. The other passenger does not appear concerned. I hear him singing, "You cannot hide it any longer. We know what you have and we shall pluck it out one fibre at a time. And yea, we shall hold it up to the morning light and when a newborn witnesses it, mysteries shall live and die in the span of a single tingle. You have brought this upon yourself, brethren. You have taken the fire with you and there's no stopping it now. A great turbulence is before us." The voice gets closer and I am seized with panic. "They know what they are searching for but cannot recognize it. Advantage is yours."

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I have used the word *reconstruction* because this retrieval has the quality of a vivid dream. I am recording all of this with the hope that, as I write, I will eventually come to some greater understanding of the man I once was and will understand my condition not from disconnected episodes, but will grasp eventually a complete life. Perhaps this is what everyone wants at the end. A quiet understanding. But there are more immediate concerns.

The room I now occupy is devoid of mirrors – or any type of glass – so I cannot describe any new disfigurements that may have altered my appearance. The wrinkles and spots on my mustard-coloured limbs and my shallow breathing suggest I have passed the point of middle age, though I cannot tell how far along. It's not simple vanity that causes me, each morning, to examine the visible parts of my body but rather a curiosity about the extent of the shrouded years that have slipped by and the portion remaining. Since I cannot see you, too, I am unaware if you are surprised or simply amused by this ignorance, this darkness about my prior life. But here's something that might surprise you; it's more than darkness because each time I recall an event, another, of equal importance, is lost. My mind is a leaking crucible and sometimes this image is so stark I instinctively feel my forehead and the back of my neck for some discharge. I awoke nine days ago, as I mentioned, so I am certain that my memories are relatively stable for this duration, at the least. The flashes of non-sequential events and pliant faces from the preceding period might as well be interpretations of overheard conversations because I can feel no connection with them. Furthermore, these random, recurring retrievals are puzzling because they cannot be placed into any context and, more significantly, because the emotions associated with these memories constantly vary. The slices of *déjà vu* are confounding, too, because I often get the sense that I can affect the outcomes; as if my memory is one aspect of a reality waiting for completion. Perhaps

this is a form of overcompensation and all those who share my condition might assume they possess this odd power. My condition. Forgive me for using this word but I can think of no other that is so vague and all encompassing.

In spite of what I have mentioned so far, I would like to assure you that I am not completely without resources. My loss of personal memory has not affected my ability to think, plan and write. Moreover, the retrievals to which I referred show glimpses of a shy but imaginative man. *Imaginative*: the word brings an unease, or rather, a bubbling fear that is puzzling to me. In any event, I would like to believe I am this man.

To preserve my sanity, I have tried to establish a routine. In the mornings, I spend an hour looking at the sketches on the walls, another hour gazing out from my jalousie, memorizing my observations of the Compound, a sprawling structure with three or four dozen wretched people roaming about. There may be fewer or many more, I can't recall counting. In spite of everything, the Compound is an intriguing place. Consider the view with which I am presented each morning.

It never varies. There are two groups marching until they are alongside each other. Sometimes I imagine they are marching to the tune of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It's odd that I should remember something so obscure but nothing of myself. The group assembled by the sage sandbush is dressed in military blue and the other, coming from the direction of the sentry box, is orange-clad. They could be going to a parade but once they are alongside each other, they stop to engage in an odd choreograph of imaginative salutes and little pirouettes that give the sense of taunting buffoonery. Both groups seem oblivious to either the jeers or the encouragement of the loiterers. They keep this up for an hour or more and when my eyes begin to burn from the glare, I shut my slit jalousie. When I reopen the slats a few moments later, I notice the teams seemed to

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have exchanged some of their players and a couple of the loiterers are now leading the charge with mops and brooms. Sometimes I feel the marchers are doing this only for my amusement, like auditioning actors. At other times, I imagine that some of them are familiar, particularly a tall man whose height and heft is disguised by his slouch and another jumpy man in a long overcoat, but I have concluded that my faulty memory is stringing along arbitrary addendums, elongating details and events and faces to fill in the gaps. Maybe the mind creates meaningless distractions to fill the gaps and breaches. Or perhaps it's like the intricate nested loops I observed on the painting of leaves.

In the late afternoons when I am watching from the same spot, I notice the gaps between the ivy-covered single-room cabins and the wobbling lanes leading to the cemetery on a hill collapsing into implausible angles and the light scrambling around the glutinous trees appearing alive and combative. Perhaps I should add that the old men and women on the pathways are always losing their mooring and caroming forward and backward like rubbery toys. This disorienting vision, thankfully, recedes with each passing day. As do my bouts of dizziness.

I will mention here that I have not yet convinced myself that it is prudent to reveal all of this to you. You, my prisoner. Faceless and nameless. And curt, too, judging from the letters I found in the jacket and from these two sentences, more clearly visible, written in block letters and left on the *escritoire*: *You are in possession of your notebooks and letters and the drawing implements. You need nothing further.* I have wondered during every one of the last nine days why you chose not to go beyond this. Nothing about your reason for doing so and more worrying, no clues as to why I acquiesced. Why did you leave the hidden warning I should trust no one, not even myself?

Perhaps I am relating this also with the hope that you will sud-

denly show yourself and accompany me during one of my surreptitious evening strolls. And as we walk together, avoiding the main areas of congregation (along the barrack-like enclosure that houses a canteen, a dispensary, a launderette and a stockroom), you will explain why you left me here. We will walk side by side to the cluster of single-cell buildings that serves as living quarters and just beyond, the derelict pavilion dotted with rusted spears and iron balls and at each building you will remind me of something I have forgotten. A date, a name, a place, an event. When we arrive at the chapel built like a capsized boat and decorated with copper snakes on the stern, you will pause to reassure me that my stay here is temporary. You will reassure me that I am not crazy and as my memories become more stable, I will understand everything and I will no longer worry that I am in a prison or a madhouse or an unwilling participant in some horrible experiment. But I know you will do none of this; your cryptic instructions left on the escritorio do not suggest a lingering friendship.

And so, I walk alone. I have seen the congregants milling about and a few standing reverentially before the Compound's massive front gate, designed to imitate the outstretched wings of a ridiculously stylized albatross clutching a leaking hourglass in its claws. From a distance, the worshippers resemble crustaceans gazing from beneath their carapaces at the town outside. These gazers or acolytes, I have noticed, soon get bored and shift their attention to one of the many billboards, empty but for the signs of age: mildew, rust, frayed paint and a few tantalizing letters hanging like lopped-off limbs. The gazers stand apart from each other, making no attempt at cooperation; nothing to communicate what the missing words might signify. For my part, I try to avoid any eye contact and whenever I slip up, I see dullness, hostility or a flickering curiosity that is so brief it barely registers. Once, I spotted an old man, immaculately dressed, holding a suitcase as if he planned to leave and another day a little man

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afflicted with blepharism who pointed to me and muttered, “It’s your fault we are struck here. You made us do it. Over and over.”

Another day, a stutterer, dressed in the clothes of an unemployed auctioneer, told me, “There are-are...”

“There are what?” I prompted him.

“Two of-of every-every...” I could see his frustration both at his difficulty in completing his sentence and at my inability to help. “L-look.” He pointed to the sky and I saw a circling bird, its revolutions remarkably unvarying.

“I can see just a single bird,” I told him. “It seems stuck in a particular orbit.”

He seemed excited with my observation but unfortunately this did not help his stammering. When I eventually walked away he was still grunting.

In the evenings, I resume my observations before I head to the huge library that is different from every other part of the Compound I have seen so far. Its sorting room smells of blue cheese coated with rat dropping and dusted with magnolias. Perhaps for this reason, the library is always empty, although this could also be because someone had taken the time to pluck random chapters from a variety of novels, memoirs and manuals and glue these between bogus covers.

For instance, there was this paragraph in one of the fantasy novels, *The Model Monkey*. “It was in the year 2075 when it was first observed that the fusion of man and machine into a unified consciousness, a singularity, had gradually eroded the ability to speculate. Patterns and coincidences had been decoded, mysteries solved, enigmas demystified, puzzles resolved. There was no need to dream or reflect because everything could be predicted through algorithmic interpolations. And because there were no mysteries, the imagination was seen as a vestigial reflex. In time, it was viewed as worse.”

Yet in the same novel I saw this segment that had been plucked

out, I suspect, from a romance novel and placed in *The Model Monkey*. “She sat on the bed, packing photographs and sewing needles and pieces of fabric on which were stitched a variety of insignias. ‘So you are really leaving?’ he asked her and when she did not reply, he added, ‘If you really intend to go to *that* place I should warn you that it’s pure madness. You will be surrounded by rogues and vagabonds.’ She zipped her bag and got up. ‘They celebrate craziness and worship tricksters. What do you expect to find there?’

“‘Chaos,’ she replied sweetly as if it were a special brand of chocolate. ‘It’s the gift we all have been looking for. Haven’t you?’ She blew away a tuft of hair above her almond eye, spread her arms and sang, ‘I cannot live like this anymore. I want tohubohu and bedlam. I want freedom.’

“‘Please. We can –’

“‘You believe memory is a tattered thing that can be stitched and joined but what’s gone is gone. Wouldn’t you say?’ He remained silent, wondering what exactly she was talking about and she repeated her question, watching around as if she was addressing a hidden audience.”

Book after book followed this pattern. Overblown romance novels shifted in my hands to manuals detailing the diseases of farm animals and handbooks on brain surgeries diverted to fairy tales fluttering with genies and swooning princesses. Religious tracts, consuetudinals, devolved into advice on fashion accessories. Who, I wondered, would take the time to rearrange these books and for what purpose? The violations were even more confusing when chapters from the same books were rearranged because there was no sense of time advancing.

Three days ago, I was forced to adjourn my visits to the library. In a reading room, I saw a tiny, naked man squatting on a stool. He was shivering but there was a celebratory grin on his blubbery

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baby face when he looked up from his knitting. He seemed crazy with his bamboo needles in one hand and a mess of yarn in the other. I was certain of this when he leaned forward and said, “Lolo still want a cuddle.”

“What are you doing here?” I managed to ask.

“Waiting all the time. When are we leaving? I must finish this.” He held up his knitting that looked like serpents looping into each other. As I hurried away, he shouted after me in a topsy-turvy voice that sounded like a litany of crazy names. His appearance there was unfortunate. Every night, before I departed the library, I would tiptoe on the same stool on which his aged testicles had been dangling and stare through the lancet window at the town outside the Compound’s towering wall.

I have to tell you that I used to look forward to the view of the shingled housetops that all seemed to be slanting at odd angles as if the ground had curled beneath the foundations and the walls were balanced on roller bearings. Later and alone in my modest room, I would try to picture this old town outside the gate but could only come up with scenes from the illustrations on my wall: dungeons with spike traps that led to perfectly furnished kitchens with wide-eyed women sitting around a table and not seeing the toddler wandering into the garden, mauve with poison. Beyond the garden, I pictured lopsided streetlamps swaying in the breeze intermittently casting their aureoles around capsized lorries frozen in steely blue ice. The trucks were always decorated with bright stickers and decals and there were stiff tufts of fur embedded in their carriages and wheels. At first, I imagined the town to be a facade with nothing beyond the front walls, but in the nights, I heard a choppy wailing as if the wind was fretting against the gables and alcoves and once, I saw beams of lights that appeared to be gambolling across the sky. I can think of no other verb.

Here is a confession: I believe a man who does not know if he

is a prisoner is worse off than someone whose status is less ambiguous. The prisoner becomes habituated to his limited space as his glances retract while the deluded man or woman, inventive-ness fuelled by threadbare hope, constantly gazes outwards; constantly adds to his horizon. And so, locked in my room, the noise outside withering to a single and prolonged squall, I envision the slow passing of winter bringing ribbons of mist that obscure the supple hills behind the town, giving the place a liquid appearance. It always ends as an underwater scene, and when I awake in the early mornings and fall into the realization that I am in a place not of shimmering and indolent sea creatures but of deformed and slouching brutes with lips of unacceptable angles and eyes that shift from blank to hostile; men and women given a last gasp of life by their inquisitiveness, I wish I could hightail it to a region a thousand miles away. But where? Where, I ask you? What else is out there? And what if the world of which the might-be-prisoner dreams is just as malformed and incomplete as the one in which he is trapped?

I know I sound hysterical and my excuse is that one of my retrievals unspooled a universe in distress. I glimpsed, ever so briefly, men who resembled each other attempting to erase this resemblance with every type of weapon. Maces, clubs, hammers and glistening armours that shot firebolts that resembled sprigs of marigold. I saw other men with flowing beards heaving out roaring machines they claimed would stop the flow of time and children scurrying into caves to escape the flashes in the sky and young women lying on brown, flattened fields. I saw transparent walls being built, rising higher and higher as if they were ladders to heaven and beyond the walls, ragged women throwing their screaming babies in the air. I saw a flood that was replenished not from the storm above but from the water surging from every vent and rathole on the ground. I saw gods cavorting among their creations and forgetting they were gods.

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I saw the beginning of time and its end.

I have to tell you that I have struggled with these visions or dreams or whatever they may be. One of the books in the library had advised, before its transposition into a diary of a widowed farmer's account of his mutated livestock and tractors rejigged into weapons, that what is gone is gone forever and it was just as pointless to peer into the probable future as to glance backwards. We favour our memories like a wayward uncle, long dead and of no use to us, was one overwrought description. It was utter nonsense, of course, this early section, but this is how I measure my retentiveness. Moments, instalments and episodes, boxed-in sequences that spring from nowhere and lead to nowhere. Think of tracks that are pulled away the instant the carriages roll over them. I have determined that for me, there is no simple return voyage. I say this because I cannot determine a starting point.

As silly as this sounds, there are moments when I wonder if I am as real as the people shuffling about. Sometimes I have to touch things, to feel pain, grate my fingers along a rusted iron railing or the nail dents on a wall to assure myself that I am not trapped in a dream. I listen to the snuffling on the roof at nights and in the mornings, I inhale the acrid aroma of vitriol and dead trees. I must admit that I have not entirely convinced myself. This, I believe, is why I have recorded the beginning of each day with the phrase I saw on the day of my awakening. *Today is a new day but yesterday was the same day.* Beneath, I affix the phrase *Day One* and *Day Two* and so on. My last entry, earlier this morning, was *Day Nine*.

In assessing my condition, *limbo* is the most charitable word that comes up. *Limbo*, a word that suggests flexible tunnels, interlocked caves and vast empty spaces that lead to nowhere. I know it's not an exact definition, but this is how I measure my life, or the little that I remember of it. You may wonder why I do not stop here; why I am recording and relating an account that does not promise

a resolution. No one wants to hear of jumbled memories and capricious experiences. What is the significance of recording my misery, you may well ask? It's a valid question and I will use an analogy you might remember. "My thoughts seem to take their cues from my visions; they are like moths circling a gloomy room. It is only when I record that I can trace their arcs and glimpse their trajectories. I record so I might stumble upon some connection." I have no idea when you mentioned this to me and if your face was thickened by some shared distress or if there had been a mischievous smile when you noticed my confusion. I even wonder sometimes if we spoke in English because, in recording this, I feel as if I am translating my thoughts from another language. I cannot recall – or I can recall only fragments of – colloquialisms and slangs and farcical expressions and nips of tart humour and I am aware that this formal account might be stilted and whinging to you as it is to me. I feel that I was once gifted with a humorous manner of transcribing events, but unfortunately that is gone now and I can only describe my situation with the tools left to me.

This evening I decided I would not avoid the library because of a naked old man so I placed the boomerang totem into my jacket and headed in that direction. Midway there, I discovered the same craziness that had led to the creation of the hybrid books in the library had also incited the recent placement of contrary signs and directions along the pathway. I ended up in a room that was, in a manner of speaking, new to me. This room, tilting to the left and smelling vaguely of brine and camphor, does not belong here, I thought at the exact moment I stumbled through the canting doorway.

"Come in, come in, come in." The voices, though different in pitch, seemed to harmonize with each other and the blended effect was not unlike the throbbing purr of a damp and dangerous cat.