

“So what brings you to India sir?”

In the past few days, ever since boarding that Cathay Pacific flight to New Delhi, I must have already been asked that question a thousand times. Yet there was something amicable about the fellow sitting next to me at the train station. Young and dressed smartly, he could easily have been a lawyer or a doctor. Yet as far as I knew it was not common for a doctor in India to be accompanied by a monkey which insisted on remaining diligently at his feet.

“I wanted to do something different,” I said. “I needed to get away from a few things back home.”

“Family?”

“Family, work, my ex girlfriend.” I had no idea why I was telling a stranger all this.

“So you thought that you could forget it all in India?”

“You could say that,” I said rather weakly.

“I won’t deny that adventure and self discovery are important,” said my friend. “But family and love is what we here in India cherish the most.”

“Do you have family of your own?” I offered him a lamington that I had brought in the cafe at Christchurch airport.

“Yes but it has been a while since I last saw them. I have been down in Sri Lanka helping the victims of the war there. In fact it is where I met Maithili, my fiancée.”

He produced a photo of himself holding hands with a beautiful young woman. I was surprised to note a monkey, possibly the very same one, sitting upon his shoulder.

“How did you both meet?” I asked.

“It is a very long story. I was assisting with the building of a bridge that brought relief to a town that had been badly damaged. She was a volunteer worker who had been held hostage

there. We met after the fighting had finished. Now I am returning home to Ayodhya where we shall finally be married.”

“It will be quite a homecoming,” I said, feeling slightly ashamed by my own apathy towards family and love.

“Well my friend, if you are in Ayodhya in time for Diwali then I insist on you coming to our wedding.”

I was rather taken back by this forward show of generosity. Up until then my plans had been just to wander wherever the mood took me. Now I had just been invited to a stranger’s wedding in a city I had never been to. The rumble of an approaching train broke the awkward tension.

“This is my train,” said the man standing up and extending his hand. “My name is Dhanurdharaya. My wedding will be held at a temple by the name of Kshireswara Nath. Perhaps I shall see you there. If not, then I pray you will find what you are looking for.”

We shook hands and I watched as he walked towards his train, accompanied by his monkey. In a country as populated as India, I very much doubted I would ever see him again.

It was by chance that I ended up in Ayodhya for Diwali. A week after my encounter with Dhanurdharaya, I had met a fellow New Zealand backpacker by the name of Zoe who invited me to go halves with her on a bus fare. After a few days in her company I found that my general malaise had vanished and by the time we reached Ayodhya our friendship had steadily developed into something more.

Once in Ayodhya we found that the festivities surrounding Diwali were already underway. Having taken South Asian studies at university, Zoe’s knowledge of Indian culture was endless and when she suggested a visit to Kshireswara Nath I immediately remembered Dhanurdharaya’s invitation.

Upon arriving there I was surprised to find that instead of wedding guests the temple was filled with devout pilgrims. It took a while but I finally managed to find a Brahmin, and upon taking him aside, inquired after my friend and his fiancée. Upon telling him their names he became enthusiastic and led us to the main shrine in the heart of the temple.

There before us stood a large statue of a man, a woman and a monkey. “Sri Rama and his wife Sita,” said the Brahmin, “or as you call them, Dhanurdharaya and Maithili. Accompanying them is Hanumanji, the lord of monkeys. For us Hindus Diwali is a time to honour their homecoming after the war in Lanka.”

I gazed at the statues in disbelief. Could Sri Rama himself have been the man I met at the station? I did not know what to make of it. Yet in that moment, as I held Zoe’s hand, I found myself willing to believe. After all, had I not found happiness? It seemed that in India anything was possible.