

Malaria

(Abbreviated chapter)

From **Yakety Yak: Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle**
by Russell McGilton

‘Congratulations,’ grinned Dr Chawla as he handed me my blood test result.
‘You are having the malaria.’

‘Malaria?’

‘Yes, yes.’ He smiled again as he slouched back in his chair and scratched his crotch.

‘Tell me, Doctor,’ I said, wiping sweat from my eye, ‘is this the kind of malaria that goes to your brain and then kills you?’

‘No, no, no, no...not yet.’

I tried to relax as my head slowly slid off my shoulders. Here I was in the middle of rural India, miles from anywhere while some deadly malaria strain coursed through my veins.

‘Do many people die from this around here?’

‘Yes, many!’ He smiled brightly. He put on his glasses and showed me the blood-test result. A Latin term was badly typed across a thin piece of paper.

‘What’s *P.falciparum*?’ I asked, reading it.

‘*Plasmodium falciparum*. It is a strain of malaria. There are four types: *Plasmodium vivax*, *ovale*, *malariae* and the one you have – *falciparum* – the killer malaria!’ he said, smiling. His wife’s indifference was matched only by his joy at my illness.

‘Right,’ I said, trying to digest all of this as I replayed being bitten on the ankle in the hotel in Mumbai, the bites through the night in Aurangabad, the bites on my neck in ... somewhere.

‘Injection! Injection is best for you! Inside!’ In the same manner as his wife, he waved me away to a cubicle.

Later, they laid me out on the table in the foyer of the hospital, flung a blanket over me, and popped a saline-solution drip into my surrendered forearm. The drip hung there draining itself like a dying tick while, outside, the noxious sounds of traffic horns tore past.

I began to think of other times I had been ill in foreign lands. The worst of it had been in Egypt, in the back of a taxi on the way to the temple of Abu Simbel, hot as hell in the middle of the Aswan desert. I had stabbing pains in my stomach and had been vomiting and crapping all day. A forty-something Israeli woman had an enlightened solution.

‘Russell, to take your mind off the pain, what you need to do is to masturbate!’

At the time, I almost considered it, but I did wonder how well that would have gone down while middle-aged Americans in big shorts posed in front of the giant statues of Ramesses II while I shat, vomited and jerked myself blue into a furious cloud of dust by their ankles ... ‘George! What’s he doing? Do you think I should give him *baksheesh* to make him stop? It’s getting all over my Nikes.’

As if to muffle such thoughts, a nurse came over and put another blanket over me. I didn’t realise I had been shivering. The nurse smiled, patted my arm, then disappeared upstairs, her purple sari waving behind her. I fell asleep.

At the news of my malaria, my friends and family were understandably concerned.

But it was my mother’s response that surprised me the most: ‘I hear you’ve got a touch of malaria.’

A *touch* of malaria? I couldn't believe it. What was she thinking? A *tickle* of bubonic plague? A *sniffle* of AIDS? Got a bit of a rash from that nasty Ebola business, luv? *Muuuuuuuum!*

A week went by and I was back at the Doctors Chawla to collect the last of my antibiotics and chloroquine. I was feeling much better. The aches and fevers had gone and I was feeling almost normal.

The doctor, to my surprise, was not so concerned about my health but about something much more pressing.

'Tell me,' he said coyly, looking around the room for his wife, then, smiling (or was that leering?), 'I hear the sex in your country is ... free.'

'Free?'

'Yes. *Free.*'

I looked around the clinic. His wife wasn't around.

'Well ... you've got to buy them a drink at least,' I said.

'Ah, drink. Hmm.'

His wife walked in and sat down at the desk. He shifted in his chair and put his glasses on.

'Tell me,' his said, scrutinising my bald pate, 'where did your hair go?'

I blinked at the remark.

'South America.'

'South America? I don't understand.'

'I'm bald, Doctor. *Pure* bald.'

'Yes, I see. You can be having the hair transplant,' he smiled, evidently finding the thought of having hair plugs butchered into my scalp a pleasing one.

'No, I don't want to have that,' I said. 'Besides, they don't really work. My father had one and he ended up getting a toupée. A wig,' I added for clarity.

'A wig? This is ridiculous. Why would you want to worry about such things?'

'I'm not sure ...' I stared at him, noting that he had tried every possible manoeuvre with his remaining hair to cover his balding pate – from the back, the sides, a little from the front – it looked like a coffee scroll and *he* was telling *me* not to worry about baldness?

'Anyway,' he said sitting up, fiddling with his glasses and affecting a professional air, 'you should not cycle with this malaria, Mr Russell.'

'But I'm feeling fine.'

'No. You must not cycle. You must rest.'

'For how long?'

'Another ten days at least.'

'Really? I'm feeling quite chipper. I had a ride today and felt great.'

'No! Not advisable. Here, take this course of tablets.'

He dumped a pile of boxes on the desk and fixed a hard stare over his glasses.

'Finish them all. And *no cycling!*'