France

The first word spoken by the Indian man Ajatashatru Oghash Rathod upon his arrival in France was, oddly enough, a Swedish word.

Ikea.

That was what he said in a quiet voice.

Having pronounced this word, he shut the door of the old red Mercedes and waited, his hands resting on his silky knees like a well-behaved child.

The taxi driver, who was not sure he had heard correctly, turned round to face his customer, making the little wooden beads of his seat cover creak as he did so.

On the back seat of his car sat a middle-aged man, tall, thin and gnarled like a tree, with an olive-skinned face and a huge moustache. Pockmarks, the consequence of chronic acne, sprinkled his hollow cheeks. There were several rings in his ears and his lips, as if he wished to be able to zip them up after use. Oh, what a clever system! thought

Gustave Palourde, seeing in this Indian zip idea the perfect remedy for his wife's incessant chattering.

The man's grey and shiny silk suit, his red tie – which he had not even bothered to knot, but had simply pinned on – and his white shirt, all terribly creased, suggested he had been on a long flight. Strangely, however, he had no luggage.

Either he's a Hindu or he's suffered a very serious head injury, the driver thought when he considered the large white turban that encircled his customer's head. The olive-skinned face and the huge moustache made him lean towards the first of these theories.

'Ikea?'

'Ikea,' the Indian repeated, elongating the last vowel.

'Which one?' he asked, in French. Then, in stuttering English: 'Er . . . what Ikea?' Gustave was as comfortable speaking English as a dog on ice skates.

The passenger shrugged as if to suggest that he couldn't care less. *Justikea*, he said, *dontmataze-oanezatbestasiutyayazeparijan*. This is more or less what the driver heard: a series of incomprehensible babbling noises. But, babbling or otherwise, this was the first time in his thirty years spent working for

Gypsy Taxis that a customer coming out of Terminal 2C of Charles de Gaulle Airport had asked to be taken to a furniture store. As far as he was aware, Ikea had not recently opened a chain of hotels.

Gustave had heard some unusual requests before, but this one took the biscuit. If this guy had really come from India, then he had paid a small fortune and spent eight hours in an aeroplane in order to buy Billy shelves or a Poäng chair. Crikey! It was incredible, really. He had to write this encounter down in his guest book, between Demis Roussos and Salman Rushdie, both of whom had once done him the honour of placing their noble posteriors on the leopard-skin seats of his taxi. He also had to remember to tell the story to his wife that evening, during dinner. As he generally had nothing to say, it was his wife (whose luscious lips were not yet equipped with a clever Indian zip system) who monopolised the mealtime conversation, while their daughter sent misspelt texts to other young people who did not even know how to read. This would change things a little, for once.

'OK!'

The Gypsy Taxi driver, who had spent his last three weekends roaming the blue-and-yellow

corridors of the Swedish store with the two aforementioned ladies in order to furnish the new family caravan, knew perfectly well that the closest Ikea was the one in Roissy Paris Nord, a mere €8.25 ride away. So he set his sights on the one in Paris Sud Thiais, located on the other side of the city, three-quarters of an hour from their current location. After all, the tourist wanted an Ikea. He had not specified which Ikea. And anyway, with his posh silk suit and his tie, he must be a wealthy Indian industrialist. Not likely to be short of a few bob, was he?

Pleased with himself, Gustave quickly calculated how much money the journey would make him, and rubbed his hands. Then he started the meter and set off.

What an excellent way to begin the day!

A fakir by trade, Ajatashatru Oghash (pronounced *A-jar-of-rat-stew-oh-gosh!*) had decided to travel incognito for his first trip to Europe. For this occasion, he had swapped his 'uniform', which consisted of a loincloth shaped like an enormous nappy, for a shiny grey suit and a tie rented for peanuts from Dilawar (pronounced *Die, lawyer!*), an old man from the village who had, during his youth, been a representative for a famous brand of shampoo, and who still had an impressive head of (greying) hair.

In choosing this disguise, which he was to wear for both days of his trip, the fakir had secretly wished to be taken for a wealthy Indian industrialist – so much so that he had forsaken wearing comfortable clothes (i.e. a tracksuit and sandals) for the three-hour bus journey and a flight lasting eight hours and fifteen minutes. After all, pretending to be something he was not was his job: he was a fakir. He had kept only his turban, for religious reasons.

Beneath it, his hair kept growing and growing. It was now, he estimated, about sixteen inches long, with a total population of thirty thousand (mostly germs and fleas).

Getting into the taxi that day, Ajatashatru (pronounced *A-cat-in-a-bat-suit*) had immediately noticed that his peculiar get-up had produced the desired effect on the European, in spite of the tie, which neither he nor his cousin knew how to knot correctly, even after the perfectly clear but somewhat shaky explanations of Dilawar, who had Parkinson's. But obviously this was a minor detail, as it had gone unnoticed amid the overwhelming elegance of his attire.

A glance in the rear-view mirror not being enough to contemplate such handsomeness, the Frenchman had actually turned round in his seat in order to better admire Ajatashatru, making the bones in his neck crack as he did so, as if he were preparing for an act of contortionism.

'Ikea?'

'Ikeaaa.'

'*Lequel?* Er . . . what Ikea?' the driver had stammered, apparently as comfortable speaking English as a (holy) cow on ice skates.

'Just Ikea. Doesn't matter. The one that best suits you. You're the Parisian.'

Smiling, the driver had rubbed his hands before starting the engine.

The Frenchman has taken the bait, thought Ajatashatru (pronounced *A-jackal-that-ate-you*) with satisfaction. This new look was proving ideal for his mission. With a little luck, and if he didn't have to open his mouth too much, he might even pass for a native.

Ajatashatru was famous throughout Rajasthan for swallowing retractable swords, eating broken glass made from zero-calorie sugar, stabbing his arms with fake needles, and a heap of other conjuring tricks, the secrets of which were known only to him and his cousins, and which he was happy to label *magical powers* in order to bewitch the masses.

So, when the time came to pay the bill for the taxi ride, which amounted to €98.45, our fakir handed over the only money he had for his entire trip – a counterfeit €100 note printed on just one side – while nonchalantly gesturing to the driver that he could keep the change.

Just as the driver was sliding the note into his wallet, Ajatashatru created a diversion by pointing at the huge yellow letters that proudly spelt out *I-K-E-A* above the blue building. The gypsy looked up long enough for the fakir to pull nimbly on the invisible elastic that connected his little finger to

the €100 note. A tenth of a second later, the money had returned to its original owner.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' said the driver, believing the note to be nestled safely within his wallet. 'Let me give you my firm's card. In case you need a taxi for the way back. We have vans as well, if you need. Believe me, even in flatpack form, furniture takes up a lot of space.'

Gustave never knew if the Indian had understood any of what he had just told him. Rummaging in the glove compartment, he pulled out a laminated business card emblazoned with a flamenco dancer and handed it to him.

'*Merci*,' said the foreigner.

When the red Mercedes of Gypsy Taxis had disappeared – although the fakir, who was only used to making small-eared Indian elephants disappear, could not claim to be responsible – Ajatashatru slipped the card into his pocket and contemplated the vast commercial warehouse that stretched out in front of him.

In 2009, Ikea had given up on the idea of opening a branch in India, as local laws would have forced the Swedish directors to share the running of their stores with Indian managers, who would also have

been majority shareholders. At the same time, the company set up a partnership with Unicef, the aim of which was to fight against child labour and slavery. This project, which involved five hundred villages in the north of India, enabled the construction of several health, nutrition and education centres throughout the region. It was in one of these schools that Ajatashatru had ended up, having been controversially fired, in his first week in the job, from the court of the maharaja Abhimanyu Ashanta Nhoi (pronounced *A-big-man-you-shouldn't-annoy*), where he had been hired as a fakir and jester. He had made the mistake of stealing a piece of sesame-seed bread, some cholesterol-free butter and two organic grapes. In other words, he had made the mistake of being hungry.

As punishment, he had first of all had his moustache shaved off, already a severe penalty in itself (even if it made him look younger), and then he had been given a straight choice between teaching schoolchildren about the perils of theft and crime, or having his right hand cut off. After all, a fakir fears neither pain nor death . . .

To the astonishment of his followers, who had become used to watching him perform all kinds of

mutilation on his body (meat skewers in his arms, forks in his cheeks, swords in his belly), Ajatashatru had declined the offer of amputation and had gone for the first option.

'Excuse me, sir, could you tell me the time, please?'

The Indian jumped. A middle-aged man in tracksuit and sandals had just stopped in front of him, pushing (not without difficulty) a trolley filled with at least ten cardboard boxes that only a Tetris champion, or a psychopath, could have arranged in that particular way.

For Ajatashatru, the question had sounded, more or less, as follows: *Euskuzaymoameussieuoriayvouleursivouplay?*

It was, in other words, completely incomprehensible, and the only response it could possibly prompt was: *WHAT?*

Seeing that he was dealing with a foreigner, the man tapped his left wrist with his right index finger. The fakir, understanding this straight away, lifted his head to the sky and, as he was used to reading the time with the Indian sun, told the Frenchman it was three hours and thirty minutes later than it actually was. The Frenchman, who understood

English better than he spoke it, became suddenly aware that he was horribly late picking up his children from school for their lunch hour, and began frantically pushing his trolley towards his car.

Watching people enter and exit the store, the Indian noticed that very few customers – well, none, in fact – were dressed like he was. Shiny silk suits were apparently not in fashion. Nor were turbans, for that matter. Given that he had been aiming to blend in seamlessly, this was not a good sign. He hoped this fact would not compromise his entire mission. The tracksuit and sandals combination would have fitted the bill much better. When he got home, he would talk about this to his cousin Parthasarathy (pronounced *Parties-are-arty*). It was his cousin who had insisted he should dress like this.

Ajatashatru spent a few moments watching the glass doors open and close in front of him. All his experiences of modernity had come from watching Hollywood and Bollywood films on television at the home of his adoptive mother, Adishree Dhou (pronounced *A-didgeridoo*). It was surprising and somewhat distressing to him to see how these devices, which he thought of as jewels of modern

technology, had become utterly banal to the Europeans, who no longer even paid any attention to them. If there had been an Ikea in Kishanyogoor (pronounced *Quiche-and-yogurt*), he would have contemplated the glass doors of this temple of technology with the same undimmed emotion each time. The French were just spoilt children.

Once, when he was only ten years old, long before the first signs of progress had appeared in his village, an Englishman had shown him a cigarette lighter and told him: 'All sufficiently advanced technology is indiscernible from magic.' At the time, the child had not understood. So the man had explained: 'What that means, quite simply, is that things which are banal for me can seem magical to you; it all depends on the technological level of the society in which you grow up.' Little sparks had then leapt from the foreigner's thumb, before coalescing into a beautiful, hot, dazzling blue flame. Before leaving, the Englishman had given him – in return for a very strange favour which will be described in more detail later – this magical object still unknown in the small, remote village on the edge of the Tharthar Desert. And with this lighter, Ajatashatru had developed his

first magic tricks, stirring the desire to one day become a fakir.

He had felt some of the same sense of wonder when he had taken the aeroplane yesterday. The journey had been an incredible experience for him. Before that, the highest from the ground he had ever flown was seven and a half inches. And even that was only when the special mechanism, cleverly hidden under his bottom during public levitations, was working perfectly. And so he had spent all night staring through the porthole of the plane, open-mouthed in amazement.

When he thought he had spent enough time in reverential contemplation of the sliding doors, the Indian finally decided to enter the store. He had travelled for more than ten hours, by bus and plane, to come here, and he did not have much time left in which to accomplish his mission. He was due to fly home the next day.

Quickening his pace, he climbed the huge staircase covered in blue lino that led to the upper floor.

For someone from a Western democracy, Mr Ikea had developed a commercial concept that was, to say the least, somewhat unusual: the dictatorial shopping experience.

Any customer wishing to reach the self-service warehouse located on the ground floor is obliged to first go upstairs, to walk along a gigantic and never-ending corridor that weaves between showcase bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens, each one more beautiful than the last, to pass a mouth-watering restaurant, perhaps stopping to eat a few meatballs or salmon wraps, and then to go back downstairs so that they can finally make their purchases in the warehouse. So, basically, someone who has come to buy three screws and two bolts might return home four hours later with a fitted kitchen and a bad case of indigestion.

The Swedes, who are very shrewd people, even thought to draw a yellow line on the floor,

indicating the correct way, just in case one of the customers thinks of straying from the beaten path. The whole time that he was on the first floor, Ajatashatru did not deviate from this line, believing that the Kings of Pine Furniture had undoubtedly posted snipers on the tops of wardrobes in order to prevent all escape attempts by shooting on sight any customer overcome by a sudden desire for freedom.

It was all so beautiful that our Rajasthani, who up to this point had known only the austerity of his modest Indian dwellings, wanted to take up residence in the store, to sit down at an Ingatorp table and be served tandoori chicken by a Swedish woman in a yellow-and-blue sari, to snuggle between the Smörboll sheets on this comfortable Sultan Fåvang and take a nap, to lie in a bath and turn on the hot-water tap so he could relax a little after his tiring journey.

As in his conjuring tricks, however, everything here was fake. The book he had picked up randomly from the Billy bookcase was nothing but a plastic brick in a book jacket, the television in the living room boasted no more electronic components than an aquarium, and not a single drop of hot water

(or cold water, for that matter) would ever drip from the tap in the bathroom.

Nevertheless, the idea of spending the night here began to germinate in his mind. After all, he had not reserved a hotel room, for financial reasons, and his aeroplane did not take off until 1 p.m. the next day. And all the money he had was his counterfeit €100 note, which he would need to buy the bed. And the invisible elastic would not work forever.

Relieved at knowing where he would be sleeping that night, Ajatashatru was now free to concentrate on his mission.

Ajatashatru had never seen so many chairs, spaghetti tongs and lamps in his life. Here, within arm's reach, an abundance of objects stretched out before his wonder-filled eyes. He was ignorant of the function of quite a few of them, but that hardly mattered. It was the sheer quantity that excited him. This was a true Aladdin's cave. There were objects everywhere. If his cousin had been there with him, he would have said: 'Look at that! And that! And that too!', leaping from one display to the next, touching everything he saw as if he were a little boy.

But he was all alone, so he could only say 'Look at that! And that! And that too!' to himself, and if he leapt from one display to the next, touching everything he saw as if he were a little boy, people were likely to conclude that he was a madman. In his village, mad people were beaten with long wooden sticks. He had no desire to find out if a kinder fate awaited the insane in France.

The sight of all these salad bowls and microwave ovens reminded him that he came from a very different world. To think that if he had not come here, he would perhaps never have known that such a place existed! He would have to tell his cousin all about this. If only Parthasarathy could be here too. Ajatashatru found it difficult to enjoy all these new discoveries on his own. When he was away from his family, he missed them so much that even the most jaw-dropping landscapes seemed boring and bland.

As he was thinking this, Ajatashatru arrived at the bedroom section. In front of him were a dozen beds, each arrayed with bright and colourful duvets labelled with improbable and unpronounceable names. Mysa Strå, Mysa Rönn, Mysa Rosenglim (was this some kind of word game with letters picked up randomly?). Soft and fluffy pillows, thrown on the beds in neat patterns – or, rather, placed neatly on the beds in a way that suggested they had been thrown – coaxed customers to lie down and take a nap.

A couple lay decorously on a Birkeland, their minds filled with visions of the delightful nights they would spend there together. Perhaps they

would even make a child in that bed? Indeed, a sign written in French and English informed visitors that one baby in ten was conceived in an Ikea bed. Ajatashatru was pretty sure that the population of India had not been included in this statistic.

This idyllic scene was rudely shattered when two children jumped like savages onto an Årviksand and began a very loud and violent pillow fight. The young couple, lying two beds down from this battle, got up in a panic and fled towards the bathroom section, indefinitely postponing all plans for procreation.

Ajatashatru did not hang around this now-hostile environment either, and wove nimbly between the bedside tables. Not that he didn't like children. Quite the contrary, in fact. He was simply not interested in any of the models of bed on display. What he was looking for did not seem to be located in this section.

He noticed three employees, dressed in the store's colours – yellow and blue, the colours of the Swedish flag, like the sari worn by the beautiful Swedish woman who had served him tandoori chicken in his imagination – but they all seemed busy with other customers. So he went over to one of the three and waited his turn.

The sales assistant he had chosen was a short fat man wearing green-tinted glasses, diamond earrings and a toupee, the kind of person who would be caught within minutes were anyone ever to witness him committing a crime. He was busy with his computer, occasionally lifting his head to look at the customers in front of him before returning his full attention to the screen. A few minutes later, he grabbed a sheet of paper from the printer and handed it to the couple who, apparently satisfied, walked quickly away, eager to tell their friends that Sir Elton John was now working in Ikea and that he had just sold them a shoe cabinet.

After checking that the sales assistant spoke English, Ajatashatru asked him if they had the latest model of the Hertsyörbåk bed of nails on display. To illustrate his query, he unfolded the piece of paper he had retrieved from his jacket pocket and handed it to the employee.

It was a colour photograph of a bed for fakirs made of real Swedish pine, available in three colours, with stainless-steel nails of adjustable length. The page had been torn from the June 2012 Ikea catalogue, 198 million copies of which had

been printed worldwide, double the annual print run of the Bible.

Several models were available: 200 nails (very expensive and extremely dangerous), 500 nails (affordable and comfortable), and 15,000 nails (very cheap and, paradoxically, very comfortable). Above the bed, a slogan boasted: *Sharpen your senses!* The price of €99.99 (for the model with 15,000 nails) was displayed in large yellow figures.

'We no longer have that model in stock,' explained the Elton John of self-assembly furniture in very good English. 'It sold out.'

Seeing the distress on the Indian's face at this news, he hastened to add: 'But you can always order one.'

'How long would that take?' asked Ajatashatru, deeply concerned at the idea that he had come all this way for nothing.

'You could have it tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow morning?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

'In that case, I'll take it.'

Pleased to have satisfied his customer, the employee sent his fingers scurrying over the keyboard.

'Your name please?'

'Mr Rathod (pronounced *Rat-head*). Ajatashatru . . . you spell it the way it sounds.'

'Oh gosh!' the employee exclaimed, stumped.

Then, more out of laziness than convenience, he wrote an X in the box while the Indian wondered how this European had known that his second name was Oghash.

'So, that's a Hertsyörbåk fakir special in real Swedish pine, with stainless-steel nails of adjustable length. What colour?'

'What are the options?'

'Puma red, tortoise blue or dolphin green.'

'I don't really see how the colours relate to the animals,' admitted Ajatashatru, who did not really see how the colours related to the animals in question.

'It's marketing,' the Frenchman shrugged. 'It's beyond the likes of us.'

'Oh. All right then, puma red.'

The sales assistant's fingers spidered frantically over the keyboard again.

'All done. You may come to fetch it tomorrow, any time after 10 a.m. Can I help you with anything else?'

'Yes, just a quick question, out of curiosity. How

come the model with fifteen thousand nails is three times cheaper than the two-hundred-nail model, which is much more dangerous?'

The man peered at Ajatashatru over the frames of his glasses, as though he did not understand.

'I have the feeling you don't understand my question,' said the fakir. 'What I mean is: what kind of idiot would buy a bed that is more expensive, far less comfortable and much more dangerous?'

'When you have spent a whole week hammering the fifteen thousand nails into the fifteen thousand holes in the wood, sir, you will no longer be asking that question. Indeed, you will regret not having bought the two-hundred-nail model, even if it is more expensive, less comfortable and more dangerous. Believe me!'

Ajatashatru nodded and took the €100 note from his wallet, being careful not to show the assistant its blank side. He had removed the invisible thread, as he would be handing the note over for good this time. The mission was about to be accomplished. Right here and right now.

'This is not where you pay, sir. You have to go

downstairs, to the tills. And you will pay tomorrow. That will be €115.89.'

Ajatashatru would have fallen over backwards had he not, at that moment, been gripping tightly to the piece of paper that the Frenchman, smiling, had handed to him.

'One hundred and fifteen euros and eighty-nine centimes?' he repeated in an offended tone.

'Ninety-nine euros and ninety-nine centimes was the promotional price. It expired last week. Look, it's written here.'

With these words, the sales assistant pointed with one pudgy finger to a line of text at the bottom of the page so small that the letters might have been ant footprints.

'Ah.'

The Indian's world collapsed around him.

'I hope you are satisfied with our service. If so, please tell everyone you know. If not, there is no need to bother. Thank you and goodbye, sir.'

At this, the young Sir Elton, considering the conversation to be over, turned his large head and his dolphin-green glasses towards the woman who was standing behind Ajatashatru.

‘Hello, madame, what can I do for you?’

The fakir moved out of the way to let the lady past. Then he stared worriedly at his €100 note, wondering how on earth he could get hold of the extra €15.89 by ten o’clock tomorrow morning.

On a large sign displayed close to the tills, Ajatashatru read that the store closed at 8 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. So, at around 7.45 p.m. – he read the time on a plastic Swatch worn by a voluptuous blonde woman – he thought it a good idea to gravitate once more to the bedroom section.

After glancing discreetly around, he slid underneath a luridly coloured bed. Just then, a woman's robotic voice boomed from the loudspeakers. Despite the fact that he was lying down, the Indian jumped, smashing his head against the wooden slats that supported the mattress. He would never have believed it possible to jump from a horizontal position.

All his senses alert, the fakir imagined the store security guards, already in position on top of the wardrobes, pointing their sniper rifles at the Birkeland under which he was hiding, while a Franco-Swedish

commando team moved stealthily and quickly to surround the bed. Inside his chest, his heart was beating to the rhythm of a Bollywood soundtrack. He undid the safety pin that held his tie in place and unbuttoned his shirt in order to breathe more easily. He feared the end of his adventure was drawing near.

After a few minutes spent holding his breath, however, no one had come to remove him from under the bed, and he deduced that the voice on the loudspeaker had merely been announcing that the store was closing.

He breathed out and waited.

A few hours earlier, just after his conversation with the sales assistant, Ajatashatru had felt hungry and headed towards the restaurant.

He did not know what time it was. And, indoors, it was impossible to calculate it from the sun's position in the sky. His cousin Pakmaan (pronounced *Pacman*) had once told him that there were no clocks in Las Vegas casinos. That way, the customers did not notice time passing and spent much more money than they had intended to spend. Ikea must have copied this technique because, although there were clocks on the walls for sale, none of them had batteries. However, whether he knew the time or not, spending more money was a luxury that Ajatashatru could not permit himself.

The Indian looked at other customers' wrists, and finally saw the time on a sporty black watch that apparently belonged to someone called Patek Philippe.

It was 2.35 p.m.

With no other money in his pocket than the €100 note that his cousin Parthasarathy had printed for him, on one side only, and which, when added to €15.89 in change, would enable him to buy his new bed of nails, Ajatashatru walked into the restaurant. His nostrils were teased by the scents of cooked meat and fish with lemon.

He went to the back of the queue, behind a woman in her forties, slim and tanned with long blonde hair, dressed in a rather bourgeois style. The perfect victim, thought Ajatashatru, as he moved closer to her. She smelt of expensive perfume. Her hands, with their burgundy-painted fingernails, picked up a plate and some cutlery.

This was the moment chosen by the Indian to take a pair of fake Police sunglasses from his pocket and put them on. He moved a little closer to the woman, and took his turn picking up a plate, a knife that did not seem likely to cut anything, and a fork with blunt prongs just like those that he used to stick in his tongue. He leaned into the woman's back and counted in his head. Three, two, one. At that very moment, feeling discomfited by the closeness of the person behind her, the Frenchwoman turned round, banging her shoulder into Ajatashatru's sunglasses and

sending them flying through the air to the ground, where they smashed into several pieces. Bingo!

'MY GOSH!' the fakir cried out, staring distraught at the sunglasses before putting his plate down and kneeling to retrieve the broken pieces.

He did not wish to overdo the melodrama.

'Oh, *je suis* embarrassed!' the lady said, bending down to help him.

Ajatashatru looked sadly at the six pieces of smoky blue glass that he held in the palm of his hand as the woman handed him the gold-coloured frames.

'I am sorry. I'm so clumsy.'

Wincing, the con man shrugged, as if to say it was not important. 'Never mind. It's OK.'

'Oh, but *oui*, it minds. It minds *beaucoup*! I am going to compensate you.'

Ajatashatru clumsily attempted to put the bits of glass back in their frame. But as soon as he managed to secure one, another would immediately fall out into his hand.

As this was happening, the woman was rummaging through her handbag in search of her purse. She took out a €20 note and apologised for not being able to give him more.

The Indian politely refused. But the bourgeois lady insisted, so finally he took the note and shoved it in his pocket.

'Thank you. It is very kind of you.'

'It is normal, it is normal. And also, the meal is for me.'

Ajatashatru put the broken sunglasses in his trouser pocket and picked up his plate.

How easy life was for thieves. In a few seconds, he had just earned the €15.89 he needed to buy the Hertsyörbåk bed, plus €4.11 in pocket money. He also got a free meal (tomatoes with paprika, a salmon wrap with chips, a banana and a glass of flat Coca-Cola) and some charming company for his lunch that day. As she too was on her own, Marie Rivière (that was her name) had suggested that they eat their meal together, as well as insisting she pay for his food in return for breaking his sunglasses.

So there they were: the victim and the con man, the antelope and the lion, sitting at the same table, she shrieking with laughter at the stories told by this unusual person in a suit and turban. If someone from Kishanyogoor were to witness this scene, they would probably not believe their eyes. Ajatashatru, who had sworn a vow of chastity and chosen a

balanced diet of organic nails and bolts, sitting at a table with a charming European lady while stuffing himself with smoked salmon and chips! In his village, a photograph of such an event would mean the immediate loss of his fakir's licence, perhaps even the shaving of his moustache. Probably a quick death sentence too, while they were at it.

'For some things, to be unfortunate is good,' the lady said, blushing. 'If I do not break your glasses, we do not meet. And then, I never see your beautiful eyes.'[1]

Perhaps it was not a woman's place to say that, Marie thought. Perhaps it was not for her to make the first move. But she really did think that the Indian had beautiful, Coca-Cola-coloured eyes, with sparkles in the irises reminiscent of the bubbles in the famous American soda – the very bubbles cruelly absent from the glass of Coke that Ajatashatru was currently drinking. Beautiful bubbles . . . or perhaps they were stars? Anyway, she was now at an age where, if she wanted something, she reached out

[1] *Author's note*: In the interests of the reader's understanding, we will polish up Marie's pidgin English during future conversations.

and took it. Life was passing so quickly these days. Here was the proof that a minor accident in a queue at Ikea could sometimes provide better results than a three-year subscription to Match.com.

The man smiled, embarrassed. His moustache pointed up at the ends like Hercule Poirot's, dragging with it all the rings that hung from his pierced lips. Marie thought those rings made him seem wild, virile, naughty . . . basically, everything she found attractive in a man. And yet his shirt was quite posh. It was an appealing mix. He looked exactly like the kind of man she often fantasised about.

'Are you staying in Paris at the moment?' she asked, trying to restrain her urges.

'You could put it like that,' replied the Rajasthani, not making it clear that he was going to spend the night in Ikea. 'But I'm leaving tomorrow. I just came here to buy something.'

'Something worth a round trip of four thousand miles . . .' she observed sagely.

So the fakir explained that he had come to France with the intention of buying the latest bed of nails to come on the market. A nail mattress was a bit like a spring mattress: after a certain time, it became

worn out. The tips of the nails grew blunt, and they had to be changed.

Of course, he did not mention that he was flat broke and that his journey here (he had chosen Paris as it was the cheapest destination he had found on an Internet search engine) had been funded by the inhabitants of his native village, who, believing him to have magic powers, had hoped to help cure the poor fakir of his rheumatism by buying him a new bed. This was, in fact, a sort of pilgrimage. Ikea was his version of the grotto in Lourdes.

While he was telling her all this, Ajatashatru felt embarrassed, for the first time in his life, by his own lies. For him, not telling the truth had become second nature. But there was something about Marie that made the act more difficult. He found this Frenchwoman so pure, so gentle and friendly. He felt as if he were dishonouring her somehow. And dishonouring himself at the same time. It was rather disconcerting for him, this new feeling, this shadow of guilt. Marie had a beautiful face that shone with innocence and kindness. The face of a porcelain doll filled with that humanity which he himself had lost during his battle to survive in the hostile jungle of his childhood.

It was also the first time that he had been asked questions about his life, that someone had shown any interest in him for something unconnected with curing chronic constipation or erectile dysfunction. He even came to regret having conned Marie in such a despicable manner.

And the way she looked at him, the way she smiled at him . . . He could be wrong, but it seemed to him that she was chatting him up. This was a strange situation because in his country it was always men who chatted up women, but it made him feel good anyway.

Inside his pocket, Ajatashatru caressed the frames of his fake sunglasses. A secret mechanism enabled the six pieces of glass to interlock and be held in tension. Bang them even slightly and the pieces burst out of the frames, giving the illusion that the glasses had smashed.

Ever since he had started using this trick, he had noticed that most people felt so guilty that they gave him money as compensation for their clumsiness.

In fact Ajatashatru, who did not have an original bone in his body, had merely tweaked the famous broken vase illusion, which he had found in an old book on tricks and hoaxes.

THE BROKEN VASE TRICK

Material: a parcel, a broken vase, wrapping paper.

You walk around a large store holding a parcel covered in wrapping paper. Inside this parcel, you have previously placed the pieces of a broken vase. As you walk around the store, you spot a victim, approach her, and press your body against hers. Your sudden presence so close to her will make her jump. When this happens, you should drop the parcel. The sound it makes when it hits the floor will give the impression that the beautiful vase you were planning to give to your beloved aunt has just smashed into a thousand pieces. The victim will feel so guilty that she will instantly offer to compensate you for the damage.

'So now I know how you charm women,' said Marie with a sly little smile, 'but what I would like to know is how you fakirs charm snakes . . . That has always intrigued me.'

Truth be told, the Indian had not intended to charm the Frenchwoman, but he accepted the compliment, assuming it was a compliment. And as he felt he owed her something, having so foully

cheated her of €20, he decided he would not lose face if he revealed one little fakir's secret to her. She deserved it.

'As I find you charming, in the literal meaning of the word, I will reveal to you this fakir's secret,' he told her solemnly. 'But you must swear to me that you will not repeat it to anyone.'

'I promise,' Marie breathed, her hand brushing his.

In the real world, they were separated by two plates of Swedish food, but in his mind, he took her in his arms and whispered his secrets into her ear.

Blushing, Ajatashatru pulled his hand back.

'In my village,' he stammered, 'we grow up in the presence of snakes. When I was still a baby, not even one year old, while you perhaps were playing with dolls, I had a cobra as a toy and a pet. Of course, the adults regularly checked that its glands did not contain any venom by forcing it to bite a rag that they held over an empty jam jar. The precious liquid was used to make an antidote. But believe me, even without venom, being bitten or headbutted by one of those creatures is not particularly pleasant. Anyway, you asked me how we charm snakes. The trick is this: snakes are deaf. I don't

know if you were aware of that. So, the snake follows the back-and-forth motion of the *pungi*, that flute which looks like a gourd run through by a long, hollow piece of wood, and the vibrations in the air produced by the instrument. To a spectator, it looks as though the snake is dancing, whereas in fact all it is doing is following the flute's movement with its head. Fascinating, isn't it?'

Yes, Marie was fascinated. This conversation was so much more interesting than any she had shared in recent years with the young men she brought back home after a night out. How hard it is to live alone when you cannot bear solitude! It leads you to put up with so many regrettable things. And, as Marie preferred being with someone unsuitable to being on her own, the next morning was often embittered by an aftertaste of regret.

'But it is so much more difficult to charm a woman than to charm a snake,' the man added, concluding with a touch of humour.

And she smiled.

'That depends on the woman . . .' At times, the beautiful Frenchwoman seemed as fragile as a porcelain doll. The next moment, she was as bewitching as a panther. 'And on the snake . . .'

The conversation was taking an odd turn. In India, it was very simple: no one chatted up fakirs. At least, that was what Ajatashatru liked to think, as no one had ever chatted him up before. He liked this Frenchwoman a lot, he really did, but the problem was that he was here for only one night, he did not even have a hotel room, and he had not come to France in order to find a woman. He had his mission to consider and, anyway, one-night stands were not his thing. No, the best thing to do was just forget all of this now. That was quite enough of that!

'So, what did you come here to buy?' he asked, attempting to rid his mind of these ideas.

But it was difficult not to look down at the Frenchwoman's pretty cleavage and to let his imagination run riot.

'A lamp, and a magnetic rack so I can hang cutlery over my kitchen sink. Nothing very sexy.'

Taking advantage of this conversational turn, Ajatashatru opened his hand in a vertical position, palm towards him, and placed his fork there. It remained suspended in the air, behind his fingers, in a horizontal position, as if by magic.

'Or you could hang your cutlery like this,' he suggested. 'Even Ikea doesn't stock this model!'

'Oh! How do you do that?' she asked, visibly impressed.

The Indian narrowed his eyes mysteriously. He shook his hand, to show that the fork was really stuck there by a powerful and irresistible force.

'Come on, tell me!' Marie pleaded, like an impatient little girl. But each time she leaned towards him to see what he was hiding behind his hand, Ajatashatru moved further back.

In these circumstances, the fakir knew, silence would only irritate and pique the curiosity of his audience. But he had already explained the flute trick to her. If he revealed the truth behind this one too, he would effectively be admitting that everything he did was merely trickery and charlatanism. In order not to lose Marie's admiration, he preferred to do as he was used to doing with his compatriots: he preferred to lie.

'With a great deal of training and meditation.'

In fact, if Marie had been sitting next to Ajatashatru, she would have seen that the fork was trapped between the palm of his hand and his knife, which was poking out vertically from his sleeve. This, you will undoubtedly agree, requires neither much training nor much meditation.

'You haven't finished your dessert,' Ajatashatru said, to create a diversion.

In the time it took Marie to look down at her cheesecake, the Indian was able to remove the knife from his sleeve and place it, unnoticed, by the side of his plate.

'I don't like you any more,' Marie said sulkily. 'You haven't told me how you did it . . .'

'One day I must show you how it is possible to pierce one's tongue with a wire from top to bottom without leaving a hole!'

Marie thought she was about to faint. Oh, she couldn't bear that!

'Have you seen the Eiffel Tower?' she asked, to change the subject before the man got it into his head to pierce his tongue with his fork.

'No. I arrived this morning from New Delhi and came straight from the airport to Ikea.'

'There are so many fascinating stories and anecdotes about that monument. Did you know that Maupassant hated the Eiffel Tower? He ate there every day because it was the only place in Paris from which he couldn't see it . . .'

'First you have to tell me who this Maupassant is. But I do like that story!'

'He was a nineteenth-century French writer. But, hang on,' she said, pausing to eat the last bite of her dessert, 'I know an even better story. There was a crook by the name of Victor Lustig who managed to sell the Eiffel Tower. Can you believe that? After the Universal Exhibition of 1889, for which it had been built, the tower was supposed to be dismantled and then destroyed. It would have cost the French government a vast amount of money to maintain it, you see. So, this Lustig pretended to be a civil servant and, having counterfeited a national sales contract, he sold the pieces of the monument to the owner of a large scrap-metal firm for the modest sum of one hundred thousand francs.'

After Marie had converted this sum into Indian rupees, using her mobile phone, Ajatashatru felt like a novice con man in comparison with this Lustig. In order not to be outdone, he felt obliged to tell the beautiful Frenchwoman stories and tales from his own country. She laughed at the story of the fakir who was so poor he couldn't afford a nail, never imagining for a moment that the story was about him.

'Anyway,' she said finally, 'it's such a shame that you won't be able to see the Eiffel Tower. Lots of

your countrymen work there, selling Eiffel Towers. Who knows, you might find one of your relatives.'

Ajatashatru did not really understand what the Frenchwoman meant by this. Perhaps something had been lost in translation. Did she mean that all the Indians in Paris were estate agents?

Had he actually gone to the Champ de Mars to verify this information, of course, he would have seen more Pakistanis and Bangladeshis than Indians, all of them busy selling (in between police patrols) key rings and other small replicas of the famous monument.

'You know, it's been a long time since I laughed like I have today,' Marie confessed. 'Or simply talked with a man about things as . . . as *different* as this. It's so good to meet someone sincere and genuine like you. The kind of person who does good and spreads that goodness around them. I feel so at ease with you. Perhaps this is a silly thing to say, but although we have just met, I have the feeling we have known each other for a long time. I must admit that I am happy, in a way, that I broke your sunglasses.'

During this speech, the beautiful Frenchwoman had once again become a little porcelain doll with long, curled eyelashes.

A sincere person who does good and spreads that goodness around him . . . Is she really talking about me? the Indian wondered, turning and looking all around to make sure she really was talking about him. And he realised that this was indeed the case. Sometimes people just have to see you a certain way, particularly if the way they see you is positive, in order to transform you into that good person. This was the first electric shock that the fakir received to his heart during this adventure.

It would not be the last.

After he had spent just a few minutes under the bed, with no one coming to disturb him, Ajatashatru ended up nodding off. The horizontal position, the darkness, the sudden silence and the long journey won out over his willpower and his tremendous physical fitness. He may have been able to pretend that he couldn't feel pain, but he was incapable of doing the same thing when it came to tiredness. And anyway, there was no one watching him here, under this bed, so he could allow himself the luxury of being weak.

When he opened his eyes again two hours later, he had forgotten where he was, as sometimes happens when one wakes up after a short sleep, and he feared he had gone blind. This fear made him jump, and once again he banged his head against the wooden slats, suddenly making him remember that he was under a bed in an Ikea store, in France, and that French beds – or, rather, Swedish beds – were much too low.

He remembered Marie, to whom he had said goodbye a few hours earlier in the bathroom section. Before they parted, he had promised he would call her the next time he came to France so they could visit the Eiffel Tower together and meet his estate agent cousins.

She had seemed disappointed that they should part in this way, and that he refused her offer to go for a drink that evening in one of the city's more lively areas. He would have liked to spend the night – his only Parisian night – with her. But that would have changed everything. It would have diverted him from his mission. This was just a quick round trip: India to France and back. If he spent the night with her, he would not be able to leave again. Anyway, at least he had her number now. Everything in his head was so muddled. Perhaps one day . . .

Ajatashatru looked to the side, but the view that extended before him consisted only of blue lino, balls of dust and bed legs. At least he couldn't see any human legs.

He slid silently out of his hiding place, glancing furtively at the ceiling in case there were any security cameras. But he saw nothing that resembled one. Then again, he didn't really know what a

security camera looked like. They were not exactly common in his village. Actually, he thought, Ikea is not all it's cracked up to be: no snipers on the wardrobes, no cameras. The Soviets were much more conscientious in terms of security.

Abandoning all attempts at concealment, he walked serenely through the corridors as if he were with Marie, strolling nonchalantly between furniture displays in search of a chair or a mirror to decorate their beautiful Parisian apartment with its view of the Eiffel Tower, where Maupassant had spent most of his days in spite of his hatred of it. He imagined the Frenchwoman now, at home, alone. It really was a shame.

From his jacket pocket, he retrieved the chewing-gum wrapper on which Marie had written her telephone number. He reread the sequence of numbers over and over again until he knew it by heart. Those numbers represented love. With a sigh, he crammed the paper into the deepest recesses of his trouser pocket, close to his penis, so he would not lose it. That was where he put everything he held dear. But anyway, he had to stop thinking about her. The mission. The mission was what mattered.

Ajatashatru looked all around. How lucky he was to be here! He felt like a child who had sneaked into a gigantic toy shop. He, who had known only the modest dwellings of Adishree and his cousin Ghanashyam (pronounced *Gonna-show-'em*), now had, for one night, all for himself, an apartment of over thirty thousand square feet, with dozens of bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens and bathrooms. Although, after doing a quick calculation in his head, he had to face the fact that he would not have enough time to sleep in all the beds available to him that night.

His stomach gurgled.

Like Goldilocks in the three bears' house, the fakir – who was no more resistant to hunger than he was to tiredness, or to anything else for that matter – set off in search of a midnight feast. He entered the labyrinth of chairs in the living-room section and followed the directions for the restaurant written on the signs.

In a large grey refrigerator, he found smoked salmon, and a Tupperware box full of crème fraiche, parsley, tomatoes and lettuce. He emptied this onto a large plate, got himself a cola from the drinks machine, put it all on a plastic tray, and walked back the way he had come.

He chose a living room decorated with black-and-white lacquered furniture. On the walls, large framed sepia photographs of New York buildings provided a touch of class. He would never have found a hotel as luxurious as this for the night, particularly not for €100, or rather for a €100 note printed on only one side.

The Indian placed his tray on a coffee table, took off his jacket and tie, and sat on a comfortable green sofa. Across from him, a fake plastic television sparked his imagination. He pretended to switch it on so he could watch the latest Bollywood blockbuster while he had his smoked salmon, that strange but tasty little fluorescent orange fish, which he was eating for the second time in his life and the second time that day.

It had not taken him long to get used to luxury.

Once his meal was finished, he stood up and stretched his legs by walking around the table. It was while doing this that he noticed something on the bookcase behind the sofa that looked different from the books.

It was a newspaper – a real one – that someone must have left there. Alongside it were rows of the fake books, those plastic bricks he had seen

earlier that day in other bookcases on display in the store.

As he did not speak French, he would not even have bothered opening it had he not recognised the inimitable front page of the American newspaper the *Herald Tribune*. This could be an entertaining evening, he thought. He was far from imagining just how entertaining it was going to be, though not for the reasons he expected.

Ajatashatru pretended to switch off the television and began reading the news. He could not bear the television being on when he was not watching it; where he lived, electricity was a rare commodity. He read the article on the front page. The president of France was called Hollande. What a strange idea! Was the president of Holland called Mr France, by any chance? These Europeans were decidedly odd.

And what was he to think of this former ice dancer who, each year, on the anniversary of Michael Jackson's death, moonwalked over five and a half thousand miles from Paris to the Forest Lawn Memorial Park cemetery, in a suburb of Los Angeles, where his idol was buried? Ajatashatru was no geography expert, but he found it hard to imagine how the man would continue to practise

that famous dance move while crossing the Atlantic, whether he was on board an aeroplane or a ship.

Seized with a bout of nervous laughter and an irresistible urge to urinate, the Indian got up from the sofa and, in his socks, traversed the showcase living rooms – without moonwalking – in the direction of the toilets.

But he never reached them.

Voices and the sounds of footsteps coming from the main staircase suddenly broke the silence, momentarily transforming Ajatashatru's narrow chest into the stands of a football stadium during a big match. Thrown into a panic, he looked all around and then hid inside the first wardrobe he saw – a sort of blue metal, two-door luggage locker, the signature piece of the all-new 'American Teenager' collection. Once inside, he began praying that they would not notice his jacket, which he had left on the sofa a few yards from where he was hiding. He also prayed that they would not find the remains of his TV dinner on the table. Most of all, he prayed that no one would open the door of the wardrobe. If they did, he would say that he had gone inside to measure its dimensions, and that he hadn't noticed time passing. He took

a wooden Ikea pencil and a metre-long Ikea paper ruler from his trouser pocket and remained motionless in the dark, expecting to be discovered from one second to the next. Inside his chest, the football supporters were smashing up their seats. Outside, the voices drew closer, and seemed to surround him. But in the end, no one discovered he was there. Perhaps it would have been better if they had.

Julio Sympa and Michou Lapaire, the manager of Ikea Paris Sud Thiais and his chief designer, climbed the stairs that led to the showcase rooms, followed by a herd of men and women in yellow T-shirts and navy cargo pants.

They were working late because they had to install a new collection.

Julio Sympa, who was six foot six and had climbed Mont Blanc four times, stopping at the top each time to read *Why I Am So Cold* by Josette Camus before going back down eight hundred and fifty-three pages later, paused in front of the 'American Teenager' bedroom and pointed in several directions before continuing on his way.

Michou Lapaire, who always wished he had been born a woman, wrote down, in a pink notebook, the furniture pointed out by his bombastic boss.

While this was happening, the members of the technical team, most of whom had undoubtedly

never heard of *Why I Am So Cold* by Josette Camus nor wished they had been born a different sex, put on their gloves, unrolled the bubble wrap, and moved the crates that would be used to protect the furniture during transportation. Due to a shortage of time, the manager had given instructions not to disassemble the furniture (at Ikea! Can you believe it?) but to pack it as it was in the large wooden crates. This way, they would avoid the physically and mentally exhausting process of disassembly and reassembly.

While the technical workers busied themselves lifting up the blue metal wardrobe and putting it inside a much larger wooden crate, a gentle splashing sound could be heard, like water trickling from a tap. If one of them had opened the wardrobe, they would have seen Ajatashatru in a very unfortunate position, standing up, huddled into a corner, concentrating on giving free rein to his bladder's imagination while he was carried, rather shakily, an inch or two above the ground. It is as difficult to piss in a wardrobe as it is in an aeroplane, observed the Indian, who never would have believed that he would one day be in a position to make such an observation.

Anyway, no one opened the wardrobe door.

'When you've finished doing that, I want someone to fix that leak,' said Julio Sympa, who had excellent hearing.

Then he pointed at a bunk bed, a few yards away, as if he were sentencing it to death. Which was more or less the case.

At that very moment – in other words, at the precise instant that Julio Sympa was pointing at the bunk bed as if he were sentencing it to death, which occurred at 11 p.m. on the dot – Gustave Palourde parked his taxi by the side of the road, checked that his windows and doors were locked, and, rubbing his hands, prepared to count the day's takings.

This was his little post-shift ritual, a satisfying conclusion to a day of hard work. Ever since his wife, Mercedes-Shayana, had one day caught him, in their house (which was what they called their caravan), counting his money after a day's work, and, having found his hiding place, stolen quite a lot of the money to buy herself a crocodile calfskin bag, Gustave had got into the habit of doing it this way. Best not to tempt fate, as he told his colleagues after this incident, though what he really meant was best not to tempt Mercedes-Shayana.

Having counted his takings, the old gypsy glanced

at his notebook and noticed that the total on the paper did not correspond with the amount of money in his hands. Somewhat vexed, he recalculated several times, first in his head and then with the calculator on his mobile phone, but the result was always the same. There was a difference of one hundred euros. He rummaged through the make-up bag he had 'borrowed' from his wife (a simple act of compensation), in which he kept all his change, then he searched his wallet, and, increasingly anxious, felt around under his seat, under the passenger seat, in the glove compartment, and finally, in desperation, in the hollow around the gearstick. But all he found was dust.

One hundred euros. Gustave thought again of the green note that the Indian had given him at Ikea. That had been the most lucrative trip of the day, so he couldn't have given it to another customer in change.

'And if I don't have that damn note, then . . .'

It did not take the gypsy long to realise that he had been the victim of someone more crooked than him. He went through the scene again in his memory. The Indian handing him the note. Him taking it in his hand. Him opening his wallet and

sliding it inside. The Indian waving his arms to show him something. Him looking. Him not seeing anything very interesting. Him thinking that the Indian was a bit of a loony. Him putting his wallet away. Him leaning over the glove compartment to pick up a business card.

'That toerag!' exclaimed Gustave. 'He only waved his arms about to distract me while he took his note back. *Cabrón*!'[2]

If there was one thing the Parisian taxi driver could not stand, it was being taken for a ride when he was the one giving the ride; being swindled when he should have been swindling. He swore, on his honour as a gypsy, he would find that Indian without delay and make him eat his turban.

As he did this, he stroked the little statue of St Sarah, the patron saint of gypsies, which hung from his rear-view mirror. When he drove off at top speed, she banged against St Fiacre, the patron saint of taxi drivers, who hung next to her.

For the entire duration of the journey back to his house (caravan), Gustave cursed the Indian

[2] *Author's note:* Spanish insult a tiny bit ruder than 'naughty boy'.

under his breath. He didn't even listen to his Gipsy Kings CD, which he always kept in the CD player. That's how annoyed he was. As he waited for a traffic light to turn green, an idea took seed in his mind. Having made his purchases in Ikea, the Indian might have used the Gypsy Taxis business card that he had given him. If so, one of Gustave's colleagues would obviously have driven him. So, all he had to do was ask where they had dropped him off, and he could go there, find him, and give him a good hiding. Without a second thought, Gustave grabbed the radio transmitter.

'Calling all units [he had copied this phrase from *Starsky & Hutch*], have any of you picked up an Indian today – crumpled grey suit, red tie pinned to his shirt, white turban on his head, huge moustache, tall, thin and gnarled like a tree . . . a Hindu, basically – from Ikea Paris Sud Thiais? This is a code T (for *Thief*), I repeat, a code T (for *Twat*). Everybody understand? That's a code T (for *waiT Till I geT my hands round your ThroaT, you filThy Indian Thief!*)

'I can't believe I trusted a *gorgio*, never mind an Indian, for a journey from Roissy to Ikea! I'll never do that again,' groaned the taxi driver, while thinking that such an event must happen about as

often as the appearance of Halley's Comet (which was next expected on 28 July 2061), and that perhaps it was not such a great idea, after all, to talk about this at dinner with his wife and look like an idiot in the eyes of his daughter, who already thought he was a bit of a jerk.

A few minutes elapsed, but none of his colleagues working that afternoon said they had picked up the mysterious passenger. So, Gustave calculated, either he had used a different taxi firm, or he had hired a minivan, or he was still somewhere in the industrial zone. In the first two scenarios, he thought, there is nothing I can do until tomorrow. But for the third, I could go and see if there's a hotel near the store. I'm in the area anyway, and it'll only take me ten or fifteen minutes.

The car noisily skidded through a sudden U-turn while St Sarah pressed herself for several seconds against the body of the smiling St Fiacre.

When Gustave arrived outside Ikea, a large freight truck was leaving. He pulled to the side and let it past, blissfully unaware that inside it was a huge wooden crate which, like a Russian doll, itself contained a metal wardrobe which, in turn, contained the Indian he was looking for.

He started up again and drove around, but saw nothing suspicious. A very large and closed furniture store, a Starbucks which was open but empty . . . you could find almost anything here. Anything except a hotel. Anything except a tall, thin Indian, gnarled like a tree, in a suit, tie and turban, who conned honest French gypsy taxi drivers.

There was a residential estate on the other side of the road, but unless he knew someone who lived there, the thief could not be there.

Then again . . . thought Gustave. You could never be sure, with this kind of person. With his slick charm and his magic tricks, he might have taken refuge with one of the residents for the night.

Just in case, he drove his Mercedes through streets lined with pretty houses, losing at least five minutes in that labyrinth of homes, and came back out on the main road on which he had begun.

He had to sort this problem out as quickly as possible, because the next day he was leaving for a family holiday in Spain. So he saw only one solution: he would have to call in the professionals.