

## Vicky Walrus : A Character Study

**Selina Sheth**

'Fast Wheels! Great Meals! Best Deals!'

So promises the Walrus. He rests fatly against a sky-blue board strung across two steel electric poles and puffs out bold black text to make things clear. Welcome to Vicky Walrus Tours and Travels. Satisfaction Guaranteed. Here, in chaotic Pahar Ganj, crammed between the city's dusty New Railway Station and the broken-down Delite cinema, nothing ever appears to go according to plan, not even crossing the street, but this is exactly how the Walrus triumphs. His toothy grin offers hope amid frustration, a sense of order within chaos.

Vicky Prasad owns this board and the tiny paan-stained establishment just behind it. His clients are mostly frazzled Europeans for whom low budget summer travel in India has swung from novelty to nightmare. Backpacking their way around Old Delhi after a week in stunning Angkor Vat or a month in hippyesque Bali, they now encounter Pahar Ganj; a maze of madness, with its sputtering rickshaws, dirty drains, neon lights, flies, rats, pimps, touts, prostitutes, endless trinket stalls and greasy panipuri vendors. And so Vicky is a legend in these parts, a fixer with mythical powers, a soother of the outsider's anxieties as he firmly handles bookings and re-bookings, cancellations and attestations, misprinted train tickets, pick-pocketed wallets, lapsed visas, lost I-pads, unending runs of Delhi Belly.

In person, Vicky Prasad twins the mascot on the board. Forty-something Vicky is short, round, triple-chinned, double-jowled. His flab is squelched into an orange T-shirt; his thick-wedged sideburns could be a pair of sweaty tusks. Unlike the indolent Walrus, however, Vicky and his girth are primed for constant action. I watch him make infinite sausage-fingered calls to mysterious airline companies, book spurious low-cost fares that end up costing more than regular ones, and wolf down a carton of oily chicken chowmein ordered off a cart from the gully across. His phone doesn't quit beeping. Vicky deftly calls back a furious customer who wasn't told that he'd

have to pay thirty per cent extra for more than one piece of baggage. Vicky's voice turns into an oil slick as he charmingly justifies the added cost and coos his warm wishes for a safe and happy journey. Then he clicks off and grins lazily, looking like he's ready to flop into an icy pool of water under the sweltering mid-May sun.

Vicky has a wife and two boys. 'My Mrs only wears saris,' he says matter-factly, 'none of this skin showing, see the college girls these days? No shame!' He chuckles and coyly adds that his was an arranged marriage, 'settled' at the age of twenty-three. Vicky's father died soon after, so his only son and heir was saddled with the grinning Walrus board and the low hum and drone of family life. No time for backpacking, no time to do the Frankfinn Travel and Tourism course in Mumbai. Landlocked Vicky, wedged between his desk and a wall, admits that he has never seen the sea.

It's late afternoon, and Vicky leans back on his creaky chair, his eyelids drooping like the sinking sun. His plump forearm brushes the pinboard behind him with its messy collage of ticket stubs and photographs of the Taj Mahal, the Qutab Minar, the Akshardam temple. The board slides heavily to an angle, a few tacked papers flutter. A hidden picture now comes into view; that of a slimmer Vicky in jeans, smiling self-consciously next to a pretty blond girl in a tunic and long scarf, worn the Indian way across her chest. 'Karoline,' murmurs Vicky, following my gaze to the wall. 'We met in the summer of 1995. Her passport got flicked at the Red Fort and so I helped her, reporting it to the cops-shops and all. We did the Sound and Light show together but the real magic was when we heard the Niazi Nizami brothers at the dargah. I had never been before, can you believe that? I always thought it was a tourist trap for foreigners. But with Karo, that night, it was mesmerizing.' Vicky's eyes turn misty. He gives them a good rub and flips on a pair of tinted spectacles ('my goggles') lying on the desk. 'Karoline was supposed to write after getting back to Sweden, but I guess she got busy. Anyway, there was no e-mail-facebook stuff in those days, I can't blame her.' Vicky smiles philosophically.

The table fan whirrs, squeaks, stops. A shadow flickers across the room. Six pm, and the sounds of the market downstairs intensify – a cyclist's bell chiming, shop shutters opening for the evening, an agitated female voice arguing with a vegetable seller – and disperse the humid silence of Vicky Prasad's little den.

In this day and age of online ticketing and booking, Walrus Tours and Travels may soon have to shut shop, Vicky tells me, as he lumbers up the rickety stairs of his dusty basement office out into the dusk light. I follow, looking sympathetic. We walk along a crowded lane to Vicky's boxy red Maruti. The inside of the car is a furnace, the front seat strewn with plastic toys, a cracked Bisleri water bottle, and a carton of bootlegged, cellophane-wrapped movie DVDs – 'camera prints' that Vicky's friend shoots on a mobile phone off the cinema screen for a small fee. Hanging from the rear view mirror is a grinning Ganesha; behind it, a small talisman sways with the words : 'It is not the unknown we fear, it is the known coming to an end.'

Vicky admires great minds. Jiddu Krishnamurthi, Dayanand Saraswati, Patanjali of the Yoga Sutras, Lord Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita. Theirs are the teachings that make sense of disorder, Vicky believes, as he puts the car into reverse gear, backs out an inch or two, and sharply brakes to avoid a passing bullock cart. In Vicky's world, chaos isn't random. There is a pattern in disarray which is beautiful, a reflection of a divine order, a calm acceptance of all that is diverse and disorienting, and it is upon this that Vicky meditates, mornings and evenings for half an hour. He intones, his face suddenly serious. 'Yoga chitti vritti nirodha. Anxiety is nothing but waves in the mind, waves that disturb the tranquillity of the calm lake that is the true mind. Restrain the waves. And you will see clearly, right to the bottom of the lake. See? It's easy. You just need to practice. Try it.'

I have to leave and I get a quick, sweaty hug from Vicky as I manoeuvre myself out of the car. Vicky laughs at me, jammed as I am between a low wall and an ocean of parked Hero cycles. I manage to slither out and cross over to the open window on his side of the car. I lean in to say a final goodbye. Vicky grasps my hand with a wet, friendly paw; with the other, he smoothly extracts a Wills Navy Cut from the dashboard and lights it with a silver Zippo, a gift from an Israeli client who Vicky transported up to the weed-filled paradise of Manali last month. Vicky chuckles sheepishly. 'Don't mention to anyone I was smoking. I've promised the biwi that I've quit. But you know how it is. That's why I keep a toothbrush in the office. And mouthwash.'

With that, Vicky winks, re-starts the engine, finds his rhythm, glides out of parking, honks for good effect, and silently rolls himself away.

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