

# The Sannyasín

Finlay's  
unflinching  
quest  
for  
enlightenment

Neil Deuchar with *Satya*

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This is a work of fiction. Characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

To Mum and Dad

## About the Author

Neil Deuchar is a retired consultant psychiatrist and senior health services director who is currently working on a project to assist homeless people with getting their voices heard through the art of writing. On top of this, Neil's first fiction novel, *The Sannyasin*, involves a doctor who attempts to reach a higher level of being to achieve peace in life and death.

# The Sannyasin

## **Canto**

I should go  
but  
I'm not ready. He's  
not ready. I  
chose him. A  
prophecy  
burns in his being; his  
becoming  
awakening, awaiting  
the fulfilment of  
Self.  
My release  
is not in his  
awareness  
yet.  
Nor in yours.  
But it's coming. Turn  
the pages, bring him,  
and set me  
free.

# Chapter 1

UK, 2019

Finlay Carter's sitting on a backpack outside a terminal, elbows on knees, carefully crafting a cigarette. His head's bent in concentration, a wisp of grey hair quivering in the wind. He looks up, once-blue eyes staring through crinkles he puts down to experience. A closer look reveals the skin under his stubble to be dry, the knuckles on his fists to be chapped, fingernails bitten to the stubs. Nearer still, as close as only a few have got, his eyes look different: one black, one blue.

He takes the filter from his mouth, lays it on the paper next to the tobacco, rolls it all together, licks the gum and finishes the job. He likes the ritual. The focus. It's a moment when he looks after himself... like giving himself love. Cigarettes, and once upon a time, wine, lots of it... reliable, always did what it said it was going to do, always there, ready, never judging, sympathetic to his needs.

What he's always looked for in a human.

That smoking causes heart disease is relative, in his world, to the havoc caused by people. What the other doctors never got is that some hearts have always been broken. He shrugs slightly inside his big black fleece, lights the cigarette and blows the smoke out of puffed cheeks. A cloud of unknowing billows in the freezing air in front of him.

He watches people arriving, taking cases out of cars, couples, hugging, kissing, *see you soon*'s over the noise of jets. A familiar feeling occurs to him: being outside looking in. Other people live their lives over there with no idea that he exists over here. Like bubbles. Sometimes it makes him feel lonely. Other times he's grateful for the anonymity: no one

to impress, pander to, cater for, disappoint, let down, be let down by.

He doesn't take it for granted that having money makes such self-sufficiency possible. *'Money isn't everything' is what people with money say.* When he didn't have it, when he lay awake in a forsaken room at the back of a brutal block, cockroaches in the cracked basin, pneumatic drills building the future outside the grubby window, money was everything.

He looks around for someone to whom to give what he doesn't need but there are no other homeless people outside this terminal. He stubs out the cigarette, rises with a grunt and throws first the butt, then the tobacco pouch, filter box and papers into a bin. Again, he looks around, then throws his beanie and gloves in. Heaving his rucksack onto one shoulder, he heads for the automatic doors and finds a spot to sit inside. It's not time to check in yet. He's early. He likes being where he's supposed to be. It's better than the default feeling of being out of place. Unready. So, he's here. Ready.

The tiredness he's been ignoring hugs him. He hears a distant rushing sound, an echo of something being dropped, a soft announcement about leaving baggage unattended, a child's squeak, hears it all outside his head, separate from him, nothing to do with him. Comforting. He undoes a Velcro pocket on his faded fawn cargo trousers, fishes out phone and glasses and opens a half-solved crossword. Words interest him. They seem reliant, but when you look up a word in a dictionary you get referred to another word, and so on, never arriving at any meaning other than something that needs another definition. Words, he thinks, must therefore be ultimately meaningless. Is it in the gaps *between* words where some other, some deeper truth can be found? But it's the words, not the gaps, that are the currency of thought; and it's thought that creates reality: the world with all its unfairness. A snort of contempt flies from his nose. All those pretensions to equality and he

relies on that which breeds injustice.

He stares at the puzzle.

*Brothel nut is unsatisfactory — as is life according to this! (5,5).*

He stares at the letters, looking for an anagram of *brothel nut* that could somehow mean life's unsatisfactory.

*Noble truth?*

He smiles faintly, enjoying a moment of telepathy with the compiler, imagined or real, there's no difference.

*Nice.*

*The first noble truth of The Buddha: life is unsatisfactory.*

*It most certainly is.*

Activity becomes purposeful around the check-in desk and a queue forms. Fin once again hauls his backpack onto his shoulder, feeling the consensus in his muscles that they'd prefer to be used for something more age-appropriate. An operative waves him over. As he approaches her desk, he wonders whether she notices his oversized fleece or finds it odd that someone traveling to India should be wearing one at all. There's an absence about her, a disconnect nudging her to treat him like a stranger, place him in a grey zone as a passenger to log, a bag to process, a boarding pass to issue. Her name is Anna. It says so on her badge. Fin toys with engaging her in conversation. Doesn't. *Would that be flirting?* He hates being a man, sometimes wonders what it would be like being a woman. Or neither. *Male, female, they're just words aren't they, products of humanity's unnatural mind. But we mistake them for reality and condition the world into a miasma of convention.* Anna slaps a label on his rucksack. *Resist convention. If homeless people are a drain on society, we should actually be role models: exemplars of sustainable living.* She hands him a boarding pass. *You aren't reduced to tears; you're exalted to them.* She looks past his shoulder to the next.

There are curt instructions from gloved attendants at metal detectors. Security people look through him, a body in a repetition that ends when the shift does. He obeys with

meek compliance but secretly hates it that people get paid to boss — the very people on whom they depend for their livelihood! *It's the same down the job centre: the system looks down on the have-nots but if it wasn't for them, it wouldn't have much to do, would it.* Smiling faces want him to try perfume, already looking past him by the time he lifts his hand to his nose. Sales assistants in posh shops catch his eye and then scan for someone else. There are momentary flickers of eye contact with fellow passengers, like ships' lights sweeping past one another in the night. Were they to stop searching and hold each other's gaze they would glimmer and glow like phosphorescence illuminating uncharted waters.

He finds a seat where he can look at the planes, his back to the concourse, with its people talking on phones... conversations in bubbles. Everyone in bubbles. Like a stranger grasping for intimacy, longing, moods ebbing in unbelonging.

He waits.

No smoking. *Not now. Not ever?*

He checks the time of arrival on his electronic ticket and scrolls down to the return section, suddenly shocked that he may not use it. He has all his possessions with him, gave the rest away, closed down accounts and memberships, stayed in touch with the few who supported him after... he lost his way, hung-over every day, the sickly smell of failure on his breath, the sun melting his wings, the fall from grace, his exit overseen with tut-tuts of sympathy, *understandable given the circumstances, but...* iron fists in surgical gloves tapped the knell of defeat and prescribed a pension.

His phone pings.

*Hi bon. Have you arrived in India yet? Hope the trip goes well. Keep me posted — wanna hear all about it. Take care! Sxx*

He drops his hand to his lap, the screen still glowing, inviting a response.

Take care.

He's never really got what that means.

Look after yourself, people say.

*How d'you do that?*

He stares at the phone. He needs all his relationships to be reconciled at this time. No loose ends, nothing that should be said that hasn't been, no outstanding quarrels or bones of contention. Any little thing could go wrong and stay that way for eternity: a tiny slip, a faint barb, an unsaid please, a sour taste in someone's mouth, a slight stuck in someone's throat.

He recalls telling Sophie his plans. Her eyes had moistened, and she'd said *Fin, that's soooo you*. Maybe she'll miss him. But she texts him as if nothing's changed. Had he not been clear? Probably not. He's not good at endings.

Time is the only thing on his side now.

Distance.

*Hi darling. On my way. I will indeed! F x*

He presses send and instantly questions it.

*Will I?*

*Will I indeed. And what's with the x? Do monks do that? Do monks even text? Made a promise, to myself, to the group, to a higher power, the god of my understanding, whoever or whatever he or she or it is, to own up to it all, make good the damage, stop drinking (did that two years ago, going well), stop smoking (did that two hours ago, going well), stop being seduced, stop seducing. Definitely stop that.* A flash of loss sears through him. He looks over his shoulder, at the couples and families. Envy knocks. He denies it entry, sneers instead, feeling euphoric and superior in his intention to wander free, leave behind all the trappings they'll all blindly carry with them to their pathetic graves. He turns around again and frowns at the waiting planes. *Don't compare yourself to anyone else. One more flight, that's it. Everyone apart from you is fine. No-one needs you. You're all set. Could've stayed and tried for a balance. But never understood moderation.*

*Just extremes.*

Ninety minutes to go.

He stands; sits down again. A man sitting opposite looks up. Fin nods at him. He doesn't respond, just looks back down at his phone. Fin becomes aware of anxiety. His? The other man's? He reminds himself to focus on breathing: in, out, using the abs, eyes closed, concentrating on the air entering the nostrils, just like Sophie taught him, in bed one morning, tissues make-up and cold tea on her bedside table. *Should be easy. But it's not. Millions of people've been trying it for thousands of years and only got so far. Except for a few who went all the way.*

He wants to go all the way.

He hears her softly admonish his wandering mind, waiting for a take-away, a chuan clanking in a wok in the kitchen. *You don't have to think solutions into existence, darling. All that you're drawn to will naturally come to you. It'll play out in your life, appearing as things you need to learn about yourself. Life's an invitation to meet yourself.*

*Soph, where do you get all this stuff from? Do you read it on boardings or something?*

*Carl Jung, mainly.*

*Well, he must've read it on boardings then.*

Suspended in the rhythm of his breathing he notices an old joke, the one about the Buddhist in Pizzaland ordering one with everything, smirks, then something real arises, holds him: it has no words, can't be found in any sacred text. It can only be felt.

Suddenly he longs for a better past.

So much wasted. So... *unready*.

He pulls a tissue from his trouser pocket, blows his nose and holds the tissue in his fist. He opens his eyes and sees that the man opposite looking at him. This time Fin holds his gaze. The man nods very slightly. Fin smiles. The man smiles back, very slightly.

Fin crosses his legs and stares at the planes. He's

carefully planned all this. Everything should be okay. Conviction replaces the confusion. *Don't want to be shouting at pigeons, d'you, a lifetime of misunderstanding spewing out in a park bench tirade. Don't want care either, from someone who's paid to do it, loneliness clutching your throat, regretting never having got ready.*

*Ready to die.*

*What would that mean?*

*Find out, Fin. Find out now.*

He checks the visa in his passport, a six-month tourist one expiring June 2020; the last chance to come back.

Or not.

What then?

Christmas carols sound somewhere behind him, sparking a visceral shaft of regret, sparkling lights in children's eyes. He quickly rehearses the plan again, the hope, and the anchor, the exotic intention to become a *sannyasin*, a monk in India. Excitement washes through him as he imagines renouncing the mundane world of wants and needs that have trapped him all his life, taking instead to the streets in those saffron dyed robes the *sannyasins* wear. *What a way to spend your old age! How amazing would it be to actually be unafraid of death — to meet the cloud of unknowing not clinging to the crags of conventional life anymore; to die gracefully, with dignity, detached, the work done in meditation, the end neither a death sentence with a full stop nor a bridge of blind faith. Just a transition.*

He still can't quite believe he's actually going to try this.

He'll always have a choice to pack it in, of course: fetch his passport and phone from wherever he's left them and check into a hotel with an air-conditioned lobby and a walk-in shower. He wonders whether his addiction to convenience and comfort will ultimately win out, urging him to throw in the towel and walk away from the ultimate opportunity, leaving behind all he's dreamt of.

*Have to get used to being hungry. No more sex either.*

*Celibacy?*

Really?

He looks behind him, feels another pang of longing, wants to be one of those people going home for Christmas. Momentarily bereft, he mourns his life. The pleasures, however brief or stupid they may have been, were *intense*. Made him feel alive. *Leave all that. You used people like drugs, anyway. Break free of it all: no responsibilities, no one holding you back, nothing stopping you becoming a beautiful old man with light shining from your eyes, sitting on a street in India in orange robes, radiating love and wisdom.*

He imagines Sophie saying *Fin, this is your time* and senses peace.

He strains to read a TV monitor on the wall. His flight has a gate. He joins a queue of people there. They're mainly Indian. A surge of thrill is quashed as he notices two white people ahead of him. Bristling at their intrusion into his uniqueness, he looks at their backs for a while, imagining their hopes and fears, wondering whether they're maybe not so different from his, accepting for a moment that everyone seeks in one way or another whether they realise it or not. When they turn, he avoids catching their eye. No mini nods of tribal recognition. Hopefully they'll be sitting a way away from him. *Don't want the beginning of the Indian experience soiled by middle class expat pseudo-spiritual whining, do we? About how crap life is in capitalist England and know-all showing off of encyclopedic knowledge of all things Indian, the food over there, the culture, this is our fifth trip actually, here's what to wear and say and do and this is how to sit in the lotus position for sixteen hours and attain Samadhi and total peace maaaaan... oh fuck off.*

He turns, smiles and nods at an Indian family behind him. The man nods in return. *On holiday for Christmas?* the man asks in Fin's mind. *I'm going to stay in a monastery for a while. Thinking of doing sannyasa,* he replies, casually, but with a certain gravitas, seeing now the man's look of surprise and respect, and perhaps a tinge of envy? And then a brief conversation, crackling with bonhomie and an understated

understanding of the fundamentals of life and death, an esoteric connection that only they in that moment could share.

The man sneezes and bends down to check something in one of his bags. Fin glances at the rest of the family and does a prayer movement with his hands.

“*Namaste*,” he says.

The children giggle. Their mother laughs, embarrassed but gracious and, looking out of the tops of smiling eyes, returns the gesture. The man straightens up and Fin draws breath, but suddenly there’s a long loud announcement and he turns back to the gate. On the other side of it lies salvation. Everything that’s happened to him, all the things he’s done, all the pain and the loss, all the trouble he’s caused, have led to this moment: this gate.

He shuffles forward, urgently.

Anna bleeps his boarding pass.

“Thank you, have a nice flight,” she says, looking at the computer.

He smiles at the side of her head.

“Thank *you*.”

He says it clearly and confidently, placing the emphasis on the second word.

She looks up. Fin imagines her thinking *oh yes, fellow in the fleece, recognize him, but don’t*. She smiles back briefly, her hand reaching for the next passenger’s documents. He consciously slows his pace as he walks down the gangway, past adverts for investment opportunities in far-off places, to the door, brief view of pilot in shirt-sleeves, pang of longing for a childhood dream, into the plane, smiling cabin crew, sound of sitar, sound of hissing air, faint smell of spices, coffee, slowly to his aisle halfway up the still empty cabin, swings into his seat, belt on, leans back, looks out of the window.

The lights of the airport shine through the winter dusk. He’s smiling now. *Take me to my quest to squeeze every drop from*

*life; to realize my destiny; to be ready for death.* He raises his eyebrows at the melodrama of his thoughts and grounds himself by considering an alternative way of looking at this, that he's doing a *geographical*, as they'd say at the group: running away from life's problems but taking with you the head that created them. Still... snug in his would-be simplicity, he watches people cramming cases and christmassy carrier bags into overhead compartments, obviously blocking the aisles, seemingly incapable of simply sitting in a seat, and he admires the cabin crew, marvels at their patience. Disjointed fragments of conversations float in and out of consciousness. *Are you sure you're not depressed? Shouldn't you be concentrating on living, not dying? Ah, thinking about dying makes you live, makes you do all the things that you'd never do if you'd carried on pretending you're immortal. But isn't it a bit selfish? Like it's all about you? What about the children? Oh, they'll be fine; chips off the old block. All grown up now. Only see them at Christmas, anyway, and anything else Lorna'll allow.*

Lorna. He's known her, what, thirty-five years now? Another iron fist, but this one was in a velvet glove.

His chest swells with hurt and pride. Deep down, beneath the veneer of humility that subtly adds to his stock of synthetic spiritual ammunition, he needs to be proud of the kids and the way he fathered them, when they were young, when he had the chance. He holds them up beside his smile like trophies. The group told him that that's addiction: relying on things outside to make him feel okay inside. It was the same with work, ditto relationships, even religion, anything that filled the void of unbelonging, the sinkhole where his relationship with himself should have been. Everything came home in those meetings, his time with the alcoholics, the people to whom he would've at one time referred to as the dregs of society. How he ate those words as they welcomed him as their friend.

*I'm Fin and I'm an alcoholic.*

The least pretentious words he's ever uttered.

The safety announcements are superfluous to him. Death is no longer something to be avoided, but he glances around him for anyone who might need help in the unlikely event...

He looks at his phone, seeing with ebullience there's nothing to respond to. What a contrast to the days when he pined for mail, measured success by the population of his inbox. Then he looks around for the Indian family he met at the gate. Can't see them. Or the white people. Quick nod and smile to the couple next to him. *There's a difference between being alone and being lonely. There's a sort of dignity to being alone. Some paths must be walked alone.*

The plane begins its pushback.

Engines start.

Waits.

Starts taxiing.

Flashing light on the wing tip.

The cabin lamps dim, wrapping him in a cocoon of anonymity.

At the end of the runway there's a pause, a taking stock, a moment of reflection, before letting go. And then release. A quiet scream comes from outside the porthole and his back is pressed into the seat, his head turned toward the window, pushed back against the headrest, waves of relief flooding through him as the plane gathers pace over the bumpy tarmac, the runway lights flitting by faster and faster, the ecstatic moment of take-off, the streetlights of his imprisonment rushing past, below, behind and

into

the

night.

## **Canto**

I'm chained  
in genes;  
family  
trees, with roots  
that stretch  
back, before the  
beginning,  
beyond  
your time,  
the line, this clan,  
without dissent  
or rebel. Until  
now. It's good.  
And I look  
to him,  
to set me  
free.

## Chapter Two

UK, 1985

The surgical team made its way from bed to bed, checking charts and making decisions in lowered voices, each patient, some still bleary from anesthetic, gazing up at the visitors. The consultant wore a suit, the absence of a white coat an emblem of his successful climb up the greasy pole of medical hierarchy. Fin's white coat was creased and smudged from another night on-call and his head was swimming from lack of sleep. A junior doctor who Fin'd been supervising over the weekend, the ward sister and two medical students completed the entourage. To each patient in turn, in a deep baritone that reminded Fin of the sound of a motorbike revving up, the consultant would say "morning", adding "and how are we today?" in a tone that carried an unspoken threat of reprisal should anyone on whom Fin'd operated over the weekend declare complications.

They went to a side room. *Lorna PERKINS, 26, Post-Op.*  
DoA 31/3/85.

She looked bright after her ordeal, a routine appendicectomy for Fin but a weekend of drama for her. She was sitting up. There was an empty cup and saucer on her bedside table. Always a good sign. One of her thin hands was lying on the bed beside her, a drip supplying fluids through a pink cannula in her wrist. Her delicate face looked pale and sunken, her reddish hair was tangled, and her lips were parched with specks of dried saliva on them.

"And how are we today?"

"A lot better than I was on Saturday," she said. "But that's not saying much."

The consultant raised his head from her temperature chart and looked at her briefly over bifocals. "Good, good,

good,” he said, looking back at the chart. “Well, let’s have a look, shall we?”

Lorna wiggled herself into a half-lying position so her hospital gown could be lifted over her waist. The consultant sat on the edge of the bed and prodded the area around the small dressing just above her right hip, watching her face for any reaction. To Fin’s relief, there was none. “It was a lily-white appendix,” he said.

“Good, good, good,” said the consultant, then, looking up at the medical students, “and what percentage of acute appendicectomies yield a normal appendix?”

One hazarded a guess: “ten per cent?” The consultant raised bushy eyebrows towards a silver hairline and, annunciating each syllable equally, said: “thirty-five.” The students looked admonished and wrote it down. Fin thought the estimate a little high but kept his mouth shut. This was just his boss’s way of telling him he’d made a hole in a human being for no apparent reason. Well, everything’s easy in hindsight. You can see everything through a retrospect-o-scope.

Getting up from the bed, the consultant said, “Well, well, everything seems settled so this thing can come out of your arm and off home you go today.” The entourage went to leave the room, the pigeon-toed patient still exposed from belly button down, gown ruffled around her chest. Fin ushered everyone out before returning to the bedside to pull up her sheet. “There you go, decent again,” he said and moved to the door, turning to look over his shoulder, one hand on the handle. “I’ll pop back later to do your TTO’s.”

“My what?” she said, brow furrowing in comic bamboozlement.

“Your medication to take home with you. To take out. TTO.” He conspiratorially raised his eyebrows and narrowed his eyes. “Medispeak.”

She started to chuckle then winced. “Ow, shit, it hurts

when I laugh. Okay, later.”

The rest of the ward round added no further grease to Fin’s career pole, and he headed for the outpatient department for the Monday morning clinic. It was mainly follow-ups for people who’d had more complicated surgery but there were some new referrals with complaints that needed investigating and, as always, a peppering of poor people with whom no-one could work out what was wrong. Fin liked them... the search for a problem that lurked beyond its presentation.

When the waiting area thinned out, he poked his head around the junior doctor’s door. “Just popping back to the ward. Bleep me if you need anything.”

He felt bright. Freedom beckoned in a few hours. But before that... Lorna.

She’d moved to the chair beside the bed and was dressed in what she’d arrived in on Saturday: a shirt with a flowery print over a floaty yellow skirt and flip-flops. Someone had found her a hairbrush and her lips looked clean and moist again. Fin took her drug chart from the foot of the bed and started writing. He glanced up, saw her looking at him, and stopped.

“Like we said, your appendix looked normal but I’m just putting you on a course of antibiotics to be on the safe side,” he explained, and resumed his focus on the chart.

“Are you always on the safe side?”

Fin’s biro wavered. Something exciting, like a restless craving, stirred in him. Not looking up, he said, “When it comes to this sort of thing, yes I most definitely am.” He finished writing. “Is there anyone at home to look after you?”

“It might take longer than usual to walk the ramparts, but the butler’ll be on hand.”

Fin stifled a laugh. “I meant, you got food and everything.”