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Man and His World

by Clark Baise

1.

In the season of dust with the sun benign, a man of forty and a boy of twelve appeared at the Tourist Reception Centre, asking for rooms. Failing that, a house, with cook and servant.

The Centre was a modest concrete bunker with thirty rooms and a dining hall, and it was full. This was winter, the time for migrating Siberian songbirds and their Japanese pursuers. For the man and boy the situation was potentially desperate. Udaipur was a walled, medieval town baked on an igneous platter a thousand feet above the desert. To the east, no settlements for two hundred kilometers. To the west lay twenty kilometers of burnt, rusted tanks and stripped, blood-stained Jeeps, a UN outpost manned by a bizarre assortment of ill-equipped troops, then barbed wire, mines, and fifteen kilometers of more trophy tanks and blood-stained Jeeps. In the winter, buses dropped off passengers twice a week, picked up freight, and returned to the capital.

The man--who gave his name as William Logan--really should have booked a room through the central authority. That way, he would have saved the trip and, who knows, maybe his life.

2.

They had been on the road six days from New Delhi. Sleeping on buses, standing on trains, paying truckers. By day, the thin air required a sweater, through the hot sun burned with its mere intention. From March, when summer returned, the town would disappear from tourist maps and the national consciousness and the road become the world's longest clothesline and camel dung kiln.

Wealth was counted in camels. Camels outnumbered bicycles in the district. Camels pulled the wooden-wheeled carts and plodded around the water-screws, drawing up monsoon rains from the summer before. They yielded their carcasses more graciously than any animal in the world. The first sight of camels grazing in the bush had been a wonder to William Logan. Something half-evolved to mammothhood, comic and terrifying in its brute immensity. It had confirmed him, for the moment, in the rightness of what he was doing.

In the desert near the Rat Temple, the government maintained a camel-breeding station. The sight of a hobbled cow being mounted by the garlanded bull, their bellows and the swelling of their reptilians necks, suggested to the Japanese naturalists on their guided tours an echo of the world's creation, a foretaste of its agony and death.

3.

Before the invasion of Aryans, Greeks, Persians and British, the desert people had their own cosmology. The Mother of the World had given birth to identical pairs of camels, tigers, gazelles, elephants and rats. She did not distinguish between her children. She did not have a particular aspect or appearance; whatever their size or ferocity, her children all resembled her, perfectly. The people of Udirpur are still known as ratworshippers.

When she was nearly too old for child-bearing and the world was already full, she found herself pregnant again. And for the first time, she suffered pain, foreboding, fatigue. She bled, lay down frequently and grew thin. And from her womb came rumbles, lava, fire and flood. When she gave birth, only one cub emerged. His strangled, identical brother fell from the womb and was hastily buried under the great stone mountain in the middle of the desert.

It is said that one brother was evil, but which one? They had struggled in the womb but the secret was kept. The tribes of animals divided. Those giving allegiance to the survivor became his servants. Others retired to the oceans and to the air and to the underworld, growing fins or scales or feathers, or shrinking themselves to become insects. They all kept faith with the one who had died.

It is said the survivor, be he good or bad, is born with sin and with guilt and is condemned to loneliness. Nowhere on the earth will he find his brother or anything else like him. And with his birth, the Mother of the World died and the creative cycle came to an end.

4.

Ten years earlier, over the mountains a thousand kilometers to the north, a woman had arrived in Udirpur: the palest, whitest woman the people had ever seen. She'd been discovered outside the Rat Temple by a lorry-driver who'd been praying to the God for a successful trip. He had offered sweets and lain sãll while the God's children had swirled over his hands and feet, licking his still-sweet fingers and lips.

Clearly the girl was a hippie--the only English word he knew--one of a tribe he'd heard about but never seen. She carried a new-born baby and nursed him like a village woman by the temple gates. She wore a torn, faded sari, something the lorry-driver's own wife or widowed mother would be ashamed to wear. But she wore it well and seemed comfortable in it.

He spoke to her in his language, offering a ride to Udirpur, where at least there were facilities for foreign women and for babies. To his surprise, she answered in a language he knew. She gathered her sleeping baby and the cotton sack that held her possessions and followed him to his truck, without question. This was the way she had travelled and lived for the past three years. At some point in time lost to her now, she had been a girl in a cold small town on the edge of a forest, near a river frequented by whales, and she had left that town on a bus to work in the city, in the

year of a World's Fair. And after that summer she's not stopped her traveling, until it brought her here.

The lorry-driver knew where to take her. In Udirpur, the city of rats, the Raja had travelled the world. He spoke every language and he welcomed whatever remnant of the world that managed to seek him out.

5.

He lived in a tawny sandstone palace two kilometers from the center of town, at the place where the igneous mesa began to split, where a summer river fed a forest and residual privilege permitted the luxury of a gardener and his family, the appropriation of water, and the maintenance of a very small game sanctuary.

In the British days, the various Nizams and Maharajas had been afforded full military salutes. The British, with their customary punctiliousness over military symbol and social hierarchy, assigned each native potentate a scrupulously-measured number of guns. Thus, powerful rajahs like those of Jaipur and Baroda enjoyed full twenty-one gun salutes, and the no-less-regal but less prepossessing rajahs of Cooch Behar and Gwalior and Dewas Senior and even Dewas Junior (the latter a one-time employer of a reticent young Englishman who introduced Gibbon to the royal reading room) were granted fifteen, or twelve, or eight guns. The Rajah of Udirpur, grandfather of the current resident of the Tawny Palace, had been assigned a mere two guns on the imperial scale. He was therefore called the Pipsqueak Rajah, or Sir Squealer Singh, for the twin effect of his popgun salute and for the only worthy attraction in his district, the notorious Temple of Rats. It is not written how Sir Squealer, a genial and worldly man by all accounts, felt about his name or his general reception.

The grandson, Freddie Singh, occupies two rooms in the sealed-off palace. In those rooms he maintained the relics he'd inherited: swords, carpets, carvings, muskets, tiger-claws, daggers, and the fine silk cords designed for efficient dispatch. Freddie Singh's private Armory was as complete as any Rajah's but no visitor ever saw it. He kept in touch with his subjects, or those few hundred who still acknowledged his rule, and kept out of the way of the State, District and Conservation authorities who actually ran the town.

He had been out of the country once as a young man, then just graduated in business administration from the Faculty of Management in Ahmedabad. The first National City Bank (India Pvt. Ltd.) had hired him as a stock-analyst, and after two years of the fast life in Bombay, he'd been sent to an office in Rome, then Paris and finally New York, to learn stocks and bonds and how to trade in futures.

Those had been the beautiful years of Freddie Singh, those years on the Strand, in the Bourse, on Wall Street, an exiled princeling, smelling of licorice.

6.

She and the baby—a rugged little chap, half-Pathan by the look of him—opened up a room on the second floor, assisted by the old Royal Groom and keeper of polo

ponies (now reduced to cook and gardener and feeder of the royal animals) and his widowed daughter and her very small daughter who became a companion for young Pierre-Rama.

She seemed to bring some order, perhaps some beauty, into Freddie's life. For the majority of people in his ancestral city, the Rajah (though still a youngish man) was either a relic or an embarrassment. When he at last took the unwed foreigner as a wife, they were prepared to call her Rani if it pleased him. Other names as well, in front of her but never him. The camel, bountiful in all things, provides an anthology of choice insults. The Rani was made to feel as worthy as the slime off a dead camel's tooth. Weeks, then finally years went by, without her ever leaving the compound.

7.

Pierre-Rama was nearly ten when the man and his son appeared in town that cool day in late December. Since the Tourist Centre was filled with bird-watchers, someone asked if the visitor would object to accomodation in the Rajah's palace? No, he would not. Would the visitor mind sharing the floor with the beautiful, exotic, mysterious Rani? No, decidedly, he would not. Would he be patient with the Rajah, who, if he could not marry his guests, would often confer upon them land deeds or Mogul miniatures or dusty carpets that had been his grandfather's privilege to disburse, but which now belonged to the state? Yes, he would be patient with the old gentleman.

They put the man and his son (a frail lad given to sneezing in the dust and to whining for the newly-outlawed American soft-drinks) in Youssef's camel-drawn cart and drove them to the gully-hugging yellow palace. They made their own way through the garden to the main gate, and pulled on a rusty chain to alert the **chowkidar**.

It was the Rajah, clad in pajamas and a shawl and smoking an English cigarette who opened the door. He was younger than the guest, a vigorous man no more than thirty-five, with a head and mane of glossy curls, a rounded face and rounded body that glowed with a kind of polish the visitor had never seen. "My wife is upstairs. She is just coming down." He called up from the stairwell, "Visitors Solange! Come quickly!" Seeing the confusion when a young, familiar-looking woman appeared at the head of the stairs, bowing shyly and murmuring "Bonjour," the Rajah winked and said, "My wife, the Rani. She is from Quebec in Canada. And where, sir, do you come from?"

"Winnipeg," said William Logan. "In Canada."

8.

That is how, this night in February two months later, under a sky pierced with stars, with meteorites flaring and bright silent things making their way across the heavens (not planes, satellites, possibly, if indeed so many had been launched) under a sky that would embarrass a Planetarium, a sky that thrills the way it

ocean or a mountain range can thrill, a sky that suggests mythologies and seems explicable only in narrative and divine inspiration, the two are talking, have been talking, for hours. She nurses the baby, Jacques-Ravinder, the Rajah's son, two months old, honey-colored, plump and good-natured.

How perfect a garment is the sari for nursing babies, thinks the man, William Logan. They sleep under a lavender or green or yellow gauze, free of flies and the glare of the sun, the mother sits with her baby anywhere, nurses him in a crowd with only the little toes peeking from the crook of her elbow to give him away.

Such is the posture that night. Logan talks. The Rani listens. The Rajah is almost asleep in his wicker chair, contributing nothing but his benign royal presence. The older boys run through the palace undisturbed, chasing rats, confining them when possible to the unused rooms.

9.

The stars over the winter desert are mythologically potent tonight, portending stories. The sky is an ocean, thinks William Logan; I could watch it forever. The Milky Way a luminous smear, the rip and tear of meteorites, blue-white stars glittering like messages, like interference; he thinks of old movies, the sputter on a sound system for every break in the film. But here is no sound but the sucking of milk.

Logan is speaking. "Now this is a night for sea-turtles," he says very slowly, because English is the Rani's last language, the one she learned here, with a local accent, from the gardener and his widowed daughter. Sea-turtles she does not understand, but lets Logan go on.

"When sea-turtles are born, they have maybe twenty minutes to memorize the exact location of their birth. Their exact twenty feet of sand, in the world. And these are among the stupidest animals on earth--can you imagine?"

"That is amazing," she says.

"But I've seen them down on the beach at Grand Cayman. Caribbean sea-turtles. The old she-turtle waddles ashore and digs a deep trough about fifty feet up from the water. And she drops in her eggs and pats down the sand and goes back to sea."

"That is beautiful," said the Maharani.

"But they don't make it, see. No, no, the natives hide behind the trees, waiting for the old she-turtles to lay their eggs. They are too tired now to move..."

"Yes, I am knowing that tiredness..."

"And so the natives attack them, turn them all over on their backs. And after a few hours they build fires on the beach and heat iron spikes red hot and then push them under the shell--"

"Oh, Mr. Logan, please. This is terrible. No more, please."

"Please do not be upset, Solange," says the Rajah, snapping awake. "I too have seen this." What we are witnessing, he goes on to suggest, is the death of a species from over-specialization. It had lived two hundred million years in one form or another, an insult to intelligence, without enemies, enjoying near-immortality. It is a model of organization, more like a religion than a living creature.

A long silence ensues. "I have seen skies like this only up north," says Logan.

"I have seen skies like this every night since I left Europe," says the Rani. "The nights on the Black Sea and on the Caspian and in the desert of Kandahar and in the mountains of Kashmir were all like this. I could not live without stars like this. The sky is a head full of jewels, the people say. And in the monsoons when the stars are covered, the people say the camel has closed her eyes and people get sick."

Mr. Logan had not yet spent a monsoon.

"I was saying, about turtles. Not about the she-turtles--that is sad and barbarian. I grant you. I was thinking of the babies. Just seconds after they hatch and climb up through the sand and they're no larger than fiddler crabs and move just as fast, and there are hundreds of them all on the same night racing from the dunes down across the wet sand of high tide to the water. Thousands of birds have gathered and all the natives who were there for the mothers are there for the babies. They carry baskets and they scoop up turtles with both hands the way we'd pick berries, and that's not the amazing thing. The amazing thing about those baby turtles is this: they have only ten minutes to break out of the egg and get into the water. And they must survive odds that would stop the most intelligent beast on earth. And that's not what they're thinking about. What they must do beyond anything else is plan for their return to this beach, this very beach, for spawning. And they do it by printing the stars indelibly in their brain. A perfect star-chart. It's as though they are born with the most perfect sensitive instrument in the world, they use it once, remember it perfectly, and then when they hit the water, if they get that far, the mind snaps shut and they live on instinct for the next three centuries."

"That is very beautiful," she agrees.

"We are the only animals who can get so lost, Mr. Logan," says Freddie Singh.

Under the sari, the Maharani shifts the baby to the other breast. For several minutes they watch the meteorites and the steadily-moving things that the Rani thinks of as extraterrestrial.

"When our geese are flying south," says Logan, "it is said that they can hear the Gulf waves crashing on the shores of Texas and they can hear the Atlantic surf on Ireland. From Winnipeg, or Montreal."

The Rani says nothing but she feels that she has travelled as unerringly as any turtle or any goose and that even tonight she could hear every voice in every language that had ever been spoken to her. This man Logan, a country-man, was over-impressed with the brains of lower animals.

"You are a restless man, Mr. Logan," says the Rani.

10.

The three-block frontage of William Logan's birth was Stiles to Raglan, between Portage and Wolseley, in the city of Winnipeg. Though life had stretched him, he often returned to that original scene, in his memory, to his house built by his father on land purchased by his grandfather, on the Assiniboine. In his way he had swum the world ever since. He had lost his bearings.

He had been in Montreal in 1967, living in Westmount and working in textiles. He'd just been divorced. He was thirty that year with a two-year-old boy and he

remembered Westmount Park, the library, the sandboxes and the slides. He was, then and now, a tall, lean, bald, elegant man--in textiles, after all--walking slowly, fingers clutched by his little boy, eyes alert to the idle young mothers, so rich, so confident and attractive. They shared an idleness those afternoons--he was frequently in and out of Montreal and found himself with half-days to kill--there was a power in being the only man in the park, with a sturdy little child.

In ten years with his mother, the child had grown less sturdy. He was better now. There was a day when a new adventure began, when he sat a reasonable distance (but on the same bench) from a blond, maturing woman in a lavender sweater. It was late April, perhaps snow still was pushed in ridges but the earth was dry and dusty. A little girl, pursued by an **au pair** girl, ran to the lady and took a good long look at William Logan.

"Mama, that man is **bald**," said the little girl.

"Damn," said the mother.

Logan, who'd never minded his baldness or the reputation it carried, found it a handy prop in establishing his essential harmlessness with younger women, said, "That's OK. Out of the mouths of babes, etc."

The mother straightened the little girl's jacket and motioned for the **au pair** to take her back to the swings. "Oh, it's not that. It's that now I have to sleep with you to restore your almighty male ego."

"Pardon me?" He'd been out of the country.

She gave her address--a brick house on Lansdowne, just up from the park.

The Rajah stood and poured a final cup of tea.

The baby was sleeping and he took him back to the palace, bidding his guest good night.

11.

"I'll never get back," he said.

"To Montreal?"

"To Winnipeg. Not that I want to. I can't anyway. I'm a fugitive."

The Rani was not disturbed. He had established his essential harmlessness.

"Tell me about the lady on Lansdowne," she said.

He sipped slowly. God forgive me, thought William Logan: she reads minds and her breast excited me though she's my hostess, a Maharani, and nursing an infant.

The lady on Lansdowne was Hungarian. Thirty-five and very beautiful and bold and angry. She was an actress and her husband had left his wife for her. He had much older children, and that obnoxious little girl.

"Her name was Laura," says the Rani.

"Yes, I believe so."

"Now, Mr. Logan, tell me about the **au pair** girl."

Before he can answer, he remembers it all. By God, he thinks. He'd lived long enough, accumulated enough points of reference, for his experience to start collapsing, growing dense with coincidence.

"You looked familiar the first time I saw you. Solange--of course."

"That day in the park. You called me the **au pair** girl but I noticed you alone in the park and I watched Mrs. R. watching you and I could see you were both very experienced in the world...I was not, not at all. I wondered how you would get together." She took a long breath, and wrapped the sari-end over her head.

"You speak a lot more when your husband is gone."

"My husband is never gone."

She listened awhile to jackals on the plain, the leathery sway of palms in the desert, the distant clatter of wooden wheels, a cart and camel over cobblestones.

"May I call you Solange?"

She pondered the question longer than he thought necessary. "I cannot stop you."

"Then what are the chances of our getting together? Surely it means something, no? It can't just be (he thought of the stars) just coincidence."

"You are perhaps too restless, Mr. Logan."

"It's just that I don't wait for things anymore."

On his last flight from Egypt to Montreal, Logan had sat next to a pleasant, moon-faced man bound for Athens, and maybe Montreal. He's asked Logan shrewd job-hunting questions and Logan had been flattered by his interest. Then he'd asked he what time it was. They were south of Athens. Logan told him and the man jerked into a new posture. He stood and opened one of the Red Cross emergency medical bags that was in the storage area immediately overhead. At the same time, six other young men stood and opened other emergency boxes. **Oh no**, Logan had thought: the boxes were full of grenades.

There is nothing in the modern world quite like eight days of siege to focus a man's attention on final matters. They had landed a few hundred yards from the hillside home of the Delphic Oracle. **Low has fallen the prophet's house**, quoted one passenger. Women and children were released; Logan made his peace. As good a place as any to die; as good a reason as any. His life was a hostage-taking anyway, he was a passenger only, detained by fanatics. He vowed, if he survived, to live his life from that moment on as though the person next to him were a terrorist, that every package contained grenades, that every flight would end on a hillside, surrounded by troops.

12.

Just a few weeks before, but a millenium ago, he had landed in Montreal, flown to Toronto, taken the airport limousine to the door of the expensive school he paid for and asked for Billy Logan, a boy who was a stranger to him and whom he'd come to dislike just a little. He'd taken Billy with him back to the airport and they'd flown to London, bought tropical clothes and Logan had sent telegrams to his boss and ex-wife. **Resign effective immediately...I have Billy don't look you'll never find us**. He bought tickets to a dozen destinations, under various names. Not merely restless, he'd become impulsive.

Some nights, sleep is an act of will requiring as sharp a focus as thought itself. Under such heavens there could be no sleep. Listening to the Rani was like listening to an Indian woman--the accent, that is--only better. It's strange but familiar.

because behind it is something he can understand. It's erotic, terribly erotic. He cannot control his love, not for her, not for his host, not for his child; he wants to displace the Rajah, he feels he has found his home.

In the second week of residence at the Tawny Palace, Logan had boldly proposed to the attractive lady who did his rooms, the gardener's widowed daughter. Perhaps she had not understood; the daughter, an exquisite child of--what? thirteen?--had appeared. And then to say to her, "No, I meant your mother" when she had presented herself so wondrously to him would have offended his morals as much as taking her. To turn from beauty is a sin, to refuse the daughter would embarrass us all, and be insulting, he feared.

But he had not intended this, any of this, and there could only be one honorable way to act. To enjoy the love of the girl and to try to love the mother. What incredible complications this would lead to, William Logan could not say: only that he was ready to face them. The adjacent space, he had learned, may always be evil, or it may open into the next world, the next level, a higher existence. The girl comes to him after bathing while the mother prepares his lunch. The Rani and Rajah have no suspicions. It is a very private, second-floor affair. The daughter must know--though she has never asked--that in the evenings after the main meal has been cooked and the sweeper has cleaned the rooms and the daughter has washed the dishes that her mother returns, laden with fruits and a small clay pot of sweets, makes tea, then lies beside him.

Is this corruption? At one time he would have known but now he cannot say. He feels at times that he has entered a compact, nothing down, no interest, small monthly payments, but that an unpayable price will be extracted. It is like a nightmare in which he is ice-skating out on the Assiniboine, and he can feel the dark waters oozing from the slashes of his blade; there is still time to skate ashore but a wind is pushing him out to the black open water and he can't turn back.

13.

Freddie Singh sits in his Armory, wondering if this is the night. He has come to like the visitor. The boys have become inseparable; there is hope for the boy. But Freddie Singh is still the Rajah of the Tawny Palace; he knows what happens on his grounds as his grandfather once knew what happens on his grounds as his grandfather once knew what happened in his larger **durbar**; he knows that an uprooted man is the principle of corruption, will spread it wherever he goes. When you announced yourself from Canada, the Rani said **get rid of him immediately** but I could not. You needed rest, just as the Rani has needed rest. But she has healed, and you have not, my friend.

The people here know of dualities, of coincidence. Every day they see the sand turn to embers. Every night to ice. Ten months of the year, never a drop of water. Two months, walls of mud.

The Rani arrived in India with a friend, another girl from Que-beck. But the other girl met a handsome Frenchman at the airport and the Rani struggled onward, to the desert. Her friend followed the boy to Bangkok, Hong Kong, Djakarta, Nepal. She loved him, she cooked for him, she helped poison people for him, maybe

dozens of young travellers, like her, like the Rani. She may be in jail for the rest of her life. She was not evil, not born evil, but she had become lost.

We have known others, thinks Freddie Singh. A four-teen-year-old girl given birth in a paddy field in Bangladesh nine months after a week of raping, after her mother's rape and murder, her village's rape and butchery. She slashes the infant's throat and wrists, hacks up the body like a fish's, then throws herself successfully on the knife. But someone came by, picked up the smaller body and took it to the hospital, and the corpse was resurrected. And the baby was adopted by a family in Levis who named her Marie-Josee and now she's the best student and the best figure-skater in her school.

The people here have seen enough of life to know that coincidence itself is no motive for action. Coincidence on your level, Mr. Logan, is a turtle's coincidence, nothing but instinct.

Coincidence is coincidental, thinks Freddie Singh.

14.

"My husband is back."

Logan, sipping the last of his cold tea, turned in his wicker chair. "Freddie, I—" In Freddie's hands is stretched taut a valuable artifact from one of the desert tribes. In the old days they had joined caravans across the desert, offering their services as entertainers and animal-handlers. And the caravans never reached their destinations. The people were called **thuoqus** and they worshiped the principle of creation no less than other tribes, though their ultimate loyalty was to the brother who had died.

Death moves swiftly across the heavens, obliterating the stars at a point just short of meaning, and across Logan's brain like some long-sought solution made suddenly apparent, only to retreat again. He looks up, about to speak and across to the Rani who now is standing, and turning away. Then he looks down, at himself, sees his head perched crazily on his chest and the widening dribble of tea on his luminous white **kurta**, and the stain spreads to fill his universe.