

The Black Taj

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Our cab clattered past a burdened elephant on the road through Haryana, India. The driver and the guide, assuming that my father and I were American tourists who could not understand the language, chuckled as they exchanged long, fluid sentences of Hindi. My father smirked as he translated their conversation for me in a whisper: "Boy, are we going to fleece these tourists, take them for everything they've got." In his business suit he looked the proper western executive, but he is a native and speaks Hindi. I don't.

I can do a passable Irish brogue, though. I have always loved shamrocks and bagpipes, green and plaid, and my mother has often said she can see in me the reckless joy of my Irish ancestors, the gusty fire of my Scottish blood. Her father was one of thirteen red-headed, freckle-faced boys, and she feared that, having married a Brahman, her baby would be born a freckled Indian. Thankfully for her, I came out an even golden brown. Often, though, I find myself wishing the freckles in my heart would show through. People see my dark hair and eyes and assume that I have an exotic history. Really, I have grown up an American; my Indian heritage holds almost as much mystery for me as for them. What strange body is this, I wonder, which makes such an elegant house for my unruly spirit? Sometimes I do feel akin to the regal tigers of the Indian jungle, the a thunderstorm always stirs my Druid blood, flooding the vast Scottish moors of my mind.

That afternoon, however, my heart was scattered among the clouds of parrots evaporating from the mango trees. Straining to see deep into the steamy greenness of the grove, I wondered if this journey would also allow me a glimpse into my mysterious Asian heritage. Since the bright morning hour when we had set out, miles of palm and mango wood had trailed past us on the road. We hoped to reach Agra by nightfall and see the Taj Majal in full moonlight. Now it was early afternoon, and my skirt stuck to the black, perforated leather of the seat, but my mind cooled as I imagined the white marble Taj glowing against a midnight sky.

The mirage shattered, however, as the cab's engine began to rattle and heave. When the car spluttered to a halt, the driver and the guide clambered out to pry open the hood, and my father went to offer his advice. I left the cab and glanced up and down the road. Some distance away a solitary water buffalo grazed. Something about his stance was odd, and I remember thinking that even surrounded by the herd he would probably have looked lonely. As I watched him, trying to discover what made him different, I suddenly noticed that he was kneeling as he ate. His hooves were so grotesquely overgrown that when he stood he could not reach the grass.

While I was in Bombay, I often felt like that buffalo. At twelve years-old, I was the tallest female in our family, and the others looked up at me, giggling softly. I felt I ought to belong there in the Matunga flat, but I could not fathom their social customs, their religious rites, everything that was life to them; I couldn't reach the grass. Instead, I was munching on sage brush which I thought quite tasty, but watching my family feast on their culture made me feel that I was missing something scrumptious. I wanted to immerse myself in their grand customs, their bright holidays, their vivacious folklore, but I warned my rowdy American spirit away, afraid it might shatter something in their exquisite display of passion.

As I was sitting with my uncle one morning, he lifted an icon painting of Ganesha from where it rested on a more recent household god, the television. "What do you think of Ganesha?" Uncle asked. I looked at the faded outlines of the elephant god, faintly remembering stories my father had told me of how Ganesha's head had been severed from his body, and how his wife had sewn the head of a wild elephant onto his corpse to revive him. Characters from a dozen Indian bedtime stories crowded my brain. All of them had fascinated me. I hesitated, wondering what response Uncle wanted. "Ganesha?" I said at last, "He's a fun god." Uncle, looking mildly appalled, shook his head and frowned, "Don't say like that." I was profoundly embarrassed. Now whenever I think of my Indian Heritage, I kneel like the buffalo, trying to taste something of its delicious grandeur, reverencing the sacraments I don't understand.

Back on the road, the water buffalo was still kneeling as we rolled past, our engine limping under the heavy sun. After a few hours the road wandered through a small village. The only evidence of commerce in Kozi was a tiny restaurant, a soda stand, and an auto repair garage. This was convenient for us because our stomachs were rumbling, our throats were itching, and the engine died again as we reached the village. As I sat sipping lukewarm lime soda across the street from the garage, the last rays of the sun exploded over the sky like capsules of red dye. The bats swarmed from the eaves, fracturing the air with their shrill cries and the harsh flapping of their wings. Through the eerie light walked a small boy, leading a trained bear by a chain. He noticed my foreign dress and began to circle me, whistling commands to the bear, prodding it with a stick that the animal, when in its natural glory could have snapped as easily as a toothpick. I was sorry that I had no money to give these tragic performers: the small brown boy ruling the great, muzzled bear.

At home in America, I have been that bear. The heritage which awes me with its immensity, interests others like a side show at the circus. I was once such

a spectacle in my school cafeteria. A boy who had recently made my acquaintance had sat down across from me, and I choked on my food as he began to extol my "breathtaking" beauty. He betted jokingly that I would be married before long. "There are a lot of Caucasians," he said with a sly grin, "who are bored with blond hair and blue eyes. They'd much rather have more interesting children." I felt my pupils dilating as blood rushed into my eyes. Someone will marry me, my mind reeled, because I may breed children with prize hides? We could open a tannery and sell their scalps and pelts: beautiful kid leather, Indian skin jackets. My thoughts festered with sarcasm, but my rage and confusion effectively muzzled me. After declaring that this was "a stupid conversation," I stood and carried my half-eaten lunch to the kitchen.

Back in Kozi, I finished sipping my bottle of warm lime soda. Strange figures ambled among the shadows, securing their town for sleep. They trickled into their dark, secret homes, and at last I sat alone, outside. I do not belong here, I thought, among the twilight and the mystery. I love these people, but they are not mine. Mine is sunlight, the exuberance of all wild, American children. But suddenly I remembered a time when the sun had turned me out.

That July afternoon bristled with heat, and I ran from my apartment to the grassy bank of the playground, where someone had filled two wading pools with water. In a small, white pool sat Julie. Julie was five, like me, so she was my friend. She was Jewish and had marvelous wavy hair the color of brass. As I stepped into the water, she smiled benevolently, but after a few minutes another of her friends arrived. "Their isn't enough room," Julie said to me, absently wiggling her toes in the water. "Go get in the pool with the blacks." I simply stared at her in answer, shocked. Her mother, observing our childish exchange, suggested gently to me that I would feel less crowded if I swam in the other pool. I shifted my glance to it; two Polynesian children were playing in the water. Blacks. "I don't believe I will swim any more today," I said, and I returned to my apartment with five-year-old dignity.

What is black? I wondered in the twilight. Someone different in body or mind from the white norm? In that case, perhaps I am black—neither Scotch, nor Irish, nor Indian, but glistening jet black. I felt black that day in the cafeteria, which is why I did not bother to point out to the boy that Indians are technically Caucasian. At that moment I raged for the dignity of all people who do not fit the ivory stereotype, who have been used and treated with calloused curiosity. At that moment I was Hebrew, Hispanic, Negroid, Mongoloid, and my white blood hid deep in my marrow for shame.

Now that the Indian sky was beginning to deepen in order to make room for the stars. At last the car began gurgling and purring, and we set out again towards Agra. I dozed for a while, and awoke to a fantastical landscape. Bathed in supernatural light, the earth rippled and undulated from the roadside to the black horizon. Far off among the hills stood the Taj, phantasmagorical, made of the same luminous stuff as the moon which shone above it.

The mosque vanished from view as we entered the city. Tension rattled the air in the dark, narrow streets. When we arrived at the gates of the Taj Majal, the police had closed them because of terrorist attacks earlier in the day. Shah Jahan, I remembered, had built this Wonder of the World to testify of his love for his wife. Now, behind its locked portal, the mosque wept in solitude for the Sikhs and Hindus who could find so little love for each other. Why, I wondered, must difference in birth spawn opposition between people? Why must it ruffle the peace within myself? I fancy that somewhere inside of me a tiny Irish woman wearing a kilt is beating a little snake charmer over the head with her rolling pin, as he curses her with his voodoo magic. We drove away, having seen nothing but a sliver of the great white dome rising above the wall. When we returned the next morning, however, we found the gates open. Light, it seemed, had washed away some of the fear. As we stood in the lofty archway I felt like Dorothy gazing at Munchkinland from the doorway of the farmhouse. Everything seemed larger than life, larger than men's petty squabbles, as large as love. The roundness of the great white dome filled my mind.

We removed our shoes in respect before climbing the stairs of the Taj. The marble felt cool beneath my feet, and I stirred a puddle of water with my toe in sheer fascination and delight. Looking across the river, my father pointed to a heap of stone on the far bank. Shah Jahan, he told me, had intended to build a black Taj there to mirror the white one, but the Shah had died before he could finish the project.

So I have tried to finish it for him, building the great, black Taj on the banks of the river of my mind, hoping to complete the symmetry and perfect my peace. My queries and emotions have sometimes poured out in a torrent, but now the reflections of the black dome and the white dome merge in the water. Each is an envoy from a different continent that, just as it reaches the other's shore, decides its mission is peaceable. My body and my soul, I am beginning to see, compliment each other. I am a setting for onyx and pearl alike, and these together are what make me irrevocably myself.