

Mumbai
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With its golden elephant gods decorating; exotic, dark help replacing white linen table cloths amid the smell of curry and spices not immediately recognizable, “The Bombay Palace” appeared sufficiently different and thus was acceptable, and so Godfrey and Nancy went there again and again until it was as though they always had.

The food was not too bad, and then it was pretty good. Describing it to friends - acquaintances really: Western Pennsylvanians forced upon them through job or apartment proximity -the food became ‘really good,’ then ‘outstanding,’ and finally ‘to die for,’ safe in the knowledge that the culinary reach of those to whom they spoke would never dare beyond the “Bake Scrod Floridian” at Eat n’ Park. Godfrey and Nancy went there often, sat in the same section served by the same waiter, and always ordered the exact same thing.

“Yes, of course I am knowing without you to say Mister Godfrey: number five for you - shrimp curry with rice -and six,-number-six Mrs. Godfrey -Tandoori chicken with Nan,” said Papul, their very own Indian waiter.

“Yes Papul - to whatever you just said,” and Godfrey and Nancy both forced a laugh again, as they had learned to do.

They used to spend a lot of time correcting Papul’s English, often refusing to order until he had addressed them properly. (“What it is we are wanting today?” No, please, stop. With one-hundred and fifty-combined credit hours you might as well put the food on the floor and refer to us as “Rover” and “Spot.”) Each of them had become obsessed in this way for different reasons. A part-time English tutor at the high school, Nancy saw it as an opportunity to teach. A tenured professor of theater at the University of Pittsburgh, Godfrey saw it as an opportunity to correct.

Then one day, completely unexpected, Nancy turned to Godfrey and said:

“You know, Godfrey, maybe we shouldn’t be so hard on Papul for the way he speaks. He has come to America and is trying to make a better life for himself. Maybe this spirit of discovery is more important than his destruction of the language.”

Godfrey looked at his wife and did little to hide his disappointment. This ‘poor huddled masses’ narrative was base, trivial, and overstated. It had spread like a tuberculosis in the Pittsburgh area, breeding in Slovak Halls, Croatian Festivals, “Festa Italiano’s” and now there was his wife, infested and sneezing all over him. Nancy could feel the contempt and condescension Godfrey usually reserved for his students, but, she was prepared.

“Of course most of ‘them’ don’t think that Indians are really immigrants,” she added. “Most of ‘them’ think that only the turn of the century European immigration is the only true immigration. Applying their narrative to the Indians, or Asians or Mexicans would be unique, Godfrey. Most of ‘them’ would find it upsetting.”

Godfrey reconsidered. However trivial and uninteresting this whole ‘we are immigrant, hear us roar,’ narrative had become, the betterment of subsequent generations inherent in the sloganeering was, after all, something one had to believe if one were to endure the cultural malaise that was Western Pennsylvania. The idea that each generation made it better for the next one, that each generation became more American and less whatever in the hell they were to begin with, provided the “Work in Progress” shingle one could hang outside the door of this stew of opportunism and desperation to justify the mess. Plus, if, applying that narrative to Papul was upsetting to Mr. Petrowski in Apartment 7a, well then...

“Yes. Mister Godfrey, I am try to learning English so hard now, please.”

...Go ahead you poor huddled mass yearning to be free: go ahead and misplace modifiers.

In fact, “Paul” had to work his Hindu ass off hiding the Queen’s English he had perfected in four years of study at Leeds University. The son of a wealthy pharmaceutical entrepreneur, once he left Mumbai for university he had not gone back. By day, he developed a particular fondness for the poetry of Blake and prose of Shelly. At night, he had become somewhat of a fixture at the Lord Castleberry Englishman’s Pub, where his propensity towards single-malt Scotch earned him the title “Gandhi on the Rocks.”

For graduation, his parents sent him a gold watch, a ticket back to Mumbai, a position as sales representative in his father’s company where it was understood he would work his way up, and a picture of the woman they had chosen for him to marry. Drunk with his friends six days running, having considered a slew of jail able offenses as a means of staving off the return flight, he eventually remembered an uncle who had opened an Indian Restaurant in America. Paul decided he would need to see the world as a way of completing his education and wrote his parents to tell them so.

Paul arrived in Pittsburgh to a chorus of “youins” and “na-uh” and quickly realized that whatever language was being spoken there, it wasn’t anything that he understood to be English. At the Indian Restaurant, his dark features and British accent generated a great deal of cognitive dissonance among the Western PA clientele, as though “Kimmie” from the nearby Chinese Restaurant had suddenly taken to wearing a sombrero and speaking Dutch.

One customer openly accused Paul of putting on airs with a fake accent.

“The British used to rule India,” Paul tried to explain. “India was a British Colony. Have you ever heard of Mahatma Gandhi? ‘Freedom at Midnight?’”

The couple walked out and with them the twenty-two-dollars a week the restaurant had collected for “two of those red chicken things, hold the spices -not hot -and a pitcher of Rolling Rock beer.”

Paul had violated the number one and number two rules of the service industry in the greater Pittsburgh area: Don’t ever ask the clientele a question they don’t know the answer to, and never, never, discuss anything to do with the subject of geography. Paul’s uncle had a talk with him: At home in Mumbai there was a woman Paul had never met who was waiting to spend the rest of her life with him the very moment he was no longer gainfully employed. Paul stuck another “p” in the middle of his name, and began to wage war on the language he loved.

“Yes, Mister Godfrey, I am so hurrying to bring Nan soon to you for.”

“No need to ‘am so hurrying’ Papul,” Godfrey said. “Tonight, we’re going to take our time. Nancy and I have a lot to figure out.”

The challenge for Godfrey and Nancy was to figure out what to do with an unexpected inheritance from Nancy's eccentric Uncle George. Inspired by their surroundings, they decided to take a trip to India. Papul becomes the self-appointed travel agent for the journey, which gives him the opportunity to exact revenge on all of America. We pick up the story after an all-night cab ride to find a hotel that doesn't exist and that ends with their arrival at the accommodations of the cab driver's friend/relative. The cab driver claims this to be the only hotel in the city of Mumbai (Bombay) that has a free room.

They followed the driver through a door and up a dark stairwell. At one point the driver flipped a switch but nothing happened. They continued on until a faint glow from a naked bulb revealed walls stained with streaks of red. There was a sign written in English, "Do not spit on walls."

At the end of the hall was a man sitting behind a candle and a statue of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant God. Godfrey wanted terribly for some idiot from Pittsburgh to walk in and refer to the statue as "Dumbo." Maybe this really was the only hotel room left in Mumbai, and wasn't it lucky their driver knew? Their driver, who was then speaking in a language incomprehensible to Godfrey and Nancy, seemed to be instructing the clerk, who responded with a series of, "ah-huh's" until he withdrew the registration cards from the desk and placed them in a drawer. Then their driver turned without a word and began to leave. Godfrey lunged at him with an urgency his colleagues in the psychology department would later describe as Stockholm syndrome.

"But...how far are we from the train station?" Godfrey asked.

"Oh, very close," the driver spoke while continuing down the hall.

"But...we have to catch a train on Sunday."

"Yes, I have told the man this, very good."

"But, I didn't tell you until just now."

"No worries, no worries. He is my cousin/good friend/relative. No worries."

The driver had disappeared but Godfrey called out anyway:

"But!"

"No worries," the man behind the desk continued. "That is my good friend/cousin who is my brother-in-law relative, cousin of my wife/friend."

"You speak English?"

"We will make good room for you, very nice," he continued. "Tomorrow we will do/see oh so many things. Please to give me your passports."

It wasn't immediately obvious that the space behind a door to which they had been led was, in fact, a hotel room. It was only after sifting through a random collection of chairs, tables, and a few empty boxes that they came upon two twin beds pushed together, but whose headboards lay in opposite directions, so that each of them would be sleeping across from the other's feet. Godfrey had been unaware of the fact that Nancy was no longer in the same room until he heard her call out from behind a door he couldn't find.

"Godfrey," was what she said.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

Godfrey opened the door to a closet and then another back to the hallway before finding Nancy behind door number three in an aborted state of undress in which her pants had gotten only as far down as her thighs. Nancy was looking around the room. On the wall were a faucet and a brightly colored plastic bucket on the floor. There was a hole in the floor that offered no visible means of support other than two ceramic-looking foot stands, rippled for... support, maybe? Rippled for traction? Nancy seemed to want an answer.

“I guess that’s the shower,” Godfrey said.

Godfrey paused.

“I guess that’s the toilet.”

In the absolute secrecy of this place where nobody would know to find them, the darkness of the room had a crushing weight that made it hard to breath. Each desired sleep because of its familiarity -the one thing in the room and in their lives they could recognize and embrace. In seven short hours, India had stripped them of the selves they had created. In the wake of this destruction, Godfrey imagined himself lying on his back and drinking vodka from a bottle; Nancy saw her arms outstretched, her hands clasping and then tightening: “Listen to me. Listen to me you son-of-a-bitch.”

They prayed that night, each one individually: where is sleep? Please, dear God...

Twenty restless minutes later, God answering with a loud hammering that was either the hotel putting on a new roof or war. Morning had arrived in full with the sun beaming brightly through drape less windows. Outside, the streets sounded like a carnival in somebody else’s language. With sounds as loud as cannon fire, the day exploding in without resistance, there was at least a distraction provided from the omnipresent nothingness that moments ago threatened to disfigure them. Their brains pressed hard towards sleep -please, now, awake for nearly two days -forcing images upon both their conscious and subconscious minds at once.

A question was being asked of Godfrey, the tone of which he understood, although the words were unclear. He sensed a professor whose imaged was blurred but who was growing bigger. This professor asked the unintelligible question again, even louder this time.

“Could you please repeat the question?” Godfrey managed.

Image: The professor’s eyes were his first recognizable feature -little black balls staring straight ahead. Then, big and floppy ears grew from the sides of his head; a trunk shot forth from the middle of his face. It was that of Ganesh, the elephant God, growing bigger still, and repeating the question louder and with an increased urgency in a language that was incomprehensible to Godfrey.

The Hindu God was growing increasingly angry at the lack of response, causing great sense of injustice and indignation to well up within Godfrey: He couldn’t understand the question! Why couldn’t this elephant understand that? He felt a loss of dignity. The sheer volume of the voice drew Godfrey towards daytime and the hammering, which he turned his face into the pillow to avoid.

Image: In and out of waking, he saw the face of one of his students cringing before him. He could recognize the question now, and he was the one who was asking it: “Who is the character least able to affect his own destiny in ‘The Cherry Orchard?’” It was one of his favorite questions: If a student chose a major character, he would criticize him for not thinking broadly. If the student chose a minor character, Godfrey could say that the character wasn’t important enough. He could only ask this question once per class. The student looked as though he was about to cry, and this helped Godfrey move closer towards sleep.

Nancy was also in a fitful state of semi-consciousness. She saw only one image, though, and it was as though it were actually occurring. She, running naked through a field, feeling utter freedom. But then, the field grew bleachers, chalk lines, cheerleaders -a football stadium. Opposing players, chasing her now; people were cheering. She saw her Uncle George on the sidelines, coaching his team to splat Nancy into the ground. .

Image: A man's back turned towards Godfrey, and he was walking away, the smell of liquor wafting. A bottle was left by the man, still half full. Godfrey picked it up and then thought to himself "fuck the Cherry Orchard."

Image, stranger even still: Nancy curled up in the corner of a room staring back at a furry, rodent creature. The rat god praying at the altar of his wife? Closer to waking still, it was simply Nancy and a rat.

"Godfrey!"

Godfrey stood up in bed and pulled the sheets up around his neck.

"Don't move," he said.

Nancy didn't.

They waited for the rat to dart into a corner, hide under a couch, or at least scurry beneath the bed. But it didn't.

"Godfrey..."

For some reason Godfrey looked at his watch, and then he just stopped.

Seeing there was no help to be found in the room, Nancy bolted from it, letting out a war hoop and battle cry so piercing it caused the man from the front desk to run past her and into the room, where he quickly determined that Godfrey-wrapped in a sheet and standing on the bed - was the most out-of-place thing there.

"What are you doing to your wife?" the desk clerk demanded of him.

Godfrey simply pointed. The man saw the rat and looked relieved.

"Oh yes. I will take care of this."

He left the room.

Standing a top his bed and looking down on the room caused Godfrey to recall defending his PhD thesis: "It should be obvious"; "Even you should know that"; and "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response."

The man returned with a bucket filled with an odd conglomeration of things which included both a rubber mallet and also what appeared to be, if Godfrey wasn't mistaken, a gun to apply epoxy.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but you must leave the room, now," and it only just occurred to Godfrey that he had been standing on the bed wrapped in a sheet like the ghost of Diwali past. He tried to exit gracefully.

Nancy was in the hallway, her eyes firmly focused on nothing in particular. Godfrey tried to remember what her voice sounded like. Then began a cacophony of sounds from the room that was something on the order of shock and awe. Godfrey could pick out variations on a dull thud made by the rubber mallet hitting various surfaces: The wall, the desk, the toilet seat, and Ah -Nancy's mostly empty suitcase.

At first the sounds provided Godfrey with a sense of comfort. There was a problem and the noises suggested it was being addressed in a serious manner. But thinking beyond the mere spectacle of things, exactly what sort of solutions was being enacted? Was the idea to actually hit the rat with the mallet, which, if successful, would spew some part of the rat's inner working across various parts of their room (the bed, for instance)? Or was the idea to create the

impression of a hostile and inhospitable environment, as if to say with each mallet stroke, “Look here fellow, this is a place of random chaos and great peril. Perhaps you might want to find someplace else to live.”

He hadn’t quite the time to follow these suppositions to their logical conclusions before being confronted with yet another auditory piece of the puzzle in the form of a spraying sound. Godfrey hadn’t noticed any sort of aerosol can in the bucket, leaving his imagination to consider and reconsider exactly what sort of materials were being permanently affixed to their dwelling as well as to their belongings. Rat poison in spray form? The noise continued much longer than he had hoped it would, followed by a return of the mallet tenderizing the room’s contents. He wondered what exactly the function of the grout gun might be.

The desk clerk emerged as though he had just defeated the British.

“It is gone now,” he offered, then added, “No worries.”

Godfrey strained to read the label on the aerosol can as it passed, but he could only see that the top of the bottle was rusted and he wondered if aerosol things had an expiration date.

“What...the spray...what,” Nancy attempted.

“Probably just Lysol.”

In the room there was a smell which neither of them could identify but which seemed toxic. It was essential they leave the room at once. Wearing clothes crusty from embedded smells and perspiration gathered across three continents, they walked out into a solid wall of sound, smells, heat and humidity that was Mumbai.

The story continues