

Revealed in Splendor

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When I was twelve years old I had a vision. The year was 1982, and my father and I were shoving our way through a market in Bangladesh so crowded that I clutched his sleeve to keep from being lost. People in saris of bright greens and deep blues rushed by, the men in sandals and long black beards, the women with beads like drops of blood dangling from their necks, their black braids bouncing about them, forcing their way into that welter of bodies. I have seen an industrial fishing boat haul its catch aboard and this throng was akin to that mountain of silver bodies, seething with life, flopping about so vigorously, so beautifully against one another.

As we pushed our way through the crowd I noticed an old man in a black cloak who seemed removed from the surrounding chaos. Though he grimaced every time he took a step, there was a refreshing kind of peace in his eyes. The man's cloak was covered in dust swept up by all the people passing by, and he brushed at it absently with his knuckles—which were grotesquely bulbous—as if that was his only worry in the whole world.

I looked him up and down, trying to understand why he moved so slowly, and with such pain. There was something dragging beneath his cloak—it looked like two smallish, dusty cantaloupes lying beneath him on the ground, moving along with him for some reason I could not discern. I didn't think much of this at first, everything being so strange to me here in this new country, but then I happened to glance back and in an electric moment I knew what dragged beneath his cloak, and I knew why he grimaced as he moved. My eyes widened as I stared at the man, and I let go of my father's sleeve.

My father shook my shoulder a moment later, bringing me back to the din of the marketplace. "What are you doing?" he

cried, yelling to be heard. He followed my eyes to see where I was looking, and his white teeth broke out of his bearded mouth in a smile.

"It's just elephantiasis, Stew," he said, laughing, and turned to go.

I wanted to follow him, but I couldn't move. I was mesmerized. And then I had my vision. My revelation—though the truth is I wouldn't know what to call it, or even how to think about what had happened, until many, many more years had passed.

This is what I saw: The man in the dark cloak began to grow suddenly, becoming larger and larger until he covered the entire sky. He stood regally in the air, bigger than the clouds, than the sun, his hands clasped calmly in the folds of his garment. Something groped about his middle. A trunk—a gray elephant's trunk was coiled around him. He was listening to a woman who was somewhere just out of sight. Though she spoke in a whisper there was a great urgency to her voice, as if she was imparting some essential secret. I had never met my mother, though I had reason to hope that I would meet her that very day, perhaps even as I walked through the market with my father. And I knew suddenly that the woman whispering was her. My mother, whom I had never met in my entire life, was now before me. She appeared suddenly, from behind the great cloaked figure, continuing to whisper urgently, and it was clear that the old man had merely been helping her deliver the words, that he was the mouthpiece, and that the message was meant for me. She raised her face and I saw her limpid green eyes, those eyes I'd only heard about in stories, and then—

The heat was tremendous. The sun oppressive, heavy in a way I'd never known.

I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew people were standing over me, blotting out the sky.

It could only have been a few moments that I lay there before my father appeared, but it felt like a great amount of time had passed. Without hesitation he stooped down, hefting me into his arms as if I was a little boy. As he carried me away I stared back at the man, watching him move through the crowded market as if in a separate, peaceful world, until he rounded a corner and

disappeared, carrying with him the mystery of the vision I'd had about my mother, and dashing, but finally, any hope I may have harbored for meeting her on that trip.

That was my first time abroad. My father and I had traveled from Boston to Bangladesh on a shopping trip for our store, which sold exotic goods from the farthest reaches of the world. He made these purchasing trips twice a year. He'd buy twelve-foot-tall doors ornately carved with scenes of battle, stone statues big as horses, tasseled rugs of green and burgundy intricately woven with geometric designs, swords and daggers with rusted iron points. Then he'd arrange shipment home, and travel on to the next town, the next *soukh*, the next exotic object.

This was my first time traveling with him. I had always wanted to go. The things he brought back, the large metal-clasped trunks and small ivory figurines, made me imagine worlds filled with such items, where one could wander as in the cave of Aladdin, joyfully picking through piles of treasure.

But the store itself was bleak. It was housed in a long, dark warehouse in downtown Boston. The only sunlight in the cavernous space came through a large plate glass window at the front, where displays of stone statuary and bright, gay tapestries could be seen by people walking by outside. We lived in the very back of the warehouse, in two rooms built against a bare cinderblock wall, separated by a small kitchen, with about thirty yards of empty concrete between us and the store.

Against the back wall like that, our living quarters felt like the last outpost at the edge of a great plain. Huge stainless steel light fixtures hung from the vaulted ceiling, illuminating the empty floor in florescent white islands. The space between these ragged aprons of light was a no-man's land I skittered quickly across, afraid of lingering alone in the darkness. When I arrived at the store's rooms I didn't feel much safer, for each one was a concentrated, often nightmarish phantasmagoria of the world's many cultures. While one room was filled with statues and fetishes of the Buddha from

the many places that worship him, another bristled with torture devices; through one room stretched the long, sinuous torso of a Chinese dragon, his black eyes big as teacups, his body vivid with feathers of red, yellow, and green, while another housed medieval weapons, broadswords, maces, and battle-axes stacked like the discarded toys of giants in a menacing heap on the floor.

We stayed alone in the warehouse most of the time. I attended public school but never made any real friends, which I realize now was caused by the strangeness of our situation. I was embarrassed about living in the warehouse, embarrassed by my father and his bizarre collections, and since I didn't want anyone to discover the particulars of my life, I avoided getting to know my classmates.

When I wasn't at school I would work at the store. We didn't get many customers so I amused myself by wandering the rooms, fingering a rough stone idol or throwing a bright, handwoven cloth around my shoulders. At the front of the store stood a marble statue of Ganesh that was as tall as me at the age of six. The marble was cold and shiny, and if I got close enough I could see my own reflection, but darkly, on its white surface. I saw him as the protector of our lives, with his great trunk rising high in the air and his watchful eyes surveying all before him.

Living as we did, just the two of us, the regular world in which families contained mothers as well as fathers seemed more exotic to me than all of our strange wares combined. Whenever a married couple wandered in with their kids, I hid and watched them, fascinated by their interactions. I thought often of my own mother, imagining the day she would finally arrive, how the many crates full of the things she'd bought would trickle to the store while she told me tales over countless days and nights, Scheherazade to a grateful prince, and the smallest of her bounty would outshine my father's grandest purchase.

I believed this would happen because my father told me it would. If I asked him about my mother he always replied that she was doing important business for the store, but would one day return. As I grew older I stopped asking, but never stopped hoping,

even when her arrival had become as likely in my estimation as the appearance of a *djinn* from one of the tarnished bronze lamps we kept in crates in the storage area.

When I was eleven, about six months before that first trip to Bangladesh, I was left in the care of a woman named Floe while my father went to Africa. My father's friend Orlando usually watched me, but he was too busy caring for his sick mother to take me this time. I could tell my father was not happy about leaving me with this woman.

Floe, I learned quickly, spent her days pacing the carpeted floor of her flat in a black silk kimono patterned with silver *koi*. Purple curlers held her bright red hair from her pale forehead, and a cigarette protruded from her thin, colorless lips as if it were part of her face. She drank steadily from a glass tumbler, and by the evening didn't bother with ice when she went with a shaking, blue-veined hand for the bottle. I knew my father shared a bed with her sometimes, because her flat was full of the same scent that he would stink of after his occasional late nights out, a distinct mixture of potpourri and cigarettes. I was curious to learn what attracted him to her.

The first meal I had with Floe was a breakfast of pork chops and eggs. But in the evening she fed me peanut butter on bread heels, for I had walked in while she was dying her gray roots red in the bathroom sink. She accused me of being nosy.

"His dad doesn't notice anything at all," she said under her breath, bringing me the sandwich, "but the kid notices every stinking little thing." As she slammed the plate down her hand struck the Formica tabletop, chipping one of her false red nails, and she cursed me again. But to be fair, her anger wasn't just about the hair dye, for I had also in that first afternoon found her diaphragm beside the sink and made some experiments projecting pebbles with it, thinking the device some kind of odd rubber sling shot.

After three days at Floe's I received a postcard from my father. It was a picture of the wide yellow savannah, with two

elephants—father and son, it looked liked—standing in the forefront. The smaller one nestled under the larger, reaching its gray snout playfully up toward the stern adult, who seemed large as a house. Written across the two in black was the word "Africa." I searched the long, wrinkled flank of the adult for a hanging penis, for I was sure it would be huge and was curious to see such a thing, but found only shadows within the folds of its tree-trunk legs and bulging midsection.

I held the card up to Floe and in a quavering voice asked if she thought the big one was a man.

"Does he have a cock?" she said, and coughed out a laugh like a belch. "Your father sure does," she muttered. She got up and walked out of the room. A minute later she returned, the loud, roiling sound of the toilet's flush preceding her.

"Let me see that," she said and plucked the postcard from my hands.

I watched her eyes narrow as she looked at the postcard. A breeze blew in and wafted her kimono open, and I got a clear glimpse of one of her breasts, a white, fleshy thing big as an eggplant and covered in red freckles, a nipple hanging from it like a tiny pink sausage. I stared at it, my mouth open, as she read the card. My throat was suddenly dry. The fabric of my pants began to tighten. Another breeze blew through the room and she raised her hand absently to the kimono, closing it so that I could no longer see.

Only when she flipped the postcard over did I dare glance up at her again. My eyes were drawn to her chest as she read my father's few words:

Dear Son,

I am good. Africa is hot, but I am getting a lot of good shopping done.

Your Father

To keep myself from continuing to stare I thought about how I resented her scrutinizing my father's sparse and seemingly loveless

letter. I tried hard to drum up some real anger, fighting to keep my eyes from her chest. But Floe was so absorbed in reading the postcard that she hadn't even noticed me staring at her. She turned it over again, studying the picture of the elephants, then burst out in a wild cackle.

"Africa!" she said. "Look at the postage—this was sent from inside the US!" She snorted, and tossed the card on the coffee table in front of me.

"Think about it, kid," she said. "How could that thing even make it to us in the time he's been gone, even if he sent it right when he got there?" She winked at me. "If I had to bet, I'd bet he was in Pittsburgh. But don't tell your father I said that."

She blew air noisily out of her mouth, looking down at the elephants. "Africa," she said again, shaking her head. She padded out of the room in her pink house slippers, an edge of her kimono brushing the postcard onto the brown carpet at my feet.

I picked it up and looked at the elephants. They seemed to be smiling secretively to each other, as if they knew something I didn't. I recalled a phrase I'd heard my father use before, about how we must not mention the elephant in the room, which hadn't made sense at the time but now seemed full of hidden meaning. The harsh sound of Floe's laughter floated out from her bedroom, and I felt like some strange scene was being enacted right before me, something I desperately wanted to see but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried.

My father returned a week later with Pygmy masks and wooden spears and daggers tipped with honed black ebony. I was dying to know why he'd sent the postcard from inside the United States and to ask why Floe had said he was in Pittsburgh, but I pushed down my curiosity and asked instead about Africa. I had read a lengthy article in Floe's *Encyclopedia Britannica* (a gift, she told me, from an admirer, fluttering her false eyelashes as she said the word) so I knew enough to ask about the Masai, the Nile, and the different animals he'd seen. His responses were all vague, but factual enough that I stopped asking.

Really, I was afraid of knowing too much. My father had once mentioned Pittsburgh as I was falling asleep, in answer to a question I'd made about where my mother was, and then told me to forget what he'd said so quickly and vehemently that the word was burned forever into my mind.

While walking through the store a few months after returning from Floe's I paused at the marble statue of Ganesh. Since staying with Floe I'd decided that there was some kind of connection between the elephants from the postcard and what I had felt when I saw her breast, a mystery to be explored, and I paused now, scrutinizing the statue. Behind the marble elephant stood an old cheval glass, forgotten there during a move. I could see myself lurking between its tusks, reflected darkly through a thick layer of grime that had collected on the glass. I moved my arm over the elephant's head to see what it would look like, and the reflection reminded me of a swaying trunk. I froze, my eyes fixed on the dark shape undulating between the two large ears.

My heartbeat quickened. I looked furtively around to see if anyone was at the store window, if my father was near. I pulled my shorts open and all my suspicions were confirmed, for there in the darkness, resting upon my pale thigh, was a miniature replica of the elephant ears and snout. Now I had only to parse out this bizarre connection—to figure out what it meant to be a man, is what the project really was, though I wouldn't have recognized that formulation at the time.

I dragged the cheval glass across the warehouse and into my room, certain it would not be missed. Once there I ran a finger across the dust, revealing my own eyes, a deep brown like that of the wood surrounding the glass. I removed my shirt, using it to wipe away the dust until the glass stood shining before me like a lozenge of clear, floating water.

In the mirror my skinny body shimmered with a pale glow. I raised an arm and flexed my bicep, watching the muscle swell into a small white ball. I held the arm tense, grimaced, and grunted.

Ha! I shook the arm out at myself, danced in a circle, watching my shoulders rotate, my stomach muscles flex subtly as I moved.

Soon I spent hours before the cheval glass. I blew kisses to myself, kicked my legs up like a cabaret dancer. I practiced scowls and winks, wry smiles and evil frowns. And, of course, there was the tiny elephant. Tingling with anticipation, I watched my mirror self open my shorts, watched him stare at the shriveled trunk and floppy ears, until I felt a stirring there. I thought of Floe's breast and that small sausage of a nipple, of the women in the underwear catalogue squirreled beneath my mattress, and I tried to imagine the sex act itself—that great, that ultimate act!—about which my general confusion did not prevent me conjuring a sort of heaving and writhing in the darkness, exciting as it was vague.

My time with the mirror ended abruptly one morning, a month or so after I'd moved it into my room. I don't know how long my father had been watching—perhaps he'd just arrived—but a chance movement caught his reflected face above my shoulder. A face livid with rage, framed terribly by his long black hair.

The silence was awful as I waited for him to respond. To yell, to punish me. I'd had a suspicion that what I was doing in front of the mirror was wrong, but hadn't paid much attention to that feeling. It was one of the few things I enjoyed doing in that cloistered, quiet space where I was forced to live, one of the few things that held some promise of hope. To see my world reflected and thereby born anew, to see *myself* born anew like that, was all I had that gave me cause to believe in a less lonely life, in a life beyond the dull brooding of my father and his dry boneyard of a warehouse, filled with odd things no one wanted.

I stood there waiting for him to react, but he didn't move. Instead, his mouth grew slack, and his reflection disappeared. The sound of his footsteps died away, and I heard the distant echo of the front door opening and closing.

He woke me late that night, pounding heavily on the front door. I stumbled in a confused daze through the rooms of the store, the shadowy objects of the store like fragments of the nightmare from

which I had woken, in which I had been reaching to touch Floe's dangling breast only to realize that the hand I was trying to touch her with was in fact an elephant's trunk.

At the door I pushed back the deadbolt and my father fell on me, reeking of liquor. He ran back to the street to vomit. Then he returned and fell to the floor, curled into himself and fell asleep. I found an old afghan and laid it across him, filled a glass with water and set it by his head.

In the morning, I brought more water. I held a wet rag to his face, made coffee as best I could, and sat with him while he drank it, carefully spitting bits of grounds into his palm and wiping them on his pants. When his hands trembled I held the cup to his lips.

As he emerged from his stupor a reproachful look filled his red eyes, which hurt me to see, so I pretended not to notice.

It was not until many years later, when I had a boy of my own who suddenly, as if overnight, had become a young man, that I would understand it wasn't reproach or shame my father felt that morning, but only regret. Regret at his detachment, regret at my odd upbringing, regret at the cruel brevity of innocence and the utter finality of its departure.

After that night, an understanding arose between us. My father made a point of spending more time with me after school and on the weekends, taking me with him on the errands he made around town and including me more in the shop's daily business—inventory checks, record keeping, customer service. It felt good to be of use, to have my presence be acknowledged for once.

And then one day, as a kind of natural outgrowth of this new attention, my father invited me on his next shopping trip.

"I'm going to Bangladesh," he told me one rainy morning, standing at the plate glass window with his eyes on the street. "I want you to come with me."

A man in a glen check suit rushed by outside, fighting the wind to open an umbrella, and I chuckled at his antics.

My father turned to face me. "This is important," he said. "Do you want to go?"

“Of course, I do,” I said. “I’m sorry. Of course, I want to go.”

My voice trembled as I said these words. I had not at first understood what he meant when he said the name, Bangladesh, for I’d never heard it before and thought it was just some store he needed to visit. Only when I saw how serious he was did I understand that he was inviting me to travel with him.

As the reality of the invitation settled in I remembered the postcard with the elephants, and wondered where we would actually go. Would it be to Pittsburgh? The more I thought about it, the more a hope sprang up in me that I might finally meet my mother. I knew the idea was absurd, but the more I tried to push it away the more strongly the notion planted itself in my mind.

The days seemed to crawl by as I waited to leave, looking at the globe in my bedroom, packing and repacking, until finally it was time. We took a taxi to the airport and boarded a large commercial airplane. As we departed it became clear we were not going to Pittsburgh or anywhere other than the place he had named, to that exotic country so many thousands of miles from everything I knew. But still I held out hope that we were, somehow, going to see my mother. That my maturation had earned me this privilege—even that what I had been doing before the mirror had signified a coming of age, and that meeting my mother was somehow the next logical step to follow.

The trip took almost two days. For the last part of the journey we flew on a small biplane, whose vibrating walls seemed made of tin. I was sure they’d burst at any moment and fling us to the watery green land below, so far away that buildings were specks of dust, lakes just blobs of spit.

Soon enough we were walking in the bustle of a crowded market. After the relative quiet of travel the transition to the marketplace was so quick, so jarring, that I had trouble believing in the overwhelming reality of the place, the exotic scents and constant noise as people jostled me from all sides. My father’s face shone happily as we passed stall after stall of rugs, baskets,

hand-made tapestries and other wares. I looked all around, hoping that in a moment we would turn a corner and find my mother at a stall, lifting up some exotic object and laughing joyfully with her mouth open.

I tried to imagine what she might look like. Would she have blond hair, like mine, or black, like my father’s? Would it be long or short? And how would she wear it?

As we pushed through the market I held my hope strongly, clutching it as I clutched my father’s sleeve. I strained to see past the people, looking for a glimpse of my mother’s face. And then out of the crowd appeared this old man in black, with his tired, long-suffering face and his halting footsteps. I looked past him, searching for my mother, but my eyes were brought back by his calm expression, so strange amidst all that chaos. And then I looked down and my eyes grew wide, and my father’s words affirmed the occult connection—*elephantiasis*, he said, like an incantation—and the postcard of elephants with the mysterious postage, the city of Pittsburgh and Floe’s breast, the statue of Ganesh and my time before the mirror, my burgeoning manhood itself, all of these things converged within that harbinger in black.

And then I had my vision.

But my mother never appeared—never as I’d hoped, anyway—not then, nor even four years later when my father took me to Pittsburgh to meet her for the first time. For this was no mother I found in that bare hospital room. I sat with that woman for twenty minutes, holding her cold hand for a while as she stared vacantly out the window at the manicured grounds. At one point she pulled her fingers away and reached out to touch the glass pane, stroking it tenderly as if it was the face of a loved one. I did not try to take it up again.

On the drive back my father would relate all of the tired details of her decline and eventual commitment, which he knew much too well, and which had been his own private anguish and tragedy. And these facts would soon enough be incorporated into my idea of the world. Whatever fantasies I’d once harbored about my

mother would come to feel like embarrassingly obvious fictions, and I would become hard—for such a very long time I was hard and angry—and I would close myself to all companionship.

But even still I never lost hope. I did not succumb to the angry resignation you see in so many people, the dullness in the eyes, the slow shuffle in the step, as if the way one lived one's life could ever be a rebuke to someone other than themselves. Though the disappointment and confusion of Bangladesh had thrust me so precipitously into adulthood, I continued to hope that I would one day find my mother revealed in splendor.

I had felt that hope as we walked down the long concrete path past the topiary garden that day in the outskirts of Pittsburgh, past the sign that made it clear exactly what kind of place we were entering, and into the antiseptic waiting room where the air was kept just a little too cold to be comfortable. Even then I'd held in reserve some sense of wonder. A feeling that my mother might emerge grinning from those white halls, holding out a bolt of emerald cloth and a small figurine, and take me to her, hug me tightly as she murmured in my ear, telling me about her many travels, explaining her long absence and finally easing my deep sorrow, my aching loneliness during all those years lived in that cold warehouse. And when she did not appear but was rather brought out to me—a cold, exotic object herself, staring out of her face as if through the eyeholes of a mask—even then there was some hopeful kernel preserved inside me, some self-willed ignorance about the cruelty of the world.

This is not my mother, I thought when she dropped my hand. This must be some trick—she must still be out there somewhere, waiting for the right moment to appear. And though, of course, I've disabused myself of this idea, I've also been careful to protect, even to cultivate, the feeling that came with it. A feeling that miracles can occur, that they do occur, and that they might, in fact, do so at any moment.

To this day I find myself wondering what she could have been whispering so urgently in the vision I had. I try to conjure the

words, believing there was some communication attempted. Of course, you could blame my fit in the marketplace on the heat, and say that the temperature affected my brain. That what happened was a result of culture shock or dehydration. And you could also say that I am a foolish old man, to spend so much time trying to piece together a message from an odd experience I had at the age of twelve. To believe that there could be such a message at all.

But lately I find myself thinking that perhaps I did hear what she said. That perhaps I have understood.

For to live with hope, to believe that revelations can occur despite all evidence to the contrary—well, isn't that exactly the kind of thing a mother would want to tell her son? ☺