



Stone Song

By Mark Jacobs

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It began in Delhi. It began with admiration, an impulse Cordelia no longer expected to feel. Early, east sun rising, from her room on the fifth floor at the Oberoi she stood watching a woman with an elegant long back do laps in the green pool. Such unthinking confidence in her strokes. With a body that worked so splendidly who needed mind? Cordelia basked in the woman's visible vigor. When she sat, it was in the wheelchair.

India was her last trip. Not before dying, but before getting out of the wheelchair without help became problematic. Multiple sclerosis came on a sliding scale of severity. Hers could slide no farther. For a long time now she had felt her body as thickness. Cordelia was tall. Striking, people said, though certainly not beautiful. In one respect she was lucky. Her hair had silvered authoritatively. She had presence. But beneath the polished surface she felt the resistance of uncooperative bulk. It was as though the individual cells of her were being injected with syrup and then frozen, one by one. The deadening process had begun in the center and was spreading outward, pushing her curious quick into a shrinking live space. Pain was perverse leaven, confirmation she was alive.

Someone knocked. That would be Mahindra. With effort she got to her feet, made her way to the door and opened it.

“Madam, good morning.”

“Good morning, Mahindra. Call me by my name, please. For an American, ‘madam’ suggests bordellos and too much red. At any rate there has been a change of plans.”

This was her way of testing him. She wanted to be sure she had hired the right person to take her around India.

“A change?”

“We'll dispense with the Lodi Gardens. I have seen enough of Delhi. I've looked into the train schedule. We'll take the express to Gwalior and spend the night at the Usha Kiran. And I forgot to ask how old you are.”

“Thirty seven, Madam. Shall we be going tomorrow to Gwalior then?”

It was the right answer. She did not want slavish acceptance of her will. She did want flexibility. When you were looking for something but had no idea what it was you needed to stay attentive, look for signals, read the signs. She would correct her course as often as necessary. She wished he would call her Cordelia.

Mahindra Dubashi was a small man with an antique look at odds with her sense of who he might be. She crumpled and tossed her mental list of adjectives describing the color of his skin the instant she realized she was exoticizing him. Call it radiant brown and be done. He was a Sanskrit scholar in goldrimmed glasses working in the tourism business; a story there he might tell her if she behaved. He was slight and muscular and moved across the ground with a

surefootedness that bespoke an array of positive moral attributes. Surety of purpose was just the beginning.

How do you propose we talk about the gods? she'd asked in the interview.

The gods?

There are so many of them in India.

We shall not gossip about them, that is foremost. We shall seek a mean, neither excessively deferential nor inappropriately casual. We shall accord them the dignity of their repose.

She'd nodded as though that were exactly what she was expecting and offered him the job.

"Not many Western tourists choose to go to Gwalior," he told her now, informing not persuading her against it.

"Exactly."

The train station was the India of the world's collective unconscious; what you were born expecting. Misery trapped in ambergris, naked life eked on the thinnest dirty edge. A century's worth of waiting in a frozen moment, waiting that transcended passivity, resignation, heroism. The express they were taking left early. In the smoky black pall before dawn the packed crowd buffeted and caressed Cordelia, unfamiliar archetypal figures looming and disappearing with bundles, burdens, urgencies she could not guess at. Mahindra steered her chair around sleeping bodies lying on newspaper and thin mats, immobile as corpses, like the victims of a terrible accident.

She was delighted that the commotion of getting her uncooperative body aboard, and then her chair, interested no one. In the great surge of coming and going her personal logistics were trivial.

"Will you drink tea, Madam?" Mahindra wanted to know as the train moved slowly through the interminable reaches of a city she refused to reduce to metaphor. Metaphor was reduction, a refusal to see. Praise specifics, that was the ticket. That two-toned crow on the yellow canvas roof of an auto-rickshaw, that tiny veiled woman shaping dung cakes with her grandmother's hands, that father of many washing himself with public dignity in an aluminum basin on the pavement.

She was not sure she answered Mahindra. At any rate her eyes were closed allowing her to see the dragonflies skimming the pond at Saylor's Bluff. July, before summer went stale. The cattails stood sturdy against a makeshift breeze. She was in an Adirondack chair, in the shade of pines on dry needles. She had walked, unassisted, up the gravel path. There were carp in the pond. If she had a little more strength now she could stand and walk and look down into the green water at their orange unstill backs. That was all she wanted, really. Couldn't do it. At peak moments pain fused with exhaustion creating weakness, and she was undone.

At a certain point, footsteps coming up the rise, crunching gravel. She knew it was Randall from the deliberate pace. He had the purposeful stride of a geologist. (He had been unhappy at Mobil since the company was taken over by Exxon, big stiff fish swallowing smaller more lively fish.) It was Monday. He had been gone since Thursday evening without a word.

I don't know how to say what I need to say, Cordelia. I'm not good at this kind of thing so let me just get it over with.

It was as close as Randall ever came to begging. Two dragonflies, iridescently blue in their skittering. Since she was a girl they had been a totem for her, sighting them a sign something bad was going to happen.

"Madam," Mahindra was saying. He was holding out a cup of tea.

"Tell me about the fort at Gwalior."

"We believe it was built in the eighth century," he began, but that was not what she meant.

What she did mean was what she saw, that afternoon, when he took her there. Austere magnificence on the blade of a hill under hot sun. Not quite ready for the delectation of tourist hordes. A warrior's vision of how to live, really, protected by a vigilance born of fear. From a parapet she looked out over several centuries, saw Hindus battling Mughals, Indians battling the British, raptors soaring on generations of thermals. In the little crowd of hawkers no one asked her to buy anything at all. She was allowed freedom, and peace. But this was not it, neither the moment nor the place. Gwalior, Mahindra told her, had seen the first recorded instance of zero in human history. Nothing was something to think about.

That evening, bathed and fortified with a double gin at the Usha Kiran, she asked Mahindra to roll her chair out to the small temple on the sculpted grounds.

"Lovely," she said.

Perhaps this was the place, and the place would command its moment. Lovely and more than lovely. The gardeners with quiet hoses were gatekeepers of a secret not about to be shared. The steeple – shikhara, Mahindra called it – was New England simple. She wanted to equate simplicity with virtue but thought multiplicity, complexity, must have its equal or greater force if not truth. In any event truth was overrated as grail. Better was heart's grasp, however false.

"Shall I leave you alone, Madam, or do you prefer an historical explanation?"

"No, no explanation."

He nodded and left. Good for him; he knew; what? She rolled to a spot facing the porch, where she could see through the door into the inner chamber.

From inside the temple emanated some sort of music, a recording. The tune was monotonous, not a tune really so much as a hypnotic aural pattern. The temple itself was simple stone, graced by trees, rendered superfluous homage by square clipped bushes. One more gin would be just right. *It's just fantastic, tomor-or-or-ow, It's just fantastic, tomor-or-or-ow.* That was what the music

seemed to be saying to her, a trompe l'oreille. Mockery? That was the easy way out, calling it a joke being perpetrated on her insignificance. She sat, she saw, she listened. At just the right moment – the man had an exquisite sense of timing – there was Mahindra to wheel her back to the hotel, where one more gin was just about right. *It's just fantastic, tomor-or-or-ow.*

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Moving she had to keep moving. A terror of not finding the thing she did not know she was seeking. She was driven, not by decline or even the idea of death but by a ferocious hunger, a drive to be, or see, or feel; she could not say which. To know? To know what? Her ravenousness appalled her, and made her proud. It brought out an imperious self, unreasonable and highhanded.

In hot Mumbai on the Arabian Sea she insisted that Mahindra join her for high tea, English style, at the Taj Majal Hotel, where she had likewise insisted he have a room. It was next to hers in the event she decided to go out and needed wheeling. The expense distressed him, offending a sense of propriety he would neither admit nor explain.

“My children are grown,” she told him. “They are prosperous, and generous. When I die they will not be thinking about a few dollars more or less.”

An irritatingly deferential waiter had seated them at the window, through which they had a terrific view of the monumental Gateway of India, built to celebrate the arrival of King George V, the only British monarch to visit the source of his colonial wealth. In the brightness there were crowds on the street, boats on the water, pigeons in lockwing flight.

“What is it about me that you disapprove of?” she asked him. She was feeling combative. She was always worse on bad days, like this one, feeling the thickness pushing her to the outer margin of her body, just a little farther from the center as she filled and hardened.

He told her almost tartly, “It is not for me to approve or disapprove anything.”

“Fair enough. Well, then. I propose a deal.”

The waiter placed a double-tiered tray of tea things between them, savory below and sweet above. Everything was the way it was supposed to be, and not quite. Mumbai was not London. Happily, it did not want to be. She watched Mahindra enjoy his tea, which he drank with milk the way Cordelia's English father had done.

“What sort of deal?”

“I will tell you something that matters to me. Then you must do the same. After all, we are spending a good deal of time together.”

He nodded. He looked into his tea. He nodded again. She wished there was something to dislike about the man. There was, instead, this roiling stillness you had to attain a degree of stillness yourself to perceive.

“I divorced my husband two years ago.”

Again he nodded, the most comprehensive gesture in the world.

“I did not want him to spend his golden years wheeling around a cripple, suffering watching me suffer. Randall, his name is Randall. He had an affair. Not a very successful one, sadly. It was very brief. My husband was not cut out for deception. An insignificant experience, I continue to think. But it gave me the pretext I needed to free him. So, now you know.”

When it was his turn he told her, “After we checked in I took a walk. In front of the hotel I watched a line of expensive automobiles disgorging beautiful anxious people. Behind the hotel, on filthy pavement, three Dalit children in rags were singing as they drew pictures.”

He wanted to say more. She gave him time to get his footing. On the water, crowded ferries moved like cattle across the choppy water, beautiful facts of a sort beyond dispute. One needed both: beauty, and a house for it to live.

“I am Indian,” Mahindra told her. “I should be inured.”

“Inured.”

“To the suffering, and the contrasts. And yet I am not. I find nothing in our history, our culture, our religions, that protects me from seeing such things. Nothing helps.”

Impulsively she told him, “I want your eyes.”

But the intimacy she had forced was too much for both of them. She called the waiter and complained her tea was cold. Mahindra was chagrined, as she knew he must be.

The next day, when the car they hired stopped at a light, she borrowed his eyes, turned her head and saw. Across a crowded sidewalk, a rope strung on poles maybe five feet off the ground. On the rope, a ragged dark girl with large flat feet balanced with a pole. Her skirt was grimy. On the ground below her, bent at an odd angle that was distressingly animal-like, the girl's mother banged a brown drum. People streamed around them, a wave with no beginning and no likely end. No one paid the girl or her mother any attention.

“My God,” Cordelia said, but Mahindra refused to admit he had seen what she was seeing.

“I think I know what bothers you,” she told him. “I think you imagine India, the little bit of your country I am seeing and living and taking with me, becoming an anecdote when I leave. It galls you to think of India as a story I tell my friends around a dinner table. The girl on a tightrope, the mother with a drum. Parables illustrating man's ongoing inhumanity to man.”

“Madam?”

His obtuseness, which was tactical, roused the despot in her. But she found no acceptable punishment to inflict, and then the light changed.

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It was wrong to insist that Mahindra be carried by bearers up the stone steps to the caves. But there was something in the light when she woke the next morning, minuscule floating bits that clumped darkly as she lay on her side, passively observing. In her idleness a sense of inevitability pressed uncomfortably against her. The clump became resentment and fell on her head. Her guide was young, he was vigorous. He had heart. He had a clarion conscience and expressed himself with precision. She could find no visible defects in the man. *What's not to resent?* Then the ferry ride from Mumbai to Elephanta Island exhausted her. It left her sick to her stomach.

“I insist.”

So they went up the steep path like a little piebald circus, strong men bearing them on blue painted litters, a teenager with a limp hauling her wheelchair on his back, past gimcrack stands and tourists in raptures at the sight of monkeys. Past a woman with a pitcher on her head waiting to be photographed, and compensated; then a man brandishing very small carved elephants with an air of angry futility. He knew they weren't buying, and his needs were vast. Divining what Cordelia was about, Mahindra kept his mouth shut despite being made a spectacle against his every instinct. In fact he was ominously quiet until they stood at the cave's mouth.

“Madam, did you read the material which I left in your room last night?”

“No.”

Her pointed frankness, verging on aggression, broke the tension. His smile was genuine. He grasped the handlebars of her chair, aiming her expertly. She admired the poise with which he addressed his work.

“The caves are Hindu,” he told her. “The work was carried out sometime from the fifth to the eighth century, we cannot say exactly when with any degree of certainty. The rock, you will notice, is basalt. This place is dedicated to Shiva. Later, if you are not fatigued, we can view Buddhist caves also on the island which are however a good bit smaller than these.”

“Shiva. The Destroyer.”

“Yes,” he conceded, “among other names, other identities.”

“Please call me Cordelia.”

He knew she was teasing him, trying to elicit a little pedantry. He resisted; good for him. And wheeled her into deep cool darkness where the enormity of the accomplishment put her in her place. How many generations of carvers and their priests had had to believe ferociously for blunt rock to be transformed into animate gods? Mahindra seemed to sense where she wanted to roll, how long to leave her in front of a carving before moving to the next. Sensed too that he ought to leave her alone before the legless dancing Shiva. The god had been conceived with legs. Erosion destroyed them, or perhaps an iconoclast. The miracle – it was a miracle – was how he continued to move at dizzying speed without them, arms whirling, torso tightly tensed, the face mobile in its dignity. Perpetual motion in stone. She closed her eyes, opened them. She could not look away.

Tourists approached in small groups, crowding her out until someone noticed what they were doing to her and they backed away, gave her space. But they snapped irritating photos, they listened to a village cicerone explain what they were seeing and the history of what they were seeing, and its significance. They saw, or failed to see. They moved on. Cordelia sat in her chair watching Shiva dance.

Maybe this was it. The inflected moment she had been driving toward. Dance lessons from a legless god, the live version. Even as she formulated the thought she knew it wasn't true. Shiva was important. The cave was important. Being there, rapt, eyes burning an image into permanent memory, had to happen, now that it was happening. That much was clear. But she knew – heart's truth-defying grasp – that this was not the moment, or the place.

Some subtle body language, perhaps the way she shifted in her chair, must have signaled to Mahindra that she was ready when she was finally ready. He was there. He was efficient. He did not intrude. He wheeled her with professional aplomb out of the cave into sunlight that blinded her. It was the light, the sudden contrast, that brought the tears to her eyes. Surely it was the shock of light. She was too proud to wipe the tears away.

Mahindra got it. Thank God he got it.

The question of the Buddhist caves did not come up.

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In South India, in Pondicherry, Cordelia stopped moving. The tedious familiar who normally rode on her shoulder spitting captious comments in her ear whispered: *it's a breakdown*. If it was – and Cordelia was not prepared to concede the point – some sort of synchronicity was involved, or did she mean parallelism? The pain in her body, asserting itself, was met and matched by a bleakness of spirit, and darkness fell down. In darkness she was able clearly to see the principal fact: her journey to the east was a fool's errand. It was time to go home.

But not yet. She could not bring herself to leave the Hotel Oriental. The French had decamped from Pondicherry in 1954, after holding restless people half a world away to an unjust social contract became untenable. A lifetime ago, really. But the quarter they had inhabited still belonged, in a confusedly spiritual way, to them. The streets were laid out on a grid, lined with houses in a style Cordelia thought of as colonial bourgeois. She was taken by a two-story place, painted blazing yellow, with rows of well tended plants in pots on the sidewalk. It was the kind of house a woman could live her alternate life in, discover secret selves, compile bootleg memories. Across the quarter, flowering bushes in domestic gardens made declarative statements about color and condition, about ways of being, and being seen. She was drawn by a sleepy decorum she had not felt elsewhere in India. The police wore French uniforms.

There was a problem when they checked in. The Oriental was an old building, and there was no elevator. She had been promised a room on the ground floor, and now none to be had. She blustered, she made a noisy nuisance of herself. She did not want to go elsewhere and stay in a generic luxury box with underpaid staff fawning on her, she wanted this place, this charm, these slow overhead fans, this profusion of plants suggesting a life that was more than

provisional.

Had she continued her tantrum they would have been happy to turn her away, she saw that. She was ugly, she was American, she was conforming to type. But Mahindra stepped in. He led her chair to a shady corner of the interior courtyard and had tea brought. Touching her shoulder lightly, he left her unsoothed. When he came back, her tea was drunk and she had a room on the first floor. Thanking him would cost more than she could spare, just then. Instead she pointed out a lizard on the bricks being studied by a cat with crooked whiskers and twitching tail.

“In another life...”

“Yes, Madam?”

“I believe I may have been a lizard.”

He shook his head, which aggravated her. What in hell did he know about her previous lives?

“Your bags have been delivered to the room.”

“I embarrassed you, didn't I?”

But he would not be drawn into a conversation that required candor. On the trip south there had been an incident. Not an incident, exactly, but something happened that changed things between them. The car she'd hired had a flat. Pulling off the highway to change the tire, the driver parked alongside hell.

It was a brickyard, stretching for acres in sunlight so intense that even through the car window Cordelia had to squint to make it out. The bricks, and the earth from which they were made, were a deep, dark brown, a foul color she had never seen before, like something dug from the earth's rancid core. Women worked in the stupefying heat, making the bricks, stacking them, squatting in clusters to rest and attend their children. They moved across the disturbing brown landscape as if they were drugged. Cordelia watched a load of bricks slide from a donkey's back, and the small woman who was leading the beast stoop to pick them up one by one as though this was what happened, this was how your life went, you loaded a donkey with bricks and they fell off and you loaded it again, and then you died.

“Dante,” she said as the driver pulled back into traffic and they turned their heads away. “He knew about this. About places like this.”

“Please, Madam.”

But Cordelia had ignored the warning. She raved about the brown ring of hell that was dedicated to brickmaking and reserved for poor women, and the children of poor women. She knew her words, her tone, her outrage offended Mahindra but could not stop herself. When she finally shut up the quality of silence filling the car had changed, and it was her fault. Damn the man and his overfine sensibility, his suffering if that's what it was. What was she supposed to do, stuff a sock in her mouth?

Now, at the Oriental, he wheeled her to her room with stiff arms.

“At what hour do you wish to dine this evening, Madam?”

She waved a hand in the air, not trusting herself to speak, and he left her alone. The room they had miraculously found for her was cool, the furniture dowager French. The ceiling was high, with crown molding that was the occasion of a certain relief she could not quantify. She heaved herself onto the soft bed and lay on her back, not bothering to take off her shoes. She was a boat. If you were a boat, everything else was ocean. She understood how that was supposed to work, but it didn't. The boat was stuck on a reef, and the oceanic day went by in seismic waves and became the oceanic night, under a starless black sky so enormous it dwarfed the sea where the little boat of Cordelia sat on its pathetic sliver of reef.

In the morning Mahindra had breakfast delivered to her room, conveniently late, the thoughtful son of a bitch. Well she ate it, she drank the good French-press coffee, she buttered the goddamn toast. And then cried. Christ it had been years since she let down like this, the last time when she learned she had M.S. and thought God was singling her out, knowing how absurd that was and not caring, her anger the thinnest cover for self-pity.

She slept. Waking, she grieved the loss of her body, and the sense of forward motion she used to live with. She cried again, more gently this time as though telling herself a story that needed close attention.

Days went by, indistinguishable from lifetimes.

Mahindra passed the time in the courtyard at an iron table, reading Sanskrit manuscripts and the *Times of India*, scrupulously checking on her to be sure she hadn't offed herself, or perhaps needed something that was out of a cripple's frustrated reach.

One morning she felt stronger and came out for breakfast, leaning on the maplewood stick Randall had carved her. The courtyard was empty save for a languid French couple whom she imagined on a tryst. Their ease of body was deserving of great praise. Folded newspapers, a litter of cups and plates, cigarettes lit and ignored. Luxurious silences, as if time were an enemy one vanquished by ignoring. The woman had lean haunches and ashy hair. The man wore black-rimmed glasses. A cryptic blue tattoo was emblazoned above one knuckle. When they spoke to one another it was efficient telegraphy.

Cordelia drank coffee and peeled a tangerine, surprised how she drew strength watching them. She spent a long time trying to put into words what it was they had. It was more than ease in the world, and less than ownership. It was, she decided, a form of address; how you took things on. When she returned to her room they watched her absently, the way they might watch the hotel cat.

The room was thick with shadows. The shadows trapped the air making it hard to breathe. She felt lightheaded and slumped into a chair. At a certain point, Mahindra knocked. She did not answer. Later, she became aware of a ceremony. It was internal. A kind of cleansing, or a scouring. Faceless minions were carting away some of the ugliness that had built up in her system, singing as they went. She felt lighter but no more alive. She understood there were a thousand ways to die.

The following morning, savoring coffee and sunshine in the quiescent courtyard, she watched the French man lather jam on toast and pass it to the woman, and decided she was ready to go home. *Thank you*, she whispered below her breath, no chance the couple would hear her. When Mahindra appeared she asked him to make the arrangements. She would fly from Chennai, the closest city with an international airport.

“You are quite certain, Madam?”

“Do I look uncertain?”

He shook his head. “I will make your reservation this morning.”

**_*_

The road from Pondicherry to Chennai terrified Cordelia. None of the thousands of people behind steering wheels seemed the slightest bit aware of what might happen in a head-on collision. Her driver was a sensible man who drove defensively, thank God, but she had to close her eyes every other mile as he swerved to avoid yet another spectacular smash. When he turned off the highway following the signs to Mamamallapuram she spoke sharply to him.

He pretended not to understand her impatient American English, deferring to Mahindra, who told her, “Stone temples, Madam. They are unique. Fine examples of Dravidian architecture depicting events of the Mahabharata. There is plenty of time. You do not fly home until tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to look at a temple.”

She wanted to blow up at him but would not do so in the presence of the driver. Her voice was honeyed reason explaining to Mahindra that she had had quite enough Indian tourism, thank you, all she wanted was to go home. Surely he could understand that. But he was stubborn. In the parking lot he sent the driver away, then told her she was wrong.

“Do you mean wrong in the sense that I don’t know what I want?”

“Madam, I urge you to see the temples.”

“Damn your temples.”

“Cordelia,” he said. That got her attention.

“Yes?”

“I have been thinking.”

“About what?”

“You are proud of yourself for having liberated your husband. Randall. You believed it quite clever to use his romantic liaison as a pretext to free him of the obligation to nurse you in your illness.”

“I did what I believed was the right thing to do.”

From the front seat he turned around to look at her directly. “May I suggest an alternate theory?”

“If you must.”

“Is it possible that you acted out of spite? That is to say, out of very great hurt. You wished to punish him. And you did so, you did so most effectively.”

He may have said more. She wasn't sure. Never would be because of the red blind wave that surged inside her. Nor could she later remember how it was she made her way to the temples. It was as though she were transported there, in her wheelchair, in a crush of schoolkids in smart uniforms and women under parasols in rainbow saris, to the base of a massive stone elephant.

Mahindra was right, of course. About Randall. More than two years on, the wound was still raw. Some day she would have a conversation with her former husband. They would both say the things that were necessary to say. But she had no wish to mend the break. In that regard she *had* done the right thing. Her path to the end was hers alone to walk.

She had never seen a place quite like Mamallapuram. Set close together, the modest temples had a homely feel, as though the gods to which they were dedicated were family types, approachable, maybe even sympathetic to the predicaments human beings got themselves into. The sculpted stone animals around them – the stately elephant, a lion, a bull – reinforced the impression of a small-time carnival that Cordelia felt, as though she had stumbled on a celebration she did not have to understand to appreciate.

She relaxed. Mahindra had been right about this, too, pushing her to make the stop when all she'd wanted was out. She stood up, left her chair, walked to a bench in the shade and sat studying the temples, hands resting on the knob of her stick. The ornate complexity of the carving suggested a storyteller's imagination. The ordered jumble of images appealed to her.

When Mahindra wheeled her chair over, thirty minutes later, she told him she wanted to come back that night.

He did not betray any impatience. “That would of course be impossible, Madam. The park will be closed.”

She looked at him. This was the way it went, becoming conscious how little time you had left. People and their faces engraved themselves on sensitive film you would do anything to protect. Tight narrow lips hiding humor. Dark eyes fusing intelligence and pride. And that wonderful stillness of spirit that she was not, not, not imagining. It was there, it filled and spilled out of him.

“Do it,” she said.

“Madam?”

“Figure it out. I understand that it will cost money.”

It did, though not as much as she would have guessed. They checked into

rooms at a nearby luxury box. She lay on her bed and slept hard but woke instantly when he knocked after sundown.

“I’m ready, Mahindra.”

For a second time the driver dropped them in the parking lot at Mamallapuram. The night was cooling, and she felt a breeze off the Bay of Bengal. For the moment, the place belonged to them. There were no tourists, no beggars or hawkers, not even a night watchman. Gates opened where they had to open, and as though she had simply willed it to happen she was there.

Mahindra took her in the chair past the elephant to the smaller temple, from whose steps she had earlier watched a woman sweep sand with a homemade broom, investing the labor with unselfconscious dignity.

“I leave you, Madam. How shall I know when it is time to return?”

“That’s the extraordinary thing about you, Mahindra. You’ll know. I don’t know how you do it, but you always know.”

He didn’t argue the point. He knew she was right. So.

There was a moon, waxing half full. It rose slowly in the night sky obscuring the stars as if it, and she, had all the time in the world. She watched the moon shadow of the temple creep on the sand, smelled the faint salt tang in the breeze. Heard a cock crow. Later, a horn honked distantly, machine lament.

It took a while to perceive the temple’s thickness. She felt the centuries passing, a kind of relentless silent streaming, like looking up and seeing clouds going by in a high wind. The temple before which she sat had been imagined, built, abandoned, and covered by five hundred years of sand. Then rediscovered, dug out, made a monument. In the course of time it had gotten fat, the stone swollen. There was no room for the gods who belonged there. And yet.

An unusual feeling of joy was stirring in her. In the moonlight she was able to make out the bird as she heard the thrum of its wings. The dark dot of it flew into the temple. Would it have a nest there, in the narrow space at the top? What kind of bird nested in a Hindu temple? She had no idea. It wasn’t going to sing but that didn’t matter. It wasn’t that kind of bird, or that kind of moment. Anyway the song was in the stone.

Mark Jacobs has published 89 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic* and *The Iowa Review*. He has stories forthcoming in *Playboy* and *The Kenyon Review*.

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