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Desert Dune Drifter

'In order to reach the desert citadel, you must have skin of coarse leather, a horse made from iron, a will unbendable, a body that suffers not from hunger, thirst or fatigue.' — Old Rajasthani Adage

The name of the medieval Golden City ran off your tongue, like the honey of glowing ecstasy shining off its yellow sandstone, in the Thar Desert dusk. Beyond the Blue Lotus, inside the leonine fort crowning a high ridge, were ornate Jain temples, and a finely sculptured palace. It was 1001 nights, and I was taking a sunset train through one of them, to Jaisalmer.

The journey, conducted with long whistles and enveloped in the clacking of a nuclear typewriter, had been colonized by chai-charged chatterboxes, horrific horkers, and a small number of lost souls. One of them was Peter, a placid Kiwi on his first overseas adventure, who had never seen the North Star. I sat, in my new curl-toed camel *juttis*, explaining the new constellations in his sky. He had trouble believing that Orion wasn't upside down.

My train, and the bitter cold desert dawn, arrived in Jaisalmer without much in the way of honey or gold. The sunrise cast only a tinge of tawny on the 12th century sandstone fort walls on Trikuta hill. About a quarter of the city still lived inside, and that's where I made for. The walls of the fort weren't as thick as the enticements.

"You are our special guest." He said, with obvious false indulgent charm. Still, it was at least a more refined attempt at charm than we had experienced in Jodhpur.

Nan Lal, the proprietor of Prince Hotel, offered me a room, for twenty rupees. The couple he recruited after me paid fifty. They had suitcases. I had an omelet, parathas, and coffee, at the Gaylord, and crashed the day away.

I awoke in the Bhati Rajput Far Pavillion, wealthy from the levies it collected on camel caravans coming from the Central Asia, Egypt, Arabia, Persia, Africa and the West, escaping direct Muslim invasion because of its remoteness. After Ala-ud-din Khiji sacked the place in 1293, it never recovered. Even the British played it like a violin, using it to fight for possession of other forts, waterholes, and cattle. Then Bombay emerged as a port, and the sea trade replaced the traditional overland routes of the caravan. The paradox was that, with Partition, Jaisalmer grew back into paramount strategic importance, lying as it was along the Pakistan border. Stark and austere, I didn't care about that. It was simply beautiful.

When I returned from exploring the upper reaches of the sandcastle, I had bought photos of the intricate stone latticework the Haveli merchant mansions, arch roof-capped with blue cupolas, and ornamented carved riots of peacocks, elephants, and soldiers.

On our way to the Gaylord, I was accosted by an eight-year-old, who

sold me a four-day camel safari into the depths of the Thar, for fifty-five rupees a day, less than five dollars. He ran off to arrange it.

The Desert festival began next morning. I wandered to the front row, to sit on lovely white pillows, with the invited dignitaries, for the inauguration. The fortified city floated on the horizon.

The festival commenced with army acrobatics, consisting mainly of comically amateurish calisthenics performed while standing on the backs of moving camels, camel races that were more like a saunter, a best-dressed camel competition, a 'dancing' camel, and the cart race that was overtaken by the polo game, in which no one hit the ball.

There were snake charmers, puppeteers, folk performers, moustache and turban tying competitions, and haunting ballads of valor, romance and tragedy. If some acts went on too long, the locals jeered. We were seduced by the *Bhagavad Gita* recital at the ashram on the way back, the far desert citadel playing presiding over the performance, a different backdrop in the fading light, for every scene.

I bought a bronze casket and a gorgeous ivory lady musician, with a thin convoluted flute that was lucky to make it home. The evening performance at the fairgrounds was better, particularly the magical Thar wanderer desert dancing of the ghummakers, nomads of Western Rajasthan, considered by many to be the original gypsies. On the full moon night, on silvery sand dunes, it was unforgettable.

His name was Goru, and he was ugly. Big and brown, he belched and farted, and ate with his mouth wide open. He got his chocolate brown Indian eyes and his hooked Rajasthani nose from his parents, who passed on their vegetarianism as well. He only answered to Hindi, and only when he wasn't eating, smoking my fags, or relieving himself in public. He had nits in his disheveled hair, stubbornness in his veins, larceny in his lymphatics, and lethargy in his limbic system. He was the quintessential native nabob. But, most of all, he was the best goddamn camel in the Thar desert.

He was waiting at my eight-year old's house, on the very outskirts of town. Ramu, his driver, and my guide, welcomed me, regaled in his beret and kamari angrakha and white cotton dhoti. He loaded us up with rice and dhal, potatoes, cauliflower, onions, carrots, Amul cheese, ginger, cardamom, tea, oranges, biscuits, and bread. I was to find out, in days to come, what a master masala chef Ramu was in the desert. I still dream of it sometimes.

The first obstacle to a camel's domestication is getting up top. The large hump, in the prime saddle position, is not your friend. The camel is an extremely tall animal, and there are no fancy leather saddles. Ramu had thrown a few makeshift blankets across, all tied down with a single rope strap, and clicked his tongue to signal him to sit. Goru shrunk his frame to a meter high, and I got on.

He stretched out its hind legs, lurched precariously forward, and just about threw me over his head in the movement. As I caught my balance Goru unfolded its front legs, leaning awkwardly backwards, and forced

me scrambling forward in the opposite direction, to regain my equilibrium and dignity.

When he straightened all his legs. I was suddenly ten feet in the air. It's a good thing I had kissed June goodbye on the way up, because I was now convinced that it was our last, and that I was never coming down.

That would be how the lurching would go, every time we set off again, over the next four days. I still think the part that Goru enjoyed most was the prospect of pitching me off, first forward, then off his backside, and then straight up, like a mortar round. I resolved from the outset, to deny him any such depraved satisfaction.

But Goru wasn't quite finished with me yet.

No matter how much I tugged at his reins, and groaned, and whistled, and hit him, and made funny mouth signals, he was determined to go nowhere. His signature movement was lagging behind, scoffing down shrubbery, and staring into space. Chewing and chilling had checkmated momentum. If I managed to find the courage to chide him more aggressively, he would bring his stomach out of his mouth, and dangle it in front of me, to make the point. And then Ramu taught me the magic word. *Ji*.

"It is meaning 'go.'" He said and encouraged me to try it.

"Ji. Ji. Ji." I said. And Goru took off like a bat out of hell, just about flinging me off the back of his acceleration in the process. Ramu caught up and brought him to a stop by grabbing an ear.

"Only one Ji." He said. I thanked him for the advice.

Ramu and I paced our mounts, both legs on the same side rising and falling together. The swaying and rocking started to make me seasick. *Ship of the Desert,* indeed.

We settled back into a rhythm and headed for the Thar's interminable line of undulating vapor. Ramu began to sing like a dentist's drill, swallowed in the vast expanse of the Great Indian Desert.

More than 200,000 square kilometers, The Thar was bounded only by the Indus River to the west, an ill-defined thorny steppe to the north, the Great Rann of Kutch salt marsh on the south, and the limits of imagination everywhere else. Despite the scarcity of water, or perhaps because of it, the southeastern monsoon for all of India is pulled across it, like a magnet. In the desert itself, intermittent ponds are the only source of it, forcing the inhabitants to live as nomads. Where wells exist, they are often lethal, either from the high percentage of highly poisonous soluble salts leaching into to them, or because the difficulty constructing them often claims the lives of the well diggers. At least a third of any crops planted here will fail, but it is a major area for opium, both in production and consumption.

What makes human habitation even remotely possible is the *Prosopis cineraria*, the 'king of the desert,' or 'wonder tree.' Capable of growing in salt and extremely alkaline soils, the khejri tree, because of its ability to fixed nitrogen in the soil, can sustain millet crops sown around it, much like the acacia and millet symbiosis used in Africa. The tree leaves provide animal fodder, edible pods, and bark, which can provide immediate relief for snake or scorpion bites. The wood makes excellent charcoal. It can live

for over 200 years. The khejri represents the Hindu goddess of power. Lord Rama made sacrifices to it, before leading his army off to kill Ravana. A local maxim says that 'death will not visit a man, even at the time of famine, if he has a khejri tree, a goat, and a camel.' We were good if you counted Goru as a camel.

The bark of another Thar tree, Marwar teak, was used to cure both gonorrhea and syphilis, but there was no imminent risk of either, if the view from Goru's hump was any inventory of prospective jeopardy.

There were peacocks in the khejri trees we passed. We were loping through the home turf of the national bird.

Over the thorns and rocks to Moon Sagar, we stopped for the first of Ramu's gourmet creations. It was just cauliflower and rice and dhal that he cooked over the fire, but the hand ground spices were the taste of the desert we were in, sharpened by the aridity, the heat, and the smell of camel shit. It was magnificent. Ramu went off to a nearby village to fill our leather water bags, while I found a shady spot under a khejri, to catch up on my journal.

The afternoon broiled and blistered, and grew monotonous, ameliorated somewhat by Ramu's lessons in animal tracks, deer spotting and high-pitched singing. By the time we made camp, late afternoon in oasis, my skin was sun-scorched, and my buttocks battered and bruised. I was ready to walk back, but the smell of garam masala and the sheer beauty of the place vaporized any such negative intentions. Oranges and peaches and yellows melted away in the sand. A '*Hoom... Hoom... Hoom'* came out from under one of the khejris, encircling our encampment.

"Bustard." Said Ramu.

"You too." I said.

"No, no. no." He said. "Great Indian Bustard." Ramu had been identifying the bird in the underbrush for me. He told me that the local Bhils used to capture the females by setting fire to twigs they had placed around a nest, containing an egg or a chick. The bustard would run over the nest and singe its wing feathers, rendering it flightless.

I slept on a real alluvial bed, soft and sandy, and surrounded by flowers and errant peacocks, The full moon played luna tunes, in the still desert night. A field of starlight shone overhead. It was the best night's sleep of my life.

Ramu, a glass of chai, and the meowing of the peacocks, woke me at dawn next morning and, after a frugal breakfast of rice bread toast, leftover dhal and rice and glucose biscuits, we were off, pitching and prancing.

At midday, we stopped for lunch near a linear stand of khejris. Two local cameleers helped us fill our water bags from a well. One dropped a stone in, to demonstrate the delay. The water was a long way down. Past a deserted village with a hauntingly sad ruin of a Jain temple, numerous lonely outposts, ravaged by the centuries.

The Jains believed in principles of Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, and Aparigraha, *Nonviolence, Truthfulness, Nonstealing, Celibacy,*

Nonpossession or Nonmaterialism. They wore masks over their noses and mouths, so not to inadvertently inhale and harm an insect. When the Muslims arrived, they didn't stand a chance.

After hours of butt-busting trauma, Ramu and I finally caught a glimpse of the dunes at Sam, that were to be our campsite that night. Goru instinctively sped up to reach them, but it still seemed like hours.

But the smell of curried onions frying in ghee, the serenity of the full moon, Ramu's questions of love and life outside his desert world, and Goru's contented ruminations, were more than adequate compensation for the day's other torments. The Sea of Tranquility beamed moonlight behind my cobwebbed retinas, and into my memory, the rest of the night.

I opened my eyes to the ginger tea in Ramu's hand, and two more camels. Less stalwart westerners had apparently bailed on their safaris, and Ramu had been entrusted by a friend to return them to Jaisalmer, while I had been asleep in the Gold Kazoo. We now had a caravan.

Goru wasn't particularly pleased with having to share the attention. His sulk took the form of bolting, and he almost threw me off several times, until Ramu spoke to him quietly. I'm not sure what was said, but I watched a camel stomach zoom back where it belonged, within the first sentence.

The third day was the hottest yet. We needed water and, with great deference, we rode toward a village well. Congregated around the borehole, was a motley male assembly of multicolored turbans, some with brass water pots on top, moustaches, gold earrings, poses, and not a few rifles. Not all the peacocks were in the trees. One tribal nomad indicated to Ramu, that he wanted my address, which I dutifully provided. Then I asked for his. Head bobble.

"Rajasthan." He smiled, panning the space around him with an open hand.

We left them for miles of barren Martian landscape, and a barely adequate lunch spot of thorns and flies and little shade, as Ramu performed his usual pilaf culinary miracle.

The afternoon continued past a dead camel on the far side of existence, rapidly losing its form to an army of carrion eaters. We eventually came to another watering hole where we waited our turn, fending off the larcenous children from a tribe of more frightening turbans.

Ramu was nervous as we walked Goru past the village, reluctantly informing me they were less than friendly.

On and on we rode, until it became apparent that Ramu really didn't have a place in mind to camp for the night. Just on dusk, I said 'here,' and that's where we were. In the company of Goru's munching and grinding, cat-crying peacocks, and deer running in the outcrops behind us, Ramu put together yet another delicious pilaf. He made chai, and asked incessant questions about Western women, culture, pride, and innocence and tradition. Signs of rebellion against a proposed arranged marriage hovered on the horizon. He took the opportunity to check out alien reference points, and I think it left him unsettled, despite my best attempt to reas-

sure him that his world was valid and beautiful enough. The moon flooded the floor of our wilderness arena. I was still 20 kilometers from June, and 243 light years from Orion's nearest star, Bellatrix.

There was just that kind of aura in the morning light, irradiating my glass of chai in the sand. It took two 'Ji's' to get Goru's four pads into the wind. We stopped to admire the intricate Jain temple at Lodarna, before drawing one last set of leather water bags through up from the depths of the desert. Ramu and I followed in behind two opulently dressed turbaned Rajputs. We stopped to free a goat's cloven hoof from a cactus, and a second time, to eat. But the heat and flies were maddening, and Ramu gave me a telling look that he was ready to return as well.

We mounted our camels and dug in our heels. Goru smelled the wind and bolted for Jaisalmer. Indian Migs flew overhead in formation. A freak shower broke above us, and we were hurtled headlong through the remnants of Amul Sagar, up over a rise, and there, rising like the dream fortress she was, loomed the Golden City.

I settled with Ramu (whispering to Goru that I would return to settle with him some other time) and headed back to the Prince Hotel. I wanted just one more day. Sometimes I still do.