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Runner-up

The Story of the Palace
Fatehpur Sikri, April 2001

*Although the palace and city
of Fatehpur are remarkably well preserved,
the design and decoration
present a problem of interpretation.*

*

I've been here twice before. Still, their attack
is more than I can stand. Even the book
on Agra says the peddlers here are worse
than anywhere. I grab my girls and curse
my way through outstretched hands. One man shouts, "Look!
Look! Lovely bangles! Madam likes the black?
This white one? Every color! Or... for hair?
Need film? Need toy for baby?" Deftly, he's
unveiled a brass wire globe that he untwists.
"See? Ball... flower... butterfly... snake... bird...!" He lists
a dozen other shapes. "Just five rupees!"

My daughter is transfixed. She makes me swear:
"We'll get one back in Delhi. *Every* store
on Janpath has them. Sweetie, one of these
won't last ten minutes."

"Mama, please—"

"Look, baby, we don't know these men—you know—"
She turns on one heel, pushes past to go
in through the sandstone gates.

What I expect
inside—lithe minarets, carved deities
watching from every nook, their faces flecked
and scarred by time—seem to have vanished. All
we're looking at is one closed door, a wall,

a single archway. There's no plaque or sign.
"Like Alice," I think, stooping to get through,
only to find another mud-walled room.

*

*Its parts are better than the whole:
it lacks, for instance,
an orienting spine.*

Flattening the guidebook out, I turn, compare,
and turn. The fine schematic is, at last,
no help: this winding palace is beyond
reduction to a single half-page map.

That's when I hear a voice:

"You need a guide?"

My rage returns. I'm certain I've been spied
on looking lost and fallen in some trap
laid by the hawkers.

I look up.

A fond

old man in white, with specs of inch-thick glass,
expressionless, almost, is standing there—
where he was not before—as if to say
"You know you need a guide."

Though in my book
it says the guides themselves make up the stories,
that no one knows the purpose of each room—

*...a granary, or else a tomb,
explains the lack of windows—*

The girls are waiting. They don't really care
if what this man might tell us *is* a lie.

He takes us through a tiny doorway I
had overlooked, and there's the open plaza,
the archways framing cantilevered halls
that telescope like mirrors tunneling back....

*

*The most intriguing building is Panch Mahal,
a five-storied pavilion of winds.
On top is a single kiosk.
The pavilion was originally used
by the women of the royal household
and ladies of the harem...
Ruqayya, Mariam, Salima, Jodh Bai...*

The Christian queen, the Muslim queen, the Hindu...

*

"This courtyard is where the king and queen played chess."

"Parcheesi!" I correct him.

"Of course, yes,

Pachisi Court."

"The pattern's on the ground."

"But that is not the point!"

"I know."

"The king
sat on this bench and moved the slaves around
the board. Live pieces for his game...."

Here's the thing:

A dozen years ago, when I was here,

I climbed up Panch Mahal. The stairs are closed now. Then, the story was he sat up *there*.

Half-listening, half-nose-down in the pages, half-watching my two girls, who've run to play Parcheesi with themselves, posing as pawns, I hear him say (quite certainly), "The school was over there, and there, the ministers gave counsel to the king." Off to my right, two laborers are carting hunks of stone from underneath a dry reflecting pool.

*

...an excavation was undertaken for which no rationale was given. The findings were so announced to give the impression that the Jain images discovered were destroyed by Muslim rulers like Akbar...

"Anup Talao—the government believes this site was built on by the Jains, before Akbar arrived." I watch the pool unfill and wonder what, next time we visit, he'll proclaim as we regard the watery blurs that are ourselves.

My young pawn turns and shouts,
"What happens to the slave girls at the end?"
"Good question," I reply, then, winging it,
"This king is good. He lets them play again."

*

...The underlying structure is Hindu post-and-beams, in many cases roofed with Muslim vaults and domes...

The noon sun's hot, and there's no wind.
I call the girls and step inside
a darkened room I don't recall
from last time. Lining every wall,
red sandstone's carved in complex shapes—
stars, diamonds, swastikas—arranged
in some sure scheme. I need the guide.

"Akbar's great vision. He believed
the world's religions all held truth.
That centerpiece is for King Solomon...
And there! The stars of David.
There, four-points—Shiaz Islamic—
swastikas for the Hindu faith.
Shi'ite, Jain, Christian, everything—
'*Din-I-Elahi*'—he conceived
a new religion, the best parts
of each joined on one path." It starts
to make sense now, the interlacing stars.

Beneath the jali-work are scenes
of jungle animals and birds,
trees, flowers, rendered perfectly.
"Akbar knew that when faith began,
flora and fauna were, to man,
the most, *most* holy." But the faces
have been scraped off and in their places
black smudges mark where hands have looked for them.
"Akbar's great-grandson. He was not enlightened.
He ordered that the faces be removed
In keeping with the principles of Islam."

There never would have been carved deities.

We touch the spaces too, as if compelled,
Then move along.

*

*All is carried out here
with cohesive and sympathetic scale:
note the 'neighborhood' atmosphere*

“And here is where the son
Akbar had prayed so long for, for an heir,
was born—”

The girls pipe up. “A baby? Where?”
“Akbar consulted Saint Sheikh Salim Chisti.
For years his wives had all been barren. Then,
with this saint’s blessing, Jahangir was born
and Akbar built this city to celebrate
the son who’d carry out what he had started.
When the saint died, Akbar decreed his tomb
would be more grand than this. We’ll go to it.”

We pass the summer palaces, Jodh Bai’s,
then Mariam’s (who gave Akbar his son).
Room after room for courtesans and maids.
The girls steal my dupatta and play princess,
framing themselves in archways, wrapping gowns
around their waists, then hiding under veils.
A cloud of parrots smokes up from the shadow
of a lone cypress bent by long-lost winds.

*

Outside, the peddlars swarm. Our man deflects
them with a wave and hurries us along.
The scale shifts. Now, the gates are fortress-sized—
“Protecting what?” but he’s no longer listening.
Passing underneath, we arch our necks:
more inlaid admonitions, and more stars.

"Your shoes."

We leave them, empty, in the cool
dark of the doorway, with a hundred others.
Out of the shadows, white hot marble blinds.
My eyes adjust. I hadn't realized
this is the destination. Crowds are queued
like serpent-tails to reach the Pearl Mosque, glistening
in the far corner of a vast, walled plaza.

"Akbar wished for a son. See all these mothers
coming to ask the saint for this same blessing."

*

The mosque's enclosed on all sides by the same
white marble carved to lattice-work, darkened
by age, four hundred years of fingers tying
blessed threads into the screen.

"You make a wish?"

"I made a wish the last time I was here."

"And it came true?"

"I can't remember now."

"You make another wish."

He leads us back
around the mosque to where a clutch of men
hides in a darkened corner, perched among
what, once I've stepped on one, I see are tombs—
turned to a corner market of contraband
roses and spools of red thread, incense, garlands.
He weighs a bag of petals, cuts some lengths.

Inside the mosque, we find an uncrowded spot.
The girls and I tie wishes, but don't tell,
then toss the petals on the sleeping saint.

I think about the scratched-out animal heads.
Be careful what you wish for comes to mind.

*

"This city flourished fourteen years, and then...

*Akbar left to defend the western borders —
It turned out that the ground here held no water —*

The book says one thing. "Not so," says our guide
who checks his watch. I pay him, none too soon,
a little extra, though I can't be sure
I trust a word he said. He disappears
into the swarm of peddlers whose bright spheres
keep magically transforming in their hands.

I pull ten rupees from my bag, "For two,"
and give the girls what they've been waiting for.
We find the car, get in, and lock the door.
At least the girls are quiet, satisfied
they know who-ate-what-where and when and who-
killed-so-and-so—

"Mom, look what I can do!"

She's turned the wire into a golden crown.
"I'll be the queen..." and so begins her tale.

*

As it recedes, the palace takes the pale
cast of the picture on the guidebook cover.
The plains are dry as ever, but the land's

dotted with neem and cypress—tufts of green
just like in Indian miniatures I've seen
where gods come down to chase a mortal lover.