

KIT REED

RAJMAHAL

SALLY

The manager tells us that the Rajmahal is very old. He says the palace was built by a Rajput ruler just to please the princess Mrinal, his beautiful wife. Gary squeezes my hand and I squeeze back; we are so excited! From the pavilion we can see the roofs of the palace and the surrounding walls of the fort; we can see the whole mountainside below and the village at the bottom, at the lip of a desert that seems thousands of miles wide. Gary and I are alone with the manager, and he says call him P.K. The twilight is sweet; the view is brilliant, and for the moment Gary and I can almost forget we're traveling with the Minneapolis Adventure Club.

The manager says the corrugated ramps in the palace were ridged so the ruler's elephants could carry treasure--gold, silks, new brides? to this beautiful pavilion at the top.

Was Mrinal happy with her prince in the Rajmahal? How could she not be happy in this palace with lacy screens between the rooms and marble underfoot? How could I not be happy with my boyfriend Gary in a stone wedding cake on a Rajasthani mountaintop?

Oh, India. Oh wow.

It's like Oz with dust.

And the Rajmahal! To get here, you come through gates higher than eight elephants standing on each other's backs; the walls are so thick you think, my God, what were they afraid of, that they made this palace so hard to reach? And then you think, Whatever it is, is it going to get me? You climb and go through still more walls; you keep going up! The manager says the hairpin curves are to confound enemy elephants. You almost give up. Then, bang, you're at the top. It is so high!

But first you pass through the most adorable little village. Darling kids come out and laugh and wave. The manager says the villagers have a wonderful relationship with the palace -- after all, it used to be their park, and before the owners took it over and began restoring the Rajmahal to its former glory, they used to wander uphill all times of the day and night to play on the grounds and throw parties in the ruins of the palace. The manager says, You know how these people are, but I don't.

Before the owners took it over the Rajmahal was such a wreck it's a wonder the villagers weren't hurt or worse, plunging into unmarked pitfalls or getting bopped by rocks or falling into the great big stone hole out front, which the

brochure says is an old water tank. The manager says really the Rajput rulers put their prisoners of war down there, along with their rivals in love; this place is so rich in history!

And this will tell you something about India. When the last Rajput ruler lost the place to invaders, his women chose death before dishonor and hurled themselves into the tank. Except the princess Mrinal. The manager says she died spectacularly, and all for love; she threw herself off the parapet just as the enemies breached the last wall and came boiling into the palace, putting an end to life the way it used to be.

I look at Gary, thinking: Would you die for me? Death before dishonor; I can't put my finger on it yet, exactly, but I know how they feel.

You can imagine the violence. Rubble everywhere, you can still see traces: raw holes in some of the ceilings, toppled towers. Then the villagers moved in on the place -- goats, camels, the works. You can guess what that was like. The graffiti alone! When the new owners took over, the fort and the palace were practically wrecked.

The manager took us around and showed us everything they're doing --restoration is the word. They have people cementing ornamental screens and rebuilding foliated arches and trying to put everything back the way it was when the Rajput princes were here. Lord, you could see where entire tops of towers had been blown away and there are these staircases that just -- break off, so if you were, like, climbing in a hurry, not looking where you were going? You'd pitch into nowhere with your legs still moving in midair.

The villagers are lucky to have somebody as enlightened as the Ashok family with the wherewithal to come in here and protect their greatest asset, this living monument. Before the Ashoks, the place was open to just anybody, which meant rock fights and dirt bike races and graffiti up to here. Well now, they only allow visitors once a year, but hey, it's for the good of the Rajmahal. A few more months of village parties and scooter races, and the place would have been an irretrievable wreck.

They should be grateful, right?

The manager says the people in the village are just like friendly children, he says they're going to love us, but he won't let us walk down the elephant path or stray outside the gates at night. Too many treacherous rocks and bad places in the road, he says; too dark, he says, too near dinnertime. Too this, too that. The manager says the people who work here have given their lives to the palace, and that they all love the Rajmahal as much as we love being here. P.K. says they're all committed to our comfort and safety, but when he leaves us he says please stay within the precincts and mind the chowkidar.

What he said was, wandering the parapets at night just might be hazardous to your health, but before we had the fight, Gary and I tried it and it wasn't all that scary. My boyfriend Gary, who I thought I knew before we started on this

trip, the rat! People said, watch out, India may be hazardous to your health. Well it turned out to be hazardous to our relationship. We need to get someplace where there are no people, so we can have it out.

The manager begs us to wait till morning because of the hazards, but what does he know? India is just like Oz, with dust.

But the palace gates are locked so we're stuck here tonight, Gary and I and, okay, and Myrna, along with the rest of our exclusive group of homefolks. The Rajmahal has only twelve finished rooms so space is limited, one reason it costs so much. Myrna, for instance, is bunking in a closet since she's a single; even if they do call it Kismet, I think she's sleeping on a shelf. There's no room for other tourists, so we're stuck with our same group. So, mostly we wait for dinner and wonder what to do until it's time for bed.

If you want to know the bedrock, bottom line truth, gorgeous as it is, the Rajmahal is getting just a little boring. One big problem is, no TV. I suppose that makes me sound superficial, but listen. Plus the electricity is out and we've all been lunging around the palace with lanterns and stumpy little candles that you can't keep on too long or you'll use up yours and you won't get another until tomorrow, if you last that long.

And even though we're all old friends back home in the States, we're getting kind of sick of our group. Our very first day in India, this Myrna went out to some store and got the cutest little vest with a funny standup collar. Within two days everybody had a vest, you know, like the Indian gentlemen wear? With the standup collar. The next day it was mirrorwork. Next it was rugs and yesterday, our fourth day in India, everybody came back with smoky topaz, cufflinks for the guys and for us, earrings, and Gary gave me a huge topaz to make up for some of the things he said.

Travel is amazing. We've learned so much about India that we feel right at home. And tomorrow we're going downhill into the adorable village, listen, we can shop! And if the cards fall right, I'll be the one who discovers the new thing -- maybe those cute turbans some of the Indians wear -- and I'll be the first in the group to lead everybody to the new shopping bonanza, wherever it is, so we can buy more things. Tomorrow we'll come back up to the palace wearing something I personally discovered, and that will show this Myrna with her black hair and her Barbie doll body, all right?

But right now it's too dark to read and there's no TV and the Minnesota Adventure Club is hissing like a nest of wasps, I am sick of the sight of them, and the manager won't let us go anywhere so we're bored, and listen, this may be one great escape just like the brochure says it is but it's boring and I'm sorry, okay?

So we're up here bored, Gary and I, in the pavilion where the Rajput ruler probably betrayed his princess Mrinal, which is probably why she jumped off, because princes get bored too; he betrayed her with dozens of women on those dense nights when the air was still tolerable and the hot wind blew the sand up

from the Rajasthani desert with summer following like a tiger, devouring life.

Rotten Gary and I sit at opposite corners of the pavilion like bored princes and wonder what we're going to do with the rest of our time here. With the rest of our lives. It's not my fault I found out about Gary and Myrna; listen, on top of everything we aren't speaking, not one word since the fight.

PREM KUMAR

Heaven knows I admire the Ashok family for what they are trying to do here and they value me; have they not made me the manager? But I am hard put to keep the guests happy and quiet in the absence of

electricity and no water to bathe. I have tried to explain that sited at the edge of the desert as we are, we must avoid conspicuous consumption of water -- one shower here uses more water than a woman from the village can carry on her head. But how can I tell Americans that the generators haven't really failed, that we've just turned off the power to keep from enraging the villagers, who have had no electricity in their homes since the regional power failure some weeks ago?

That is, the ones whose houses are in fact electrified. Understand, I know better than anyone that we here at Rajmahal are in an unhealthy situation of dramatic contrasts. Our opulence, with Rolls Royces parked in the courtyard and VCRs. Their lives. But I must be quiet and protect the guests. It is after all my job here, and I have a family in Kashmir depending on the rupees I send home. The money that comes with my position.

The money that comes with my position! That's a laugh. My monthly income from this job would not put a dent in the wallets of our wealthy guests, who throw the gems of India around like so many unwanted sweets. And my own income beggars what trickles down to the villagers at the bottom of the hill. Well that is their problem. I have my job here, I have my obligation to keep silent about the grumbling in the town -- to the guests, at least -- and I have my obligation to keep the villagers off the property, no matter what. Isn't that enough?

The villagers. Why can't the beggars understand that they stand to profit here? It's not my fault the owners ordered three hundred ornamental urns from one potter and three hundred from another, took them on consignment but never paid and never picked up the items? Why can't the fellows take their goods and offer them to the palace patrons, sweetening it in souvenir terms by painting on the name of the place? There is profit to be made here, as you can see. And the potters are only one example.

So I must encourage the guests to go down into the village -- by day, of course -- and send along staff to follow at a safe distance -- and entreat our tourists to cover themselves instead of going about in shorts. And watch them go off with their cameras and their pockets full of rupees like large children, and hope the day goes well. And hope the foreigners' ears are not attuned to the local grumble, because the management wants them to believe that the village is there

for their entertainment, and it does not want them even to guess there may be unhappiness in the town.

Daily I wave goodbye. And watch how these large children behave. And listen. And learn from them insofar as I can, because I do not intend to spend the rest of my life as a manager. Nor will I, if I can keep the stupid foreigners from getting hurt on the parapets at night or blundering where they shouldn't. And if I can keep the kitchen help from spitting in the food or forgetting to wash the vegetables before they shred them into the relish tray. And if I can manage -- most of all -- to keep my ear to the ground in the village, where even the air is growing sour. It's not my fault that the owners have brought in help from Uttar Pradesh and employed only twelve of them, and it's not my fault that they can't come into a place that they used for so long as if it were their property!

And now there is a new problem. This weekend's batch of tourists from the state of Minnesota, America is bumptious at best, laughing on the stairs and fighting on the balconies so their quarrels carry through every courtyard. Perhaps it's just as well they don't know how much I understand of what they say here.

This couple for instance -- Sally it is, this Sally and Gary.

They don't even guess that I have heard them fighting. Or that I understand. But I heard this Sally tell her Gary that she was sick of their relationship, the lying, that everything they stood for was false and that she was going to find true, uncomplicated love this weekend, perhaps even in the village.

"Listen," she said, "you can't look down on these people just because they're poor, and foreigners. At least they are sincere. And besides, some of the young men are -- well. You saw them waving when the bus came through, and the one that waved -- frankly, he was gorgeous!"

And her Gary said, "He wasn't waving, he was shaking his fist because our bus took a chunk off the corner of that building."

"No," she said, the fool! "I think it was some kind of Islamic gesture of greeting." Islamic! What a fool!

And her Gary in his own ignorance. "What makes you think these people are Hindus?" Islamic Hindus? How ignorant can you be?

Who am I to set them straight?

"I don't know what they are," she said, "but you know what I mean. He was, you know, trying to get in touch!"

"Sure," he said to her. "Like you know all about India."

And this is what she told him. "No," she said, "I don't know. Not yet," she said, "not really. But tomorrow morning first thing I'm going down into the village and find out, okay?"

And the way he yelled out, "Okay!" I knew it was not agreement but a primitive cry of anger.

So tomorrow I must be careful. The woman is determined to get up early and stray before I have a chance to warn the chowkidar or set someone to go along -- at a discreet distance of course -- to be sure she does not get us all into terrible trouble. And I must do all this without infringing on this Sally's, what is it Americans say, infringing on her "freedom," or I will hear about it from our owners.

They have not a golden monkey's idea how precarious is our position here. But I know how precarious mine is. Silence is the word. No. Survival. I have a position here and I must be ready to do whatever is necessary to protect it.

## TAMAS

Not my fault I am the angriest. Not my fault that I see what is going on and have no power to prevent it. Not my fault that I saw the pretty redhaired American woman waving to me from the bus as they rode in last night or that we exchanged significant glances before the thing roared around the corner, almost smashing three dogs under the wheels and scattering pigs and almost hitting one of our children.

The children! How can I, Tamas Kanoji, protect them from what is going on here -- the anger of Surjit and the others, the venality of the shopkeepers, the carelessness of the visitors to the palace? For eighteen months now, ever since outsiders discovered the Rajmahal and began the renovations, the village has been stewing. Surjit and most of the other young men who sit at the smoke shop and watch the road are angry, going on furious. "Look at them," Surjit says when another bus roars by, or another pair of glossy vans or a new Mercedes, so shiny that it awes the onlookers even as they rage at the intrusion. "They owe us something!"

"Look," Amar says, "through our roads and up our driveway and into our monument without so much as a by-your-leave and without a backward look or even a hundred rupees per capita for payment, straight into our place, our PALACE, our very own property that has been appropriated under the guise of preservation of a public monument. It's time to rise up and make them pay for all the rupees that they have failed to pay us!"

Meanwhile Surjit suggests we barricade the approach to the gates with stones and keep it closed until the owners pay us a hundred thousand rupees for the insult and guarantee every villager employment. His girlfriend and her girlfriends are willing to put on little caps and aprons if necessary, and bow and scrape just long enough to make running-away money so they can go to live in Jaipur, or go up north to the big-city life in Delhi.

But Amat wants -- not blood, exactly, but some kind of retribution. "They have ignored us long enough," he says, trying to organize it. "They have gotten in

their big red vans and rolled right over us. I am through lying down and taking it."

Only the shopkeepers have kept Amat from tipping the elephant so it falls over and demolishes the structure. For they see there is profit to be made from the situation if only they can figure out how to lure the foreigners into their shops and separate them from their rupees. If they have their way we will have painted marquees over all the shops and if the power ever comes back we will have neon characters chasing themselves across our modest buildings. Gujar already has a generator and is designing a lighted banner to put over his shop; in big red characters it will say, **BIG BARGAINS. COME TO GUJAR'S EMPORIUM.**

It breaks my heart, this foolishness. And look what it is doing to my children!

Yes, mine. When you are schoolmaster, all the children of the village are your children.

And since the vans of the wealthy started kicking up dust and scattering pigs and goats on their heedless way up the hill to the Rajmahal, something terrible has happened to my schoolchildren. They laugh and wave and tell the foreigners good morning, crying for joy, "Good morning!" they leave my classroom to follow the strangers all over the village. At first even I found it rather charming, but then one of the foreigners turned around to Ameeta, pretty little Ameeta who is the smartest and my favorite, and tossed her a note -- dear heaven, fifty rupees! That was the beginning. Now when she hears the foreigners' vans and busses or hears their funny nasal voices in the road outside, she and all the others run out of my school yard and take to the streets to follow, and the devil take anything I might be trying to do in the schoolroom. My soul, it is enough to wring tears from a stone elephant.

"Oh look!" a foreign woman cries. That voice! "They are so cute! Come over here, honey, let me take your picture next to that camel."

Terrible. It makes me want to side with Amat the militant against Surjit and against the shopkeepers -- anything to keep our village fresh and our children safe from rank venality.

But now, suddenly, my heaven, I look out of my school yard gate --children scattered like puppies, fawning and laughing at the most beautiful pink woman I have ever seen, a redheaded woman in acid-washed jeans like the ones I have seen in Delhi, my foreign beauty from the bus, and here she is wandering in the mud among the children -- my children -- and raising her pink hands to scatter candy and crying, "Good morning, good morning!" and I am embarrassed that my darlings are not studying English -- no time yet in our curriculum, the streets will teach them--and so they cry, "Good-bye, good-bye," and think that they are greeting her. This would leave me pleased and a little proud of their friendliness except for this one thing. They look at her and smile, but all the time my poor corrupted children are thinking: Well enough, madam, but how many rupees for this smile?

Or maybe they are not. She is so attractive! "Good morning," she cries, "Good-bye! What are your names? Oh how adorable. I will call you..." She is at a loss but she brightens with that smile that lures me out of the door and into her aura, "You can call me Sally."

"Sally." "Sah-lee," they work on it. And out of my own mouth tumbles the most amazing thing.

"And I am Tamas," I say. "I am the schoolmaster."

Puzzled, she squints at me, and then brightens. "Oh, do you know English?" And embarrassed by her incomprehension -- is it my pronunciation? I smile and nod my head.

Her smile is like a gift. "I'm so glad!"

I would follow her anywhere.

At a distance I see dust -- an angry Anglo from the palace, huffing down the road in search of her. "This way," I say quickly, before she sees him following. "I will take you to meet our best potter." And before the fellow can catch us up I have whisked her around a corner and so we have the rest of the day together.

I manage this by dismissing the children. I may not be able to keep discipline since the foreigners have come to distract us, but by heaven I can keep them at a distance, so they do not disturb.

Then I take this beautiful lady along the little road outside the village to the ruined temple, where we wander like two lovers who have been predestined to meet.

"Sally!" A man's voice follows us. "Where are, you?"

She shakes her head and murmurs, for me alone, "I've brought some American chocolate and some Bisleri water."

And so we have a feast there in the shadows.

But the foreigner's voice is getting closer: "Sally, it's Gary. Where are you?"

And next to me in the shadow of the wall this beautiful creature puts her fingers to her mouth: Shhhh.

Oh yes my darling Sally, we will shhhh.

Throughout the long morning and into the afternoon I hear the foreigner calling her: "Sally, it's Gary. I'm sorry about everything. Wherever you are, come on, come ON." As I lead her through my village, we run ahead of his cries. I know every half-inch of this place so I can show her how to dodge this way and that, visiting this shopkeeper and that coffee shop. Her rejected lover's voice



follows us around corners and behind hills and just behind it follow the children's voices, my class, they are so swift at learning the language! "Cahm ahn, cahm ahn," if they hang with this Gary for long enough they will pick it up and syllabus or no, tomorrow I will introduce English lessons to my students.

At the top of his lungs he grieves for her. "I'm sorry. It's over. What more can I say?"

My beautiful redheaded Sally ignores his cries. She and I learn to understand each other's English. We begin to understand more. We understand that when night falls we may find a way and a place to be together -- it is so exciting! And if at bottom I am disturbed by this encounter -- the danger of being spoiled by the foreigners, like a village, swept away and somehow undone by the opulent atmosphere of the palace -- I find it hard to escape what is between us, or slow down, much less stop it happening.

I try to find a place where we can be alone. Outside the town there is a ruined monument, all that is left to us of the precincts of the Rajmahal. Perhaps because it was too far from the palace to be defended, the Rajput princes abandoned it soon after it was built, but the ruins live on-- the temple next to our huge and stunningly empty tank. And except for the families living in the shadows of the surrounding walls, we are alone.

"Oooh," my Sally says. "This is truly India."

I cannot bear to tell her that it is not as simple as this.

Sitting together on the bottom-most step of the tank, we raise our palms, touching fingertips.

We are in the grip of something extraordinary, held like preserved flowers in plastic, breathless, in suspension.

In the depths of our communion at the tank, on the brink of love and already beyond understanding, she takes my hands and looks into my eyes and says my name -- "Tamas," she says, and unlikely as it is, here at the lip of the universe, we are close, so close! to happening.

"Sally."

And she looks into my eyes and says from somewhere deep, "You are my India."

So it is my fault that we were so disrupted by love that I lost track and the dusk had crept up from the Rajasthani desert before I understood what was going on behind us. Going on in the bowels of the town. In the dark. Without my knowing.

The forces of anger had broken the dam of reason, flooding the streets like a million monsoons.

And because I was in love I lost the power to prevent it.

I was so enthralled that I even lost the power to protect her.

My fault, then, that while I was waylaid thus, beguiled, Amar had raised his troops and accomplished almost everything he threatened. The blockade of stones, laid so silently that nobody noticed. The barricade of camel drivers. By the time the first cries of anger rose and the foreigners cut adrift and stranded in the town found themselves unable to go uphill, and by the time the first cars from the palace found it impossible to come downhill to help them; by the time my villagers took up sticks and tools and began mixing it up with the chowkidars from the place; by the time the camels grew disturbed by the racket and began to rustle in the road and stampede, charging us; by that time, and before the police came, it was too late for me to prevent the accident.

My Sally, running ahead of me in the road with her red hair streaming and her arms spread, crying, "Oh stop, please don't, please don't hurt each other!"

My Sally, with me running after crying, but in such distress that I fell into my own language and there was no way for her to hear, much less heed my warning, "My love, my Sarah, watch out, watch out!"

My fault, then, and not the camel driver's.

And above her last, great cry of pain and love as the hoofs of the camel overtook my red-haired beloved and extinguished her, the voice of Amar, my champion, my nemesis, Amar triumphantly bashing one of the palace-wallahs and shouting and the police van roared to the spot, too late to save Sally but in time to quell the insurrection, "That'll show the bastards!"

Our fault, the village's, for what they have turned us into.

And my fault for letting my attention wander for that short, idyllic day and so make disaster befall my life, my love, my village!

I loved her.

I loved my village.

I loved my children.

And with all the love in the world I was powerless to help them.

I am leaving my job and my village now. I can no longer hold up my head there. I am going into the desert to die if I can manage it. I am no good here. I am no good to my self. I am no good to the village, cut off by police lines and barbed wire from the palace, which is defunct as a resort because of the happenings. I am no good to anyone -- I loved her! There is nothing in this life beyond love and failure and no future.

For in that brief day that fell like a stone knife between past and present,  
Sally became my future.

I am sorry about what happened to her.

-- New Delhi, January 13, 1992