

You and Me in Paradise

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For the comfort and convenience of our guests and the smooth running of the building, we request that residents do not offer gratuities to staff, or discuss personal matters with them.

The concierge led Mark into the apartment, pointing out the fine marble floor, the air-conditioning controls; he demonstrated the television, flicking through pages of channels, Arabic, African, European. He showed him the double sinks with taps, whose operation required such a fleeting touch as to be practically psychic and how to adjust the lights in brightness and hue to match every conceivable mood.

‘Even extreme rage?’ said Mark.

The concierge allowed his thin moustache to crease in a smile to acknowledge his guest’s little joke, and he finished by saying, ‘Whatever we can do to help, is our pleasure,’ in a hushed reverent tone. He lifted the apartment brochure with its slogan, ‘Perfect service, imperceptibly,’ in florid gold script, passing his hand over the words to absorb their magic.

‘There is just one thing. I’d like to be able to open the window.’

The concierge’s smile did not change as Mark attempted to manipulate the window catches, but they remained firmly locked.

The concierge headed to the air conditioning controls. ‘This system regulates the atmosphere to your exact requirement. Hot or cold as you like. Filtered quality air. Let me show you again.’

‘I would like to open the window.’

‘The air outside is not good. But I will make a note of your request.’

‘Thank you. Will it take long?’

‘I will do it straight away.’

‘No, but how long to unlock the windows?’

The concierge was smiling. ‘As I said, your request will be actioned promptly.’ He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. ‘Perfectly regulated.’

Mark looked out of the window onto the area below, with its polished concrete dyed into geometric patterns, creating a path heading towards the mall with its green copper minarets. Receding into the distance, towers were in various stages of construction, each one populated by hundreds of migrant workers crawling around the skeletons of the upper storeys, wearing uniforms of orange and white.

He had come to work at site on the east of the city, a complex of luxury flats and leisure facilities. He had decided to look for work abroad after returning to find his Crystal Palace flat emptied of his wife’s clothes. He had sat in the kitchen surrounded by the boxes of the units he’d spent months trying to assemble, with her note that it took him three days to read.

He had been candid in the job agency. ‘I’m not sure I’m really qualified for this.’

The agent persuaded him that it was his doubts that showed he was the ideal candidate for the job. ‘Safety Adviser. It’s common sense. You read their safety documents. If they’re okay you sign them off. If not, you don’t.’

‘So when do I have an interview?’

The agent had smiled. ‘That was it.’

They paid for his flight and as he arrived at the airport, the brief blast of the baking air stopped him, breathless. He looked up at a poster of a man of an uncertain ethnicity smiling at his jewelled sports watch. Underneath was the slogan, ‘Everything is possible.’

He requested his driver take him straight to site from the airport, but instead found himself delivered to the apartment, where

the site manager greeted him with a long handshake and sweet mint tea. The site manager expressed horror at Mark's plan to start work straight away.

'Rest. Explore...'

'I'm not just going to sign a report, you know. I want to do site inspections.'

Despite his sleek grey suit, the site manager clutched a pristine hard-hat and gloves. He was always ready for action. 'Of course not,' he said. 'You must see everything. Tomorrow.'

Mark suggested that accommodation closer to the work site might be better. Unfortunately, nothing was available with a suitable level of comfort.

'A driver will collect you every day. Anywhere you want to go.'

'I'll make my own way.'

'That is not possible. You would die.'

Later Mark walked a circuit of the outside of his apartment block. Even that was very difficult.

The whole block seemed barely occupied. If he heard footsteps, or caught sight of someone, they had always disappeared before an encounter occurred. Despite the newness, one of the bathroom taps dripped. With the perfect condition of everything else it began to obsess him. He phoned the concierge.

'Of course, sir. Right away.'

A few minutes later a young Indian man in a boiler suit arrived carrying a toolbox and an enthusiastic smile. 'Sir. No problem, sir,' he said, disappearing into the bathroom. There was banging.

'All finished,' he said, still smiling.

'Thank you.'

'No problem, sir.'

'Where are you from?'

The man looked puzzled. 'From downstairs.'

'No, are you from India? Whereabouts in India?'

The man passed his hand over the tap and water flowed. He spoke softly. 'Kerala, sir. Lot of water in Kerala.' He demonstrated the tap once more and as he headed towards the door to leave, his face turned wistful.

Mark held out his hand. 'I'm Mark. Thank you.'

The man hesitated, looking at the hand suspiciously, before shaking it. 'What is your name?'

'Arshad. Arshad Kamal.'

'Just one more thing Arshad... The window... do you have something to open the window?'

Arshad pointed to the concierge button on the phone. 'That button, sir. To report.'

In the morning Mark's car didn't turn up, and when he rang site, they told him it had been outside waiting for him. 'But he didn't call me to say he was there.'

'He is there when you need him. I will send him back for you, sir.'

'Thanks. He will call when he arrives?'

When Mark called back later they said the driver had again waited downstairs but had now been called away. The driver would return shortly.

Mark waited in the lobby, flicking through site reports, sitting next to a petrified tree.

At last the car returned.

'Journey... how long?' He gestured a steering motion to the driver.

'One hour.' He smiled. 'Site close in one hour. Work finish.'

'Tomorrow. Early start. Call.' He gave the driver a slip with his mobile number on it.

Mark got out of the car and took the site reports back to his room.

'He will be there. Whenever you require,' the office told him when he rang to explain.

The apartment was serviced, with a pristine and minimal kitchen. The basement restaurant could provide a range of cuisines at any time of day, but Mark decided to visit the mall to buy food to prepare himself.

He smiled at the concierge on the front desk, and followed the covered way to the tiled entrance. 'The Gateway to Paradise' it said in golden letters. He wandered round the circuit with a family group that consisted of a veiled woman in a voluminous gown, a

stocky adolescent boy with a skateboard, and a line of girls, time-lapsed through adolescent years. They glanced indifferently into each outlet, and the staff gazed back with even less interest.

He discovered luxury goods, electronics, perfumes and western-branded clothes, but nowhere that sold food. He stopped at a music shop to look at an oud on a stand, fascinated by the deep sheen of the polished wood, the decorated sound hole, the fluting of the tuning pegs. He wanted it.

The assistant came over, shaking his head. 'Not for you,' he said. 'Not for English. Arab. Arab music.' He steered him towards electric guitars.

Mark was going to argue but realised he would have to try the instrument in the shop with the sales assistants listening and watching. 'Not for English.' Mark bought a CD of oud music instead.

'Welcome back sir.' The concierge greeted him as if he was returning from an epic trip of endurance rather than a twenty-minute stroll round the mall.

He sensed something had changed in his apartment. The previous evening he had rearranged the furniture, moving the sofa towards the window and putting the chair back in the corner to create a bigger space, but now they had begun a journey back towards their original positions.

The tap was dripping again.

'Kerala is a beautiful place. I visited once,' he said to the young handyman as he arrived to fix the tap again.

'This country, very beautiful. Good work. Lot of work. Best place.'

'No but Kerala... you must miss it.'

Arshad shrugged.

Mark pointed to a roll of blue tape in Arshad's toolbox. 'Can I have it?' He unpeeled a note from his wallet.

Arshad smiled as Mark tucked the money into the pocket of his overalls. 'No sir,' he said shaking his head, without attempting to return it.

'Any news on the window Arshad?' Mark unpeeled another note.

Arshad patted the money inside his pocket. 'This. Beautiful country. Kerala, no work.' He pointed to the concierge button on the wall-phone. 'Window.'

‘Do you send money home to your family?’ Mark put pieces of blue tape on the marble to mark the positions of the sofa and chairs.

When it got dark, Mark went outside to the rear of the building and lay on the concrete far below his window, which still retained the heat as if he was in the embers of a fire. He stared up at the sky and its haze flashed with the lights of a distant nightclub. Bass-beats thudded through his back.

He returned to the concierge’s desk. ‘Any news on the window?’

The concierge looked up. ‘Good Evening, sir. How can I help you?’

‘Good evening. Is there any news on getting my window unlocked?’

‘It is in progress. My top priority sir.’

‘Any idea how long?’

‘Top of my list. Is there anything else I can help you with?’

The next morning Mark waited in the lobby and when the car arrived he got in. It was a different driver who spoke no English. ‘Where are you taking me?’ he shouted, and found himself dropped at offices deep in the city.

‘I want to go to the site. Wait here.’ He got out and the receptionist called someone who could translate, but when they returned outside the car had gone. At an office on the seventh floor a man was assigned to help him and with every question Mark asked the man disappeared to return with another stack of documents. When the pile was a foot high he stopped asking.

When a car finally arrived to take him to the worksite, they got stuck in traffic. After two hours of crawling through roads full of drivers on the brink of violence, he was delivered back to the apartment block.

Exhausted by the heat, he carried his pile of documents from the car.

At the front desk he waited for the concierge to look up.

‘Sir? The window. Good news. We examined the window.’

‘And?’

‘There is no problem with the window.’

‘It’s not broken. I wanted to open it.’

‘No, sir. Let me show you the air controls.’

As Mark collapsed on the sofa, he realised the tap was dripping again. He checked the tape. The tape had moved with the sofa.

When Arshad arrived, Mark greeted him like an old friend. Arshad smiled, dropped his tool bag and went into the bathroom. He bashed at the tap.

‘Sir. All fixed.’ The dripping had stopped.

‘While you’re here, could you look at the window?’

Arshad looked out over the landscape. ‘Beautiful country,’ he said and they both looked over the vista of half-constructed buildings, the clumps of workers bare-chested under their hi-visibility jackets and hard hats.

‘Do you have a big family in Kerala, Arshad? Do you miss them?’ Arshad watched nervously as Mark unpeeled notes from the roll in his pocket. ‘Can you unlock the window?’

Arshad went deep into his tool bag, and pulled out a handcrafted piece of metal, inserting it into the latch which sprang apart. He slid the window open.

A rush of air began, exchanging cold and warm, filtered and particulate, and the ceiling vents throbbed with this extra burden. The new air was hot and dirty with smoke and grit, but it felt good. Mark breathed it deep, and his stomach lurched at the drop to the ground below.

‘Mother, sister, brother, sister, sister, auntie.’

‘It must be hard, living here, away from them.’

Arshad screwed his face up, saving the question and its answer for later, his private time.

That night Mark moved the sofa so he could lie at the open window, and look up at the night sky, immersed in cool air.

The car arrived in the morning as Mark reached the lobby and drove him for a couple of miles before they became embedded in a traffic jam of luxury cars, ultra-loud horns blaring. After three hours, he exchanged some complicated signing with the driver, and found himself delivered back to the apartment block.

The furniture had moved again. The tape and his marker pen arrows on the marble had also moved. Both taps were now dripping.

The concierge came to his room. ‘I am sorry you have needed to complain about our service. I will investigate with the member of staff involved.’

'I'm not complaining. I just think it maybe he could fix the tap once and for all, rather than having a daily visit.'

'I will check the record to find out who...'

'Arshad. Arshad Kamal. Talk to Arshad.'

'Sir.'

'He told me his name. He's from Kerala.'

'Sir, that is not possible. Our staff do not exchange personal information. Your complaint...'

'I'm not complaining. He fixes it, but the next day it's dripping again. I'm sure it's not his fault. And he helped me with the window.'

The concierge's face darkened as he examined the window, running his finger over the latch. 'I will get that fixed.'

Mark lay on the sofa that evening, watching the night sky with the double pinging of the taps of the two sinks dripping in and out of phase.

The next morning the driver took him to the construction site without a hitch. 'So where is everyone?' he asked.

The security man frowned. 'Holiday.'

The site manager offered him an interim inspection report to sign.

'I can't sign that...'

'Read. If anything is incorrectly described... you amend in the final report.'

'I haven't seen anything.'

'It's a good report. Thorough. Everything is covered.'

For seven hours he sat in a hut in baking heat, trying to review documents full of sentences with multiple sub-clauses and broken syntax, until his head pounded. The report was complete and consistent, but without connection to the world around him.

He signed the audit report, then went up the ladders to the tenth floor, and walked round the grit-covered steel of the concrete carcass and looked out over the expanse of turmoil and rubble below. The smoke still rose from the bonfire of cable reels and scrap material. He tore sheet after sheet from the report and let them fly through the unfenced open space of the building to scatter far below.

At his apartment the drip was fixed, but the window was locked

again. The furniture had not moved. He lay on the sofa, squashing the remote control, flicking the television on. The programme was a compilation of animals dying in range of disasters: melting ice floes, drying lakes, newly formed deserts. He ran down the stairs to reception.

‘Where is he? Arshad Kamal?’

The concierge smiled. ‘No-one of that name works here.’

‘He fixed my tap. Four days running.’

Mark pushed past him to the staff accommodation behind the reception desk.

‘Sir, staff only.’

The room smelt ripe; sweat and feet and piss mixed with drains and rotting food. Rows of men lying on beds blinked at his intrusion and the sudden light. He peered into the darkness at the bunks.

‘Arshad Kamal?’

The men began shouting angrily at him and began pushing him out, as if they did not want him to see the shame of their living conditions.

‘English? Does anyone speak English?’

Still nothing. Nothing.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said to the concierge.

Outside he watched two men hose down and sweep the expanse of concrete around the apartment and when they had finished he lay on the steaming concrete, to stare upwards into the sun.

Someone had slipped a photograph under the door of his apartment. Arshad in a family photo, with a broad grin, and mother, sister, brother, sister, sister, auntie. When he slept, he dreamt of dark hunched figures pushing his furniture back to the correct places.

The next morning when the driver called Mark he was ready in the lobby. Everything was in place, for whatever he wanted to see. The car was outside, its engine ticking over.

The concierge eventually came over. ‘Can I help sir? Your car is ready. Are you waiting for someone?’

‘Yes. I’m waiting for Arshad Kamal.’

‘Sir, I have not heard of this person.’

‘Ok. I’ll wait until he comes.’ He settled into the sofa in the reception area.

A trace of controlled anger appeared on the concierge's face. 'This area... not for resident sitting. For visitors only.'

Mark flicked through the magazines on the table, with their adverts for expensive apartments in constructions nearby, and advertisement features on luxury restaurants. 'Gold dust was sprinkled on my rice for that extra magic...'

'Is it okay if I...?' He took the oud off the hook on the wall and examined it. The finish on this was rough and the fingerboard was warped. Not like the music shop oud. He strummed the strings anyway.

'Sir, for decoration. Not playing.'

'How do you tune it? Is it in fifths?'

The concierge did not answer, but Mark tuned it in fifths by ear, then slid his left hand up the fingerboard as he plucked the strings in a fast tremolo, using a snapped credit card as a plectrum. He began to sing tunelessly as he strummed.

Arshad Kamal. Arshad Kamal.

The concierge slammed the book closed on his desk and stood in front of Mark.

'You see, it's very important I see him. I promised I would send his family money if anything happened to him. Do you have the family address in Kerala?'

'Sir, your car is waiting.'

The driver was fiddling on his phone, the engine racing as the thermostat for the chiller kicked in, then eased off. Petrol was cheap in paradise. Petrol and people.

The concierge flicked a switch turning off the air conditioning in the lobby.

Within a few minutes beads of sweat appeared on the concierge's face and dripped from his nose onto the register he fastidiously updated. Mark could smell a rank odour developing in his own armpits. He strummed the oud violently, and sang.

*Did you hear the story of
Arshad Kamal?
Used to work here,
Had a terrible fall...*

One of the strings pinged broken.

‘Do you have a spare? One string down. It will affect my playing.’

The concierge moved into his back office and Mark heard the whirr of his fan. He rushed into the reception toilet. On his return a brass tray with water, a jug of coffee, and pastries, heavy with nuts and sugar syrup, sat on the table.

He ate until his body was fired up by sugar and drank the coffee, and the water. He lifted the plate to lick off the last fragments and underneath found a replacement string for the oud.

He strummed five stings once more.

*Did you hear the story of...
Arshad Kamal?*

He spent the rest of the day playing the oud until the noise even annoyed him. That night he slept on the reception bench dreaming of a giant television on which every channel featured a falling man turning endlessly on a journey towards the ground. And the man was still screaming and falling after he'd turned the dream television off.

In the morning his own smell was overpowering. The glances as residents rushed through the lobby told him that the whole reception area was filling with the odour of his unwashed sweaty body.

‘How many more days do you reckon?’ he said to the petrified tree, the other resident of the reception area. Its desiccated leaves barely rustled up an answer.

A new tray appeared on the table, bearing a sandal, its red straps strained by an oversized foot, a Boston Red Sox cap, lined with grime and an iPod with a smashed screen and single earphone. He put them in his pocket. He would return them to Arshad.

‘I think the oud might be tuned augmented fourths rather than fifths,’ Mark said so the concierge could hear. He retuned it. Tritones were harder; you had to use harmonics and the strings were too old to ring properly.

The tray also held fruit, yoghurt, coffee and a guide to playing the oud in Urdu with diagrams showing correct positions (tick) and incorrect positions (cross).

‘Good morning,’ Mark waved to the concierge.

The concierge came over and began a little speech. 'We have an impossible situation. There have been complaints...'

'I have a complaint too...'

'From the other residents. Occupation of the reception area is not permitted. I have passed your request to the management for further investigation.'

'That's good. Very good.'

'So you will return to your room?'

'Yes.'

The concierge smiled, relieved, and put the oud back on the wall.

'When I have the results of the investigation. A truthful investigation.'

The concierge looked less happy.

'The investigation into the disappearance of Arshad Kamal. I need to get to the truth. His family are depending on me. I have spent a lot of time thinking about truth. There is the world documented in reports... and there is the world of facts. How do we connect the two?'

The concierge nodded. 'I have explained the facts very clearly...'

'Maybe they can't be connected, like dimensions, impossible concepts, imaginary numbers. All we can have is a story. Give me a good story that makes sense. I will return to my apartment and never open the window again.'

A steely rage appeared on the concierge's face. The battle was serious and Mark knew he was really stinking badly. The concierge went back to his office.

In the afternoon the concierge delivered two envelopes to Mark on a brass tray with an elaborate geometric design. One was from his employer, terminating his contract. The other was from the apartment management, ending his residency without notice. The concierge watched for his reaction, and departed with a slight bow.

Later a package appeared on the table, containing a boiler suit such as a building maintainer might wear. Mark put it on and discarded his filthy clothes. It felt good to have fresh clothes. In the toilet he splashed water over his face, armpits and groin.

When he emerged, his old clothes had gone along with his wallet and keys. In his boiler suit pocket he found a picture of a smiling

girl in a sari. Her smile was so broad and generous that Mark felt moisture developing at a point deep in his eyes, so that it never emerged as tears. Arshad's girlfriend. Wife maybe. He wished they had put a name and address on it. A name at least. So he could repeat it to himself as he dozed.

In his sleep that night, his closed eyes reported to him the approach of a vehicle, endlessly pulling up and its occupants, men in uniforms, getting out and rushing towards him, always rushing.

In the morning when he woke, a tray had been set in front of him with the finest breakfast he could possibly imagine and next to it, a bundle of neatly folded fresh clothes. On top of the clothes was a pack of oud strings, each string tied in a loop by coarse silk in a different colour. And in a cloth bag, a tongue scraper and toothbrush with a tube of Ayurvedic toothpowder.

When he had changed the strings on the oud and they had stretched enough for the tuning to stabilise he sang his song again, and even though he kept forgetting the words, he heard the beating of pans in the kitchen, following its rhythm.

As he changed his clothes he realised he had now adopted Arshad's smell; a hint of methi seed, neem leaves, betel nut. It was a smell deep in his skin.

Every time he closed his eyes the television in his head played, showing an endless sweep of half-constructed buildings, always finishing in his apartment, where the furniture was moving, so slowly as to be barely perceptible.

Mark decided the oud should be tuned in diminished fourths. He broke a string as he retuned it. He knew the string would be replaced. He could break endless strings. There would come a point of revelation, after a hundred strings... a thousand strings broke... as he wound them tighter and tighter, and played until they snapped... then he would understand.

The concierge came over to see him, bowing slightly as he handed Mark a folded sheet of paper without an envelope or a tray. He did not have to open it to know that it explained in stark sentences how life was supported by strings held in tension and if one string broke the whole structure collapsed.

'I need to arrange my departure,' Mark said and played a sustained tremolo on a single note. The secret of a good tremolo was

to lose all control, all sense of everything other than the continuous note, to become that note.

Here's the story of Arshad Kamal.

In the distance Mark heard another sound in harmony with him, a tapping, a beating of a drum, in the same insistent rhythm. An Indian flute. Finger cymbals. He breathed hot, dirty air and felt the approach of a marching band in the dazzle of sunlight.

The concierge was making a sequence of silent phone calls, watching as the van pulled up outside. A van to take him to the airport. It was so easy.

In the half-light of the van, Mark felt the need to whisper. 'You know,' he said to the man next to him, 'this really is paradise. Arshad Kamal explained it all to me...'