

# Hampi

a short story

by

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## HAMPI

She stood up and tucked her sleeveless khaki army vest into sand coloured army trousers; the multiple pockets bulging in places did little to detract from the fine form of a body in perfect condition. Then, she did up the long laces of her desert boots with a practiced speed. Stretching up she pulled a full kit bag off the luggage rack the action revealing a full six-pack readily seen through the taught vest. Dropping it at her feet with controlled ease she turned her head in the same manner and stared directly into my eyes - I smiled - she did not but turned away swinging the bag up onto her muscular shoulder. The action had hardly affected the large protruding breasts and it made me wonder what form of engineering skills had gone into the construction of her bra.

I was at that time a man in my prime as in my early forties I was still fit if not as fit as this perfectly formed woman. Her face, if a little on the harsh side was blessed with almond eyes and lips, a straight nose and short thick black hair. She was not much shorter than myself and moved with grace on legs in perfect proportion to her body. Her skin radiated the Mediterranean sun through a light gauze of olive.

I followed her off the train but by the time I had navigated my way through the crowds she had exited the station and was already setting off in a tuk-tuk.

There was something in that stare - a lonely defiance, perhaps, a searching need, possibly, a combination of these with other traits undefined. How much can a writer read into a simple connection that had barely lasted a blink? Yet I knew then we were to have history.

My vision was obstructed at this point by a smiling face, 'Did you know that Vijayanagar was the capital of one of the largest Hindu empires, and was founded in 1336 by the Telugu princes, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century had a population of half a million?'

'You don't say?' I said with enthusiasm.

'Oh yes, and at one time it covered an area of nearly 50 square miles and is built either side of the Tungabhadar River' here, his voiced turned sad, 'Unfortunately, it was destroyed by the Islamic Sultanates of the Deccan'.

'How tragic.' I quipped, but before he could continue I enquired, 'I take it you have some form of transport?'

'Indeed, please step this way.'

He was overjoyed to have found a traveller so easily persuaded to journey with him in an old beat-up car that was not a taxi. There are many such people in India all trying to make a living in whatever way they can and from time to time I indulge them for they have a right to make a living as much as anyone else. Having been to Hampi on more than one occasion I was fully aware of the taxi fare and the situation regarding hotels, so he was not going to fleece me, and having taken him out of the chaotic equation outside of the railway station he was not going to be in a position to fleece anyone else.

I smiled a benevolent smile as he continued.

'During its 200-year history it was a centre of the spice trade and as such was extremely wealthy. The magnificence of the Virupaksha temple that dominates the centre stands testament to this.'

And so it went on until we finally arrived at the bus stand just behind Hampi Bazaar. His assumed position as director of my itinerary was soon laid to rest when I informed him that I was already booked into the Vishnu guesthouse on the other side of the bazaar. Pressing my advantage I offered him an extra 50 rupees for his history lesson and asked him as a means of deflection, as much as anything else, whether or not there had been a large influx of Israelis in the passed few weeks.

This tired little man in his shabby suit and grubby shirt and tie collapsed into resigned acquiescence admitting that business had not been good on account of the arrival of the yearly migration of that most tragic of races.

Every year India plays host to young Israelis who have just finished their 2-year national service. India is one of the few places these social outcasts of the global village can find a place for R & R. Arriving in their thousands they first populate the northern beaches of Goa before heading inland to Hampi. Now this had consequences for myself in that finding lodging would be impossible on the other side - the quieter side - of the river. Indeed finding lodging at all might just have turned out to be impossible. You see, I had lied to the history teacher about an advanced booking, and was now contemplating that perhaps I was about to get my comeuppance - this, however, did not materialize.

I soon found a small room at the very top of a guesthouse just behind the bazaar. It was a single room built onto a third of the flat roof and as such had its own yard space - a boon for

those who, like myself, like to sleep outside when one gets the chance.

For those who have not been to Hampi the arrangement is quite unique because the guesthouses, cafes and shops are part of the ruined temple complex. One is actually living inside of an archaeological site. It's as if the pyramids of Giza had been turned into apartment blocks and where the Sphinx had become the playground Soho of the west end. That is until more recently when the World Heritage Organisation has declared it a World Heritage Site and is threatening to evict everyone.

Back then one could get the feel of what it must have been like to have lived in that ancient culture, albeit with rock music and pizza parlours.

Early that evening I strolled out to watch the sunset making my way out along the riverbank to the Mango Tree restaurant. It was already full and so I contented myself with a large coffee that I drank just below the restaurant taking my place on one of the giant boulders that pepper the valley. You have to understand these boulders were pebbles to giants some of them being 25 metres in height. In places one could even imagine one-self being a crab on a shingle beach, there was that many. The wide valley on the other side of the river was cultivated. The rocky precipices that make up the edges of the top of the valley sides are quite flat and in places temples are in residence.

This is a unique centre for a civilization that had obviously been chosen for many reasons but I can't help but think that the aesthetic was a primary one. Its unique character lends a unique atmosphere that calls one back time and again.

With so many tourists I decided to eat early - probably my only chance to get a table. If the Mango Tree was already full the other restaurants that line the riverbanks on both sides would also be. So I headed back towards the bazaar area where there was a collection of eateries. The first table I saw free was where I parked up - a pizza parlour boasting Italian flour. By the time I had finished my meal the place was full - full of Israelis. They have a subtle way of intimidating non-cast members. Glances that were more like stares and an annoying habit of taking the free chairs around one's table without asking.

It was on the removal of the last free chair that I spotted the girl from the train. Oh what a wicked way I have when annoyed, for I, at that point, stood up and showed her my

chair by picking it up. She was obviously Israeli and obviously looking for a place to eat, and here was this gentile with whom she had exchanged a meaningful glance waving the last chair in the restaurant at her. All eyes were now moving between her and myself. She was not amused being fully aware of the situation but she came and took it anyway.

My grin was of the bountiful kind and I could see the respect on her face as she took the chair I was holding. Taking it by one leg she flipped it over so she could place it on the ground in a position of her choosing. I made my exit, bidding the onlookers a good evening but without even a glance back at the girl.

I went for a stroll along the main drag - an avenue of ancient temples - to where a giant statue of Nandi, Shiva's bull, sits in sublime repose. I was still smiling when I sat down at its feet, the shape of my face only changing on the first sip from the chi I had purchased from a chi-wallah who had positioned him self perfectly for those taking the air after dinner.

Now it may strike the reader that I am arrogant and I would certainly not disagree for I have long known of this part of my make-up. It is only that I place little value on what I consider to be a mere mannerism. This particular foible can be best summed up by my response to the ancient Chinese saying 'The arrogant dragon has cause to repent.' For realizing that I am indeed an arrogant dragon and also knowing that I have had many occasions to repent for this quirk in my nature, I took the proactive step, many a long year ago, to repent as an on going process. I achieved this noble end by giving up chocolate biscuits - a particularly enjoyable vice of mine.

The next day, with the intention of getting an early start, I rose with the dawn and found a small restaurant that served egg fry and fresh chapattis. The inevitable then happened as a fellow traveller engaged me in conversation where we exchanged stories of the extravagant kind of the 'Only in India' variety. It was soon midday and very hot and not at all a good time to be setting off for the Vittal temple complex a few miles east along the river where I had intended to go. I ordered a fresh fruit salad with curd with every intention of returning to my room for a siesta after I had finished. But then she walked past, at speed, and with purpose, and in the direction of the Vittal temple.

Quickly finishing my lunch and grabbing a bottle of water I left my travelling friend with a rye smile on his face for he had seen my quarry and my haste.

It's an enjoyable walk with excellent vistas opening up every few hundred metres. On the way one can see the remains of an ancient bridge and also an aqueduct - all in ruin. I had gone a little over a mile when I could see in the distance a figure mounting the path I was on. She climbed up a steep slope with ease then stopped at the top where the path disappeared behind one of the megaliths and turned towards me. I stopped as a means of recognition and also one of communication, waiting for her to continue before I proceeded myself. If I needed further confirmation that our paths were already entwined her head reappeared momentarily from behind the huge boulder.

I then had to hurry for there was a branch on the path that if followed led down to a crossing place over the river, through a maze of boulders and up a steep incline to a temple on the ridge. If she was to take this path she would easily be lost to view and after my sacrifice of my siesta it would undoubtedly have put me into a bad mood, as she would also have been lost to my machinations. It was as I feared, for arriving at the branch she was nowhere to be seen.

It only takes a moment for me to divest myself of petty annoyance and having replaced this with the equipoise of those who *cultivate stillness* I soon was certain that she had indeed taken this branch down to the river. There I found a trace of her presence in the form of a wet footprint on one of the rocks - I hurried on.

Following the main well worn track through the maze I exited on the other side, but knew already she would not be seen on the path ahead nor on the steep track that led up to the top of the ridge. Somewhere in that labyrinth she was waiting for me - this had to be a test.

I was by then in full hunting mode - my primitive primate instinct fully engaged. I dashed in amongst those huge megaliths, squirming through gaps where they leaned across one another. After half an hour I was completely lost - my orientation only saved by glimpses of the ridge above. I stopped, sat down in shade and drank a good draft of water. It was in the silence into which I had retreated that hope came whispering through. On the border of my hearing I could just say make out voices - Indian voices - but which direction.

Trying several avenues I got what I thought was a reasonable location by means of triangulation and made my way in that direction as best I could in the difficult terrain. But when I stopped all was silent.

I was about to give up when I glimpsed her at some distance through a small gap in a tumultuous rock pile. She was flattened against a boulder with her head turned away as if she was hiding or listening. As I pondered whether to call out or not she suddenly fled in the opposite direction from which she had been facing. I gathered speed as I set off in a direction of intersection with the one she seemed to have taken, good fortune allowing me to use gaps between the boulders to that end. Then I came to a cul-de-sac and was just about to retrace my steps when I saw a way up onto a boulder lying across two others. Mounting this obstacle wasn't easy but by then I was being propelled by concern.

There had been robberies in Hampi for many years - the landscape affording excellent cover. And by the time the victims got back to the bazaar the thieves were long gone. The police do clean them out but they only come back when things have quietened down.

I was forced to drop down by sliding over the edge of a recumbent boulder and was lucky not to break my ankle, as the drop was more than I had guessed being about 5 metres. As it was, it was only on the annoyance side of painful. I dashed to an opening between the giants and there she was with her back to a boulder surrounded by 6 young Indian boys. One was holding his arm and I could see blood oozing through his fingers - it was then that I saw the large army knife in her hand. My quickness of mind saved the situation, for I called out loudly, "She's over here! Hurry she's being attacked by gundars!"

I waited until their eyes were on me before looking away, and waving to imaginary people in the distance. I was in fact looking for a weapon of some sort. Spotting a cigar-like stone I dashed to get it and tried it out in my hand - it was perfect. Then summoning up my courage I dashed back around from where I had disappeared from the view of the woman and her assailants.

"Come on they're still here!" I bluffed.

But it worked for the boys - and they were no more than boys - split and ran.

To my horror the girl started to pursue them and I had to make a desperate dash to hold her back. I just say caught her before she picked up enough speed to leave me for dead.

Half whispering, "There's only me."

"So what" she said defiantly, "we can take these *arseholes*." She said this with hate filled aggression and ... something else.

I had no doubt she meant it but the situation warranted retreat for we were in a place the enemy obviously knew well and there were plenty of places for ambush.

I played for time, "It will involve the Indian police and that could be costly. Especially as you have wounded one of them."

Holding onto her arm as I went through this rationale she was forced to consider my argument so by the time she looked to where they were they were no longer to be seen. She pulled her arm away from me and gave me an angry look then strode off in the other direction.

I was at pains - because of my ankle - to keep up with her and found it impossible to catch her up as she simply increased her speed whenever I came close. We came out at the river and she crossed it by leaping from boulder to boulder, only stopping when she heard me fall in.

She was puffed up with contempt but came back and helped me out anyway. The strength in those arms was amazing and I was almost thrown onto the bank.

"Why the fuck did you let them get away?" She hurled this at me.

"They were only boys. Poor boys. Boys with little going for them in their lives, and besides they were probably just fooling around. "

"And you could tell all that from just a few ..." Her anger over ran her ability to express herself. "Give me a fucking break!"

The *something else* that I had detected in her first utterances now stood out with clarity - she had an American accent and if I was not mistaken a one of the New York variety. It was only too obvious, laced as it now was with contempt, which suits its condescending tones.

I brightened and smiled which amazed her. I laughed out loud as much from relief of the situation as the discovery of my mistake.

"And what the hell's so funny?"

"I thought you were an Israeli."



She sat back on a stone and viewed me with her angry eyes. She had words to speak alright but I could see through her puffing frustration that she thought it was going to take far too long to be worthwhile.

"Let me guess?" I said, unwilling to let go of our communication now it had been established. "You're a New York Jewess who wanted to do her bit for Israel so you joined their army, but, it's ended up asking more questions than its answered."

Here, I must admit to smirking and even with my T-shirt tightly grasped in her left hand and a knife at my throat I couldn't help but, yes, chortle.

My chortle is obviously a powerful weapon for she sagged and retook her seat holding her head in her hands, the knife along side of her ear was pointing skyward as she was facing the ground.

"It's ok, I understand. I've a couple of friends that have been through it. My good friend Larry Gold - he's from the Lower-East side - went through exactly what you're going through now. He ended up with one of the sickest senses of humour of anyone I ever met."

I could tell it was going well the way her body heaved with laughter, so I continued in the same bright vein.

"Here's one of his original master pieces, I blathered on, 'There was an Englishman, a Frenchman, a German and a Jew on an aeroplane when the Captain came back and told them they didn't have enough fuel to make their destination and so someone would have to get out. The Englishman said he couldn't possibly as the world needed his keen sense of humour and sense of fair play. The Frenchman said the world would descend into barbarity without the cultural & intellectual brilliance that his countrymen brought to the world. The German said he couldn't because the world needed his engineering and scientific skills, and the Jew said where would the world be without his business acumen. A bitter argument ensued until the German finally got up and opened the door, and said with bitterness, 'It is always left to the master race in the end.' And with that he threw the Jew out."

Oh how I laughed, but laughing more in memory of the time that Larry first told me this piece of racist whimsy in front of a crowd of loud Zionists. His survival of two years national

service with Zionist bigots was due to being possessed of a sick sense of humour and coming from an Eastside Jewish culture that only pays lip service to political correctness.

She was still heaving but now the tears like amber crystals dropped onto the stone between her feet - she was much further gone than I had supposed. Suddenly she shouted out in a voice racked by terrible grief, "I've got to rid myself of this fucking crap!" She was pounding the sides of her head with her fists.

A terrible sadness surfaced laying to rest my ridiculous behaviour. All I could say as I got up and left was, "Sorry."

When I got back I duly reported the incident to the police who said they would look into it with a bored resignation that didn't bode well for a speedy outcome. I returned to my little room with a sadness that threatened to turn into a bad mood. I alleviated this by engaging the 'improbability drive' of 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.' There I remained for the entire evening engrossed in the genius of a fellow writer and contenting myself with a selection of fruit that I invariably carry with me on my travels - I'd had enough adventures for one day.

The next morning I returned to the same place for breakfast and again met up with the traveller with whom I had exchanged stories. He was heading off, the ambience for him destroyed by an ugly fight the night previously when a number of Israelis had 'kicked the shit' out of a Frenchman for siding with the Palestinians in a drunken argument. He also had news of the woman from my previous days adventure. He said she was so drunk she could hardly stand - another wave of sadness. I toyed with the idea of leaving with my fellow traveller but hadn't made up my mind about my destination and so spent the rest of the day planning my journey for the morrow.

With darkness come I headed out along the river and was lucky enough to find a small table under some trees in the garden of the Lakshmi guesthouse. It was a dark night - the moon on the turn was not yet risen - and as there was little in the way of illumination - just a candle in a glass on the table - I blended into the shoulder high wall behind me, which suited my mood perfectly.

And what was my mood: disturbed, certainly, sad, angry, bitter, frustrated - in more ways than one - and with the knowledge that there was something missing that I couldn't put my finger on.

"So there you are." She said dropping down beside me from the upper terrace. She curled one leg under her on the bench we were sitting on as she turned to face me. "And where the hell were you last night?" The voice although annoyed was asking a genuine question. A one that implied that she had been searching specifically for me.

"Let me guess, you were attacked again?"

A poor attempt at a joke was hardly a proper reply and I got what I deserved.

"Don't be a smart-arse. Did you hear what they did to that French guy?"

"Ah!" This was my all-knowing 'Ah', which I use when I'm not exactly sure what my response should be. It's very much in the same vein as when Indians swivel their heads on their shoulders - they are only agreeing to understanding what you have said and not exactly to what you have said.

The intensity of her stare finally prompted me out of an awkward silence.

"I heard you were drunk?"

"Cut the bull! Don't tell me you aren't disgusted."

She knew I was, so it was hardly worth the confirmation and I moved the conversation along.

"He should have had more sense." I said this with the strength of conviction to give her the room for a reaction, which I knew was what she was really looking for.

"He had every right to express his opinion!"

But I wasn't going to let her go down that path further than to release the immediate tension.

"Tell me about your grandparents." This threw her and it was a few seconds before she responded, "Why do you want to know about my grandparents?"

"Tell me and you'll find out."

There was suspicion in those dark almond eyes but she began anyway, "They were from Lithuania."

"And?"

"They left for America after their land was confiscated."

"Confiscated because they were Jews?"

"Why else?"

"And what did they find in America?"

She pondered this long and hard eventually saying - with the first softness that I had heard in her voice - "Hope."

"Hope." There was hope for this girl that was for sure and I tried to express it in the way I delivered the word as a feeling of trust rather than in its more usual meaning as an expectation soon realized.

I waited, but she needed prompting, "Well?"

"I don't understand."

"Has anyone taken your land from you in America?"

"No way."

"That's the difference. You were brought up in the land of the free. Your Israeli friends were brought up in a world where their land could be taken from them. Only of course most of it is not *their* land."

"That's God damn right, so why are you sticking up for the arseholes?" She said this with a creeping anxiety tingeing her voice.

"Hardly sticking up for them. And always remember, you can understand a person's mindscape without agreeing with it."

"Israel is doing to the Palestinians exactly what the Lithuanians did to my grandparents. Is that the point you're trying to make?" She said this as if willing it to be true.

"Precisely!" I lent back and basked in my own arrogant brilliance only to receive a sharp blow to the side of my head for my trouble.

"Ow!" It really did hurt.

"Don't be such a smart arse."

"Tell me?" I said with a smile.

"What?"

"What material is your bra made out of?"

"Ow!" This hurt even more and I involuntarily rubbed my ear.

Things were going swimmingly well. Any woman - even this testosterone fuelled one - who instigates physical contact is well on her way to the Promised Land - the Promised Land here being my bed in a no-star hotel.

I changed position so I could face her face on. I gazed into dark eyes now filled with something else besides anger and smiled my most benevolent smile - that's the one where mirth plays around the corners of my perfectly formed lips. I was of course chancing another blow but before the silence made it inevitable I started in on one of my great set pieces.

"The whole thing is absolutely ridiculous. Jews and Moslems believe in exactly the same God as they both lay claim to Abraham as the founder of their religion."

"Same goes for the Christians!" She shot back.

"Absolutely. They're all stark raving bonkers the fucking lot of them."

The poker face nearly cracked at this point but she held onto it with an act of will - she wasn't ready yet. So I continued in vein.

"Have you read the Old Testament?" I said with derision. "They have a God who admits to jealousy. And worse, he's a sadist who enjoys watching people suffer. You're from the States you must know Bob Dylan's take on this from 'Highway 61 Revisited'."

"Before my time." She said this as a cutting put-down but she enjoyed it far too much for it to have any significant meaning. I was beginning to enjoy myself and so was she.

In a singsong voice I began,

"Now God said to Abraham, 'kill me a son',  
And Abe said, 'God, you must be putting me on'.  
God said, 'No',  
Abe said, 'What',  
God said, 'Abe you can do what you want but the next time you see me coming you'd better run.'  
Abe said, 'Where do you want this killing done?'  
And God said, 'Take him out onto Highway 61.'"

"You see the Old Testament has an anthropomorphic take on God. And what's more he would seem to have all of our very worst characteristics. Can you imagine a God who created this amazing universe we live in being so petty as to terrorise a bunch of desert bumpkins into believing in him. So you just know they're wrong."

I could see she was fighting with more than a smile, a full blown laugh and one born out of finally finding someone she could relate to as much as the wisdom inherent in what I was saying. I pressed my advantage,

"'No Eternal God would forgive us now for *wasting* the Dawn', now there's a line worthy of a God, but of course it was written by a man - Jim Morrison."

"So you *do* believe in an Eternal God?" She said this with certain confidence.

"God? Gods more like. Why be mean and have only one. The Hindus have the right idea, they have so many you can't even count them."

Here she pulled a face to cover up a rising joy that was so desperate to get through.

Oh how I wanted to kiss the skewed lips but I would have been chancing my hand to go for broke at that junction - so I carried on, displaying my genius like a peacock showing off his wondrous tail.

"All the Hindu Gods are one God. All of us are Gods if we did but know it for are we not part of that one God. So when you think about God like that how then can you describe that as God? The Hindus of the Upanishads never did, they simply called it *that* - not that thing, just *that*. It is beyond words let alone a 3 letter word that in reverse means a flea bitten mutt."

"You really are a smart arse."

"I know. I can't help it. But tell me, and just be honest. Have you ever had a mystical experience?"

She thought about it but the answer was not long in coming, "I guess not."

I love this form of honesty because it is with such honesty the mystical journey must be borne.

"My name is Will, and you are?" She looked at my outstretched hand. This was the moment, *and* she new it. Our eyes were then entwined as she finally acquiesced by placing her hand in mine, "Sarah."

We moved the mattress from my room out onto the roof and I busied myself removing her clothes while she undid her boots. Finally there was only the bra left and what a work of art it was. Woven spandex tailor made by the Israeli army so that the stretch caused by physical exertion only increased its rigidity due to an intricate web of interwoven cross strapping. Engineering genius. She lifted her arms above her head reducing the tension and I pulled it up over desired flesh. Oh how I buried my head, squeezing the mounds either side of my face, and there, beneath a star filled sky we wrestled for the benefit of Eternal Gods.

Light was already in the eastern sky when I was awoken by a subliminal sound. Now it takes some describing a sound that is so deep it is as much a feeling as a note. But there it was

and as the truth of its nature sank in a change overcame me as my very flesh responded in kind. I tuned my voice till it disappeared in blended union. Then I looked at Sarah lying so peacefully by my side and gently woke her.

"We have a destiny to fulfil, Sarah, you have been blessed by the very Gods for you are about to experience the wonder of India."

"What's that sound?" She was waking fast and I helped her up. I quickly slipped my black T-shirts over her head as she slipped on her trousers. Then dragged her away from her boots. "We haven't time."

Taking her by the hand I led her down the stairs and out of the hotel into the lane, but just before we arrived onto Temple Avenue I took her to one side and onto a small raised pathway. From this vantage point we looked out over a sea of people - the men in black sarongs the women in black saris - here were the devotees of Ayyappaan the second son of Shiva.

Thousands of voices were in tune to the first letter of his name. As the mantra like note began to ascend I could see the wonder in her face. All eyes now turned to the very pinnacle of the Virupaksha Temple, Shiva's Temple. We were waiting for that moment when the rays of the sun first touch its heaven most point.

Standing behind her with my arms around her waist I could feel the resonance, as, swept away, she too bore the sacred sound.

Soon in harmony with the devotees and so soon with the great cry - ...AAAAAAYYAPPA!!! Soon made joy the air of the new day in a new era the ecstatic moment always brings. She collapsed and I was forced to let her down gently to her knees.

Resting against me she raised a bent arm to feel my face and said in a barely audible voice, "Free."