



RADHIKA SINGH

# The Goose Man

SINGH

The first time that Clarika saw the Goose Man was on a walk during lunch break to the boat dock. It was July and all morning the thermostat at work had kicked freezing air into open cubicles in the office of the software company in which Clarika worked. Looking out from the tall glass windows of her open cubicle on the third floor, Clarika could see the sharp glitter of sunlight on Corkscrew Slough as it wound its way out into the bay past the Redwood City harbor. The urge to feel that heat on her face had prompted Clarika to ask Marisol, a colleague, to step outside with her for a short walk.

The sun outside warmed everything untouched by shade. Clarika was a fair-skinned transplant who had spent most of her childhood as an American expatriate on the Indian subcontinent. Now as an adult, who had relocated back to the USA, she had to devise protection from the California sun. The tropical sun shone softer; its gaze diluted by the haze of pollution. The California

sun made her burn. Today, she had forgotten her floppy Columbia hat and only wore her sunglasses and sun-screen for protection. Clarika made a concerted effort to stay inside the shadow of trees, choosing to walk in the dappled spots on the road instead of the sidewalk. She was so focused on perfecting this technique that she did not spot the Goose Man until Marisol made her stop and called her attention to the sight.

Marisol, a woman who was prone to speaking in pithy Twitter feeds said, “The Goose Man Returns.”

Clarika saw the Goose Man lying on a bright patch of lush green lawn marked by a profusion of geese and geese droppings. He lay sideways and motionless. An arm propped up his head, another lay on his waist, framing triangles of open space. He looked like a reclining Buddha in the midst of cackling geese. The boat dock was a few feet away from the lawn and Clarika could see the green algae on the side of the wood deck and on the concrete pillars that supported it. Clarika and Marisol stood approximately ten feet away on the concrete walkway that edged the lawn.

Clarika did not look at the Goose Man’s face yet. Under the harsh rays of the sun and the dry breeze from the bay, the Goose Man had turned a burnished orange. He had a long torso, his legs had well-defined calf mus-

cles, and the arm that formed an inverted V with the hand resting on the waist had strong biceps and looked carved from granite. He looked like a statue. Then Clarika noticed the stomach. It was a man's stomach, a beer belly that protruded on the grass and spoke in a language understood by the geese. It heaved and the geese cackled, it heaved and the geese cackled again.

The sight of a man sunbathing on a poop-infested lawn in an area marked by office campuses was startling enough but the color of his skin was especially surprising. Clarika did not immediately see that the reason why she saw so much orange was because he had no clothes on his torso. He was not naked. He wore tight, shiny, black swim trunks, the kind that French men wear in the South of France, skinny little briefs that could pass for underwear. The Goose Man was a sight to behold. He lay like a model posing in the sun, his gaze unaffected by the things in front. Clarika would have called his gaze dispassionate. He must have seen the two women in front of him stop to gawk, but he looked at them as if they did not exist, as if he perceived them as inanimate objects, or even, as if he had the uncanny ability to look through them and see the world beyond. The geese pecked at his feet, one sat on his leg but none ventured near his head. In all this time, the Goose Man lay there

unchanged, not moving.

"Let's go," Marisol said in a whisper. "I've heard of him. This Goose Man, he lies here all summer. Crazy, creepy man. Look at all that orange skin. He'll die of skin cancer and he probably doesn't have insurance," Marisol proclaimed.

Clarika agreed with everything that Marisol said. She would have turned away and walked on to make the loop back to her office and go back up and sit in her cubicle and work, but she didn't because the Goose Man looked at her and made her shiver in the sun. She thought she heard his voice saying, "Wait!" But of course it had been in her head, otherwise Marisol would have heard it too and stopped. Instead, Marisol must have thought that Clarika was following her and had started walking ahead.

"Look at me if you want to know more," was what Clarika thought the Goose Man must have wanted to say to her. "Of course he can't plant thoughts in people's heads," thought Clarika. "Look at him! It must have been me trying to imagine what he would want to say," she thought. And yet she removed her sunglasses and put them up on her blonde hair and looked at him. The Goose Man fixed his gaze on her, staring at her as if she was an object he had never before seen. His eyes drew Clarika closer. She stepped onto the lawn, took a few

steps into the mix of geese and the Goose Man watched her approach without diverting his gaze. His eyes were grey and cold as stone. His eyes were unreadable. "What would you read in stone unless someone had inscribed something there?" Clarika thought, and thought too about the incongruity of being locked in an eye gaze with a half-naked man lying on a lawn.

The Goose Man did not blink. Clarika felt she should not blink either. Her eyes widened and she felt the sting of tears starting to form, but she did not want to be the first to blink. She realized that it must look very odd to people if they watched this sight as they walked by. If she were to engage in this sort of eye lock with a manager in a meeting, just think how strange and uncomfortable it would look to everyone else. They would think she was mad.

"Why do you think it matters?" was the thought in her head and Clarika blinked. She had the eerie sensation that perhaps this thought was not her own, that it was planted there. She then stopped this thought from reaching its logical conclusion of asking by whom. "Enough!" thought Clarika. "These are my thoughts because I can stop them," she thought.

Marisol, who had walked on further, now realized that Clarika was not with her. She turned back in sur-

prise and yelled, "Hey!"

Clarika broke the eye lock and turned to look at Marisol who was gesturing at her to come away. Clarika stepped back and started to walk toward Marisol. She turned to look back and saw the cold grey eyes following her, she could feel the prickle of being watched on the base of her neck. The sensation would stay with her long after she was out of his sight.

"What were you doing, standing there staring at him? It looked like you were talking to him. Did you talk to him?" Marisol asked.

"No. I wanted to look. I just wanted to get closer to look," Clarika said.

Marisol gave her a funny look as if something personal had leaked into the professional space between them.

"I'd keep away. That guy looks like a psycho. I've seen him a couple of times. He does this every summer. Creeps me out. There are kids that come to the boat launch area to learn sail boating!" Marisol said.

"I'm surprised the cops never picked him up," Clarika said.

"I'm sure they have. But he keeps coming back to lie here. I don't see him when the kids are around so maybe he knows when to stay away out of trouble. Maybe

he's homeless or maybe he lives on a boat, who knows," Marisol said.

"How long has he done this?" Clarika asked.

"I've worked here five years. I started hearing about him in the first year I joined. He seems to have become a permanent fixture around here," Marisol said.

After they had gone back to the office and sat at their separate cubicles to eat lunch at their desks, Clarika found it hard to concentrate at the computer screen in front of her. She kept thinking about the Goose Man and the way he had looked at her. She thought that his gaze was not suggestive. If anything, it was dissective, as if she were an insect and he was the dispassionate entomologist, inquisitive but without feeling. Clarika felt flushed and left her lunch at her desk to go to the restroom. There, she splashed cold water on her face and patted it with a towel. Perhaps she had too much sun. She should have remembered her hat and should not have taken off her sunglasses in that bright glare.

Clarika checked her reflection in the mirror. At thirty five, she had never married and did not have a boyfriend. She was not gay, even though she had many friends who were girls. She had always lacked patience with men to continue the effort to sustain a romance. And perhaps

the men too lacked patience maybe this was how it was these days. The lack of patience led to quick couplings that got over soon enough. She was comfortable with her life. She would date occasionally but nothing lasted long enough for it to be considered serious. If you did a Sex in the City tally of the number of men she had slept with, her score would be high. Clarika viewed sex as a socially acceptable activity in the dating scene, one did if after ten or more successful dates. The guys she dated initially found her pretty. She thought that she had successfully fooled them with her hair and clothes and makeup. It took her thirty minutes to get ready each day and she knew she was an anomaly in the software company where she worked as a Senior Project Manager. She wore her carefully contrived Bohemian outfits to a workplace where the men often wore cycling shorts and the women flip flops. More than once, after she had broken up after the tenth date, a guy had called her cold.

Clarika looked at her green eyes in the mirror and thought about the cold grey eyes that had locked into hers. "Could he have read something there?" she thought. The Goose Man had looked at her with such intensity that she had felt weak willed.

That gaze brought back the memory of a time when she was eleven years old, living in a secure colony of

American expatriates in New Delhi, India. She had been sent on an errand by her mother to buy coconut macaroons from the small bakery shop three blocks from where Clarika lived. Clarika's mother was busy giving orders to the servants for a party later that night, and she had sent Clarika outside, one, to teach her how to effectively communicate in a foreign language in a foreign land, two, to be self sufficient because you couldn't rely on servants in the USA, and three to keep her out of her hair. Clarika's mother especially wanted to impress a senior embassy official for whom three years later she would divorce her husband to marry. Clarika had been told to fetch coconut macaroons. Her mother would put them in the oven for ten minutes and serve them warm with coconut ice cream for dessert.

Clarika remembered that the day had the dry heat feel of a slow baking oven but she wore no sunscreen or hat. On a street corner, near a construction site where a new high rise was being built, a brown man stared at Clarika as she walked. The street was deserted and Clarika would soon have to pass the man because he stood in her path. She was used to being stared at because of the color of her skin and hair, but there was something suggestive in this stare that she had never before experienced. The neighborhood, or the colony as it was called

here, was considered safe and the people who came in and out of its gates always had to provide documentation. Therefore, the intensity of the man's gaze was unnerving. She felt embarrassed and frightened and could not look at his face. Her brain told her to take a detour, but what if the guy was just a normal guy, she thought. She couldn't turn away from every man who looked at her. She passed the man but he called to her and spoke in flattened English. "Hey! Do you want to come over here with me? I have something to show you," he said.

Clarika stopped. Her heart beat faster. This strange request seemed wrong. She had been taught about sexual predators in her school. She should run, scream, yell, or walk away fast. She knew she had to do these things. But the intensity of the man's gaze froze her. She said in a high pitched American voice, "My mom wants me to buy coconut macaroons from that shop over there. Show me when I get back." Clarika could walk away after saying that. She thought that would demonstrate the alacrity of her mind and the coolness of her response. She was eleven years old and could talk back to a stranger. She could take care of herself. She went to the bakery and bought the coconut macaroons and prayed that as she walked back she would not have to meet the man again. She did not tell anyone at the shop about the man but when she

saw him standing there at that exact spot where she had left him, instinct made her want to run back to the store and tell everyone. But what would she tell them? That a man had talked to her on the way? What would the adults do with this information anyway? Would someone offer to walk back with her? Then she would have to walk back with another stranger. How was that safer?

The man stopped her by saying, "I was waiting for you little girl. I want to show you something. Come with me, it's over there," he said and looked at her as he pointed into the cross street at a section of construction where activity was stalled on a weekend. His gaze was mesmerizing. As Clarika took a few steps forward, she crossed over to a place where time remained still up to the moment when it was interrupted by the voice of the maid yelling out for her. "Baby-ji! Baby-ji!" Clarika ran towards the maid's voice and saw the maid calling out for her down the street. The servants called her baby-ji. Baby because she was little and "ji" for respect for her family. Clarika ran toward the maid and turned back to see that the man was no longer there.

The maid wanted to tell her that her mother had forgotten to tell Clarika about buying the flour. She did not see the man Clarika had talked to and Clarika did not even tell the maid or her mother about him. Her moth-

er was a high strung woman and Clarika was confused and unsure about what may or may not have happened. Clarika's mother thought that the reason why Clarika did not want to go back to the store was because she wanted to hole up in her room again like a typical pre-teen. But Clarika had only wanted to splash cold water on her face and remove the image of those eyes following her. She did not remember the man's face but that intense gaze became an apparition in her nightmares for many years to come.

In the restroom of her office, Clarika wondered what would have happened if she had followed that man into the construction site? Had she followed him? Or, had she only skirted at the periphery of the path? What did she run from? What if he had abducted her, taken her away from her mother? What kind of stranger would talk to a child like that without a hint of something evil in his nature?

Two weeks later, Clarika went out for a walk alone to the boat dock. She wanted to see if the Goose Man was still there. He was. This time, he lay on his back with his arms under his head. The sky was overcast and there was a cold breeze from the bay. The boats in the

boat dock bobbed up and down because of it. But the Goose Man was still lying on the grass surrounded by geese, still wearing nothing but black swim briefs. "His body must be armor," Clarika thought. Although the day was cloudy there was still a glare in the atmosphere. Clarika kept her sunglasses on this time. She stood and stared at the Goose Man. He had not seen her approach. His gaze was out toward the water. Clarika stood there for a moment and turned to walk but the Goose Man turned his head and saw her and he looked at her with eyes the color of the cold, gray sky. Clarika shivered and she thought it was because she had forgotten to carry her sweater down from her cubicle. Redwood City could get cold fast in the summer.

Again, the Goose Man looked at her with his cool, dissective gaze. Clarika felt exposed as if he could see through the barrier of her Coach sunglasses. Clarika told herself that she was not eleven years old.

"Why are you lying here?" she asked.

The Goose Man said nothing.

Perhaps because the summer day had turned cold, windy, and cloudy, most employees had preferred to stay indoors for lunch. Clarika could not see anyone nearby. Clarika and the Goose Man were alone.

She thought he had not heard her. She stepped closer

and asked, "Why do you lie here?"

The geese scattered at her approach. As she stepped on the grass, the Goose Man drew an arm out and made a motion for her to halt with his hand.

Clarika stopped.

The Goose Man waved his hand in a universal gesture that meant step back.

Clarika stepped back hastily.

Then the Goose Man motioned for her to wait and pointed at her feet. Clarika looked down at the nearly crushed flower. It lay on the grass on a long green stem, its pink petals rippling in the breeze. It looked like a wildflower, the kind she had seen growing in springtime in the Sierra Nevadas. She had gone hiking with a guy friend and he had shown her wildflowers and while she had thanked him for both the hike and the sights, she realized that she had not been as overcome with the sense of beauty as he was. They had remained Facebook friends.

Now, a similar wildflower lay at her feet. It's leggy stem and weedy leaves looked like a violation on this well manicured strip of green. Clarika looked around, perhaps gardeners grew this flower now because it was hardy, but no, this flower was not present in the well maintained gardens around.



More than ever Clarika wanted to know why the Goose Man was here. Was he schizophrenic, a junkie, a homeless guy? She had a strong desire to know this.

The Goose Man did not say anything. Instead he rolled over and reached out to pick up the flower. He rolled closer to Clarika and lay on his back, one arm under his head, the other offering the flower to Clarika. At no time did he seem to try to get up. The gesture was so unexpected that Clarika did not know what to do. She stood there staring at the flower in his outstretched hand and the Goose Man did not move or change position. A minute may have gone by or eternity and the Goose Man still lay at her feet with one hand stretched, offering her a semi-crushed flower.

Clarika chose to take it. The Goose Man placed his hand back under his head and looked at her.

“Was she supposed to say thank you?” Clarika thought.

“You don’t have to say thank you,” the Goose Man said and Clarika jumped back because it was as if he had read her thoughts. She stepped back from the grass and on the concrete walkway. Clarika walked away from the Goose Man and down the path. She felt the eyes of the Goose Man following her and she knew he must be watching when she stopped to throw the weed over the

wooden fence into the murky water. She walked on and made the loop back to her office but then she walked back for another quick round to the boat dock.

Clarika was not surprised that the Goose Man was still there. He lay sideways in his trademark pose, one hand propping his head, the other on his waist. He watched her walk as if he was expecting her. Clarika walked past the Goose Man but he stopped her by asking, “Why did you throw the flower away?”

His voice carried clear, a man’s voice with no special intonation. Clarika hesitated and shrugged. There was no one else in sight. “It was a weed,” she said.

“If you move the “i” after the “k” in your name, you see how special the Clarkia flower is to you, Clarika,” the Goose Man said.

Clarika startled. She moved five slow steps back as if the Goose Man were a reclining Bengal tiger who might pounce.

“How do you know my name?” Clarika asked. Of course, she thought, her colleague must have called out to her the first time she had seen the Goose Man.

“I don’t know your name because of your friend. I just know things,” the Goose Man said.

“You’re a liar! Clarika said in a shrill voice and felt as if she was eleven years old again.

The Goose Man said nothing but looked at her with his cold eyes and she had an eerie feeling that he was not outside in front of her, but in her head, picking up her scattered thoughts, subjecting them to his scrutiny, discarding them as unimportant and moving on. It felt as if he was searching for something, a memory hidden amidst the steady chatter in her mind. Her head hurt. She brought her hand to cover her head.

“Do you want to come over here? I have something to show you,” the Goose Man said.

Clarika felt a cold shiver run down her spine. She could not move away. After sometime she said, “I don’t know who you are. You have nothing interesting to show me. You frighten people lying here on the grass watching them. You can’t be here. This is office space. Who are you? Why are you here?” Clarika asked.

The Goose Man said nothing. Clarika noticed a bag of bread crumbs tucked under his protruding belly. He reached into it and drew out a handful of crumbs and threw them around into the air. They landed everywhere and the geese flocked and cackled noisily.

“What did you want to show me then?” Clarika asked.

“I was waiting for you little girl. I want to show you something, it’s over there,” the Goose Man said and

pointed at the murky green water at the edge of the boat dock.

The Goose Man looked at her and Clarika looked back. She did not have to look at the water to know that it was dark, depth unknown. She prayed that someone would see her and call her name as she stepped forward.