

the hippoman

It hangs there in the cupboard. Breathing in through its many pores the combined fragrance of mothballs and air-freshener, and the mustiness of damp. A muddy grey, it falls from the outstretched arms of the hanger, the skin of a beast from which the soul has fled. Limp, lifeless and deceptively calm.

Do not be fooled. Within it lurks a monster. You can't touch it, or feel it. But if you were to zip yourself into its hide, it would grab you by the throat. Pierce your flesh with its claws, knot your tendons into a ball of twine and suck you dry of your soul.

The beast hasn't got a heart you can appeal to. Look into its eyes, forever focused on a point above your head. It stares with a blankness that defies emotion. Enormous lips line the cavernous mouth, which is pursed, entombing silence in its dark confines.

This is the beast that rules my life. Every day, I give myself to it, to do with as it pleases. To dominate and govern. In return, it gives me the keys to a kingdom. I am the king of a land populated by small furry creatures of the imagination. There are moments when I revel in my kingship of this nursery land. There are moments when the mantle of the beast overshadows me, so that I don't know any more whether I am man or beast.

It is these moments that take over my thoughts when sleep eludes me with the cunningness of a fox familiar with its territory. I think I may never have found expression for this spectacular being that exists in technicolour, in the depths of my mind. That I may have lived life without ever knowing what I'm capable of. That I may have remained what I am without the hippo-suit: an insignificant man with an insignificant destiny.

I think of what I would have been if Lewis hadn't relinquished the hippo-suit to me. So, it is with Lewis my story ought to start...

There never was a store like this. Its façade stretched a thousand feet long. Each one of its windows was the size of a little room inhabited by families of mannequins, each group portraying a slice of life. A birthday party, a great time at the beach, a day at the zoo... You could stand there all day, peering, nose pressed to the giant plate-glass, while your mind went on daytrips to the lands the mannequins lived in.

Walk down the steps, and the magic still persists. A toy train runs around the parking lot, an open carriage drawn by ponies with pink plumes on their heads, which you can hop into for a ride. There is even a camel man. Then there is as much popcorn as you can eat, huge dollops of ice cream in cones, sticks of cotton candy and heart-shaped balloons you can send into the clouds when you tire of holding them. All you have to do is walk into the store.

The day they opened the store, the traffic stood still at the junction. Lights changed, horns hooted and tooted, voices rose, fists waved. And then, mysteriously, the men and their machines were bewitched by the fantasy unfolding before their eyes. 'I know that creature,' a voice whispered. 'That's Humpty Dumpty.'

Lord, oh lord, this is childhood revisited. They were all there. Our friends from nursery land, whom we had parted from so ungraciously. The Three Blind Mice. Little Miss Muffet. Old McDonald and all the farm animals. Bo-Peep and Old King Cole. And there was a grey lumbering hippo. 'What is that animal doing there?' someone hissed.

The huge, ugly, clumsy grey hippo opened its pink mouth wide, stuck its furry-felt, strawberry-red tongue out, turned its back and waggled its enormous bottom before breaking into a little jig.

Then the hippo sat itself on a little jaunty stool, took a guitar and struck a few chords. The crowd hushed in expectation. Once again, the nursery-land folk were sent into exile in favour of more adult amusement. Here was a rarity. Here was the star of the store. The singing hippo.

Once upon a time, the Hippoman had a dream. To create music the world would cherish as a precious pearl. Once upon a time, the Hippoman had a voice that soared into the skies. Once upon a time, the Hippoman had a name: Lewis.

The hotel-bookings he took on were just to keep the money coming in, he told himself. When he had saved enough, he would hire a studio, get the best sound engineer and launch himself. Meanwhile, he hoped somebody from the music industry would walk into the restaurant one day and discover him. Ten years ago, all of it had seemed possible.

And then, one day, a man in a pink suit walked in. All through the evening, he eyed Lewis. He saw the dexterity of the fingers that plucked at the strings. He heard the voice that soared above the incessant croaking of the bull frogs from the pool around the restaurant, and strove to rise beyond its tiled ceiling. He sensed the ambition, the dejection. All evening he sat there,

the man in the pink suit, sipping a fruit drink and toying with his glass noodles and mixed vegetable salad. When Lewis finished for the day, the man in the pink suit slipped a hundred-rupee note into Lewis' hand, gave him a card and asked him to give him a call.

Lewis turned over the card once, twice, a dozen times before he made up his mind. He put it into his wallet, got into bed and drew the quilt to his chin. He curled his toes and stretched them as his mind pondered the significance of the card. Something told him it was no ordinary happening. His life and his luck were going to change.

Lewis stumbled through a maze of beams and unplastered walls. This was where the voice on the phone had said they could meet. Amidst the dust and workmen, Lewis found him. In a mauve suit and a psychedelic tie that could hypnotize you if you stared at it too long. The man had a name. Reddy. And a proposition. A store, like the city had never seen before.

'But where do I fit in?' Lewis asked, bewildered. 'I'm not a salesman.'

'I don't expect you to stand behind a counter and do any selling. I don't even expect you to know what merchandise is in stock and what isn't. I want you to sing and manage a musical troupe,' Reddy coaxed. 'You will have all the freedom you want. You can sing what you please. We'll even cut a disc of your songs and market it. All I insist on is, you let me decide what your costume will be.'

That was how Lewis became king of the nursery land, in the foyer of the world's cutest store for kids. He was given a month's time to put his troupe together. 'They'll have to pitch in and sell in the store every once in a while though,' Reddy had warned him, when Lewis led us all into the store to meet him. None of us had a proper job or any hope of finding one. And we had one other thing in common: our love for music.

To us it seemed that Lewis was our messiah, leading us to a job that would answer the need in us to make music.

We were willing to do anything for him. Work long hours, stand behind counters and wear grins and even sweep the floors if necessary. And then we saw the costumes we were meant to wear.

'But Lewis, how can we...?' Something in me cringed at the thought of having to cavort in such a ridiculous costume in front of the whole world.

Lewis had smiled, his long lean face creasing into crinkles of amusement. 'Do you see this?' He gestured to a muddy-grey costume. 'This is what I will be wearing. The silliest costume of all. At least you guys will look cute.'

Lewis began zipping himself into the costume as he talked. We stared, unable to believe what we were seeing.

'Go on, tell me how I look,' Lewis said, striking a silly pose.

We giggled. We smirked. We laughed till tears rolled down our cheeks and ran into our mouths. We had never seen anything as silly as this. I thought I would pop an artery laughing, till Lewis discovered the cunning little opening through which he could move his hands freely, and the little slit that allowed him to breathe and sing.

Lewis picked up his guitar, struck a chord and began to sing. Lewis's voice was proud and strong, pure and clear, incongruous with the ugly body that clothed it. We watched him in amazement and awe. We saw in him the makings of a legend. And Reddy knew his hunch had been right.

Lewis liked being a star. He loved the way children clamoured for a place by his side. He liked, even better, the spell he cast on the women with his music. He basked in the envious glances the men threw at him as they wondered what it was about the

ugly grey hippo that exuded such charisma.

Life had never been more delightful. All day he sang what he pleased. Ballads. Old Jazz tunes. Blues and Soul and Country. And never did he sing a request. Once, on a whim, he rewrote the words of an old Sammy Davis Jr. song and that became an anthem.

Children tumbled all around him, begging him to sing 'The Hippoman Song'. Inside the hippo-suit, Lewis grinned. If only they knew, he thought as he strummed the guitar and began to sing:

'The Hippoman!

Oh, the Hippoman came with his pretty songs...'

The Hippoman made good newspaper copy. The city magazine did a four-page feature with big glossy photographs, and some newspapers mentioned him as the new wave-maker in town. He was the mascot that mounted billboards and adorned signages. His face beamed from T-shirts and coffee mugs. He signed autographs with a flourish and every once in a while, obliged a parent by allowing a child to perch on his lap for a photograph.

As the legend of the Hippoman gained popularity, his powers too spread beyond the nursery land. Reddy liked him to sit in on every meeting. Promotions, festive discounts, bargain sales, even window-dressing ideas—the Hippoman had an opinion on everything. When a floor manager had a problem, he approached the Hippoman first. It was well known throughout the store that if you had the Hippoman's support, Reddy was at least willing to listen, instead of biting your head off the moment you opened your mouth.

Lewis loved all the attention he got. He walked with a swagger, and could hardly be bothered to give us the time of day. It hurt us alright. He was the friend we had all made music with. He was the guy who was game for a mug of beer any

time. He was a good, fun person and suddenly Lewis had turned into the management, looking at the big clock pointedly if any of us took a few minutes extra during the breaks.

But none of us, including me, Lewis's oldest friend, dared say anything to him. For, after all, a few weeks ago, at a staff party, when someone was mimicking how Lewis played the Hippoman, Reddy had said, 'If I were you, I'd be careful what I said about Hippoman. When I move on to bigger things, he's going to be your boss.' And he'd laughed loudly and wagged a finger at the Hippoman.

Surely that laugh meant it was in jest. But no one was willing to take a chance. Not even I.

Popo the Clown spoke with a French accent. He was half French and half Indian, but said that he didn't know whether he was in spirit a Frenchman or an Indian. He was, he said, still seeking an identity.

He was plump, with round cheeks and chubby arms. His smile stretched from ear to ear and his eyes glittered with the merriment of baubles on a Christmas tree. He joked, he mimed, he sang and he juggled. He made you laugh till your sides ached, tears rolled down your cheeks, and all you wanted was to get your breath back. Sometimes, when Popo could be persuaded to, he read palms. And then he became a different man. He was all concentration and seriousness. But the moment he finished, he would switch off and become the grinning clown again.

It was just before the holiday season that Reddy began talking of variety. 'The nursery land is fine, but we need something more. Something that's new. What do you think, Lewis?'

The Hippoman nodded and chewed on a toothpick. The past year had been the best in forty years of living. The contentment

had grown and spread, padding his waist and haunches, his neck and jowls. Oh yes, our Lewis was beginning to resemble the creature that he lived within most of the day.

'How about a clown?' he suggested. Lewis was being very careful. He didn't want a musician who might usurp his place. A clown he was sure would pall after some time. After all, how many jokes can a man make?

Reddy stared hard at Lewis and then clapped him on his shoulder. 'Perfect! I knew I could trust you to come up with a brilliant suggestion. A clown it shall be.'

Rumour had it that for that suggestion, Lewis received a hefty incentive in a white envelope. The stars, it seemed, were rallying again for the Hippoman.

But stars are fickle patrons. From their lofty heights, they chance on a destiny and let their stardust settle on it. Often, for no reason except the sheer boredom of doing the same thing day after day, they tire of illuminating a destiny and switch off. And then they scour the earth for a new victim. Astrologers refer to this as the passing of a phase. The waxing and waning of fortune. Just when you have beguiled yourself into a false sense of security, the stars do something to disturb it. The stars love upsetting apple carts, houses of cards, and lives. They detest complacency. And so they seek you out if you show signs of being happy in your skin.

Poor Lewis. He had it coming. He wore his contentment easily. All the world was a hippo-suit in which he dwelled comfortably.

Popo, we thought, would leave after some time. But, contrary to expectations, Popo was a hit and Lewis grudged him his popularity. Lewis was rude to him and openly hostile. He would cut in when Popo was juggling with oranges and lumber off with an orange, breaking Popo's momentum. And how the children laughed when they saw the Hippoman wag his bottom

at the clown and stick his tongue out. Behind his greasy skin, Popo's mouth would droop and his eyes would cloud over. We were all sorry for him, but we didn't dare cross Lewis by showing our sympathy.

Lewis did everything to ruin Popo's act. But he had overlooked the one other talent Popo had. Reddy was a superstitious man and was forever referring to the almanacs and meeting soothsayers. Popo was just biding his time till he managed to get Reddy to himself for a moment. The next thing we knew, Popo had disappeared into Reddy's room and stayed there for several hours. When he came out, he wore a strange expression. That evening the stars decided to abandon Lewis.

'It's all his doing,' Lewis mumbled from across the table.

'What?' I asked in surprise, trying to gulp down the hot tea as fast as I could without scalding my tongue. Ten minutes was all we had to drink a cup of tea, smoke a cigarette and use the loo.

'He's been reading Reddy's palm and now the fool can't stop talking about him. Reddy says that as the mascot of the company, I ought to be moved away from the entrance. He's been doing some mumbo-jumbo charts for Reddy, and now he wants me to wait here till they decide on a new position for me. That pipsqueak doesn't know who he's messing with. He'll find out soon.' Lewis glowered at the teacup as if it was Popo with a handle.

I slipped back to nursery land and spread my tidbit of news. The truth is, all of us were a little tired of Lewis's tyranny. He no longer treated us as friends. Lewis was king and he made us aware of the chasm between him and us, with every word and gesture he used.

'Good for Popo,' Bo-Peep muttered.

'What do you think he'll do, though?' Humpty Dumpty asked.

'Knowing Lewis as we all do, you can be sure he'll make Popo's life miserable,' Old King Cole said under his breath, loosening his brocade dressing gown and blowing some air down his chest. It was one of those clear days when the sun shone relentlessly, drying the moisture off leaves.

'Hush,' whispered one of the Blind Mice. 'She is coming this way.'

Little Miss Muffet swayed towards us. Lewis and she had an arrangement. Some nights she stayed over at his place. Here in nursery land she seldom left his side. Once in a while they even sang duets together. It meant just one thing. He did care for her. Or he would never have let her share even a crumb of his glory.

'Hi guys,' she breezed as she drew closer. 'Have you seen Lewis?'

Then she stopped in mid-stride and her mouth fell open in shock. We turned to look at what was causing the horror on her face. The Hippoman stood in a corner of the entrance veranda, almost obscured by the giant waffle cone and chocolate-chip ice-cream cut-out. He stood there, forlorn jaws gaping, tongue hanging out, clutching his guitar.

'Oh, my God!' Little Miss Muffet said again and again. 'He must be boiling in that suit. There isn't an inch of shade there. Why is he standing there?'

We looked aghast at each other. This was worse than we had expected. And it dawned on us that Popo was no simple clown, content to laugh and be laughed at. Popo intended to get even, one way or the other.

For a week the Hippoman endured the ignominy. Lewis suffered when families walked past him, barely registering his presence. Lewis grit his teeth and clenched his fists when he saw Popo

usurp his place. For a week his pride saw him through. During the break, the Hippoman would sit silently, drinking his tea and chewing on a matchstick till it became a soggy pulp. He barely glanced our way and mostly ignored even Little Miss Muffet. It was like Lewis blamed us all for what was happening to him. How would all this end, I wondered.

Then one day Popo was eating his lunch, taking tiny bites out of a sandwich to protect his greased-on grin, when Lewis walked up to him. He thrust his palm out and growled, 'I hear you read palms. Do mine, will you?'

Popo continued to chew as he stared into Lewis's eyes unflinchingly. Then he said, 'Have you heard of the word please?'

The rest of us gasped. But Lewis didn't say anything. Instead, he stood there chewing on yet another matchstick as if he were trying to make up his mind. A long moment later, he said grudgingly, 'Please. Will you please look at my palm?'

Popo's greased-on grin came alive. He dusted his hands and said, 'Sure.'

We heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe things would work out between them. Maybe life would go back to being the way it used to be.

The clown peered at the Hippoman's palm. He traced a line with his forefinger and felt the ball of his thumb. He mumbled to himself and pressed his knuckles to his temples.

'Do you want to hear the truth or do you want to hear what you would like to hear?' Popo asked.

Lewis sucked in his breath. 'The truth.'

'Well, first of all, you have a very unusual hand.'

Lewis gleamed at that. Lewis always fancied himself to be special.

'There is fame in your destiny. Fame and prosperity. You will never feel the lack of anything material in your life. Not that it was always like this. There was a period when you touched

rock bottom. See this configuration here. It means trials. Am I right? Is that how your earlier life was?’

Lewis’s face was a study in amazement. This stranger was laying bare his life. He leaned forward eagerly, his voice syrupy with the willingness to please. ‘I don’t know how you do it, but everything you’ve said is the whole unadulterated truth.’

Strangely, I felt a deep sense of unease. Popo had never read my palm nor had I ever seen him do it before. He was just making educated guesses, manipulating the person in front of him and taking advantage of the chaos he was causing in the person’s mind. Lewis was playing into his hands. No sooner had I thought this than I heard Lewis say, ‘But that’s all in the past. Tell me more. Tell me about my future.’

Popo cleared his throat. He stared at Lewis’s palm. ‘Your line of fortune is very strong. See this line. This is what you make of your life. And your hand is the hand of an achiever.

‘Oh oh, but see this maze of lines here. It indicates a terrible period in your midlife. Disgrace and falling from favour. Humiliation and soreness of heart. And such mental anguish that you might even contemplate killing yourself.’

Lewis pulled his palm back. ‘I don’t believe you. You’re just making it up.’

Popo got up and spoke to the room in general. ‘This is the problem. People don’t like hearing the truth. I did ask you, and now you don’t believe me. That’s your problem. Ask any one of them and they’ll tell you how accurate my readings are.’

‘I don’t need to,’ Lewis retorted. ‘Maybe you told them the truth. But this,’ he continued with a flourish of his hands, ‘you are making up.’

Popo shrugged. ‘Fine. If that’s what you want to think. All I did was tell you what destiny has in store for you.’

Lewis’s eyes blazed. ‘You are the one who is playing with my life. Not destiny. You son of a bitch, do you think I don’t

realize what you are up to?' Lewis said quietly.

There was silence in the room after Lewis walked out. There was a certain stature in the way he carried himself. A pulling in of the stomach, a pushing out of the chest, an erectness to the back, as if he were preparing himself to battle for his dignity.

Popo looked around the room, trying to gauge our expressions. Then he broke into a laugh, as if to inject into the room that old feeling of camaraderie he shed around him. Only this time his laughter carried a trill of malice, an affectation of falseness. 'What's wrong with him?' he said to no one in particular.

None of us spoke a word. None of us liked him very much at that moment.

Lewis went to see Reddy. He stood waiting outside and I kept him company. There was no longer any question of divided loyalties. I wanted Lewis to know that he could count on me for anything. Lewis smiled at me. 'Strangely, this reminds me of the first time I went to meet him.'

Reddy was busy as usual. Where once he would have fitted in the Hippoman without a second thought, time was at a premium today.

'So how have you been, Lewis?' Reddy asked, shuffling a few papers on his desk.

'Not so good, sir,' Lewis said quietly.

Reddy looked up in surprise. He had expected trouble, but not open rebellion. 'And why is that?' he said with a frown.

For the first time, Lewis took a good look at Reddy. His garish suit and chunky jewellery. The cologne he wore like a neon sign and his smile that was too white to be true. And he made up his mind that this man would not be allowed to govern his life.

'It is this new position you have given me, sir,' Lewis began.
'What about it?'

'Firstly, no one comes that side. Which means I don't get to entertain as much as I used to. And sir, it is much too hot to stand there all day in a hippo-suit.'

'Is that all? I'll take care of that. I'll get someone to fix a beach umbrella there.'

'But what about my singing?' Lewis's voice rose in vexation.

'I don't know what you think, but let me tell you that my customers come here to shop, not to hear you sing. Let's get one thing straight, Lewis. You are just an accessory to the shop. A kind of a living, talking, singing commercial and nothing more,' Reddy said harshly.

'It is in my best interest and the shop's best interest that I allotted that place to you. Take it or leave it. I can always find another out-of-work musician to fill a hippo-suit and strum a few chords.' Reddy bent to look at the open file in front of him and said dismissively, 'You will have to excuse me now, I'm busy.'

Little Miss Muffet dunked a biscuit in her tea and sucked it into her mouth. Thoughtfully, she said to me, as I sat trying to improvise my blind mouse act, 'Lewis ought to be an unhappy man. But he's not. That's what worries me. Do you think it has affected him up here?' She pointed to her temple.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Well, he's working out. He's cut his hair in a new style, and I see him practice juggling, and once I caught him making faces in the mirror. And the other night he asked me for my lipstick and he drew a huge pair of lips around his mouth and spoke to me in a different voice... so unlike his rich, deep tones. He went like this...' she said, mimicking a clear, light,

gay voice. A clown's voice.

I was stumped. What was Lewis planning to do? Make a comeback as a clown?

It was a Friday evening, one of our busiest times, when Lewis grabbed the horns of his recalcitrant destiny and brought it to its feet.

The Hippoman stood strumming his guitar moodily. Nobody paid him any attention. Everybody hovered in the section where Popo was. The children watched as he walked on stilts and juggled cups with great dexterity. The children clapped and clapped when Popo finished his act. 'Hang on there, kids,' he cried, 'help your Mummy choose what you want to buy, and meanwhile I'll be back before you can say Popo the Clown.'

When he came back, Little Miss Muffet was sitting on a fibreglass rock, spooning curds into her pouting mouth. He went to stand behind her and made faces that made even the grown-ups grin. Then the clown fell on his fours, splayed his arms and feet and crept up to Miss Muffet, pretending to be a spider. Little Miss Muffet squealed in fright like she was meant to. But the spider didn't go away.

He just crept closer and closer until he'd pushed her back onto the rock crop. Little Miss Muffet's screams now filled the store. When the tongue of the spider clown darted into Little Miss Muffet's mouth, she ceased screaming to exclaim in surprise. But the tongue allowed her to say no more and slid deeper into her mouth, devouring, silencing. And as if to match the tongue's bold forays, the clown's hand crept under her skirt.

The children stared. Mothers and fathers stared. For a moment, even the mannequins craned their necks and stared. Then the spell broke as Little Miss Muffet began to scream again. Voices rose. When Reddy came to discover the cause of

the commotion, he heard several garbled versions.

'But where the hell is he?' he asked, his mouth tightening. Someone murmured, 'He walked off as if he'd done nothing wrong. I think he went down the stairs.'

When Reddy walked into the staffroom, Popo the Clown was sipping a cup of tea. Reddy stood in the doorway staring at Popo. When he spoke, his voice had a molten-steel casing to it. 'You have exactly two minutes to clear out of here. Your settlements will be made by cheque and mailed to you. Now get the hell out of here.'

Popo stared, bewildered, horrified. 'But why?'

'Why?' Reddy spluttered. 'They were right. You are cool. If you wanted to kiss Miss Muffet, you should have done so on your time. How dare you risk the reputation of my store?'

'Kiss Miss Muffet?' the clown repeated. 'Why should I? I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Get out!' Reddy bellowed. 'I don't want to hear any more concoctions.'

Reddy walked to his room thoughtfully. It wasn't going to be easy wiping that ugly scene off people's minds. But first he would have to make peace with Lewis. Only the magic of the Hippoman could save the store's image.

The Hippoman zipped his suit on for the last time. It had served its purpose, but it was time to move on.

'What can I say that will make you change your mind?' Reddy pleaded.

'Nothing,' Lewis said gently. 'You said take it or leave it. I am leaving it. But I do have a suggestion to make, for whatever it's worth. He'll make a good Hippoman,' he said, pointing to me.

'After all, you just need a voice to fill a hippo-suit.' And

Lewis smiled and gave me a conspiratorial wink. It was his way of rewarding me for my part in his act of revenge. I had kept Popo talking in the staffroom while Lewis had turned into Popo the Clown for a few minutes.

Reddy looked stricken. Suddenly his whole world was falling apart.

'What are you going to do?' I asked Lewis.

'I am going to sing all my favourite songs now.'

'No, I mean like tomorrow, like in the future.'

Lewis took a deep breath. 'I'm going to take off. Go on a holiday, see a ruin by moonlight, paddle in the waves, ride a camel, do all those things I never had a chance to do before.'

'And then?' I probed, sure there was more.

'And then, I'm going to cut a disc. I'll be Lewis. Not a voice in a hippo-suit.'

I stare at the hippo-suit hanging in the cupboard lifelessly. And then, slowly, the thought of wearing it weighs down my shoulders. I have a kingdom to rule. Songs to sing. People to entertain. I don't feel any joy at the thought. I only feel trapped.