

A Marxist and the Window Pane by George Schaaf

Can a mere sheet of glass truly separate two universes? Yes, and I saw it happen. I was sitting in a palace of a hotel room in Mumbai, India. This was no ordinary hotel. It was one of India's finest, and perhaps one of the finest in the world. The room I had was a VIP suite. I sat, in my throne of opulence, marveling at the luxury of it all, a glass of Johnny Walker Black Label scotch in hand: complimentary of course. This was quite a shock, for I had spent the previous week out extending medical care in the remote villages of western India, where a solid roof was considered luxury. In the villages I would shower by filling a bucket and ladling water onto myself, while the mosquitoes obliged their voracious appetites on my bare posterior. This act of showering, almost a ritual, did not seem primitive to me, I had somehow adapted to this form of living and was content with the nature of things. But then, all of the sudden here I was in this hotel. I was thrown into comfort and treated like some Saudi prince. This was a shock. I was uncomfortable and uneasy. This extravagant way of life did not bode well with me. But it got worse.

I took my glass of scotch and seated myself in the panoramic window of the VIP suite; out I gazed. The grounds of the hotel were fenced in and maintained like some sort of plastic paradise—everything perfect, nothing ill-placed. Out beyond this false little world of the rich and famous, beyond the fence, sat India. There stood one of Mumbai's finest slums, in all its third-world regalia, exposing itself to me and my throne. It was rude and unapologetically naked. Next to this slum sprawled a rather large garbage heap, with little children scavenging through it...what a koudak moment. Then reality itself came smashing through the window, or so it seemed. This was real. This was India I was looking at, not some National Geographic exposé. I glanced back down at my scotch and jiggled the ice cubes contemplatively. "Does this scene bother you?" I

asked myself. "I know it should in my head, but my heart doesn't give a damn." came the response. This I found troublesome.

Mustering up the courage I glanced out once again. By golly, this is how Karl Marx became a socialist. He sat on my side of the window pane and pondered exactly what I was pondering. He looked through the glass and saw a contrast so sharp and so distinct that it must have been another universe, it had to be. But then, just as I, Marx soon realized that it was indeed his very own world, and something was very wrong. When outrageous wealth is forced to reckon with abject poverty, those on either side of the 'window' will notice. Those who notice and don't care are either arrogant pigs or blinded mendicants. Those who do care are all socialists, communists or bleeding heart liberals (no difference). Marx's solutions for fixing this just never quite worked out. Hell, maybe ole' Karl wasn't evil, maybe he was just sensitive. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Mr. Joe McCarthy.

So what should I do? This was all wrong and it was starting to bother me. Do I just drink more and medicate myself, in a vain attempt for peace? Do I rip my clothes off and join the children in the trash (this was my favorite idea)? Or do I simply accept this, as the way things are? Accepting that I was born, by the providence of God into in my wealthy family, and in my wealthy country. While also accepting that these Indians were born here in that family, in this country. Do they even know something is amiss? Do the trash-rooting children look through their side of the window and see me: my scotch, my iPod...my life? Or are they simply ignorant of the circumstances around them, content to live one step above some stray animal? Then I thought back to the villages I had been at. Those people were happy. There in the villages, an impoverished life was relative and they appreciated every minute of it, blissfully ignorant to

what they did not have. Even I myself had adapted to it, accepting the bucket shower with the vampiric insects for company as normal.

I had to accept everything the way it was. I couldn't do anything else (or so it felt). Not only did I have to accept it, but I had to be grateful for what I had been given. Not so much in the material sense, but that I had been educated, allowed to see both sides of the window. My ignorance had been kindly removed, and I was able to see. Had I not been purged of my blind arrogance I would have never been able to appreciate my life as I do. I have been given so much. Such wealth I have, not even King Solomon could have imagined it.

I was at peace. I looked out my window at the other universe, now content, and smiled. The children were playing cricket along side a rice patty. I love looking at rice patties. I love simplicity.

It dawns on me that my prosperity is the only reason I'm here. And I made a difference. I don't have to accept anything. Out of the several hundred people that got medical care, maybe some of them were truly helped, their lives improved. I'll be back.