RUSKIN BOND

Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra

Stories
Contents

About the Author
Also By Ruskin Bond
Dedication
Return to Dehra
Maplewood: An Introduction
Escape from Java
The Bent-Double Beggar
Untouchable
All Creatures Great and Small
Coming Home to Dehra
What’s Your Dream?
The Last Tonga Ride
Calypso Christmas
The Last Time I Saw Delhi
The Good Old Days
Binya Passes By
As Time Goes By
From Small Beginnings
Death of the Trees
The Bar That TimeForgot
Desert Rhapsody
Ruskin Bond’s first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, written when he was seventeen, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Since then he has written several novellas (including *Vagrants in the Valley*, *A Flight of Pigeons* and *Delhi Is Not Far*), essays, poems and children’s books, many of which have been published by Penguin India. He has also written over 500 short stories and articles that have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993 and the Padma Shri in 1999.

Ruskin Bond was born in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, and grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, Delhi and Shimla. As a young man, he spent four years in the Channel Islands and London. He returned to India in 1955 and has never left the country since. He now lives in Landour, Mussoorie, with his adopted family.
ALSO BY RUSKIN BOND

Fiction
The Room on the Roof & Vagrants in the Valley
The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories
Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories
Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra
A Season of Ghosts
When Darkness Falls and Other Stories
A Flight of Pigeons
Delhi Is Not Far
A Face in the Dark and Other Hauntings
The Sensualist
A Handful of Nuts

Non-Fiction
Rain in the Mountains
Scenes from a Writer’s Life
The Lamp Is Lit
The Little Book of Comfort
Landour Days
Notes from a Small Room

Anthologies
Dust on the Mountain: Collected Stories
Friends in Small Places
Indian Ghost Stories (ed.)
Indian Railway Stories (ed.)
Classical Indian Love Stories and Lyrics (ed.)
Tales of the Open Road
Ruskin Bond’s Book of Nature
Ruskin Bond’s Book of Humour
A Town Called Dehra
Classic Ruskin Bond
Poetry

Ruskin Bond’s Book of Verse
For Prem and the family
As my stuff settles into shape, I am told (and sometimes myself discover, uneasily, but feel all right about it in calmer moments) it is mainly autobiographic and even egotistic after all—which I finally accept, and am contented so.

– Walt Whitman
Return to Dehra

So this is old Dehra of mangoes and lemons,
    Where I grew beside the jackfruit tree
    Planted by my father on the sunny side
Of the house since sold to Major-General Mehra.
The town’s grown hard, none know me now or knew
My mother’s laughter. Most men come home as strangers.
    And yet, the trees my father planted here, these
Trees—old family trees—are growing still in Dehra.
Maplewood: An Introduction

It isn’t many years since I left Maplewood, but I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that the cottage has disappeared. Already, during my last months there, the trees were being cut and the new road was being blasted out of the mountain. It would pass just below the old cottage. There were (as far as I know) no plans to blow up the house; but it was already shaky and full of cracks, and a few tremors, such as those produced by passing trucks, drilling machines and bulldozers, would soon bring the cottage to the ground.

If it has gone, don’t write and tell me: I’d rather not know.

When I moved in, it had been nestling there among the oaks for over seventy years. It had become a part of the forest. Birds nested in the eaves; beetles burrowed in the woodwork; a jungle cat moved into the attic. Some denizens remained, even during my residence. And I was there—how long? Eight, nine years, I’m not sure; it was a timeless sort of place. Even the rent was paid only once a year, at a time of my choosing.

I first saw the cottage in late spring, when the surrounding forest was at its best—the oaks and maples in new leaf, the oak leaves a pale green, the maple leaves red and gold and bronze, turning to green as they matured; this is the Himalayan maple, quite different from the North American maple; only the winged seed-pods are similar, twisting and turning in the breeze as they fall to the ground, so that the Garhwalis call it the Butterfly Tree.

There was one very tall, very old maple above the cottage, and this was probably the tree that gave the house its name. A portion of it was blackened where it had been struck by lightning, but the rest of it lived on; a favourite haunt of woodpeckers: the ancient peeling bark seemed to harbour any number of tiny insects, and the woodpeckers would be tapping away all day, seeking to dislodge and devour their sweet, succulent prey.
A steep path ran down to the cottage. During heavy rain, it would become a watercourse and the earth would be washed away to leave it very stony and uneven. I first took this path to see Miss Mackenzie, an impoverished old lady who lived in two small rooms on the ground floor and who was acting on behalf of the owner. It was she who told me that the cottage was to let—provided she could remain in the portion downstairs.

Actually, the path ran straight across a landing and up to the front door of the first floor. It was the ground floor that was tucked away in the shadow of the hill; it was reached by a flight of steps, which also took the rush of water when the path was in flood.

Miss Mackenzie was eighty-six. I helped her up the steps and she opened the door for me. It led into an L-shaped room. There were two large windows, and when I pushed the first of these open, the forest seemed to rush upon me. The maples, oaks, rhododendrons, and an old walnut, moved closer, out of curiosity perhaps. A branch tapped against the window-panes, while from below, from the ravine, the deep-throated song of the whistling thrush burst upon me.

I told Miss Mackenzie I would take the place. She grew excited; it must have been lonely for her during the past several years, with most of the cottage lying empty, and only her old bearer and a mongrel dog for company. Her own house had been mortgaged to a moneylender. Her brothers and sisters were long dead. ‘I’m the last Mackenzie in India,’ she told me.

I told her I would move in soon: my books were still in Delhi. She gave me the keys and I left a cheque with her.

It was all done on an impulse—the decision to give up my job in Delhi, find a cheap house in a hill-station, and return to freelance writing. It was a dream I’d had for some time; lack of money had made it difficult to realize. But then, I knew that if I was going to wait for money to come, I might have to wait until I was old and grey and full of sleep. I was thirty-five—still young enough to take a few risks. If the dream was to become reality, this was the time to do something about it.

I don’t know what led me to Maplewood; it was the first place I saw, and I did not bother to see any others. The location was far from being ideal. It faced east, and stood in the shadow of the Balahissar Hill; so that while it received the early morning sun, it went without the evening sun. By three in the afternoon, the shadow of the hill crept over the cottage. This was all right in summer, but in winter it meant a cold, dark house.
There was no view of the snows and no view of the plains. In front stood Burnt Hill, or Pari Tibba (Hill of the Fairies), where apparently lightning played and struck more frequently than elsewhere. But the forest below the cottage seemed full of possibilities, and the windows opening on to it probably decided the issue. In my romantic frame of my mind, I was susceptible to magic casements opening wide.

I would make a window-seat and lie there on a summer’s day, writing lyric poetry ….

But long before that could happen I was opening tins of sardines and sharing them with Miss Mackenzie. And then Prem came along. And there were others, like Binya.

I went away at times, but returned as soon as possible. Once you have lived with mountains, there is no escape. You belong to them.

Most of these stories (including those about my childhood) were written in Maplewood. So were many of the stories in my other two collections *The Night Train to Deoli* and *Time Stops at Shamli*. The old cottage was kind to a struggling young writer.

Mussoorie
October 1991

Ruskin Bond
Escape from Java

It all happened within the space of a few days. The cassia tree had barely come into flower when the first bombs fell on Batavia (now called Jakarta) and the bright pink blossoms lay scattered over the wreckage in the streets.

News had reached us that Singapore had fallen to the Japanese. My father said: ‘I expect it won’t be long before they take Java. With the British defeated, how can the Dutch be expected to win?’ He did not mean to be critical of the Dutch; he knew they did not have the backing of an Empire such as Britain then had Singapore had been called the Gibraltar of the East. After its surrender there could only be retreat, a vast exodus of Europeans from South-East Asia.

It was World War II. What the Javanese thought about the war is now hard for me to say, because I was only nine at the time and knew very little of worldly matters. Most people knew they would be exchanging their Dutch rulers for Japanese rulers; but there were also many who spoke in terms of freedom for Java when the war was over.

Our neighbour, Mr Hartono, was one of those who looked ahead to a time when Java, Sumatra and the other islands would make up one independent nation. He was a college professor and spoke Dutch, Chinese, Javanese and a little English. His son, Sono, was about my age. He was the only boy I knew who could talk to me in English, and as a result we spent a lot of time together. Our favourite pastime was flying kites in the park.

The bombing soon put an end to kite flying. Air raid alerts sounded at all hours of the day and night, and although in the beginning most of the bombs fell near the docks, a couple of miles from where we lived, we had to stay indoors. If the planes sounded very near, we dived under beds or tables. I don’t remember if there were any trenches. Probably there hadn’t been time for trench digging, and now there was time only for digging graves. Events had moved all too swiftly, and everyone (except of course the Javanese) was anxious to get away from Java.
‘When are you going?’ asked Sono, as we sat on the veranda steps in a pause between air raids.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It all depends on my father.’

‘My father says the Japs will be here in a week. And if you’re still here then, they’ll put you to work building a railway.’

‘I wouldn’t mind building a railway,’ I said.

‘But they won’t give you enough to eat. Just rice with worms in it. And if you don’t work properly, they’ll shoot you.’

‘They do that to soldiers,’ I said. ‘We’re civilians.’

‘They do it to civilians, too,’ said Sono.

What were my father and I doing in Batavia, when our home had been first in India and then in Singapore? He worked for a firm dealing in rubber, and six months earlier he had been sent to Batavia to open a new office in partnership with a Dutch business house. Although I was so young, I accompanied my father almost everywhere. My mother left when I was very small, and my father had always looked after me. After the war was over he was going to take me to England.

‘Are we going to win the war?’ I asked.

‘It doesn’t look it from here,’ he said.

No, it didn’t look as though we were winning. Standing at the docks with my father, I watched the ships arrive from Singapore crowded with refugees—men, women and children, all living on the decks in the hot tropical sun; they looked pale and worn-out and worried. They were on their way to Colombo or Bombay. No one came ashore at Batavia. It wasn’t British territory; it was Dutch, and everyone knew it wouldn’t be Dutch for long.

‘Aren’t we going too?’ I asked. ‘Sono’s father says the Japs will be here any day.’

‘We’ve still got a few days,’ said my father. He was a short, stocky man, who seldom got excited. If he was worried, he didn’t show it. ‘I’ve got to wind up a few business matters, and then we’ll be off.’

‘How will we go? There’s no room for us on those ships.’

‘There certainly isn’t. But we’ll find a way, lad, don’t worry.’

I didn’t worry. I had complete confidence in my father’s ability to find a way out of difficulties. He used to say, ‘Every problem has a solution hidden away somewhere, and if only you look hard enough you will find it.’
There were British soldiers in the streets but they did not make us feel much safer. They were just waiting for troop ships to come and take them away. No one, it seemed, was interested in defending Java, only in getting out as fast as possible.

Although the Dutch were unpopular with the Javanese people, there was no ill-feeling against individual Europeans. I could walk safely through the streets. Occasionally small boys in the crowded Chinese quarter would point at me and shout, ‘Orang Balandi!’ (Dutchman!) but they did so in good humour, and I didn’t know the language well enough to stop and explain that the English weren’t Dutch. For them, all white people were the same, and understandably so.

My father’s office was in the commercial area, along the canal banks. Our two-storied house, about a mile away, was an old building with a roof of red tiles and a broad balcony which had stone dragons at either end. There were flowers in the garden almost all the year round. If there was anything in Batavia more regular than the bombing, it was the rain, which came pattering down on the roof and on the banana fronds almost every afternoon. In the hot and steamy atmosphere of Java, the rain was always welcome.

There were no anti-aircraft guns in Batavia—at least we never heard any—and the Jap bombers came over at will, dropping their bombs by daylight. Sometimes bombs fell in the town. One day the building next to my father’s office received a direct hit and tumbled into the river. A number of office workers were killed.

The schools closed, and Sono and I had nothing to do all day except sit in the house, playing darts or carrom, wrestling on the carpets, or playing the gramophone. We had records by Gracie Fields, Harry Lauder, George Formby and Arthur Askey, all popular British artists of the early 1940s. One song by Arthur Askey made fun of Adolph Hitler, with the words, ‘Adolph, we’re gonna hang up your washing on the Siegfried Line, if the Siegfried Line’s still there!’ It made us feel quite cheerful to know that back in Britain people were confident of winning the war!

One day Sono said, ‘The bombs are falling on Batavia, not in the countryside. Why don’t we get cycles and ride out of town?’

I fell in with the idea at once. After the morning all-clear had sounded, we mounted our cycles and rode out of town. Mine was a hired cycle, but Sono’s was his own. He’d had it since the age of five, and it was constantly in need of repairs. ‘The soul has gone out of it,’ he used to say.

Our fathers were at work; Sono’s mother had gone out to do her shopping (during air raids she took shelter under the most convenient shop counter) and wouldn’t be back for at least an hour. We expected to be back before lunch.
We were soon out of town, on a road that passed through rice fields, pineapple orchards and cinchona plantations. On our right lay dark green hills; on our left, groves of coconut palms and, beyond them, the sea. Men and women were working in the rice fields, knee-deep in mud, their broad-brimmed hats protecting them from the fierce sun. Here and there a buffalo wallowed in a pool of brown water, while a naked boy lay stretched out on the animal’s broad back.

We took a bumpy track through the palms. They grew right down to the edge of the sea. Leaving our cycles on the shingle, we ran down a smooth, sandy beach and into the shallow water.

‘Don’t go too far in,’ warned Sono. ‘There may be sharks about.’

Wading in amongst the rocks, we searched for interesting shells, then sat down on a large rock and looked out to sea, where a sailing ship moved placidly on the crisp, blue waters. It was difficult to imagine that half the world was at war, and that Batavia, two or three miles away, was right in the middle of it.

On our way home we decided to take a short cut through the rice fields, but soon found that our tires got bogged down in the soft mud. This delayed our return; and to make things worse, we got the roads mixed up and reached an area of the town that seemed unfamiliar. We had barely entered the outskirts when the siren sounded, to be followed soon after by the drone of approaching aircraft.

‘Should we get off our cycles and take shelter somewhere?’ I called out.

‘No, let’s race home!’ shouted Sono. ‘The bombs won’t fall here.’

But he was wrong. The planes flew in very low. Looking up for a moment, I saw the sun blotted out by the sinister shape of a Jap fighter-bomber. We pedalled furiously; but we had barely covered fifty yards when there was a terrific explosion on our right, behind some houses. The shock sent us spinning across the road. We were flung from our cycles. And the cycles, still propelled by the blast, crashed into a wall.

I felt a stinging sensation in my hands and legs, as though scores of little insects had bitten me. Tiny droplets of blood appeared here and there on my flesh. Sono was on all fours, crawling beside me, and I saw that he too had the same small scratches on his hands and forehead, made by tiny shards of flying glass.

We were quickly on our feet, and then we began running in the general direction of our homes. The twisted cycles lay forgotten on the road.

‘Get off the street, you two!’ shouted someone from a window; but we weren’t going to stop running until we got home. And we ran faster than we’d ever run in our lives.
My father and Sono’s parents were themselves running about the street, calling for us, when we came rushing around the corner and tumbled into their arms.

‘Where have you been?’
‘What happened to you?’
‘How did you get those cuts?’

All superfluous questions; but before we could recover our breath and start explaining, we were bundled into our respective homes. My father washed my cuts and scratches, dabbed at my face and legs with iodine—ignoring my yelps—and then stuck plaster all over my face.

Sono and I had had a fright, and we did not venture far from the house again.

That night my father said: ‘I think we’ll be able to leave in a day or two.’

‘Has another ship come in?’
‘No.’
‘Then how are we going? By plane?’
‘Wait and see, lad. It isn’t settled yet. But we won’t be able to take much with us—just enough to fill a couple of travelling bags.’
‘What about the stamp collection?’ I asked.

My father’s stamp collection was quite valuable and filled several volumes.
‘I’m afraid we’ll have to leave most of it behind,’ he said. ‘Perhaps Mr Hartono will keep it for me, and when the war is over—if it’s over—we’ll come back for it.’
‘But we can take one or two albums with us, can’t we?’
‘I’ll take one. There’ll be room for one. Then if we’re short of money in Bombay, we can sell the stamps.’
‘Bombay? That’s in India. I thought we were going back to England.’
‘First we must go to India.’

The following morning I found Sono in the garden, patched up like me, and with one foot in a bandage. But he was as cheerful as ever and gave me his usual wide grin.
‘We’re leaving tomorrow,’ I said.

The grin left his face.
‘I will be sad when you go,’ he said. ‘But I will be glad too, because then you will be able to escape from the Japs.’
‘After the war, I’ll come back.’
‘Yes, you must come back. And then, when we are big, we will go round the world together. I want to see England and America and Africa and India and Japan. I want to go everywhere.’
‘We can’t go everywhere.’
‘Yes, we can. No one can stop us!’

We had to be up very early the next morning. Our bags had been packed late at night. We were taking a few clothes, some of my father’s business papers, a pair of binoculars, one stamp album, and several bars of chocolate. I was pleased about the stamp album and the chocolates, but I had to give up several of my treasures—favourite books, the gramophone and records, an old Samurai sword, a train set and a dartboard. The only consolation was that Sono, and not a stranger, would have them.

In the first faint light of dawn a truck drew up in front of the house. It was driven by a Dutch businessman, Mr Hookens, who worked with my father. Sono was already at the gate, waiting to say goodbye.

‘I have a present for you,’ he said.
He took me by the hand and pressed a smooth hard object into my palm. I grasped it and then held it up against the light. It was a beautiful little sea horse, carved out of pale blue jade.
‘It will bring you luck,’ said Sono.
‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘I will keep it forever.’
And I slipped the little sea horse into my pocket.

‘In you get, lad,’ said my father, and I got up on the front seat between him and Mr Hookens.

As the truck started up, I turned to wave to Sono. He was sitting on his garden wall, grinning at me. He called out: ‘We will go everywhere, and no one can stop us!’

He was still waving when the truck took us round the bend at the end of the road.

We drove through the still, quiet streets of Batavia, occasionally passing burnt-out trucks and shattered buildings. Then we left the sleeping city far behind and were climbing into the forested hills. It had rained during the night, and when the sun came up over the green hills, it twinkled and glittered on the broad, wet leaves. The light in the forest changed from dark green to greenish gold, broken here and there by the flaming red or orange of a trumpet-shaped blossom. It was impossible to know the names of all those fantastic plants! The road had been cut through dense tropical forest, and on either side, the trees jostled each other, hungry for the sun; but they were chained together by the liana creepers and vines that fed upon the same struggling trees.
Occasionally a Jelarang, a large Javan squirrel, frightened by the passing of the truck, leapt through the trees before disappearing into the depths of the forest. We saw many birds: peacocks, jungle-fowl, and once, standing majestically at the side of the road, a crowned pigeon, its great size and splendid crest making it a striking object even at a distance. Mr Hookens slowed down so that we could look at the bird. It bowed its head so that its crest swept the ground; then it emitted a low hollow boom rather than the call of a turkey.

When we came to a small clearing, we stopped for breakfast. Butterflies, black, green and gold, flitted across the clearing. The silence of the forest was broken only by the drone of airplanes, Japanese Zeros heading for Batavia on another raid. I thought about Sono, and wondered what he would be doing at home: probably trying out the gramophone!

We ate boiled eggs and drank tea from a thermos, then got back into the truck and resumed our journey.

I must have dozed off soon after, because the next thing I remember is that we were going quite fast down a steep, winding road, and in the distance I could see a calm blue lagoon.

‘We’ve reached the sea again,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ said my father. ‘But we’re now nearly a hundred miles from Batavia, in another part of the island. You’re looking out over the Sunda Straits.’

Then he pointed towards a shimmering white object resting on the waters of the lagoon.

‘There’s our plane,’ he said.

‘A seaplane!’ I exclaimed. ‘I never guessed. Where will it take us?’

‘To Bombay, I hope. There aren’t many other places left to go to!’

It was a very old seaplane, and no one, not even the captain—the pilot was called the captain—could promise that it would take off. Mr Hookens wasn’t coming with us; he said the plane would be back for him the next day. Besides my father and me, there were four other passengers, and all but one were Dutch. The odd man out was a Londoner, a motor mechanic who’d been left behind in Java when his unit was evacuated. (He told us later that he’d fallen asleep at a bar in the Chinese quarter, waking up some hours after his regiment had moved off!) He looked rather scruffy. He’d lost the top button of his shirt, but, instead of leaving his collar open, as we did, he’d kept it together with a large safety pin, which thrust itself out from behind a bright pink tie.
‘It’s a relief to find you here, guvnor,’ he said, shaking my father by the hand. ‘Knew you for a Yorkshireman the minute I set eyes on you. It’s the song-fried that does it, if you know what I mean.’ (He meant sang-froid, French for a ‘cool look.’) ‘And here I was, with all these flippin’ forriners, and me not knowing a word of what they’ve been yattering about. Do you think this old tub will get us back to Blighty?’ ‘It does look a bit shaky,’ said my father. ‘One of the first flying boats, from the looks of it. If it gets us to Bombay, that’s far enough.’ ‘Anywhere out of Java’s good enough for me,’ said our new companion. ‘The name’s Muggeridge.’

‘Pleased to know you, Mr Muggeridge,’ said my father. ‘I’m Bond. This is my son.’ Mr Muggeridge rumpled my hair and favoured me with a large wink. The captain of the seaplane was beckoning to us to join him in a small skiff which was about to take us across a short stretch of water to the seaplane. ‘Here we go,’ said Mr Muggeridge. ‘Say your prayers and keep your fingers crossed.’

The seaplane was a long time getting airborne. It had to make several runs before it finally took off; then, lurching drunkenly, it rose into the clear blue sky. ‘For a moment I thought we were going to end up in the briny,’ said Mr Muggeridge, untying his seat belt. ‘And talkin’ of fish, I’d give a week’s wages for a plate of fish an’ chips and a pint of beer.’ ‘I’ll buy you a beer in Bombay,’ said my father. ‘Have an egg,’ I said, remembering we still had some boiled eggs in one of the travelling bags. ‘Thanks, mate,’ said Mr Muggeridge, accepting an egg with alacrity. ‘A real egg, too! I’ve been livin’ on egg powder these last six months. That’s what they give you in the Army. And it ain’t hens’ eggs they make it from, let me tell you. It’s either gulls’ or turtles’ eggs!’ ‘No,’ said my father with a straight face. ‘Snakes’ eggs.’ Mr Muggeridge turned a delicate shade of green; but he soon recovered his poise, and for about an hour kept talking about almost everything under the sun, including Churchill, Hitler, Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, and Betty Grable. (The last-named was famous for her beautiful legs.) He would have gone on talking all the way to Bombay had he been given a chance; but suddenly a shudder passed through the old plane, and it began lurching again. ‘I think an engine is giving trouble,’ said my father.
When I looked through the small glassed-in window, it seemed as though the sea was rushing up to meet us.

The copilot entered the passenger cabin and said something in Dutch. The passengers looked dismayed, and immediately began fastening their seat belts.

‘Well, what did the blighter say?’ asked Mr Muggeridge.

‘I think he’s going to have to ditch the plane,’ said my father, who knew enough Dutch to get the gist of anything that was said.

‘Down in the drink!’ exclaimed Mr Muggeridge. ‘Gawd’ elp us! And how far are we from Bombay, guv?’

A few hundred miles,’ said my father.

‘Can you swim, mate?’ asked Mr Muggeridge looking at me.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But not all the way to Bombay. How far can you swim?’

‘The length of a bathtub,’ he said.

‘Don’t worry,’ said my father. ‘Just make sure your life-jacket’s properly tied.’

We looked to our life-jackets; my father checked mine twice, making sure that it was properly fastened.

The pilot had now cut both engines, and was bringing the plane down in a circling movement. But he couldn’t control the speed, and it was tilting heavily to one side. Instead of landing smoothly on its belly, it came down on a wing tip, and this caused the plane to swivel violently around in the choppy sea. There was a terrific jolt when the plane hit the water, and if it hadn’t been for the seat belts we’d have been flung from our seats. Even so, Mr Muggeridge struck his head against the seat in front, and he was now holding a bleeding nose and using some shocking language.

As soon as the plane came to a standstill, my father undid my seat belt. There was no time to lose. Water was already filling the cabin, and all the passengers—except one, who was dead in his seat with a broken neck—were scrambling for the exit hatch. The copilot pulled a lever and the door fell away to reveal high waves slapping against the sides of the stricken plane.

Holding me by the hand, my father was leading me towards the exit.

‘Quick lad,’ he said. ‘We won’t stay afloat for long.’

‘Give us a hand!’ shouted Mr Muggeridge, still struggling with his life-jacket. ‘First this bloody bleedin’ nose, and now something’s gone and stuck.’

My father helped him fix the life-jacket, then pushed him out of the door ahead of us.

As we swam away from the seaplane (Mr Muggeridge splashing fiercely alongside us), we were aware of the other passengers in the water. One of them shouted to us in
Dutch to follow him.

We swam after him towards the dinghy, which had been released the moment we hit the water. That yellow dinghy, bobbing about on the waves, was as welcome as land.

All who had left the plane managed to climb into the dinghy. We were seven altogether—a tight fit. We had hardly settled down in the well of the dinghy when Mr Muggeridge, still holding his nose, exclaimed: ‘There she goes!’ And as we looked on helplessly, the seaplane sank swiftly and silently beneath the waves.

The dinghy had shipped a lot of water, and soon everyone was busy bailing it out with mugs (there were a couple in the dinghy), hats, and bare hands. There was a light swell, and every now and then water would roll in again and half fill the dinghy. But within half an hour we had most of the water out, and then it was possible to take turns, two men doing the bailing while the others rested. No one expected me to do this work, but I gave a hand anyway, using my father’s sola topi for the purpose.

‘Where are we?’ asked one of the passengers.
‘A long way from anywhere,’ said another.
‘There must be a few islands in the Indian Ocean.’
‘But we may be at sea for days before we come to one of them.’
‘Days or even weeks,’ said the captain. ‘Let us look at our supplies.’

The dinghy appeared to be fairly well provided with emergency rations: biscuits, raisins, chocolates (we’d lost our own), and enough water to last a week. There was also a first aid box, which was put to immediate use, as Mr Muggeridge’s nose needed attention. A few others had cuts and bruises. One of the passengers had received a hard knock on the head and appeared to be suffering from a loss of memory. He had no idea how we happened to be drifting about in the middle of the Indian Ocean; he was convinced that we were on a pleasure cruise a few miles off Batavia.

The unfamiliar motion of the dinghy, as it rose and fell in the troughs between the waves, resulted in almost everyone getting seasick. As no one could eat anything, a day’s rations were saved.

The sun was very hot, but my father covered my head with a large spotted handkerchief. He’d always had a fancy for bandanna handkerchiefs with yellow spots, and seldom carried fewer than two on his person; so he had one for himself too. The sola topi, well soaked in seawater, was being used by Mr Muggeridge.

It was only when I had recovered to some extent from my seasickness that I remembered the valuable stamp album, and sat up. exclaiming, ‘The stamps! Did you bring the stamp album, Dad?’
He shook his head ruefully. ‘It must be at the bottom of the sea by now,’ he said. ‘But don’t worry, I kept a few rare stamps in my wallet.’ And looking pleased with himself, he tapped the pocket of his bush shirt.

The dinghy drifted all day, with no one having the least idea where it might be taking us.

‘Probably going round in circles,’ said Mr Muggeridge pessimistically.

There was no compass and no sail, and paddling wouldn’t have got us far even if we’d had paddles; we could only resign ourselves to the whims of the current and hope it would take us towards land or at least to within hailing distance of some passing ship.

The sun went down like an overripe tomato dissolving slowly in the sea. The darkness pressed down on us. It was a moonless night, and all we could see was the white foam on the crests of the waves. I lay with my head on my father’s shoulder, and looked up at the stars which glittered in the remote heavens.

‘Perhaps your friend Sono will look up at the sky tonight and see those same stars,’ said my father. ‘The world isn’t so big after all.’

‘All the same, there’s a lot of sea around us,’ said Mr Muggeridge from out of the darkness.

Remembering Sono, I put my hand in my pocket and was reassured to feel the smooth outline of the jade sea horse.

‘I’ve still got Sono’s sea horse,’ I said, showing it to my father.

‘Keep it carefully,’ he said. ‘It may bring us luck.’

‘Are sea horses lucky?’

‘Who knows? But he gave it to you with love, and love is like a prayer. So keep it carefully.’

I didn’t sleep much that night. I don’t think anyone slept. No one spoke much either, except of course Mr. Muggeridge, who kept muttering something about cold beer and salami.

I didn’t feel so sick the next day. By ten o’clock I was quite hungry; but breakfast consisted of two biscuits, a piece of chocolate, and a little drinking water. It was another hot day, and we were soon very thirsty, but everyone agreed that we should ration ourselves strictly.

Two or three still felt ill, but the others, including Mr Muggeridge, had recovered their appetites and normal spirits, and there was some discussion about the prospects of being picked up.
‘Are there any distress rockets in the dinghy?’ asked my father. ‘If we see a ship or a plane, we can fire a rocket and hope to be spotted. Otherwise there’s not much chance of our being seen from a distance.’

A thorough search was made in the dinghy, but there were no rockets.

‘Someone must have used them last Guy Fawkes Day,’ commented Mr Muggeridge.

‘They don’t celebrate Guy Fawkes Day in Holland,’ said my father. ‘Guy Fawkes was an Englishman.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Muggeridge, not in the least put out. ‘I’ve always said, most great men are Englishmen. And what did this chap Guy Fawkes do?’

‘Tried to blow up Parliament,’ said my father.

That afternoon we saw our first sharks. They were enormous creatures, and as they glided backward and forward under the boat it seemed they might hit and capsize us. They went away for some time, but returned in the evening.

At night, as I lay half asleep beside my father, I felt a few drops of water strike my face. At first I thought it was the sea spray; but when the sprinkling continued, I realized that it was raining lightly.

‘Rain!’ I shouted, sitting up. ‘It’s raining!’

Everyone woke up and did his best to collect water in mugs, hats or other containers. Mr Muggeridge lay back with his mouth open, drinking the rain as it fell.

‘This is more like it,’ he said. ‘You can have all the sun an’ sand in the world. Give me a rainy day in England!’

But by early morning the clouds had passed, and the day turned out to be even hotter than the previous one. Soon we were all red and raw from sunburn. By midday even Mr Muggeridge was silent. No one had the energy to talk.

Then my father whispered, ‘Can you hear a plane, lad?’

I listened carefully, and above the hiss of the waves I heard what sounded like the distant drone of a plane; but it must have been very far away, because we could not see it. Perhaps it was flying into the sun, and the glare was too much for our sore eyes; or perhaps we’d just imagined the sound.

Then the Dutchman who’d lost his memory thought he saw land, and kept pointing towards the horizon and saying, ‘That’s Batavia, I told you we were close to shore!’ No one else saw anything. So my father and I weren’t the only ones imagining things.

Said my father, ‘It only goes to show that a man can see what he wants to see, even if there’s nothing to be seen!’
The sharks were still with us. Mr Muggeridge began to resent them. He took off one of his shoes and hurled it at the nearest shark; but the big fish ignored the shoe and swam on after us.

‘Now, if your leg had been in that shoe, Mr Muggeridge, the shark might have accepted it,’ observed my father.

‘Don’t throw your shoes away,’ said the captain. ‘We might land on a deserted coastline and have to walk hundreds of miles!’

A light breeze sprang up that evening, and the dinghy moved more swiftly on the choppy water.

‘At last we’re moving forward,’ said the captain.

‘In circles,’ said Mr Muggeridge.

But the breeze was refreshing; it cooled our burning limbs, and helped us to get some sleep. In the middle of the night I woke up feeling very hungry.

‘Are you all right?’ asked my father, who had been awake all the time.

‘Just hungry,’ I said.

‘And what would you like to eat?’

‘Oranges!’

He laughed. ‘No oranges on board. But I kept a piece of my chocolate for you. And there’s a little water, if you’re thirsty.’

I kept the chocolate in my mouth for a long time, trying to make it last. Then I sipped a little water.

‘Aren’t you hungry?’ I asked.

‘Ravenous! I could eat a whole turkey. When we get to Bombay or Madras or Colombo, or wherever it is we get to, we’ll go to the best restaurant in town and eat like—like—’

‘Like shipwrecked sailors!’ I said.

‘Exactly.’

‘Do you think we’ll ever get to land, Dad?’

‘I’m sure we will. You’re not afraid, are you?’

‘No. Not as long as you’re with me.’

Next morning, to everyone’s delight, we saw seagulls. This was a sure sign that land couldn’t be far away; but a dinghy could take days to drift a distance of thirty or forty miles. The birds wheeled noisily above the dinghy. Their cries were the first familiar sounds we had heard for three days and three nights, apart from the wind and the sea and our own weary voices.
The sharks had disappeared, and that too was an encouraging sign. They didn’t like the oil slicks that were appearing in the water.

But presently the gulls left us, and we feared we were drifting away from land.

‘Circles,’ repeated Mr Muggeridge. ‘Circles.’

We had sufficient food and water for another week at sea; but no one even wanted to think about spending another week at sea.

The sun was a ball of fire. Our water ration wasn’t sufficient to quench our thirst. By noon, we were without much hope or energy.

My father had his pipe in his mouth. He didn’t have any tobacco, but he liked holding the pipe between his teeth. He said it prevented his mouth from getting too dry.

The sharks came back.

Mr Muggeridge removed his other shoe and threw it at them.

‘Nothing like a lovely wet English summer,’ he mumbled.

I fell asleep in the well of the dinghy, my father’s large handkerchief spread over my face. The yellow spots on the cloth seemed to grow into enormous revolving suns.

When I woke up, I found a huge shadow hanging over us. At first I thought it was a cloud. But it was a shifting shadow. My father took the handkerchief from my face and said, ‘You can wake up now, lad. We’ll be home and dry soon.’

A fishing boat was beside us, and the shadow came from its wide, flapping sail. A number of bronzed, smiling, chattering fishermen—Burmese, as we discovered later—were gazing down at us from the deck of their boat.

A few days later my father and I were in Bombay.

My father sold his rare stamps for over a thousand rupees, and we were able to live in a comfortable hotel. Mr Muggeridge was flown back to England. Later we got a postcard from him, saying the English rain was awful!

‘And what about us?’ I asked. ‘Aren’t we going back to England?’

‘Not yet,’ said my father. ‘You’ll be going to a boarding school in Simla, until the war’s over.’

‘But why should I leave you?’ I asked.

‘Because I’ve joined the RAF,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, I’m being posted in Delhi. I’ll be able to come up to see you sometimes.’

A week later I was on a small train which went chugging up the steep mountain track to Shimla. Several Indian, Ango-Indian and English children tumbled around in the compartment. I felt quite out of place among them, as though I had grown out of
their pranks. But I wasn’t unhappy. I knew my father would be coming to see me soon. He’d promised me some books, a pair of roller-skates, and a cricket bat, just as soon as he got his first month’s pay.

Meanwhile, I had the jade sea horse which Sono had given me.

And I have it with me today.
The Bent-Double Beggar

The person I encounter most often on the road is old Ganpat, the bent-double beggar. Every morning he hobbles up and down the road below my rooms, biding his time, and suddenly manifesting himself in front of unwary passers-by or shoppers. It is difficult to resist Ganpat because, though bent double, he is very dignified. He has a long, white beard and a commanding eye. His voice is powerful and carries well; which is probably why people say he was once an actor.

People say many things about him. One rumour has it that he was once a well-to-do lawyer with a European wife: a paralytic stroke put an end to his career, and his wife finally left him. I have also been told that he is a CID man in disguise—a rumour that might well have been started by Ganpat himself.

I was curious to know the true story of his life, for I was convinced that he was not a beggar by choice; he had little in common with other members of his profession. His English was good, and he could recite passages from Shakespeare; his Hindi was excellent. He never made a direct request for money, but would enter into conversation with you, and remark on the weather or the innate meanness of the human race, until you slipped him a coin.

‘Look, Ganpat,’ I said one day, ‘I’ve heard a lot of stories about you, and I don’t know which is true. How did you become a beggar? How did you get your crooked back?’

‘That’s a very long story,’ he said, flattered by my interest in him. ‘I don’t know if you will believe it. Besides, it is not to everyone that I would speak freely.’

He had served his purpose in whetting my appetite. I said, ‘It will be worth a rupee if you tell me your story.’

He stroked his beard, considering my offer.

‘Very well,’ he said, squatting down on his haunches, while I pulled myself up on a low wall. ‘But it happened more than twenty years ago, and you cannot expect me to remember the details very clearly ….’
In those days,’ said Ganpat, ‘I was a healthy young man, with a wife and baby daughter. I owned a few acres of land, and, though we were not rich, we were not very poor. When I took my produce to the market, five miles away, I harnessed the bullocks and drove down the dusty village road, sometimes returning home late at night.

‘Every night I passed a peepul tree, which was said to be haunted. I had never met the ghost, and did not really believe in him, but his name, I was told, was Bippin, and long ago he had been hanged from the peepul tree by a gang of dacoits. Since then this ghost had lived in the tree, and was in the habit of pouncing upon any person who resembled a dacoit and beating him severely. I suppose I must have looked a little guilty after a particularly successful business deal, because one night Bippin decided to pounce on me. He leapt out of the tree and stood in the middle of the road, bringing my bullocks to a halt.

‘“You, there,” he shouted. “Get off your cart, I am going to thrash you and then string you up from this tree!”

‘I was of course considerably alarmed, but decided to put on a bold front.’ “I have no intention of getting off my cart. If you like, you can climb up yourself!”

‘“Spoken like a man,” said Bippin, and he jumped up beside me. “But tell me one good reason for not stringing you up.”

‘“I am not a dacoit,” I replied.

‘“But you look as though you could be one. That is the same thing.”

‘“I am a poor man, with a wife and child to support.”

‘“You have no business being poor,” said Bippin angrily.

‘“Well, make me rich if you can.”

‘“Do you not believe I can? Do you defy me to make you rich?”

‘“Certainly,” I said. “I defy you to make me rich.”

‘“Then drive on,” cried Bippin. “I am coming home with you.”

‘And I drove on to the village with Bippin sitting beside me.

‘“I have so arranged it,” he said, “that no one will be able to see me. And another thing. I must sleep beside you every night, and no one must know of it. Should you tell anyone about my presence, I will not hesitate to strangle you!”

‘“You needn’t worry,” I said. “I won’t tell any one.”

‘“Good. I look forward to living with you. It was getting lonely in that peepul tree.”

‘And so Bippin came to live with me, and he slept beside me every night; and we got on very well together. He kept his promise, and money began to pour in from every conceivable source, until I was in a position to buy more land and cattle.
Nobody knew of our association, though naturally my friends and relatives wondered where all the money was coming from. At the same time, my wife was rather upset at my unwillingness to sleep beside her at night. I could not very well put her in the same bed with a ghost, and Bippin was most particular about sleeping near me. At first I told my wife that I wasn’t well, and that I would sleep on the veranda. Then I told her that there was someone after our cows, and that I would have to keep an eye on them at night. Bippin and I slept in the cow-house.

‘My wife would often spy on me at night, suspecting infidelity; but she always found me lying alone amongst the cows. Unable to understand my strange behaviour, she mentioned it to her family; and next day my in-laws arrived on our doorstep, demanding an explanation.

‘At the same time my own relatives were insisting that I give them some explanation for my own rapidly increasing fortune. Uncles and aunts and distant cousins descended on me from all parts of the country, wanting to know where the money was coming from, and hoping to have some share of it.

“Do you all want me to die?” I said, losing my patience with them. “I am under an oath of silence. If I tell you the source of my wealth, I will be signing my own death-warrant.”

‘But they laughed at me, taking this for a lame excuse; they suspected I was trying to keep my fortune to myself. My wife’s relatives suspected that I had found another woman. Finally I became so exasperated with their questions and demands that in a moment of weakness I blurted out the truth.

‘They didn’t believe the truth (who does?), but it gave them something to think about and talk about, and they left me in peace for a few days.

‘But that same night Bippin did not come to sleep beside me. I was left alone with the cows. When he did not come the following night, I was afraid that he would throttle me while I slept. I was almost certain that my good fortune had come to an end, and I went back to sleeping in my own house.

‘The next time I was driving back to the village from the market, Bippin leapt out of the peepul tree.

“False friend,” he cried, halting the bullocks. “I gave you everything you wanted, and still you betrayed me!”

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “But as a ghost you wouldn’t understand what a man’s relatives can be like. You can of course hang me from the peepul tree, if you wish.”

“No, I cannot kill you,” he said. “We have been friends for too long. But I must punish you all the same.”
‘Picking up a stout stick, he struck me three times across the back, until I was bent double.

‘After that,’ concluded Ganpat, ‘I could never straighten myself up again, and for twenty years I have been a crooked man. My wife left me and went back to her family, and I could no longer work in the fields. I left my village and wandered from one city to another, begging for a living. That is how I came here. People in this town seem to be more generous than elsewhere.’

He looked at me with his most appealing smile, waiting for the promised rupee.

‘You can’t expect me to believe that story,’ I said. ‘But for your powers of invention you deserve a rupee.’

‘No, no,’ said Ganpat, backing away and affecting indignation. ‘If you don’t believe me, keep the rupee!’

Finally he permitted me to force the note into his hand, and then he went hobbling away to the bazaar. I was almost certain he had been telling me a very tall story. But you can never really be sure. Perhaps it was true about Bippin. And it was clever to give him the rupee, just in case he was, after all, a CID man.

SOME TEACHINGS OF THE BENT-DOUBLE BEGGAR:

‘A woman can become jealous of anyone, anything,’ maintained Ganpat. ‘Even of a ghost.’

‘You must love everyone,’ said the bent-double beggar.

‘Even my enemies?’ I asked.

‘It is difficult to love your enemies. Much simpler not to have enemies.’

We observed a naked ascetic ‘meditating’ beneath a peepul tree.

‘He is superior to us,’ I said. ‘He has conquered all desire. We cannot be like that, Ganpat.’

‘You think so? Well, let’s see….’ And approaching the ascetic, he said, ‘Babaji, can you teach us to meditate as you do?’

‘Yes, I will teach you,’ said the other readily. ‘It will cost only fifty rupees a lesson.’

‘You see?’ said Ganpat, turning to me. ‘There is indeed some purpose—even desire—in his meditation. I must remember to charge a fee the next time you ask me for advice.’
Ganpat the bent-double beggar used to say that if all the troubles in the world could be laid down in one big heap, and everyone was allowed to choose one trouble, we should end up by picking up our old trouble again.

He saw in the commonplace what others did not see. A snake. He taught me to see not only the snake, but the path taken by the snake, the beauty of its movements; both the nature of the snake and the nature of the path. He taught me to be that snake, even if it was only for the duration of its passing.

‘I asked you to my party, but you did not come,’ I complained.

‘You asked me, that is the important thing. What does it matter if I did not come? You wanted me there, amongst your rich friends. That knowledge gave me all the refreshment I needed.’

In this life all our desires are fulfilled, on the condition that they do not bring the happiness we expected from them.

It is no use getting upset about delays in India; they come with unfailing punctuality.

His favourite proverb: If you must eat dung, eat elephant’s dung.

One can forgive ignorance in a man who has had little or no education; but ignorance in a man who has been to college is unforgivable. Yet it is quite common.

For democracy to succeed, the first requirement is that the majority of people should be honest.

Nietzsche was wrong; it isn’t action but pleasure that binds us to existence.

It is difficult to be miserable all the time. Human nature won’t permit it. Even when we are burning or burying our dead, we are thinking of what we will eat or drink later in the day.

Chance gives, and takes away, and gives again.

I travelled a lot once (said Ganpat), but you can go on doing that and not get anywhere. Wherever you go or whatever you do, most of your life will have to happen in your mind. And there’s no escape from that little room!
Untouchable

(This was my first short story, written when I was sixteen.)

The sweeper-boy splashed water over the khus matting that hung in the doorway, and for a while the air was cooled. I sat on the edge of my bed, staring out of the open window, brooding upon the dusty road shimmering in the noon-day heat. A car passed, and the dust rose in billowing clouds.

Across the road lived the people who were supposed to look after me while my father lay in hospital with malaria. I was supposed to stay with them, sleep with them: but except for meals, I kept away. I did not like them and they did not like me.

For a week, longer probably, I was going to live alone in the red-brick bungalow on the outskirts of the town, on the fringe of the jungle. At night the sweeper-boy would keep guard, sleeping in the kitchen. Apart from him, I had no company; only the neighbours’ children, and I did not like them and they did not like me.

Their mother said, ‘Don’t play with the sweeper-boy, he is unclean. Don’t touch him. Remember, he is a servant. You must come and play with my boys.’

Well, I did not intend playing with the sweeper-boy; but neither did I intend playing with her children. I was going to sit on my bed all week and wait for my father to come home.

Sweeper-boy … all day he pattered up and down between the house and the water-tank, with the bucket clanging against his knees.

Back and forth, with a wide, friendly smile.

I frowned at him.

He was about my age, ten. He had short-cropped hair, very white teeth, and muddy feet, hands, and face. All he wore was an old pair of khaki shorts; the rest of his body was bare, burnt a deep brown.

At every trip to the water tank he bathed, and returned dripping and glistening from head to toe.

I dripped with sweat.
It was supposedly below my station to bathe at the tank, where the gardener, water-carrier, cooks, ayahs, sweepers, and their children all collected. I was the son of a ‘sahib’ and convention ruled that I did not play with servant children.

But I was just as determined not to play with the other sahibs’ children, for I did not like them and they did not like me.

I watched the flies buzzing against the window-pane, the lizards scuttling across the rafters, the wind scattering petals of scorched, long-dead flowers.

The sweeper-boy smiled, and saluted in play. I avoided his eyes, and said, ‘Go away.’

He went into the kitchen.

I rose and crossed the room, and lifted my sun helmet off the hatstand.

A centipede ran down the wall, across the floor.

I screamed and jumped on the bed, shouting for help.

The sweeper-boy darted in. He saw me on the bed, the centipede on the floor; and picking a large book off the shelf, slammed it down on the repulsive insect.

I remained standing on my bed, trembling with fear and revulsion.

He laughed at me, showing his teeth, and I blushed and said, ‘Get out!’

I would not, could not, touch or approach the hat or hatstand. I sat on the bed and longed for my father to come home.

A mosquito passed close by me and sang in my ear. Half-heartedly, I clutched at it and missed; and it disappeared behind the dressing-table.

That mosquito, I reasoned, gave the malaria to my father: now it is trying to give it to me!

The next-door lady walked through the compound and smiled thinly from outside the window. I glared back at her.

The sweeper-boy passed with the bucket, and grinned. I turned away.

In bed at night, with the lights on, I tried reading: but even books could not quell my anxiety.

The sweeper-boy moved about the house, bolting doors, fastening windows. He asked me if I had any orders.

I shook my head.

He skipped across to the electric switch, turned off the light, and slipped into his quarters. Outside, inside, all was dark; only one shaft of light squeezed in through a crack in the sweeper-boy’s door, and then that too went out.

I began to wish I had stayed with the neighbours. The darkness worried me—silent and close—silent, as if in suspense.
Once a bat flew flat against the window, falling to the ground outside; once an owl hooted. Sometimes a dog barked. And I tautened as a jackal howled hideously in the jungle behind the bungalow. But nothing could break the overall stillness, the night’s silence ….

Only a dry puff of wind ….

It rustled in the trees, and put me in mind of a snake slithering over dry leaves and twigs. I remembered a tale I had been told not long ago, of a sleeping boy who had been bitten by a cobra.

I would not, could not, sleep. I longed for my father ….
The shutters rattled, the doors creaked, it was a night for ghosts.

Ghosts!

God, why did I have to think of them?

My God! There, standing by the bathroom door ….

My father! My father dead from the malaria, and come to see me!

I threw myself at the switch. The room lit up. I sank down on the bed in complete exhaustion, the sweat soaking my night clothes.

It was not my father I had seen. It was his dressing-gown hanging on the bathroom door. It had not been taken with him to the hospital.

I turned off the light.

The hush outside seemed deeper, nearer. I remembered the centipede, the bat, thought of the cobra and the sleeping boy; pulled the sheet tight over my head. If I could see nothing, well then, nothing could see me.

A thunderclap shattered the brooding stillness.

A streak of lightning forked across the sky, so close that even through the sheet I saw a tree and the opposite house silhouetted against the flashing canvas of gold.

I dived deeper beneath the bedclothes, gathered the pillow about my ears.

But at the next thunderclap, louder this time, louder than I had ever heard, I leapt from my bed. I could not stand it. I fled, blundering into the sweeper-boy’s room.

The boy sat on the bare floor.

‘What is happening?’ he asked.

The lightning flashed, and his teeth and eyes flashed with it. Then he was a blur in the darkness.

‘I am afraid,’ I said.

I moved towards him and my hand touched a cold shoulder.

‘Stay here,’ he said. ‘I too am afraid.’
I sat down, my back against the wall; beside the untouchable, the outcaste … and the thunder and lightning ceased, and the rain came down, swishing and drumming on the corrugated roof.

‘The rainy season has started,’ observed the sweeper-boy, turning to me. His smile played with the darkness, and he laughed. And I laughed too, but feebly.

But I was happy and safe. The scent of the wet earth blew in through the skylight and the rain fell harder.
Instead of having brothers and sisters to grow up with in India, I had as my companions an odd assortment of pets, which included a monkey, a tortoise, a python and a Great Indian Hornbill. The person responsible for all this wildlife in the home was my grandfather. As the house was his own, other members of the family could not prevent him from keeping a large variety of pets, though they could certainly voice their objections; and as most of the household consisted of women—my grandmother, visiting aunts and occasional in-laws (my parents were in Burma at the time)—Grandfather and I had to be alert and resourceful in dealing with them. We saw eye to eye on the subject of pets, and whenever Grandmother decided it was time to get rid of a tame white rat or a squirrel, I would conceal them in a hole in the jackfruit tree; but unlike my aunts, she was generally tolerant of Grandfather’s hobby, and even took a liking to some of our pets.

Grandfather’s house and menagerie were in Dehra and I remember travelling there in a horse-drawn buggy. There were cars in those days—it was just over twenty years ago—but in the foothills a tonga was just as good, almost as fast, and certainly more dependable when it came to getting across the swift little Tons river.

During the rains, when the river flowed strong and deep, it was impossible to get across except on a hand-operated ropeway; but in the dry months, the horse went splashing through, the carriage wheels churning through clear mountain water. If the horse found the going difficult, we removed our shoes, rolled up our skirts or trousers, and waded across.

When Grandfather first went to stay in Dehra, early in the century, the only way of getting there was by the night mail-coach. Mail ponies, he told me, were difficult animals, always attempting to turn around and get into the coach with the passengers. It was only when the coachman used his whip liberally, and reviled the ponies’ ancestors as far back as their third and fourth generations, that the beasts could be persuaded to move. And once they started, there was no stopping them. It was a
gallop all the way to the first stage, where the ponies were changed to the accompaniment of a bugle blown by the coachman.

At one stage of the journey, drums were beaten; and if it was night, torches were lit to keep away the wild elephants who, resenting the approach of this clumsy caravan, would sometimes trumpet a challenge and throw the ponies into confusion.

Grandfather disliked dressing up and going out, and was only too glad to send everyone shopping or to the pictures—Harold Lloyd and Eddie Cantor were the favourites at Dehra’s small cinema—so that he could be left alone to feed his pets and potter about in the garden. There were a lot of animals to be fed, including, for a time, a pair of Great Danes who had such enormous appetites that we were forced to give them away to a more affluent family.

The Great Danes were gentle creatures, and I would sit astride one of them and go for rides round the garden. Inspite of their size, they were very sure-footed and never knocked over people or chairs. A little monkey, like Toto, did much more damage.

Grandfather bought Toto from a tonga-owner for the sum of five rupees. The tonga-man used to keep the little, red monkey tied to a feeding-trough, and Toto looked so out of place there—almost conscious of his own incongruity—that Grandfather immediately decided to add him to our menagerie.

Toto was really a pretty, little monkey. His bright eyes sparkled with mischief beneath deep-set eyebrows, and his teeth, a pearly-white, were often on display in a smile that frightened the life out of elderly Anglo-Indian ladies. His hands were not those of a Tallulah Bankhead (Grandfather’s only favourite actress), but were shrivelled and dried-up, as though they had been pickled in the sun for many years. But his fingers were quick and restless; and his tail, while adding to his good looks—Grandfather maintained that a tail would add to anyone’s good looks—often performed the service of a third hand. He could use it to hang from a branch; and it was capable of scooping up any delicacy that might be out of reach of his hands.

Grandmother, anticipating an outcry from other relatives, always raised objections when Grandfather brought home some new bird or animal; and so for a while we managed to keep Toto’s presence a secret by lodging him in a little closet opening into my bedroom wall. But in a few hours he managed to dispose of Grandmother’s ornamental wall-paper and the better part of my school blazer. He was transferred to the stables for a day or two, and then Grandfather had to make a trip to neighbouring Saharanpur to collect his railway pension. Anxious to keep Toto out of trouble, he decided to take the monkey along with him.
Unfortunately I could not accompany Grandfather on this trip, but he told me about it afterwards.

A black kit-bag was provided for Toto. When the strings of the bag were tied, there was no means of escape from within, and the canvas was too strong for Toto to bite his way through. His initial efforts to get out only had the effect of making the bag roll about on the floor, or occasionally jump in the air—an exhibition that attracted a curious crowd of onlookers on the Dehra railway platform.

Toto remained in the bag as far as Saharanpur, but while Grandfather was producing his ticket at the railway turnstile, Toto managed to get his hands through the aperture where the bag was tied, loosened the strings, and suddenly thrust his head through the opening.

The poor ticket-collector was visibly alarmed; but with great presence of mind, and much to the annoyance of Grandfather, he said, ‘Sir, you have a dog with you. You’ll have to pay for it accordingly.’

In vain did Grandfather take Toto out of the bag to prove that a monkey was not a dog or even a quadruped. The ticket-collector, now thoroughly annoyed, insisted on classing Toto as a dog; and three rupees and four annas had to be handed over as his fare. Then Grandfather, out of sheer spite, took out from his pocket a live tortoise that he happened to have with him, and said, ‘What must I pay for this, since you charge for all animals?’

The ticket-collector retreated a pace or two; then advancing again with caution, he subjected the tortoise to a grave and knowledgeable stare.

‘No ticket is necessary, sir,’ he finally declared. ‘There is no charge for insects.’

When we discovered that Toto’s favourite pastime was catching mice, we were able to persuade Grandmother to let us keep him. The unsuspecting mice would emerge from their holes at night to pick up any corn left over by our pony; and to get at it they had to run the gauntlet of Toto’s section of the stable. He knew this, and would pretend to be asleep, keeping, however, one eye open. A mouse would make a rush—in vain; Toto, as swift as a cat, would have his paws upon him … Grandmother decided to put his talents to constructive use by tying him up one night in the larder, where a guerrilla-band of mice were playing havoc with our food supplies.

Toto was removed from his comfortable bed of straw in the stable, and chained up in the larder, beneath shelves of jam-pots and other delicacies. The night was a long and miserable one for Toto, who must have wondered what he had done to deserve such treatment. The mice scampered about the place, while he, most uncatlike, lay curled up in a soup tureen, trying to snatch some sleep. At dawn, the mice returned to
their holes; Toto awoke, scratched himself, emerged from the soup tureen, and looked about for something to eat. The jam-pots attracted his notice, and it did not take him long to prise open the covers. Grandmother’s treasured jams—she had made most of them herself—disappeared in an amazingly short time. I was present when she opened the door to see how many mice Toto had caught. Even the rain-god Indra could not have looked more terrible when planning a thunderstorm; and the imprecations Grandmother hurled at Toto were surprising coming from someone who had been brought up in the genteel Victorian manner.

The monkey was later reinstated in Grandmother’s favour. A great treat for him on cold winter evenings was the large bowl of warm water provided by Grandmother for his bath. He would bathe himself, first of all gingerly testing the temperature of the water with his fingers. Leisurably he would step into the bath, first one foot, then the other, as he had seen me doing, until he was completely sitting down in it. Once comfortable, he would take the soap in his hands or feet, and rub himself all over. When he found the water becoming cold, he would get out and run as quickly as he could to the fire, where his coat soon dried. If anyone laughed at him during this performance, he would look extremely hurt, and refuse to go on with his ablutions.

One day Toto nearly succeeded in boiling himself to death. The large kitchen kettle had been left on the fire to boil for tea; and Toto, finding himself for a few minutes alone with it, decided to take the lid off. On discovering that the water inside was warm, he got into the kettle with the intention of having a bath, and sat down with his head protruding from the opening. This was very pleasant for some time, until the water began to simmer. Toto raised himself a little, but finding it cold outside, sat down again. He continued standing and sitting for some time, not having the courage to face the cold air. Had it not been for the timely arrival of Grandmother, he would have been cooked alive.

If there is a part of the brain especially devoted to mischief, that part must have been largely developed in Toto. He was always tearing things to bits, and whenever one of my aunts came near him, he made every effort to get hold of her dress and tear a hole in it. A variety of aunts frequently came to stay with my grandparents, but during Toto’s stay they limited their visits to a day or two, much to Grandfather’s relief and Grandmother’s annoyance.

Toto, however, took a liking to Grandmother, inspite of the beatings he often received from her. Whenever she allowed him the liberty, he would lie quietly in her lap instead of scrambling all over her as he did on most people.
Toto lived with us over a year, but the following winter, after too much bathing, he caught pneumonia. Grandmother wrapped him in flannel, and Grandfather gave him a diet of chicken soup and Irish stew; but Toto did not recover. He was buried in the garden, under his favourite mango tree.

Perhaps it was just as well that Toto was no longer with us when Grandfather brought home the python, or his demise might have been less conventional. Small monkeys are a favourite delicacy with pythons.

Grandmother was tolerant of most birds and animals, but she drew the line at reptiles. She said they made her blood run cold. Even a handsome, sweet-tempered chameleon had to be given up. Grandfather should have known that there was little chance of his being allowed to keep the python. It was about four feet long, a young one, when Grandfather bought it from a snake-charmer for six rupees, impressing the bazaar crowd by slinging it across his shoulders and walking home with it. Grandmother nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled round Grandfather’s throat.

‘You’ll be strangled!’ she cried. ‘Get rid of it at once!’

‘Nonsense,’ said Grandfather. ‘He’s only a young fellow. He’ll soon get used to us.’

‘Will he, indeed?’ said Grandmother. ‘But I have no intention of getting used to him. You know quite well that your cousin Mabel is coming to stay with us tomorrow. She’ll leave us the minute she knows there’s a snake in the house.’

‘Well, perhaps we ought to show it to her as soon as she arrives,’ said Grandfather, who did not look forward to fussy Aunt Mabel’s visits any more than I did.

‘You’ll do no such thing,’ said Grandmother.

‘Well, I can’t let it loose in the garden,’ said Grandfather with an innocent expression. ‘It might find its way into the poultry house, and then where would we be?’

‘How exasperating you are!’ grumbled Grandmother. ‘Lock the creature in the bathroom, go back to the bazaar and find the man you bought it from, and get him to come and take it back.’

In my awestruck presence, Grandfather had to take the python into the bathroom, where he placed it in a steep-sided tin tub. Then he hurried off to the bazaar to look for the snake-charmer, while Grandmother paced anxiously up and down the veranda. When he returned looking crestfallen, we knew he hadn’t been able to find the man.
‘You had better take it away yourself,’ said Grandmother, in a relentless mood. ‘Leave it in the jungle across the river-bed.’

‘All right, but let me give it a feed first,’ said Grandfather; and producing a plucked chicken, he took it into the bathroom, followed, in single file, by me, Grandmother, and a curious cook and gardener.

Grandfather threw open the door and stepped into the bathroom. I peeped round his legs, while the others remained well behind. We couldn’t see the python anywhere. ‘He’s gone,’ announced Grandfather. ‘He must have felt hungry.’

‘I hope he isn’t too hungry,’ I said. ‘We left the window open,’ said Grandfather, looking embarrassed.

A careful search was made of the house, the kitchen, the garden, the stable and the poultry shed; but the python couldn’t be found anywhere. ‘He’ll be well away by now,’ said Grandfather reassuringly. ‘I certainly hope so,’ said Grandmother, who was half way between anxiety and relief.

Aunt Mabel arrived next day for a three-week visit, and for a couple of days Grandfather and I were a little apprehensive in case the python made a sudden reappearance; but on the third day, when he didn’t show up, we felt confident that he had gone for good.

And then, towards evening, we were startled by a scream from the garden. Seconds later, Aunt Mabel came flying up the veranda steps, looking as though she had seen a ghost.

‘In the guava tree!’ she gasped. ‘I was reaching for a guava, when I saw it staring at me. The look in its eyes! As though it would devour me——’

‘Calm down, my dear,’ urged Grandmother, sprinkling her with eau-de-cologne. ‘Calm down and tell us what you saw.’

‘A snake!’ sobbed Aunt Mabel. ‘A great boa-constrictor. It must have been twenty feet long! In the guava tree. Its eyes were terrible. It looked at me in such a queer way…..’

My grandparents looked significantly at each other, and Grandfather said, ‘I’ll go out and kill it,’ and sheepishly taking hold of an umbrella, sallied out into the garden. But when he reached the guava tree, the python had disappeared.

‘Aunt Mabel must have frightened it away,’ I said. ‘Hush,’ said Grandfather. ‘We mustn’t speak of your aunt in that way.’ But his eyes were alive with laughter.
After this incident, the python began to make a series of appearances, often in the most unexpected places. Aunt Mabel had another fit of hysterics when she saw him admiring her from under a cushion. She packed her bags, and Grandmother made us intensify the hunt.

Next morning I saw the python curled up on the dressing-table, gazing at his reflection in the mirror. I went for Grandfather, but by the time we returned the python had moved elsewhere. A little later he was seen in the garden again. Then he was back on the dressing-table, admiring himself in the mirror. Evidently he had become enamoured with his own reflection. Grandfather observed that perhaps the attention he was receiving from everyone had made him a little conceited.

‘He’s trying to look better for Aunt Mabel,’ I said; a remark that I instantly regretted, because Grandmother overheard it, and brought the flat of her broad hand down on my head.

‘Well, now we know his weakness,’ said Grandfather.

‘Are you trying to be funny too?’ demanded Grandmother, looking her most threatening.

‘I only meant he was becoming very vain,’ said Grandfather hastily. ‘It should be easier to catch him now.’

He set about preparing a large cage with a mirror at one end. In the cage he left a juicy chicken and various other delicacies, and fitted up the opening with a trap-door. Aunt Mabel had already left by the time we had this trap ready, but we had to go on with the project because we couldn’t have the python prowling about the house indefinitely.

For a few days nothing happened, and then, as I was leaving for school one morning, I saw the python curled up in the cage. He had eaten everything left out for him, and was relaxing in front of the mirror with something resembling a smile on his face—if you can imagine a python smiling …. I lowered the trap-door gently, but the python took no notice; he was in raptures over his handsome reflection. Grandfather and the gardener put the cage in the pony-trap, and made a journey to the other side of the river-bed. They left the cage in the jungle, with the trap-door open.

‘He made no attempt to get out,’ said Grandfather later. ‘And I didn’t have the heart to take the mirror away. It’s the first time I’ve seen a snake fall in love.’

And the frogs have sung their old song in the mud …. This was Grandfather’s favourite quotation from Virgil, and he used it whenever we visited the rain-water pond behind the house where there were quantities of mud and frogs and the
occasional water buffalo. Grandfather had once brought a number of frogs into the house. He had put them in a glass jar, left them on a window-sill, and then forgotten all about them. At about four o’clock in the morning the entire household was awakened by a loud and fearful noise, and Grandmother and several nervous relatives gathered in their night-clothes on the veranda. Their timidity changed to fury when they discovered that the ghastly sounds had come from Grandfather’s frogs. Seeing the dawn breaking, the frogs had with one accord begun their morning song.

Grandmother wanted to throw the frogs, bottle and all, out of the window; but Grandfather said that if he gave the bottle a good shaking, the frogs would remain quiet. He was obliged to keep awake, in order to shake the bottle whenever the frogs showed any inclination to break into song. Fortunately for all concerned, the next day a servant took the top off the bottle to see what was inside. The sight of several big frogs so startled him that he ran off without replacing the cover; the frogs jumped out and presumably found their way back to the pond.

It became a habit with me to visit the pond on my own, in order to explore its banks and shallows. Taking off my shoes, I would wade into the muddy water up to my knees, to pluck the water-lilies that floated on the surface.

One day I found the pond already occupied by several buffaloes. Their keeper, a boy a little older than me, was swimming about in the middle. Instead of climbing out on to the bank, he would pull himself up on the back of one of his buffaloes, stretch his naked brown body out on the animal’s glistening wet hide, and start singing to himself.

When he saw me staring at him from across the pond, he smiled, showing gleaming white teeth in a dark, sun-burnished face. He invited me to join him in a swim. I told him I couldn’t swim, and he offered to teach me. I hesitated, knowing that Grandmother held strict and old-fashioned views about mixing with village children; but, deciding that Grandfather—who sometimes smoked a hookah on the sly—would get me out of any trouble that might occur, I took the bold step of accepting the boy’s offer. Once taken, the step did not seem so bold.

He dived off the back of his buffalo, and swam across to me. And I, having removed my clothes, followed his instructions until I was floundering about among the water-lilies. His name was Ramu, and he promised to give me swimming lessons every afternoon; and so it was during the afternoons—especially summer afternoons when everyone was a sleep—that we usually met. Before long I was able to swim across the pond to sit with Ramu astride a contented buffalo, the great beast standing like an island in the middle of a muddy ocean.
Sometimes we would try racing the buffaloes, Ramu and I sitting on different mounts. But they were lazy creatures, and would leave one comfortable spot only to look for another; or, if they were in no mood for games, would roll over on their backs, taking us with them into the mud and green slime of the pond. Emerging in shades of green and khaki, I would slip into the house through the bathroom, bathing under the tap before getting into my clothes.

One afternoon Ramu and I found a small tortoise in the mud, sitting over a hole in which it had laid several eggs. Ramu kept the eggs for his dinner, and I presented the tortoise to Grandfather. He had a weakness for tortoises, and was pleased with this addition to his menagerie, giving it a large tub of water all to itself, with an island of rocks in the middle. The tortoise, however, was always getting out of the tub and wandering about the house. As it seemed able to look after itself quite well, we did not interfere. If one of the dogs bothered it too much, it would draw its head and legs into its shell, and defy all their attempts at rough play.

Ramu came from a family of bonded labourers, and had received no schooling. But he was well-versed in folklore, and knew a great deal about birds and animals.

‘Many birds are sacred,’ said Ramu, as we watched a bluejay swoop down from a peepul tree and carry off a grasshopper. He told me that both the bluejay and the god Shiva were called Nilkanth. Shiva had a blue throat, like the bird, because out of compassion for the human race he had swallowed a deadly poison which was intended to destroy the world. Keeping the poison in his throat, he did not let it go any further.

‘Are squirrels sacred?’ I asked, seeing one sprint down the trunk of the peepul tree.

‘Oh yes, Lord Krishna loved squirrels,’ said Ramu. ‘He would take them in his arms and stroke them with his long fingers. That is why they have four dark lines down their backs from head to tail. Krishna was very dark, and the lines are the marks of his fingers.

Both Ramu and Grandfather were of the opinion that we should be more gentle with birds and animals, and should not kill so many of them.

‘It is also important that we respect them,’ said Grandfather. ‘We must acknowledge their rights. Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to survive, because we are trying to destroy both them and their forests. They have to keep moving as the trees disappear.’

This was especially true of the forests near Dehra, where the tiger and the pheasant and the spotted deer were beginning to disappear.
Ramu and I spent many long summer afternoons at the pond. I still remember him with affection, though we never saw each other again after I left Dehra. He could not read or write, so we were unable to keep in touch. And neither his people, nor mine, knew of our friendship. The buffaloes and frogs had been our only confidants. They had accepted us as part of their own world, their muddy but comfortable pond. And when I left Dehra, both they and Ramu must have assumed that I would return again like the birds.
The faint queasiness I always feel towards the end of a journey probably has its origin in that first homecoming after my father’s death.

It was the winter of ’44—yes, a long time ago—and the train was running through the thick sal forests near Dehra, bringing me at every click of the rails nearer to the mother I hadn’t seen for four years and the stepfather I had seen just once or twice before my parents were divorced.

I was eleven and I was coming home to Dehra.

Three years earlier, after the separation, I had gone to live with my father. We were very happy together. He was serving in the RAF, at New Delhi, and we lived in a large tent somewhere near Humayun’s tomb. The area is now a very busy part of urban Delhi but in those days, it was still a wilderness of scrub jungle, where black buck and Nilgai roamed freely. We took long walks together, exploring the ruins of old tombs and forts; went to the pictures (George Form by comedies were special favourites of mine); collected stamps; bought books (my father had taught me to read and write before I started going to school); and made plans for going to England when the war was over.

Six months of bliss, even though it was summer and there weren’t any fans, only a thick *khus* reed curtain which had to be splashed with water every hour by a *bhisti* (water-carrier) who did the rounds of similar tents with his goat-skin water bag. I remember the tender refreshing fragrance of the *khus*, and also the smell of damp earth outside, where the water had spilt.

A happy time. But it had to end. My father’s periodic bouts of malarial fever resulted in his having to enter hospital for a week. The *bhisti’s* small son came to stay with me at night, and during the day I took my meals with an Anglo-Indian family across the road.

I would have been quite happy to continue with this arrangement whenever my father was absent, but someone at Air Headquarters must have advised him to put me
in a boarding school.

Reluctantly he came to the decision that this would be the best thing—‘until the war is over’—and in the June of ’43 he took me to Shimla, where I was incarcerated in a preparatory school for boys.

This is not the story of my life at boarding school. It might easily have been a public school in England; it did in fact pride itself on being the ‘Eton of the East’. The traditions—such as ragging and flogging, compulsory games and chapel attendance, prefects larger than life, and Honour Boards for everything from school captaincy to choir membership—had all apparently been borrowed from Tom Brown’s Schooldays.

My father wrote to me regularly, and his letters were the things I looked forward to more than anything else. I went to him for the winter holidays, and the following summer he came to Shimla during my mid-term break and took me out for the duration of the holidays. We stayed in a hotel called Craig-Dhu, on a spur north of Jacko Hill. It was an idyllic week: long walks; stories about phantom rickshaws; ice-creams in the sun; browsings in bookshops; more plans. ‘We will go to England next year.’

School seemed a stupid and heartless place after my father had gone away. He had been transferred to Calcutta and he wasn’t keeping well there. Malaria again. And then jaundice. But his last letter sounded quite cheerful. He’d been selling part of his valuable stamp collection so as to have enough money for the fares to England.

One day my class-teacher sent for me.

‘I want to talk to you, Bond,’ he said. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

I knew immediately that something was wrong.

We took the path that went through the deodar forest, past Council Rock where Scout meetings were held. As soon as my unfortunate teacher (no doubt cursing the Headmaster for having given him this unpleasant task) started on the theme of ‘God wanting your father in a higher and better place’, as though there could be any better place than Jacko Hill in mid-summer, I knew my father was dead, and burst into tears.

They let me stay in the school hospital for a few days until I felt better. The Headmaster visited me there and took away the pile of my father’s letters that I’d kept beside me.

‘Your father’s letters. You might lose them. Why not leave them with me? Then at the end of the year, before you go home, you can come and collect them.’

Unwillingly I gave him the letters. He told me he’d heard from my mother that I would be going home to her at the end of the year. He seemed surprised that I evinced no interest in this prospect.
At the end of the year, the day before school closed, I went to the HM’s office and asked for my letters.

‘What letters?’ he said. His desk was piled with papers and correspondence, and he was irritated by my interruption.

‘My father’s letters,’ I explained. ‘I gave them to you to keep for me, Sir—when he died …’

‘Letters. Are you sure you gave them to me?’

He grew more irritated. ‘You must be mistaken, Bond. Why should I want to keep your father’s letters?’

‘I don’t know, sir. You said I could collect them before going home.’

‘Look, I don’t remember any letters and I’m very busy just now, so run along. I’m sure you’re mistaken, but if I find your letters, I’ll send them to you.’

I don’t suppose he meant to be unkind, but he was the first man who aroused in me feelings of hate ….

As the train drew into Dehra, I looked out of the window to see if there was anyone on the platform waiting to receive me. The station was crowded enough, as most railway stations are in India, with overloaded travellers, shouting coolies, stray dogs, stray stationmasters …. Pandemonium broke loose as the train came to a halt and people debouched from the carriages. I was thrust on the platform with my tin trunk and small attache case. I sat on the trunk and waited for someone to find me.

Slowly the crowd melted away. I was left with one elderly coolie who was too feeble to carry heavy luggage and had decided that my trunk was just the right size and weight for his head and shoulders. I waited another ten minutes, but no representative of my mother or step-father appeared. I permitted the coolie to lead me out of the station to the tonga stand.

Those were the days when everyone, including high-ranking officials, went about in tongas. Dehra had just one taxi. I was quite happy sitting beside a rather smelly, paan-spitting tonga-driver, while his weary, underfed pony clip-clopped along the quiet tree-lined roads.

Dehra was always a good place for trees. The valley soil is very fertile, the rainfall fairly heavy; almost everything grows there, if given the chance. The roads were lined with neem and mango trees, eucalyptus, Persian lilac, jacaranda, amaltas (laburnum) and many others. In the gardens of the bungalows were mangoes, litchis and guavas; sometimes jackfruit and papaya. I did not notice all these trees at once; I came to know them as time passed.
The tonga first took me to my grandmother’s house. I was under the impression that my mother still lived there.

A lovely, comfortable bungalow that spread itself about the grounds in an easygoing, old-fashioned way. There was even smoke coming from the chimneys, reminding me of the smoke from my grandfather’s pipe. When I was eight, I had spent several months there with my grandparents. In retrospect it had been an idyllic interlude. But Grandfather was dead. Grandmother lived alone.

White-haired, but still broad in the face and even broader behind, she was astonished to see me getting down from the tonga.

‘Didn’t anyone meet you at the station?’ she asked.

I shook my head. Grandmother said: ‘Your mother doesn’t live here any more. You can come in and wait, but she may be worried about you, so I’d better take you to her place. Come on, help me up into the tonga. I might have known it would be a white horse. It always makes me nervous sitting in a tonga behind a white horse.’

‘Why, Granny?’

‘I don’t know, I suppose white horses are nervous, too. Anyway, they are always trying to topple me out. Not so fast, driver!’ she called out, as the tonga-man cracked his whip and the pony changed from a slow shuffle to a brisk trot.

It took us about twenty-five minutes to reach my stepfather’s house which was in the Dalanwala area, not far from the dry bed of the seasonal Rispana river. My grandmother, seeing that I was in need of moral support, got down with me, while the tonga-driver carried my bedding roll and tin trunk on to the veranda. The front door was bolted from inside. We had to knock on it repeatedly and call out, before it was opened by a servant who did not look pleased at being disturbed. When he saw my grandmother he gave her a deferential salaam, then gazed at me with open curiosity.

‘Where’s the memsahib?’ asked grandmother.

‘Out,’ said the servant.

‘I can see that, but where have they gone?’

‘They went yesterday to Motichur, for shikar. They will be back this evening.’

Grandmother looked upset, but motioned to the servant to bring in my things.

‘Weren’t they expecting the boy?’ she asked. ‘Yes,’ he said looking at me again. ‘But they said he would be arriving tomorrow.’

‘They’d forgotten the date,’ said Grandmother in a huff. ‘Anyway, you can unpack and have a wash and change your clothes.’

Turning to the servant, she asked, ‘Is there any lunch?’
‘I will make lunch,’ he said. He was staring at me again, and I felt uneasy with his eyes on me. He was tall and swarthy, with oily, jet-black hair and a thick moustache. A heavy scar ran down his left cheek, giving him a rather sinister appearance. He wore a torn shirt and dirty pyjamas. His broad, heavy feet were wet. They left marks on the uncarpeted floor.

A baby was crying in the next room, and presently a woman (who turned out to be the cook’s wife) appeared in the doorway, jogging the child in her arms.

‘They’ve left the baby behind, too,’ said Grandmother, becoming more and more irate. ‘He is your young brother. Only six months old.’ I hadn’t been told anything about a younger brother. The discovery that I had one came as something of a shock. I wasn’t prepared for a baby brother, least of all a baby half-brother. I examined the child without much enthusiasm. He looked healthy enough and he cried with gusto.

‘He’s a beautiful baby,’ said Grandmother. ‘Well, I’ve got work to do. The servants will look after you. You can come and see me in a day or two. You’ve grown since I last saw you. And you’re getting pimples.’

This reference to my appearance did not displease me as Grandmother never indulged in praise. For her to have observed my pimples indicated that she was fond of me.

The tonga-driver was waiting for her. ‘I suppose I’ll have to use the same tonga,’ she said. ‘Whenever I need a tonga, they disappear, except for the ones with white ponies …. When your mother gets back, tell her I want to see her. Shikar, indeed. An infant to look after, and they’ve gone shooting.’

Grandmother settled herself in the tonga, nodded in response to the cook’s salaam, and took a tight grip of the armrests of her seat. The driver flourished his whip and the pony set off at the same listless, unhurried trot, while my grandmother, feeling quite certain that she was going to be hurtled to her doom by a wild white pony, set her teeth and clung tenaciously to the tonga seat. I was sorry to see her go.

My mother and stepfather returned in the evening from their hunting trip with a pheasant which was duly handed over to the cook, whose name was Mangal Singh. My mother gave me a perfunctory kiss. I think she was pleased to see me, but I was accustomed to a more intimate caress from my father, and the strange reception I had received made me realize the extent of my loss. Boarding school life had been routine. Going home was something that I had always looked forward to. But going home had meant my father, and now he had vanished and I was left quite desolate.
I suppose if one is present when a loved one dies, or sees him dead and laid out and later buried, one is convinced of the finality of the thing and finds it easier to adapt to the changed circumstances. But when you hear of a death, a father’s death, and have only the faintest idea of the manner of his dying, it is rather a lot for the imagination to cope with—especially when the imagination is a small boy’s. There being no tangible evidence of my father’s death, it was, for me, not a death but a vanishing. And although this enabled me to remember him as a living, smiling, breathing person, it meant that I was not wholly reconciled to his death, and subconsciously expected him to turn up (as he often did, when I most needed him) and deliver me from an unpleasant situation.

My stepfather barely noticed me. The first thing he did on coming into the house was to pour himself a whisky and soda. My mother, after inspecting the baby, did likewise. I was left to unpack and settle in my room.

I was fortunate in having my own room. I was as desirous of my own privacy as much as my mother and stepfather were desirous of theirs. My stepfather, a local businessman, was ready to put up with me provided I did not get in the way. And, in a different way, I was ready to put up with him, provided he left me alone. I was even willing that my mother should leave me alone.

There was a big window to my room, and I opened it to the evening breeze, and gazed out on to the garden, a rather unkempt place where marigolds and a sort of wild blue everlasting grew rampant among the litchi trees.
What’s Your Dream?

An old man, a beggar man, bent double, with a flowing white beard and piercing grey eyes, stopped on the road on the other side of the garden wall and looked up at me, where I perched on the branch of a litchi tree.

‘What’s your dream?’ he asked.

It was a startling question coming from that raggedy old man on the street; even more startling that it should have been made in English. English-speaking beggars were a rarity in those days.

‘What’s your dream?’ he repeated.

‘I don’t remember,’ I said. ‘I don’t think I had a dream last night.’

‘That’s not what I mean. You know it isn’t what I mean. I can see you’re a dreamer. It’s not the litchi season, but you sit in that tree all afternoon, dreaming.’

‘I just like sitting here,’ I said. I refused to admit that I was a dreamer. Other boys didn’t dream, they had catapults.

‘A dream, my boy, is what you want most in life. Isn’t there something that you want more than anything else?’

‘Yes,’ I said promptly. ‘A room of my own.’

‘Ah! A room of your own, a tree of your own, it’s the same thing. Not many people can have their own rooms, you know. Not in a land as crowded as ours.’

‘Just a small room.’

‘And what kind of room do you live in at present?’

‘It’s a big room, but I have to share it with my brothers and sisters and even my aunt when she visits.’

‘I see. What you really want is freedom. Your own tree, your own room, your own small place in the sun.’

‘Yes, that’s all.’

‘That’s all? That’s everything! When you have all that, you’ll have found your dream.’
‘Tell me how to find it!’
‘There’s no magic formula, my friend. If I was a godman, would I be wasting my
time here with you? You must work for your dream, and move towards it all the time,
and discard all those things that come in the way of finding it, and then, if you don’t
expect too much too quickly, you’ll find your freedom, your room of your own. The
difficult time comes afterwards.’
‘Afterwards?’
‘Yes, because it’s so easy to lose it all, to let someone take it away from you. Or
you become greedy, or careless and start taking everything for granted, and—Poof!—
the dream has gone, vanished!’
‘How do you know all this?’ I asked
‘Because I had my dream and lost it.’
‘Did you lose everything?’
‘Yes, just look at me now, my friend. Do I look like a king or a godman? I had
everything I wanted, but then I wanted more and more …. You get your room, and
then you want a building, and when you have your building you want your own
territory, and when you have your own territory you want your own kingdom—and all
the time it’s getting harder to keep everything. And when you lose it—in the end, all
kingdoms are lost—you don’t even have your room any more.’
‘Did you have a kingdom?’
‘Something like that …. Follow your own dream, boy, but don’t take other people’s
dreams, don’t stand in anyone’s way, don’t take from another man his room or his
faith or his song.’ And he turned and shuffled away, intoning the following verse,
which I have never heard elsewhere, so it must have been his own.

Live long, my friend, be wise and strong,
But do not take from any man his song.

I remained in the litchi tree, pondering his wisdom and wondering how a man so
wise could be so poor. Perhaps he became wise afterwards. Anyway, he was free, and
I was free, and I went back to the house and demanded (and got) a room of my own.
Freedom, I was beginning to realize, is something you have to insist upon.
The Last Tonga Ride

It was a warm spring day in Dehradun, and the walls of the bungalow were aflame with flowering bougainvillaea. The papayas were ripening. The scent of sweetpeas drifted across the garden. Grandmother sat in an easy chair in a shady corner of the veranda, her knitting needles clicking away, her head nodding now and then. She was knitting a pullover for my father. ‘Delhi has cold winters,’ she had said; and although the winter was still eight months away, she had set to work on getting our woollens ready.

In the Kathiawar states, touched by the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, it had never been cold but Dehra lies at the foot of the first range of the Himalayas.

Grandmother’s hair was white, her eyes were not very strong but her fingers moved quickly with the needles and the needles kept clicking all morning.

When Grandmother wasn’t looking, I picked geranium leaves, crushed them between my fingers and pressed them to my nose.

I had been in Dehra with my grandmother for almost a month and I had not seen my father during this time. We had never before been separated for so long. He wrote to me every week, and sent me books and picture postcards; and I would walk to the end of the road to meet the postman as early as possible, to see if there was any mail for us.

We heard the jingle of tonga-bells at the gate, and a familiar horse-buggy came rattling up the drive.

‘I’ll see who’s come,’ I said, and ran down the veranda steps and across the garden.

It was Bansi Lal in his tonga. There were many tongas and tonga-drivers in Dehra but Bansi was my favourite driver. He was young and handsome and he always wore a clean white shirt and pyjamas. His pony, too, was bigger and faster than the other tonga ponies.

Bansi didn’t have a passenger, so I asked him, ‘What have you come for, Bansi?’
'Your grandmother sent for me, dost.' He did not call me ‘chota sahib’ or ‘baba’, but ‘dost’ and this made me feel much more important. Not every small boy could boast of a tonga-driver for his friend!

‘Where are you going, Granny?’ I asked, after I had run back to the veranda.

‘I’m going to the bank.’

‘Can I come too?’

‘Whatever for? What will you do in the bank?’

‘Oh, I won’t come inside, I’ll sit in the tonga with Bansi.’

‘Come along, then.’

We helped Grandmother into the back seat of the tonga, and then I joined Bansi in the driver’s seat. He said something to his pony, and the pony set off at a brisk trot, out of the gate and down the road.

‘Now, not too fast, Bansi,’ said Grandmother, who didn’t like anything that went too fast—tonga, motor car, train, or bullock-cart.

‘Fast?’ said Bansi. ‘Have no fear, Memsahib. This pony has never gone fast in its life. Even if a bomb went off behind us, we could go no faster. I have another pony, which I use for racing when customers are in a hurry. This pony is reserved for you, Memsahib.’

There was no other pony, but Grandmother did not know this, and was mollified by the assurance that she was riding in the slowest tonga in Dehra.

A ten-minute ride brought us to the bazaar. Grandmother’s bank, the Allahabad Bank, stood near the clock tower. She was gone for about half-an-hour and during this period Bansi and I sauntered about in front of the shops. The pony had been left with some green stuff to munch.

‘Do you have any money on you?’ asked Bansi.

‘Four annas,’ I said.

‘Just enough for two cups of tea,’ said Bansi, putting his arm round my shoulders and guiding me towards a tea stall. The money passed from my palm to his.

‘You can have tea, if you like,’ I said. ‘I’ll have a lemonade.’

‘So be it, friend. A tea and a lemonade, and be quick about it,’ said Bansi to the boy in the teashop and presently the drinks were set before us and Bansi was making a sound rather like his pony when it drank, while I burped my way through some green, gaseous stuff that tasted more like soap than lemonade.

When Grandmother came out of the bank, she looked pensive, and did not talk much during the ride back to the house except to tell me to behave myself when I
leant over to pat the pony on its rump. After paying off Bansi, she marched straight indoors.

‘When will you come again?’ I asked Bansi.

‘When my services are required, *dost*. I have to make a living, you know. But I tell you what, since we are friends, the next time I am passing this way after leaving a fare, I will jingle my bells at the gate and if you are free and would like a ride—a fast ride!—you can join me. It won’t cost you anything. Just bring some money for a cup of tea.’

‘All right—since we are friends,’ I said.

‘Since we are friends.’

And touching the pony very lightly with the handle of his whip, he sent the tonga rattling up the drive and out of the gate. I could hear Bansi singing as the pony cantered down the road.

Ayah was waiting for me in the bedroom, her hands resting on her broad hips—sure sign of an approaching storm.

‘So you went off to the bazaar without telling me,’ she said. (It wasn’t enough that I had Grandmother’s permission!) ‘And all the time I’ve been waiting to give you your bath.’

‘It’s too late now, isn’t it?’ I asked hopefully.

‘No, it isn’t. There’s still an hour left for lunch. Off with your clothes!’

While I undressed, Ayah berated me for keeping the company of tonga-drivers like Bansi. I think she was a little jealous.

‘He is a rogue, that man. He drinks, gambles, and smokes opium. He has T.B. and other terrible diseases. So don’t you be too friendly with him, understand, baba?’

I nodded my head sagely but said nothing. I thought Ayah was exaggerating, as she always did about people, and besides, I had no intention of giving up free tonga rides.

As my father had told me, Dehra was a good place for trees, and Grandmother’s house was surrounded by several kinds—peepul, neem, mango, jackfruit, papaya, and an ancient banyan tree. Some of the trees had been planted by my father and grandfather.

‘How old is the jackfruit tree?’ I asked grandmother.

‘Now let me see,’ said Grandmother, looking very thoughtful. ‘I should remember the jackfruit tree. Oh yes, your grandfather put it down in 1927. It was during the rainy season. I remember, because it was your father’s birthday and we celebrated it by planting a tree. 14 July 1927. Long before you were born!’
The banyan tree grew behind the house. Its spreading branches, which hung to the ground and took root again, formed a number of twisting passageways in which I liked to wander. The tree was older than the house, older than my grandparents, as old as Dehra. I could hide myself in its branches behind thick, green leaves and spy on the world below.

It was an enormous tree, about sixty feet high, and the first time I saw it I trembled with excitement because I had never seen such a marvellous tree before. I approached it slowly, even cautiously, as I wasn’t sure the tree wanted my friendship. It looked as though it had many secrets. There were sounds and movement in the branches but I couldn’t see who or what made the sounds.

The tree made the first move, the first overture of friendship. It allowed a leaf to fall.

The leaf brushed against my face as it floated down, but before it could reach the ground I caught and held it. I studied the leaf, running my fingers over its smooth, glossy texture. Then I put out my hand and touched the rough bark of the tree and this felt good to me. So I removed my shoes and socks as people do when they enter a holy place; and finding first a foothold and then a handhold on that broad trunk, I pulled myself up with the help of the tree’s aerial roots.

As I climbed, it seemed as though someone was helping me; invisible hands, the hands of the spirit in the tree, touched me and helped me climb.

But although the tree wanted me, there were others who were disturbed and alarmed by my arrival. A pair of parrots suddenly shot out of a hole in the trunk and, with shrill cries, flew across the garden—flashes of green and red and gold. A squirrel looked out from behind a branch, saw me, and went scurrying away to inform his friends and relatives.

I climbed higher, looked up, and saw a red beak poised above my head. I shrank away, but the hornbill made no attempt to attack me. He was relaxing in his home, which was a great hole in the tree trunk. Only the bird’s head and great beak were showing. He looked at me in rather a bored way, drowsily opening and shutting his eyes.

‘So many creatures live here,’ I said to myself. ‘I hope none of them are dangerous!’

At that moment the hornbill lunged at a passing cricket. Bill and tree trunk met with a loud and resonant ‘Tonk!’

I was so startled that I nearly fell out of the tree. But it was a difficult tree to fall out of! It was full of places where one could sit or even lie down. So I moved away from
the hornbill, crawled along a branch which had sent out supports, and so moved quite a distance from the main body of the tree. I left its cold, dark depths for an area penetrated by shafts of sunlight.

No one could see me. I lay flat on the broad branch hidden by a screen of leaves. People passed by on the road below. A sahib in a sun-helmet. His memsahib twirling a coloured silk sun-umbrella. Obviously she did not want to get too brown and be mistaken for a country-born person. Behind them, a pram wheeled along by a nanny.

Then there were a number of Indians; some in white dhotis, some in western clothes, some in loincloths. Some with baskets on their heads. Others with coolies to carry their baskets for them.

A cloud of dust, the blare of a horn, and down the road, like an out-of-condition dragon, came the latest Morris touring car. Then cyclists. Then a man with a basket of papayas balanced on his head. Following him, a man with a performing monkey. This man rattled a little hand-drum, and children followed man and monkey along the road. They stopped in the shade of a mango tree on the other side of the road. The little red monkey wore a frilled dress and a baby’s bonnet. It danced for the children, while the man sang and played his drum.

The clip-clop of a tonga pony, and Bansi’s tonga came rattling down the road. I called down to him and he reined in with a shout of surprise, and looked up into the branches of the banyan tree.

‘What are you doing up there?’ he cried.
‘Hiding from Grandmother,’ I said.
‘And when are you coming for that ride?’
‘On Tuesday afternoon,’ I said.
‘Why not today?’
‘Ayah won’t let me. But she has Tuesdays off.’
Bansi spat red paan-juice across the road. ‘Your ayah is jealous,’ he said.
‘I know,’ I said. ‘Women are always jealous, aren’t they? I suppose it’s because she doesn’t have a tonga.’

‘It’s because she doesn’t have a tonga-driver,’ said Bansi, grinning up at me. ‘Never mind. I’ll come on Tuesday—that’s the day after tomorrow, isn’t it?’

I nodded down to him, and then started backing along my branch, because I could hear Ayah calling in the distance. Bansi leant forward and smacked his pony across the rump, and the tonga shot forward.

‘What were you doing up there?’ asked Ayah a little later.
‘I was watching a snake cross the road,’ I said. I knew she couldn’t resist talking about snakes. There weren’t as many in Dehra as there had been in Kathiawar and she was thrilled that I had seen one.

‘Was it moving towards you or away from you?’ she asked.

‘It was going away.’

Ayah’s face clouded over. ‘That means poverty for the beholder,’ she said gloomily.

Later, while scrubbing me down in the bathroom, she began to air all her prejudices, which included drunkards (‘they die quickly, anyway’), misers (‘they get murdered sooner or later’) and tonga-drivers (‘they have all the vices’).

‘You are a very lucky boy,’ she said suddenly, peering closely at my tummy.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘You just said I would be poor because I saw a snake going the wrong way.’

‘Well, you won’t be poor for long. You have a mole on your tummy, and that’s very lucky. And there is one under your armpit, which means you will be famous. Do you have one on the neck? No, thank God! A mole on the neck is the sign of a murderer!’

‘Do you have any moles?’ I asked.

Ayah nodded seriously, and pulling her sleeve up to her shoulder, showed me a large mole high on her arm.

‘What does that mean?’ I asked.

‘It means a life of great sadness,’ said Ayah gloomily.

‘Can I touch it?’ I asked.

‘Yes, touch it,’ she said, and taking my hand, she placed it against the mole.

‘It’s a nice mole,’ I said, wanting to make Ayah happy. ‘Can I kiss it?’

‘You can kiss it,’ said Ayah.

I kissed her on the mole.

‘That’s nice,’ she said.

Tuesday afternoon came at last, and as soon as Grandmother was asleep and Ayah had gone to the bazaar, I was at the gate, looking up and down the road for Bansi and his tonga. He was not long in coming. Before the tonga turned into the road, I could hear his voice, singing to the accompaniment of the carriage bells.

He reached down, took my hand, and hoisted me on to the seat beside him. Then we went off down the road at a steady jog-trot. It was only when we reached the outskirts of the town that Bansi encouraged his pony to greater efforts. He rose in his seat, leaned forward and slapped the pony across the haunches. From a brisk trot we
changed to a carefree canter. The tonga swayed from side to side. I clung to Bansi’s free arm, while he grinned at me, his mouth red with paan-juice.

‘Where shall we go, dost?’ he asked.
‘Nowhere,’ I said. ‘Anywhere.’
‘We’ll go to the river,’ said Bansi.

The ‘river’ was really a swift mountain stream that ran through the forests outside Dehra, joining the Ganga about fifteen miles away. It was almost dry during the winter and early summer: in flood during the monsoon.

The road out of Dehra was a gentle decline and soon we were rushing headlong through the tea gardens and eucalyptus forests, the pony’s hoofs striking sparks off the metalled road, the carriage wheels groaning and creaking so loudly that I feared one of them would come off and that we would all be thrown into a ditch or into the small canal that ran beside the road. We swept through mango groves, through guava and litchi orchards, past broad-leaved sal and shisham trees. Once in the sal forest, Bansi turned the tonga on to a rough cart-track, and we continued along it for about a furlong, until the road dipped down to the stream bed.

‘Let us go straight into the water,’ said Bansi. ‘You and I and the pony!’ And he drove the tonga straight into the middle of the stream, where the water came up to the pony’s knees.

‘I am not a great one for baths,’ said Bansi, ‘but the pony needs one, and why should a horse smell sweeter than its owner?’ Saying which, he flung off his clothes and jumped into the water.

‘Better than bathing under a tap!’ he cried, slapping himself on the chest and thighs. ‘Come down, dost, and join me!’

After some hesitation I joined him, but had some difficulty in keeping on my feet in the fast current. I grabbed at the pony’s tail, and hung on to it, while Bansi began sloshing water over the patient animal’s back.

After this, Bansi led both me and the pony out of the stream and together we gave the carriage a good washing down. I’d had a free ride and Bansi got the services of a free helper for the long overdue spring-cleaning of his tonga. After we had finished the job, he presented me with a packet of *aam papar*—a sticky toffee made from mango pulp—and for some time I tore at it as a dog tears at a bit of old leather. Then I felt drowsy and lay down on the brown, sun-warmed grass. Crickets and grasshoppers were telephoning each other from tree and bush and a pair of bluejays rolled, dived, and swooped acrobatically overhead.
Bansi had no watch. He looked at the sun and said, ‘It is past three. When will that ayah of yours be home? She is more frightening than your grandmother!’

‘She comes at four.’

‘Then we must hurry back. And don’t tell her where we’ve been, or I’ll never be able to come to your house again. Your grandmother’s one of my best customers.’

‘That means you’d be sorry if she died.’

‘I would indeed, my friend.’

Bansi raced the tonga back to town. There was very little motor traffic in those days, and tongas and bullock-carts were far more numerous than they are today.

We were back five minutes before Ayah returned. Before Bansi left, he promised to take me for another ride the following week.

The house in Dehra had to be sold. My father had not left any money; he had never realized that his health would deteriorate so rapidly from the malarial fevers which had grown in frequency; he was still planning for the future when he died. Now that my father had gone, Grandmother saw no point in staying on in India; there was nothing left in the bank and she needed money for our passages to England, so the house had to go. Dr Ghose, who had a thriving medical practice in Dehra, made her a reasonable offer, which she accepted.

Then things happened very quickly. Grandmother sold most of our belongings, because as she said, we wouldn’t be able to cope with a lot of luggage. The kabaris came in droves, buying up crockery, furniture, carpets and clocks at throwaway prices. Grandmother hated parting with some of her possessions, such as the carved giltwood mirror, her walnut-wood armchair, and her rosewood writing desk, but it was impossible to take them with us. They were carried away in a bullock-cart.

Ayah was very unhappy at first but cheered up when Grandmother got her a job with a tea-planter’s family in Assam. It was arranged that she could stay with us until we left Dehra.

We went at the end of September, just as the monsoon clouds broke up, scattered, and were driven away by soft breezes from the Himalayas. There was no time to revisit the island where my father and I had planted our trees. And in the urgency and excitement of the preparations for our departure, I forgot to recover my small treasures from the hole in the banyan tree. It was only when we were in Bansi’s tonga, on the way to the station, that I remembered my top, catapult, and Iron Cross. Too late! To go back for them would mean missing the train.

‘Hurry!’ urged Grandmother nervously. ‘We mustn’t be late for the train, Bansi.’
Bansi flicked the reins and shouted to his pony, and for once in her life
Grandmother submitted to being carried along the road at a brisk trot.
‘It’s five to nine,’ she said, ‘and the train leaves at nine.’
‘Do not worry, Memsahib. I have been taking you to the station for fifteen years,
and you have never missed a train!’
‘No,’ said Grandmother. ‘And I don’t suppose you’ll ever take me to the station
again, Bansi.’
‘Times are changing, Memsahib. Do you know that there is now a taxi—a motor
car—competing with the tongas of Dehra? You are lucky to be leaving. If you stay,
you will see me starve to death!’
‘We will all starve to death if we don’t catch that train,’ said Grandmother.
‘Do not worry about the train, it never leaves on time, and no one expects it to. If it
left at nine o’clock, everyone would miss it.’
Bansi was right. We arrived at the station at five minutes past nine, and rushed on
to the platform, only to find that the train had not yet arrived.
The platform was crowded with people waiting to catch the same train or to meet
people arriving on it. Ayah was there already, standing guard over a pile of
miscellaneous luggage. We sat down on our boxes and became part of the platform
life at an Indian railway station.
Moving among piles of bedding and luggage were sweating, cursing coolies;
vendors of magazines, sweetmeats, tea and betel-leaf preparations; also stray dogs,
stray people and sometimes a stray stationmaster. The cries of the vendors mixed with
the general clamour of the station and the shunting of a steam engine in the yards.
‘Tea, hot tea!’ Sweets, papads, hot stuff, cold drinks, toothpowder, pictures of film
stars, bananas, balloons, wooden toys, clay images of the gods. The platform had
become a bazaar.
Ayah was giving me all sorts of warnings.
‘Remember, baba, don’t lean out of the window when the train is moving. There
was that American boy who lost his head last year! And don’t eat rubbish at every
station between here and Bombay. And see that no strangers enter the compartment.
Mr Wilkins was murdered and robbed last year!’
The station bell clanged, and in the distance there appeared a big, puffing steam
engine, painted green and gold and black. A stray dog, with a lifetime’s experience of
trains, darted away across the railway lines. As the train came alongside the platform,
doors opened, window shutters fell, faces appeared in the openings, and even before
the train had come to a stop, people were trying to get in or out.
For a few moments there was chaos. The crowd surged backward and forward. No one could get out. No one could get in. A hundred people were leaving the train, two hundred were getting into it. No one wanted to give way.

The problem was solved by a man climbing out of a window. Others followed his example and the pressure at the doors eased and people started squeezing into their compartments.

Grandmother had taken the precaution of reserving berths in a first-class compartment, and assisted by Bansi and half-a-dozen coolies, we were soon inside with all our luggage. A whistle blasted and we were off! Bansi had to jump from the running train.

As the engine gathered speed, I ignored Ayah’s advice and put my head out of the window to look back at the receding platform. Ayah and Bansi were standing on the platform, waving to me and I kept waving to them until the train rushed into the darkness and the bright lights of Dehra were swallowed up in the night. New lights, dim and flickering came into existence as we passed small villages. The stars too were visible and I saw a shooting star streaking through the heavens.

I remembered something that Ayah had once told me, that stars are the spirits of good men, and I wondered if that shooting star was a sign from my father that he was aware of our departure and would be with us on our journey. And I remembered something else that Ayah had said—that if one wished on a shooting star, one’s wish would be granted, provided of course that one thrust all five fingers into the mouth at the same time!

‘What on earth are you doing?’ asked Grandmother staring at me as I thrust my hand into my mouth.

‘Making a wish,’ I said.

‘Oh,’ said Grandmother.

She was preoccupied, and didn’t ask me what I was wishing for; nor did I tell her.
My first Christmas in London had been a lonely one. My small bed-sitting-room near Swiss Cottage had been cold and austere, and my landlady had disapproved of any sort of revelry. Moreover, I hadn’t the money for the theatre or a good restaurant. That first English Christmas was spent sitting in front of a lukewarm gas-fire, eating beans on toast, and drinking cheap sherry. My one consolation was the row of Christmas cards on the mantelpiece—most of them from friends in India.

But in the following year I was making more money and living in a bigger, brighter, homelier room. The new landlady approved of my bringing friends—even girls—to the house, and had even made me a plum pudding so that I could entertain my guests. My friends in London included a number of Indian and Commonwealth students, and through them I met George, a friendly, sensitive person from Trinidad.

George was not a student. He was over thirty. Like thousands of other West Indians, he had come to England because he had been told that jobs were plentiful, that there was a free health scheme and national insurance, and that he could earn anything from ten to twenty pounds a week—far more than he could make in Trinidad or Jamaica. But, while it was true that jobs were to be had in England, it was also true that sections of local labour resented outsiders filling these posts. There were also those, belonging chiefly to the lower middle-classes, who were prone to various prejudices, and though these people were a minority, they were still capable of making themselves felt and heard.

In any case, London is a lonely place, especially for the stranger. And for the happy-go-lucky West Indian, accustomed to sunshine, colour and music, London must be quite baffling.

As though to match the grey-green fogs of winter, Londoners wore sombre colours, greys and browns. The West Indians couldn’t understand this. Surely, they reasoned, during a grey season the colours worn should be vivid reds and greens—colours that would defy the curling fog and uncomfortable rain? But Londoners frowned on these
gay splashes of colour: to them it all seemed an expression of some sort of barbarism. And then again Londoners had a horror of any sort of loud noise, and a blaring radio could (quite justifiably) bring in scores of protests from neighbouring houses. The West Indians, on the other hand, liked letting off steam; they liked holding parties in their rooms at which there was much singing and shouting. They had always believed that England was their mother country, and so, despite rain, fog, sleet and snow, they were determined to live as they had lived back home in Trinidad. And it is to their credit, and even to the credit of indigenous Londoners, that this is what they succeeded in doing.

George worked for British Railways. He was a ticket-collector at one of the underground stations; he liked his work, and received about ten pounds a week for collecting tickets. A large, stout man, with huge hands and feet, he always had a gentle, kindly expression on his mobile face. Amongst other accomplishments he could play the piano, and as there was an old, rather dilapidated piano in my room, he would often come over in the evenings to run his fat, heavy fingers over the keys, playing tunes that ranged from hymns to jazz pieces. I thought he would be a nice person to spend Christmas with, so I asked him to come and share the pudding my landlady had made, and a bottle of sherry I had procured.

Little did I realize that an invitation to George would be interpreted as an invitation to all George’s friends and relations—in fact, anyone who had known him in Trinidad—but this was the way he looked at it, and at eight o’clock on Christmas Eve, while a chilly wind blew dead leaves down from Hampstead Heath, I saw a veritable army of West Indians marching down Belsize Avenue, with George in the lead.

Bewildered, I opened my door to them; and in streamed George, George’s cousins, George’s nephews and George’s friends. They were all smiling and shaking hands with me, making complimentary remarks about my room (‘Man, that’s some piano!’ ‘Hey, look at that crazy picture!’ ‘This rocking chair gives me fever!’) and took no time at all to feel and make themselves at home. Everyone had brought something along for the party. George had brought several bottles of beer. Eric, a flashy, coffee-coloured youth, had brought cigarettes and more beer. Marian, a buxom woman of thirty-five, who called me ‘darling’ as soon as we met, and kissed me on the cheeks saying she adored pink cheeks, had brought bacon and eggs. Her daughter Lucy, who was sixteen and in the full bloom of youth, had brought a gramophone, while the little nephews carried the records. Other friends and familiares had also brought beer; and one enterprising fellow produced a bottle of Jamaican rum.

Then everything began to happen at once.
Lucy put a record on the gramophone, and the strains of *Basin Street Blues* filled the room. At the same time George sat down at the piano to hammer out an accompaniment to the record: his huge hands crushed down on the keys as though he were chopping up hunks of meat. Marian had lit the gas-fire and was busy frying bacon and eggs. Eric was opening beer bottles. In the midst of the noise and confusion I heard a knock on the door—a very timid, hesitant sort of knock—and opening it, found my landlady standing on the threshold.

‘Oh, Mr Bond, the neighbours—’ she began; and glancing into the room was rendered speechless.

‘It’s only tonight,’ I said. ‘They’ll all go home after an hour. Remember, it’s Christmas!’

She nodded mutely and hurried away down the corridor, pursued by something called *Be Bop A-Lula*. I closed the door and drew all the curtains in an effort to stifle the noise; but everyone was stamping about on the floorboards, and I hoped fervently that the downstairs people had gone to the theatre. George had started playing calypso music, and Eric and Lucy were strutting and stomping in the middle of the room, while the two nephews were improvising on their own. Before I knew what was happening, Marian had taken me in her strong arms, and was teaching me to do the calypso. The air, I think, was *Banana Boat Song*.

Instead of the party lasting an hour, it lasted three hours. We ate innumerable fried eggs and finished off all the beer. I took turns dancing with Marian, Lucy, and the nephews. There was a peculiar expression they used when excited. ‘Fire!’ they shouted. I never knew what was supposed to be on fire, or what the exclamation implied, but I too shouted ‘Fire!’ and somehow it seemed a very sensible thing to shout.

Perhaps their hearts were on fire, I don’t know; but for all their excitability and flashiness and brashness they were lovable and sincere friends, and today, when I look back on my two years in London, that Christmas party is the brightest, most vivid memory of all, and the faces of George and Marian, Lucy and Eric, are the faces I remember best.

At midnight someone turned out the light. I was dancing with Lucy at the time, and in the dark she threw her arms around me and kissed me full on the lips. It was the first time I had been kissed by a girl, and when I think about it, I am glad that it was Lucy who kissed me.

When they left, they went in a bunch, just as they had come. I stood at the gate and watched them saunter down the dark, empty street. The buses and tubes had stopped
running at midnight, and George and his friends would have to walk all the way back to their rooms at Highgate and Golders Green.

After they had gone, the street was suddenly empty and silent, and my own footsteps were the only sounds I could hear. The cold came clutching at me, and I turned up my collar. I looked up at the windows of my house, and at the windows of all the other houses in the street. They were all in darkness. It seemed to me that we were the only ones who had really celebrated Christmas.
The Last Time I Saw Delhi

I’d had this old and faded negative with me for a number of years and had never bothered to make a print from it. It was a picture of my maternal grandparents. I remembered my grandmother quite well, because a large part of my childhood had been spent in her house in Dehra after she had been widowed; but although everyone said she was fond of me, I remembered her as a stern, somewhat aloof person, of whom I was a little afraid.

I hadn’t kept many family pictures and this negative was yellow and spotted with damp.

Then last week, when I was visiting my mother in hospital in Delhi, while she awaited her operation, we got talking about my grandparents, and I remembered the negative and decided I’d make a print for my mother.

When I got the photograph and saw my grandmother’s face for the first time in twenty-five years, I was immediately struck by my resemblance to her. I have, like her, lived a rather spartan life, happy with my one room, just as she was content to live in a room of her own while the rest of the family took over the house! And like her, I have lived tidily. But I did not know the physical resemblance was so close—the fair hair, the heavy build, the wide forehead. She looks more like me than my mother!

In the photograph she is seated on her favourite chair, at the top of the veranda steps, and Grandfather stands behind her in the shadows thrown by a large mango tree which is not in the picture. I can tell it was a mango tree because of the pattern the leaves make on the wall. Grandfather was a slim, trim man, with a drooping moustache that was fashionable in the twenties. By all accounts he had a mischievous sense of humour, although he looks unwell in the picture. He appears to have been quite swarthy. No wonder he was so successful in dressing up ‘native’ style and passing himself off as a street-vendor. My mother tells me he even took my grandmother in on one occasion, and sold her a basketful of bad oranges. His
character was in strong contrast to my grandmother’s rather forbidding personality and Victorian sense of propriety; but they made a good match.

But here’s the picture, and I am taking it to show my mother who lies in the Lady Hardinge Hospital, awaiting the removal of her left breast.

It is early August and the day is hot and sultry. It rained during the night, but now the sun is out and the sweat oozes through my shirt as I sit in the back of a stuffy little taxi taking me through the suburbs of Greater New Delhi.

On either side of the road are the houses of well-to-do Punjabis, who came to Delhi as refugees in 1947 and now make up more than half the capital’s population. Industrious, flashy, go-ahead people. Thirty years ago, fields extended on either side of this road, as far as the eye could see. The Ridge, an outcrop of the Aravallis, was scrub jungle, in which the black buck roamed. Feroz Shah’s 14th century hunting lodge stood here in splendid isolation. It is still here, hidden by petrol pumps and lost within the sounds of buses, cars, trucks and scooter-rickshaws. The peacock has fled the forest, the black buck is extinct. Only the jackal remains. When, a thousand years from now, the last human has left this contaminated planet for some other star, the jackal and the crow will remain, to survive for years on all the refuse we leave behind.

It is difficult to find the right entrance to the hospital, because for about a mile along the Panchkuin Road the pavement has been obliterated by tea shops, furniture shops, and piles of accumulated junk. A public hydrant stands near the gate, and dirty water runs across the road.

I find my mother in a small ward. It is a cool, dark room, and a ceiling fan whirrs pleasantly overhead. A nurse, a dark pretty girl from the South, is attending to my mother. She says, ‘In a minute,’ and proceeds to make an entry on a chart.

My mother gives me a wan smile and beckons me to come nearer. Her cheeks are slightly flushed, due possibly to fever; otherwise she looks her normal self. I find it hard to believe that the operation she will have tomorrow will only give her, at the most, another year’s lease on life.

I sit at the foot of her bed. This is my third visit, since I flew back from Jersey, using up all my savings in the process; and I will leave after the operation, not to fly away again, but to return to the hills which have always called me back.

‘How do you feel?’ I ask.

‘All right. They say they will operate in the morning. They’ve stopped my smoking.’

‘Can you drink? Your rum, I mean?’

‘No. Not until a few days after the operation.’
She has a fair amount of grey in her hair, natural enough at fifty-four. Otherwise she hasn’t changed much; the same small chin and mouth, lively brown eyes. Her father’s face, not her mother’s.

The nurse has left us. I produce the photograph and hand it to my mother.

‘The negative was lying with me all these years. I had it printed yesterday.’
‘I can’t see without my glasses.’

The glasses are lying on the locker near her bed. I hand them to her. She puts them on and studies the photograph.

‘Your grandmother was always very fond of you.’
‘It was hard to tell. She wasn’t a soft woman.’

‘It was her money that got you to Jersey, when you finished school. It wasn’t much, just enough for the ticket.’
‘I didn’t know that.’

‘The only person who ever left you anything. I’m afraid I’ve nothing to leave you, either.’

‘You know very well that I’ve never cared a damn about money. My father taught me to write. That was inheritance enough.’
‘And what did I teach you?’
‘I’m not sure …. Perhaps you taught me how to enjoy myself now and then.’

She looked pleased at this. ‘Yes, I’ve enjoyed myself between troubles. But your father didn’t know how to enjoy himself. That’s why we quarrelled so much. And finally separated.’

‘He was much older than you.’
‘You’ve always blamed me for leaving him, haven’t you?’

‘I was very small at the time. You left us suddenly. My father had to look after me, and it wasn’t easy for him. He was very sick. Naturally I blamed you.’

‘He wouldn’t let me take you away.’
‘Because you were going to marry someone else.’

I break off; we have been over this before. I am not there as my father’s advocate, and the time for recrimination has passed.

And now it is raining outside, and the scent of wet earth comes through the open doors, overpowering the odour of medicines and disinfectants. The dark-eyed nurse comes in again and informs me that the doctor will soon be on his rounds. I can come again in the evening, or early morning before the operation.

‘Come in the evening,’ says my mother. ‘The others will be here then.’
‘I haven’t come to see the others.’
‘They are looking forward to seeing you.’ ‘They’, being my stepfather and half-brothers.
‘I’ll be seeing them in the morning.’
‘As you like ….’

And then I am on the road again, standing on the pavement, on the fringe of a chaotic rush of traffic, in which it appears that every vehicle is doing its best to overtake its neighbour. The blare of horns can be heard in the corridors of the hospital, but everyone is conditioned to the noise and pays no attention to it. Rather, the sick and the dying are heartened by the thought that people are still well enough to feel reckless, indifferent to each other’s safety! In Delhi there is a feverish desire to be first in line, the first to get anything ….. This is probably because no one ever gets around to dealing with second-comers.

When I hail a scooter-rickshaw and it stops a short distance away, someone elbows his way past me and gets in first. This epitomizes the philosophy and outlook of the Delhi-wallah.

So I stand on the pavement waiting for another scooter, which doesn’t come. In Delhi, to be second in the race is to be last.

I walk all the way back to my small hotel, with a foreboding of having seen my mother for the last time.
The Good Old Days

I took Miss Mackenzie an offering of a tin of Malabar sardines, and so lessened the sharpness of her rebuke.

‘Another doctor’s visit, is it?’ she said, looking reproachfully at me over her spectacles. ‘I might have been dead all this time….’

Miss Mackenzie, at eighty-five, did not show the least signs of dying. She was the oldest resident of the hill station. She lived in a small cottage half way up a hill. The cottage, like Longfellow’s village of Attri, gave one the impression of having tried to get to the top of the hill and failed halfway up. It was hidden from the road by oaks and maples.

‘I’ve been away,’ I explained. ‘I had to go to Delhi for a fortnight. I hope you’ve been all right?’

I wasn’t a relative of Miss Mackenzie’s, nor a very old friend; but she had the knack of making people feel they were somehow responsible for her.

‘I can’t complain. The weather’s been good, and the padre sent me some eggs.’

She set great store on what was given to her in the way of food. Her pension of forty rupees a month only permitted a diet of dal and rice; but the thoughtfulness of people who knew her and the occasional gift parcel from England lent variety to her diet and frequently gave her a topic of conversation.

‘I’m glad you have some eggs,’ I said. ‘They’re four rupees a dozen now.’

‘Yes, I know. And there was a time when they were only six annas a dozen.’

‘About thirty years ago, I suppose.’

‘No, twenty-five. I remember, May Taylor’s eggs were always the best. She lived in Fairville—the old house near the Raja’s estate.’

‘Did she have a poultry farm?’

‘Oh no, just her own hens. Very ordinary hens too, not White Leghorns or Rhode Island Reds—but they gave lovely eggs; she knew how to keep her birds healthy …. May Taylor was a friend of mine. She didn’t supply eggs to just anybody, you know.’
‘Oh, naturally not. Miss Taylor’s dead now, I suppose?’
‘Oh yes, quite dead. Her sister saw to that.’
‘Oh!’ I sensed a story. ‘How did that happen?’
‘Well, it was a bit of a mystery really. May and Charlotte never did get on with each other and it’s a wonder they agreed to live together. Even as children they used to fight. But Charlotte was always the spoilt one—prettier, you see. May, when I knew her was thirty-five, a good woman if you know what I mean. She saw to the house and saw to the meals and she went to church like other respectable people and everyone liked her. But Charlotte was moody and bad-tempered. She kept to herself—always had done, since the parents died. And she was a little too fond of the bottle.’
‘Neither of them were married?’
‘No—I suppose that’s why they lived together. Though I’d rather live alone myself than put up with someone disagreeable. Still, they were sisters. Charlotte had been a gay, young thing once, very popular with the soldiers at the convalescent home. She refused several offers of marriage and then when she thought it time to accept someone there were no more offers. She was almost thirty by then. That’s when she started drinking—heavily, I mean. Gin and brandy, mostly. It was cheap in those days. Gin, I think, was two rupees a bottle.’
‘What fun! I was born a generation too late.’
‘And a good thing, too. Or you’d probably have ended up as Charlotte did.’
‘Did she get delirium tremens?’
‘She did nothing of the sort. Charlotte had a strong constitution.’
‘And so have you, Miss Mackenzie, if you don’t mind my saying so.’
‘I take a drop when I can afford it—.’ She gave me a meaningful look. ‘Or when I’m offered ….’
‘Did you sometimes have a drink with Miss Taylor?’
‘I did not! I wouldn’t have been seen in her company. All over the place she was, when she was drunk. Lost her powers of discrimination. She even took up with a barber! And then she fell down a khud one evening, and broke her ankle!’
‘Lucky it wasn’t her head.’
‘No, it wasn’t her own head she broke, more’s the pity, but her sister May’s—the poor, sweet thing.’
‘She broke her sister’s head, did she?’ I was intrigued. ‘Why, did May find out about the barber?’
‘Nobody knows what it was, but it may well have been something like that. Anyway, they had a terrible quarrel one night. Charlotte was drunk, and May, as
usual, was admonishing her.’

‘Fatal,’ I said. ‘Never admonish a drunk.’

Miss Mackenzie ignored me and carried on.

‘She said something about the vengeance of God falling on Charlotte’s head. But it was May’s head that was rent asunder. Charlotte flew into a sudden rage. She was given to these outbursts, even when sober and brought something heavy down on May’s skull. Charlotte never said what it was. It couldn’t have been a bottle, unless she swept up the broken pieces afterwards. It may have been a heavy—what writers sometimes call a blunt instrument.

‘When Charlotte saw what she had done, she went out of her mind. They found her two days later wandering about near some ruins, babbling a lot of nonsense about how she might have been married long ago if May hadn’t clung to her.’

‘Was she charged with murder?’

‘No, it was all hushed up. Charlotte was sent to the asylum at Ranchi. We never heard of her again. May was buried here. If you visit the old cemetery you’ll find her grave on the second tier, third from the left.’

‘I’ll look it up some time. It must have been an awful shock for those of you who knew the sisters.’

‘Yes, I was quite upset about it. I was very fond of May. And then, of course, the chickens were sold and I had to buy my eggs elsewhere and they were never so good. Still, those were the days, the good old days—when eggs were six annas a dozen and gin only two rupees a bottle!’
While I was walking home one day, along the path through the pines, I heard a girl singing.

It was summer in the hills, and the trees were in new leaf. The walnuts and cherries were just beginning to form between the leaves.

The wind was still and the trees were hushed, and the song came to me clearly; but it was not the words—which I could not follow—or the rise and fall of the melody which held me in thrall, but the voice itself, which was a young and tender voice.

I left the path and scrambled down the slope, slipping on fallen pine needles. But when I came to the bottom of the slope the singing had stopped and no one was there. ‘I’m sure I heard someone singing,’ I said to myself; but I may have been wrong. In the hills it is always possible to be wrong.

So I walked on home, and presently I heard another song, but this time it was the whistling thrush rendering a broken melody, singing of dark, sweet secrets in the depths of the forest.

I had little to sing about myself, as the electricity bill hadn’t been paid, and there was nothing in the bank, and my second novel had just been turned down by another publisher. Still, it was summer, and men and animals were drowsy, and so too were my creditors. The distant mountains loomed purple in the shimmering dust-haze.

I walked through the pines again, but I did not hear the singing. And then for a week I did not leave the cottage, as the novel had to be rewritten, and I worked hard at it, pausing only to eat and sleep and take note of the leaves turning a darker green.

The window opened on to the forest. Trees reached up to the window. Oak, maple, walnut. Higher up the hill, the pines started, and further on, armies of deodars marched over the mountains. And the mountains rose higher, and the trees grew stunted until they finally disappeared and only the black spirit-haunted rocks rose up to meet the everlasting snows. Those peaks cradled the sky. I could not see them from
my windows. But on clear mornings they could be seen from the pass on the Tehri road.

There was a stream at the bottom of the hill. One morning, quite early, I went down to the stream, and using the boulders as stepping-stones, moved downstream for about half a mile. Then I lay down to rest on a flat rock, in the shade of a wild cherry tree, and watched the sun shifting through the branches as it rose over the hill called Paritibba (Fairy Hill) and slid down the steep slope into the valley. The air was very still and already the birds were silent. The only sound came from the water running over the stony bed of the stream. I had lain there ten, perhaps fifteen minutes, when I began to feel that someone was watching me.

Someone in the trees, in the shadows, still and watchful. Nothing moved; not a stone shifted, not a twig broke; but someone was watching me. I felt terribly exposed; not to danger, but to the scrutiny of unknown eyes. So I left the rock and, finding a path through the trees, began climbing the hill again.

It was warm work. The sun was up, and there was no breeze. I was perspiring profusely by the time I got to the top of the hill. There was no sign of my unseen watcher. Two lean cows grazed on the short grass; the tinkling of their bells was the only sound in the sultry summer air.

That song again! The same song, the same singer. I heard her from my window. And putting aside the book I was reading, I leant out of the window and started down through the trees. But the foliage was too heavy, and the singer too far away for me to be able to make her out. ‘Should I go and look for her?’ I wondered. Or is it better this way—heard but not seen? For having fallen in love with a song, must it follow that I will fall in love with the singer? No. But surely it is the voice, and not the song that has touched me ….’ Presently the singing ended, and I turned away from the window.

A girl was gathering bilberries on the hillside. She was fresh-faced, honey-coloured; her lips were stained with purple juice. She smiled at me. ‘Are they good to eat?’ I asked.

She opened her fist and thrust out her hand, which was full of berries, bruised and crushed. I took one and put it in my mouth. It had a sharp, sour taste. ‘It is good,’ I said. Finding that I could speak haltingly in her language, she came nearer, said ‘Take more then,’ and filled my hand with bilberries. Her fingers touched mine. The sensation was almost unique; for it was nine or ten years since my hand had touched a girl’s.
‘Where do you live?’ I asked. She pointed across the valley to where a small village straddled the slopes of a terraced hill.

‘It’s quite far,’ I said. ‘Do you always come so far from home?’

‘I go further than this,’ she said. ‘The cows must find fresh grass. And there is wood to gather and grass to cut.’ She showed me the sickle held by the cloth tied firmly about her waist. ‘Sometimes I go to the top of Pari Tibba, sometimes to the valley beyond. Have you been there?’

‘No. But I will go some day.’

‘It is always windy on Pari Tibba.’

‘Is it true that there are fairies there?’

She laughed. ‘That is what people say. But those are people who have never been there. I do not see fairies on Pari Tibba. It is said that there are ghosts in the ruins on the hill. But I do not see any ghosts.’

‘I have heard of the ghosts,’ I said. ‘Two lovers who ran away and took shelter in a ruined cottage. At night there was a storm, and they were killed by lightning. Is it true, this story?’

‘It happened many years ago, before I was born. I have heard the story. But there are no ghosts on Pari Tibba.’

‘How old are you?’ I asked.

‘Fifteen, sixteen, I do not know for sure.’

‘Doesn’t your mother know?’

‘She is dead. And my grandmother has forgotten. And my brother, he is younger than me and he’s forgotten his own age. Is it important to remember?’

‘No, it is not important. Not here, anyway. Not in the hills. To a mountain, a hundred years are but as a day.’

‘Are you very old?’ she asked.

‘I hope not. Do I look very old?’

‘Only a hundred,’ she said, and laughed, and the silver bangles on her wrists tinkled as she put her hand up to her laughing face.

‘Why do you laugh?’ I asked.

‘Because you looked as though you believed me. How old are you?’

‘Thirty-five, thirty-six, I do not remember.’

‘Ah, it is better to forget!’

‘That’s true,’ I said, ‘but sometimes one has to fill in forms and things like that, and then one has to state one’s age.’

‘I have never filled a form. I have never seen one.’
‘And I hope you never will. It is a piece of paper covered with useless information. It is all a part of human progress.’

‘Progress? ’
‘Yes. Are you unhappy?’
‘No.’
‘Do you go hungry?’
‘No.’
‘Then you don’t need progress. Wild bilberries are better.’

She went away without saying goodbye. The cows had strayed and she ran after them, calling them by name: ‘Neelu, Neelu!’ (Blue) and ‘Bhuri!’ (Old One). Her bare feet moved swiftly over the rocks and dry grass.

Early May. The cicadas were singing in the forest; or rather, orchestrating, since they make the sound with their legs. The whistling thrushes pursued each other over the tree-tops, in acrobatic love-flights. Sometimes the langurs visited the oak trees, to feed on the leaves. As I moved down the path to the stream, I heard the same singing, and coming suddenly upon the clearing near the water’s edge, I saw the girl sitting on a rock, her feet in the rushing water—the same girl who had given me bilberries. Strangely enough, I had not guessed that she was the singer. Unseen voices conjure up fanciful images. I had imagined a woodland nymph, a graceful, delicate, beautiful, goddess-like creature; not a mischievous-eyed, round-faced, juice-stained, slightly ragged pixie. Her dhoti—a rough, homespun sari—was faded and torn; an impractical garment, I thought, for running about on the hillside, but the village folk put their girls into dhotis before they are twelve. She’d compromised by hitching it up, and by strengthening the waist with a length of cloth bound tightly about her, but she’d have been more at ease in the long, flounced skirt worn in the further hills.

But I was not disillusioned. I had clearly taken a fancy to her cherubic, open countenance; and the sweetness of her voice added to her charms.

I watched her from the banks of the stream, and presently she looked up, grinned, and stuck her tongue out at me.

‘That’s a nice way to greet me,’ I said. ‘Have I offended you?’
‘You surprised me. Why did you not call out?’
‘Because I was listening to your singing. I did not wish to speak until you had finished.’

‘It was only a song.’
‘But you sang it sweetly.’
She smiled. ‘Have you brought anything to eat?’
‘No. Are you hungry?’
‘At this time I get hungry. When you come to meet me you must always bring something to eat.’
‘But I didn’t come to meet you. I didn’t know you would be here.’
‘You do not wish to meet me?’
‘I didn’t mean that. It is nice to meet you.’
‘You will meet me if you keep coming into the forest. So always bring something to eat.’
‘I will do so next time. Shall I pick you some berries?’
‘You will have to go to the top of the hill again to find the kingora bushes.’
‘I don’t mind. If you are hungry, I will bring some.’
‘All right,’ she said, and looked down at her feet, which were still in the water. Like some knight-errant of old, I toiled up the hill again until I found the bilberry bushes; and stuffing my pockets with berries, I returned to the stream. But when I got there I found she’d slipped away. The cowbells tinkled on the far hill.

Glow-worms shone fitfully in the dark. The night was full of sounds—the tonk-tonk of a nightjar, the cry of a barking deer, the shuffling of porcupines, the soft flip-flop of moths beating against the window-panes. On the hill across the valley, lights flickered in the small village—the dim lights of kerosene lamps swinging in the dark.

‘What is your name?’ I asked, when we met again on the path through the pine forest.
‘Binya,’ she said. ‘What is yours?’
‘I’ve no name.’
‘All right, Mr No-name.’
‘I mean I haven’t made a name for myself. We must make our own names, don’t you think?’
‘Binya is my name. I do not wish to have any other. Where are you going?’
‘Nowhere.’

‘No-name goes nowhere! Then you cannot come with me, because I am going home and my grandmother will set the village dogs on you if you follow me.’ And laughing, she ran down the path to the stream; she knew I could not catch up with her.

Her face streamed summer rain as she climbed the steep hill, calling the white cow home. She seemed very tiny on the windswept mountainside; a twist of hair lay flat
against her forehead, and her torn blue dhoti clung to her firm round thighs. I went to her with an umbrella to give her shelter. She stood with me beneath the umbrella and let me put my arm around her. Then she turned her face up to mine, wonderingly, and I kissed her quickly, softly on the lips. Her lips tasted of raindrops and mint. And then she left me there, so gallant in the blistering rain. She ran home laughing. But it was worth the drenching.

Another day I heard her calling to me—‘No-name, Mister No-name!’—but I couldn’t see her, and it was some time before I found her, halfway up a cherry tree, her feet pressed firmly against the bark, her dhoti tucked up between her thighs—fair, rounded thighs, and legs that were strong and vigorous.

‘The cherries are not ripe,’ I said.
‘They are never ripe. But I like them green and sour. Will you come into the tree?’
‘If I can still climb a tree,’ I said.
‘My grandmother is over sixty, and she can climb trees.’
‘Well, I wouldn’t mind being more adventurous at sixty. There’s not so much to lose then.’ I climbed into the tree without much difficulty, but I did not think the higher branches would take my weight, so I remained standing in the fork of the tree, my face on a level with Binya’s breasts. I put my hand against her waist, and kissed her on the soft inside of her arm. She did not say anything. But she took me by the hand and helped me to climb a little higher, and I put my arm around her, as much to support myself as to be close to her.

The full moon rides high, shining through the tall oak trees near the window. The night is full of sounds, crickets, the tonk-tonk of a nightjar, and floating across the valley from your village, the sound of drums beating, and people singing. It is a festival day, and there will be feasting in your home. Are you singing too, tonight? And are you thinking of me, as you sing, as you laugh, as you dance with your friends? I am sitting here alone, and so I have no one to think of but you.

Binya … I take your name again and again—as though by taking it, I can make you hear me, come to me, walking over the moonlit mountain ….

There are spirits abroad tonight. They move silently in the trees; they hover about the window at which I sit; they take up with the wind and rush about the house. Spirits of the trees, spirits of the old house. An old lady died here last year. She’d lived in the house for over thirty years; something of her personality surely dwells here still. When I look into the tall, old mirror which was hers, I sometimes catch a glimpse of
her pale face and long, golden hair. She likes me, I think, and the house is kind to me. Would she be jealous of you, Binya?

The music and singing grows louder. I can imagine your face glowing in the firelight. Your eyes shine with laughter. You have all those people near you and I have only the stars, and the nightjar, and the ghost in the mirror.

I woke early, while the dew was still fresh on the grass, and walked down the hill to the stream, and then up to a little knoll where a pine tree grew in solitary splendour, the wind going *hoo-hoo* in its slender branches. This was my favourite place, my place of power, where I came to renew myself from time to time. I lay on the grass, dreaming. The sky in its blueness swung round above me. An eagle soared in the distance. I heard her voice down among the trees; or I thought I heard it. But when I went to look, I could not find her.

I’d always prided myself on my rationality; had taught myself to be wary of emotional states, like ‘falling in love’, which turned out to be ephemeral and illusory. And although I told myself again and again that the attraction was purely physical, on my part as well as hers, I had to admit to myself that my feelings towards Binya differed from the feelings I’d had for others; and that while sex had often been for me a celebration, it had, like any other feast, resulted in satiety, a need for change, a desire to forget …. Binya represented something else—something wild, dreamlike, fairy-like. She moved close to the spirit-haunted rocks, the old trees, the young grass; she had absorbed something from them—a primeval innocence, an unconcern with the passing of time and events, an affinity with the forest and the mountains; this made her special and magical.

And so, when three, four, five days went by, and I did not find her on the hillside, I went through all the pangs of frustrated love: had she forgotten me and gone elsewhere? Had we been seen together, and was she being kept at home? Was she ill? Or had she been spirited away?

I could hardly go and ask for her. I would probably be driven from the village. It straddled the opposite hill, a cluster of slate-roof houses, a pattern of little terraced fields. I could see figures in the fields, but they were too far away, too tiny, for me to be able to recognize anyone. She had gone to her mother’s village a hundred miles away, or so, a small boy told me.

And so I brooded; walked disconsolately through the oak forest hardly listening to the birds—the sweet-throated whistling thrush; the shrill barbet; the mellow-voiced
doves. Happiness had always made me more responsive to nature. Feeling miserable, my thoughts turned inward. I brooded upon the trickery of time and circumstance; I felt the years were passing by, *had* passed by, like waves on a receding tide, leaving me washed up like a bit of flotsam on a lonely beach. But at the same time, the whistling thrush seemed to mock at me, calling tantalizingly from the shadows of the ravine: ‘It isn’t time that’s passing by, it is you and I, it is you and I ….’

Then I forced myself to snap out of my melancholy. I kept away from the hillside and the forest. I did not look towards the village. I buried myself in my work, tried to think objectively, and wrote an article on ‘The inscriptions on the iron pillar at Kalsi’; very learned, very dry, very sensible.

But at night I was assailed by thoughts of Binya. I could not sleep. I switched on the light, and there she was, smiling at me from the looking glass, replacing the image of the old lady who had watched over me for so long.
Prem’s boys are growing tall and healthy, on the verge of manhood. How can I think of death, when faced with the full vigour and confidence of youth? They remind me of Somi and Daljit, who were the same age when I knew them in Dehra during our schooldays. But remembering Somi and Dal reminded me of death again—for Dal had died a young man—and I looked at Prem’s boys again, haunted by the thought of suddenly leaving this world, and prayed that I could be with them a little longer.

Somi and Dal .... I remember: it was going to rain. I could see the rain moving across the hills, and I could smell it on the breeze. But instead of turning back, I walked on through the leaves and brambles that grew over the disused path, and wandered into the forest. I had heard the sound of rushing water at the bottom of the hill, and there was no question of returning until I had found the water.

I had to slide down some smooth rocks into a small ravine, and there I found the stream running across a bed of shingle. I removed my shoes and socks and started walking up the stream. Water trickled down from the hillside, from amongst ferns and grass and wild flowers; and the hills, rising steeply on either side, kept the ravine in shadow. The rocks were smooth, almost soft, and some of them were grey and some yellow. The pool was fed by a small waterfall, and it was deep beneath the waterfall. I did not stay long, because now the rain was swishing over the sal trees, and I was impatient to tell the others about the pool.

Somi usually chose the adventures we were to have, and I would just grumble and get involved in them; but the pool was my own discovery, and both Somi and Daljeet gave me credit for it.

I think it was the pool that brought us together more than anything else. We made it a secret, private pool, and invited no others. Somi was the best swimmer. He dived off rocks and went gliding about under the water, like a long, golden fish. Dal threshed about with much vigour but little skill. I could dive off a rock too, but I usually landed on my belly.
There were slim silverfish in the waters of the stream. At first we tried catching them with a line, but they usually took the bait and left the hook. Then we brought a bedsheet and stretched it across one end of the stream, but the fish wouldn’t come near it. Eventually Somi, without telling us, brought along a stick of dynamite, and Dal and I were startled out of a siesta by a flash across the water and a deafening explosion. Half the hillside tumbled into the pool, and Somi along with it; but we got him out, as well as a good supply of stunned fish which were too small for eating.

The effects of the explosion gave Somi another idea, and that was to enlarge our pool by building a dam across one end. This he accomplished with Dal’s and my labour. But one afternoon, when it rained heavily, a torrent of water came rushing down the stream, bursting the dam and flooding the ravine; our clothes were all carried away by the current, and we had to wait for night to fall before creeping home through the darkest alleyways; for we used to bathe quite naked; it would have been unmanly to do otherwise.

Our activities at the pool included wrestling and buffalo-riding. We wrestled on a strip of sand that ran beside the stream, and rode on a couple of buffaloes that sometimes came to drink and wallow in the more muddy parts of the stream. We would sit astride the buffaloes, and kick and yell and urge them forward, but on no occasion did we ever get them to move. At the most, they would roll over on their backs, taking us with them into a pool of slush.

But the buffaloes were always comfortable to watch. Solid, earth-bound creatures, they liked warm days and cool, soft mud. There is nothing so satisfying to watch than buffaloes wallowing in mud, or ruminating over a mouthful of grass, absolutely oblivious to everything else. They watch us with sleepy, indifferent eyes, and tolerate the pecking of crows. Did they think all that time, or did they just enjoy the sensuousness of soft, wet mud, while we perspired under a summer sun …? No, thinking would have been too strenuous for those supine creatures; to get neck-deep in water is their only aim in life.

It didn’t matter how muddy we got ourselves, because we had only to dive into the pool to get rid of the muck. In fact, mud-fighting was one of our favourite pastimes. It was like playing snowballs, only we used mud balls.

If it was possible for Somi and Dal to get out of their houses undetected at night, we would come to the pool and bathe by moonlight, and at these times we would bathe silently and seriously, because there was something subduing about the stillness of the jungle at night.
I don’t exactly remember how we broke up, but we hardly noticed it at the time. That was because we never really believed we were finally parting, or that we would not be seeing the pool again. After about a year, Somi passed his matriculation and entered the military academy. The last time I saw him, about twenty-five years ago, he was about to be commissioned, and sported a fierce and very military moustache. He remembered the pool in a sentimental, military way, but not as I remembered it.

Shortly after Somi had matriculated, Dal and his family left town, and I did not see him again, until after I returned from England. Then he was in Air Force uniform, tall, slim, very handsome, completely unrecognizable as the chubby little boy who had played with me in the pool. Three weeks after this meeting I heard that he had been killed in an air crash. Sweet Dal … I feel you are close to me now … I want to remember you exactly as you were when first we met. Here is my diary for 1951*, when I was sixteen and you thirteen or fourteen:

7 September: ‘Do you like elephants?’ Somi asked me.
‘Yes, when they are tame.’
‘That’s all right, then. Daljit!’ he called. ‘You can come up. Ruskin likes elephants.’

Dal is not exactly an elephant. He is one of us.
He is fat, oh yes he is fat, but it is his good nature that is so like an elephant’s. His fatness is not grotesque or awkward; it is a very pleasant plumpness, and nothing could suit him better. If Dal were thin he would be a failure.

His eyes are bright and round, full of mischievousness and a sort of grumpy gaiety.

And what of the pool?
I looked for it, after an interval of more than nearly thirty years, but couldn’t find it. I found the ravine, and the bed of shingle, but there was no water. The stream had changed its course, just as we had changed ours.
I turned away in disappointment, and with a dull ache in my heart. It was cruel of the pool to disappear; it was the cruelty of time. But I hadn’t gone far when I heard the sound of rushing water, and the shouting of children; and pushing my way through jungle, I found another stream and another pool, and about half-a-dozen children splashing about in the water.

They did not see me, and I kept in the shadow of the trees and watched them play. But I didn’t really see them. I was seeing Somi and Daljeet and the lazy old buffaloes, and I stood there for almost an hour, a disembodied spirit, romping again in the shallows of our secret pool. Nothing had really changed. Time is like that.
From Small Beginnings

‘And the last puff of the day-wind brought from the unseen villages, the scent of damp wood-smoke, hot cakes, dripping undergrowth, and rotting pine-cones. That is the true smell of the Himalayas, and if once it creeps into the blood of a man, that man will at the last, forgetting all else, return to the hills to die.’

—Rudyard Kipling

On the first clear September day, towards the end of the rains, I visited the pine-knoll, my place of peace and power.

It was months since I’d last been there. Trips to the plains, a crisis in my affairs, involvements with other people and their troubles, and an entire monsoon, had come between me and the grassy, pine-topped slope facing the Hill of Fairies (Pari Tibba to the locals). Now I tramped through late monsoon foliage—tall ferns, bushes festooned with flowering convolvulus—crossed the stream by way of its little bridge of stones—and climbed the steep hill to the pine slope.

When the trees saw me, they made as if to turn in my direction. A puff of wind came across the valley from the distant snows. A long-tailed blue magpie took alarm and flew noisily out of an oak tree. The cicadas were suddenly silent. But the trees remembered me. They bowed gently in the breeze and beckoned me nearer, welcoming me home. Three pines, a straggling oak, and a wild cherry. I went among them, acknowledged their welcome with a touch of my hand against their trunks—the cherry’s smooth and polished; the pine’s patterned and whorled; the oak’s rough, gnarled, full of experience. He’d been there longest, and the wind had bent his upper branches and twisted a few, so that he looked shaggy and undistinguished. But, like the philosopher who is careless about his dress and appearance, the oak has secrets, a hidden wisdom. He has learnt the art of survival!

While the oak and the pines are older than me and have been here many years, the cherry tree is exactly seven years old. I know, because I planted it.

One day I had this cherry seed in my hand, and on an impulse I thrust it into the soft earth, and then went away and forgot all about it. A few months later I found a
tiny cherry tree in the long grass. I did not expect it to survive. But the following year it was two feet tall. And then some goats ate its leaves, and a grass cutter’s scythe injured the stem, and I was sure it would wither away. But it renewed itself, sprang up even faster; and within three years it was a healthy, growing tree, about five feet tall.

I left the hills for two years—forced by circumstances to make a living in Delhi—but this time I did not forget the cherry tree. I thought about it fairly often, sent telepathic messages of encouragement in its direction. And when, a couple of years ago, I returned in the autumn, my heart did a somersault when I found my tree sprinkled with pale pink blossom. (The Himalayan cherry flowers in November.) And later, when the fruit was ripe, the tree was visited by finches, tits, bulbuls and other small birds, all come to feast on the sour, red cherries.

Last summer I spent a night on the pine-knoll, sleeping on the grass beneath the cherry tree. I lay awake for hours, listening to the chatter of the stream and the occasional tonk-tonk of a nightjar; and watching, through the branches overhead, the stars turning in the sky; and I felt the power of the sky and earth, and the power of a small cherry seed ….

And so, when the rains are over, this is where I come, that I might feel the peace and power of this place. It’s a big world and momentous events are taking place all the time. But this is where I have seen it happens.

This is where I will write my stories. I can see everything from here—my cottage across the valley; behind and above me, the town and the bazaar, straddling the ridge; to the left, the high mountains and the twisting road to the source of the great river; below me, the little stream and the path to the village; ahead, the Hill of Fairies, the fields beyond; the wide valley below, and then another range of hills and then the distant plains. I can even see Prem Singh in the garden, putting the mattresses out in the sun.

From here he is just a speck on the far hill, but I know it is Prem by the way he stands. A man may have a hundred disguises, but in the end it is his posture that gives him away. Like my grandfather, who was a master of disguise and successfully roamed the bazaars as fruit-vendor or basket-maker; but we could always recognize him because of his pronounced slouch.

Prem Singh doesn’t slouch, but he has this habit of looking up at the sky (regardless of whether it’s cloudy or clear), and at the moment he’s looking at the sky.

Eight years with Prem. He was just a sixteen-year-old boy when I first saw him, and now he has a wife and child.
I had been in the cottage for just over a year .... He stood on the landing outside the kitchen door. A tall boy, dark, with good teeth and brown, deep-set eyes; dressed smartly in white drill—his only change of clothes. Looking for a job. I liked the look of him. But—

‘I already have someone working for me,’ I said.
‘Yes, sir. He is my uncle.’

In the hills, everyone is a brother or uncle.
‘You don’t want me to dismiss your uncle?’
‘No, sir. But he says you can find a job for me.’
‘I’ll try. I’ll make enquiries. Have you just come from your village?’
‘Yes. Yesterday I walked ten miles to Pauri. There I got a bus.’
‘Sit down. Your uncle will make some tea.’

He sat down on the steps, removed his white keds, wriggled his toes. His feet were both long and broad; large feet, but not ugly. He was unusually clean for a hill boy. And taller than most.
‘Do you smoke?’ I asked.
‘No, sir.’
‘It is true,’ said his uncle, ‘he does not smoke. All my nephews smoke, but this one, he is a little peculiar, he does not smoke—neither beedi nor hookah.’
‘Do you drink?’
‘It makes me vomit.’
‘Do you take bhang?’
‘No, sahib.’
‘You have no vices. It’s unnatural.’
‘He is unnatural, sahib,’ said his uncle.
‘Does he chase girls?’
‘They chase him, sahib.’
‘So he left the village and came looking for a job.’ I looked at him. He grinned, then looked away, began rubbing his feet.
‘Your name is?’
‘Prem Singh.’
‘All right, Prem, I will try to do something for you.’

I did not see him for a couple of weeks. I forgot about finding him a job. But when I met him again, on the road to the bazaar, he told me that he had got a temporary job in the Survey, looking after the surveyor’s tents.
'Next week we will be going to Rajasthan,’ he said.
‘It will be very hot. Have you been in the desert before?’
‘No, sir.’
‘It is not like the hills. And it is far from home.’
‘I know. But I have no choice in the matter. I have to collect some money in order to get married.’

In his region there was a bride price, usually of two thousand rupees.
‘Do you have to get married so soon?’
‘I have only one brother and he is still very young. My mother is not well. She needs a daughter-in-law to help her in the fields and with the cows and in the house. We are a small family, so the work is greater.’

Every family has its few terraced fields, narrow and stony, usually perched on a hillside above a stream or river. They grow rice, barley, maize, potatoes—just enough to live on. Even if they produced sufficient for marketing, the absence of roads makes it difficult to get the produce to the market towns. There is no money to be earned in the villages, and money is needed for clothes, soap, medicines, and recovering the family jewellery from the money-lenders. So the young men leave their villages to find work, and to find work they must go to the plains. The lucky ones get into the Army. Others enter domestic service or take jobs in garages, hotels, wayside teashops, schools ....

In Mussoorie the main attraction is the large number of schools, which employ cooks and bearers. But the schools were full when Prem arrived. He’d been to the recruiting centre at Roorkee, hoping to get into the Army; but they found a deformity in his right foot, the result of a bone broken when a landslip carried him away one dark monsoon night; he was lucky, he said, that it was only his foot and not his head that had been broken.

He came to the house to inform his uncle about the job and to say goodbye. I thought: another nice person I probably won’t see again; another ship passing in the night, the friendly twinkle of its lights soon vanishing in the darkness. I said ‘Come again’, held his smile with mine so that I could remember him better, and returned to my study and my typewriter. The typewriter is the repository of a writer’s loneliness. It stares unsympathetically back at him every day, doing its best to be discouraging. Maybe I’ll go back to the old-fashioned quill pen and a marble ink-stand; then I can feel like a real writer, Balzac or Dickens, scratching away into the endless reaches of the night .... Of course, the days and nights are seemingly shorter than they need to
be! They must be, otherwise why do we hurry so much and achieve so little, by the standards of the past ....

Prem goes, disappears into the vast faceless cities of the plains, and a year slips by, or rather I do, and then here he is again, thinner and darker and still smiling and still looking for a job. I should have known that hill men don’t disappear for ever. The spirit-haunted rocks don’t let their people wander too far, lest they lose them forever.

I was able to get him a job in the school. The Headmaster’s wife needed a cook. I wasn’t sure if Prem could cook very well but I sent him along and they said they’d give him a trial. Three days later the Headmaster’s wife met me on the road and started gushing all over me. She was the type who gushes.

‘We’re so grateful to you! Thank you for sending me that lovely boy. He’s so polite. And he cooks very well. A little too hot for my husband, but otherwise delicious—just delicious! He’s a real treasure—a lovely boy.’ And she gave me an arch look—the famous look which she used to captivate all the good-looking young prefects who became prefects, it was said, only if she approved of them.

I wasn’t sure if she didn’t want something more than a cook, and I only hoped that Prem would give every satisfaction.

He looked cheerful enough when he came to see me on his off-day.

‘How are you getting on?’ I asked.

‘Lovely,’ he said, using his mistress’s favourite expression.

‘What do you mean—lovely? Do they like your work?’

‘The memsahib likes it. She strokes me on the cheek whenever she enters the kitchen. The sahib says nothing. He takes medicine after every meal.’

‘Did he always take medicine—or only now that you’re doing the cooking?’

‘I am not sure. I think he has always been sick.’

He was sleeping in the Headmaster’s veranda and getting sixty rupees a month. A cook in Delhi got a hundred and sixty. And a cook in Paris or New York got ten times as much. I did not say as much to Prem. He might ask me to get him a job in New York. And that would be the last I saw of him! He, as a cook, might well get a job making curries off Broadway; I, as a writer, wouldn’t get to first base. And only my Uncle Ken knew the secret of how to make a living without actually doing any work. But then, of course, he had four sisters. And each of them was married to a fairly prosperous husband. So Uncle Ken divided up his year among them. Three months with Aunt Ruby in Nainital. Three months with Aunt Susie in Kashmir. Three months with my mother (not quite so affluent) in Jamnagar. And three months in the Vet Hospital in Bareilly, where Aunt Mabel ran the hospital for her veterinary husband. In
this way he never overstayed his welcome. A sister can look after a brother for just three months at a time and no more. Uncle K had it worked out to perfection.

But I had no sisters, and I couldn’t live forever on the royalties of a single novel. So I had to write others. So I came to the hills.

The hill men go to the plains to make a living. I had to come to the hills to try and make mine.

‘Prem,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you work for me.’

‘And what about my uncle?’

‘He seems ready to desert me any day. His grandfather is ill, he says, and he wants to go home.’

‘His grandfather died last year.’

‘That’s what I mean—he’s getting restless. And I don’t mind if he goes. These days he seems to be suffering from a form of sleeping sickness. I have to get up first and make his tea ….‘

Sitting here under the cherry tree, whose leaves are just beginning to turn yellow, I rest my chin on my knees and gaze across the valley to where Prem moves about in the garden. Looking back over the seven years he has been with me, I recall some of the nicest things about him. They come to me in no particular order—just pieces of cinema—coloured slides slipping across the screen of memory ….

Prem rocking his infant son to sleep—crooning to him, passing his large hand gently over the child’s curly head—Prem following me down to the police-station when I was arrested*, and waiting outside until I reappeared—his smile, when I found him in Delhi—his large, irrepressible laughter, most in evidence when he was seeing an old Laurel and Hardy movie.

Of course there were times when he could be infuriating, stubborn, deliberately pig-headed, sending me little notes of resignation—but I never found it difficult to overlook these little acts of self-indulgence. He had brought much love and laughter into my life, and what more could a lonely man ask for?

It was his stubborn streak that limited the length of his stay in the Headmaster’s household. Mr Good was tolerant enough. But Mrs Good was one of those women who, when they are pleased with you, go out of their way to help, pamper and flatter; and who, when they are displeased, become vindictive, going out of their way to harm or destroy. Mrs Good sought power—over her husband, her dog, her favourite pupils, her servant …. She had absolute power over the husband and the dog; partial power over her slightly bewildered pupils; and none at all over Prem, who missed the
subtleties of her designs upon his soul. He did not respond to her mothering; or to the way in which she tweaked him on the cheeks, brushed against him in the kitchen, or made admiring remarks about his looks and physique. Memsahibs, he knew, were not for him. So he kept a stony face and went diligently about his duties. And she felt slighted, put in her place. Her liking turned to dislike. Instead of admiring remarks, she began making disparaging remarks about his looks, his clothes, his manners. She found fault with his cooking. No longer was it ‘lovely’. She even accused him of taking away the dog’s meat and giving it to a poor family living on the hillside: no more heinous crime could be imagined! Mr Good threatened him with dismissal. So Prem became stubborn. The following day he withheld the dog’s food altogether; threw it down the *khud* where it was seized upon by innumerable strays; and went off to the pictures.

It was the end of his job. ‘I’ll have to go home now,’ he told me. ‘I won’t get another job in this area. The Mem will see to that.’

‘Stay a few days,’ I said.

‘I have only enough money with which to get home.’

‘Keep it for going home. You can stay with me for a few days, while you look around. Your uncle won’t mind sharing his food with you.’

His uncle did mind. He did not like the idea of working for his nephew as well; it seemed to him no part of his duties. And he was apprehensive lest Prem might get his job.

So Prem stayed no longer than a week.

Here on the knoll the grass is just beginning to turn October yellow. The first clouds approaching winter cover the sky. The trees are very still. The birds are silent. Only a cricket keeps singing on the oak tree. Perhaps there will be a storm before evening. A storm like that in which Prem arrived at the cottage with his wife and child—but that’s jumping too far ahead ….

After he had returned to his village, it was several months before I saw him again. His uncle told me he had taken a job in Delhi. There was an address. It did not seem complete, but I resolved that when I was next in Delhi, I would try to see him.

The opportunity came in May, as the hot winds of summer blew across the plains. It was the time of year when people who can afford it, try to get away to the hills. I dislike New Delhi at the best of times, and I hate it in summer. People compete with each other in being bad-tempered and mean. But I had to go down—I don’t remember
why, but it must have seemed very necessary at the time—and I took the opportunity to try and see Prem.

Nothing went right for me. Of course the address was all wrong, and I wandered about in a remote, dusty, treeless colony called Vasant Vihar (Spring Garden) for over two hours, asking all the domestic servants I came across if they could put me in touch with Prem Singh of Village Koli, Pauri Garhwal. There were innumerable Prem Sinhs, but apparently none who belonged to Village Koli. I returned to my hotel and took two days to recover from heatstroke before returning to Mussoorie, thanking God for mountains!

And then the uncle gave me notice. He’d found a better-paid job in Dehradun and was anxious to be off. I didn’t try to stop him.

For the next six months I lived in the cottage without any help. I did not find this difficult. I was used to living alone. It wasn’t service that I needed but companionship. In the cottage it was very quiet. The ghosts of long dead residents were sympathetic but unobtrusive. The song of the whistling thrush was beautiful, but I knew he was not singing for me. Up the valley came the sound of a flute, but I never saw the flute player. My affinity was with the little red fox who roamed the hillside below the cottage. I met him one night and wrote these lines:

As I walked home last night
I saw a lone fox dancing
In the cold moonlight.
I stood and watched—then
Took the low road, knowing
The night was his by right.
Sometimes, when words ring true,
I’m like a lone fox dancing
In the morning dew.

During the rains, watching the dripping trees and the mist climbing the valley, I wrote a great deal of poetry. Loneliness is of value to poets. But poetry didn’t bring me much money, and funds were low. And then, just as I was wondering if I would have to give up my freedom and take a job again, a publisher bought the paperback rights of one of my children’s stories, and I was free to live and write as I pleased—for another three months!

That was in November. To celebrate, I took a long walk through the Landour Bazaar and up the Tehri road. It was a good day for walking; and it was dark by the
time I returned to the outskirts of the town. Someone stood waiting for me on the road above the cottage. I hurried past him.

If I am not for myself,
Who will be for me?
And if I am not for others,
What am I?
And if not now, when?

I startled myself with the memory of these words of Hillel, the ancient Hebrew sage. I walked back to the shadows where the youth stood, and saw that it was Prem.

‘Prem! ‘I said. ‘Why are you sitting out here, in the cold? Why did you not go to the house?’
‘I went, sir, but there was a lock on the door. I thought you had gone away.’
‘And you were going to remain here, on the road?’
‘Only for tonight. I would have gone down to Dehra in the morning.’
‘Come, let’s go home. I have been waiting for you. I looked for you in Delhi, but could not find the place where you were working.’
‘I have left them now.’
‘And your uncle has left me. So will you work for me now?’
‘For as long as you wish,’
‘For as long as the gods wish.’

We did not go straight home, but returned to the bazaar and took our meal in the Sindhi Sweet Shop; hot puris and strong sweet tea.

We walked home together in the bright moonlight. I felt sorry for the little fox, dancing alone.

That was twenty years ago, and Prem and his wife and three children are still with me. But we live in a different house now, on another hill.
Death of the Trees

The peace and quiet of the Maplewood hillside disappeared forever one winter. The powers-that-be decided to build another new road into the mountains, and the PWD saw fit to take it right past the cottage, about six feet from the large window which had overlooked the forest.

In my journal I wrote: already they have felled most of the trees. The walnut was one of the first to go. A tree I had lived with for over ten years, watching it grow just as I had watched Prem’s little son, Rakesh, grow up …. Looking forward to its new leaf-buds, the broad, green leaves of summer, turning to spears of gold in September when the walnuts were ripe and ready to fall. I knew this tree better than the others. It was just below the window, where a buttress for the road is going up.

Another tree I’ll miss is the young deodar, the only one growing in this stretch of the woods. Some years back it was stunted from lack of sunlight. The oaks covered it with their shaggy branches. So I cut away some of the overhanging branches and after that the deodar grew much faster. It was just coming into its own this year; now cut down in its prime like my young brother on the road to Delhi last month: both victims of the roads. The tree killed by the PWD; my brother by a truck.

Twenty oaks have been felled. Just in this small stretch near the cottage. By the time this bypass reaches Jabarkhet, about six miles from here, over a thousand oaks will have been slaughtered, besides many other fine trees—maples, deodars and pines—most of them unnecessarily, as they grew some fifty to sixty yards from the roadside.

The trouble is, hardly anyone (with the exception of the contractor who buys the felled trees) really believes that trees and shrubs are necessary. They get in the way so much, don’t they? According to my milkman, the only useful tree is one which can be picked clean of its leaves for fodder! And a young man remarked to me: ‘You should come to Pauri. The view is terrific, there are no trees in the way!’
Well, he can stay here now, and enjoy the view of the ravaged hillside. But as the oaks have gone, the milkman will have to look further afield for his fodder.

Rakesh calls the maples the butterfly trees because, when the winged seeds fall, they flutter like butterflies in the breeze. No maples now. No bright red leaves to flame against the sky. No birds!

That is to say, no birds near the house. No longer will it be possible for me to open the window and watch the scarlet minivets flitting through the dark green foliage of the oaks; the long-tailed magpies gliding through the trees; the barbet calling insistently from his perch on top of the deodar. Forest birds, all of them, they will now be in search of some other stretch of surviving forest. The only visitors will be the crows, who have learnt to live with, and off, humans, and seem to multiply along with roads, houses and people. And even when all the people have gone, the crows will still be around.

Other things to look forward to: trucks thundering past in the night; perhaps a tea and pakora shop around the corner; the grinding of gears, the music of motor horns. Will the whistling thrush be heard above them? The explosions that continually shatter the silence of the mountains, as thousand-year-old rocks are dynamited, have frightened away all but the most intrepid of birds and animals. Even the bold langurs haven’t shown their faces for over a fortnight.

Somehow, I don’t think we shall wait for the tea shop to arrive. There must be some other quiet corner, possibly on the next mountain, where new roads have yet to come into being. No doubt this is a negative attitude, and if I had any sense I’d open my own tea shop. To retreat is to be a loser. But the trees are losers too; and when they fall, they do so with a certain dignity.

Never mind. Men come and go; the mountains remain.
The Bar That Time Forgot

‘Cockroaches!’ exclaimed Her Highness, the Maharani. ‘Cockroaches everywhere! Can’t put down my glass without finding a cockroach beneath it!’

‘Cockroaches have a special liking for this room,’ observed Colonel Wilkie, from his corner by the disused fireplace. ‘For one thing, our Melaram there—’ and he indicated the bartender with a tilt of his double-chin—‘never washes the glasses properly. And there are sandwich remains all over the place. Last week’s sandwiches, I might add. From that party of yours, Vijay.’

Vijay, former test cricketer, now forty and with a forty-three waist, turned to the colonel. ‘You should see the kitchen. A pigsty. The cook is seldom sober.’

‘We are seldom sober,’ said Suresh Mathur, income-tax lawyer, from his favourite bar stool.

‘Speak for yourself,’ snapped H.H. ‘Simon, fetch me another whisky.’

Simon Lee, secretary-companion to Her Highness, rose dutifully from his chair and took her glass over to the bar counter.

‘Indian whisky or Scotch, sir?’ asked the bartender in a loud voice, knowing the Maharani was too mean to buy Scotch.

‘Whisky will do,’ said Simon. ‘And a beer for me.’ Just then he felt like spiking the Maharani’s whisky with something really lethal, and be free of her for the rest of his days. Years of loyalty and companionship had given way to abject slavery, and there was nothing he could do about it. Nearing seventy, unqualified and unworldly, he could hardly set about creating any sort of career for himself.

‘And what are you having?’ he asked Suresh Mathur, who had just put away his first drink.

‘I’m never vague, I ask for Haig!’ Suresh replied, chuckling at his clever rhyme. None of the others thought it amusing, but this was usual. ‘When they stop giving me credit I’ll try the local stuff.’
‘Good on you!’ called Colonel Wilkie from his corner. ‘But there’s nothing to beat Solan No. 1. Don’t trust these single malts—they always give me gout!’

‘I’ve never seen you move from that chair,’ said Vijay. ‘No wonder you suffer from gout.’

‘Played cricket once, like you,’ said the colonel. ‘Made a few runs. But they always made me twelfth man. Got fed up carrying out the drinks, or fielding when the star batsman felt indisposed. Gave up cricket. Indoor games are better. Why don’t we have a dartboard in here? In England, every respectable pub has a dartboard.’

I’d been listening to the conversation from a small table behind a potted palm. I was sixteen, just out of school, and I wasn’t supposed to be in the bar, even if I wasn’t drinking. The large potted palm separated the barroom from the outer lounge; it was neutral territory.

‘I have a dartboard!’ I piped up, and every head turned towards me. Most of them had been unaware of my presence. They knew, of course, that I was the son of the lady who managed the hotel.

Suresh Mathur, the most literary-inclined of the lot, said: ‘Young Copperfield has a dartboard!’

‘I’ll go and fetch it,’ I said, only too ready to justify my presence in the bar.

I dashed down the corridor to my room and collided with my mother who was doing her nightly round of the hotel.

‘What are you doing here? You mustn’t hang around the bar,’ she said sharply. ‘You have a radio in your room, apart from all your books.’

The radio had given to me the previous year by a guest who was now wanted by the police (on suspicion of being a serial killer), but I did not feel in any way guilty about possessing it; the guest had been very friendly and generous.

‘Darts,’ I told my mother. ‘They want to play darts. That’s what a pub is for, isn’t it?’ And I charged into my room, picked up my old dartboard and set of darts, and returned breathless to the barroom.

My arrival was greeted by cheers, and Vijay helped me find a place for the dartboard, just below a framed picture of winged cherubs sporting about on some unlikely clouds.

‘Whoever gets the highest score has a free drink,’ announced Vijay.

‘Who pays for it?’ asked Suresh Mathur.

‘We all do—income-tax lawyers included.’

‘He never saved anyone a rupee of tax,’ declared the Maharani. ‘But come on, let’s have a game.’
'Would you like to start the proceedings, H.H.?'
'No, I’ll wait till everyone’s finished. You can start with Colonel Wilkie.'
'Age before beauty,’ said Vijay. ‘Come on, Colonel, we know you have a steady hand.’

Colonel Wilkie’s hand was far from steady. His hands were always trembling. But he struggled out of his chair and took up his position at a point indicated by Vijay. Only one of his darts struck the board, earning him fifteen points. The others were near misses. Two darts bounced off the picture on the wall.

‘The old fool’s aiming at those naked cherubs,’ crowed H.H. ‘Go on, Simon, see if you can win a free drink for me.’

Simon did his best, but scored a meagre thirty points.
‘Idiot!’ cried H.H. ‘And you always said you were a good darts player.’
‘Out of practice,’ Simon mumbled.

Meanwhile, someone had opened up the old radiogram and placed a record on the turn-table. The cheeky voice of Maurice Chevalier filled the room:

All I want is just one girl,
But I have to have one girl—
All I want is one—
For a start!

The evening was livening up. Suresh Mathur scored a few points, but it was Vijay who hit the bull’s eye and claimed a drink on the house.

‘Not until I’ve had my turn,’ shouted H.H., and made a grab for the darts.

She flung them at the board at random, missing wildly—so much so that one dart lodged itself in Colonel Wilkie’s old felt hat which was hanging from a peg, while another streaked across the room and narrowly missed the Roman nose of Reggie Bhowmik, ex-actor, who had just entered the room accompanied by his demure little wife.

Between ex-actor Reggie and former cricketer Vijay there was no love lost. Both middle-aged and no longer in demand, they were rivals in failure. One spoke of the prejudice and incompetence of the cricket selectors, the other of jealousy in the film industry and his subsequent neglect. Both lived in the past—Vijay recalling the one outstanding innings he had played for the country (before being dropped after a series of failures), Reggie living on memories of his one great romantic role before a sagging waist-line and alcohol-coarsened features had led to a rapid decline in his popularity. Somehow they had drifted into the backwater that was Dehra in 1950.
There are some places, no matter how dull or lacking in opportunity, which nevertheless take a grip on the individual—especially the more easy-going types—and hold him in thrall, rendering him unfit for life in a larger, more competitive milieu. Dehra was one such place.

The bar at Green’s Hotel was their refuge and their strength. Here they could reminisce, hark back to glory days, even speak optimistically of the future. Colonel Wilkie, Suresh Mathur, Vijay Kapoor, Reggie Bhowmik, H.H.—the Maharani—and Simon Lee, were all drop-outs, failures in their own way. Had they been busy and successful, they would not have found their way to Green’s every evening.

Reggie Bhowmik liked making dramatic entrances, but the Maharani was just as fond of being the centre of attention, and wasn’t about to give up centre stage to a fading actor.

‘A double whisky for Vijay!’ she declared. ‘He’s the only one here who still has a steady hand.’

‘You haven’t felt my hand,’ said Reggie, bearing down on her. ‘You missed my nose by a whisker.’

‘You’d look better with a scar running down your face,’ said H.H. ‘Then you might get a role as Frankenstein or the phantom of the opera.’

This touched a raw nerve, as Reggie had been having some difficulty in getting a decent role in recent months. But he snapped back: ‘I’ll play the phantom on condition you’re cast as the fat soprano—then I shall take great pleasure in strangling you.’

‘Let’s change the subject,’ said his wife Ruby, always ready to pour oil on troubled waters. She moved over to Colonel Wilkie’s table and asked: ‘How have you been, Colonel?’

‘Like an old bus—just about moving, and badly in need of spare parts.’

‘Well, have a beer with us—and some French fries if we can get any.’

‘Cook’s on strike,’ said Vijay. ‘Only liquid diet today.’

I saw my opportunity, and piped up again from behind the potted palm. ‘I can boil some eggs for you if you like!’

There was a stunned silence, broken by Suresh Mathur who said, sounding a little incredulous, ‘Young Master Copperfield can boil an egg!’

Everyone clapped, and Vijay said, ‘Copperfield has certainly saved the day for us. First he produces a dartboard, and now he’s about to save us from starvation. Go to it, Copperfield!’
Off I went, then, not to boil eggs—there weren’t any in the kitchen—but to find Sitaram, the room-boy, who was the only person of my age in the hotel. I found him in my room, listening to ‘Binaca Geet Mala’, the popular musical request programme, on my radio.

‘We need some eggs,’ I told him. ‘Boiled.’

‘Egg-man comes tomorrow,’ he said. ‘Cook finished the rest. Made himself an omelette, got drunk, and took off!’

‘Well, let’s go down to the bazaar and buy some eggs. I’ve got enough money on me.’

So off we went, and near the clock tower found a street-vendor selling boiled eggs. We bought a dozen and hurried back to the barroom, where Vijay and Reggie were having a heated argument on the relative merits of cricket and football. Reggie didn’t think much of cricket, and Vijay didn’t think much of football.

‘And what’s your favourite game?’ asked Ruby of Suresh Mathur.

‘Snakes and ladders,’ he said, chuckling, and returned to his drink.

‘Boiled eggs!’ I announced. ‘On the house!’

Sitaram produced saucers, and distributed the eggs among the guests—two each, exactly.

‘Do I have to peel my own egg?’ asked the Maharani querulously, staring down at the two eggs rolling about on her plate. ‘Peel them for me, Simon!’

Simon dutifully cracked one of the eggs and began peeling it for her. ‘Not that way, you fool. You’re leaving all the skin on it.’ And seizing the half-peeled egg from her companion, she flung it across the room, narrowly missing the bartender.

‘Good throw!’ exclaimed Vijay. ‘You’d be great fielding on the boundary.’

‘Better at baseball,’ said Reggie.

‘Snakes and ladders,’ said Suresh again, now quite drunk.

Colonel Wilkie, equally drunk, gave a loud belch.

The Maharani got up to leave. ‘Well, I’m not going to sit here to be insulted by everyone. Come on, Simon, drive me home!’ And she marched out of the room with an attempt at majesty, but tripped over the hotel cat, an ugly striped creature who had sensed that there was food around and had come looking for it. The cat caterwauled, H.H. screamed and cursed, Reggie cheered, and Suresh Mathur pronounced, ‘When two cats are fighting they make a hideous sound.’

Not to be outdone in nastiness, the Maharani went up to Suresh, looked him up and down, and said, ‘It’s easy to tell you’re a single man.’
‘I’m not homosexual,’ said Suresh defensively. (The word ‘gay’ had yet to be used in any sense other than ‘happy’ in those days.)

‘No,’ the Maharani smiled wickedly. ‘You’re single because you are so damn ugly!’

And on that triumphant note she left the room, followed by the obedient Simon.

‘Pay no attention to her, Suresh,’ said Vijay generously. ‘You’re better-looking than that old lapdog who follows her around.’

‘I understand she’s leaving him her fortunes,’ said Reggie. ‘I could do with some of it myself. Perhaps I could interest her in producing a film.’

‘She’s tight-fisted,’ said Vijay. ‘If you look closely at Simon you’ll notice he’s wearing the late Maharaja’s smoking-jacket and deer-stalker cap. The old Maharaja loved dressing up like Sherlock Holmes.’

Colonel Wilkie came out of his reverie. ‘When I was in Jamnagar—’ he began.

‘We’ve heard that a hundred times,’ said Vijay.

‘I haven’t,’ said Ruby.

‘When I was in Jamnagar,’ continued Colonel Wilkie, ‘I saw Duleepsinhji made a hundred. That was against Lord Tennyson’s team.’

‘Yesterday you said Ranjitsinhji,’ remarked Vijay.

‘I’m not that old,’ said Colonel Wilkie, struggling to his feet. ‘But old enough to want to go to bed. I’ll toddle off now.’ Locating his walking-stick, he found his way to the door, wishing everyone goodnight as he passed them. They heard the tap of his walking-stick as he walked away down the corridor.

‘Shouldn’t someone go with him?’ asked Ruby. ‘It’s very late and he isn’t too steady on his feet.’

‘Oh, he’ll find his way home,’ said Suresh nonchalantly. ‘Lives just around the corner, in rented rooms near the Club.’

‘Why doesn’t he join the Club?’

‘Can’t afford it. Neither can I.’

‘Neither can I,’ said Vijay.

‘Neither can we,’ added Ruby, sadly. ‘And anyway, it’s more homely here. Even when the Maharani is around.’

‘She can afford the Club,’ said Suresh. ‘But they won’t let her in. Created a disturbance once too often. Insulted the secretary and emptied a dish of chicken biryani on his head.’

‘Not done,’ said Vijay. ‘Not cricket.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Reggie. ‘Can’t be true.’

‘Calling me a liar?’ asked Suresh, bristling.
Ruby poured oil on troubled waters again. ‘Interesting if true,’ she said. ‘And if not true, still interesting.’

‘Mark Twain.’

My mother came along the corridor just as Vijay had shown off his knowledge of literature, and found me behind the palms listening to all this fascinating talk.

‘Time you went to your room, young man,’ she said.

‘I’m waiting for everyone to go home,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll help Sitaram tidy up. There’s no cook, as you know.’

‘Let him stay,’ called Suresh from his bar stool. ‘It’s all part of his education. And he’s old enough for a glass of beer. How old are you, sonny?’

‘Sixteen,’ I said.

‘Well, enjoy yourself. It’s later than you think.’

But I wasn’t thinking of beer just then. I knew there were sausages in the fridge, and I had every intention of polishing them off as soon as all the guests had gone. I wanted to be a writer, but I had no intention of starving in a garret. However, all thoughts of food vanished when I looked across the room and saw Colonel Wilkie framed in the opposite doorway. He was staring at us through the glass. The glass door then opened of its own volition, and Colonel Wilkie stepped into the room. We all looked up, and Reggie said, ‘Back again, Colonel? Still feeling thirsty?’ But Colonel Wilkie ignored the jibe, and walked slowly across the room to the table where he had been sitting. This was close to where I was standing. He bent down and picked up his pipe from the table. He’d forgotten it when he’d left the barroom. Shoving the pipe into his pocket, he turned and retraced his steps, leaving the room by the door from which he had entered.

‘Well, I’m blowed,’ said Vijay. ‘I thought he was sleep-walking.’

‘Never goes anywhere without his pipe,’ said Suresh. ‘A perfect example of single-mindedness.’

‘Didn’t say a word.’

‘The pipe was all that mattered.’

‘Like a favourite cricket bat,’ said Vijay.

‘Maybe I’ll come back for mine when I’m dead.’

A silence fell upon the room. The mention of death had a sobering effect upon the small group. And come to think of it, Colonel Wilkie on his return to the barroom had something of the zombie about him—the walking dead.

There was a commotion in the passageway, and my mother burst into the room, followed by the night-watchman.
‘Colonel Wilkie’s dead,’ said my mother. ‘He collapsed on his steps about half an hour ago.’

‘But he was here five minutes ago,’ said Vijay.

‘No, sir,’ said Gopal the watchman. ‘I went home with him when he left here some time back. Madam said to keep an eye on him. When we got to his place, he began climbing his steps with some difficulty. I helped him to the top step, and then he collapsed. I dragged him into his room and then ran for Dr Bhist. He is there now.’

There was silence for a couple of minutes, and then Ruby said, ‘We all saw him. Colonel Wilkie.’

‘We saw his ghost,’ Vijay murmured.

‘He came for his pipe,’ said Suresh quietly. ‘I told you he wouldn’t go anywhere without it.’

Colonel Wilkie was buried the next day, and we made sure his pipe was buried with him. We did not want him turning up from time to time, looking for it. It could be a bit unnerving for the customers.

In all the excitement I’d forgotten about the sausages, but decided they would keep until after the funeral.

All the regular bar-flies turned up for the funeral. H.H. was quite sloshed when she arrived and had to be extricated from an open grave into which she had slipped, the ground being soft and yielding after recent rain. She blamed secretary Simon for the mishap and called him an ‘ullu-ka-patha’—son of an owl—but he was quite used to such broadsides and took them in his stride. Was it love or loyalty or dependence that kept him in abeyance? Or was it, as some said, the prospect of becoming her heir? If so, he was paying a heavy price well in advance of such a prospect. Not everyone relishes being abused and kicked around in public by a half-crazed maharani.

When Colonel Wilkie’s coffin was lowered into the grave, we all said ‘Cheers!’ He would have liked that. We then returned to Green’s for an early opening of the bar. Alcoholics Unanimous held a subdued but not too melancholy meeting.

But bad news was in store for everyone. A day or two later, I heard the owner, our Sardarji, inform my mother that the hotel had been sold and that she’d have to leave at the end of the month. She’d been expecting something like this, and had already accepted a matron’s job at one of the schools in the valley. As for me, I was to be packed off to England to my aunt’s home in Jersey. The prospect did not thrill me, but I was more or less resigned to it. And there did not appear to be much future for me in Dehra.
Even before the month was out, workers had begun pulling down parts of the building. It was to be rebuilt as a cinema hall, and would show the latest hits from Bombay. It was even rumoured that Dilip Kumar, the biggest star of that era, would inaugurate the new cinema when it was ready to open.

The spirit and character of a building lasts only while the building lasts. Remove the roof-beams, pull down the walls, smash the stairways, and you are left with nothing but memories. Even the ghosts have nowhere to go.

An old hotel that once had a personality of its own was now dismantled with startling rapidity. It had gone up slowly, brick by brick; it came down like a house of cards. No treasures cascaded from its walls; no skeletons were discovered. In two or three days the demolishers had wiped out the past, removed Green’s Hotel from the face of the earth so effectively that it might never have existed.

Searching through the ruins one day, I found a bottle-opener lying in the dust, and kept it as a souvenir.

The bar had been the only common factor in the lives of those disparate individuals who had come there so regularly—drawn to the place rather than to each other.

Now they went their different ways—Suresh Mathur to the Club, the Maharani to her card-table and private bar, Vijay to a public school as cricket coach, Reggie Bhowmik and Ruby to Darjeeling to make a documentary … Sitaram continued to work for my mother, so I had his company whenever he was free.

The cinema came up quite rapidly, but I had left for England before it opened. When I returned five years later, it was showing Madhubala and Guru Dutt in a romantic comedy, *Mr & Mrs 55*.

Then I moved to Delhi.

In recent years, some of the old single cinemas have been closing down, giving way to multiplexes. The other day, passing through Dehra, I saw that ‘our’ cinema hall was being pulled down.

‘What now?’ I asked my taxi driver. ‘A multiplex?’

‘No, sir. A shopping mall!’

And such is progress.

I think I’m the only one around who is old enough to remember the old Green’s Hotel, its dusty corridors, shabby barroom, and odd-ball customers. All have gone. All forgotten! Not even footprints in the sands of time. But by putting down this memoir of an evening or two at that forgotten watering-place, I think I have cheated Time just a little.
Desert Rhapsody

A fierce sun beat down on the desert sand. Heat waves shimmered across the barren landscape. Did anything live out there? I wondered, as I sat in a cane chair on the rest-house veranda on the outskirts of the city of Jodhpur.

It was September, and there was no likelihood of rain. I had spent a night in this remote rest house, and now there was nothing for me to do until late evening when I would catch a train to Delhi. The previous day had been spent in Ajmer, where the grounds of the old Mayo School had provided ample shade. But there was no shade outside Jodhpur.

The only relief from the glare was provided by a small pond that existed in a declivity to one side of the rest house. And this too had shrivelled in recent weeks, leaving large cracks in the dry mud where the water had receded.

I had taken my breakfast in the veranda, served by a room-boy who had also done the cooking and was now about to tidy up the rooms. Apparently, the rest house had a staff of one.

‘You do everything by yourself?’ I asked.

He assured me that it was no trouble, as hardly anyone came to stay in the rest house. He gave me a good breakfast—parathas and an omelette—and set about making up the bed.

As he lifted up a pillow, a large black scorpion ran out and scurried across the bed sheets, its tail raised as if to strike.

I was horrified. I had spent the night with my head on that pillow, unaware that it also sheltered a scorpion.

The room-boy was unperturbed. ‘Must be more here,’ he said, and lifted the mattress. Several fierce-looking scorpions emerged, running for shelter. I had spent the entire night on a bed of scorpions.

I decided to spend the rest of the day on the veranda. No afternoon siesta for me, no matter how drowsy I felt.
The room-boy assured me that the room was now free of scorpions, and asked me if I would be staying another night. I told him that it was vital that I catch the train to Delhi that evening.

‘There is another room,’ he told me.
‘I don’t think I’ll need it,’ I said.
But the pond looked inviting.
Not that I was about to plunge into it. A green scum covered most of the surface. But at least it looked cool.

And presently its cool waters attracted a group of youths who drove their buffaloes into the shallows, and then followed them, shouting and splashing around. Had I been a boy I might well have joined them. But at seventy-five you don’t go leaping into strange ponds, mixing with a herd of buffaloes and their high-spirited keepers. No, I just didn’t have the figure for it any more.
So I sat and watched.

After half-an-hour the youths and their buffaloes left the pond and meandered away. Buffaloes have to be fed, if you want them to provide for you. Nobody keeps buffaloes because they make nice pets.

The pond was still again. A cormorant arrived, wading into the shallows on its long legs, looking for a small fish or two for breakfast. A kingfisher flew across the pond, a sparkle of colour, but it did not dive or descend; the water was still too muddy.

A small islet, consisting of sand and a fringe of rushes, stood out in the middle of the pond. What I took to be a small boulder turned out to be a tortoise. It hadn’t moved since I’d first seen it, and it remained motionless for the rest of the morning.

Three mynas were squabbling on the patch of grass in front of the bungalow. One of them was bald, having lost its feathers in some previous gladiatorial contest. Its companions did not care for its unconventional appearance, and like humans who resent the presence of a nonconforming outsider, they went at it with their beaks and talons until it fled from the field.

The room-boy gave me lunch in the little sitting room, beneath an overhead fan. This young all-rounder, whose name was Bhim, had made the lunch himself. His dal, roti, and aloo-mattar, was better than any hotel meal; but I couldn’t do justice to the very sticky dessert (a sort of pastry stuffed with coconut and various nuts) that he served up afterwards, and he was a little put out that I pushed my plate away after a couple of mouthfuls.

‘Mawa-ki-kachori,’ he informed me. ‘Special to Jodhpur.’
‘Too sweet for me,’ I said. ‘But the dal-roti was perfect.’
He was mollified, and went off on his bicycle to carry out a few errands.
I was left with the sun and the sand and the pond below. The tortoise was still meditating on its islet.
I slept. I overslept. And young Bhim was late in returning from the city. As a result, no taxi turned up to take me to the station.
‘Never mind,’ he said philosophically. ‘You can leave tomorrow. Tonight I make mutton kababs and hot bean curry. You will like!’
I did not feel so philosophical, and wondered if Bhim had conspired to keep me in the rest house for another night. He couldn’t be having many guests in that remote place.
At sunset he turned up with a glass, a bottle of soda, and a half-bottle of rum.
‘Good Army rum,’ he said. ‘No headache.’
I gave in. Drank the rum, consumed the kababs and bean curry, and slept peacefully in the second bedroom. Bhim had made the bed in my presence, convincing me that there were no scorpions or centipedes among the bed sheets. We turned the mattress over. All clear.
I woke at seven, to be greeted by Bhim with a cup of tea.
Then I went to the bathroom. Settled down on the toilet-seat. At peace with the world—as I usually am, when the bowels are moving freely.
And then I looked down and froze.
A large, glistening snake had wound itself around the base of the toilet-seat. It had a frog in its jaws, and only the back legs of the frog were visible. I have no idea what kind of snake it was—I did not stop to study it, but leapt from the seat and dashed into the bedroom, shouting for the room-boy.
Bhim appeared almost instandy.
‘What is wrong, sir? Breakfast almost ready.’
‘A snake!’ I shouted. ‘There’s a huge snake in the bathroom!’
‘Not to worry, sir. Only a dhaman, not poisonous. He comes through the drainpipe. Kills the rats. Very helpful.’
‘Well, he has a frog this time,’ I said. ‘And I’m leaving right away. Just as soon as I can find my trousers.’
He went into the bathroom and returned with my trousers.
‘Snake gone,’ he said. ‘Nothing to fear.’
I felt better after putting on my trousers. It’s amazing what a pair of trousers can do for one’s confidence.
‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘And now you can get me a taxi.’
‘But the train doesn’t leave till evening.’
‘I’m taking a bus,’ I said. ‘A bus leaves for Jaipur every hour.’

Disappointed, Bhim cycled off to arrange for some transport. I waited on the veranda, taking a last look at the pond. It was certainly safer outside than in the house. The buffaloes were back. So were there young minders. So was the cormorant. And the tortoise was there too. It was all very peaceful—just another tranquil day in the desert.
This diary formed the nucleus of my first novel, *The Room on the Roof*. 
FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS

* On a warrant from Bombay, charging me with writing an allegedly obscene short story!
First published by Penguin Books India 1991

Copyright © Ruskin Bond 1991

‘Binya Passes By’, ‘From Small Beginnings’ and ‘Death of the Trees’ are appearing here for the first time. A Flight of Pigeons was made into the Hindi film Junoon (directed by Shyam Benegal and produced by Shashi Kapoor).

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual person, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover photograph by Amit Khullar
Cover design by Bena Sareen

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978-01-4016-902-7

This digital edition published in 2013.
e-ISBN: 978-81-8475-443-8

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher’s prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser and without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above-mentioned publisher of this book.