About the book

‘I forget what took me to Fosterganj in the first place. Destiny, perhaps; although I’m not sure why destiny would have bothered to guide an itinerant writer to an obscure little hamlet in the hills. Chance would be a better word. For chance plays a great part in all our lives. And it was just by chance that I found myself in the Fosterganj bazaar one fine morning early in May…’
About the author

Ruskin Bond has been writing for over sixty years, and has now over 120 titles in print—novels, collections of stories, poetry, essays, anthologies and books for children. His first novel, The Room on the Roof, received the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys award in 1957. He has also received the Padma Shri, and two awards from the Sahitya Akademi—one for his short stories and another for his writings for children. In 2012, the Delhi government gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Born in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Shimla, New Delhi and Dehradun. Apart from three years in the UK, he has spent all his life in India, and now lives in Mussoorie with his adopted family.

A shy person, Ruskin says he likes being a writer because, ‘When I’m writing there’s nobody watching me. Today, it’s hard to find a profession where you’re not being watched!’
Tales of Fosterganj

RUSKIN BOND
The rain ceases, and a bird’s clear song suddenly announces the difference between
Heaven and hell.
—Thomas Merton

~

A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small parcel.
—John Ruskin
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End of the Road
Straddling a spur of the Mussoorie range, as it dips into the Doon valley, Fosterganj came into existence some two hundred years ago and was almost immediately forgotten. And today it is not very different from what it was in 1961, when I lived there briefly.

A quiet corner, where I could live like a recluse and write my stories—that was what I was looking for. And in Fosterganj I thought I’d found my retreat: a cluster of modest cottages, a straggling little bazaar, a post office, a crumbling castle (supposedly haunted), a mountain stream at the bottom of the hill, a winding footpath that took you either uphill or down. What more could one ask for? It reminded me a little of an English village, and indeed that was what it had once been; a tiny settlement on the outskirts of the larger hill station. But the British had long since gone, and the residents were now a fairly mixed lot, as we shall see.

I forget what took me to Fosterganj in the first place. Destiny, perhaps; although I’m not sure why destiny would have bothered to guide an itinerant writer to an obscure hamlet in the hills. Chance would be a better word. For chance plays a great part in all our lives. And it was just by chance that I found myself in the Fosterganj bazaar one fine morning early in May. The oaks and maples were in new leaf; geraniums flourished on sunny balconies; a boy delivering milk whistled a catchy Dev Anand song; a mule train clattered down the street. The chill of winter had gone and there was warmth in the sunshine that played upon old walls.

I sat in a teashop, tasted my teeth on an old bun, and washed it down with milky tea. The bun had been around for some time, but so had I, so we were quits. At the age of forty I could digest almost anything.

The teashop owner, Melaram, was a friendly sort, as are most teashop owners. He told me that not many tourists made their way down to Fosterganj. The only attraction was the waterfall, and you had to be fairly fit in order to scramble down the steep and narrow path that led to the ravine where a little stream came tumbling over the rocks. I would visit it one day, I told him.

‘Then you should stay here a day or two,’ said Melaram. ‘Explore the stream.
Walk down to Rajpur. You’ll need a good walking stick. Look, I have several in my shop. Cherry wood, walnut wood, oak.’ He saw me wavering. ‘You’ll also need one to climb the next hill—it’s called Pari Tibba.’ I was charmed by the name—Fairy Hill.

I hadn’t planned on doing much walking that day—the walk down to Fosterganj from Mussoorie had already taken almost an hour—but I liked the look of a sturdy cherry-wood walking stick, and I bought one for two rupees. Those were the days of simple living. You don’t see two-rupee notes any more. You don’t see walking sticks either. Hardly anyone walks.

I strolled down the small bazaar, without having to worry about passing cars and lorries or a crush of people. Two or three schoolchildren were sauntering home, burdened by their school bags bursting with homework. A cow and a couple of stray dogs examined the contents of an overflowing dustbin. A policeman sitting on a stool outside a tiny police outpost yawned, stretched, stood up, looked up and down the street in anticipation of crimes to come, scratched himself in the anal region and sank back upon his stool.

A man in a crumpled shirt and threadbare trousers came up to me, looked me over with his watery grey eyes, and said, ‘Sir, would you like to buy some gladioli bulbs?’ He held up a basket full of bulbs which might have been onions. His chin was covered with a grey stubble, some of his teeth were missing, the remaining ones yellow with neglect.

‘No, thanks,’ I said. ‘I live in a tiny flat in Delhi. No room for flowers.’
‘A world without flowers,’ he shook his head. ‘That’s what it’s coming to.’
‘And where do you plant your bulbs?’
‘I grow gladioli, sir, and sell the bulbs to good people like you. My name’s Foster. I own the lands all the way down to the waterfall.’

For a landowner he did not look very prosperous. But his name intrigued me. ‘Isn’t this area called Fosterganj?’ I asked.

‘That’s right. My grandfather was the first to settle here. He was a grandson of Bonnie Prince Charlie who fought the British at Bannockburn. I’m the last Foster of Fosterganj. Are you sure you won’t buy my daffodil bulbs?’
‘I thought you said they were gladioli.’
‘Some gladioli, some daffodils.’

They looked like onions to me, but to make him happy I parted with two rupees (which seemed the going rate in Fosterganj) and relieved him of his basket of bulbs. Foster shuffled off, looking a bit like Chaplin’s tramp but not half as dapper. He clearly needed the two rupees. Which made me feel less foolish about spending money that I should have held on to. Writers were poor in those days. Though I didn’t feel poor.

Back at the teashop I asked Melaram if Foster really owned a lot of land.

‘He has a broken-down cottage and the right-of-way. He charges people who pass through his property. Spends all the money on booze. No one owns the hillside, it’s
government land. Reserved forest. But everyone builds on it.’

Just as well, I thought, as I returned to town with my basket of onions. Who wanted another noisy hill station? One Mall Road was more than enough. Back in my hotel room, I was about to throw the bulbs away, but on second thoughts decided to keep them. After all, even an onion makes a handsome plant.
Next morning I found myself trudging down from Mussoorie to Fosterganj again. I didn’t quite know why I was attracted to the place—but it was quaint, isolated, a forgotten corner of an otherwise changing hill town; and I had always been attracted to forgotten corners.

There was no hotel or guesthouse in the area, which in itself was a blessing; but I needed somewhere to stay, if I was going to spend some time there.

Melaram directed me to the local bakery. Hassan, the baker, had a room above his shop that had lain vacant since he built it a few years ago. An affable man, Hassan was the proud father of a dozen children; I say dozen at random, because I never did get to ascertain the exact number as they were never in one place at the same time. They did not live in the room above the bakery, which was much too small, but in a rambling old building below the bazaar, which housed a number of large families—the baker’s, the tailor’s, the postman’s, among others.

I was shown the room. It was scantily furnished, the bed taking up almost half the space. A small table and chair stood near the window. Windows are important. I find it impossible to live in a room without a window. This one provided a view of the street and the buildings on the other side. Nothing very inspiring, but at least it wouldn’t be dull.

A small bathroom was attached to the room. Hassan was very proud of it, because he had recently installed a flush tank and western-style potty. I complimented him on the potty and said it looked very comfortable. But what really took my fancy was the bathroom window. It hadn’t been opened for some time, and the glass panes were caked with dirt. But when finally we got it open, the view was remarkable. Below the window was a sheer drop of two or three hundred feet. Ahead, an open vista, a wide valley, and then the mountains striding away towards the horizon. I don’t think any hotel in town had such a splendid view. And this little bathroom had it all. I could see myself sitting for hours on that potty, enraptured, enchanted, having the valley and the mountains all to myself. Almost certain constipation of course, but I would take
that risk.

‘Forty rupees a month,’ said Hassan, and I gave him two month’s rent on the spot.

‘I’ll move in next week,’ I said. ‘First I have to bring my books from Delhi.’

On my way back to the town I took a short cut through the forest. A swarm of yellow butterflies drifted across the path. A woodpecker pecked industriously on the bark of a tree, searching for young cicadas. Overhead, wild duck flew north, on their way across Central Asia, all traveling without passports. Birds and butterflies recognize no borders.

I hadn’t been this way before, and I was soon lost. Two village boys returning from town with their milk cans gave me the wrong directions. I was put on the right path by a girl who was guiding a cow home. There was something about her fresh face and bright smile that I found tremendously appealing. She was less than beautiful but more than pretty, if you know what I mean. A face to remember.

A little later I found myself in an open clearing, with a large pool in the middle. Its still waters looked very deep. At one end there were steps, apparently for bathers. But the water did not look very inviting. It was a sunless place, several old oaks shutting out the light. Fallen off leaves floated on the surface. No birds sang. It was a strange, haunted sort of place. I hurried on.
Late for a Funeral

When I said that Fosterganj appeared to be the sort of sleepy hollow where nothing ever happened, it only served to show that appearances can be deceptive. When I returned that summer, carrying books and writing materials, I found the little hamlet in a state of turmoil.

There was a rabies scare.

On my earlier visit I had noticed the presence of a number of stray dogs. The jackal population must have been fairly large too. And jackals are carriers of the rabies virus.

I had barely alighted from the town’s only Ambassador taxi when I had to jump in again. Down the road came some ten to fifteen dogs, of no particular breed but running with the urgency of greyhounds, ears flattened, tails between their legs, teeth bared in terror, for close behind them came the dog-catchers, three or four men carrying staves and what appeared to be huge butterfly nets. Even as I gaped in astonishment one of the dogs took a tumble and, howling with fright, was scooped up and dumped in a metal cage on wheels which stood at the side of the road.

The dog chase swept past me, one young man staying behind to secure the trapped canine. Some people have faces that bear an uncanny resemblance to the features of different animals. This particular youth had something of the wolf in his countenance. The dog obviously thought so too, for it whimpered and cowered in a corner of its rusty cage. I am not a great dog-lover but I felt sorry for this frightened creature and put my hand through the bars to try and pat it. Immediately it bared its teeth and lunged at my hand. I withdrew it in a hurry.

The young man laughed at my discomfiture.

‘Mad dog,’ he said. ‘All the dogs are going mad. Biting people. Running all over the place and biting people. We have to round them up.’

‘And then what will you do? Shoot them?’

‘Not allowed to kill them. Cruelty to animals.’

‘So then?’
‘We’ll let them loose in the jungle—down near Rajpur.’
‘But they’ll start biting people there.’
‘Problem for Rajpur.’ He smiled disarmingly—canines like a wolf’s.
‘If they are mad they’ll die anyway,’ I said. ‘But don’t you have a vet—an animal doctor—in this place?’
‘Not in Fosterganj. Only in Rajpur. That’s why we leave them there.’
Defeated by this logic, I picked up my two suitcases and crossed the empty street to Hassan’s bakery. The taxi sped away; no business in Fosterganj.

Over the next few days, several people were bitten and had to go down to Dehra for anti-rabies treatment. The cobbler’s wife refused to go, and was dead within the month. There were several cases in Rajpur, due no doubt to the sudden influx of mad dogs expelled from Fosterganj.

In due course, life returned to normal, as it always does in India, post earthquakes, cyclones, riots, epidemics and cricket controversies. Apathy, or lethargy, or a combination of the two, soon casts a spell over everything and the most traumatic events are quickly forgotten.

‘Sab chalta hai,’ Hassan, my philosophical landlord, would say, speaking for everyone.

It did not take me long to settle down in my little room above the bakery. Recent showers had brought out the sheen on new leaves, transformed the grass on the hillside from a faded yellow to an emerald green. A barbet atop a spruce tree was in full cry. It would keep up its monotonous chant all summer. And early morning, a whistling-thrush would render its interrupted melody, never quite finishing what it had to say.

It was good to hear the birds and laughing schoolchildren through my open window. But I soon learnt to shut it whenever I went out. Late one morning, on returning from one of my walks, I found a large rhesus monkey sitting on my bed, tearing up a loaf of bread that Hassan had baked for me. I tried to drive the fellow away, but he seemed reluctant to leave. He bared his teeth and swore at me in monkey language. Then he stuffed a large piece of bread into his mouth and glared at me, daring me to do my worst. I recalled that monkeys carry rabies, and not wanting to join those who had recently been bitten by rabid dogs, I backed out of the room and called for help. One of Hassan’s brood came running up the steps with a hockey stick, and chased the invader away.

‘Always keep a mug of water handy,’ he told me. ‘Throw the water on him and he’ll be off. They hate cold water.’
‘You may be right,’ I said. ‘I’ve never seen a monkey taking a bath.’
‘See how miserable they are when it rains,’ said my rescuer. ‘They huddle
together as though it’s the end of the world.’

‘Strange, isn’t it? Birds like bathing in the rain.’

‘So do I. Wait till the monsoon comes. You can join me then.’

‘Perhaps I will.’

On this friendly note we parted, and I cleaned up the mess made by my simian visitor, and then settled down to do some writing.

But there was something about the atmosphere of Fosterganj that discouraged any kind of serious work or effort. Tucked away in a fold of the hills, its inhabitants had begun to resemble their surroundings: one old man resembled a willow bent by rain and wind; an elderly lady with her umbrella reminded me of a colourful mushroom, quite possibly poisonous; my good baker-cum-landlord looked like a bit of the hillside, scarred and uneven but stable. The children were like young grass, coming up all over the place; but the adolescents were like nettles, you never knew if they would sting when touched. There was a young Tibetan lady whose smile was like the blue sky opening up. And there was no brighter blue than the sky as seen from Fosterganj on a clear day.

It took me some time to get to know all the inhabitants. But one of the first was Professor Lulla, recently retired, who came hurrying down the road like the White Rabbit in Alice, glancing at his watch and muttering to himself. If, like the White Rabbit, he was saying ‘I’m late, I’m late!’ I wouldn’t have been at all surprised. I was standing outside the bakery, chatting to one of the children, when he came up to me, adjusted his spectacles, peered at me through murky lenses, and said, ‘Welcome to Fosterganj, sir. I believe you’ve come to stay for the season.’

‘I’m not sure how long I’ll stay,’ I said. ‘But thank you for your welcome.’

‘We must get together and have a cultural and cultured exchange,’ he said, rather pompously. ‘Not many intellectuals in Fosterganj, you know.’

‘I was hoping there wouldn’t be.’

‘But we’ll talk, we’ll talk. Only can’t stop now. I have a funeral to attend. Eleven o’clock at the Camel’s Back cemetery. Poor woman. Dead. Quite dead. Would you care to join me?’

‘Er—I’m not in the party mood,’ I said. ‘And I don’t think I knew the deceased.’

‘Old Miss Gamleh. Your landlord thought she was a flowerpot—would have been ninety next month. Wonderful woman. Hated chokra-boys.’ He looked distastefully at the boy grinning up at him. ‘Stole all her plums, if the monkeys didn’t get them first. Spent all her life in the hill station. Never married. Jilted by a weedy British colonel, awful fellow, even made off with her savings. But she managed on her own. Kept poultry, sold eggs to the hotels.’

‘What happens to the poultry?’ I asked.

‘Oh, hens can look after themselves,’ he said airily. ‘But I can’t linger or I’ll be late. It’s a long walk to the cemetery.’ And he set off in determined fashion, like Scott of
the Antarctic about to brave a blizzard.

‘Must have been a close friend, the old lady who passed away,’ I remarked.

‘Not at all,’ said Hassan, who had been standing in his doorway listening to the conversation. ‘I doubt if she ever spoke to him. But Professor Lulla never misses a funeral. He goes to all of them—cremations, burials—funerals of any well-known person, even strangers. It’s a hobby with him.’

‘Extraordinary,’ I said. ‘I thought collecting match-box labels was sad enough as a hobby. Doesn’t it depress him?’

‘It seems to cheer him up, actually. But I must go too, sir. If you don’t mind keeping an eye on the bakery for an hour or two, I’ll hurry along to the funeral and see if I can get her poultry cheap. Miss Gamla’s hens give good eggs, I’m told. Little Ali will look after the customers, sir. All you have to do is see that they don’t make off with the buns and creamrolls.’

I don’t know if Hassan attended the funeral, but he came back with two baskets filled with cackling hens, and a rooster to keep them company.
Enter a Man-Eater

Did I say nothing ever happens in Fosterganj?

That is true in many ways. If you don’t count the outbreak of rabies, that is, or the annual depredations of a man-eating leopard, or the drownings in the pool.

I suppose I should start with the leopard, since its activities commenced not long after I came live in Fosterganj.

Its first victim was Professor Lulla, who was on his way to attend another funeral.

I don’t remember who had died. But I remember the cremation was to take place in Rajpur, at the bottom of the hill, an hour’s walk from Fosterganj. The professor was anxious not to miss it, although he had met the recipient of the honour only once. Before the sun was up, he was on his way down the mountain trail. At that early hour, the mist from the valley rises, and it obscured the view, so that he probably did not see the leopard as it followed silently behind him, waiting its opportunity, stalking its victim with pleasurable anticipation. The importunate professor might have heard the rattle of stones as the leopard charged; might have had a glimpse of it as it sprang at his throat; might even have uttered a cry, or screamed for help. But there was no one to hear, no witness of the attack.

The leopard dragged the dying man into the kingora bushes and begun to gnaw at his flesh. He was still at his meal when, half an hour later, a group of Nepali labourers came down the path, singing and making merry, and frightened the beast away. They found the mangled remains of the professor; two of the party ran back to Fosterganj for help, while the rest stood guard over the half-eaten torso.

Help came in the form of half the population of Fosterganj. There was nothing they could do, as the leopard did not return. But next day they gave the professor a good funeral.

However, a couple of public-spirited citizens were determined to hunt down the leopard before it took a further toll of human life. One of them was our local bank manager, Vishaal, a friendly and amiable sort, who was also a self-confessed disciple
of Jim Corbett, the great shikari who had disposed of dozens of man-eaters. Vishaal did not possess a gun, but the bank’s chowkidar, a retired Gurkha soldier, did. He had an ancient 12-bore shotgun which he carried about with him wherever he was on duty. The gun hadn’t been fired for years—not since it had gone off accidentally when being handled by an inquisitive customer.

Vishaal found a box of cartridges in the bank’s safe. They had been there for several years and looked a little mouldy, as did almost everything in Fosterganj, including some of the older residents. ‘Stay here more than three years,’ philosophized Hassan, ‘and unless you have God on your side, your hair goes white and your teeth get yellow. Everyone ends up looking like old Foster—descendent of the kings of Scotland!’

‘It must be the water,’ I said.

‘No, it’s the mist,’ said Hassan. ‘It hangs around Fosterganj even in good weather. It keeps the sun out. Look at my bread. Can’t keep a loaf fresh for more than a day, the mould gets to it in no time. And the monsoon hasn’t even begun!’

In spite of his bad teeth and ragged appearance, however, Foster—or Bonnie Prince Charlie, as the older residents called him—was fairly active, and it was he who set up a rough machaan in an old oak tree overlooking the stream at the bottom of the hill. He even sold Vishaal an old goat, to be used as bait for the leopard.

Vishaal persuaded me to keep him company on the machaan, and produced a bottle of brandy that he said would see us through the night.

Our vigil began at eight, and by midnight the brandy bottle was empty. No leopard, although the goat made its presence apparent by bleating without a break.

‘If the leopard has developed a taste for humans,’ I said, ‘why should it come for a silly old goat?’

I dozed off for some time, only to be awakened by a nudge from Vishaal, who whispered, ‘Something’s out there. I think it’s the leopard! Shine the torch on it!’

I shone the torch on the terrified goat, and at the same moment a leopard sprang out of the bushes and seized its victim. There was a click from Vishaal’s gun. The cartridge had failed to go off.

‘Fire the other barrel!’ I urged.

The second cartridge went off. There was a tremendous bang. But by then both leopard and goat had vanished into the night.

‘I thought you said it only liked humans,’ said Vishaal.

‘Must be another leopard,’ I said.

We trudged back to his rooms above the bank, and opened another bottle of brandy.

In the morning a villager came to the bank and demanded a hundred rupees for his goat.

‘But it was Foster’s goat,’ protested Vishaal. ‘I’ve already paid him for it.’
‘Not Foster Sahib’s goat,’ said the villager. ‘He only borrowed it for the night.’
A day or two later I was in the bank, run by Vishaal (manager), Negi (cashier), and Suresh (peon). I was sitting opposite Vishaal, who was at his desk, taken up by two handsome paperweights but no papers. Suresh had brought me a cup of tea from the teashop across the road. There was just one customer in the bank, Hassan, who was making a deposit. A cosy summer morning in Fosterganj: not much happening, but life going on just the same.

In walked Foster. He’d made an attempt at shaving, but appeared to have given up at a crucial stage, because now he looked like a wasted cricketer finally on his way out. The effect was enhanced by the fact that he was wearing flannel trousers that had once been white but were now greenish yellow; the previous monsoon was to blame. He had found an old tie, and this was strung round his neck, or rather his unbuttoned shirt collar. The said shirt had seen many summers and winters in Fosterganj, and was frayed at the cuffs. Even so, Foster looked quite spry, as compared to when I had last seen him.

‘Come in, come in!’ said Vishaal, always polite to his customers, even those who had no savings. ‘How is your gladiola farm?’

‘Coming up nicely,’ said Foster. ‘I’m growing potatoes too.’

‘Very nice. But watch out for the porcupines, they love potatoes.’

‘Shot one last night. Cut my hands getting the quills out. But porcupine meat is great. I’ll send you some the next time I shoot one.’

‘Well, keep some ammunition for the leopard. We’ve got to get it before it kills someone else.’

‘It won’t be around for two or three weeks. They keep moving, do leopards. He’ll circle the mountain, then be back in these parts. But that’s not what I came to see you about, Mr Vishaal. I was hoping for a small loan.’

‘Small loan, big loan, that’s what we are here for. In what way can we help you, sir?”

‘I want to start a chicken farm.’
‘Most original.’
‘There’s a great shortage of eggs in Mussoorie. The hotels want eggs, the schools want eggs, the restaurants want eggs. And they have to get them from Rajpur or Dehradun.
‘Hassan has a few hens,’ I put in.
‘Only enough for home consumption. I’m thinking in terms of hundreds of eggs—and broiler chickens for the table. I want to make Fosterganj the chicken capital of India. It will be like old times, when my ancestor planted the first potatoes here, brought all the way from Scotland!’
‘I thought they came from Ireland,’ I said. ‘Captain Young, up at Landour.’
‘Oh well, we brought other things. Like Scotch whisky.’
‘Actually, Irish whisky got here first. Captain Kennedy, up in Simla.’ I wasn’t Irish, but I was in a combative frame of mind, which is the same as being Irish.
To mollify Foster, I said, ‘You did bring the bagpipe.’ And when he perked up, I added: ‘But the Gurkha is better at playing it.’
This contretemps over, Vishaal got Foster to sign a couple of forms and told him that the loan would be processed in due course and that we’d all celebrate over a bottle of Scotch whisky. Foster left the room with something of a swagger. The prospect of some money coming in—even if it is someone else’s—will put any man in an optimistic frame of mind. And for Foster the prospect of losing it was as yet far distant.
I wanted to make a phone call to my bank in Delhi, so that I could have some of my savings sent to me, and Vishaal kindly allowed me to use his phone.
There were only four phones in all of Fosterganj, and there didn’t seem to be any necessity for more. The bank had one. So did Dr Bisht. So did Brigadier Bakshi, retired. And there was one in the police station, but it was usually out of order.
The police station, a one-room affair, was manned by a Daroga and a constable. If the Daroga felt like a nap, the constable took charge. And if the constable took the afternoon off, the Daroga would run the place. This worked quite well, as there wasn’t much crime in Fosterganj—if you didn’t count Foster’s illicit still at the bottom of the hill (Scottish hooch, he called the stuff he distilled); or a charming young delinquent called Sunil, who picked pockets for a living (though not in Fosterganj); or the barber who supplemented his income by supplying charas to his agents at some of the boarding schools; or the man who sold the secretions of certain lizards, said to increase sexual potency—except that it was only linseed oil, used for oiling cricket bats.
I found the last named, a man called Rattan Lal, sitting on a stool outside my door when I returned from the bank.
‘Saande-ka-tel,’ he declared abruptly, holding up a small bottle containing a vitreous yellow fluid. ‘Just one application, sahib, and the size and strength of your valuable member will increase dramatically. It will break down doors, should doors be shut against you. No chains will hold it down. You will be as a stallion, rampant in a
field full of fillies. Sahib, you will rule the roost! Memsahibs and beautiful women will fall at your feet.’

‘It will get me into trouble, for certain,’ I demurred. ‘It’s great stuff, I’m sure. But wasted here in Fosterganj.’

Rattan Lal would not be deterred. ‘Sahib, every time you try it, you will notice an increase in dimensions, guaranteed!’

‘Like Pinochio’s nose,’ I said in English. He looked puzzled. He understood the word ‘nose’, but had no idea what I meant.

‘Naak?’ he said. ‘No, sahib, you don’t rub it on your nose. Here, down between the legs,’ and he made as if to give a demonstration. I held a hand up to restrain him.

‘There was a boy named Pinochio in a far-off country,’ I explained, switching back to Hindi. ‘His nose grew longer every time he told a lie.’

‘I tell no lies, sahib. Look, my nose is normal. Rest is very big. You want to see?’

‘Another day,’ I said.

‘Only ten rupees.’

‘The bottle or the rest of you?’

‘You joke, sahib,’ and he thrust a bottle into my unwilling hands and removed a ten-rupee note from my shirt pocket; all done very simply.

‘I will come after a month and check up,’ he said. ‘Next time I will bring the saanda itself! You are in the prime of your life, it will make you a bull among men.’ And away he went.

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The little bottle of oil stood unopened on the bathroom shelf for weeks. I was too scared to use it. It was like the bottle in Alice in Wonderland with the label DRINK ME. Alice drank it, and shot up to the ceiling. I wasn’t sure I wanted to grow that high.

I did wonder what would happen if I applied some of it to my scalp. Would it stimulate hair growth? Would it stimulate my thought processes? Put an end to writer’s block?

Well, I never did find out. One afternoon I heard a clatter in the bathroom and looked in to see a large and sheepish-looking monkey jump out of the window with the bottle.

But to return to Rattan Lal—some hours after I had been sold the aphrodisiac, I was walking up to town to get a newspaper when I met him on his way down.

‘Any luck with the magic oil?’ I asked.

‘All sold out!’ he said, beaming with pleasure. ‘Ten bottles sold at the Savoy, and six at Hakman’s. What a night it’s going to be for them.’ And he rubbed his hands at the prospect.

‘A very busy night,’ I said. ‘Either that, or they’ll be looking for you to get their
money back.’

‘I come next month. If you are still here, I’ll keep another bottle for you. Look there!’ He took me by the arm and pointed at a large rock lizard that was sunning itself on the parapet. ‘You catch me some of those, and I’ll pay you for them. Be my partner. Bring me lizards—not small ones, only big fellows—and I will buy!’

‘How do you extract the tel?’ I asked.

‘Ah, that’s a trade secret. But I will show you when you bring me some saandas. Now I must go. My good wife waits for me with impatience.’

And off he went, down the bridle path to Rajpur.

The rock lizard was still on the wall, enjoying its afternoon siesta.

It did occur to me that I might make a living from breeding rock lizards. Perhaps Vishaal would give me a loan. I wasn’t making much as a writer.
Fairy Glen Palace

The old bridle path from Rajpur to Mussoorie passed through Fosterganj at a height of about five thousand feet. In the old days, before the motor road was built, this was the only road to the hill station. You could ride up on a pony, or walk, or be carried in a basket (if you were a child) or in a doolie (if you were a lady or an invalid). The doolie was a cross between a hammock, a stretcher, and a sedan chair, if you can imagine such a contraption. It was borne aloft by two perspiring partners. Sometimes they sat down to rest, and dropped you unceremoniously. I have a picture of my grandmother being borne uphill in a doolie, and she looks petrified. There was an incident in which a doolie, its occupant and two bearers, all went over a cliff just before Fosterganj, and perished in the fall. Sometimes you can see the ghost of this poor lady being borne uphill by two phantom bearers.

Fosterganj has its ghosts, of course. And they are something of a distraction.

Writing is my vocation, and I have always tried to follow the apostolic maxim: 'Study to be quiet and to mind your own business'. But in small-town India one is constantly drawn into other people’s business, just as they are drawn towards yours. In Fosterganj it was quiet enough, there were few people; there was no excuse for shirking work. But tales of haunted houses and fairy-infested forests have always intrigued me, and when I heard that the ruined palace half way down to Rajpur was a place to be avoided after dark, it was natural for me to start taking my evening walks in its direction.

Fairy Glen was its name. It had been built on the lines of a Swiss or French chalet, with numerous turrets decorating its many wings—a huge, rambling building, two-storeyed, with numerous balconies and cornices and windows; a hodge-podge of architectural styles, a wedding-cake of a palace, built to satisfy the whims and fancies of its late owner, the Raja of Ranipur, a small state near the Nepal border. Maintaining this ornate edifice must have been something of a nightmare; and the present heirs had quite given up on it, for bits of the roof were missing, some windows were without panes, doors had developed cracks, and what had once been a garden was now a small
jungle. Apparently there was no one living there anymore; no sign of a caretaker. I had walked past the wrought-iron gate several times without seeing any signs of life, apart from a large grey cat sunning itself outside a broken window.

Then one evening, walking up from Rajpur, I was caught in a storm.

A wind had sprung up, bringing with it dark, over-burdened clouds. Heavy drops of rain were followed by hailstones bouncing off the stony path. Gusts of wind rushed through the oaks, and leaves and small branches were soon swirling through the air. I was still a couple of miles from the Fosterganj bazaar, and I did not fancy sheltering under a tree, as flashes of lightning were beginning to light up the darkening sky. Then I found myself outside the gate of the abandoned palace.

Outside the gate stood an old sentry box. No one had stood sentry in it for years. It was a good place in which to shelter. But I hesitated because a large bird was perched on the gate, seemingly oblivious to the rain that was still falling.

It looked like a crow or a raven, but it was much bigger than either—in fact, twice the size of a crow, but having all the features of one—and when a flash of lightning lit up the gate, it gave a squawk, opened its enormous wings and took off, flying in the direction of the oak forest. I hadn’t seen such a bird before; there was something dark and malevolent and almost supernatural about it. But it had gone, and I darted into the sentry box without further delay.

I had been standing there some ten minutes, wondering when the rain was going to stop, when I heard someone running down the road. As he approached, I could see that he was just a boy, probably eleven or twelve; but in the dark I could not make out his features. He came up to the gate, lifted the latch, and was about to go in when he saw me in the sentry box.

‘Kaun? Who are you?’ he asked, first in Hindi then in English. He did not appear to be in any way anxious or alarmed.

‘Just sheltering from the rain,’ I said. ‘I live in the bazaar.’

He took a small torch from his pocket and shone it in my face.

‘Yes, I have seen you there. A tourist.’

‘A writer. I stay in places, I don’t just pass through.’

‘Do you want to come in?’

I hesitated. It was still raining and the roof of the sentry box was leaking badly.

‘Do you live here?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I am the raja’s nephew. I live here with my mother. Come in.’ He took me by the hand and led me through the gate. His hand was quite rough and heavy for an eleven- or twelve-year-old. Instead of walking with me to the front step and entrance of the old palace, he led me around to the rear of the building, where a faint light glowed in a mullioned window, and in its light I saw that he had a very fresh and pleasant face—a face as yet untouched by the trials of life.

Instead of knocking on the door, he tapped on the window. ‘Only strangers knock
on the door,’ he said. ‘When I tap on the window, my mother knows it’s me.’

‘That’s clever of you,’ I said.

He tapped again, and the door was opened by an unusually tall woman wearing a kind of loose, flowing gown that looked strange in that place, and on her. The light was behind her, and I couldn’t see her face until we had entered the room. When she turned to me, I saw that she had a long reddish scar running down one side of her face. Even so, there was a certain, hard beauty in her appearance.

‘Make some tea—Mother,’ said the boy rather brusquely. ‘And something to eat. I’m hungry. Sir, will you have something?’ He looked enquiringly at me. The light from a kerosene lamp fell full on his face. He was wide-eyed, full-lipped, smiling; only his voice seemed rather mature for one so young. And he spoke like someone much older, and with an almost unsettling sophistication.

‘Sit down, sir.’ He led me to a chair, made me comfortable. ‘You are not too wet, I hope?’

‘No, I took shelter before the rain came down too heavily. But you are wet, you’d better change.’

‘It doesn’t bother me.’ And after a pause, ‘Sorry there is no electricity. Bills haven’t been paid for years.’

‘Is this your place?’

‘No, we are only caretakers. Poor relations, you might say. The palace has been in dispute for many years. The raja and his brothers keep fighting over it, and meanwhile it is slowly falling down. The lawyers are happy. Perhaps I should study and become a lawyer some day.’

‘Do you go to school?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Quite old, I’m not sure. Mother, how old am I?’ he asked, as the tall woman returned with cups of tea and a plate full of biscuits.

She hesitated, gave him a puzzled look. ‘Don’t you know? It’s on your certificate.’

‘I’ve lost the certificate.’

‘No, I’ve kept it safely.’ She looked at him intently, placed a hand on his shoulder, then turned to me and said, ‘He is twelve,’ with a certain finality.

We finished our tea. It was still raining.

‘It will rain all night,’ said the boy. ‘You had better stay here.’

‘It will inconvenience you.’

‘No, it won’t. There are many rooms. If you do not mind the darkness. Come, I will show you everything. And meanwhile my mother will make some dinner. Very simple food, I hope you won’t mind.’

The boy took me around the old palace, if you could still call it that. He led the
way with a candle-holder from which a large candle threw our exaggerated shadows on the walls.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked, as he led me into what must have been a reception room, still crowded with ornate furniture and bric-a-brac.

‘Bhim,’ he said. ‘But everyone calls me Lucky.’

‘And are you lucky?’

He shrugged. ‘Don’t know…’ Then he smiled up at me. ‘Maybe you’ll bring me luck.’

We walked further into the room. Large oil paintings hung from the walls, gathering mould. Some were portraits of royalty, kings and queens of another era, wearing decorative headgear, strange uniforms, the women wrapped in jewellery—more jewels than garments, it seemed—and sometimes accompanied by children who were also weighed down by excessive clothing. A young man sat on a throne, his lips curled in a sardonic smile.

‘My grandfather,’ said Bhim.

He led me into a large bedroom taken up by a four-poster bed which had probably seen several royal couples copulating upon it. It looked cold and uninviting, but Bhim produced a voluminous razai from a cupboard and assured me that it would be warm and quite luxurious, as it had been his grandfather’s.

‘And when did your grandfather die?’ I asked.

‘Oh, fifty-sixty years ago, it must have been.’

‘In this bed, I suppose.’

‘No, he was shot accidentally while out hunting. They said it was an accident. But he had enemies.’

‘Kings have enemies… And this was the royal bed?’

He gave me a sly smile; not so innocent after all. ‘Many women slept in it. He had many queens.’

‘And concubines.’

‘What are concubines?’

‘Unofficial queens.’

‘Yes, those too.’

A worldly-wise boy of twelve.
I did not feel like sleeping in that room, with its musty old draperies and paint peeling off the walls. A trickle of water from the ceiling fell down the back of my shirt and made me shiver.

‘The roof is leaking,’ I said. ‘Maybe I’d better go home.’
‘You can’t go now, it’s very late. And that leopard has been seen again.’

He fetched a china bowl from the dressing-table and placed it on the floor to catch the trickle from the ceiling. In another corner of the room a plastic bucket was receiving a steady patter from another leak.

‘The palace is leaking everywhere,’ said Bhim cheerfully. ‘This is the only dry room.’

He took me by the hand and led me back to his own quarters. I was surprised, again, by how heavy and rough his hand was for a boy, and presumed that he did a certain amount of manual work such as chopping wood for a daily fire. In winter the building would be unbearably cold.

His mother gave us a satisfying meal, considering the ingredients at her disposal were somewhat limited. Once again, I tried to get away. But only half-heartedly. The boy intrigued me; so did his mother; so did the rambling old palace; and the rain persisted.

Bhim the Lucky took me to my room; waited with the guttering candle till I had removed my shoes; handed me a pair of very large pyjamas.

‘Royal pyjamas,’ he said with a smile.
I got into them and floated around.

‘Before you go—’ I said. ‘I might want to visit the bathroom in the night.’

‘Of course, sir. It’s close by.’ He opened a door, and beyond it I saw a dark passage. ‘Go a little way, and there’s a door on the left. I’m leaving an extra candle and matches on the dressing-table.’

He put the lighted candle he was carrying on the table, and left the room without a light. Obviously he knew his way about in the dark. His footsteps receded, and I was
left alone with the sound of raindrops pattering on the roof and a loose sheet of corrugated tin roofing flapping away in a wind that had now sprung up.

It was a summer’s night, and I had no need of blankets; so I removed my shoes and jacket and lay down on the capacious bed, wondering if I should blow the candle out or allow it to burn as long as it lasted.

Had I been in my own room, I would have been reading—a Conrad or a Chekhov or some other classic—because at night I turn to the classics—but here there was no light and nothing to read.

I got up and blew the candle out. I might need it later on.

Restless, I prowled around the room in the dark, banging into chairs and footstools. I made my way to the window and drew the curtains aside. Some light filtered into the room because behind the clouds there was a moon, and it had been a full moon the night before.

I lay back on the bed. It wasn’t very comfortable. It was a box-bed, of the sort that had only just begun to become popular in households with small bedrooms. This one had been around for some time—no doubt a very early version of its type—and although it was covered with a couple of thick mattresses, the woodwork appeared to have warped because it creaked loudly whenever I shifted my position. The boards no longer fitted properly. Either that, or the box-bed had been overstuffed with all sorts of things.

After some time I settled into one position and dozed off for a while, only to be awakened by the sound of someone screaming somewhere in the building. My hair stood on end. The screaming continued, and I wondered if I should get up to investigate. Then suddenly it stopped—broke off in the middle as though it had been muffled by a hand or piece of cloth.

There was a tapping at the pane of the big French window in front of the bed. Probably the branch of a tree, swaying in the wind. But then there was a screech, and I sat up in bed. Another screech, and I was out of it.

I went to the window and pressed my face to the glass. The big black bird—the bird I had seen when taking shelter in the sentry box—was sitting, or rather squatting, on the boundary wall, facing me. The moon, now visible through the clouds, fell full upon it. I had never seen a bird like it before. Crow-like, but heavily built, like a turkey, its beak that of a bird of prey, its talons those of a vulture. I stepped back, and closed the heavy curtains, shutting out the light but also shutting out the image of that menacing bird.

Returning to the bed, I just sat there for a while, wondering if I should get up and leave. The rain had lessened. But the luminous dial of my watch showed it was two in the morning. No time for a stroll in the dark—not with a man-eating leopard in the vicinity.

Then I heard the shriek again. It seemed to echo through the building. It may have
been the bird, but to me it sounded all too human. There was silence for a long while after that. I lay back on the bed and tried to sleep. But it was even more uncomfortable than before. Perhaps the wood had warped too much during the monsoon, I thought, and the lid of the old box-bed did not fit properly. Maybe I could push it back into its correct position; then perhaps I could get some sleep.

So I got up again, and after fumbling around in the dark for a few minutes, found the matches and lit the candle. Then I removed the sheets from the bed and pulled away the two mattresses. The cover of the box-bed lay exposed. And a hand protruded from beneath the lid.

It was not a living hand. It was a skeletal hand, fleshless, brittle. But there was a ring on one finger, an opal still clinging to the bone of a small index finger. It glowed faintly in the candlelight.

Shaking a little (for I am really something of a coward, though an inquisitive one), I lifted the lid of the box-bed. Laid out on a pretty counterpane was a skeleton. A bundle of bones, but still clothed in expensive-looking garments. One hand gripped the side of the box-bed; the hand that had kept it from shutting properly.

I dropped the lid of the box-bed and ran from the room—only to blunder into a locked door. Someone, presumably the boy, had locked me into the bedroom.

I banged on the door and shouted, but no one heard me. No one came running. I went to the large French window, but it was firmly fastened, it probably hadn’t been opened for many years.

Then I remembered the passageway leading to the bathroom. The boy had pointed it out to me. Possibly there was a way out from there.

It opened easily, and I stepped out into the darkness, finding myself entangled in a creeper that grew against the wall. From its cloying fragrance I recognized it as wisteria.

A narrow path led to a wicket-gate at the end of the building. I found my way out of the grounds and back on the familiar public road. The old palace loomed out of the darkness. I turned my back on it and set off for home, my little room above Hassan’s bakery.

Nothing happens in Fosterganj, I told myself. But something had happened in that old palace.
'What did you want to go there for?' asked Hassan, when I knocked on his door at the crack of dawn.

‘It was raining heavily, and I stopped near the gate to take shelter. A boy invited me in, his mother gave me something to eat, and I ended up spending the night in the raja’s bedroom.’ I said nothing about screams in the night or the skeleton in the bed.

Hassan presented me with a bun and a glass of hot sweet tea.

‘Nobody goes there,’ he said. ‘The place has a bad name.’

‘And why’s that?’

‘The old raja was a bad man. Tortured his wives, or so it was said.’

‘And what happened to him?’

‘Got killed in a hunting accident, in the jungles next to Bijnor. He went after a tiger, but the tiger got to him first. Bit his head off! Everyone was pleased. His younger brother inherited the palace, but he never comes here. I think he still lives somewhere near the Nepal border.’

‘And the people who still live in the palace?’

‘Poor relations, I think. Offspring from one of the raja’s wives or concubines—no one quite knows, or even cares. We don’t see much of them, and they keep to themselves. But people avoid the place, they say it is still full of evil, haunted by the old scoundrel whose cruelty has left its mark on the walls… It should be pulled down!’

‘It’s falling down of its own accord,’ I said. ‘Most of it is already a ruin.’

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Later that morning I found Hassan closing the doors of the bakery.

‘Are you off somewhere?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘Down to Rajpur. My boys are at school and my daughter is too small to look after the place.’

‘It’s urgent, then?’
‘That fool of a youth, Sunil, has got into trouble. Picking someone’s pocket, no doubt. They are holding him at the Rajpurthana.

‘But why do you have to go? Doesn’t he have any relatives?’

‘None of any use. His father died some time back. He did me a favour once. More than a favour—he saved my life. So I must help the boy, even if he is a badmash.

‘I’ll come with you,’ I said on an impulse. ‘Is it very far?’

‘Rajpur is at the bottom of the hill. About an hours’ walk down the footpath. Quicker than walking up to Mussorrie and waiting for a bus.’

I joined him on the road, and together we set off down the old path.

We passed Fairy Glen—the ruin where I had passed the night. It looked quite peaceful in the April sunshine. The gate was closed. There was no sign of the boy or his mother, my hosts of the previous night. It would have been embarrassing to meet them, for I had left in an almighty hurry. There was no sign of the big black bird, either. Only a couple of mynas squabbling on the wall, and a black-faced langur swinging from the branch of an oak.

I had some difficulty in keeping up with Hassan. Although he was over forty and had the beginnings of a paunch, he was a sturdy fellow, and he had the confident, even stride of someone who had spent most of his life in the hills.

The path was a steep one, and it began to level out only when it entered the foothills hamlet of Rajpur. At that time Rajpur was something of a ghost town. Some sixteen years earlier, most of its inhabitants, Muslims like Hassan, had fled or been killed by mobs during the communal strife that followed the partition of the country.

Rajpur had yet to recover. We passed empty, gutted buildings, some roofless, some without doors and windows. Weeds and small bushes grew out of the floors of abandoned houses. Successive monsoons had removed the mud or cement plaster from the walls, leaving behind bare brickwork which was beginning to crumble. The entire length of the street, where once there had been a hundred homes pulsating with life and human endeavour, now stood empty, homes only to jackals, snakes, and huge rock lizards.

Hassan stopped before an empty doorway. Behind it an empty courtyard. Behind it a wall with empty windows.

‘I lived here once,’ he said. ‘My parents, younger brother, sister, my first wife… all of us worked together, making bread and buns and pastries for the rich folk in the houses along the Dehra road. And in one night I lost everyone, everything—parents, brother, sister, wife… The fire swept through the mohalla, and those who ran out of their houses were cut down by swords and kirpans.’

I stopped and put a hand on his shoulder.

‘It’s hard for me to talk about it. Later, perhaps…’ And he moved on.

The street of lost homes gave way to a small bazaar, the only visible sign of some sort of recovery. A young man from a nearby village ran the small dhaba where we
stopped for tea and pakoras. He was too young to have any memories of 1947. And in India, town and countryside often appear to have completely different histories.

Hassan asked me to wait at the dhaba while he walked down to the local thana to enquire after Sunil.

‘A thana is no place for a respectable person like you,’ he said.
‘In Delhi, the prisons are full of respectable people,’ I said.
‘But not respected anymore?’
‘Well, some of them don’t seem to be too bothered. They get bail, come out with a swagger, and drive home in their cars.’
‘And what are their crimes?’
‘The same as Sunil’s. They pick pockets, but in a big way. You don’t see them doing it. But carry on, I’ll wait here for you.’

The dhak, or flame of the forest, was in flower, and I sat on a bench taking in the sights and sounds of summer’s arrival in the valley. Scarlet bougainvillea cascaded over a low wall, and a flock of parrots flung themselves from one tall mango tree to another, sampling the young unripe fruit.

‘Will there be a good crop this year?’ I asked the young dhabawala.
‘Should be, if the parrots and monkeys leave any for us.’
‘You need a chowkidar,’ I said, and thought of recommending Sunil. But Hassan came back without him.

‘No magistrate in court today. We’ll try again tomorrow. In the meantime he gets board and lodging at government expense. He doesn’t have to pick any pockets.’
‘He will, if he gets a chance. It’s an incurable disease.’
We did not return by way of the ruined and deserted township. Hassan wished to avoid it. ‘Bad memories,’ he said.

We cut across a couple of fields until we reached a small stream which came down the ravine below Fosterganj. Hassan knew it well. He went there to bathe from time to time. A narrow path took us upstream.

‘How did you escape?’ I asked, still curious about the events of 1947.

Hassan continued to walk, looking straight ahead. He did not turn his face to me as he spoke. ‘I was late returning from Mussoorie. The houses were already ablaze. I began running towards ours, but the mob cut me off. Most of them Sikhs, wanting revenge—they had lost homes and loved ones in the Punjab—there was madness everywhere—hate and greed and madness. Gandhi couldn’t stop it. Several men caught hold of me and flung me to the ground. One stood over me with his sword raised. That’s when Bhai Saheb—Sunil’s father—appeared as if out of nowhere. “What are you doing?” he cried. “That’s my nephew. Don’t touch him, or my entire village will be up in arms against you!” The attackers left me and moved on to other targets. Of course it was all over with my people. Sunil’s father kept me in his village, not far from here, until the killing stopped. Sooner or later it had to stop. It exhausts itself. A few hours of madness and we spend years counting the cost.’

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After almost an hour of walking upstream, slipping on moss-covered boulders and struggling up the little-used pathway, we came to a pool, a catchment area where the water was still and deep.

‘We’ll rest here awhile,’ said Hassan. ‘Would you like to bathe?’

It was a warm day, and down there in the ravine there was no breeze. I stripped to my underwear and slipped into the pool.

After some time Hassan joined me. He was a well-built man. Having a half-
dozen children had worn out his consumptive wife, but he was in fine shape—strong in
the chest and thighs; he had the build of a wrestler.

I was enjoying the water, swimming around, but Hassan was restless, continually
looking up at the hillside and the overhanging branches of the trees that grew near the
water. Presently he left the pool and began striding up a grassy knoll as though in search
of something—as though he sensed the presence of danger. If you have faced danger
once, you will know when it comes again.

‘What are you looking for?’ I called.

‘Nothing,’ he replied. ‘Just looking around.’ And he went further up the path.
I swam around a little, then pulled myself up on a flat boulder, and sat there in the
sun, contemplating a thicket of ferns. A long-tailed magpie squawked and flew away in
a hurry. The sun was in my eyes. I turned my back to it, and looked up into the yellow
eyes of a leopard crouching on the rocks above me.

I wanted to shout, but couldn’t. And perhaps it was better that I remained silent.
Was it the man-eater? There was no way of knowing, but it seemed likely.

For what seemed an age, I looked at the leopard and the leopard stared at me. In
fact, it was only a matter of seconds; but each second was an hour to me.

The leopard came forward a little and snarled. Perhaps he was puzzled that I
made no sound and did not run. But he sank down, his forepaws spreading to get a grip
on the rocks. His tail began to twitch—a sure signal that he was about to spring. His
lips drew back and the sun shone on his canines and the dark pink of his gums.

Then I saw Hassan appear just behind the crouching beast. He held a large rock
in his hands—it was bigger than a football. He raised his arms and brought the rock
down with all his might on the leopard’s head.

The leopard seemed to sag. Its paws scrabbled in the dust. Blood trickled from
its ears. Hassan appeared again, with an even bigger rock, and he brought it down with
such force that I heard the animal’s skull crack. There was a convulsive movement, and
then it was still.

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We returned to Fosterganj and told everyone that the man-eater was dead. A number of
people went down to the stream to fetch the carcass. But Hassan did not join them. He
was behind with his work, and had to bake twenty to thirty loaves of bread for delivery
the next morning. I tried to help him, but I am not much good at baking bread, and he
told me to go to bed early.

Everyone was pleased that the leopard had been killed. Everyone, that is, except
Vishaal, the bank manager, who had been hoping to vanquish it himself.
An Evening with Foster

Keep right on to the end of the road,
Keep right on to the end.
If your way be long
Let your heart be strong,
And keep right on to the end.
If you’re tired and weary
Still carry on,
Till you come to your happy abode.
And then all you love
And are dreaming of,
Will be there—
At the end of the road!

The voice of Sir Harry Lauder, Scottish troubadour of the 1930s, singing one of his favourites, came drifting across the hillside as I took the winding path to Foster’s cottage.

On one of my morning walks, I had helped him round up some runaway hens, and he had been suitably grateful.

‘Ah, it’s a fowl subject, trying to run a poultry farm,’ he quipped. ‘I’ve already lost a few to jackals and foxes. Hard to keep them in their pens. They jump over the netting and wander all over the place. But thank you for your help. It’s good to be young. Once the knees go, you’ll never be young again. Why don’t you come over in the evening and split a bottle with me? It’s a homemade brew, can’t hurt you.’

I’d heard of Foster’s home-made brew. More than one person had tumbled down the *khad* after partaking of the stuff. But I did not want to appear standoffish, and besides, I was curious about the man and his history. So towards sunset one summer’s evening, I took the path down to his cottage, following the strains of Harry Lauder.

The music grew louder as I approached, and I had to knock on the door several
times before it was opened by my bleary-eyed host. He had already been at the stuff he drank, and at first he failed to recognize me.

‘Nice old song you have there,’ I said. ‘My father used to sing it when I was a boy.’

Recognition dawned, and he invited me in. ‘Come in, laddie, come in. I’ve been expecting you. Have a seat!’

The seat he referred to was an old sofa and it was occupied by three cackling hens. With a magnificent sweep of the arm Foster swept them away, and they joined two other hens and a cock-bird on a book-rack at the other end of the room. I made sure there were no droppings on the sofa before subsiding into it.

‘Birds are finding it too hot out in the yard,’ he explained. ‘Keep wanting to come indoors.’

The gramophone record had run its course, and Foster switched off the old record-player.

‘Used to have a real gramophone,’ he said, ‘but can’t get the needles any more. These electric players aren’t any good. But I still have all the old records.’ He indicated a pile of 78 rpm gramophone records, and I stretched across and sifted through some of them. Gracie Fields, George Formby, The Street Singer... music hall favourites from the 1930s and 40s. Foster hadn’t added to his collection for twenty years.

He must have been close to eighty, almost twice my age. Like his stubble (a permanent feature), the few wisps of hair on his sunburnt head were also grey. Mud had dried on his hands. His old patched-up trousers were held up by braces. There were buttons missing from his shirt, laces missing from his shoes.

‘What will you have to drink, laddie? Tea, cocoa or whisky?’

‘Er—not cocoa. Tea, maybe—oh, anything will do.’

‘That’s the spirit. Go for what you like. I make my own whisky, of course. Real Scotch from the Himalaya. I get the best barley from yonder village.’ He gestured towards the next mountain, then turned to a sagging mantelpiece, fetched a bottle that contained an oily yellow liquid, and poured a generous amount into a cracked china mug. He poured a similar amount into a dirty glass tumbler, handed it to me, and said, ‘Cheers! Bottoms up!’

‘Bottoms up!’ I said, and took a gulp.

It wasn’t bad. I drank some more and asked Foster how the poultry farm was doing.

‘Well, I had fifty birds to start with. But they keep wandering off, and the boys from the village make off with them. I’m down to forty. Sold a few eggs, though. Gave the bank manager the first lot. He seemed pleased. Would you like a few eggs? There’s a couple on that cushion, newly laid.’

The said cushion was on a stool a few feet from me. Two large hens’ eggs were
supported upon it.
‘Don’t sit on ’em,’ said Foster, letting out a cackle which was meant to be
laughter. ‘They might hatch!’
I took another gulp of Foster’s whisky and considered the eggs again. They
looked much larger now, more like goose eggs.
Everything was looking larger.
I emptied the glass and stood up to leave.
‘Don’t go yet,’ said Foster. ‘You haven’t had a proper drink. And there’s dinner
to follow. Sausages and mash! I make my own sausages, did you know? My sausages
were famous all over Mussoorie. I supplied the Savoy, Hakmans, the schools.’
‘Why did you stop?’ I was back on the sofa, holding another glass of Himalayan
Scotch.
‘Somebody started spreading a nasty rumour that I was using dog’s meat. Now
why would I do that when pork was cheap? Of course, during the war years a lot of
rubbish went into sausages—stuff you’d normally throw away. That’s why they were
called “Sweet mysteries”. You remember the old song? “Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life!”
Nebon Eddy and Jeanette Macdonald. Well, the troops used to sing it whenever they
were given sausages for breakfast. You never knew what went into them—cats, dogs,
camels, scorpions. If you survived those sausages, you survived the war!’
‘And your sausages, what goes into them?’
‘Good, healthy chicken meat. Not crow’s meat, as some jealous rivals tried to
make out.’
He frowned into his china mug. It was suddenly quieter inside. The hens had
joined their sisters in the back yard; they were settling down for the night, sheltering in
cardboard cartons and old mango-wood boxes. Quack-quack-quack. Another day nearer to
having their sad necks wrung.
I looked around the room. A threadbare carpet. Walls that hadn’t received a coat
of paint for many years. A couple of loose rafters letting in a blast of cold air. Some
pictures here and there—mostly racing scenes. Foster must have been a betting man.
Perhaps that was how he ran out of money.
He noticed my interest in the pictures and said, ‘Owned a racehorse once. A
beauty, she was. That was in Meerut, just before the war. Meerut had a great
racecourse. Races every Saturday. Punters came from Delhi. There was money to be
made!’
‘Did you win any?’ I asked.
‘Won a couple of races hands down. Then unexpectedly she came in last, and
folks lost a lot of money. I had to leave town in a hurry. All my jockey’s fault—he was
hand in glove with the bookies. They made a killing, of course! Anyway, I sold the
horse to a sporting Parsi gentleman and went into the canteen business with my Uncle
Fred in Roorkee. That’s Uncle Fred, up there.’
Foster gestured towards the mantelpiece. I expected to see a photograph of his Uncle Fred but instead of a photo I found myself staring at a naked skull. It was a well-polished skull and it glistened in the candlelight.

‘That’s Uncle Fred,’ said Foster proudly.

‘That skull? Where’s the rest of him?’

‘In his grave, back in Roorkee.’

‘You mean you kept the skull but not the skeleton?’

‘Well, it’s a long story,’ said Foster, ‘but to keep it short, Uncle Fred died suddenly of a mysterious malady—a combination of brain fever, blood-pressure and Housemaid’s Knee.’

‘Housemaid’s Knee!’

‘Yes, swollen kneecaps, brought about by being beaten too frequently with police lathis. He wasn’t really a criminal, but he’d get into trouble from time to time, harmless little swindles such as printing his own lottery tickets or passing forged banknotes. Spent some time in various district jails until his health broke down. Got a pauper’s funeral—but his cadaver was in demand. The students from the local medical college got into the cemetery one night and made off with his cranium! Not that he had much by way of a brain, but he had a handsome, well-formed skull, as you can see.’

I did see. And the skull appeared to be listening to the yarn, because its toothless jaws were extended in a grin; or so I fancied.

‘And how did you get it back?’ I asked.

‘Broke into their demonstration room, naturally. I was younger then, and pretty agile. There it was on a shelf, among a lot of glass containers of alcohol, preserving everything from giant tapeworms to Ghulam Kadir’s penis and testicles.’

‘Ghulam Kadir?’

‘Don’t you know your history? He was the fellow who blinded the Emperor Shah Alam. They caught up with him near Saharanpur and cut his balls off. Preserved them for posterity. Waste of alcohol, though. Have another drink, laddie. And then for a sausage. Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life!’

After another drink and several ‘mystery’ sausages, I made my getaway and stumbled homewards up a narrow path along an open ridge. A jackal slunk ahead of me, and a screech-owl screeched, but I got home safely, none the worse for an evening with the descendant of Bonnie Prince Charlie.
Who’s Been Sleeping in My Bed?

There was a break in the rains, the clouds parted, and the moon appeared—a full moon, bathing the mountains in a pollen-yellow light. Little Fosterganj, straddling the slopes of the Ganga-Yamuna watershed, basked in the moonlight, each lighted dwelling a firefly in the night.

Only the Fairy Glen palace was unlit, brooding in the darkness. I was returning from an evening show at the Realto in Mussoorie. It had been a long walk, but a lovely one. I stopped outside the palace gate, wondering about its lonely inhabitants and all that might have happened within its walls. I wanted to see them again, but not at night—not with strange birds flapping around and skeletons hidden in the box-beds. Old skeletons, maybe; but what were they doing there?

I reached Hassan’s bakery around midnight, and mounted the steps to my room. My door was open. It was never locked, as I had absolutely nothing that anyone would want to take away. The typewriter, which I had hired from a shop in Dehradun, was a heavy machine, designed for office use; no one was going to carry it off.

But someone was in my bed.


I switched on the light, shook the recumbent figure. He started up. It was Sunil. After giving him a beating, the police had let him go.

‘Uncle, you frightened me!’ he exclaimed.

He called me ‘Uncle’, although I was only some fifteen or sixteen years older than him. Call a tiger ‘Uncle’, and he won’t harm you; or so the forest-dwellers say. Not quite how it works out with people approaching middle age. Being addressed as ‘Uncle’ didn’t make me very fond of Sunil.

‘I’m the one who should be frightened,’ I said. ‘A pickpocket in my bed!’

‘I don’t pick pockets any more, Uncle. I’ve turned a new leaf. Don’t you know that expression?’ Sunil had studied up to Class 8 in a ‘convent school’.

‘Well, you can turn out of my bed,’ I said. ‘And return that watch you took off me before you got into trouble.’
‘You lent me the watch, Uncle. Don’t you remember? Here!’ He held out his arm. ‘Take it back.’ There were two watches on his wrist; my modest HMT, and something far more expensive.

I removed the HMT and returned it to my own wrist. ‘Now can I have my bed back?’ I asked. ‘There’s room for both of us.’ ‘No, there isn’t, it’s only a khatiya. It will collapse under our combined weight. But there’s this nice easy chair here, and in the morning, when I get up, you can have the bed.’

Reluctantly, Sunil got off the bed and moved over to the cane chair. Perhaps I’d made a mistake. It meant that Sunil would be awake all night, and that he’d want to talk. Nothing can be more irritating than a room companion who talks all night.

I switched off the light and stretched out on the cot. It was a bit wobbly. Perhaps the floor would have been better. Sunil sat in the chair, whistling and singing film songs—something about a red dupatta blowing in the wind, and telephone calls from Rangoon to Dehradun. A romantic soul, Sunil, when he wasn’t picking pockets. Did I say there’s nothing worse than a companion who talks all night? I was wrong. Even worse is a companion who sings all night.

‘You can sing in the morning,’ I said. ‘When the sun comes out. Now go to sleep.’ There was silence for about two minutes. Then: ‘Uncle?’ ‘What is it?’ ‘I have to turn over a new leaf.’ ‘In the morning, Sunil,’ I turned over and tried to sleep. ‘Uncle, I have a project.’ ‘Well, don’t involve me in it.’ ‘It’s all seedha-saadha, and very interesting. You know that old man who sells saande-ka-tel—the oil that doubles your manhood?’ ‘I haven’t tried it. It’s an oil taken from a lizard, isn’t it?’ ‘A big lizard.’ ‘So?’ ‘Well, he’s old now and can’t go hunting for these lizards. You can only find them in certain places.’ ‘Maybe he should retire and do something else, then. Grow marigolds. Their oil is also said to be good for lovers.’ ‘Not as good as lizard oil.’ ‘So what’s your project?’ He was succeeding in keeping me awake. ‘Are you going to gather lizards for him?’ ‘Exactly, Uncle. Why don’t you join me?’
Next morning Sunil elaborated on his scheme. I was to finance the tour. We would trek, or use a bus where there were roads, and visit the wooded heights and rocky slopes above the Bhagirathi river, on its descent from the Gangotri glacier. We would stay in rest-houses, dharamsalas, or small hotels. We would locate those areas where the monitors, or large rock lizards, were plentiful, catch as many as possible and bring them back alive to Fosterganj, where our gracious mentor would reward us to the tune of two hundred rupees per reptile. Sunil and I would share this bonanza.

The project, if any, did not interest me. I was extremely skeptical of the entire scheme. But I was bored, and it sounded like it could be fun, even an adventure of sorts, and I would have Sunil as guide, philosopher and friend. He could be a lovely and happy-go-lucky companion—provided he kept his hands out of other people’s pockets and did not sing at night.

Hassan was equally skeptical about the success of the project. For one thing, he did not believe in the magical properties of saande-ka-tel (never having felt the need for it); and for another, he did not think those lizards would be caught so easily. But he thought it would be a good thing for Sunil, something different from what he was used to doing. The young man might benefit from my ‘intellectual’ company. And in the hills, not many folks had money in their pockets.

And so, with the blessings of Hassan, and a modest overdraft from Vishaal, our friendly bank manager, I packed a haversack with essentials (including my favourite ginger biscuits as prepared by Hassan) and set out with Sunil on the old pilgrim road to Tehri and beyond.

Sunil had brought along two large baskets, as receptacles for the lizards when captured. But as he had no intention of carrying them himself—and wisely refrained from asking me to do so—he had brought along a twelve-year-old youth from the bazaar—a squint-eyed, hare-lipped, one-eared character called Buddhoo, whose intelligence and confidence made up for his looks. Buddhoo was to act as our porter and general factotum. On our outward journey he had only to carry the two empty baskets; Sunil hadn’t told him what their eventual contents might be.

It was late July, still monsoon time, when we set out on the Tehri road.

In those days it was still a mule-track, meandering over several spurs and ridges, before descending to the big river. It was about forty miles to Tehri. From there we could get a bus, at least up to Pratap Nagar, the old summer capital of the hill state.
On the Trail of the Lizard

That first day on the road was rather trying. I had done a certain amount of walking in the hills, and I was reasonably fit. Sunil, for all his youth, had never walked further than Mussoorie’s cinemas or Dehra’s railway station, where the pickings for his agile fingers had always been good. Buddhoo, on the other hand, belied his short stature by being so swift of foot that he was constantly leaving us for behind. Every time we rounded a corner, expecting to find him waiting for us, he would be about a hundred yards ahead, never tiring, never resting.

To keep myself going I would sing either Harry Lauder’s ‘Keep right on to the end of the road,’ or Nelson Eddy’s ‘Tramp, tramp, tramp’.

*Tramp, tramp, tramp, along the highway,*  
*Tramp, tramp, tramp, the road is free!*  
*Blazing trails along the byways…*

Sunil did not appreciate my singing.

‘You don’t sing well,’ he said. ‘Even those mules are getting nervous.’ He gestured at a mule-train that was passing us on the narrow path. A couple of mules were trying to break away from the formation.

‘Nothing to do with my singing,’ I said. ‘All they want are those young bamboo shoots coming up on the hillside.’

Sunil asked one of the mule-drivers if he could take a ride on a mule; anything to avoid trudging along the stony path. The mule-driver agreeing, Sunil managed to mount one of the beasts, and went cantering down the road, leaving us far behind.

Buddhoo waited for me to catch up. He pointed at a large rock to the side of road, and sure enough, there, resting at ease, basking in the morning sunshine, was an ungainly monitor lizard about the length of my forearm.

‘Too small,’ said Buddhoo, who seemed to know something about lizards. ‘Bigger ones higher up.’
The lizard did not move. It stared at us with a beady eye; a contemptuous sort of stare, almost as if it did not think very highly of humans. I wasn’t going to touch it. Its leathery skin looked uninviting; its feet and tail reminded me of a dinosaur; its head was almost serpent like. Who would want to use its body secretions, I wondered. Certainly not if they had seen the creature. But human beings, men especially, will do almost anything to appease their vanity. Tiger’s whiskers or saande-ka-tel—anything to improve their sagging manhood.

We did not attempt to catch the lizard. Sunil was supposed to be the expert. And he was already a mile away, enjoying his mule-ride.

An hour later he was sitting on the grassy verge, nursing a sore backside. Riding a mule can take the skin off the backside of an inexperienced rider.

‘I’m in pain,’ he complained. ‘I can’t get up.’

‘Use saande-ka-tel,’ I suggested.

Buddhoo went sauntering up the road, laughing to himself.

‘He’s mad,’ said Sunil.

‘That makes three of us, then.’
Companions of the Road

By noon we were hungry. Hassan had provided us with buns and biscuits, but these were soon finished, and we were longing for a real meal. Late afternoon we trudged into Dhanolti, a scenic spot with great views of the snow peaks; but we were in no mood for scenery. Who can eat sunsets? A forest rest-house was the only habitation, and had food been available we could have spent the night there. But the caretaker was missing. A large black dog frightened us off.

So on we tramped, three small dots on a big mountain, mere specks, beings of no importance. In creating this world, God showed that he was a great mathematician; but in creating man, he got his algebra wrong. Puffed up with self-importance, we are in fact the most dispensable of all his creatures.

On a long journey, the best companion is usually the one who talks the least, and in that way Buddhoo was a comforting presence. But I wanted to know him better.

‘How did you lose your ear?’ I asked.
‘Bear tore it off,’ he said, without elaborating.
Brevity is the soul of wit, or so they say.
‘Must have been painful,’ I ventured.
‘Bled a lot.’
‘I wouldn’t care to meet a bear.’
‘Lots of them out here. If you meet one, run downhill. They don’t like running downhill.’
‘I’ll try to remember that,’ I said, grateful for his shared wisdom. We trudged on in silence. To the south, the hills were bleak and windswept; to the north, moist and well-forested. The road ran along the crest of the ridge, and the panorama it afforded, with the mountains striding away in one direction and the valleys with their gleaming rivers snaking their way towards the plains, gave me an immense feeling of freedom. I doubt if Sunil felt the same way. He was preoccupied with tired legs and a sore backside. And for Buddhoo it was a familiar scene.

A brief twilight, and then, suddenly, it grew very dark. No moon; the stars just
beginning to appear. We rounded a bend, and a light shone from a kerosene lamp swinging outside a small roadside hut.

It was not the pilgrim season, but the owner of the hut was ready to take in the odd traveller. He was a grizzled old man. Over the years the wind had dug trenches in his cheeks and forehead. A pair of spectacles, full of scratches, almost opaque, balanced on a nose long since broken. He’d lived a hard life. A survivor.

‘Have you anything to eat?’ demanded Sunil.

‘I can make you dal-bhaat,’ said the shopkeeper. Dal and rice was the staple diet of the hills; it seldom varied.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘But first some tea.’

The tea was soon ready, hot and strong, the way I liked it. The meal took some time to prepare, but in the meantime we made ourselves comfortable in a corner of the shop, the owner having said we could spend the night there. It would take us two hours to reach the township of Chamba, he said. Buddhoo concurred. He knew the road.

We had no bedding, but the sleeping area was covered with old sheepskins stitched together, and they looked comfortable enough. Sunil produced a small bottle of rum from his shoulder-bag, unscrewed the cap, took a swig, and passed it around. The old man declined. Buddhoo drank a little; so did I. Sunil polished off the rest. His eyes become glassy and unfocused.

‘Where did you get it?’ I asked.

‘Hassan Uncle gave it to me.’
‘Hassan doesn’t drink—he doesn’t keep it, either.’

‘Actually, I picked it up in the police station, just before they let me go. Found it in the Havildar’s coat pocket.’

‘Congratulations,’ I said. ‘He’ll be looking forward to seeing you again.’

The dal-bhaat was simple but substantial.

‘Could do with some pickle,’ grumbled Sunil, and then fell asleep before he could complain any further.

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We were all asleep before long. The sheepskin rug was reasonably comfortable. But we were unaware that it harboured a life of its own—a miniscule but active population of fleas and bugs—dormant when undisturbed, but springing into activity at the proximity of human flesh and blood.

Within an hour of lying down we were wide awake.

When God, the great mathematician, discovered that in making man he had overdone things a bit, he created the bedbug to even things out.

Soon I was scratching. Buddhoo was up and scratching. Sunil came out of his stupor and was soon cursing and scratching. The fleas had got into our clothes, the bugs
were feasting on our blood. When the world as we know it comes to an end, these will be the ultimate survivors.

Within a short time we were stomping around like Kathakali dancers. There was no relief from the exquisite torture of being seized upon by hundreds of tiny insects thirsting for blood or body fluids.

The teashop owner was highly amused. He had never seen such a performance—three men cavorting around the room, scratching, yelling, hopping around.

And then it began to rain. We heard the first heavy raindrops pattering a rhythm on the tin roof. They increased in volume, beating against the only window and bouncing off the banana fronds in the little courtyard. We needed no urging. Stripping off our clothes, we dashed outside, naked in the wind and rain, embracing the elements. What relief! We danced in the rain until it stopped, and then, getting back into our clothes with some reluctance, we decided to be on our way, no matter how dark or forbidding the night.

We paid for our meal—or rather, I paid for it, being the only one in funds—and bid goodnight and goodbye to our host. Actually, it was morning, about 2 a.m, but we had no intention of bedding down again; not on those sheepskin rugs.

A half-moon was now riding the sky. The rain had refreshed us. We were no longer hungry. We set out with renewed vigour.

Great lizards, beware!
At day break we tramped into the little township of Chamba, where Buddhoo proudly pointed out a memorial to soldiers from the area who had fallen fighting in the trenches in France during the First World War. His grandfather had been one of them. Young men from the hills had traditionally gone into the army; it was the only way they could support their families; but times were changing, albeit slowly. The towns now had several hopeful college students. If they did not find jobs they could go into politics.

The motor road from Rishikesh passed through Chamba, and we were able to catch a country bus which deposited us at Pratap Nagar later that day.

Pratap Nagar is not on the map, but it used to exist once upon a time. It may still be there, for all I know. Back in the days of the old Tehri Raj it had been the raja’s summer capital. There had even been a British resident and a tiny European population—just a handful of British officials and their families. But after Independence, the raja no longer had any use for the place. The state had been poor and backward, and over the years he had spent more time in Dehradun and Mussoorie.

We were there purely by accident, having got into the wrong bus at Chamba.

The wrong bus or the wrong train can often result in interesting consequences. It’s called the charm of the unexpected.

Not that Pratap Nagar was oozing with charm. A dilapidated palace, an abandoned courthouse, a dispensary without a doctor, a school with a scatter of students and no teachers, and a marketplace selling sad-looking cabbages and cucumbers—these were the sights and chief attractions of the town. But I have always been drawn to decadent, decaying, forgotten places—Fosterganj being one of them—and while Sunil and Buddhoo passed the time chatting to some of the locals at the bus stand—which appeared to be the centre of all activity—I wandered off along the narrow, cobbled lanes until I came to a broken wall.

Passing through the break in the wall I found myself in a small cemetery. It contained a few old graves. The inscriptions had worn away from most of the tombstones, and on others the statuary had been damaged. Obviously no one had been
buried there for many years.

In one corner I found a grave that was better preserved than the others, by virtue of the fact that the lettering had been cut into an upright stone rather than a flat slab. It read:

\[
\begin{align*}
Dr \text{ Robert Hutchinson} \\
Physician to His Highness \\
Died July 13, 1933 \\
of Typhus Fever \\
May his soul rest in peace.
\end{align*}
\]

Typhus fever! I had read all about it in an old medical dictionary published half a century ago by *The Statesman* of Calcutta and passed on to me by a fond aunt. Not to be confused with typhoid, typhus fever is rare today but sometimes occurs in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and is definitely spread by lice, ticks, fleas, mites and other micro-organisms thriving in filthy conditions—such as old sheepskin rugs which have remained unwashed for years.

I began to scratch at the very thought of it.
I remembered more: ‘Attacks of melancholia and mania sometimes complicate the condition, which is often fatal.’

Needless to say, I now found myself overcome by a profound feeling of melancholy. No doubt the mania would follow.

I examined the other graves, and found one more victim of typhus fever. There must have been an epidemic. Fortunately for my peace of mind, the only other decipherable epitaph told of the missionary lady who had fallen victim to an earthquake in 1905. Somehow, an earthquake seemed less sinister than a disease brought on by bloodthirsty bugs.

While I was standing there, ruminating on matters of life and death, my companions turned up, and Sunil exclaimed: ‘Well done, Uncle, you’ve already found one!’

I hadn’t found anything, being somewhat short-sighted, but Sunil was pointing across to the far wall, where a great fat lizard sat basking in the sun.

Its tail was as long as my arm. Its legs were spread sideways, like a goalkeeper’s. Its head moved from side to side, and suddenly its tongue shot out and seized a passing dragonfly. In seconds the beautiful insect was imprisoned in a pair of strong jaws.

The giant lizard consumed his lunch, then glanced at us standing a few feet away.

‘Plenty of fat around that fellow,’ observed Sunil. ‘Full of that precious oil!’

The lizard let out a croak, as though it had something to say on the matter. But Sunil wasn’t listening. He lunged forward and grabbed the lizard by its tail.
Miraculously, the tail came away in his hands.

Away went lizard, minus its tail.

Buddhoo was doubled up with laughter. ‘The tail’s no use,’ he said. ‘Nothing in the tail!’

Sunil flung the tail away in disgust.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘Catch a lizard by its tail—make a wish, it cannot fail!’

‘Is that true?’ asked Sunil, who had a superstitious streak.

‘Nursery rhyme from Brazil,’ I said.

The lizard had disappeared, but a white-bearded patriarch was looking at us from over the wall.

‘You need a net,’ he said. ‘Catching them by hand isn’t easy. Too slippery.’

We thanked him for his advice; said we’d go looking for a net.

‘Maybe a bedsheet will do,’ Sunil said.

The patriarch smiled, stroked his flowing white beard, and asked: ‘But what will you do with these lizards? Put them in a zoo?’

‘It’s their oil we want,’ said Sunil, and made a sales pitch for the miraculous properties of saande-ka-tel.

‘Oh, that,’ said the patriarch, looking amused. ‘It will irritate the membranes and cause some inflammation. I know—I’m a nature therapist. All superstition, my friends. You’ll get the same effect, even better, with machine oil. Try sewing-machine oil. At least it’s harmless. Leave the poor lizards alone.’

And the barefoot mendicant hitched up his dhoti, gave us a friendly wave, and disappeared in the monsoon mist.
Tremors in the Night

Not to be discouraged, we left the ghost town and continued our journey upriver, as far as the bus would take us. The road ended at Uttarkashi, for the simple reason that the bridge over the Bhagirathi had been washed away in a flash flood. The glaciers had been melting, and that, combined with torrential rain in the upper reaches, had brought torrents of muddy water rushing down the swollen river. Anything that came in its way vanished downstream.

We spent the night in a pilgrim shelter, built on a rocky ledge overlooking the river. All night we could hear the water roaring past below us. After a while, we became used to the unchanging sound; it became like a deep silence, and made our sleep deeper. Sometime before dawn, however, a sudden tremor had us trembling out of our cots.

‘Earthquake!’ shouted Sunil, making for the doorway and banging into the wall instead.

‘Don’t panic,’ I said, feeling panicky.
‘It will pass,’ said Buddhoo.

The tremor did pass, but not before everyone in the shelter had rushed outside. There was the sound of rocks falling, and everyone rushed back again. ‘Landslide!’ someone shouted. Was it safer outside or inside? No one could be sure.

‘It will pass,’ said Buddhoo again, and went to sleep.

Sunil began singing at the top of his voice: ‘Pyarkiya to darnakya—Why be afraid when we have loved’. I doubt Sunil had ever been in love, but it was a rousing song with which to meet death.

‘Chup, beta!’ admonished an old lady on her last pilgrimage to the abode of the gods. ‘Say your prayers instead.’

The room fell silent. Outside, a dog started howling. Other dogs followed his example. No serenade this, but a mournful anticipation of things to come; for birds and beasts are more sensitive to the earth’s tremors and inner convulsions than humans, who are no longer sensitive to nature’s warnings.
A couple of jackals joined the chorus. Then a bird, probably a nightjar, set up a monotonous croak. I looked at my watch. It was 4 a.m, a little too early for birds to be greeting the break of day. But suddenly there was a twittering and cawing and chattering as all the birds in the vicinity passed on the message that something was amiss.

There was a rush of air and a window banged open.

The mountain shuddered. The building shook, rocked to and fro.

People began screaming and making for the door.

The door was flung open, but only a few escaped into the darkness.

Across the length of the room a chasm opened up. The lady saying her prayers fell into it. So did one or two others. Then the room and the people in it—those who were on the other side of the chasm—suddenly vanished.

There was the roar of falling masonry as half the building slid down the side of the mountain.

We were left dangling in space.

‘Let’s get out of here quickly!’ shouted Sunil.

We scrambled out of the door. In front of us, an empty void. I couldn’t see a thing. Then Buddhoo took me by the hand and led me away from the crumbling building and on to the rocky ledge above the river.

The earth had stopped quaking, but the mountain had been shaken to its foundations, and rocks and trees were tumbling into the swollen river. The town was in darkness, the power station having shut down after the first tremor. Here and there a torch or lantern shone out of the darkness, and people could be heard wailing and shouting to each other as they roamed the streets in the rain. Somewhere a siren went off. It only seemed to add to the panic.

At 5 a.m, the rain stopped and the sky lightened. At six it was daybreak. A little later the sun came up. A beautiful morning, except for the devastation below.
I think I’ll join the army,’ announced Sunil three days later, when we were back in Fosterganj. ‘Do you think they’ll take me?’

Sunil had been impressed by the rescue work carried out by the army after the Uttarkashi earthquake.

‘Like a flash,’ I said. ‘Provided you keep your fingers out of the brigadier’s pockets.’

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In those early hours of the morning, confusion had prevailed in and around Uttarkashi. Houses had crumbled from the tremors and aftershocks, or been buried under the earth and rocks of a number of landslides. Survivors were wandering around in a daze. Many lay crushed or trapped under debris. It would take days, weeks for the town to recover.

At first there were disorganized attempts at rescue, and Sunil, Buddhoo and I made clumsy attempts to extricate people from the ruins of their homes. A township built between two steep mountains, and teetering along the banks of a moody river, was always going to be at risk. It had happened before, it would happen again.

A little girl, dusty but unhurt, ran to me and asked, ‘Will there be school today?’

‘I don’t think so,’ I said.

A small boy was looking for his mother; a mother was searching for her children; several men were digging in the rubble, trying to extricate friends or family members.

And then a couple of army trucks arrived, and the rescue work moved more swiftly, took on a certain momentum. The jawans made all the difference. Many were rescued who would otherwise have perished.

But the town presented a sad spectacle. A busy marketplace had vanished; a school building lay in ruins; a temple had been swallowed up by a gaping wound in the earth.

On the road we met the bearded patriarch, the one we had encountered two days
earlier.

‘Did you find your lizards?’ he asked.

But we had forgotten about lizards.

‘What we need now are kitchen utensils,’ he said. ‘Then we can prepare some food for those who need it.’

He was, it appeared, the head of a social service organization, and we followed him to his centre, a shed near the bus stand, and tried to make ourselves useful. A doctor and nurse were at work on the injured.

I have no idea how many perished, or were badly injured in that earthquake, I was never any good at statistics. Old residents told me that the area was prone to such upheavals.

‘Men come and go,’ I said, ‘but the mountains remain.’

‘Not so,’ said an old-timer. ‘Out here, the mountains are still on the move.’

~

As soon as the buses were running again, Sunil and I returned to Fosterganj. Buddhoo remained behind, having decided to join the patriarch’s aid centre. We missed his good-natured company, even his funny hare-teeth smile. He promised to meet us again. But till the time I left Fosterganj, we were still waiting for him to turn up. I wonder what became of him. Some of the moving forces of our lives are meant to touch us briefly and then go their way.
A Ghost Village

On our way back, the bus broke down, as buses were in the habit of doing in those good old days. It was shake, rattle and roll for most of the journey, or at least part of the journey, until something gave way. Occasionally a bus went out of control and plunged over a cliff, taking everyone with it; a common enough occurrence on those hill roads.

We were lucky. Our bus simply broke its axle and came to rest against a friendly deodar tree.

So we were walking again.

Sunil said he knew of a short cut, and as a result we got lost, just the two of us, everyone else having kept to the main road.

We wandered over hill and dale, through a forest of oak and rhododendron, and then through some terraced fields (with nothing in them) and into a small village which appeared to be inhabited entirely by monkeys. An unfriendly lot of the short-tailed rhesus clan, baring their teeth at us, making guttural sounds and more or less telling us to be off.

There were about fifteen houses in the village, and all of them were empty—except for the monkeys and a colony of field rats. Where were all the people?

Going from house to house, we finally found an old couple barricaded inside a small hut on the outskirts of the village. They were happy to see us. They hadn’t seen another human for over a month.

Prem Singh and his wife Chandni Devi were the only people still living in the village. The others had gone away—most of them to towns or cities in the plains, in search of employment, or to stay with friends or relatives; for there was nothing to sustain them in the village. The monkeys by day and the wild boars by night had ravaged the fields. Not a leaf, nor an edible root, remained. Prem Singh and his wife were living on their small store of rice and lentils. Even so, the wife made us tea and apologized that there was no milk or sugar.

‘We too will leave soon,’ she said. ‘We will go to our son in Ludhiana. He works in a factory there.’
And that was what the others had done—gone wherever an earning member of the family had settled.

As it was growing dark, and the couple had offered us the occupancy of a spare room, we decided to stay the night.

An eerie silence enveloped the hillside. No dogs barked. They were no match for the monkeys. But we were comfortable on our charpais.

Just before daybreak Sunil had to go outside to relieve himself. The nearest field would do, he said; they were all empty anyway. I was still asleep, dreaming of romantic encounters in a rose garden, when I was woken by shouts and a banging of the door, and Sunil rushed in bare-bottomed and out of breath.

‘What happened?’ I asked, somewhat disoriented by this ridiculous interruption of my love dream.

‘A wild pig came after me!’ he gasped. ‘One of those with tusks. I got up just in time!’

‘But it got your pants, it seems,’ I said.

When the sun came up, we both ventured into the field but there was no sign of a wild pig. By now the monkeys were up and about, and I had a feeling that they had made off with Sunil’s pants. Prem Singh came to the rescue by giving him an old pair of pyjamas, but they were much too tight and robbed Sunil of his usual jaunty ebullience. But he had to make do with them.

The whole situation had provided Prem Singh and his wife with much needed comic relief. In their hopeless predicament they could still find something to laugh at. Sunil invited them to visit his village, and we parted on friendly terms.

And so we limped back to Fosterganj without any lizards, and Sunil without pants; but we had learnt something during the week’s events. Life in the hills and remote regions of the country was very different from life in the large towns and cities. And already the drift towards the cities had begun. Would the empty spaces be taken over again by the apes, reptiles and wild creatures? It was too early to tell, but the signs were there.

Meanwhile, Sunil was still intent on joining the army, and no sooner were we back in Fosterganj than he was off to the recruiting centre in Lansdowne. Would they take him, I wondered. He wasn’t exactly army material. But then, neither was Beetle Bailey.
As usual, nothing was happening in Fosterganj. Even the earthquake had barely touched it. True, part of Foster’s old cottage had collapsed, but it was going to do that anyway. He simply moved into the remaining rooms without bothering about the damaged portion. In any case, there was no money for repairs.

Passing that way a couple of times, I heard the strains of Sir Harry Lauder again. At least the gramophone was still intact!

Hassan had a Murphy radio and had heard about the Uttarkashi earthquake and its aftermath, so he was relieved to see that I was back.

There was a rumour going around that the Fairy Glen had been sold, and that it was going to be pulled down to make way for a grand hotel. I wondered what would happen to its occupants, the young-old boy and his equally intriguing mother. And would skeletons be turning up all over the place, now that it was to be dismantled? Or had I imagined that skeletal hand in the box-bed? In retrospect, it seemed more and more like a nightmare.

I dropped in at the bank and asked Vishaal if the rumours were true.

‘There’s something going on,’ he admitted. ‘Nothing certain as yet, because there’s more than one owner—a claimant in Nepal, another in Calcutta and a third in Mauritius! But if they come to some agreement there’s a hotel group that’s interested.’

‘Who would want to come to Fosterganj?’ I mused.

‘Oh, you never know. They say the water here has healing properties.’

‘Well, I certainly get diarrhoea pretty frequently.’

‘That’s because it’s pumped up from the dhobi ghat. Don’t drink the tap water. Drink the water from upstream.’

‘I walked upstream,’ I said, ‘and I arrived at the burning ghat.’

‘Oh, that. But it isn’t used much,’ said Vishaal. ‘Only one or two deaths a year in Fosterganj.’

‘They can put that in the brochure, when they build that hotel. But tell me—what will happen to those people living in the palace? They’re caretakers, aren’t they?’
‘The boy and his mother? Poor relatives. They’ll be given some money. They’ll go away.’

I thought it would be charitable on my part to warn the boy and his mother of the impending sale—if they did not know about it already. Quixotic rather than charitable. Or perhaps I just needed an excuse to see them again.

But unwilling to meet skeleton or big black bird, I went there during the day.

It was early September, and the monsoon was beginning to recede. While the foliage on the hillside was still quite lush, autumn hues were beginning to appear. The Virginia creepers, suspended from the oak trees, were turning red. Wild dahlias reared their heads from overhanging rocky outcrops. In the bank manager’s garden, chrysanthemums flounced around like haughty maharanis. In the grounds of Fairy Glen, the cosmos had spread all over the place and was just beginning to flower. In the late monsoon light, the old palace looked almost beautiful in its decadence; a pity it would have to go. We need these reminders of history, even though they be haunted, or too grand for their own good.

The boy was out somewhere, but the mother—if, indeed, she was this mother—was at the back of the building, putting out clothes to dry. She smiled when she saw me. The smile spread slowly across her face, like the sun chasing away a shadow, but it also lit up the scar on her cheek.

She asked me to sit down, offered me tea. I declined the tea but sat down on the steps, a bench and a couple of old chairs being festooned with garments.

‘At last I can dry some clothes. After so many days the sun has finally come out.’

Although the boy usually spoke in English, she was obviously more at home in Hindi. She spoke it with a distinct Nepali lilt.

‘Well, you haven’t seen the sun for days,’ I said, ‘and I haven’t seen the dhobi for weeks. I’m down to my last shirt.’

She laughed. ‘You should get married.’

It was my turn to laugh. ‘You mean marry a washerwoman? Wives don’t wash clothes anymore.’

‘But mothers do.’ And then she surprised me by adding, ‘Wives can also be mothers.’

‘There are washing machines now, in England and America,’ I said. ‘They’ll be here soon enough. Expensive, of course. But new things are always expensive. We’ll also have television soon.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Radio with pictures. It’s in Delhi already. A bit boring but it might catch on. Then you won’t have to go to the cinema.’

‘I don’t go to the cinema. Not since my husband died. He took me once—six or seven years ago. I forget the name of the film, but an actress called Madhubala was in it. She was very pretty.’
‘Just like you,’ I said.
She looked away. ‘I’m not young.’
‘Some people don’t age. Your son—some say that he’s much older than he looks.’
She did not reply, and just then the boy himself appeared, whistling cheerfully and bowing to me as he approached.

‘It is good to see you again,’ he said. ‘The last time you were here, you left in a hurry.’

‘I’m sorry, but that was a very creepy room you put me in. There was something in the box-bed. My imagination, probably.’

‘A skeleton, probably. Grandfather stored them all over the palace. He didn’t like burial grounds or cremations. And in the old days, if you were rich and powerful you could do as you liked.’

‘It’s the same today,’ I said. ‘Although not so openly. But I heard the property is being sold, to be pulled down—a hotel will come up. Did you know?’

‘If it’s true—’ a shadow crossed his face, and for a few seconds he looked much older. ‘If it’s true, then…’ He did not complete what he wanted to say.

‘If it happens,’ said his mother, ‘then we will have to leave. To Nepal, perhaps. Or to Nabha. I have a cousin there. We are Sirmauris on my mother’s side.’

‘We are not going anywhere,’ said the boy, glowering. The brightness had gone from his face. No one likes the thought of being thrown out of a house which has been a home for most of one’s life. When I was a boy, my mother and stepfather were constantly being evicted from one house after another. Their fault, no doubt, but I grew up feeling that the world was a hostile place full of rapacious landlords.

‘I’ll try to find out more,’ I said, getting up to leave. ‘Vishaal, the bank manager, will know.’
When I called on Vishaal at the bank a day or two later, he was busy with a couple of customers. This was unusual. Busy days in the bank, let alone in Fosterganj, were rare indeed.

The cashier brought in another chair, and I joined the tea party in Vishaal’s office. No secrets in Fosterganj. Everyone knew what everyone else had in their accounts, savings or otherwise.

One of the clients was Mr Foster.

He had first presented Vishaal with a basket of eggs, with the proviso that they be distributed among the staff.

‘I should have brought sweets,’ said Foster, ‘but for sweets I’d have to trudge up to Mussoorie, while the eggs are courtesy my hens. Courtesy your bank, of course.’

‘We appreciate them,’ said Vishaal. ‘We’ll have omelettes in the lunch break. So how are the hens doing?’

‘Well, a fox got two of them, and a jackal got three, and your guard got my rooster.’

Vishaal looked up at the guard who was standing just outside the door, looking rather stupid.

‘Gun went off by mistake,’ said the guard.

‘It’s not supposed to go off at all,’ said Vishaal. ‘You could kill somebody. It’s only for show. If someone holds up the bank, we give them the money. It’s all insured.’

The second customer looked interested. A lean, swarthy man in his sixties, he played with the knob of his walnut-wood walking stick and said, ‘Talking of insurance, do you know if the Fairy Glen was insured?’

‘Don’t think so,’ said Vishaal. ‘It’s just a ruin. What is there to insure?’

‘It’s full of interesting artifacts, I’m told. Old pictures, furniture, antiques… I’m going there today. The owners have asked me to list anything that may be valuable, worth removing, before they hand over the place to the hotel people.

‘So it’s really going?’ I asked.
‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘The deal is all but sealed.’
‘And the present occupants?’
‘Just caretakers. Poor relatives. I believe the woman was the old raja’s keep—or one of them, anyway. They’ll have to go.’
‘Perhaps the hotel can find some work for them.’
‘They want vacant possession.’ He got up, twirling his walking stick. ‘Well, I must go. Calls to make.’
‘You can use our phone,’ said Vishaal. ‘The only other public phone is at the police outpost, and it’s usually out of order. And if you like, I can send for the local taxi.’
‘No, I’ll call from Mussoorie. I shall enjoy walking back to town. But I might want that taxi later.’
He strode out of the bank, walking purposefully through the late monsoon mist.
He was one of the world’s middlemen, a successful commission agent, fixing things for busy people. After some time they make themselves indispensable.
Mr Foster was quite the opposite. No one really needed him. But he needed another loan.
‘No more chickens,’ said Vishaal. ‘And you haven’t built your poultry shed.’
‘Someone stole the wire netting. But never mind the chickens, I’ve another proposition. Mr Vishaal, sir, what about aromatherapy?’
‘What about it? Never heard of such a thing.’
‘It’s all the rage in France, I hear. You treat different ailments or diseases with different aromas. Calendula for headaches, roses for nervous disorders, gladioli for piles—’
‘Gladioli don’t have an aroma,’ I said.
‘Mine do!’ exclaimed Foster, full of enthusiasm. ‘I can cover the hillside with gladioli. And dahlias too!’
‘Dahlias don’t have an aroma, either.’ I was being Irish again.
‘Well then, nasturtiums,’ said Foster, not in the least put out. ‘Nasturtiums are good for the heart.’
‘All right, go ahead,’ said Vishaal. ‘What’s stopping you? You don’t need a loan to grow flowers.’
‘Ah, but I have to distil the aroma from them.’
‘You need a distillery?’
‘Something like that.’
‘You already have one. That rhododendron wine you made last year wasn’t bad. Forget about aromas. Stick to wine and spirits, Mr Foster, and you’ll make a fortune. Now I’m off for lunch.’
The bank shut its doors for lunch, and we went our different ways: Vishaal to his rented cottage, Foster to his dilapidated house and poultry farm, and I to Fairy Glen to
warn my friends of trouble that lay in store for them.
Over the next two days the assessor, let’s call him Mr Middleman, was busy at Fairy Glen, notebook in hand, listing everything that looked as though it might have some value: paintings, furnishings, glassware, chinaware, rugs, carpets, desks, cupboards, antique inkwells, an old grandfather clock (home to a colony of mice, now evicted), and a nude statue of Venus minus an arm. Two or three rooms had been locked for years. These were opened up by Mr Middleman who proceeded to explore them with enthusiasm. Small objects, like silver hand-bowls and cutglass salt cellars, went into his capacious pockets.

The boy and his mother watched all this activity in silence. They had been told to pack and go, but in reality they had very little to pack. The boy had handed over a bunch of keys; he wasn’t obliged to do any more.

On the second day, when he had finished his inventory, Mr Middleman said he would be back the next day with a truck and some workmen to help remove all that he had listed—box-beds included. The boy simply shrugged and walked away; his mother set about preparing dinner, the kitchen still her domain. They were in no hurry.

It was almost dark when Mr Middleman set out on his walk back to town. The clouds had parted, and a full moon was coming up over Pari Tibba, Fairy Hill. In the moonlight a big black bird swooped low over the ravished building.

Pockets bulging with mementoes, Mr Middleman strode confidently through the pine forest, his walking stick swinging at his side. A village postman, on his way home, passed him in the gathering darkness. That was the last time Mr Middleman was seen alive.

His body was discovered early next morning by some girls on their way to school. It lay at the edge of the pond, where the boys sometimes came for a swim. But Mr Middleman hadn’t been swimming. He was still in his clothes and his pockets were still bulging with the previous day’s spoils. He had been struck over the head several times with the clubbed head of his walking stick. Apparently it had been wrenched from his hands by a stronger person, who had then laid into him with a fury of blows to the
head. The walking stick lay a few feet away, covered with blood.
From then on, events moved quickly.

A jeepful of policemen roamed up and down Fosterganj’s only motorable road, looking for potential killers. The bank, the bakery and the post office were centres of information and speculation.

Fosterganj might have had its mad dogs and professor-eating leopards; old skeletons might pop up here and there; but it was a long time since there’d been a proper murder. It was reported in the Dehradun papers (both Hindi and English) and even got mentioned in the news bulletin from All India Radio, Najibabad.

When I walked into Vishaal’s small office in the bank, I found him chatting to a police inspector who had come down from Mussoorie to investigate the crime. One of his suspects was Sunil, but Sunil was far away in Lansdowne, making an earnest attempt to enlist in the Garhwal Rifles. And Sunil would have cleaned out the victim’s pockets, the only possible motivation being robbery.

The same for Mr Foster, who was also one of the inspector’s suspects. He wouldn’t have left behind those valuable little antiques. And in any case, he was a feeble old man; he would not have been able to overcome someone as robust as Mr Middleman.

The talk turned to the occupants of Fairy Glen. But the inspector dismissed them as possible suspects: the woman could never have overpowered the assessor; and her son was just a boy.

I could have told him that the boy was much stronger than he looked, but I did not wish to point the finger of suspicion in his direction; or in any direction, for that matter. Mr Middleman was an outsider; his enemies were probably outsiders too.

After the inspector had gone, Vishaal asked: ‘So—who do you think did it?’

‘I, said the sparrow, with my bow and arrow, I killed Cock Robin!’

‘Seriously, though.’

‘I, said the fly, with my little eye, I saw him die.’ Vishaal raised his hands in exasperation. I decided to be serious. ‘We’ll know only if there was a witness,’ I said.
‘Someone who saw him being attacked. But that’s unlikely, if it happened after dark. Not many people use that path at night.’

‘True. More than one person has fallen into that pond.’

Indeed, before the day was over, the inspector had fallen into the pond. He had been looking for clues at the water’s edge, peering down at a tangle of reeds, when he heard an unusually loud flapping of wings. Looking up, he saw a big black bird hovering above him. He had never seen such a bird before. Startled, he had lost his footing and fallen into the water.

A constable dragged him out, spluttering and cursing. Along with the reeds and water weeds that clung to him was a mask made of cloth. It was a small mask, made for a boy.

The inspector threw it away in disgust, along with a drowned rat and a broken cricket bat that had come to the surface with him. Empty a village pond, and you will come up with a lot of local history; but the inspector did not have time for history.

The only person who seemed unperturbed by the murder was Hassan; he had seen people being killed out of feelings of hate or revenge. But here the reasons seemed more obscure.

‘Such men make enemies,’ he said. ‘The go-betweens, the fixers. Someone must have been waiting for him.’ He shrugged and went back to his work.

Hassan, a man who loved his work. He loved baking, just as some of us love writing or painting or making things. Most of the children were off to school in the morning, and his wife would be busy washing clothes or cleaning up the mess that children make. The older boys would take turns making deliveries, although sometimes Hassan did the rounds himself. But he was happiest in the bakery, fashioning loaves of bread, buns, biscuits and other savouries.

The first condition of happiness is that a man must find joy in his work. Unless the work brings joy, the tedium of an aimless life can be soul-destroying.

Something that I had to remember.
A Fire in the Night

It was late evening the same day when I encountered the boy from the palace.

I was strolling through the forest, admiring the mushrooms that had sprung up in damp, shady places. Poisoned, no doubt, but very colourful. Beware of nature’s show-offs: the banded krait, the scarlet scorpion, the beautiful belladonna, the ink-squirting octopus. Even so, history shows human beings to be the most dangerous of nature’s show-offs. Inimical to each other, given over to greed and insatiable appetites. Nature strikes when roused; man, out of habit and a perverse nature.

The boy still had some of the animal in him, which was what made him appealing.

‘I’ve been looking for you, sir,’ he said, as he stepped out of the shadows.

‘I did not see you,’ I said, startled.

‘They’ve been looking for me. The police. Ever since that fellow was killed.’

‘Did you kill him?’

I could see him smile even though it was dark. ‘Such a big man? And why bother? They will take the palace anyway.’

He fell into step with me, holding my hand, leading the way; he knew the path and the forest better than I did. They would not find him easily in these hills.

‘My mother has a favour to ask of you, sir.’

‘Yes?’

‘Will you keep something for her?’

‘If it’s not too big. I can’t carry trunks and furniture around. I’m a one-suitcase person.’

‘It’s not heavy. I have it with me.’ He was carrying a small wooden case wrapped in cloth. ‘I can’t open it here. It contains her jewellery. A number of things. They are all hers, but they will take them from us if they get a chance.’

‘They?’

‘The owners. The old king’s family. Or their friends.’

‘So you are going away?’
‘We have to. But not before—.’ He did not finish what he was going to say. ‘You will keep them for us?’

‘For how long? I may leave Fosterganj before the end of the year. I will run out of money by then. I’ll have to return to Delhi and take up a job.’

‘We will get in touch with you. We won’t be far.’

‘All right, then. Give me the case. I’ll have to look inside later.’

‘Of course. But don’t let anyone else see it. I’ll go now. I don’t want to be seen.’

He put the wrapped-up box in my hands, embraced me—it was more of a bear hug, surprising me with its intensity—and made off into the darkness.

~

I returned to my room with the box, but I did not open it immediately. The door of my room did not fasten properly, and anyone could have walked in. It was only eight o’clock. So I placed the box on a shelf and covered it with my books. No one was going to touch them. Books gather dust in Fosterganj.

Vishaal had asked me over for a drink, and it was past ten when I started walking back to my room again.

Hassan and family were out on the road, along with some other locals. They were speculating on the cause of a bright rosy glow over the next ridge.

‘What’s happening?’ I asked.

‘Looks like a fire,’ said Hassan. ‘Down the Rajpur road.’

‘It may be the Fairy Glen palace,’ I said.

‘Yes, it’s in that direction. Let’s go and take a look. They might need help.’

Fosterganj did not have a fire engine, and in those days Mussoorie did not have one either, so there was little that anyone could do to put out a major fire.

And this was a major fire.

One section of the palace was already ablaze, and a strong wind was helping the fire to spread rapidly. There was no sign of the boy and his mother. I could only hope that they were safe somewhere, probably on the other side of the building, away from the wind-driven flames.

A small crowd had gathered on the road, and before long half the residents of Fosterganj were watching the blaze.

‘How could it have started?’ asked someone.

‘Probably an electrical fault. It’s such an old building.’

‘It didn’t have electricity. Bills haven’t been paid for years.’

‘Then maybe an oil lamp fell over. In this wind anything is possible.’

‘Could have been deliberate. For the insurance.’

‘It wasn’t insured. Nothing to insure.’

‘Plenty to insure, the place was full of valuables and antiques. Furniture, mostly.
All gone now.’
‘What about the occupants—that woman and her boy?’
‘Might be gone too, if they were sleeping.’
‘Perhaps they did it.’
‘But why?’
‘They were being forced out, I heard.’

And so the speculation continued, everyone expressing an opinion, and in the meantime the fire had engulfed the entire building, consuming everything within—furniture, paintings, box-beds, skeletons, carpets, curtains, grandfather clock, a century’s accumulated finery, all reduced to ashes. Most of the stuff had already outlived its original owner, who had himself been long since reduced to ashes. His heirs had wished to add to their own possessions, but possession is always a fleeting, temporary thing, and now there was nothing.

Towards dawn the fire burnt itself out and the crowd melted away. Only a shell of the palace remained, with here and there some woodwork still smouldering among the blackened walls. I wandered around the property and the hillside, looking for the boy and his mother, but I did not really expect to find them.

As I set out for home, something screeched in the tallest tree, and the big black bird flew across the road and over the burnt-out palace before disappearing into the forest below.
A Handful of Gems

After an early breakfast with Hassan, I returned to my room and threw myself down on my bed. Then I remembered the case that the boy had left with me. I got up to see if it was still where I had hidden it. My books were undisturbed.

So I took the case down from the shelf, placed it on the bed, and prepared to open it. Then I realized I had no key. There was a keyhole just below the lid, and I tried inserting the pointed end of a pair of small scissors, but to no avail; then a piece of wire from the wire netting of the window, but did no better with that. Finally I tried the open end of a safety pin which I had been using on my pyjama jacket; no use. Obviously I was not meant to be a locksmith, or a thief.

Eventually, in sheet frustration, I flung the box across the room. It bounced off the opposite wall, hit the floor, and burst open.

Gemstones and jewellery cascaded across the floor of the room.

When I had recovered from my astonishment and confusion, I made sure the door was shut, then set about collecting the scattered gems.

There were a number of beautiful translucent red rubies, all aglow in the sun that streamed through the open window. I spread them out on my counterpane. I did not know much about gemstones, but they looked genuine enough to me. Presumably they had come from the ruby mines of Burma.

There was a gold bracelet studded with several very pretty bright green emeralds. Where did emeralds come from? South America, mostly. Supposedly my birthstone; but I’d never been able to afford one.

A sapphire, azure, sparkling in a silver neck-chain. A sapphire from Sri Lanka? And a garnet in a ring of gold. I could recognize a garnet because my grandmother had one. When I was small and asked her what it was, she said it was a pomegranate seed.

So there I was, with a small fortune in my hands. Or may be a large fortune. I had never bothered with gemstones before, but I was beginning to get interested. Having them in your hands makes all the difference.

Where should I hide them? Sooner or later someone would disturb my books. I
looked around the room; very few places of concealment. But on my desk was a round biscuit tin. One of Hassan’s boys used to keep his marbles in it; I had given him more marbles in exchange for the tin, because it made a handy receptacle for my paper-clips, rubber bands, erasers and such like. These I now emptied into a drawer. The jewels went into the biscuit tin—rubies, emeralds, sapphire, garnet—just like marbles, only prettier.

But I couldn’t leave that biscuit tin lying around. One of the boys might come back for it.

On the balcony were several flowerpots; two were empty; one was home to a neglected geranium, another to a money-plant that didn’t seem interested in going anywhere. I put the biscuit tin in an empty pot, and covered it with the geranium, earth, roots and all, and gave it a light watering. It seemed to perk up immediately! Nothing like having a fortune behind you.

I brought the pot into my room, where I could keep an eye on it. The plant would flourish better indoors.

All this activity had sharpened my appetite, and I went down to the bakery and had a second breakfast.
Foster Makes a Sale

In our dear country sensational events come and go, and excitement soon gives way to ennui.

And so it was in Fosterganj. Interest in the murder and the fire died down soon enough, although of course the police and the palace owners continued to make their enquiries.

Vishaal tried to liven up the hillside, spotting another leopard in his back garden. But it was only a dog-lifter, not a man-eater, and since there were very few dogs to be found in Fosterganj after the last rabies scare, the leopard soon moved on.

A milkman brought me a message from Foster one morning, asking me to come and see him.

‘Is he ill?’ I asked.

‘Looks all right,’ said the milkman. ‘He owes me for two months’ supply of milk.’

‘He’ll give you a laying hen instead,’ I said. ‘The world’s economy should be based on exchange.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the milkman. ‘But his hens are dying, one by one. Soon he won’t have any left.’

This didn’t sound too good, so I made my way over to Foster’s and found him sitting in his small patch of garden, contemplating his onions and a few late gladioli.

‘No one’s buying my gladioli, and my hens are dying,’ he said gloomily. An empty rum bottle lay in the grass beside his wobbly cane chair. ‘Sorry I can’t offer you anything to drink. I’ve run out of booze.’

‘That’s all right,’ I said. ‘I don’t drink in the daytime. But why don’t you sell onions? They’ll fetch a better price than your gladioli.’

‘They’ve all rotted away,’ he said. ‘Too much rain. And the porcupines take the good ones. But sit down—sit down, I haven’t been out for days. Can’t leave the hens alone too long, and the gout is killing me.’ He removed a slipper and displayed a dirty bare foot swollen at the ankles. ‘But tell me—how’s the murder investigation going?’
‘It doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.’
‘Probably that boy,’ said Foster. ‘He’s older than he looks. A strange couple, those two.’
‘Well, they are missing. Disappeared after the fire.’
‘Probably started it. Well, good luck to them. We don’t want a flashy hotel in the middle of Fosterganj.’
‘Why not? They might buy your eggs—and your gladioli.’
‘No, they’d go to town for their supplies.’
‘You never know… By the way, when did Fosterganj last have a murder? Or was this the first?’
‘Not the first by any means. We’ve had a few over the years. Mostly unsolved.’
‘The ones in the palace?’
‘The disappearing maharanis—or mistresses. Very mysterious. No one really knows what happened to them, except they disappeared. Any remains probably went in that fire. But no one really bothered. The raja’s life was his own business, and in those days they did much as they wanted. A law unto themselves.’
A large white butterfly came fluttering up to Foster and sat on his ear. He carried on speaking.
‘Then there was that school principal, down near Rajpur. Fanthorne, I think his name was. Suspected his wife of infidelity. Shot her, and then shot himself. Nice and simple. Made it easy for the police and everyone concerned. A good example to all who contemplate murder. Carry out the deed and then turn yourself in or blow your brains out. Why leave a mess behind?’
‘Why, indeed. Apart from your brains.’
‘Of course you can also hang yourself, if you want to keep it clean. Like poor old Kapoor, who owned the Empire. It went downhill after Independence. No one coming to Mussoorie, no takers for the hotel. He was heavily in debt. He tried setting fire to it for the insurance, but it was such a sturdy old building, built with stones from the riverbed, that it wouldn’t burn properly! A few days later old Kapoor was found hanging from a chandelier in the ballroom.’
‘Who got the hotel?’
‘Nobody. It passed into the Receiver’s hand. It’s still there, if you want to look at it. Full of squatters and the ghost of old Kapoor. You can see him in the early hours, wandering about with a can of petrol, trying to set fire to the place.’
‘Suicide appears to have been popular.’
‘Yes, it’s that kind of place. Suicidal. I’ve thought of it once or twice myself.’
‘And how would you go about it?’
‘Oh, just keep boozing until I pass out permanently.’
‘Nice thought. But don’t do it today—not while I’m here.’
‘I was coming to that—why I asked you to come over. I was wondering if you
could lend me a small sum—just to tide me over the weekend. I’m all out of rations and
the water supply has been cut too. Have to fill my bucket at the public tap, after all
those washerwomen. Very demeaning for a sahib!’

‘Well, I’m a little short myself,’ I said. ‘Not a good time for writers. But I can
send you something from the bakery, I have credit there.’

‘Don’t bother, don’t bother. You wouldn’t care to buy a couple of hens, would
you? I’m down to just three or four birds.’

‘Where would I keep them? But I’ll ask Hassan to take them off you. He’ll give
you a fair price.’

‘Fine, fine. And there’s my furniture. I could part with one or two pieces. That
fine old rocking chair—been in the family for a century.’

I had seen the rocking chair on my previous visit, and had refrained from sitting
in it, as it had looked rather precarious.

‘I would laze in at all day and get no work done,’ I said.

‘What about Uncle Fred’s skull? It’s a real museum piece.’

‘No, thanks. It’s hardly the thing to cheer me up on a lonely winter’s evening.
Unlike your gramophone, which is very jolly.’

‘Gramophone! Would you like the gramophone?’ The white butterfly jumped up a
little, as excited as Foster, then settled back on his ear.

‘Well, it only just occurred to me—but you wouldn’t want to part with it.’

‘I might, if you made me a good offer. It’s a solid HMV 1942 model. Portable,
too. You can play it on a beach in Goa or a mountaintop in Sikkim. Springs are in good
condition. So’s the handle. Four hundred rupees, and you get the records free. It’s a
bargain!’

How do you bargain with a Scotsman? Foster’s urgent need of money overrode
his affection for the ballads of Sir Harry Lauder. I offered him two hundred, which was
all the money I had on me. After a good deal of haggling we settled on three hundred. I
gave him two and promised to pay the rest later.

In good spirits now, Forster suddenly remembered he had some booze stashed
away somewhere after all. We celebrated over a bottle of his best hooch, and I
stumbled home two hours later, the gramophone under one arm and a box of records
under the other.

That night I treated myself to Sir Harry Lauder singing ‘Loch Lomond’, Dame
Clara Buck singing ‘Comin’ through the Rye’, and Arthur Askey singing ‘We have no
bananas today’. Hassan’s children attended the concert, and various passers-by stopped
in the road, some to listen, others to ask why I couldn’t play something more pleasing to
the ear. But everyone seemed to enjoy the diversion.
Treasure Hunt

The nights were getting chilly, and I needed another blanket. The rains were over, and a rainbow arched across the valley, linking Fosterganj to the Mussoorie ridge. A strong wind came down from Tibet, rattling the rooftops.

I decided to stay another month, then move down to Rajpur.

~

Someone had slipped a letter under my door. I found it there early one morning. Inside a plain envelope was a slip of paper with a few words on it. All it said was: ‘Chakrata. Hotel Peak View. Next Sunday’.

I presumed the note was from the boy or his mother. Next Sunday was just three days away, but I could get to Chakrata in a day. It was a small military cantonment half way between Mussoorie and Simla. I had been there as a boy, but not in recent years; it was still a little off the beaten track.

I did not tell Hassan where I was going, just said I’d be back in a day or two; he wasn’t the sort to pry into my affairs. I stuffed a change of clothes into a travel bag, along with the little box containing the jewels. Before hiding it, I had taped the lid town with Sellotape. It was still under the geranium, and I removed it carefully and returned the plant to its receptacle, where it would now have a little more freedom to spread its roots.

I took a bus down to Dehradun, and after hanging around the bus station for a couple of hours, found one that was going to Chakrata. It was half empty. Only a few village folk were going in my direction.

A meandering road took us through field and forest, and then we crossed the Yamuna just where it emerged from its mountain fastness, still pure and unpolluted in its upper reaches. The road grew steeper, more winding, ascending through pine and deodar forest, and finally we alighted at a small bus stop, where an old bus and two or three ponies appeared to be stranded. A deserted church and a few old graves told me
that the British had once been present here.

There was only one hotel on the outskirts of the town, and it took me about twenty minutes to get to it, as I had to walk all the way. It stood in a forest glade, but it did provide a view of the peaks, the snowcapped Chor range being the most prominent.

It was a small hotel, little more than a guesthouse, and I did not notice any other residents. There was no sign of a manager, either; but a gardener or handyman led me to the small reception desk and produced a register. I entered my name and my former Delhi address. He then took me to a small room and asked me if I’d like some tea.

‘Please,’ I said. ‘And something to eat.’

‘No cook,’ he said. ‘But I’ll bring you something from the market.’ And he disappeared, leaving me to settle down in my room.

I needed a wash, and went into the bathroom. It had a nice view, but there was no water in the tap. There was a bucket half filled with water, but it looked rather murky. I postponed the wash.

I settled down in an armchair, and finding it quite comfortable, immediately fell asleep. Being a man with an easy conscience I’ve never had any difficulty in falling asleep.

I woke up about an hour later, to find the cook-gardener-caretaker hovering over me with a plate of hot pakoras and a pot of tea. He had only one eye, which, strangely, I hadn’t noticed before. I recalled the old proverb: ‘In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king.’ But I’d always thought the antithetical was true, and a more likely outcome, in the country of the blind, would be the one-eyed man being stoned to death. How dare he be different.

My one-eyed man seemed happy to talk. Not many tourists came to Chakrata; the intelligence department took a strong interest in visitors. In fact, I could expect a visit from them before the day was out.

‘Has anyone been asking for me?’ I asked. ‘A young man accompanied by his mother?’

‘They were here last week. Said they were from Nepal. But they left in a hurry. They did not take your name.’

‘Perhaps they’ll be back. I’ll stay tonight—leave in the morning. Will that be all right?’

‘Stay as long as you like. It’s ten rupees a day for the room and two rupees for a bucket of water. Water shortage.’

‘And it’s been raining for three months.’

‘But we are far from the river,’ he said. And then he left me to my own devices.

It was late evening when he appeared again to inform me that there were people in the hall who wanted to see me. Assuming that the boy and his mother had arrived, I said, ‘Oh, show them in,’ and got up from the armchair to receive them.

Three men stepped into the room.
They were total strangers.
One of them asked to see my passport.
‘I don’t have one,’ I said. ‘Never left the country.’
‘Any identification?’
I shook my head. I’d never been asked for identification. This was 1961, and border wars, invasions, insurrections and terrorist attacks were all in the future. We were free to travel all over the country without any questions being asked.

One of the three was in uniform, a police inspector. The second, the man who had spoken to me, was a civilian but clearly an official. The third person had some personal interest in the proceedings.

‘I think you have something to deliver,’ he said. ‘Some stones belonging to the royal family.’
‘You represent the royal family?’ I asked.
‘That is correct.’
‘And the people who looked after the property?’
‘They were servants. They have gone missing since the fire. Are you here to meet them?’
‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m a travel writer. I’m writing a book on our hill stations. Chakrata is one of them.’
‘But not for tourists,’ said the official. ‘This is purely a military station now.’
‘Well, I have yet to see a soldier. Very well camouflaged.’
‘Soldiers are not deployed here. It is a scientific establishment.’
I thought it better to leave it at that. I had come to the place simply to deliver some gemstones, and not as a spy; I said as much.

‘Then may we have the stones?’ said the third party. ‘You will then be free to leave, or to enjoy the hospitality of this hotel.’
‘And if I don’t hand them over?’
‘Then we may have to take you into custody,’ said the inspector. ‘For being in possession of stolen property.’ And without further ado, he picked up my travel bag, placed it on a table, and rummaged through the contents. With three men standing over me, and the gardener in the background, there was no point in trying to be a hero.

The biscuit tin was soon in his hands. He shook it appreciatively, and it responded with a pleasing rattle. He tore off the tape, pressed open the lid and emptied the contents on the table.

Some thirty or forty colourful marbles streamed across the table, some rolling to the ground, others into the hands of the inspector, who held them up to the light and exclaimed, ‘But these are not rubies!’
‘My marble collection,’ I said. ‘And just as pretty as rubies.’
The Great Truck Ride

*What had happened, quite obviously, was that Hassan’s children, or at least one of them, had seen me secrete the box in the geranium pot. Wanting it back, they had unearthed it while I was out, removed the gemstones and replaced them with their store of marbles.*

But what on earth had they done with the jewels? Hidden them elsewhere, perhaps. Or more likely, being still innocent children, they had seen the gems as mere rubbish and thrown them out of my window, into the ravine.

If I got back safely, I’d have to search the ravine.

But I was still in Chakrata, and my interlocutors had told me not to leave before morning. They were still hoping that the boy and his mother, or someone on their behalf, might have followed me to Chakrata.

The three gentlemen left me, saying they’d be back in the morning. I was left with the one-eyed gardener.

‘When does the first bus leave for Dehradun?’ I asked.

‘At ten tomorrow.’

‘Are there no taxis here?’

‘Who would want a taxi? There is nothing to see. The best view is from your window.’

I gave him five rupees and asked him to bring me some food. He came back with some puris and a potato curry, and I shared it with him. He became quite chatty, and told me the town hadn’t been off-bounds in the past, but security had been tightened since some border intrusions by the Chinese. Relations with China had soured ever since the Dalai Lama and his followers had fled to India two years previously. The Dalai Lama was still living in Mussoorie. Chakrata was, in a way, a lookout point; from here, the passes to the north could be better monitored. I’d come to the wrong place at the wrong time.

‘I’m no spy,’ I said. ‘I’ll come some other time to enjoy the scenery. I’ll be off in the morning.’
‘If they let you go.’
That sounded ominous.

The gardener-caretaker left me in order to lock up for the night, and I lay down on my bed in my clothes, wondering what I should do next. I was never much good in an emergency, and I was feeling quite helpless. Without friends, the world can seem a hostile place.

After some time I heard the door being bolted from outside. I’d been locked in.

I hate being locked into rooms. Once, as a small boy, I broke an expensive vase, and as punishment my grandmother locked me in the bathroom. I tried kicking the door open, and when that didn’t work, I got hold of a water jug, smashed open a window, and climbed out; only to receive further punishment, by way of being sent to bed without any dinner.

And now I did more or less the same thing, but I waited for an hour or two, to give the gardener time to retire for the night. Then I unlatched the window—no need to break any glass—and peered out into the night.

The moon was a melon, just coming up over the next mountain. There was a vegetable patch just below the window. A cluster of cucumbers stood out in the mellow light. As I did not want to be encumbered with things to carry, I abandoned my travel bag and its meager contents; I would survive without pyjamas and a tattered old sweater. I climbed out on the window ledge and dropped into the vegetable patch, avoiding the cucumbers but pitching forward into a clump of nettles.

The nettles stung me viciously on the hands and face, and I cursed in my best Hindustani. The European languages have their strengths, but for the purposes of cursing out loud you can’t beat some of the Indian languages for range and originality.

It took about twenty minutes for the pain of the nettle stings to subside, and by then my linguistic abilities were exhausted. But the nettles had given greater urgency to my flight, and I was soon on the motor road, trudging along at a good pace. I was beginning to feel like a character in a John Buchan novel, always on the move and often in the wrong direction. All my life had been a little like that. But I wouldn’t have known any other way to live.

I knew I had to go downhill, because that was the way to the river. After walking for an hour, I was hoping someone would come along and give me a lift. But there would be few travellers at that late hour. Jackals bayed, and an owl made enquiring sounds, but that was all...

And then I heard the approach of heavy vehicles—not one, but several—and a convoy of army trucks came down the road, their headlights penetrating the gloom and leaving no corner of the road in shadow.

I left the road and stood behind a walnut tree until they had passed. I had no intention of taking a lift in an army truck; I could end up at some high-altitude border post, abandoned there in sub-zero temperatures.
So I returned to the road only when the last truck had gone round the bend, then continued to tramp along the highway, sore of foot but strong of heart. Harry Lauder would have approved.

Something else was coming down the road. Another truck. An old one, rattling away and groaning as it changed gear on a sudden incline. The army wouldn’t be using an old wreck. So I stood in the middle of the road and waved it to a stop. An elderly Sardarji, older than the truck, looked out of his cabin window and asked me where I was headed.

‘Anywhere,’ I said. ‘Wherever you’re going.’
‘Herbertpur,’ he said. ‘Get in the back.’

Herbertpur was a small township near the Timli Pass, on the old route to Dehradun. Herbert had been a tea-planter back in the 1860s or thereabouts. The family had died out, but the name remained.

I would have liked to sit up front, but Sardarji already had a companion, his assistant, about half my age and fair of face, who showed no signs of making way for me. So I made my way to the back of the truck and climbed into its open body, expecting to find it loaded with farm produce. Instead, I found myself landing in the midst of a herd of goats.

There must have been about twenty of them, all crammed into the back of the truck. Before I could get out, the truck started, and I found myself a fellow traveller with a party of goats destined for a butcher’s shop in Herbertpur.

I must say they tried to make me welcome. As the truck lurched along the winding road, we were thrown about a good deal, and I found myself in close contact with those friendly but highly odorous creatures.

Why do we eat them, I wonder. There can be nothing tougher than the meat of a muscular mountain goat. We should instead use them as weapons of offence, driving herds of goats into enemy territory, where they will soon consume every bit of greenery —grass, crops, leaves—in a matter of minutes. Sometimes I wonder why the Great Mathematician created the goat; hardly one of nature’s balancing factors.

But I was the intruder, I had no right to any of their space. So I could not complain when a kid mistook me for its mother and snuggled up to me, searching for an udder. When I thrust it away, a billy goat got annoyed and started butting me on the rump. Fortunately for me, two female goats came to my rescue, coming between me and the aggressive male.

By the time we reached Herbertpur it was two in the morning, and I was feeling like a serving of rogan josh or mutton keema, two dishes that I resolved to avoid if ever I saw a menu again.

When I scrambled out of that truck, I was smelling to high heaven. The goats were bleating, as though they missed me. I thanked Sardarji for the lift, and he offered to take me further—all the way to Saharanpur. The goats, he said, would soon be
unloaded, and replaced by a pair of buffaloes.
    I decided to walk.
    There was a small canal running by the side of the road.
    There was just one thing I wanted in life. A bath.
    I jumped into the canal, clothes and all, and wallowed there until daylight.
Rubies in the Dust

I was back in Fosterganj that same evening, but I waited near the pool until it was dark before returning to my room. My clothes were in a mess, and I must have looked like the Creature from the Black Lagoon or an explorer who had lost his way in the jungle. After another bath, this time with good old Lifebuoy soap, I changed into my last pair of pyjamas, and slept all through the night and most of the next day, only emerging from my room because hunger had overcome lassitude. Hassan fed me on buns, biscuits and boiled eggs while I gave him an edited account of my excursion. He did not ask any questions, simply told me to avoid areas which were in any way under surveillance. Sage advice.

Over the next week, nothing much happened, except that the days grew shorter and the nights longer and I needed a razai at night.

I inspected all the flowerpots, emptying them one by one, just in case the marble players had switched the hiding place of the gemstones. The children watched me with some amusement, and I had to pretend that I was simply repotting the geraniums and begonias. It was the season for begonias; they flamed scarlet and red and bright orange, challenging the autumn hues of dahlias and chrysanthemums. Early October was a good time for flowers in Fosterganj. Vishaal’s wife had created a patch of garden in front of the bank; the post office verandah had been brightened up; and even Foster’s broken-down cottage was surrounded by cosmos gone wild.

I searched the ravine below the bakery, in case the gems had been thrown down from my window. I found broken bottles, cricket balls, old slippers, chicken bones, the detritus that accumulates on the fringes of human habitations; but nothing resembling jewellery.

And then one morning, as I was returning from a walk in the woods, I encountered the poor woman who was sweeping the road. This chore was usually carried out by her husband, but he had been ill for some time and she had taken over his duties. She was a sturdy woman, plain-looking, and dressed in a faded sari. Even when sweeping the road she had a certain dignity—an effortless, no-fuss dignity that few of
us possess.

When I approached, she was holding something up to the light. And when she saw me, she held it out on her palm, and asked, ‘What is this stone, Babuji? It was lying here in the dust. It is very pretty, is it not?’

I looked closely at the stone. It was not a pebble, but a ruby, of that I was certain.

‘Is it valuable?’ she asked. ‘Can I keep it?’

‘It may be worth something,’ I said. ‘But don’t show it to everyone. Just keep it carefully. You found it, you keep it.’

‘Finder’s keepers’, the philosophy of my school days. And whom did it belong to, anyway? Who were the rightful owners of those stones? There was no way of telling.

And what was their real worth? We put an artificial value on pretty pebbles found in remote places. Just bits of crystals, poor substitutes for marbles. Innocent children know their true worth. Nothing more than the dust at their feet.

The good lady tied the stone in a corner of her sari and lumbered off, happy with her find. And I hoped she’d find more. Better in her hands than in the hands of princes.
Out of the blue, Sunil arrived. There he was, lean and languid, sitting on the bakery steps, waiting for me to return from my walk.

‘I thought you’d joined the army,’ I said.

‘They wouldn’t take me. I couldn’t pass the physical. You have to be an acrobat to do some of those things, like climbing ropes or swinging from trees like Tarzan.’

‘All out of date,’ I said. ‘They need less brawn and more brain.’

He followed me up the steps to my room and stretched himself out on the cot. He reminded me of a cat, sleek and utterly self-satisfied.

‘So what else happened?’ I asked.

‘Well, the colonel was a nice chap. He couldn’t enlist me, but he gave me a job in the mess room. You know, keeping the place tidy, polishing the silver, helping at the bar. It wasn’t hard work, and sometimes I was able to give myself a rum or a vodka on the quiet. Lots of silver trophies on the shelves. Very tempting, but you can’t do much with those things, they are mostly for show.’

‘What made you leave?’

‘Ivory. There were these elephant’s tusks mounted on the wall, you see. Huge tusks. They’d been there for years. The elephant had been shot by a colonel-shikari about fifty years ago, and the tusks put on display in the mess. All that ivory! Very tempting.’

‘You can’t just pocket elephant tusks.’

‘Not pocket them, but you can carry them off. And I knew how to get into that mess room in the middle of the night without anyone seeing me.’

‘So did you get away with them?’

‘Perfectly. I had a rug in which I hid the tusks, and I’d tied them up with a couple of good army belts. I took the bus down to Kotdwar without any problem. No one was going to miss those tusks—not for a day or two, anyway.’

‘So what went wrong?’

‘Things went wrong at the Kotdwar railway station. I was walking along the
platform with the rug on my shoulder, looking for an empty compartment, when a luggage trolley bumped into me. I dropped the rug and it burst open. The tusks were there for all to see. A couple of railway police were coming down the platform, so I took off like lightning. Ran down the platform until it ended, then crossed the railway lines and hid in a sugarcane field. Later, I took a ride on a bullock-cart until I was well away from the town. Then I borrowed a bicycle and rode all the way to Najibabad.’

‘Where’s the cycle?’

‘Left it outside the police station just in case the owner came looking for it.’

‘Very thoughtful of you. So here you are.’

He smiled at me. He was a rogue. But at least he’d stopped calling me uncle.

~

It was only later that day—towards evening, in fact—that Sunil spotted the gramophone in a corner of my room.

‘What’s this you’ve got?’ he asked.

‘Mr Foster’s gramophone. It plays music.’

‘I know that. My grandfather has one. He plays old Saigal records.’

‘Well, this one has old English records. You won’t care for them. I bought the gramophone and the records came with it.’

Sunil lost no time in placing the gramophone on the table, opening it, and putting a record on the turntable. But the table was stuck.

‘It’s fully wound,’ said Sunil. ‘There’s something jammed inside.’

‘It was all right when I went away. The kids must have been fooling around with it.’

‘Have you a screwdriver?’

‘No, but Hassan will have one. I’ll go and borrow it.’

I left Sunil fiddling about with the gramophone, and went downstairs, and came back five minutes later with a small screwdriver. Sunil took it and began unscrewing the upper portion of the gramophone. He opened it up; revealing the springs, inner machinery, the emerald bracelet, garnet broach and sapphire ring.

Sunil immediately slipped the ring on to a finger and said, ‘Very beautiful. Did it come with the gramophone?’
‘Sapphires are unlucky,’ I told him. ‘You have to be very special to wear a sapphire.’

‘I’m lucky,’ he said, holding his hands to the light and admiring the azure stone in its finely crafted ring. ‘It suits me, don’t you think? And where did all this treasure come from?’

There was no point in making up a story. I told him how the jewels had come into my possession. Even as I did, I wondered who had put the jewellery in the gramophone. One of the children, I presumed—only a child would recognize the value of jewels but not of gemstones. I thought it best not to tell Sunil this. I did not mention the rubies, either. I did not want him hunting all over Fosterganj for them, and interrupting games of marbles to check if the children were playing with rubies.

‘Those two won’t be back,’ he said, referring to the palace boy and his mother. ‘They will be wanted for theft, arson and murder. But others may be after these pretty pebbles.’

‘I know,’ I said, and told him about my visitors in Chakrata.

‘And you will get visitors here as well. I think we should go away for some time. Come to my village. Not the one near Rajpur. I mean my mother’s village in Bijnor, on the other side of the Ganga. It’s an out-of-the-way place, far from the main highways. Strangers won’t be welcome.’

‘Will I be welcome?’

‘With me, you will always be welcome.’

~

I allowed Sunil to take over. I wasn’t really interested in the stones, they were more trouble than they were worth. All I wanted was a quiet life, a writing pad, books to read, flowers to gaze upon, and sometimes a little love, a little kiss… But Sunil was fascinated with the gems. Like a magpie, he was attracted to all that glittered.

He transferred the jewels to a small tin suitcase, the kind that barbers and
masseurs used to carry around. It was seldom out of his sight. He told me to pack a few things, but to leave my books and the gramophone behind; we did not want any heavy stuff with us.

‘You can’t carry a palace around,’ he said. ‘But you can carry the king’s jewels.’

‘Take that sapphire off,’ I said. ‘Unless it’s your birthstone, it will prove to be unlucky.’

‘Well, I don’t know my date of birth. So I can wear anything I like.’

‘It doesn’t suit you. It makes you look too prosperous.’

‘Seeing it, people won’t suspect that I’m after their pockets.’

He had a point there. And he wasn’t going to change his ways.

You have to accept people as they are, if you want to live with them. You can’t really change people. Only a chameleon can change colour, and then only in order to deceive you.

If, like Sunil, you have a tendency to pick pockets, that tendency will always be there, even if one day you become a big corporate boss. If, like Foster, you have spent most of your life living on the edge of financial disaster, you will always be living on the edge. If, like Hassan, you are a single-minded baker of bread and maker of children, you won’t stop doing either. If, like Vishaal, you are obsessed with leopards, you won’t stop looking for them. And if, like me, you are something of a dreamer, you won’t stop dreaming.
‘Ganga-maiki jai!’

The boat carrying pilgrims across the sacred river was ready to leave. Sunil and I scrambled down the river bank and tumbled into it. It was already overloaded, but we squeezed in amongst the pilgrims, mostly rural folk who had come to Hardwar to visit the temples and take home bottles of Ganga water—in much the same way that the faithful come to Lourdes, in France, and carry away the healing waters of a sacred stream. People are the same everywhere.

In those days there was no road bridge across the Ganga, and the train took one to Bijnor by a long and circuitous route. Sunil’s village was off the beaten track, some thirty miles from the nearest station. The easiest way to get there was to cross the river by boat and then take an ekka, or pony-cart, to get to the village.

The boat was meant to take about a dozen people, but for a few rupees more the boatmen would usually take in more than the permitted number. When we set off, there must have been at least twenty in the boat—men, women and children.

‘Ganga-maiki jai!’ they chanted, as the two oarsmen swung into the current.

For a time, all went well. In spite of its load, the boat made headway, being carried a little downstream but in the general direction of its landing place. Then halfway across the river, where the water was deep and strong, the boat began to wobble about and water slopped in over the sides.

The singing stopped, and a few called out in dismay.

There was little one could do, except urge the oarsmen on.

They did their best, straining at the oars, the sweat pouring down their bare bodies. We made some progress, although we were now drifting with the current.

‘It doesn’t matter where we land,’ I said, ‘as long as we don’t take in water.’

I had always been nervous in small boats. The fear of drowning had been with me since childhood: I’d seen a dhow go down off the Kathiawar coast, and bodies washed ashore the next day.

‘Ganga-maiki jai!’ called one or two hardy souls, and we were about two-thirds
across the river when water began to fill the boat. The women screamed, the children cried out.

‘Don’t panic!’ I yelled, though filled with panic. ‘It’s not so deep here, we can get ashore.’

The boat struck a sandbank, tipped over. We were in the water.

I was waist-deep in water, but the current was strong, taking me along. The menfolk picked up the smaller children and struggled to reach the shore. The women struggled to follow them.

Two of the older women were carried downstream; I have no idea what happened to them.

Sunil was splashing about near the capsized boat. ‘Where’s my suitcase?’ he yelled.

I saw it bobbing about on the water, just out of his reach. He made a grab for it, but it was swept away. I saw it disappearing downstream. It might float for a while, then sink to the bottom of the river. No one would find it there. Or some day the suitcase would burst open, its contents carried further downstream, and the emerald bracelet be washed up among the pebbles of the riverbed. A fisherman might find it. In older times he would have taken it to his king. In present times he would keep it.

We struggled ashore with the others and sank down on the sand, exhausted but happy to be alive.

Those who still had some strength left sang out: ‘Ganga-maiki jai!’ And so did I. Sunil still had the sapphire ring on his hand, but it hadn’t done him much good.
End of the Road

We stayed in Sunil’s village for almost a month. I have to say I enjoyed the experience, in spite of the absence of modern conveniences. Electricity had come to the village—which was surprising for that time—and in our room there was a ceiling fan and an old radio. But sanitation was basic, and early in the morning one had to visit a thicket of thorn bushes, which provided more privacy than the toilets at the bus stop. Water came from an old well. It was good sweet water. There were pigeons nesting in the walls of the well, and whenever we drew up a bucket of water the pigeons would erupt into the air, circle above us, and then settle down again.

There were other birds. Parrots, green and gold, settled in the guava trees and proceeded to decimate the young fruit. The children would chase them away, but they would return after an hour or two.

Herons looked for fish among the hyacinths clogging up the village pond. Kingfishers swooped low over the water. A pair of Sarus cranes, inseparable, treaded gingerly through the reeds. All on fishing expeditions.

The outskirts of an Indian village are a great place for birds. You will see twenty to thirty species in the course of a day. Bluejays doing their acrobatics, sky-diving high above the open fields; cheeky bulbuls in the courtyard; seven sisters everywhere; mynas quarrelling on the verandah steps; scarlet minivets and rosy pastors in the banyan tree; and at night, the hawk cuckoo or brain fever bird shouting at us from the mango-tope.

Almost every village has its mango-tope, its banyan tree, its small temple, its irrigation canal. Old men smoking hookahs; the able-bodied in the fields; children playing gulli-danda or cricket. An idyllic setting, but I did not envy my hosts. They toiled from morn till night—ploughing, sowing, reaping, always with an eye on the clouds—and then having to sell, in order to buy…

Sunil’s uncle urged him to stay, to help them on the farm; but he was too lazy for any work that required physical exertion. Towns and cities were his milieu. He was fidgety all the time we were in the village. And when I told him it was time for me to start working, looking for a job in Delhi, he did not object to my leaving but instead
insisted on joining me. He too would find a job in Delhi, he said. He could work in a hotel or a shop or even start his own business.

And so I found myself back in my old room in dusty Shahdara in Delhi, and within a short time I’d found work with a Daryaganj publisher, polishing up the English of professors who were writing guides to Shakespeare, Chaucer and Thomas Hardy.

Sunil had friends in Delhi, and he disappeared for long periods, turning up only occasionally, when he was out of pocket or in need of somewhere to spend the night.

And then one of his friends came by to tell me he’d been arrested at the New Delhi railway station. He’d been back to his old ways, relieving careless travellers of their cash or wristwatches. He was a skilful practitioner of his art, but he’d grown careless.

The police took away the sapphire ring, and of course he never saw it again. It must have brought a little affluence but not much joy to whoever flaunted it next.

Denied bail, Sunil finally found himself lodged in a new, modern jail that had come up at a village called Tihar, on the old Najafgarh road. As a boy I’d gone fishing in the extensive Najafgarh jheel, but now much of it had been filled in and built over. The herons and kingfishers had moved on, the convicts had moved in.

Sunil had been there a few months when at last I was able to see him. He was looking quite cheerful, not in the least depressed; but then, he was never the despondent type. He was working in the pharmacy, helping out the prison doctor. He had become popular with the inmates, largely due to his lively renderings of Hindi film songs.

Our paths had crossed briefly, and now diverged. I knew we would probably not see each other again. And we didn’t. What became of him? Perhaps he spent many more months in jail, making up prescriptions for ailing dacoits, murderers, embezzlers, fraudsters and sexual offenders; and perhaps when he came out, he was able to start a chemist’s shop. Unlikely, but possible. In any case, he would have made Delhi his home. The big city would have suited him.

Fosterganj was a far cry from all this, and I was too busy to give it much thought. And then one Sunday, when I was at home, had a visitor.

It was Hassan.

He had come to Delhi to attend a relative’s marriage and he had got my address from the publisher in Daryaganj. Having given up any hope of seeing me again in Fosterganj, he’d brought along my books, typewriter, and the gramophone.

He spent all morning with me, bringing me up to date on happenings in Fosterganj.

Vishaal had been transferred, getting a promotion, and taking over a branch in the heart of Madhya Pradesh. Mowgli country! Leopard country! Vishaal would be happy there.

‘And how’s old Foster?’ I asked.

‘Not too good. He says he won’t last long, and he may be right. He wants to know
if you’ll accept his uncle’s skull as a gift.’

‘Tell him to gift it to the Mussoorie municipality. I believe they are starting a museum in the Clock Tower. But thanks for bringing the gramophone down. I could do with a little music.’

Hassan then told me that the hotel was now coming up on the site of the old palace. It would be a posh sort of place, very expensive.

‘What are they calling it?’ I asked.

‘Lake View Hotel.’

‘But there isn’t a lake.’

‘They plan to make one. Extend the old pool, and feed it with water from the dhobi ghat. Fosterganj is changing fast.’

‘Well, as long as it’s good for business. Should be good for the bakery.’

‘Oh, they’ll have their own bakery. But I’ll manage. So many workers and labourers around now. Population is going up. So when will you visit us again?’

‘Next year, perhaps. But I can’t afford Lake View Palaces.’

‘You don’t need to. Your room is still there.’

‘Then I’ll come.’


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Over the next three or four years I lost touch with Fosterganj. My life changed a little. I found companionship when I was least expecting it, and I became a freelance writer for a travel magazine. It was funded by a Parsi gentleman who was rumoured to own half of Bombay. I saw no evidence of the wealth in the cheques I received for my stories, but at least I got to travel a lot, zipping around the country by train, bus and, on one occasion, a dilapidated old Dakota of the Indian Airlines.

The forests of Coonoor; the surge of the sea at Gopalpur; old settlements on the Hooghly; the ghats of Banaras; the butterflies of the western ghats; the forts of Gwalior; the sacred birds of Mathura; the gardens of Kashmir—all were grist to my mill, or rather to the portable typewriter which had taken the place of the clumsy old office machine. How could Fosterganj’s modest charms compare with the splendours that were on offer elsewhere in the land?

So Fosterganj was far from my thoughts—until one day I picked up a newspaper and came across a news item that caught my attention.

On the outskirts of the hill station of Nahan a crime had been committed. An elderly couple living alone in a sprawling bungalow had been strangled to death. The police had been clueless for several weeks, and the case was almost forgotten, until a lady turned up with information about the killer. She led them to a spot among the pines behind the bungalow, where a boy was digging up what looked like a small wooden chest. It contained a collection of valuable gemstones. The murdered man had been a
well-known jeweller with an establishment in Simla.

The accused claimed that he was a minor, barely fifteen years old. And certainly he had looked no older to the police. But the woman told them he was only a few years younger than her, and that she was nearly fifty. She confessed to being his accomplice in similar crimes in the past; it was always gems and jewellery he was after. He had been her lover, she said. She had been under his domination for too long.

I looked at the photograph of the man-boy that accompanied the report. A bit fuzzy, but it certainly looked like Bhim the Lucky. Who else could it have been?

The next few mornings I scanned the papers for more information on the case. There was a small update, which said that a medical test had confirmed the accused was in his forties. And the woman had disappeared.

Then there was nothing. The newspapers had moved on to other scandals and disasters.

I felt sorry for the woman. We had met only twice, but I had sensed in her a fellow feeling, a shared loneliness that was on the verge of finding relief. But for her it was not to be. I wondered where she was, and what she would do to forget she had given many years of her life for a love that had never truly existed.

I never saw her again.

~

Not the happiest memory to have of Fosterganj. When I look back on that year, I prefer to think of Hassan and Sunil and Vishaal, and even old Foster (long gone), and the long-tailed magpies flitting among the oak trees, and the children playing on the dusty road.

And last winter, when I was spending a few weeks in a bungalow by the sea—far from my Himalayan haunts—I remembered Fosterganj and thought: I have written about moonlight bathing the Taj and the sun beating down on the Coromandel coast—and so have others—but who will celebrate little Fosterganj?

And so I decided to write this account of the friends I made there—a baker, a banker, a pickpocket, a hare-lipped youth, an old boozer of royal descent, and a few others—to remind myself that there had been such a place, and that it had once been a part of my life.
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