

Indian Magic

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HopeRoad: London

LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY

The lights of London went to my head. Its sights and sounds bowled me over.

'I am in London!' I said to myself.

'Am I really there?' I asked myself.

I bit my hand for the answer and walked and walked in the magic avenues of my brave new world. With my suitcase in Left Luggage at Victoria station and a bag slung across my shoulder, I could walk till my legs gave out. And sleep just anywhere. That was exactly what I did when my legs gave out - on a bench at Platform One in Victoria station.

I slept like a log. Next morning, I sat up with hungry eyes. My God, how clean and noiseless it all was, so unlike Delhi, the only superstation I knew back home. Here, hundreds of people rushed around urgently, criss-crossing each other like ants. Trains glided in gracefully, disgorging multitudes in a great hurry, then slipped out silently once more, whisking away great crowds. Unlike Delhi, no hysterics accompanied either event. No hawkers bawled their lungs out at deaf travellers. Nor did any notices warn the equivalent of: *Bombay Express - Delayed 18 hours*, or *Calcutta Mail - Late 24 Hrs*. I had the joy of seeing the face of the most utopian form of capitalism - an unattended newspaper stall doing roaring business for its absent owner. I watched a uniformed African snake-charmer charm an anaconda of fifty little trolleys into loops and bends of astonishing grace and suppleness. I saw a beautiful young woman alight from a *Brighton Belle* and walk straight into the arms of a beautiful young man, and the two lock together in an embarrassingly passionate embrace - in public.

For just a penny with the head of King George V, I conducted my morning do's in the station's big loo in its basement. There was quite a community of us in the *Gents* - men shaving and washing in a cocktail of lavatorial smells stirred with that of human sweat. I spruced myself up in the mirror to look my best to present myself to London, and only twenty-four hours to kill before I got my Work Permit.

'We *are* looking good,' I heard someone say from behind me and saw in the mirror the smiling face of a kind-looking gentleman in a felt hat. I didn't know what to say. I returned the smile and looked back. A queue had formed behind me for

the sink I had monopolised. I felt nervous and confused – mine was the only brown mug in the crowd. I stepped back and came face to face with the man in the hat.

‘Just arrived from India?’

‘Yes.’ How did he know? I asked.

‘You people have something, what shall I say now? A certain innocence. It’s fresh and appealing.’

This seemed a good start to my first day on English soil. I thanked him on behalf of all my countrymen and made my way to the stairs leading to the *Way Out* sign. Last night I had done some market research and discovered that cafés outside the station were cheaper by far than those inside. I went to one where I could eat a small meal for half a crown and a reasonable one for a shilling more. I had left home with five pounds only, all we were allowed to take out of India in hard currency late in the autumn that year. The country had been fighting a losing war with China. It needed every dollar or pound it could lay its hands on to buy guns from the West.

More than two of my precious pounds had already been blown on the Italian boat from Bombay to Genoa. Five shillings, a quarter of another, was consumed by the Genoa-Calais train-ride for the purchase of two, foot-long French sandwiches. Added to that was the cost of last night’s ‘dinner’. I had to be more than careful how I spent what I was left with and make it last till I found a job. On my way to the café, I bought *The Times*, *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*.

‘Wrong papers if you are looking for work.’ The man in the felt hat was standing behind me at the café’s counter. ‘Get the *Evening Standard* tomorrow morning. It comes out at eleven. Tea’s on me.’

I said no thank you very much and paid for my cup and two buns. But we sat at the same table. He was forty-something and seemed very knowledgeable. First we talked about the just-over Cuban Crisis and President Kennedy’s bold handling of it. Then we moved on to something much closer to my heart – the Chinese invasion of India and the sudden ceasefire declared by them only a few days ago. It flattered me greatly to know how interested he was, an Englishman, in my country.

‘Bullies, that’s what they are, the Chinese. Big bullies. Never liked Mao Tse Tung and Chou En Lai anyway. Your poor Mr Nehru - stabbed in the back for trusting them.’

We had a second cup together. He insisted on paying for this one.

‘Loved Gandy, you know. Great man. I remember crying when he was shot. We were devastated here. But you are too young to remember that.’

I was seven and a half when Mahatma Gandhi was shot on 30th January 1948. But, like everyone else, I remembered where I was and doing what when the news had come – playing cricket with a

tennis ball at Anandale Racecourse in Simla, my hometown in the hills.

'Let me introduce myself,' said my new friend. 'I'm Henry Baines. B.A.I.N.E.S.'

'Raavi Kumar Mehra. M.E.H.R.A.'

'Cold?'

'No.'

'Must be – it's almost December. Homesick?'

'No.' I was too excited to feel anything other than excitement itself at being in the city of my dreams.

'You seem well-educated. Well-brought up too.'

Mr Baines was very polite. I answered all his questions about myself.

He summarised, 'You come from a good family. You are well-mannered, well-educated too. And you've come here to work and save up enough to go to an English university. But you have only two pounds and two shillings left.' Mr Baines said that with a note of friendly concern in his voice. I was touched.

'That's right.'

'You need a job, my young friend. Don't you?'

'Badly.'

'Maybe I can help.'

'Oh, really? How?' What luck!

'Let's see now. Ever thought of working in films?' Films? I'd do anything to work in films.

'Frankly, no. But anything will do for the moment. Just anything. But why do you ask?'

'A friend of mine makes films. Maybe ...'

'What kind of films? Features? Documentaries?'

'Films of a personal nature. You don't mind that, do you?'

'Not at all. But I have never acted before.'

'Not to worry. You are - what shall I say now? - a natural. Handsome and strong. You'll be perfect.'

Had I heard him right? I knew I was good-looking and lucky. But this - getting a film role on my very first day in England - was something else. I felt the hand of God in it and I saw *Introducing Raavi Kumar Mehra* flash across the silver screen. The method of recruitment seemed a bit unusual, but I had heard stories galore of directors and producers picking up their stars from heaps of dirt, as it were - from crowded bazaars, temple throngs, railway platforms.

'What role would I have to play?'

'Nothing which you simply wouldn't love.'

'I suppose your friend would want to audition me.'

'I'll do the auditioning, if that is all right by you?'

'Perfectly all right.'

'I'll give you a blow job. You'd like that.'

'What is a blow job, Mr Baines?'

'Henry to you, my young Indian friend. Henry. And you

don't know what a blow job is? Wonderful. It will be my pleasure to train you for the camera. Let's make a date then. How about this evening?'

'Perfect. But,'

'But what?'

'But I haven't got my Work Permit yet.'

Mr Baines half laughed. 'Don't worry about that. No one need know.'

'And ... ?'

'Ah, money! What shall I say now? Five pounds for the auditioning? More will follow. A *lot* more if all goes well. And it will.'

Five pounds, all that the Reserve Bank of India could afford to give me, just for a few minutes' work?

'And it will,' I repeated, giving my hand for a shake. Mr Baines gripped it like Akhil and Sheel, my bum chums back home, and held it in his for a good ten seconds. Then he wrote out his address at the top of *The Times*' faceless front page. It was in a place called Soho.

'Seven o'clock sharp.'

'Seven o'clock sharp, Mr Baines.'

'Henry, for God's sake. Come at seven and shine like the Star of India, all of you. If things work out, we might even have somewhere for you to live, too.'

I spent the morning writing aerogrammes to my bum chums, proudly announcing that I had landed a job in the British Film Industry - a blow job. I decided to defer writing to my parents about it till I had signed the contract and all. I treated myself to a good lunch in an Italian restaurant (I couldn't find an Indian one) - I was going to be rich in the evening with a future on the magic silver screen.

The rest of the day I simply floated up and down the perfumed streets of London, convinced that every beautiful girl who looked me in the eye had fallen in love with me.

The short-lived English winter afternoon abruptly melted into evening; at five it was almost night and the smudgy yellow streetlights were happily saying – *only two hours to go. Only two.* It was then that I made another friend. This chap was a young Indian like me, one of the very few Indians I had seen since last night; there were hardly any around those days. He had rushed out of a shop with pictures of horses and dogs in its windows as if he was being chased by hounds. Being in the hurry he was, he slipped on some wet leaves and fell flat on his backside. He picked himself up, dusted himself down and hurried on. In the process, he dropped something - his wallet.

'I say, you've dropped something,' I yelled. But the fellow didn't hear me, even though he was only ten yards in front. I picked up his wallet and stole a look in it - I couldn't resist. Money! *Shut up, RKM. Put the thing in your*

pocket and walk in the opposite direction. But RKM could not shut up. 'I say,' I bellowed. 'You've dropped your wallet.' The fool still did not hear me. He was in some hurry. I had to sprint up to him. 'Sir, be this yours?'

'My dear boy.' He snatched his wallet from my hand and embraced me Punjabi-style - like a lover. He was a couple of years older than me and good-looking. 'My dear boy. You are a gem. Or a fool. Obviously you've just landed. What's your good name? Mine is Bishamber Shukla. Call me Bish. Or Shuk.'

I introduced myself and he hugged me again. Then he thumped me on the shoulder, as if he was angry with me.

'Any other son of a bitch would have kept it. There's lolly in here. The bookies' lolly.' I didn't know what or who the bookies were. I asked and he thumped me again and said, 'Obviously you've just arrived. Obviously. When?'

'Last evening.'

'I'm buying you a drink. Damn. Not five thirty yet. These bloody laws. So let's have a coffee instead. I'm meeting this dame Ingrid, my girl, at eight. Boy, is she something!'

By five thirty over coffee I had my new friend's biography. Bish had a BA degree from an Indian university which was about as good as the paper it was written on. He lived for cricket, loved cooking and was karate mad. He worked for an insurance company in Victoria Street, earning eighteen pounds clear a week, and was saving up to go to an English university for 'a real degree'. And one more thing - women loved him.

'What are you doing this evening? You are eating with us.' It was an order, not an invitation. 'Ingi is so ...' Bish used his hands to describe her shape.

'I can't. I'm being auditioned.'

'On your very first day? What kind of film, what role?'

'I'm being given a blow job.'

'Oh, really? You know what it means?'

'No, but I don't care. A job is a job.'

Bish at first smiled. Then he punched me on both my shoulders and laughed like an idiot. 'Wait till Ingi hears about it. Oh, boy. Oh, boy.' Arm in arm, we walked out of the café.

'You *are* eating with us - understood? I'll spend the night with Ingi so you can sleep in my room. And tomorrow we'll find you somewhere to live. But first.'

He had to see someone in Harrow Road. We took a bus and I saw London unfolding itself, dreamlike. In Harrow Road, Bish brought me to a scruffy-looking building - *The Duke of York* public house.

I had made three unbreakable promises with my mother before leaving Simla. One of them was that I would not drink or frequent houses of disrepute, like pubs where alcohol was consumed.

'Bish, I'll wait outside. You go in and see your friend.'

'I can't believe it. I can't,' Bish muttered.
Whether he could or not, I was not going in there.
'It's bitterly cold. Your balls will freeze, Brando boy.'
'That's okay, Bish. Honest. I'll wait here.'
'If that's what you want - two frozen peas. I'll be in for
as long as it takes to kill a pint.'

As Bish went in the pub, I drifted along the street. I
stopped at a cigarette shop to look at local ads. People only
wanted charladies or wanted to be charladies. Then I caught
sight of something which gave me an electric shock - notices
for rooms to let, saying, *No Blacks. No Indians. No Irish.*
Stunned, I came reeling back to stand outside the pub, blowing
into my bare hands and shifting my weight from foot to foot.
Bish must have decided to kill two or three pints. Feeling
that his prediction was on the verge of coming true, I nearly
broke my promise to my mother. A policeman passed. He would
have walked on had I not stared at him awkwardly, feeling
guilty for no reason - maybe because the message of the shop
window was still working on me. Staring at the man was a
mistake. He stopped and said something which I did not
understand, for he spoke some kind of sub-English. But I guessed.

'I am waiting for a friend.'
'Been waiting for forty minutes?' Had he been watching me
all that time? What a waste of valuable police time! I
wished I could tell him so, but I was afraid of him. I
shouldn't have been. Back home we were told that English
policemen were the best in the world - polite and intelligent.
'Are you sure it isn't more than forty minutes only?'
The policeman didn't like that.

'None of your cheek, lad. I said forty minutes, didn't I?'
'Have you been watching me all this time? It was quite
unnecessary, really.' I knew at once I had said the wrong
thing. But I was confused and quite frightened now.

'Where do you live, boy? What's your address?'
'Platform One, Victoria Station, SW1.'
This did not go down well at all. I saw him frown.
'You'd better come along to *my* station, boyo.'
'What on earth for?' Confusion and fright turned to panic.
'For a few questions. Just routine.'

The man advanced and tried to lay a hand on me. Thereupon
I did something foolish - I ran. Two cricket pitches on, a
woman walking past tripped me and I fell flat on the hard
pavement. More passers-by from the bile-like yellow streetlight
gathered around us. A couple of local heroes sprang into
action. They just sat on me.

'What have I done?' I screamed.
'Keep him there. Keep him there.'
They kept me there till a police van hissed to a halt by the
kerbside. Weight lifted off my chest and I was bundled into

the van. The police station was close by.

'Is there anyone responsible here who could answer my very simple question - what have I done?'

I feared the worst. But they did not hit me as their brethren back home would have done to make me 'talk'. The Immigration Act had been passed earlier that year. I was told that it was being broken right, left, right and centre, mostly by my own brethren - Indians and Pakistanis.

'How long have you been here?'

'Arrived yesterday.'

'How did you get in the country?'

I nearly said, 'Swam the English Channel.' But instead I pulled out my passport, my Employment Voucher and my travel documents. They let me go.

I ran again. I broke my promise to my mother and went in the pub. My new friend was not there. The portly man with florid cheeks behind the bar said yes, there had been two Indian blokes. But they had left about half an hour ago. The London streets again. I no longer bit my hand. I walked and walked. Time walked with me, a slow companion. Days two, three and four came and went and I was as far from a job as I had been on day one. I hoped Bishamber Shukla would come looking for me. I sat up every evening, waiting and staring vacantly at the ever-shifting mass of bodies in a hurry to get somewhere. There was many a man like me to whom Victoria was mother and home. They artfully concealed themselves in nooks and crannies, trying to become invisible.

Mornings were the most painful time of the day. We had to clear out of the station very early, and go and sit on benches in shelters in the parks or lie down on flattened cardboard boxes under the railway arches. These were the moments which made me burn with loneliness and longing for home. By God, I would have given my right arm to be transported there just then: to be home, hearing the clang of the brass utensils, Grandma muttering her morning mantras, Mother ordering the kitchen for Father's 'bed tea', the loaded milk wallah groaning coming up the steep mountain road, my little sister Ushee refusing to be bathed and crying bitterly, the children next door waking up yelling, the bells of Christ Church on The Ridge.

There was much in common between my mountain hometown Simla and my newly adopted English one. Cool in the summer, Simla was made by the English for the English and was just as cold in the winter. But it had a lovable face which breathed out a comforting warmth. The cold of London was faceless. Forbidding.

Day five I saw the wonder of an English autumn morning sun, a red-orange glow, a football of gentle incandescence entangled in the naked branches of a tree in a park. Momentarily it smothered the desperation ringing inside me. For a minute I felt soothed, as if a gentle hand had applied a

paste of turmeric on a burn. Then a funny thing happened - I felt a large smile spread on my face. I had smiled because a space between my thoughts had suddenly been invaded by a question - *why had I come here?* I could have laughed. I could have also cried. I walked and walked

In a shop, the bespectacled owner with a tailor's tape around his neck was simply taken aback to see me present myself. He scratched his nose and lowered his glasses to have a proper look at the rare specimen before him.

'Now what makes you think I have a job for you?'

'But you've advertised for an assistant.'

'Thank you for applying.' He just waved me out of his shop.

Under some railway arches in Kings Cross I saw a notice for a vacancy for another assistant, saying *Apply Within*. It was a joinery or something - there was a lot of cut wood and sawdust around. Chin up, I put my best foot into the place.

'Nothing personal, but the West Indian sweat gets me.'

'But I am Indian.'

'And the smell of curry.'

'I haven't eaten Indian food for over three weeks.'

'Nothing personal, you get my meaning? But you are different anyway. I can see you are. Try Shoreditch.'

Try Shoreditch. *What can you lose?* I said to myself, and nearly got taken on by the security department of Woolworth's there. But when I stood on the weighing machine, I turned out to be a stone underweight for my five foot eleven and the all-important quarter inch. It was a savage disappointment. But being a Mehra, I clung onto hope and said to the man, whose name was Livingstone: 'There's been an unavoidable disruption in my eating pattern lately.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'It's only fourteen pounds, Dr Livingstone.'

'That's a stone.'

'Please take me. May I presume to promise I will put it back on again in just one week at two pounds a day? You don't know me, Dr Livingstone.'

'No, I don't. Nor do I want to. And watch your step, young Stanley.'

The yellow streetlight now radiated a hostile indifference. My feet lead-heavy, and my belly resoundingly empty, I wanted to sit down somewhere for a bit of a rest. It was a desperate physical need, but I couldn't afford to. It was a Thursday, which meant late-night shopping, and an extra hour for me to look for work. Mechanically, I went from door to door, receiving the same polite reply, leading me to conclude that when it came to politeness, the English people beat the rest of the world hands down (as they had at everything else).

By seven I couldn't take a step further - I had been walking the streets for twelve whole hours. Spotting a shelter in a little park in Pimlico, with a couple of benches, I sat down on

one. I was angry - with the world, but more than that, with myself. Then suddenly, I felt a tear roll down my cheek.

Dog. Why did you come to this country? To make your fortune, eh? What fortune? This?

The bitter English December chilled my bones, the salt of tears was on my lips and hunger howled in my stomach.

This England you loved so much.

In spite of my anger and my tears, I knew it was pathetic to feel sorry for myself. I had to be reasonable. It was not England's fault. Nor that of the English people.

They simply don't know you exist. Once they do.

The thing was to make them aware that I existed. But how? Hadn't I tried? Ask my feet!

Someone came and sat down next to me on the same bench, a strange, bulbous lady. I had seen her sort dipping their grubby hands in big black bins (sometimes a shiver would run through me when I saw them do that, and if one ever looked at me while doing so, I knew what they were saying with their furtive glances – *boy, you next time*). The woman, who was my mother's age – about fifty, was eating something from a conical white paper bag. She held my gaze and smiled. It was my mother's smile - full of warmth and comfort. I really felt I was her son and she my mother.

'Poor dear.' She dipped a hand in a pocket of her soiled coat and held out a sixpenny piece. 'Ere. Go and buy yourself a bag.'

I did not understand, but I smiled back, anyway.

'Go on - go and buy yourself a bag, luv. The Chippie's just round the corner.'

I still did not understand. Smiling shyly, I stood up.

'No, thank you very much, madam,' I blurted out in my best English and, egged on by pride, I walked away from the shelter. A hundred yards on, I came to a small shop with a powerful smell of frying oil. The shop's name was *Moby Dick*. *Oh, yes. Herman Melville and Gregory Peck and Captain Ahab* - I had both read the book and seen the film in Simla.

A number of boys and girls of my age were coming out of *Moby Dick* carrying paper-bags like my tramp-mother's. They wore black leather jackets with steel studs all over, and looked strangely beautiful. I looked at them in wonder. They stared back collectively. Then one boy flung something at me from his bag. It would have hit me in the eye had I not caught it in mid-air, being the cricketer that I was. A soggy potato chip. I hurled it back at him, reflex action. Middle stump, his chin - but he was no cricketer. A hail of potato chips then hit me on the face. I was surrounded. There was a smell of beer and my left arm got twisted behind my back. Two heavy boots pinned both my feet down. This was my first contact with my contemporaries in Fair England, the country of my dreams.

'Let go,' I screamed.

'Break it,' urged a male voice.

'Let 'im go, Tone. He aint done nuffink,' said a girl with beautiful golden hair, pulling at the arm-twister. Without a further glance at me, they let me go and marched away, filling the air I breathed with fear.

For sixpence I got a bagful of chips. I took it to the Shelter to eat them in the company of the kind lady. She had gone and I wished she hadn't. Ten minutes later, I was back at *Moby Dick* for another bag. The man and the woman who made the chips were not English. They appeared to be angry with each other, for whenever they spoke, they did so in angry shouts. I felt afraid of them too. But they didn't look at me while serving me. Fifteen minutes on, I turned up at their shop for the third time. The woman, short and buxom with an apple-round face and a permanent blush, studied me this time, smiling - the second person to smile at me within the same half hour. She made a bag for me and sprinkled salt and vinegar on it. Then she wrapped a piece of fried fish and placed it on the chips.

'How much, madam?' I held out my last half-crown.

'Six pence.'

'But the fish?'

'You pay for *feesh* when you get job.'

'If I don't?'

'You get job,' the lady said with authority.

The world was not all indifference and hurt, after all. Once out of *Moby Dick*, I walked tall, feeling for no reason that from now on, things were going to be all right. I did not really know where to go. But walking on a full stomach after two whole days of walking on one completely empty, I didn't care which way I went. Anyway, that decision was promptly taken out of my hands. I saw the same bunch of my leather-clad contemporaries coming my way, looking more menacing in that yellow streetlight which didn't seem to like me. Commonsense made me describe a quick about-turn.

Ten minutes later, somewhere near Pimlico tube station, I found myself looking at a shop sign - *Indian Magic, Prop: Gokul Swami*. In fact it was a restaurant - one of the very few Indian restaurants in London in those days. On an impulse I went in. It was an L-shaped place, quite large with over fifteen tables, muskily dark, smelling of joss sticks and spices. The wallpaper was embossed, with velvety sunflowers in a field of viridian green. Twenty odd people were sat eating in there and it was not yet eight. At least someone was doing well.

'One only?' said a waiter in English.

'I have eaten,' I confided in him, a countryman of mine.

'Then?' The man gave me a look one gives to an idiot - if I had eaten, what the hell was I doing in a restaurant?

'I have come to see Mr Swami.'

'Them boss are over there standing.' The man pointed to

his boss at the till counter with shelves full of glistening bottles behind him at the far end. Mr Swami was a short plump man with a round, boyish face. He was the same age as my father, fifty-one or fifty-two. He was rubbing and re-rubbing a spotlessly clean wine glass with a snow-white napkin.

‘Good evening, Mr Swami.’

‘Good evening. Better is you come to the point.’ Mr Swami had guessed why I was there.

‘Sir.’ I explained my situation, ending with: ‘Anything will do. Just anything to keep me going till I can do what I’ve come here for.’

‘And that is?’

‘To join an English university.’

‘How long you been in London?’

‘Nearly a week, sir.’

‘Doing what? Sleeping where?’

I told him.

‘Fool boy. Why didn’t you go on the dole?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Too proud, eh? Show your hands.’

I showed him my hands.

‘You haven’t done a day’s work in your life.’ It was true. But young men of my kind of background didn’t have to work. And he knew it from my speech and how I looked. Narrowing his eyes, he studied my face for a long minute, my heart racing. ‘All I can give you is dishwasher job at four bob an hour.’

Phen!

‘Father’s occupation back and where?’

‘My father is a doctor in Simla.’

‘Ah, *the* Shimla! And he issend you here penniless?’

‘Sir, the Indian government allows only five pounds sterling of foreign currency. The China war.’

‘Any qualification?’

I showed him my degree obtained earlier that year.

‘Indian English MA in UK? Useless. What you learned? I’ll tell you what I learned without degree. I learned God helps those who help each other. Right? So Indian must help Indian. If not, God save Indians. I am Gujarati, you are Punjabi. So what? So I help. So it is twelve to three pm. During the daytime and seven to eleven at night, with meals thrown in. Good or not? Isspeak.’

I was speechless - a job and food, Indian food!

Mr Swami stood by what he had learned. He even lent me the unbelievably vast sum of five pounds, saying: ‘Remember: God helps those who help each other.’

‘Sir, keep my degree as my guarantee.’

Mr Swami called the waiter I had spoken to. ‘Jagan, take boy down and show him what is where and what to do.’

In the large and busy kitchen, Jagan showed me what I had to do. On his way back upstairs, he spoke inaudibly to the

three workers there and I saw them raise their eyebrows.

‘Our Gujarati boss must have seen something special in you, a Punjabi,’ said someone to me with a smile - someone of my age.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean he never takes anyone from anywhere other than Gujarat. We are all Gujarati here.’

‘Really? But we are all Indian.’

‘Yeah, but. And lending you five quid just like that!!!’

The first thing I did was to go to *Moby Dick* with a bunch of flowers. At last I saw a notice which didn’t say *No Blacks, No Indians, No Irish*. It directed me to a large house in the Finchley Road. Strangely, like every other house around, it was identical to houses in Simla, being of a mock Tudor design. It was like being in Simla without its Himalayan heights, poetry and drama, Simla on straight flat roads. My room was on the ground floor. Even though it was small, it was heaven on earth. Here I could do what I wanted to most in the world - sleep. Sleep, sweet sleep.

Owned by an absentee Indian doctor, the house was looked after by a kindly Portuguese lady, Mrs Ferreiro. She said she could tell by looking at me that she was going to like me.

‘As long as you pay rent every Saturday. Two pounds ten.’

My room had two doors. One led into the hall, with its red lino floor. The other to a long misty garden overgrown with weed, wild bush and coarse tall grass lined by leafless autumn trees. Next to this door was a half-curtained window.

There were another three rooms on my floor and many more upstairs - on the first floor and the loft - all occupied by young Indian and Pakistani men only. This fact led the house to be called ‘the Subcontinental’ - someone here had a sense of humour. Mostly new arrivals, they were hardworking men who did overtime and had plans to set up their own businesses when they had saved up enough. They all had pained faces, as if they were being bullied by someone. I knew well by whom - by this city, the world’s greatest and ‘best’. With the same bully breathing down my neck, I wondered if I, too, had a pained face.

Jagan was ‘permanent’ and proud of it.

‘What Gokul saw? I see nothing,’ Jagan said to the other ‘permanent’, Prohit, as I walked in one day.

‘When Gokul lent you even a tenner? And five pounds?’ Prohit rolled his eyes. Both in their late thirties, they did not like the two or three ‘hire and fire’ waiters who came and went. Whenever they spoke to me, they were doing me a favour.

The downstairs staff consisted of the bald old Bandhu, the silent chef, his equally quiet deputy Hari and his not-so-quiet second deputy, Ranjit. Ranjit was the one who had given me that wicked smile on my first night. He was my age and height. Ranjit had a ‘lil boy’ face with unbelievably white teeth and gleaming black eyes. He was always laughing and

singing Hindi film songs. When he got carried away, the song got louder and he got thumped by the boss. But he didn't care. I called him Ranji after the great cricketer. He loved it.

'Always knew there was something great about me.'

Ranji asked me to guess how many pairs of socks he wore. The answer was two - 'at least'.

'Englishman's winter, this. But himself he don't feel it. I have seen him walking in the street only in this vest I wear under my shirt. Sometime I think he is mad.'

It was Ranji who told me what 'upstair' called me:

'Posh Balls.'

'Why?' I laughed my head off.

'Because Jagan and Prohit get the hot chilli of jealousy up their arse.'

'But why?'

'Because you are educated. Because you speak English English-style. Because of the way you dress and stand. Jagan says it's not Gokul Swami but Posh Balls' own *Indian Magic*.'

This worried me. I decided to go out of my way to befriend them and called them Jagan-ji and Prohit-ji out of respect.

'Work. Work,' they barked at me each time I tried to draw them into a friendly chat. 'We pay you four bob an hour for what - to yap like the other good-for-nothing downstairs?'

'Huh, better is call them Joker-ji,' laughed Ranji. 'Leave the fools with their chili where it is.'

'Ranji, miss home?' I asked one day.

Ranji became sad, almost tearful. He looked up at the ceiling for a long moment. I did not press for an answer. Next day he flashed a little passbook at me.

'I have two fifty in the post office. The day I have two thousand, I'm footing back.'

'You'll miss England. It's lovely shops and lovely girls.'

'English girls - I am already missing them. And the shops too. Especially Harrod. Shop of shops. Go look. Your posh balls will start singing. But useless waste of time.'

'Why?'

'Indian not allowed, that's why. Only Maharajah type.'

One afternoon after a visit to my favourite museum - the Victoria and Albert, in South Kensington, I turned up there all the same. I was convinced there wouldn't be notices saying *Blacks and Indians not allowed*. But I wasn't sure. After all, I had seen them in every bay-window when I was looking for a room. It made my day not to see any in Harrod's mouth-watering windows with lights leaping with joy. I still needed some courage to walk into that shop of shops, however. Christmas shoppers packed the place. It was like the ten-yearly *kumbha mela* throng of worshippers at Benares on the Ganges - a mass of humanity compressed by the common fervour and devotion to acquiring. I wasn't there to buy anything, only to look. I

moved around like a thief, looking through the corners of my eyes to see if I was being watched. I even felt like one. That is, I felt as if I had stolen something from there, but I hadn't stolen a thing - only glances at that collection of beautiful things. I was in Ali Baba's cave on so many floors. How did England become so rich? Was it all real? Would people back home ever possess the things my eyes devoured? I was struck by awe and crushed by shame that I was.

That evening, I told Ranji I had been to Harrods.

'My balls sang a duet. Everybody clapped silly. Honest.'

Ranji laughed and confessed that he had lied.

'Was only testing to see if you had any shine in them downstairs marbles.'

Then the conversation took the natural turn.

'Boy! European girl. She's different.'

'From who?'

'From Indian girl, you fool.'

'How?'

'She like to lend if you know how to borrow.'

'Have you done much borrowing from English girls?'

'English girl doesn't lend to Indian. Thinks she is Queen's niece and turn her nose up. Thinks you are *infie*.'

'What's that?'

'Inferior. Continental girl is best. You her equal.'

'So you?'

'Many time.'

'How did you meet them?'

'You catch her from café and shops. She work for English family who treat her too as *infie*. So she is lonely and likes Indian boy. One time a Dutch Delight take me home because the family is on holiday. We have bath together. We do it in the bath. Then we do it in bed. Not her bed, because it is single. Husband-wife's bed who employ her. Kingsize. We make it kingsize. And laugh kingsize. My best experience.'

'What a singular experience.'

'Don't give me your posh ball shit. I never tell you of another and I have many.'

'Please, Ranji. Let's hear another. I beg.'

By ten in the evening, it could be very quiet sometimes.

Then often there was a sudden influx of customers. As that night.

'Pub-released crowd like cars at traffic lights when it turn green. Four five pints down then rush here for an arse-splitting *Magic* curry. Night out for one pound - drink and all. Then guess what please - thok, thok, thok in bed. National habit. How Britain become Great I don't understand.'

'Ranji, why do they call our food *curry*?'

Ranji did not know.

But Mr Gokul Swami did. He said he liked people.

'And vice versa.'

This was how he had started - as 'an honest dishwasher'. He had arrived in England without a passport or a penny.

'My pockets were empty. But the rest of me was full. Times were hard. But I had great expectations.'

'So you know Dickens then, sir?' I interrupted, surprised.

'Who he? I talk of myself, Mr Gokul Isswami. Yes. Pockets were empty - total - but the rest of me was full.'

Of conviction - he was in the *Land of Hope and Glory*.

Mr Swami had come as a stowaway on board an Indian merchant vessel *HMS Jwalamukhi*, named after an extinct volcano in Northern India. He was not found out till the ship had gone round the Cape of Good Hope. The Second World War was in full swing. All Allied shipping had to take that ancient and romantic route. It was first discovered by the Portuguese sailor, Vasco da Gama more than a hundred years before Elizabeth I had granted a few English merchants permission to trade with India, then the world's richest country.

'How come you were not found out earlier, sir?'

'Ahha!' That said it all - *Indian Magic!*

One sweet night *HMS Jwalamukhi* entered the harassed English port of Tilbury. And Indian Magic happened again. Hitler dispatched a couple of squadrons of choice war planes to welcome Mr Gokul Swami. Perfect timing. Screaming Stukas, blinding searchlights, mighty ack-ack. There were hits in the gentle seaside night sky; there were hits on the land and sea. The extinct volcano first erupted, then it sank.

'It was Pearl Harbor Number Two you could say,' Mr Swami said, as if he had been at Pearl Harbor Number One.

In the chaos that followed, Mr Swami found his freedom. Next morning he and his friend took the train to London.

'From then on, my life was in my own hands.'

A friend of his friend took him in. When the time came, he had him fixed up as a dishwasher in another friend's restaurant off Commercial Road in the East End.

'In the meantime was German bomb and Anderson Shelter and ration card and I didn't have one.' Mr Swami paused.

'Then?' I asked after a suitable pause.

'Then was no work. Then was hard work. Twenty-one years. Thing is when we Indians want to do something, we can.'

'Boss-ji, why Englishman call all our food *curry*?' Ranji asked him now out of the blue.

'His habit to lump everything when he know nothing. Anyway, why you want to know?'

'Not me, I don't care. Him. He cares.'

'There are only three real kinds of food in the world - Indian, French, Chinese. The rest is in between.'

'Mr Swami, may I make an observation?' I said.

'What *observation*? Make.'

'Sir.' I wanted to say something about *his* food - it

was awful. But I chose my words carefully. 'It is most interesting, but it is unlike the food back home. I mean, it hasn't the same character and flavour.'

'Englishman don't want character and flavour. He want mild, medium or hot. That's what he want. He can't tell the difference between cumin seed and watermelon seed.'

'But, sir, it is not really Indian. I mean *Indian* Indian.'

'Mild, medium or hot. Plus fire brigade lager. That's what Englishman want and that's what he get here.'

'Sir, attract more Indians. And more and more of them have started coming here. The papers are full of it.'

'UK is going to regret the decision to let us in,' Ranji said and Mr Swami dismissed him with the flick of his index finger as if he was talking bullshit. But he told me to stay on by wagging the same finger.

'What you talking about the real thing, boy?'

'Mughal cuisine. Tandoori cooking. Out of this world.'

'So?'

'So get a special chef from India, sir.'

'You don't know what you talking.'

'I am talking of a special chef.'

'Who he?'

'Balli Shah from my home town Simla, sir.'

'But who *is* he?'

'King of chefs, sir. Works in my best friend's father's restaurant called the *Savoy of Simla*. I can pinch him.'

'And who will pay his ticket money? You don't know what you talking. Downisstairs.'

I got a seat in the tube next to a large and slovenly woman. Her silvery hair was tinted blue. Her cheeks were BBQ red, her ears translucent pink. An unlit cigarette dangled from her half-open mouth and two loosely packed plastic carrier-bags rested between her feet. She smelled of chicken and tobacco.

'Flippin' hell,' she yelled, darting a caustic soda glance at me, making me feel I had stepped on her foot or something. 'Flippin' hell.' She turned her head away in disgust.

Why had she shot away from my side like that? Because my ears were opaque brown? Or did she think I stank of curry?

I did not know what to think. Nor how to react - feel angry, insulted or what? For no reason at all, I began to feel apologetic too. Then, as I tried to recompose myself, I noticed my other neighbour, an elegant lady of around forty.

'Silly old bag,' this person said, without looking at the woman with blue hair and bad odour. 'Don't take any notice of her, dear,' she added, turning to me.

'It's you lot what in-courage them,' the other woman snapped at my fashionable neighbour.

'Stupid cow. Don't listen to her,' my defendant said.

I obeyed. Like everyone else in the compartment, I buried

myself in a paper. The other woman ranted on: 'It's you lot,' Et cetera. I could not understand the rest of it because I could make neither head nor tail of her cockney. But I didn't have to be a language expert to get the message. Madam did not care for 'fuckin' forriners' who should go back to their 'bloody cunt-rees' or 'you lot' would have to face the 'bleedin' consequences'.

The tube was crowded. But not a single person paid any attention to her speech. It was as if they hadn't heard a word. I knew they were on my side, each one of them. I felt the whole of England on my side. It lifted an enormous weight off my chest. I felt happy, I felt proud. So happy and proud, I forgave the woman.

The next stop was very long in coming. But it came.

'Why don't you get lost, woman?' said a man who had been intently devoted to his newspaper, causing everyone else in the compartment to look at her.

'It's you lot,' the woman started up again, jabbing a finger at him.

Apparently, it was her stop. As people got out and in, everybody in my carriage returned to whatever they had been reading. Then a hand rested on my shoulder - somebody had come in and sat in the seat on my left.

'Brando boy. Where did you disappear to that night?'

'Bish? Or should I say Shuk?'

'Say what you like. But put it here.'

Bish had invited me to lunch that Sunday morning. He came to meet me at his tube station, Gloucester Road.

'I knew we would meet again. Even told Ingi,' Bish said, hugging me like a long-separated lover, inviting looks from people around. 'These damn fools think we are queer.' Bish was blessed with classical good looks, reminding me of a famous film star whose name I couldn't recall.

'Cary Grant to your Brando,' whispered my obliging friend.

Bish lived in a room three times the size of mine with its own little bath, kitchenette and phone. I was impressed.

I was even more impressed to see his walls festooned with certificates of his prowess at karate, Black Belt awards and photographs of him lashing out at chaps twice his size. Then I was treated to a 'finger-licking hotty, hotty'. Everything about Bish was 'finger-licking'. Only after we had finished eating did he say that in his humble opinion, Scottish beef was the best meat in the world.

'You mean?' Panic struck, I realised I had broken the second promise I had made to my mother: I had eaten the flesh of the most sacred of beings to us Hindus. It was a heinous crime. I felt my face throb with guilt and self-disgust.

'Why didn't you tell me?' I whispered.

'What did you think was in the hamburgers you've been living on since you came here?'

I had never felt more foolish.

'India!' he laughed, 'has world monopoly in producing nuts.'

As the afternoon deepened, Bish took me to meet Ingi.

Ingi's home was a large comfy bedsit nearby. Her hair was the colour of white gold. Her eyes were swimmingpool blue, her cheeks honey-hued and her lips blood red – a cardiac arrest.

'I hear you nearly got a film role, Raavi.' She gave us tea and laughed and laughed. 'And you really not know what it mean?' Then she went to the hall to make a phone call. An Indian girl would not have talked like that to a stranger.

'Swedish.' The way Bish said *Swedish* sounded like *sweet dish*.

She comes from the land of long nights and no hang-ups.'

By our second cup, Ingrid and I knew a fair amount about each other.

'Homesick?' she asked.

'A little,' I lied.

'You are much. I can tell,' Ingrid said, looking deep into my eyes. It sent chills through me. 'You be all right. Like Beesh. He too was, he say. But look at him now. All he think of now is only one thing.'

'At my age a man has the right to.'

'I come here to study English. I was *au-pair* in English family.' Now she was working in the Swedish Centre in the West End. 'I not like English peepole. You like?'

'I haven't met any yet.' It was true. I had been here a full three weeks and hadn't yet talked to a single native - man or woman. They were everywhere – this being their country - but somehow they bypassed me, as if I was invisible to them. Polite England dealt with me in 'thank you's' - *thank you for applying, thank you for telephoning* and for the bus ticket I had bought from the conductor, four 'thank you's'.

'Englishman boring. Englishwoman cow. You got one - English girlfriend? No? Good.'

Two cups of tea was legitimate. Three was over-staying my welcome. I rose to leave.

'Sit down. Where are you going?' Bish barked.

'I have my laundry to do, Bish.'

'Do it another day. You have nothing to do in the mornings.'

'But.' My laundry was a serious matter for me.

'Sit, you Brando fool. We're going to have a party.'

A party of three? What kind of a party was that?

'My dear Bish, it is my duty to inform you as a friend that you are rude, bad and mad,' I said.

'Ingi, you tell him.'

'Brigit is coming. My best friend. You like.'

'Yes, you like. Now get off your hairy backside and let's go buy something to drink. Seven - opening time. Ingi, Honey Lips, what else shall I get?'

'I haav everything. But you get what you want.'

'I want lots of things.' Bish cupped his hands near the front of her turquoise blue polo-neck and tried to help himself.

'Raavi is right. You are bad,' Ingrid said, but let Bish treat himself to a good fondle while I turned my back on them. Then we went to the open-on-Sundays *Europa* and walked out of the shop both carrying a full carrier bag.

'Who is this Brigit, Beesh, or should I say Shook?'

'Wait till you see her. Your b's will light up like hundred-watt bulbs - if you got any b's, that is. Have you?'

'Only two. Already lit. And you?'

'Tell you later, Brando boy.'

It was seeing and believing - the same gold, the same turquoise and the same honey. The two girls were identical replicas of each other - Nordic Magic! I had no idea what wattage or luminosity was generated in me where predicted by my friend. But the motor inside my ribcage had begun to malfunction. I knew that my fate was sealed.

'Still want to go to do laundry?' my friend whispered in my otherwise deaf ear - I had missed every single word of the introduction. I had a sudden inner intimation that I had met she to whom I wished to surrender that which I had been guarding for so long and so unwillingly - my virginity. A murmur told me that the time for it had come. But how? Oh, how? Practical advice was prompt in coming.

'Don't rush. Play it cool. Be laid back, but be attentive. And be very charming. Like me,' Bish said in Punjabi.

'Imitating someone like you can't be easy. But I'll try.'

'English spoken here only. Or you lose something you not like to lose. What Raavi say to you, Beesh?'

'Only how heavenly Brigit looks,' Bish said on my behalf.

'Why he not tell her himself?'

'Shy fool.'

'Ohh. I like shy boys. I loff shy boys.'

'What about me? I am also shy,' Bish said. He gathered both the girls in his arms and pressed them to his sides.

'You - shy?' The girls roared with laughter. I saw Brigit look sideways at me and slip out of Bish's embrace, her eyes still on me. She was saying something through that look and that gesture - *I am keeping myself for you*. I was sure she was.

'You give us one drink or not?'

'Only if you strip.'

'Don't talk naughty. Or I show you the door.'

There were four glasses on the small round dining table, now the party table groaning with food and drink. Bish opened a half bottle of vodka we had bought and poured some in each glass.

'Not for me, Bish.'

'Don't be a prick.'

'Give me some lemonade instead.'

'Yes, don't give him vodka if he not like. Let him haav

little sweet sherry. No, Raavi? Yes. A little. Christmas coming. Time to have fun,' Ingrid said, fixing me with smiling eyes.

'Yes. Besides, you've got to learn,' Bish said.

'No, thank you.' I was quite firm about it. I knew I was spoiling the party, but there was nothing I could do about it.

'Trouble with us Indians is we don't know how to mix in society,' growled Bish, quite annoyed. I wished he had said that in Punjabi - it was public humiliation. Still I said no.

'Reason why we remain backward. Besides, it is bad manners to behave like this. You are not among Punjabi idiots.'

'Raavi, don't drink if you not like,' Ingrid said again.

She filled me a glass from an open bottle of sherry and focused those eyes of hers on mine as she held out the glass to me. I was part hypnotised, part up in flames. How could I say no? At the same time, how could I explain that I had made a promise to the person I loved and cared for more than anyone in this world?

'That's right. You drink if you like. If not, not.'

'Very tempting. But.' I held up my hand.

'RKM, go to hell,' growled Bish again. I was being awkward. I was letting him down. I was doing far worse, I was letting India down. 'Think what Gandhi did. Or Nehru. When they were studying law in London.'

I thought of what Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru had done and dashed my promise with my mother. We clinked glasses. Soon, it began to feel jolly good. Then it began to feel ting-a-lingy good for four old friends. Then Ingrid came and sat in my lap.

'You like?'

'Delicious. I'm drunk.'

'You joke. Drink this,' Ingrid said, putting her glass to my lips. She poured it down my throat like they used to do with medicine when I was eight. 'There. 'You like?'

'He does. Can't you tell?' Bish said a tiny bit sharply.

I had this uneasy feeling he was jealous. He needn't have been. For all I had in my head or heart for Ingrid at that moment were the purest of thoughts and feelings, all my *other* thoughts and feelings being reserved for her friend who sat on Bish's lap. But what was she doing there? And what for that matter was Ingrid doing on mine? I looked at my friend. He grinned. His hands were inside Brigit's jumper and she was wrapped around his neck. 'Everything goes,' he said in Punjabi. Without my permission my thoughts and feelings did the quickest about-turn in the history of human emotions.

'Have fun. On me,' Bish added grandly, as if he were paying for an expensive meal in the Savoy Grill.

'Shut up, Beesh. We are not talking to you,' Ingrid said and took my mouth in hers and completely and utterly erased me from the face of this English earth. I had never kissed a girl before. I did not know that having a beautiful girl in your

arms, holding her breasts inside what she wore and sucking her lips could catapult you straight to the realm of gold, one delightfully different from Keats'. But my friend, trust him, soon brought me back to earth.

'I say,' Bish said, pointing to the salads and pies on the party table. 'I fancy something hotty, hotty like my beef curry. Bij-ji?' Brigit rose from his lap and picked up her coat. My friend looked for his. He put a bottle of wine in a carrier bag, an arm around Brigit and led her out.

'They not come back,' Ingrid said. 'Now we do what we want.'

'I know nothing, Ingi.'

'You learn. I think you make good pupil.'