contents

CHAPTER 1

1967 - boeing boeing

Three years earlier, to the day, sees us in Karachi airport at four in the morning. We have just stepped off a ten-hour flight from London, with only a couple of stopovers in hot dusty transit lounges in the war-torn middle east, and we are, unsurprisingly, completely exhausted and worn out.

The Karachi transit room, however, is cool and sparse, and devoid of the myriad of fast-food franchises that would characterise a modern air terminus, but there is air conditioning and comfortable seating, and we flop down gratefully to wait for the final leg of our flight to be announced. Yet, even in our semi-comatose state, it seems that something is not quite right, and as the dust settles, we realise that there are only about ten weary travellers in the quiet room, and that the various airline desks which line the opposite wall are dark and deserted.

My dad anxiously scans the departure board but it is blank, and other travellers who have staggered up behind him begin to voice his silent fear that there might not be a connecting flight tonight.

All eyes quickly turn to the only manned airline desk, and the PIA clerk behind it gulps nervously as he clears his throat.

'Gentlemen and their good ladies, please, good evening,' he stammers in a quaint, but well-spoken voice. 'Gentlemen and ladies wishing to continue their journeys to Dacca and Chittagong, please be advised that your PIA flight will leave promptly at nine o'clock this morning, whereupon a delicious English breakfast will be being served. Please take rest now and wait patiently. A very good night to you!'

On the last syllable he snaps off the light on his green illuminated sign and makes a bolt for the safety of the staff-only door at the rear of the hall, but a fellow traveller, who had earlier introduced himself to us as Dr Khan, moves in like a quarterback in an American movie and intercepts him neatly.

'Just one moment,' he says, his good-looking face stern, 'what are you saying, you fellow? There is no flight till morning?'

'Uncle,' the squirming clerk stammers, 'it is four in the morning, there is no one flying aeroplanes at this hour…'

Dr Khan treats him to his best you-have-a-terminal-disease-and-I-don't-care glare and shakes his head disgustedly, still barring the unfortunate's way as he addresses my dad.

'My friend, I have been in UK for four years slaving at the Birmingham Royal Infirmary, and today I return to my homeland. Yet this is the welcoming committee that they send. You, fellow, get us a taxi, we will go to a hotel!'

In the background some Iranian students who have boarded the flight at Tehran are laying claim to the couches and fashioning their hand luggage into makeshift

pillows. If I wasn't too young to know what the word meant, I would have said it was an omen.

'Uncle,' the hapless clerk wheedles in a Uriah Heep-like gesture of supplication, 'we cannot get you a hotel. You have not yet been through customs.'

'So, we will go through customs, I have nothing to hide.'

'It is four o'clock in the morning, Uncle, there are no customs officers on duty. In the morning your flight will be ready and PIA will serve you a fine breakfast. Go and take rest now.'

'This is preposterous…' the good doctor begins, climbing deftly onto his high horse, as my dad quickly steers my mother and myself to three vacant sofas. 'There'll be no flight tonight,' he says quietly.

When the departing British partitioned India in 1947, some bright spark designated the two main Islamic areas, separated by a thousand miles of hostile Hindu territory, as the new state of Pakistan, and thus we find ourselves stuck in an airport lounge on the wrong side of the great divide waiting for a 'local' flight in the middle of the night.

Still, the transit room is calm and cool, and the couch feels good to my tired bones. 'Dad, have we been to Karachi before?' I ask sleepily as my father makes a pillow for me from my school blazer and covers me with his jacket.

'Once, when you were little, when the steamer stopped at the docks and we went on a trip here. But you won't remember…'

Dimly, in the back recesses of my mind, I can see the interior of a black and yellow taxi and hot streets with rickshaws and camels. 'There were camels, and it was hot,' I murmur, 'really, really hot. And it was really smelly…'

'Yes, that's right, Chummo,' Dad says patting my shoulder. 'But it's nice and cool in here, so you try and sleep for a bit, there's a long day ahead tomorrow.'

'OK,' I smile to him, just as there's a loud clunk from the ventilation shafts and the air-conditioning dies. A soft muttered 'Ufffgh!' rises briefly from the nomadic camp that's just sprung up, and then silence again, as the temperature slowly begins to rise.

'And I've really met Wallace?' I mutter, as my heavy eyelids grow heavier.

'Yes, but you won't remember him, you were only two or three,' Dad reassures, but I have already crossed over to the other side, and I dream of camels and hot streets, and Wallace, who looks like a demented Santa Claus in colonial fatigues, letting a deranged monkey out of a box, and all the king's horses and all the king's men can't ever make it cool again.

I wake to the sound of bustle and tinny voices announcing flights. The airline desks, so like a ghost town the night before, are now peopled by smiling women in strange

hats, and new travellers with hand-luggage mill around the now lit-up departures board.

The Khan family breeze in, having dragged some hapless official out of bed in the middle of the night to pass them as fit to go to a hotel. The doctor, his neat moustache still razor sharp, looks slightly more dishevelled than the previous night, but his wife is resplendent in a fresh sari, and sails into the busy room like a brightly-painted ship's figurehead.

'My friends, my friends,' the good doctor says effusively, 'you should have stayed with us. I argued with that fellow until half past six in the morning. This is not the UK, you know, you have to tell these fellows what to do or they will do nothing.'

My dad nods, knowing well the mentality of bureaucrats in the subcontinent, but the doctor has already charged forward, beckoning us to follow. 'Come. Come. We will all get on the plane, these fellows have kept us waiting long enough, you there, peon, make way!'

The Khan party surges forward and we quickly follow. The air conditioning has been restored inside, so the early morning heat hits us like a white light as we step out onto the already steaming tarmac, our waiting plane a gleaming silver bird against a cloudless blue desert sky.

Pretty girls in green outfits greet us as we board, handing us each a scented wet towel as though it were the crown jewels and chirping, 'PIA welcomes you aboard your flight,' to each of us in turn.

Another girl seats Dr Khan and his wife at the front of the cabin and my mum and dad at the opposite side of the aisle. She smiles genuinely at myself and Dr Khan's son, Iqbal, and ushers us into the seat behind. 'So, I am

putting you two naughty boys together, and, after breakfast, if you are good as gold, I will allow you to come and visit the cockpit,' she offers as a bribe for good behaviour, before departing with a friendly wink.

Iqbal looks over at me, dishevelled and somehow incongruous in this heat with my blazer and British school uniform. 'You been here before, man?' he asks in a thick Brummy accent.

'Yes, no,' I say, hesitatingly, 'just India, I was born in India…'

'And you're going to Dacca?'

'Chittagong.'

'Chittagong? You're going to Chittagong? That's the end of the world, man. Fight for day school. They'll try to board you out when they see the schools there!'

At Dacca we say goodbye to the Khans and leave the comfortable jet to shuffle across the now burning tarmac to an old Fokker Friendship, which sits, its twin propellers idling, ready for take off. These sturdy little planes have been in service since the fifties, and this one looks like the prototype model, its bodywork pitted from frequent storms and its green PIA livery peeling and parched. There is no roped-off area to the boarding ladder, but the pilot, who is standing smoking by the landing gear, beckons us forward, and a single girl in a sari welcomes us aboard, this time sans the aromatic cool towels of the Karachi flight.

The little planes only hold about thirty folk on a good day, and this one is already packed to the gunnels, but we manage to squeeze aboard and Dad bags me a window seat as we taxi past the corrugated-iron hangars and out onto the main runway and then, with surprising agility, up into the air.

Ascending from Karachi we had flown over a parched desert landscape, but the countryside around Dacca is lush and green, and we are soon over rice fields and large stretches of water, passing perilously close to little island villages where naked children cheer and wave at the big silver bird in the sky. Soon the flourishing alluvial plain gives way to azure blue water as we cut across the magnificent Bay of Bengal, and then swoop down to Chittagong, a bustling port town on the coast, with miles of sandy beaches and acres and acres of agricultural land leading inland towards its verdant green hills.

My dad leans over me and looks out of the tiny porthole as the runway rushes up to meet us, 'We're here now, Chummo,' he murmurs with a trace of anxiety in his voice. 'I hope they've sent someone to meet us.'

'Probably a damn rickshaw,' my mother complains, getting into her stride. 'I told you to get a definite time from them, you can't trust these bally people…'

'It'll be fine,' my dad reassures, exuding a confidence he doesn't feel as we all scan the tiny brick terminal building. 'Wallace will have set something up for us.'

'Oh, you and your damn friend Wallace,' Mum rejoins, as we struggle down the rickety wheeled staircase to the tarmac in heat that feels like the backwash off a blast furnace. 'We'll be lucky if we get something better than

an open truck. Max, don't slouch, and fix your tie, they might have sent someone important!'

'Who?' I ask, looking at this place that is easily five hundred miles past the end of the world. 'Who could possibly know us out here?'

As if in answer there's a loud shout from the open doorway of the tiny terminal and a stocky man with close-cropped ginger hair, and dressed in the customary jute wallah's whites, rushes out and grips my flabbergasted father in a fierce bear hug.

'Chic, you old bastard, you've finally come. I knew when I wrote you couldn't resist the call of the soil for ever. Retire us? Those bastards in government house can't retire us till we're good and ready to go. And who's this bastard? This can't be Max, can it? Why, the bugger's as big as a Rangoon rickshaw wallah. Come and give your Uncle Wallace a hug, boy!'

I'm engulfed into arms like the jaws of a steel bear trap and I catch the fleetingly familiar scents of jute dust and sweat, and, before I'm summarily dropped onto the ground so that Wallace can whirl my little round mother into the air, I get a momentary flashback of a previous and happy life, and, suddenly, I know that, despite all its strangeness, we have come home.

Films about the Raj always depict the British in India as tight-lipped Englishmen sitting stoically in their tuxedos in the heat of sweltering tropical nights, and whereas these kind of people did exist, they weren't our people.

My dad and his ilk were the Calcutta Jute Wallahs, a ragtag bunch of lowbrow Scots, mainly from the grey Presbyterian metropolis of Dundee, who had manned the myriad of mills along the Hooghly river for generations and were now grasping at the last years of the old colonial lifestyle in the hot and dusty machine shops of East Pakistan.

Thus, when we enter the tiny little air terminal building at this forgotten outpost, there is a huge cry of welcome as a myriad of weather-beaten Scotsmen embrace my parents and slap me heartily on the back.

However, Wallace, a long-time buddy of my dad, and the person who has been instrumental in luring us out here, propels me past the crowd and through an outer tier of shyly smiling native under-managers and their bejewelled wives, and leads me to a gaggle of kids who are seated on top of two wooden benches, swinging their bare feet over the seating area.

Most of them are young indigenous lasses in brightly coloured clothes, but in the middle, and obviously holding court over their entourage, are two dumpling-faced white girls about twelve years old, dressed in print frocks and little white socks and sandals.

'So, Max, do you remember my twins, Harriet and Elsa? You used to roll around naked with them when you were nippers,' Wallace laughs by way of introduction. 'Harriet peed on your leg once, didn't half make you howl!'

The aforementioned Harriet makes a face. 'Don't you mind Pop, boy, we're going to be great friends. We've got you a fine gun and we'll show you how to shoot next week, if you're game?'

I nod, still in a world where guns are plastic James Bond replica pistols from British toyshops, when the second twin claps me gruffly on the back and says, 'Yes, I brought down three damn moonya birds by the river this morning, patach, patach, patach! I'm one hell of a crack shot to beat, so you'd better be on your form, boy. Come on, let's go wait in the car…'

I'm about to dragged out into the inferno that is the car park when my mother's voice cuts through the maelstrom with a howl of anguished rage: 'They've lost our luggage? What do you mean, they've lost our luggage!'

It seems that, after managing to follow us successfully from Dundee to Dacca, our luggage has not made the last leg of the journey, and it is decided that my mother and I and most of the entourage should head 'home' while my dad and Wallace remain at the airport to collect our baggage from the next flight.

I'm herded into an old Austin with the twins and two little girls who don't appear to speak any English; an old Dundonian called Barry ('He's still living with the Indian woman, you know,' I hear Peggy, Wallace's wife, whisper to my mother as I'm bundled into his car); and a tall fair-skinned West Pakistani called The Captain, who is something very important in the mill my father has come out to manage.

Next to Barry's Austin stands a dark blue Vauxhall Victor, which is to be ours for the duration of our stay.

A tubby driver with a cheeky grin loiters in the meagre shade of the airport building, but he hastily stubs out his cigarette and lumbers over to open the door as my mother and Peggy approach, followed by a flotilla of bashful under-managers' wives in their best saris, all hot cerises and peacock blues, gold embroidery flashing in the baking afternoon sun.

Everyone else is being bundled into a ratty old Volkswagen minibus, but, before the dust has had time to settle, the Vauxhall speeds off in a cloud of dirt, and I realise that I am eleven years old and alone in a car full of maniacs in a very foreign land. However, I've no time to feel insecure as Barry takes off after the speeding sedan, his horn blaring as we cut out into the main thoroughfare, a bumpy, dusty road jam-packed with cars, bullock carts, cycle rickshaws and gaudily painted trucks.

'Faster, Uncle, faster!' the twins cry, hanging out of the windows without fear of imminent decapitation by the honking lorries. 'Let's race that fellow and teach him a lesson!'

Barry grins and accelerates, swerving past wavering baby taxis, the twins swearing loudly in Bengali at their drivers, but the car ahead spots his ploy and leaps forward into the afternoon traffic. On the right-hand side of the road there are busy docks and breakers' yards with towering ships at anchor, and on the left sun-baked jute godowns and small bamboo kutcha houses and shops, which soon give way to jerry-built concrete structures as we get nearer to the town.

The noise is deafening and the three o'clock sun is white-hot and punishing, bouncing off the tarmac in shimmering mirages that blind stoic white bullocks as they pull their heavy loads towards the factories and

markets of the city. Inappropriately dressed in a blazer, nylon shirt, school tie and heavy synthetic grey shorts, I feel like I'm being broiled alive in the hot tin can that masquerades as Barry's car, and I silently take my handkerchief from my pocket and wipe the sweat off my face as the twins continue to hang out of the open windows and exchange insults with street urchins who sit on top of high whitewashed walls.

'You hot, man?' Harriet, the slightly more human of the two enquires. 'Take that jacket off and get some breeze.'

'Yeah, what you in all those clothes for?' Elsa chimes in, appraising me with her practised slaughter-man's eye. 'You look like an office baboo who's forgotten his umbrella!'

The twins find this analogy hilarious and translate it into Bengali for the benefit of their friends, who giggle disproportionately, and Barry, catching my despairing eye in the rear view mirror, winks and says, 'Aye, you're no in Dundee now, Burrah Sahib!'

After about thirty minutes of interminable traffic we head out of the bustling town again, and the houses and shops thin and give way to acres of rice fields stretching out across the flat river plain to the sea. The road climbs up onto a man-made embankment, taking it about four or five feet above the level of the patchwork of wet fields and potential flooding, and the clear surface acts as a red rag to the driver of the Vauxhall, who makes the jump into

hyperspace and shoots ahead, disappearing into a little blue dot on the distant horizon.

'This fellow thinks he's Stirling Moss,' Barry mutters as he struggles to keep pace with the car ahead, but the twins look at him blankly until the quiet captain explains: 'An English racing driver.'

Eventually, as the traffic begins to thicken again, high barbed-wire-topped walls whitewashed in the customary jute mill turmeric yellow appear on the left side of the road, while kutcha houses and small shops suddenly crowd onto the right. Women pause in their labours in front of their small huts, and tiny children shout and point at the car-loads of white people that now perambulate through their quiet village.

'Bloody gundas!' Elsa mutters disgustedly, but further comment is lost as the car rounds a bend and we find ourselves enmeshed in the thick of a herd of untended native cattle, strange humpbacked beasts that British farmers would send straight to the glue factory, and our three-car convoy picks its way slowly through their midst, horns blaring.

'Is there much further to go?' I ask the Captain, who seems the safest bet out of the resident inmates, and he smiles kindly, as though seeing this tired and bewildered white boy for the first time.

'Oh no,' he says calmly, 'you are home now,' and, next to a square-shaped pond filled to the brink with limpid green water, I see large British-era cast-iron gates bearing the words 'Victory Jute Products' in an arc of rusty iron letters. The Vauxhall honks its horn aggressively and the gates swing inwards, and we follow inside as a moustachioed Pathan durwan proudly salutes our arrival.

Arriving for the first time at an Indian jute wallah's house is a bit like showing up for a weekend house party at a British stately home in the height of the season, and a line-up of servants by the door is not uncommon. Today, however, as Barry's car drives under the flaming red bougainvillea arch to the salute of yet another hairy-faced durwan, there is no welcoming committee of men in white livery assembled outside the spacious, if not palatial, bungalow, and we walk in alone.

The twins rush off to rip brass fittings from the doors as trophies, and I slink gratefully over to my mother's side as we walk cautiously under a high stone arch and onto the cool black and white checked marble-floored veranda that surrounds the house that is to be our home for the coming three years.

A short pot-bellied man, bare-footed and dressed in white cotton trousers and a long white muslin shirt, strides out of open French doors to greet us, his arms open in a gesture of welcome and his smile warm and genuine.

'Aunty, Aunty, welcome, welcome, I have waited for so many days for your safe arrival in our land. I trust that Manager Sahib will also soon be arriving. These fellows at the airport are in need of one good slap to wake them up. Come, come, come inside, we have prepared tea in your honour.'

He gestures expansively and leads the way inside, signalling us to follow, and we all pile into a large airy sitting room with plain whitewashed walls and comfortable, if old, settees and armchairs.

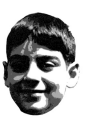
'Sit, please, sit,' the smiling man beseeches, as ceiling fans lazily stir the warm afternoon air round the big room, and we all take our places around a low table spread with wilting European-style cakes and pastries.

'Do you know who he is?' my mother whispers to me, as chipped pre-partition china cups and plates are handed around.

'Maybe the Burrah Bearer,' I reply, taking my best guess, but my mother shakes her head.

'No, he's too well-spoken for a servant,' Mum muses in one of her famous not-too-discreet stage whispers, 'but the damn fellow's dressed like a bally baboo.'

The Captain, who's seated himself to my left and formed a barrier against the twins who are busy demolishing the cake salvers, intervenes diplomatically, and speaks directly to my mother, saying, 'This is Zahidee Sahib, Aunty, he has been our beloved manager here these three years past, but is now leaving us to work for his cousins in West Pakistan.'



My dad and Wallace eventually show up at about five, thankfully bearing suitcases, and there is much speculation on just how much abuse Wallace has had to heap on the heads of the airport officials in order to achieve this miracle. More and more tea is served, and the assembled multitudes show no sign of leaving, until, at seven o'clock sharp, Wallace rises up from his seat, claps his hands authoritatively and announces that it is time everyone went home.

Jet-lagged and exhausted as I am, I still want to jump up and kiss his florid cheeks with gratitude, but content myself with coming to the veranda doorway to make sure that all the crazy people actually vacate the premises completely. I've lost my blazer somewhere along the way and have had to abandon my shoes after inadvertently standing on an ant-hill courtesy of the twins, but I still look and feel like an extra from an Ealing boarding school comedy who's wandered inadvertently onto a Bollywood film set.

Mum has already vanished inside the house, and Dad puts a friendly arm around my shoulder as the last car vanishes under the blazing bougainvillea, and he leads me inwards, saying, 'Well, this is probably the only time in your life that you'll be willing to go to bed at seven.'

We stroll tiredly back into the now quiet house together, and thanking the smiling cook who offers a supper of yet more tea and sweet biscuits, Dad takes me through to the room designated to be my bedroom, where I flop gratefully onto the bed.

And then cry out in disbelief.

The bed is a plain, wooden divan, with a lumpy unsprung horsehair mattress, and landing on it feels like flopping down onto a bed of hard-compacted earth. My dad plumps it with his hand and mutters, 'We'll get you a new one tomorrow, Chummo. Come on, you can sleep in our room for tonight,' but any further plans of rest are quickly interrupted by the sound of loud hammering and my mother yelling, 'Chic, Chic! Where are you? I'm locked in the bally bedroom. The damn door's gone and jammed!'

CHAPTER 2

bazaar bizarre

When I wake the next day the sun is already bright and clean, the morning air fresh and scented from the summer flowers outside. My father has, inconceivably after the previous night's shenanigans, gone off to the mill at six a.m. to mark his new territory, much to the shock and awe of his fleet of under-managers, and Mum has monopolised their en suite bathroom, so I pad down the long marble-floored hall to the other bedroom to use the facilities there.

This shady room is bigger than my bedroom back in Dundee, cool and echoy, and there is, thankfully, an English toilet, plus an ancient recycled porcelain sink and a huge built-in marble bath with a large chromed shower hanging precariously over it. I fiddle with the taps and, predictably, there's no hot water, but the day is already warm enough not to need it and I stand gratefully under the steady stream of cool brownish liquid, inhaling the forgotten aromas of anti-prickly-heat soap and medicated shampoo.

Abandoning my British school uniform I dress in clean summer shorts and a striped Marks & Spencer's tee-shirt, little knowing that I'll be able to sell it on the black market when I outgrow it in a few months' time, and wander through to a comfortable dining room furnished with an old teak-wood table and sideboard.

My mother is already ensconced at the head of the table like the resident dowager and, as there's apparently no bearer as yet, the cook from the previous night waits patiently by the table.

'What eat, Chotta Sahib?' he asks me in English, and fighting back the urge to ask for Coco Pops, I remember my years of Indian training and reply, 'What you will bring me, Botchi.'

The cook grins at my correct etiquette and vanishes off through a gloomy pantry where a huge 1950s American fridge hums contentedly, and we soon hear him banging pots in his kitchen beyond.

My mother, the duchess, who looks like the last four years in Scotland have been surgically expunged, pours herself more tea and informs me that we will be going to the market this morning, as soon as 'some damn baboo' arrives from the mill with money for her to equip the house with 'decent crockery and sheets'.

'Is anyone else coming?' I ask cautiously as the cook piles about a week's supply of eggs and toast and a jar of guava jam in front of me, beaming, 'Eat it all now, Chotta Sahib, grow big and strong,' but when my mother says it will be just us, I readily agree to join the expedition.

The cook and my mother now enter into a long and involved conversation about menus and something called meatless days, so when I finish my eggs and toast I wander out to the pillared veranda to investigate the grounds properly.

Our flat-roofed bungalow, which seems to have been built in the late fifties, is large and roomy but nothing like the mansion-houses we have previously occupied in India. It sits in a sizeable garden with a lawn about the size of a small football field to the front, with a vegetable

patch, bulky chicken coop and a coppice of banana and guava trees to the rear. There's an eight-foot-high wall all around the gated property, and bougainvillea and other climbers have been planted to conceal the barbed wire and broken glass that tops it, but I can nevertheless make out the minaret of the local mosque and the thatched rooftops of kutcha houses that have been built onto the other side of our fortifications.

All is pretty much as I've expected, except that at the far back corner of the vegetable patch, screened from the house by a thick jungle creeper festooned with luscious red flowers, there's a mysteriously empty corrugated-iron shed that smells like the circus, and when I return to the dining room I ask the cook about it.

'Ah, Zahidee Sahib,' he tells me sadly, 'he kept a cow, and we made fine butter and ghee. Those happy days are over now.'

'Gosh, Mum,' I say, eyes bright with possibility, 'I'd love to keep a cow. Can we…'

'No way,' my mother interrupts, slipping back into a vocabulary that proves that we have, indeed, spent the last four years in Dundee. 'Not a chance in hell.'

The aforementioned 'damn baboo' eventually shows up with the requisite rupees, and we pile into the dark Vauxhall, which, on close inspection, bears many dents and scratches from near misses with bullock carts and lorries. The driver who had so frustrated Barry the previous day opens the back door for my mother but

signals for to me to join him in the front seat. He's a mischievous-looking man in his mid thirties, with inky-black skin, thick curly hair and the customary pencil moustache, and I immediately sense an ally.

'What's our driver's name, Mum?' I ask in English.

'Ask him yourself,' my mother replies. 'Speak in Hindi, it's almost the same as Urdu, he'll understand you perfectly.'

I frown, summoning up words that have lain dormant for almost a third of my young life.

'*Tumhara naam kya hai?*' I stammer hesitatingly, and a huge smile spreads across the driver's dusky face.

'You speak Urdu, Chotta Sahib,' he grins, 'I will not be able to have any secrets in your company. Do you also speak Bangla?'

'No, only Manager Sahib speaks Bengali,' I reply, finding the forgotten words flowing back, and the driver nods knowingly.

'So, Chotta Sahib,' he says expansively, 'my name is Mafzal, and I live in the village beyond the gates. I have a wife and eleven children and my own paddy field and a very fine cow.'

'Don't even bally well ask…' my mother threatens in English.

We virtually fly along the elevated road through the patchwork of rice fields, small wet squares of green paddy encased in low mud walls, where women and small boys heft heavy copper pans of water from the irrigation

ditches to their fragile crops. It is August and the end of the rainy season, so the water is plentiful, and an ornate waxy-leafed plant, christened water hyacinth by the British, grows copiously over all the wet surfaces, its pale purple flowers resplendent in the bright morning sun.

Mafzal speeds along the highway, skilfully avoiding stray cows, goats and cyclists, but eventually is forced to slow down as we near the outskirts of the town and stalled traffic tails back into our path.

The Vauxhall eventually comes to rest in a small bazaar, a mixture of kutcha and brick-built shops, and stops parallel to a small boxlike establishment bearing the weathered English signboard, 'Shokutt and Partners – Fine Art Dealers'. The front of the store is open and unglazed, and on its three inner walls hang row upon row of gaudily hand-coloured pictures, much in the style of Pierre et Gilles, of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Virgin Mary and some monkey-faced Italian pin-up girls in bikinis.

I've been so intent on this dazzling display of colour that I haven't noticed the rest of my surroundings, and suddenly become aware that in the two or three minutes we have been at rest a small crowd of children and casual bystanders have gathered, and they stand quietly peering into our car like peaceable zombies from a PG-rated version of *Night of the Living Dead*.

'What are they all staring at, Mum?' I ask, not wholly comfortable.

'Oh, just us,' my mother replies matter-of-factly, 'all these bally gundas do it, you'll soon get used to it again.'

The traffic ahead starts to move and Mafzal slips the car into gear and we surge forward along a badly pot-holed road, but we have only gone another few hundred

yards when we come to a stop again at a closed railway crossing gate.

'The people of Chittagong wanted a bridge over this railway and raised the money for it by public subscription,' Mafzal explains to us, 'but the contractor was a chorr wallah and his concrete was bad, so we still have to always be waiting by this gate.'

'Is a gate so bad?' my mother asks diplomatically but Mafzal shakes his head in the way of one who knows better.

'Ah, Memsahib,' he says gloomily, 'the gates are shut according to the train timetables, and often the trains are many hours late…'

We eventually hit the centre of town, which is a wide dual carriageway called Station Road. There's a huge cemetery on a hill to the left, which abruptly gives way to rows of street-front shops, while a bustling fruit market heaving with overflowing baskets of late season mangoes sits noisily on the right-hand side.

The two horn-blaring lanes of traffic are divided by a thin strip of raised grass where there have once been trees and ornamental flower beds, but these have now been colonised by street dwellers and strange Heath-Robinsonlike structures made from bamboo and flattened-out ghee tins are affixed to the old colonial railings.

Women sit by cooking fires stirring things in copper pots as Mafzal elbows the car into a tight parking space on the main thoroughfare, blasting his horn and hurling

abuse at a bullock cart driver attempting to unload his cargo, and a mob of half-naked urchins surges forth from the shanties and immediately surrounds us, hands outstretched, crying, 'Hello, baksheesh, Aunty!' in shrill strident voices.

Mother gets out of the car like visiting royalty, brushing the kids aside with a brisk 'Jaao! Jaoo!' but we have barely cleared them when our way is barred by a cripple on a strange wheeled contraption like a low-slung skateboard. The man's eyes are limpid pools of misery as he looks up at me like a Hallmark puppy dog, his withered legs hanging useless beside him on his grubby cart.

'Please, Chotta Sahib…' he beseeches, and I immediately reach for my pocket and the single rupee note I have been given earlier.

The beggar's eyes light up as he identifies an easy mark, but Mafzal's hand shoots out and intercepts mine, whispering, 'No, no, Chotta Sahib,' and my mother turns to me witheringly, snapping, 'Do you remember nothing of India?'

'But the poor man's crippled!' I protest as I'm dragged away. 'Someone has to help him!'

Mafzal and my mother exchange a look. 'His parents bound his legs when he was child, so that he could beg,' Mum explains patiently, and Mafzal adds, 'It is permissible to give him some coins on a Friday or holy day, but never ever a note, or we will all be robbed blind!'

After four years in Dundee, where shops consist of the somewhat presbyterian local Co-op and a trip to Marks 'n' Sparks on a Saturday afternoon, the bustling centre of Chittagong is a fantasia of outlandish colours and scents. The wide boulevard-style pavements built by the long-departed British seethe with open-fronted stalls, most comprising just a dais for goods and their cross-legged proprietors and then a rush-mat roof to fend off the blinding afternoon sun.

While the fruit sellers tend to congregate exclusively on the right-hand side of the road, there is no real rhyme or reason to retailers on the left, and a toy stall selling cricket bats and gaudily-coloured plastic balls happily rubs shoulders with a grain merchant's, while at the end of the row there's a wizened old man with a henna-dyed beard offering black magic aids, and bits of offal in jars of alcohol sit cheerfully amidst dried crocodile feet and an assortment of animal teeth.

'Come, Memsahib, these street-front fellows are all thieves,' Mafzal says, beckoning us towards a maze of narrow alleys, and we follow him into a netherworld of stalls and open-fronted brick-built shops, offering everything from brightly-coloured plastic shoes to exotic-looking dried fruits and groceries. The combined smell of spice and animals and dirt here is overpowering, and even my mother, raised in the east, has to give in and reach for a cologne-soaked handkerchief from her red plastic handbag as we proceed deeper into the seething labyrinth.

A pedlar carrying a bamboo frame laden with papier mâché masks calls to me to purchase from his wares, while small boys with strings of firecrackers round their necks vie with him for my trade, darting in front of fat bearded

men who try to push squawking chickens into my face. Bhangra music blares stridently from crackly Tannoys outside music stores, and, as we round a bend, we come face to face with the local meat market, a collection of low daises spread with coarsely butchered carcases, heads and offal sitting cheek by jowl with prime cuts, and everything crawling with slow-buzzing flies.

I can feel my breakfast starting to rise up, and Mafzal, spotting my discomfort, suggests that maybe the new market might be a better bet for the Chotta Sahib on his first trip to town.

The 'new market' in question is a two-storeyed concrete mall boasting long aromatically-scented tunnels of cool shade and hundreds of merchants selling everything from imported sweets and groceries to tinny Japanese transistor radios. Mafzal, spying a paan vendor outside, tells us to wander as we choose, and we perambulate down a long parade of fabric shops, all pleasantly incense-scented and stocked to the roofs with bright cotton prints, rich velvets and silks in all the hues of the rainbow.

Crockery vendors call out to us in English as we emerge into their quarter, and pot-bellied men in singlets and lunghis beseech us to inspect their mishmash of wares. My mother brushes their overtures aside with an experienced eye, however, tutting disdainfully at the glowing displays of enamelled cups and coarsely-painted delft plates, and, when we finally grace a large fancy goods emporium with our presence, the proprietor himself puts

down his bubbling hookah and emerges from his den at the rear, calling for chairs and bottles of ice-cold 7-Up to be brought in our honour.

Dinner service after dinner service is paraded for our benefit, some in trendy sixties patterns, others somewhat more antique in their design, and, although I am greatly enamoured of a tea set commemorating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, we eventually settle on a Heal's-style blue and white striped ensemble. Junior assistants arrive with tea chests and straw to wrap everything, there being no original packaging anywhere in sight, and my mother and the shopkeeper lock in mortal combat to negotiate a price, which, after various accusations of daylight robbery and protestations of certain bankruptcy, is finally reached, and our purchases are loaded into the back of the waiting car.