

ONE

A PLAIN TALE FROM THE HILLS

To be a fifth son, even in a family of means, is to know that you must make your own way. My father told me that I would have a handsome send-off. After that, I would become what I made of myself. He longed for me to enter the world of commerce and, though I feared disappointing him, I knew from boyhood that I was not made to run my life in pursuit of values that spiral and plummet. By inclination, I am a squire: a man of leisure, property, and learning.

At the Academy, where I followed my elder brothers to school, the presumption of superiority soaked into my skin, just as a cultivated English, more Oxford than Bombay, drenched my vocal chords. The masters despaired of me: was I really the sibling of those assiduous young men who were distinguishing themselves in our emerging market? I read too much yet studied too little. I was interested in cricket only as a spectator. The games master never tired of reminding me that my eldest brother had been a left-armed fast bowler, the second had hit for six on his first appearance in the school colours, the third ... No, that was not me. To rush back and forth across the cricket pitch was preparation for a life consumed by undignified haste. I dreamed of a village of picturesque antiquity where I could be recognized as a man of culture; time for my books; a sinecure that would free me from running after money; and the company of sophisticated women. My final wish surprised my schoolmates, who had taken my indolence as evidence of sexual inversion. The day I was caned for reading magazines that had pictures of girls, the other boys indulged me as an exemplary slave of sanctioned lusts. Out of term, they began to invite me to parties.

Being picturesque made me popular. I remembered this lesson.

A lesson, though learned, cannot always be applied. One must find oneself in propitious circumstances. Where, in the teeming confinement of India, was I to locate my idyll? At university I read English literature.

“English loiterature,” my eldest brother, already a towering business wallah, murmured. “You should be making your way in the world.”

To annoy him, I loitered longer, remaining at university for a Master's degree. For three years I pretended to be writing a thesis on Rudyard Kipling. *Kim* and *Plain Tales from the Hills* satisfied my thirst for anachronism. Yet satisfaction, I discovered, is no motor for prose: after three years, when all I could show my supervisor was a perfunctory introduction, he suggested that I spare us both embarrassment by withdrawing from my degree. Generations of Indians, he reminded me, had included such qualifications on their curricula vitae: *M.A. Bombay (failed)*. I had written myself into an ancient tradition.

But where would I live my life?

Not beneath the critical eyes of my brothers. I dreamed of London—the London of Charles Dickens and Sherlock Holmes, of fog and gas lamps, where street Arabs sang ditties and sleuths pursued miscreants. I trembled to imagine London today. Knowing I would not endure a reality that sullied my most cherished literary memories, I preserved London as the territory of my imagination. I sought a blank space where I could dream myself into a new life. After thwarted plans and false starts, I emigrated to Canada.

My B.A. and M.A.—I suppressed the treacherous *failed*—were evaluated as equivalent to the training received at a Canadian secondary school. This was my first taste of Canadian naivety. In fact, it was my secondary-school training that was equivalent to their M.A.! But, as I wished Canada to indulge me, I indulged Canada. I cut a stately figure: the underdeveloped immigrant pleading to be admitted to modernity. I supplicated for a student visa to study English literature. I even offered to populate the Canadian wilderness by applying to a new university in the bush. Lakehead University. The name smacked of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Absconding like a fugitive, I boarded a plane to a spot far beyond my brothers' scrutiny.

TWO

A PASSAGE TO INDIA

I arrived in Thunder Bay in September. The weather was clear and devoid of thunder; the chill lacerated my bones. The man sent from the university to fetch me from the tiny airport told me that the rocky headland that prodded into the bay was believed to be a sleeping Indian. I stared at this mass of bald stone. It did not look the least bit like an Indian. I marvelled at Canadians' misapprehensions. I shuddered at the cold. The temperature was fifteen degrees centigrade! "So this is the Canadian winter," I said. "It certainly is chilly."

"You ain't seen nothing," the driver said. "Wait until January when it's thirty-five below."

"Surely," I said, uncertain what he meant by *below*, "it cannot get colder than this?"

When lessons began, I saw that the other students were eighteen years old; the literature class was intended for children of twelve. The town of Thunder Bay, while it resembled a village, lacked the antiquity I sought. It was not an English village. It did not have thatched Tudor cottages or an undulating village green. No retired colonels who had served in the Punjab walked spunky terriers through the morning mist. In spite of the lake, almost as vast as an ocean, on whose shores the sleeping Indian reposed, mist was rare in Thunder Bay. It was a climate of harsh extremes. I was despondent at the thought that life in an English village was not my destiny. Should I have moved to England, after all? Had I betrayed my dreams by coming to Thunder Bay? I resigned myself to staying here, though I feared that I would always regard Canada as second best. In this I followed the example that Canadians set for me. My fellow students admired grandparents who had retired to Florida, parents who shopped in Chicago and New York, or actors who, though they appeared on American television speaking in American accents, were known to have been born in Canada. The deprecation of one's choice of nation, I grasped, was a Canadian habit.

In spite of the Canadian students' predispositions to self-abasement, I was unable to lord it over them. In Thunder Bay, high prices kept me poor; the cultural offerings could make one think only of Mahatma Gandhi's observation that Western civilization would be a very good idea.

As it was clear that none of my first three conditions for a good life—a beautiful village, a cultured life, financial security—could be met here, I concentrated on the fourth. In class, one of my professors mentioned that the current Prime Minister of Canada, when he was Minister of Justice, had decreed that the state had no place in the bedrooms of the nation. My ears pricked up at these words. I scanned the classroom, casting an expectant look at my female classmates. I realized too late that my bearded young professor was doing the same. The response he elicited was far more enthusiastic than any that I obtained. Two young women remained after class to talk with him. I lingered until it was clear that they were ignoring me.

In Canada, I observed, young women became amusing mainly after consuming large volumes of alcohol. When I approached girls who did not drink, they told me they were Christians: alcohol, alas, was not the only lapse from which they abstained. Their doctrinal rigidity sent me back to the girls who drank. I doubted that my slender body would withstand the gallons of beer that the tall boys from the university's hockey and football teams consumed—or, as they said, *chugged*. I knew that, rather than competing with them, it was incumbent upon me to offer something different. For a few weeks I tried to look like a brown-skinned hippie. Like some other male students, I grew my hair. I ceased to shave. The results were not those I had anticipated. One girl asked me if I was a guru. A youth with vacant eyes wanted to know what “karma” meant and whether a procedure known as “LSD” enabled one to glimpse the infinite. Attracting such company made me regret my decision to grow my hair. The attention of women was no closer; the company of fools, on the other hand, had become unavoidable.

Disconsolate, I felt like a caricature of myself. I worried that I could not be other than a caricature when I was the only Indian in

Thunder Bay. But I had decided to uproot myself; I must accept the consequences. On a day when I did not have lessons, I went in search of a barber. I bowed my head against the cold. My brothers, for all their brawn, would not have believed that a man—particularly an Indian man—could walk through the icy blast of twenty degrees below zero without perishing. I had a woollen hat (I had learned to call it a *toque*) pulled down over my ears and a scratchy scarf drawn up over my mouth. My bulky parka weighed on my shoulders. Walking with my head lowered, I got lost. I found myself in a district of my town where I had not set foot before. I did not find a barber, but, to my astonishment, I saw a sign that read *Singh's Quick Curries*.

I was not the only Indian in Thunder Bay! I was not even the only Singh. Here were people who shared my name and nationality. As I opened the steamed-up glass door, a gust of hot korma tantalized my nostrils. A burly Sikh about forty years old looked up from behind a counter where he was ladling basmati into a Styrofoam take-away container. In a Punjabi that I was able to decipher, he asked: “Why have you come here?”

My compatriot served his customer, rang up the purchase at the till, then looked at me again as though I were an apparition. I wondered whether he did not have a point. Why had I come to Canada? To Thunder Bay?

I remained silent.

It didn't matter. S. A. Singh, sole owner and proprietor of Singh's Quick Curries, introduced himself in a burst of jovial greeting. Of course his name was Singh; all Sikh men used this surname. For them it was a way of erasing the false social distinctions of the caste system. For me it was simply a common surname that might belong equally to a Sikh or a Hindu.

“We are brothers!” S. A. said with a laugh. He welcomed me as a lost soul, a wandering foreign student who was too far from home to know how to look after himself. A married man with two children and his own business, he seemed to feel an obligation to take me under his wing. He served me chicken korma and, leaving his adolescent daughter,

a girl in a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater, behind the counter, sat down with me at one of his takeaway's three tables.

"You look like a vagabond or a fugitive," S. A. said, once we had exchanged desultory information about our families. He interrupted our conversation to shout instructions at his daughter, Seema. He spoke in Punjabi and I in Hindi. Once I had finished my korma—there was no question of his charging me for it—he switched to English, and our roles changed. His English was loud, with a strong Canadian twang. "You sound like a Brit," he said. "And you look like a deviant. We've got to do something about that hair."

"I was on my way to the barber."

"In my family, you don't go to the barber, you learn how to tie a turban."

"That is hardly appropriate for a Hindu."

He laughed. "Canadians can't tell the difference between Hindus and Sikhs. They don't even know where India is. Half the people who come in here think I'm some sort of Arab!"

I stared at this strange man, feeling that I had taken passage to India—to the India that existed outside India: an India-in-a-nutshell that endured among confused emigrants scattered to the farthest reaches of the known world.

I sipped the tea that S. A.'s daughter brought us. "I don't know how to tie a turban," I murmured.

"I'll show you." He stood up. I felt a squeeze of alarm. Did this madman imagine he was making a religious convert? His smile, though, was reassuringly sardonic. "It's always good to know how to put on a turban." As his laughter died away, he said: "Then you may go on your way and visit the barber."

I felt soothed, though my head remained topsy-turvy. My culture had acquired a lightness that made me dizzy. Two months earlier I had been in India, where culture is not a word but flesh and being, where religion is not a costume but a man's essence. I did not think that S. A. Singh was a bad man, but rather that he had drunk the waters of Canadianness more deeply than I would be comfortable doing. Our

madcap midday party continued. I told myself not to be troubled because this was not serious; yet this lack of seriousness was what troubled me.

He disappeared into the back of the shop. Seema served chicken curry to two youths, bantering with them in a way that was inappropriate for an Indian girl. They talked about hockey. “If you’re down at the arena on Friday night,” one boy said, “I’ll buy you a beer.”

“You better not be bullshittin’ me,” Seema said. “If I go down there, I expect my beer.”

She fell silent as her father returned, yet the spectacle had disoriented me. She looked like an Indian girl but spoke like someone else. An Indian girl did not drink beer or consort with boys. Was recklessness a family trait? This riddle twirled in my mind as her father spread his arms wide to display a vast piece of bright blue cloth. I had taken turbans for granted without knowing much about them. It had not occurred to me that the fabric Sikhs used was longer and wider than the fitted sheet on a king-sized bed.

“First,” S. A. said, “you must put on a turban cap.” He passed me a tight-fitting white cap. I struggled to push my bedraggled locks onto the top of my head, then pulled down the cap over them. The girl smiled at me as though we were fellow sufferers of her irrepressible papa. Had I ever visited an Indian family where a young woman had smiled at me in such a brazen way—and, to top it off, with her father standing there? I silenced the derogatory epithets that rose into my mind, the remarks I would have made had I discussed this incident with my classmates at the Academy. I knew that this girl was depraved, yet I recognized, also, that by coming to Canada I had lost the privilege of condemning her depravity. By the same token, she had gained the privileges of drinking beer at fifteen and smiling at a strange man who was being subjected to her father’s caprices.

S. A. stood me up in the middle of the shop, amid the burble of boiling water and the shuffle of cutlery on the counter as his daughter served curry. “You fold the sheet like this, then you fold it again. You start like this,” —his big hairy hands held my head in place, “—with a tail of fabric down the back. Then you wind it around and wind it

again.”

In truth, this turban business was not so difficult. Like all revered customs, it was a sequence of gestures. The realization perturbed me. It lingered, as I knew the image of Seema consorting with Canadian boys would linger in my mind.

When S. A. had finished securing the final fold of this curious weight on my skull, he smiled. I felt not ridiculed, but dignified. S. A. led me to a small, grubby toilet where I was able to look in the mirror. What a fine, self-confident fellow smiled back at me! I no longer looked like a deviant, or a bedraggled hippie. I was a man of substance, yet also, in Canadian eyes, I suspected, of mystery. If I wore this accoutrement to class, the girls in my lessons would wonder what wisdom I had trussed up in my brilliant blue cloth. The turban even enhanced my physical presence. I looked taller.

“Do you like it?” S. A. asked.

“I like it a lot.” I glanced at him. “I would like to take it with me. I will pay you for it, of course. It is a huge piece of fabric.”

“It was a just a joke, my friend.” He shrugged his shoulders. “A lark. I wasn’t trying to convert you.” Now his smile was nervous. Did he fear that he had stumbled on a fellow who was more deranged than he was?

“I want to buy the turban,” I repeated. I could sense Seema, on the other side of the room, staring at me. “I will pay you a fair price.”

“All right, my friend,” S. A. said in a quiet voice. “If that is what you want.” He shuffled his feet. His smile returned. “This is all in good fun, right, brother? It is my way of welcoming you to Thunder Bay. My way of inviting you to come back and visit us again.”