THE END OF THE RAJ

From early on, I suspected I must be important. Five servants looked after me. Mummy cared for me at night and bossed the other servants during the day. My ayah, Ranju, the second most important person, looked after me from breakfast to suppertime. The cook prepared my meals, and the cook's wife cleaned the house and washed my clothes. The fifth servant, Daddy, was often away and appeared not much needed. Later I discovered he would bring me toys, a most important job. These five servants lived on the property. Mummy and Daddy—later to become Mum and Dad—stayed with me in a nice single-storey house in Ferozepur. Ranju, and the cook and his wife lived in servants' quarters, attached to the back veranda by a covered walkway.

The house stood less than half a kilometre from the town centre. A rubber hedge, almost as high as the roof, surrounded the small, sun-hardened, mud front garden. A mid-sized tree grew outside the playroom—sometimes referred to as the lounge. I kept my red wooden train and Hornby clockwork train set in that room.

Our big backyard must have been one of the greenest spots in the town, with lush grass and a single washing line to one side. A low storm mesh fence ran around the property. The grass grew fast, and one sunny Saturday afternoon, Mum bought me a pet lamb from a passing shepherd. The lamb kept the grass short, and sometimes gambolled in the backyard with Mum's dachshund, Julie. Once a month, the barber would visit and cut my hair while I sat on a dining chair on the grass.

Opposite the house lay a patchy sports field with tufts of grass interspersed with sun-hardened mud. Intended for hockey and football, it also became a good place to shoot rabid dogs. No one could say what attracted mad dogs to that field. The people appeared terrified, running from a 'mad dog'. Might they have overreacted to a bewildered, lost dog, or a dog joining in a game of chase? These episodes always ended the same way. A soldier would turn up with a rifle and shoot the animal. Exciting stuff! Mad dogs beat hockey and football every time.

Sometimes Ranju or Mum took me for a walk to the general dealer's store on the edge of town. Mum liked the friendly owners. The shop owners always made a fuss of me. Pots, pans, knives, forks, rice, lentils, and other things that grown-ups liked filled the small shop's shelves all the way to the ceiling. I grew curious about what lay further on in town, but Ranju or Mum never took me past the general dealers.

One morning, a breathless Ranju rushed into the house, saying people fought and killed each other in the streets. From the street corner outside our garden, we could look straight down the main road into town. We hurried out with Dad's army binoculars to see for ourselves. Mum soon tired of the chaotic scene and returned to the house. I stayed on the corner with Ranju to watch the fighting. People scattered in all directions, and others chased them with long sticks and curved swords. I saw people being hit and falling. Through the binoculars, they looked like toy soldiers fighting in the town centre.

Then Ranju brought the news that the amiable Mohammedan owners of the general dealers had been killed. She said people were looting the shop, and we should hurry before everything disappeared. Mum gave Ranju a pillowcase to fill with looted items, and I

accompanied her to the shop. The excited looters pulled goods from the shelves, including long rolls of colourful fabrics. They didn't care about the damage they caused. For me, the only thing of interest was a small, light-blue plastic mug. Ranju proved to be a far more effective looter. I felt safe in the crowd. The ethnic violence between the Hindu and Muslim majorities didn't threaten a Nepalese Buddhist ayah and a small white boy.

The barber never came again. Another Mohammedan, killed in the fighting. Over the next few weeks, events followed a cycle. There would be fighting. The army would restore order, but then the trouble would start again.

During this period, Dad was seldom home. Late one night, I woke to voices in the passage and the sound of lorries idling on the road. Outside, people spoke in urgent tones, and then the sound of a lorry's tailgate slammed shut. This became a regular occurrence in the early hours. Whenever I heard late-night voices, Dad would leave with a convoy of lorries and return at lunchtime the next day. The mysterious and hush-hush atmosphere intrigued me.

Ferozepur was a small town on the banks of the Sutlej River on the north-west border of the Punjab. Mum let me in on the big secret. Dad, a sergeant major in the British Army, oversaw convoys taking Mohammedans across the border. He'd return with Hindu and Sikh refugees from the other side. The Partition of India and Pakistan was underway. Late-night departures helped to avoid attacks by the local Hindus and Sikhs, who would slaughter the Mohammedans if the chance arose.

The convoys did not go every night. And they always left at short notice to avoid news of their departure leaking out. On one occasion, a Mohammedan family, with a boy of about my age, hid in our servants' quarters for three nights. They waited for the next convoy going over the border. Our loyal Hindu cook and his wife kept their presence secret. From then on, we often hid Mohammedans in our servants' quarters. They'd be there one or two nights before suddenly disappearing.

Shortly before my fourth birthday, Mum asked me if I wanted a party. She said other children would bring presents. Yes, that sounded like a good idea. Saturday afternoon arrived, and seven or eight kids turned up in their party clothes. Cool drinks and cakes kept everyone happy, and we played games in the front garden. But one of the other boys always argued about my choice of game. I made a mental note to tell Mum not to invite him next year.

The house and garden were my world, and I seldom ventured out. But on one occasion, Mum and Dad took me to see an Indian strongman use ropes to pull an army lorry on his own. Next, he lay on the ground to let the lorry drive over him twice. Soft, sandy soil prevented him from being squashed.

One hot afternoon, Mum took me with her to the tennis club. I liked the steady thwack of the racquets hitting the tennis balls. Why did some people used oval racquets and others, rectangular ones? Only years later did I realise the rectangular ones were racquet presses to prevent the racquets from warping. Whenever I saw Mum whitening her plimsoles (tennis shoes), I knew it meant another visit to the tennis club.

One quiet Sunday morning, a passing Indian told Dad that the river would flood that evening because heavy rains drenched the foothills of the Himalayas. Wild rumours spread, so I went with Dad to visit an army engineer who lived close to the weir. That was the first time Mum entrusted Dad with my care. The army engineer walked with us to the weir. He

assured Dad there would be no problem. Indian soldiers stationed on the weir would open the floodgates if the river rose too high. Reassured, we returned home for lunch.

At five o'clock that evening, a man came running down the street shouting that the river burst its banks. There would be a flood. Dad again visited the engineer to confirm the news. The soldiers on the weir panicked and fled when they saw the wall of water racing towards them. Waiting to open the floodgates seemed a senseless idea.

In Dad's absence, the servants, Mum, and I used a chair to climb onto the tree outside my playroom, and then got onto the sloping roof. We edged our way to a large flat section of the roof at one end of the house. Food, clothing, blankets, and other necessities took the same route. By the time Dad returned, we all, including my lamb, the servants, and the cook's two small children, waited on the roof. Julie, Mum's dachshund, died several months earlier, so was not with us. The couple from next door also joined us, as their roof lacked a flat section.

Amongst the food items, Mum brought a can of baked beans, my favourite dish. Better yet, a jumbo size tin, almost twice as wide as the standard size cans. I picked it up to lay claim, but despite my mother's warnings, dropped it on my big toe, signalling the start of an eventful week.

Everyone settled on the roof by early evening, waiting for the expected flood. Before dark, the first trickle of water appeared, moving at a walking pace. It came down the road in a lazy roll, but soon enough, water covered the entire area.

Next morning, the water lay about two feet deep. The neighbour worried about the chickens he'd left behind in his rush to get onto our roof. Dad took me down with him to help the neighbour find them. Somehow, they'd got into the neighbour's lounge and sat in a row on the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

By evening, the flood water lay halfway up the walls of the house. But the next morning, the water lapped the edge of the roof. Two inches higher and it would have swamped us. Then I noticed my red wooden train floating in the water, caught in the upper branches of the rubber hedge. The flood water threatened to carry it off at any moment, so I nominated Dad to recover it. He was reluctant, but Mum insisted. I made a fuss, and everyone watched, willing him to do the right thing. He must have seen the sense in my argument because he relented and swam out and rescued the red wooden train. So that was his other role; to do things no one else would.

That whole day, the water lapped at the roof edge. We all kept an eye on the water level, but it rose no higher. What a disappointment! The roof wouldn't be flooded. Towards late afternoon, the first of the rowing boats passed. Each boat carried two soldiers headed for the surrounding suburb, searching for people who needed saving. Our house stood strong, so they ignore us and rowed on. Later, rescued people passed in the rowing boats, each towing two or three zinc bathtubs filled with their belongings. The boats looked like mother ducks swimming with their chicks following. This became a common sight over the next two or three days.

On Wednesday, one of the rowing boats came for the elderly neighbours who struggled with the trying conditions. We stayed on the roof until Saturday, when the water had receded one or two feet. The soldiers said we should leave, as the house might collapse. They returned in the evening in two rowing boats and rescued us and the servants. We'd been on the roof for six full days. Not long enough, I thought.

In the dwindling light, the soldiers rowed to the hotel opposite the railway station. This, the highest part of town, remained unaffected by the flood waters. Soldiers' families, lying or sitting on the floor, packed the hotel foyer, resembling a tin of sardines. To reach the reception desk, we needed to pick our way through the reclining bodies. Dad's senior rank in the army led to an upstairs room in the hotel.

After two days, the flood receded, and the hot sun dried everything. Our cook and his family left for their home elsewhere. Mum, Dad, and I farewelled Ranju, leaving on the train for her home in Nepal. The last I saw; she held my pet lamb at the compartment window and waved goodbye. She promised to take good care of the lamb, and only years later did I realise I'd given her the key ingredient for a good lamb curry.

We said goodbye to Ferozepur when Dad was transferred to the army base in Trombay, a north-eastern suburb of Bombay. The hot and boring house stood next to the boom gate at the barracks' entrance, where armed guards provided me with a little company. I wrecked my Hornby clockwork railway locomotives, playing on the sandy ground outside our front door.

When India gained independence in 1947, soldiers in the British Army were given a choice between staying with the British Army and losing one rank or transferring to the Indian Army and maintaining their rank. My father chose the latter, but it soon became clear that there was no future for British people in the Indian Army. So, my father resigned from the army and got the temporary posting to Trombay, where we waited for the army to complete his discharge formalities. Soon, we'd be leaving for England.

The three months in Trombay dragged. At last we boarded the Empress of Scotland, an ocean liner headed for Liverpool. A nice cabin on the ship's starboard side helped make the trip more fun. At Port Said, rowing boats with children on board surrounded the ship. Passengers threw coins into the sea. The sinking coins glinted in the sunlight as they rocked from side to side. But the children dove into the water and caught them before they sank into the depths. We also bought three Japanese made Parker pens. With scratchy nibs and poor rubber ink reservoirs, they never worked well.

After passing through the Suez Canal, journey's end was in sight. The weather deteriorated, and we spent less and less time on deck. The autumn trip through the Mediterranean proved dull. To break the monotony, Mum bought me a large, grey stuffed elephant, almost too big for me to hold.

Three days from Liverpool, a measles epidemic broke out on the ship. My infection became apparent on the last day of the voyage. I went from the ship, straight into an ambulance, to a hospital opposite the Aintree horse racecourse in Liverpool. So began the most boring week of my life, even worse than Trombay. I spent hours each day watching the dust floating in the shafts of sunlight that came through the hospital windows. When Saturday crawled around, I was free to go. Mum came to fetch me in the afternoon. The hospital insisted I leave my stuffed elephant behind for fear of spreading the infection. I didn't trust them, believing they wanted to keep it for the hospital playroom.

Soon I would be five years old. An exciting new chapter in my life had begun.