

Walking the Indian Streets

1960

I

HEMCOMING

A letter from an ancient and religious aunt who has ignored my existence for many years arrives in the morning post. "Dear Child," it reads. "You will be coming home to India after ten years. How you must have grown. I hope you are still my fifteen-year-old darling and love me as you did before. I think about how Ram came home, after fourteen years' banishment, having fought and conquered evil in the jungles, and the people enjoyed and celebrated his return with candles and with bonfires. They say that when he returned the earth glowed like the sun. I hope you still remember and read the 'Ramayana,' our great religious epic. Maybe you don't, though. Boys get corrupted by the West. . . ." My old aunt goes on, but I really haven't time to read the letter properly. I am just in the middle of studying for my Oxford finals, reading the notes on four-by-six index cards. I put the letter beside me and start on the cards. I go through hundreds of them, dealing with Alfred, with John and Henry VIII, with Elizabeth, Cromwell, and Gladstone. There isn't any time for my aunt, so I bury her among my index cards, along with other late Hanoverians.

I ought to explain that if I had received the same letter two years ago it would have been an occasion for self-analysis and self-mortification. It would have made me look at myself in my mental mirror, and I would not have enjoyed watching the image there. I would have brooded over my shortcomings. But in these two years something has happened to me. The previous intensity of my feelings seems to have faded into the leisurely

habits of Oxford. When I arrived at Oxford, after living in America for seven years, I was crew-cut innocence abroad. I sprang out of bed at the healthy hour of seven, drank milk with breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and was in bed before midnight. I submitted to the influences of Oxford when I started breaking up my afternoon work with a cup of tea at four. Then followed a cup of coffee after dinner. Sometimes I let myself be persuaded to coffee after lunch also. Then came sherry before dinner, first on weekends, then on weekdays. I enjoyed, now and again, taking some wine with dinner and brandy with coffee, and on special occasions, like a good party, I was prevailed upon to take punch with a gin base, or even a Scotch. I never drank very much, because it made me feel tired, and also because the pressure of work never let up. When I did take a coffee or tea break, or have a beer in Hall, I often became less serious and intense, more social and convivial. And this was splendid, because friendships and attachments came easily, and I abandoned introspection for gossip and wit. The English apparently know how to be casual and witty at the same time. For my part, I sometimes found the strain of making witty remarks too much, but by persevering I developed the ability to pick up a remark and turn it in a funny and unexpected direction. Often the wit was the result of clever, clever me, and when I was being unusually clever, I controlled the wit as if I were working marionettes. Sometimes, stringing along with the wooden English figures, I performed feats I little expected, and while I never thought all this was really changing me in any radical way, in time I became adept at exploiting my fancies. I began feeling that, somehow, there were two me's. The playful me did not make the serious me less dependable (just less vulnerable), and I came to see a quick, satirical wisdom in my own foolishness.

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Revised Edition, 1971

INTRODUCTION

BUMMY HOLIDAY REVISITED

Today, once again, a letter has come imploring me to straighten out the record of a part of a summer—the summer of 1959—that my good friend Dom Moraes and I spent travelling together in India. Bewildered readers have been writing such letters to me ever since Dom and I published clashing accounts of our summer, each written in ignorance of the other's work. "I am a graduate student specializing in contemporary Indian literature," the latest letter to me begins. "In January and May, 1960, after you returned to the States, you wrote in the pages of *The New Yorker* about a summer in India, some of which you spent with Dom Moraes. In July and August of 1960, oddly, the *Observer* serialized an account of the same summer by Moraes after *his* return to England. Publishers in both Britain and the United States then brought out book-length accounts of the same summer by each of you.* [Here there is an actual footnote, which reads, in its entirety, "*Ved Mehta, 'Walking the Indian Streets,' Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960; and London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1961. Cf. Dom Moraes, 'Gone Away: An Indian Journey,' Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960; and London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1960."] The strange thing is that even when you are describing the same experiences—the same people and the same places—your versions are poles apart, and this in spite of the fact that you were both Indians, and both going back home from Oxford. I am at a loss to understand."

I acknowledge the need for all sorts of explanations. But explaining means overcoming years of reluctance to reopen a

subject recorded and closed, and facing what I did that summer in the light of what in later years I came to feel about it. In fact, year after year following that summer I made plans to return to India and then abandoned them, because I did not quite see how I could go back without first trying to straighten out the confusion that the 1959 visit created in my mind. But then I resolved to revisit both the confusion and India, and I have done so, which has meant rereading our two reports—Dom's "Gone Away" and my "Walking the Indian Streets." "Gone Away" is the fatter of the two books, and, reading it, I am once again enthralled. I feel like an old Boy revisiting his college after many years out in the world, and, in fact the book is full of our particular undergraduate years at Oxford—1956 through 1959. From this distance, I am naturally a little embarrassed at the cozy details of the Oxford feast that is "Gone Away." But I am comforted by the presence at the feast of E. M. Forster, who joins it as a reviewer of the book for the *Observer*. Forster tells approvingly of a talk he once had with Dom. "When I met Mr. Moraes some years ago, he made a remark that both surprised and pleased me," he says, a bit donnishly. "He had lent me some of his poems, and when accepting them I said rather conventionally: 'I'll write to you about them.' To which he replied, with perfect courtesy: 'I do not wish you to write about them. I wish you to read them.' It was a sound remark and it recalled me to essentials." Having noted that "Gone Away," though not unpoetical, is essentially a journal, and therefore a piece of journalism, and that it deserves to be discussed as well as read, Forster gives Dom a one-sentence character reference, calling him "an excellent mixer, if occasionally farouche," and adds quickly that the book is "an excellent mixture . . . irreverent, gay, unexpected, besides being what the shops call 'contemporary' ('You may not like this pattern, sir, it is rather contemporary')." According to Forster, the question of the pattern's durability doesn't arise, because Dom is just journalistically describing a few months he spent in India following four years' absence. Forster agreeably compliments his host on his reputation as a poet—the result of a small volume of poems called "A

Beginning" and published when Dom was an undergraduate—and mentions the influence on Dom of his father, Frank Moraes, who is an Oxford graduate himself and an eminent Indian journalist. However, Forster goes on to compete with his host, remarking, in the best Forsterian manner, "I appreciated his account of his visit to the Calcutta painter Jamini Roy, for it recalls my own visit fifteen years ago. Indeed, I wish to enter into competition at this point and to inform the *Observer* that Jamini Roy gave me one of his pictures. It is a blue farmer or maybe a god, holding a little bird, and a most treasured possession. Mr. Moraes got only three kings in a boat." Then, at that undergraduate banquet of ours, Forster taps me on the shoulder: "Part of the time he is with Mr. Ved Mehta, his talented contemporary at Oxford who is now on *The New Yorker*. Now the pace quickens. A pair of gifted gigglers, they hire a taxi and drive through the brothel district of Calcutta to tease the prostitutes and pimps. This is not a great success. Perhaps they did not drink enough champagne first." I bristle; I am a moderate drinker, and even have long stretches of teetotalism. Forster, possibly knowing this, shifts his censorious look to Dom: "He is always drinking, which becomes a bore. On the opening page of the book brandy is mentioned twice, whiskey three times, and this continues until the reader longs for a non-alcoholic edition."

When the review appeared, I wished that I could tell Forster exactly how it was that in Dom's book I became a giggler in those escapades, but, as I have said, for years I was reluctant to reopen the subject. Now that I am speaking up, I say to Forster—as though the "Gone Away" banquet had been reconvened for an anniversary—that, the last time around, he was a credulous guest as well as an honored one. I explain, "You must remember it was a smashing holiday—could be nothing less if I was to keep my sanity in India. Or so it seemed at the time. I had been living the life of an expatriate in America and England for ten years. I had left my home in New Delhi in 1949, at the age of fifteen, to start my education abroad. As you can imagine, greeting the members of my family—a large one—after ten

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years was not easy, although, just out of Oxford, I was loath to admit it, even to myself. At King's, even more than at my college, Balliol, you know one would jeer at anyone looking for a shoulder to cry on. So Dom found me in Delhi, longing for Oxford, ready for anything. We went on some of the escapades described in 'Gone Away,' it's true, in a spirit of frantic high holiday; other things Dom brought in because, I suppose, he carried his holiday spirit into his writing. So I appear as a mixture of Sancho Panza and Dr. Watson, marvelling at the feats of my inspired friend. But one thing at a time."