

BEM LE HUNTE

*What the servant saw*

We were jailed in my mother's Delhi farmhouse, knowing for certain that if we tried to make it out we would shrink like crisp packets under the grill. Outside the air-conditioned comfort of the glass conservatory, crows were falling out of the sky, their ghoulish caws trailing across the blue. The plants inside the conservatory guiltily faced their cousins across the pane – plants too shrunken to look up. The *mali* whose job it was to help the foliage survive the summer squinted as he brushed away the wilted leaves that spoil the fading lawn, his legs like strobes walking across the grass in unreal surrender.

Tara, my mother's twenty-eight-year-old servant brought us *nimboo pani* and hovered around my husband, Jan, who sat over his computer, making the most of one of those rare, open-eyed connections to an Internet that was forever on the blink.

"Where do you come from in Uttarakhand?" he asked Tara in his curious Aussie Hindi.

Tara, who could understand more English than he let on, gave the name of his village. Jan tapped away and smiled as he commanded Google Earth to take him there by digital air-borne chariot. He arrived in a flick, his chariot hovering over Tara's village, tucked away in the holy mountains, high in the Himalayan ranges that were now reduced to an undulating crop of tiny mounds. Tara laughed. His half-closed *Pahari* eyes, so distinctive in highlanders, closed to barely visible behind his lashes – his lips opened in a hearty smile, revealing the charming gap in his two front teeth, big enough for a twenty-five *paise* coin. Jan mirrored his smile, revealing a similar gap, big enough for a dollar coin. In many ways they were brothers, I thought, with only the collapsible brackets of space and time to segment them into the categories of servant and *saab* – an entirely un-Australian separation in the eyes of Jan, who had grown up in the jungles of Papua New Guinea, the son of an anthropologist, with tribal elders for family.

Yet today, in spite of the similarity, they smiled across a canyon, with Jan comfortably sitting on the edges of the known world, revealing what lay beyond the digital divide.

"Can you see my house?" Tara asked, dazzled by the light, the possibilities.

"*Han ji*," yes, Jan replied, using the respectful form of address reserved for seniors.

"Take me to it," Tara instructed, with familiarity he'd never use in any exchange with my mother – emboldened by the radiant light of this vision. Jan zoomed in further and soon found Tara's house with its flat roof, clothesline and plastic bucket atop.

"I didn't expect it to be so big," Jan remarked.

“Sir, we have six bedrooms,” Tara replied. “It’s very big.”

“Then it’s bigger than ours,” Jan replied, and they both laughed.

Jan zoomed out and within a couple of vertiginous seconds we’d transcended the mountains: a few digiseconds later we’d arrived at my mother’s farm on the Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road in Delhi. Another quantum moment and we’d risen above the green globe to return safely to our house in Paddington, Sydney, complete with our beaten up Toyota outside, its paint curling off.

“I want to come and visit Australia, sir,” Tara said. “Next time *memsahib* comes I will come with her.”

It had been some weeks since my mother applied for Tara’s visa. She’d gone through an agent, of course; there was no point languishing in the cage that sat like a sore on the lawns of the Australian embassy in Delhi, filled with potential patisserie chefs and other visa hopefuls. Needless to say, I had written a letter of support for Tara. My mother never travelled without him, I said (completely true), as she relied upon him so totally. He was her porter, her nurse, her driver, cook and cleaner on the road. It was Tara who plugged her into her breathing apparatus at night – a life-lung we affectionately re-named ‘the Ganesh machine,’ for the trunk it added to her face. Without Tara, I wrote, my mother could not exhale.

The visa for Tara arrived promptly, such was the necessity, but then, God forbid, came the letter saying my mother could not be granted entry into Australia for health reasons. How could she travel if she was so sick? What kind of burden would she present to the Australian health system? Had she had her x-rays and blood tests to ensure she wasn’t going to spread tuberculosis or AIDS around our vast sunburnt country? The saga continued, as did my letters, their tone refreshed. Of course my mother was fit enough to travel – she did it all the time – why there was hardly a month when she wasn’t skipping with Tara between Switzerland, Cyprus, England or Thailand (completely true).

The Australian High Commission in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, saw the sense behind my nonsense and finally caved in. Mother and servant, renamed ‘carer’ to address Australian sensibilities, were both coming and I had been instructed to design an Australian road trip to end all road trips.

Our two bigger children went straight to school as tall as poppies, to announce that they would soon have their very own servant and anybody could come round to watch if they didn’t believe it. Our concerns were a little more pragmatic. How would we get Tara to sit down and eat at our table without inflicting a blow of embarrassment so deep that he’d never recover? And would Jan end up compensating for the embarrassment of inequity by cleaning up after Tara at every turn. He was only too aware, after all, that in India, the guest is God.

As soon as Tara and my mother arrived at the airport and the hugs were complete Jan tried to seize the trolley from Tara, but he replied, “I will push it, sir”. Jan and I looked at each other, having anticipated this moment over a hundred discussions. This was certainly going to be the alternative Australian adventure story. The one Jan had

wanted me to write about, from his point of view: a kind of “Travels With My Mother-in-law” that would tell it like it was for an Australian who had married into an Indian family.

We made our way home to Paddington and I found myself observing the city from Tara’s perspective in the same way I witnessed the arrival of one of my friends in India for the first time: the surprise to see the cow feeding on coconut hulls in the gutter; the sleeping, uniformed wedding band on the roadside; the street children with painted moustaches doing back flips by the car window for a few rupees. There was none of that, but the long row of exotic Gynea Lilies on South Dowling Street to herald the new.

If my mother was to the manor born in India, she’d done a huge detour by coming to live in London with four small children and no help. After the expansive early childhood days of Calcutta and Orissa, my siblings and I soon acquainted ourselves with the parallel universe of a shrunken England: life in our own mess, with no-frills self-service suppers. The only problem was in trying to convey any sense of our lives to those living in India. How did Tara imagine we carried on out here in Australia? No doubt he had pictured a grand home, like the one my mother returned to after her thirty-year detour via England.

Tara walked into our house and complimented us on it.

“*Apka ghur bhoth acha hay, memsahib.*” How satisfying that approval was – even if he had referred to my place as a ‘home’ rather than a ‘mansion,’ the standard description for a house of the kind my mother lived in.

My mother went into her room and started ordering room service. Her blood sugar needed checking, her low-sugar meal needed cooking, her bag needed to be unpacked and her voluminous quantities of medicines administered.

“Are you tired, Tara?” I asked.

“No ma’am, I’m good,” he replied in half-Hindi and started to make labour of my home.

“We’re going to have to go to the Indian store and find him some *aata*,” my mother said. “They don’t consider that they’ve eaten unless they have a pile of *rotis*, she said, although I have managed to feed him successfully in MacDonalds a few times. Somehow he considers that to be food.”

Shopping at the Indian grocery store in Cleveland Street was like a homecoming for Tara, but I could sense the unspoken questions he had. What was it like for the shopkeeper to come here and work in this orderly country? I could sense that he wanted to return. Maybe to ask the owner some of these questions?

“Tara goes on long walks when we’re travelling,” my mother told me, somewhat ominously. “He tells me he wants to *goomnay*, and sometimes I don’t see him for hours. I don’t know where he goes or what he gets up to.”

The first walk we did by the sea was what really impressed Tara, living as he did between the land-locked Himalayas and Delhi’s desert heat. When we took him to Camp Cove he insisted on going for a swim.

“I’m worried about him,” my mother said. “If he gets sick what will I do?”

Yet swim he did. And most touching, he stopped to hold his hands together and pray to the ocean before he entered its water world: to honour *Samudra* and its deity, *Varuna*, carrier of the moon, lover of the shores, God of the underworld.

“You’ll see a lot more beaches when we go up to Darwin,” Jan told them both. “But you’ll have to be careful of the crocodiles.”

What was the crocodile? The dreaded *mugurmuch*? YES! After this truth was revealed, I detected a skerrick of hesitation to leave the comfort of Sydney and go up North. Where were these crazy foreigners going to take him? What sort of duties would he be required to perform beyond that of porter, cook, cleaner, nurse and driver?

I’d warned my mother that we were going to travel, sleep and cook in two Wicked vans. I’d even called them ‘fuck trucks’ so that she wouldn’t be under any delusions of being chauffeured around in a luxury caravan with onboard toilet. It was our budget holiday, and I knew, secretly, that she was going to dine out at Delhi parties on the fact that she had survived a holiday in one of these low-down, roughed-up graffitied trucks. But more than that, I knew that ever since her childhood days playing in the red earth of Mosaboni, in Bihar, her soul longed for a return to vast empty spaces, preferably of the derelict kind. Who was I to come between her and this mythic nostalgia?

Still, there was the whole issue of the trucks...

We were the most unlikely family group waiting for our two passion wagons at the Wicked garages in Darwin. Never before in the history of Wicked, I am quite certain, had a seventy-two-year-old Indian grandmother, her servant and a three-year-old grandchild required the services of Wicked. Never had such a motley bunch ever had to debate over who was going to go in naked to get a free day’s rental, as Wicked advertised.

While we waited our turn my mother explained away to Tara in Hindi how young people in the West liked to go travelling without knowing where they were going, and how their favourite pastime was to sleep in trucks in their holidays. No doubt he was thinking *why the hell would they want to do that? And why, more importantly, would memsahib want to do something so ridiculous in her state of health?* But it was too late, and if my mother was nervous about this trip she was hiding it well. Instead she was observing Tara for his reactions, which he had learned well to disguise. Only when it was our turn to pick up our trucks did my mother reveal a little hesitation.

“Please do give us a really decent truck,” she asked in her commanding English accent. Truly, with Tara standing next to her gripping his old-fashioned attaché case, it looked as if we were trying to get away with some kind of a drug deal instead of a simple swap of cash for keys.

“Well, we’ve only got what you’ve been allocated,” the young twenty-something-year-old told us.

For me there was no surprise that Wicked didn’t have special trucks for seniors, but for my mother, coming from India, there were always ways to elicit a better class of service: like a new five hundred rupee note in a folded business card; a plea of frailty on account of one’s age and gender.

“But please, one that works well. We don’t want to be stuck in the middle of nowhere. My health isn’t so...”

“It’s actually quite cozy,” I assured my mother: “Don’t you think?”

“But will the van’s battery be strong enough to run my breathing machine, and how will I get up and down these stairs to sleep in the back?” she asked in a mild state of panic. “My knees don’t actually bend any more.”

“We’ll all help you,” I replied. “We’re going to have a ball,” I said loudly, as a way of reminding myself.

After stocking up we started making our way out of town towards Florence Falls. It was late, though: our first night and we had no idea where we were going to rest our heads come nightfall.

“Don’t go too fast,” my mother told me as we set off on our convoy. “Tara’s never driven long distances before.”

“WHAT! Now you tell us,” I replied, furious. Why was it that these important details were always left till last?

“How much does an international licence cost in India nowadays?” Jan asked, clearly more humoured than I was by this situation.

And so we continued.

When we finally entered Litchfield National Park we stopped to look at the roadside map. It was only when we were out of our trucks that the bush struck. With engines switched off we were received into an inescapably deep silence – a void that rang like an empty bell – covered by a larger-than-life sky that gnawed into my confidence as it darkened into a silhouetted magnificence, dwarfing the stubby gum trees.

“Perhaps we should go back to that caravan park on the edge of Litchfield,” I enthused. “I think Mama would be more comfortable there.”

“But we’ve come all this way. I want to go ahead and find somewhere out in the bush to camp,” my mother replied – arthritic, diabetic, heart patient – stoic and stalwart with a wanderlust that had long burst free of the inconvenience of her form. “But we should try and make it to our campsite before it gets too late so that Tara can set up my Ganesh machine.”

We followed signs to the campsite, where Tara helped Jan set up our tent with unexpected expertise considering he’d never slept in one. The fact that we were camping meant he was in strangely familiar territory – almost as if he was taking my mother to his village – a village that had somehow been transported to a stranger’s land.

“God, how I love this place,” my mother declared when we she finally sat down by the fire, watching the other campfires in the cozy distance. “I just so love it here,” she repeated, and almost as a reward for her enthusiasm a possum appeared with blinded eyes glinting in the flames, hungry for the curried vegetables he could smell. “Tara, *dheko, juldi*,” my mother whispered loudly. “That creature is an Australian rat!”

Katherine was very hot and touristy, and of course the able-bodied among us went to see the gorge, but it was getting harder and harder to show my mother Australia. Every time we saw a staggering waterfall, a rock painting or a glimpse of a sacred site, she had to be left behind to marvel at the rainbow lorikeets and kangaroos at the campsite – the mountains that came to Muhammad. The hottest parts of the day were the hardest, because there was no shelter in a Wicked truck and she suffered mostly silently. However, there was an evening towards the end of our trip that I caught her looking out at the tragic stars in the middle distance.

“Who knows when or if I will ever do this again,” she told them.

Her pleasure was always vicarious. And though my mother could never do the walks, she somehow followed us in her imagination. The second day at Katherine Gorge was Tara’s birthday and she didn’t want to give him money, which would surely have gone on buying something utilitarian for his wife and two small children back in Delhi. She wanted to give him an experience he could only exchange for memories: something that would never be measured in *rotis* or grain. With her characteristic excess she decided that she should indulge her servant in a helicopter ride over Katherine Gorge.

When the time came for Tara to receive his ‘present’ the kids, Jan and I ran through the bush to a hut that served as a helipad, filled with our vicarious pleasure as well as my mother’s. As she couldn’t walk this far she had requested that we take dozens of photographs so that he could show off to all his family and the other servants in her household. Truly, Tara was not just going to go up into the sky but up into the stratosphere of Indian village esteem. He was going to rise like an angel, and he knew it, so he’d dressed in his smartest clothes and donned his reflective sunglasses.

“You look like Amitabh Bachan,” Jan coaxed, hoping for the ultimate performance, and Tara’s smile broadened further still as he leaned like a millionaire against the side of the red helicopter. He was every movie star he had ever seen and also a few Australian heroes he’d never come across like Crocodile Dundee. He was the luckiest man in the world.

We watched and filmed and cheered as the propellers gently levitated the helicopter up into the Katherine sky, taking Tara’s smile out of sight. Every inch of elevation taking him off to his next incarnation: Tara – it even meant ‘star’ in Hindi – and there he was claiming his place in the firmament.

We waited for some time, but not long. You can burn money quickly when you hire a helicopter. They stopped for some photos, Tara said, and then they came back down again. That simple.

“How did the gorge look?” Mama asked.

“Very nice, memsahib,” he replied. “We saw many valleys.”

“Were you scared?”

“It was very noisy,” Tara replied.

Truly, there was no amazement at the miracle of this ascent.

“Was there anything at all surprising about it?” my mother asked.

“There was a lady pilot,” he replied, and with these words got to work on rolling out the dough he’d prepared before his trip to the helipad.

If Jan were to continue with this tale of ‘travels with my mother-in-law’ I would have to mention the time when Tara squatted down at a campsite near a public tap in Douglas Hot Springs to do the dishes village-style, scrubbing the dirt around the pans to scour off the food. A grey-boomer on his Australian campervan tour, overcome with curiosity, came over to ask what the Indian gentleman was up to.

“Cleaning the dishes, of course,” Jan replied, protectively. “It’s the best way to do it.”

“Well you learn something new every day,” our onlooker replied in good humour.

There were so many other people who looked on with their unasked questions. If Jan were telling the tale he would probably continue by recounting the endless times that Tara called him ‘sir’ and me ‘madam’ on the campsite, to the bemusement of other campers, from Australia and elsewhere. And how unsettling it felt to be given such status when we woke up disheveled in the morning out of one of those ‘don’t come knocking if it’s rocking’ passion wagons, looking like the lowliest of low campers next to the others with their six-bedder American-style supervans. What sirs and madams we were!

The strongest impression of Australia, however, was formed when he discovered that there was free gas in the barbecue areas.

“*Memsahib*, you just press on the button and they give you gas!” he exclaimed. “You don’t have to pay, you don’t have to ask anyone if you can have it, you just take it!” It made me think: if only the average Australian could reproduce this sense of amazement at the bounty of free barbies we would all be happy citizens from now till kingdom come.

“It’s because we don’t have so many people living here,” I told him. “And the government want us to have more babies. You know I got over four thousand dollars for having Kashi.”

Tara stopped cooking and gave me an enormous *Pahari* smile at this joke.

“*Memsahib*, maybe we can send you some of the spare people we have in Bihar,” he told me, confident that he had come up with the ultimate win-win solution.

How could I possibly ever know what Tara believed to be the highlight of his trip? It could have been the free gas, or the helicopter ride, or the day we blew up our lilos and swam in Edith Falls. It could have been the crocodiles we saw jumping on the Adelaide River. Most likely, I would say, it was the day that Tara went for one of his long walks on our return to Sydney and came back with a suitcase, a little worn in places, but still good.

“Look what I found!” he declared. “It works perfectly well and someone just threw it out on the street because they didn’t want it!”

He kept opening and closing the case, checking the zippers, searching for *some* reason why the previous proud owner would have thrown it away.

It gave me the idea to look around the streets of Darling Point and Point Piper the next day on their tip-out night, perhaps as an anthropological exercise in western excess. With these suburbs chucking out their muck it would be like *Diwali*, *Lori* and *Holi* rolled into one – like all of Tara’s Christmases had come at once.

From the start Tara was on the hunt, and my mother was as eager as he was to find items that could decorate the three-bedroom house she had just built him in Delhi as a reward for his eight years of loyal service.

We started near Rushcutters Bay where there was a pile of furniture: a perfectly decent sofa, almost untouched, and a chest of drawers. The sad truth was that it would never fit onto an aeroplane and he knew it. This was the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, with water everywhere that could never be brought to his lips: it was bounty in abundance that would never leave Australian shores. But Tara scoured, nonetheless, and my mother watched on with silent satisfaction at every street find that would travel back with them; a few plastic flowers; a small carpet; an electric fan still boxed; an unused frying pan; an amateur painting.

And then he found it. A LAPTOP COMPUTER! Just like the one *saab* had shown him that could fly people from the holy mountains of India to the sacred spaces of Australia in a flick of a switch. This was it. This is what he had come to Australia to find.

As he filled up our car with his booty I wished I could look through the computer’s camera lens on his arrival back in Delhi and witness *his* version of this story: ‘Travels with my *memsahib*.’ And what picture of Australia we would see.