

Fireflies

I was about ten years old, which places the narrative at around 1952. We had been in Calcutta for about two years when my mother, a teacher at St. Thomas's School, Kidderpore, was invited to join my Uncle Josh and his fiancée Yvonne for a holiday in the depths of the Orissan jungle! This included myself and my sister Valerie, of course. This was our family: my father, a teacher by profession who joined the Indian Air Force at the beginning of the second World War as a fighter pilot, had died in a low-flying accident in 1944. I inherited his passion for the air, but that is another story.

Josh was a forester whose occupation was the continual inspection and felling of the timber in his area, an enormous forest of teak. Josh, like his two brothers James (my father) and Sam, was a keen Shikar (hunter), and an expert shot. His life in the jungles frequently called upon this skill, as remote villages were often plagued by marauding elephants and, occasionally, the odd man-eater. Yvonne, his future wife, was also an excellent shot and I remember standing open-mouthed as she shot a lime off a bush at about fifty yards with a Savidge 22 long rifle. The Savidge was my father's gun, inherited by Josh, and an amazing light rifle with a trajectory that was completely flat for a mile, using the 303-type waisted long shells. It could take a small croc or a deer, and could handle the normal, long, and extra-long bullets. I believe that when Josh left India it was sold to a Maharaja.

However, my mother who had not had a holiday since my father died in '44, jumped at the opportunity. Val and I had never been on holiday at all. So began our first adventure. We boarded a train at Howrah, Calcutta's major train station. I shall never forget that journey. At Howrah we found our 2nd Class carriage (teachers have never been well paid) and pushed and shoved our way on board. The long benches along each carriage wall were not exactly comfortable, hard wooden-slatted seats, but we settled ourselves and prepared for the journey. I can't remember just how long it was, but think it was about twelve hours. At Howrah we were besieged by vendors: cups of cha, fruit, sweetmeats - anything you could possibly imagine. We bought the cha, some sweetmeats, and hurled angry words (in Hindi) at the less welcome vendors. This did not stop them approaching us again and again. Eventually, we learned to ignore them, by far the most effective way to get rid of their attentions.

The train pulled off in a cloud of steam and smoke, wafting down the platform ahead of the prevailing wind and the journey began. It was not particularly eventful except at the stations en route when the vendors descended on passengers like a horde of locusts. Oh yes, at one station a villager and three goats boarded and, in spite of threats by the other passengers, remained in the carriage until we arrived at the next station. The goats weren't unfriendly, but they did smell a bit! Val and I spent the trip looking out of the (barred) windows, watching the countryside roll by. Fields, hills, occasional ponds and lakes, small townships and villages, all new to us city dwellers.

Jeraikela, journey's end. Josh was waiting on the platform, tanned, in khaki shorts and shirt, a rugged, good looking 30'ish man. We jumped off the train, leaving Mum to manhandle the luggage! We hadn't seen Josh for ages, not since we had left Allahabad, and greeted him with a degree of shyness. Josh shepherded us to his Jeep, a genuine Willys WW2 ex-army vehicle, and we left the manganese-red earth of Jeraikela for the forest. Again, I can't remember just how long the trip actually lasted, but it was long and enjoyable enough. No

tar-macadam roads, just rough red jungle paths, sometimes firm and sometimes wheel-spin soft, but Josh and the Willys handled it. At one point we came to a steep rise in the trail, about 45 degrees (I'm not exaggerating), and Josh had to shift the two gear levers into four-wheel drive. We had a heart-stopping moment about halfway up when the wheels began to spin, but Josh kept control and we got over the crest with a stomach-wrenching leap. Fortunately the luggage was tied down!

We arrived at Josh's forest home at about dusk: a thatched cottage in the middle of the jungle, circumscribed by a ten-foot high chain link fence. Eve opened the gates at the sound of the Willys horn and we entered the enclosure. Again, the memory of a ten-year-old fails, but it seemed like a fifty-yard square enclosure with a cottage in the middle and an enormous hibiscus bush to the right, just by the fence. There were a number of small bushes to the rear of the cottage, but otherwise the land was sparse and red with manganese ore and oxide. Eve welcomed us and we went in. The cottage was homely and comfortable, with a large wood or coal-burning fireplace at one end of the living room. We were all tired and hungry, and welcomed the meal Eve and Connie (my grandmother) had prepared; we dined well that night on peacock that Josh and Eve had shot earlier. In those days peafowl were plentiful and fair game, and delicious! Better than turkey or chicken, certainly.

We woke late the next day, recovering from the journey, to find Josh and Eve readying themselves for an excursion. Josh had received news of a man-eating tiger that had taken villagers about thirty miles away, and, as the only shikar in the area, he had been requested to find and kill the beast. Eve, game as always, was accompanying him. They prepared themselves for a three-day trip, confident that they would find and dispatch the man-eater in that period. Josh and his brothers had scores of kills to their credit, not just for kudos or skins, but also to protect villages of unarmed farmers. A man-eater plays havoc into the daily lives of simple village folk, and apart from the misery of losing family and friends, the villagers were unable to tend their fields and flocks while the marauder was rampant, which led to even more misery. The pair set off after warning us to keep the high gates closed from dusk to dawn.

The next couple of days were pleasant but uneventful. My mother read her Agatha Christie novels (she was an addict) while knitting yet another garment, my grandmother busied herself with cooking and cleaning, while Val and I had the run of the compound. It was just after the rains, and the ground was heaving with red bugs. These creatures were a brilliant carmine with soft round bodies around a centimetre across, and completely harmless. It was almost impossible to walk across the compound without annihilating dozens of them. We would pick them up and examine them, put them down, try to find out where they were coming from, and generally amuse ourselves playing with them. We weren't allowed to leave the compound because of the danger of encountering wild beasts. There weren't many of these, but the possibility of tiger and leopard did exist. I remember bragging loudly of how I would handle such an encounter, and what happened when it actually occurred! But, that's yet another story.

On the third evening without Josh and Eve we had decided to sleep out in the open. It was unbearably hot and humid so the khatias (bamboo and hemp camp beds) were placed outside the cottage with protective mosquito nets covering them. Val and I were put to bed and Mum and Grandma Connie sat on cane chairs, talking. After a while Connie retired too, and Mum sat reading by the brilliant light of a pump-up hurricane lantern. It was very bright and bathed the surrounding area in the intense white light of its asbestos mantle. The beds were

about twenty feet from the hibiscus bush I mentioned at the beginning of this narrative. The bush, and its sweet-centred red flowers, attracted fireflies in their thousands, and on the two previous nights I had sat outside watching the twinkling green lights until I had been too tired to stay awake any longer. On this night, being outside, I had watched them again from my bed, and had eventually fallen asleep. Suddenly, in the midst of my slumber, I felt myself being hauled up and half-carried from my bed. In my stupor I asked what was happening and heard my mother tell me to hurry to get inside. I saw my grandmother manhandling my sister in a similar way. We were dragged inside the cottage and put down on something comfortable. I heard doors and windows being slammed shut, in spite of the heat, and then, like any ten-year-old, I promptly fell asleep again!

I woke next morning to the sound of Josh and Eve returning from shikar, and leapt up to hear the news of the man-eater. I heard Josh tell Mum that the trip had been unproductive, and that although they had both sat in a machan (tree platform) for three nights, over a recent kill, the tiger had not returned. Mum became very agitated and told Josh and Eve of the fireflies in the hibiscus bush the previous night, and of two in particular that were *yellow*, not green. Josh listened quietly, then turned and went with Eve to the hibiscus. I followed. They crouched down under the bush and inspected the ground beneath the ten-foot high chain link fence. It had rained during the night and there, impressed in the soft earth, were the pugmarks of the man-eater they had been hunting for the last three days!

Fortunately, for us, it must have fed well before it visited our compound.

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