

White Cargo 7

Last time, we heard how Felicity's mother, Laura (known as YoYo) gathered more and more luggage and created a home environment for her family wherever they arrived on their travels, while Geoffrey was happy to travel light. Felicity told her father that she was planning a burial plot in Dorset for him, to avoid the terrible confusion that ensued when they tried to take Laura's ashes to India.

Episode 7

Now look here! This is getting beyond a joke..... Today, as soon as I started reading to you, you let out a blood-curdling groan. I could not believe the groans were connected to my reading, but having tested it out, it would appear that they are. Either you don't like Byron; you hate my reading to you; or you react to what can you react to, but the poem?

Other people say you hold their hands tight or look meaningfully into their eyes, but I never seem to be here when that happens, and I get the feeling that you don't want me here any more. Do you blame me for not getting you better?

I was always the one you looked to in the last ten years of your life. Maybe you think I'm holding you prisoner here. So many questions. And none answered.

And it's raining. It's been raining for hours, gentle English rain, dribbling out of the grey sky. Not like the monsoon rain of India that you and I loved so much.

On the first day of the monsoon, the skies exploded in a magnificent waterfall of solid warm wetness. The heat was suffocating for weeks, and the nights unbearable. When the rains finally came, we would all run outside – children, adults, dogs – and drink in the sweet water, dripping with cool relief. I would run and find Jennifer. Taking my hand, she would say, 'Come on, little Fatty Foo, let's see who can get wettest.' Hours of walking later, we would return, sopping wet, content in the knowledge that tonight we could sleep.

Jennifer had the most glorious smile, teeth white and shiny and perfectly straight. I called her Fufu, Jennifer being a mouthful, and she called me little Fatty Foo. Years later, looking at early photos of myself, I realized it was perhaps a little unkind. Plump perhaps.

Maybe that nickname was the only small sign of sibling rivalry, something we seem to have bypassed in our relationship – although she did ask my mother to promise faithfully that, as soon as I had finished breastfeeding, I was to be given away (a promise I believe my mother made, for some reason). But I adored Fufu without conditions. And she responded with fierce love and protection.

I knew I wasn't pretty, I knew Jennifer was the pretty, clever one, but I was not the slightest bit jealous. I loved her completely, and my plainness was not her

fault.

She was a most beautiful woman in her youth, but sometimes weak from asthma, coughs and colds. By contrast I never caught a thing: I would eat all sorts of unspeakable rubbish with no ill effects and sail through fevers in a few days. Jennifer was different. But then Jennifer was good.

'You're a bad little bugger, Foo, and you're as tough as old nails,' Geoffrey would say, if ever I crossed him. Jennifer would burst into tears and throw things or slap his face if there was a disagreement, and he would slap her back – quite often, as he did Mother – but he never struck me in his life.

But for all my admiration of her, I never wanted to be like her. She was definitely the favoured one, but her constant generosity of spirit sometimes left her exhausted. She spent herself pleasing other people, unable to keep any part for herself. Her confidence in herself was very frail. She had more talent as an actor than I ever did, but she had inherited none of Geoffrey's bravery and bluster.

Jennifer told me everything. Mother told me nothing at all. Her finishing-school manners had taught her to cover her underwear with her dress or skirt when she laid them out on a chair. It never occurred to me to broach any intimate subject with her at all. So it was that I remained in blissful ignorance until, at the advanced age of eleven, Jennifer explained in rudimentary terms the well-overdue facts of life. She proceeded to amaze me with details of bodily functions that I found quite fascinating and not a little silly.

'Are you sure? Are you really sure?' I kept saying. 'You're not teasing me, are you?' I had always wished I was a boy, now I knew that I was right. It was a few years before I finally came to terms with the inevitable and started to enjoy being female, but by then I was falling in love a lot and it all seemed worth it.

There was another baby between Jennifer and me, whom my mother lost during the war. They had been staying in the family house in Barrow, and Jennifer, a small child, was asleep in her cot. My mother woke to an explosion of sound and light, then found herself in darkness with cold night air rushing through the bedroom. One side of the house had gone: the wall where Jennifer's cot stood. In the dark she rushed over, thinking to throw herself after Jennifer, but the cot was still there, with the child safe.

But in the morning my mother lost her baby. She never mentioned the baby to me until a year before she died. By then she was eighty-five and very frail and we were driving to see the hip surgeon in Harley Street. She said it had been a little boy, and that she had never told anyone about it. How different were the reactions of the women of her generation, compared to the outpouring of emotions and personal problems that is thought almost essential to our state of mental health today.

I had often asked why there was a thirteen-year gap between my sister and me, and was always given 'the war' as the answer – and, although even I could see that the maths didn't quite work, I never inquired further.

Another seizure. I was 'called in'. And now I'm here. You look as white as a sheet.

They've been giving you oxygen. You don't look well, darling. I think you are on the way out this time. What can I do, my dear? What can I do?

Three days later. You old bugger. You're still here. So you are not going on the boat to Hades this time. You are a remarkable piece of man. I came across one of your early diaries the other day. I knew you loved India, but I had no idea you loved it so much.

Christmas Day, 1956, Ootacamund.

It is all here, in India.....The eternal snows of the Himalayas, the Central jungles, the mountain streams, turning into giant rivers, the deserts, the romantic royal cities, the tropical south and the cool hills, the white beaches of Goa and the exotic east coast. All here. The multiple creeds of Hindu, Muslim, Christian....the Parsees and the Jews, all living in harmony. This country is blessed by myriads of Gods, all looking down upon us. One can feel it as soon as one arrives. It is here for everyone....and the blessing is India. That is why India is my home.

Okay. You win. I'll cancel the plot in Dorset.

The Maharajah seemed enormous. His colossal belly strained the ruby and diamond buttons on his brocade astrakhan coat, and his head, swathed in a fuchsia puggaree, seemed impossibly out of reach. I held the jasmine and rose petals in my by now sweaty six-year-old hands and, going on tiptoe, extended my arms in a futile attempt to garland this giant. The company had just finished performing *Arms and the Man* for him and his family at the palace, and as a special treat I was allowed to stay up late and pay this tribute to our patron. But our patron was standing up and talking to the cast, and I was down below and unnoticed. Suddenly a vision in turquoise silk and gold jewels bent down and whispered into my ear, 'Let me help you, sweetie.' In a waft of Mitsouko, the Maharanee of Udaipur lifted me up and allowed me, blushing, to garland her husband. We were staying at the palace at the invitation of the Rajah. The royal family treated our motley crew as if we were honoured guests, rather than as travelling actors for hire. The east wing of the palace had been opened up for us. After Independence, the princes had been persuaded to sign over much of their power in return for their title and a pension that could not compete with their former riches. The family, having to cut down in order to survive in these relatively straitened circumstances, had shut up most of the palace and now lived in only a small part of it, though still in comparative splendour. Only a few years after our visit they would turn their home into the luxury hotel it is now, with air-conditioning and television. But when we were there, the smell was musty and the atmosphere decidedly spooky, but to our band of actors, used to cheap digs in England, this was opulence few had dreamed of. There were hunting trophies everywhere and billiard rooms with dozens of tiger skins on the walls or strewn on the floor. There were cabinets full of jewelled ornaments, silver lamps, gold trays, ivory tables – the place was like a museum, crammed full to bursting with heirlooms. My favourite was an electric train made of silver. It ran the full length of the banqueting table on a silver track, stopping in front of any guest who wished to help themselves to one of the spicy delicacies piled high on its silver carts.

Arms and the Man was one of two shows given to an invited audience. The show was played out under the stars on the balcony, against the backdrop of the lake, surrounded by mountains. In the middle of the lake was the now famous water palace, a beautiful pale ghost of domes and carved marble balconies, shivering in the moonlight, that seemed to float on the water. Before we gave our command performance we had been given several days to make ourselves at home. On our second day Mary and I went exploring. At the back of the palace we came across dozens of stables, astonishing because of their curious size – they looked as though they belonged to some giant.

An old driver was polishing the silver Rolls in the courtyard. ‘Oh, yes, so you’ve come to see the pets?’ he inquired. ‘Come, come, I’ll show you the Rajah Sahib’s collection.’

He led us into the dark stalls, and whisked away large pale sheets to reveal a collection of priceless cars. There were Bentleys, Bugattis, Fords, American limos, Italian sports cars, gleaming, in mint condition.

‘Rajah Sahib, he no drive, he just check up every day. Every day he does check up! He comes to look at his pets.’

Then he explained the mystifying size of the stables. ‘These garages are elephant stalls. We had so many elephants, now we only have one, come with me, I’ll show him.’

We went through another courtyard, past what seemed to be hundreds of horse stables that looked minute by comparison – empty now, just dust and weeds, the days when a Rajah had hundreds of horses and dozens of elephants long gone. In a clearing stood the sole remaining elephant. He was chained to the ground by one foot and was being fed grass by a tiny boy. ‘He’s very friendly,’ said the driver. ‘Azrul, show your tricks.’ Azrul shouted ‘Ooot, ooot’ and nudged the elephant’s trunk with a small stick. At this, the elephant twisted his trunk around the waist of the little mahout boy and plopped him on his neck, where he looked down at us and laughed. We were later to be given a ride on this old chap in the howdah that he was to wear when he carried Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on her first state visit to India in the sixties.

We left the elephant to his breakfast and continued on our sightseeing walk.

The next morning we had just had breakfast when a message came that there was a present for me. Presents were not something we went in for much; they were reserved strictly for birthdays and Christmas time, so I was more than a little excited. I rushed to get Mary, and we went in search of the ‘present’.

First I was told it was in the stable block. We went and asked the drivers if they knew anything about a present, but they pointed to the kitchens. This was like a game of hide and seek, and by now I was bursting with anticipation. At the back of the palace the kitchen block opened out on to a yard full of women chopping onions and sifting rice, grinding spices and washing silver cooking vessels.

Amid all this hubbub were children playing and one of them had a baby deer, a tiny creature on the end of a piece of string. He was feeding it milk from a baby’s glass bottle. ‘Oh, Missy Baba, this is your present,’ said one of the cookboys.

I couldn’t believe it. My very own live Bambi – small, bony and still wobbly on

stick-like legs. I gathered up my precious bundle and staggered back to our rooms with him, where he promptly peed on the floor. Mother put her foot down and he had to be returned to the yard at night.

He became quite tame in the remaining week of our stay. He would follow me about the garden and frolic along the endless corridors of the palace. I called him Raju and loved him completely.

Raju was the consequence of a hunting party the night before. They had failed to bag any tigers, and had ended up shooting a deer just before dawn. They had not seen the baby, or they would not have fired. When they went to collect their trophy, this little chap had been standing over his dead mother. Jennifer was a vegetarian and passionate animal lover, so this episode sent her into a major outbreak of anguish and horror. I, on the other hand, was not much moved. I was a hard-hearted little thing, and already my experience of India and the poverty of people meant that animals came way down on my list of priorities.

I spent an idyllic week playing with my Raju, and when the time came to say goodbye I don't remember shedding any tears. I was already used to moving on and leaving behind friends and places, going on to new adventures. But I had been so happy with my little companion that I managed to persuade my mother to get me a kitten for Christmas. She promised. She never forgot or broke her promises, but this was one I came to regret that she kept.

End of Ep 7