

White Cargo 9

Last time, we heard how little Felicity's Christmas kitten turned out to be the monstrous fighting tomcat, Sheba, which attacked her on every possible occasion. Mother was oddly attached to him, and he was of some benefit when Mother's guilt at keeping the savage beast caused her to bribe the little girl with a lovely gift for Foo to give to Jennifer for her 21st birthday. Geoffrey's 88th birthday was celebrated at his bedside by Felicity and the grandchildren, remembering Jennifer, who sadly had died fifteen years before. Geoffrey smiled at Kunal, Jennifer's eldest son, and it seemed like a miracle.

Episode 9

I was a tomboy and one of my favourite pastimes was climbing the tall tamarind trees. Hours and hours would be spent in the countryside all by myself, climbing trees or wading in streams, playing with the half-tame goats, or just sitting in the shade, waiting for the time to pass until the grown-ups had finished working or Mary called me in to eat or nap.

Because I spoke Hindi I could easily find playmates when I was very small, and usually ended up playing with the servants' children, who always ran about the compounds behind the kitchens. We often played Bones, a fiendishly complicated game that involved tossing old bones into the air and catching them precisely in the correct order. Mary would take me to the local meat seller and we would get a dozen or so goats' knuckles, then Mary would clean them and dry them in the sun. Very old, worn bones that looked like polished ivory were best, and I would barter several new bones for an old worn one.

I had a collection of cloth dolls bought at railway stations. They were all Indian women or men in traditional costumes, and the better ones could be dressed and undressed in their little coats or saris. I longed more than anything for a baby doll, but baby dolls were simply not available in India, so I made do with my sari'd ladies, performing grown-up stories with them from the plays I knew.

It was a magical childhood, no doubt about it, and I was never lonely or unhappy. The days were solitary sometimes, but I liked being on my own and living in a world of make-believe. Besides, the company was an extended family who petted and teased me.

The biggest tease was James Gibson, who appointed himself my firm friend – and torturer. 'Oh, Jimmy, *please!*' Mother would object, as he inflicted yet another prank upon me, but her pleas were in vain.

Once he lifted me effortlessly under one strong arm and took a running leap into the deep end of the marble pool in Ajmer's palace gardens. I emerged clutching him round the neck, spluttering and shrieking at the top of my lungs. I could not swim and was terrified of deep water.

'You're such a coward, Foo. Come on, let's do it all over again.' And he yanked me out, laughing, and held me over the water until my high-pitched screams shattered the afternoon peace. 'Oh, James,' Mother said. 'Must you?'

My relationship with him split into equal parts of devotion and terror as to what gruesome thing he would do to me next. Mother's refrain, 'Oh, Jimmy, not again' accompanied most of our activities.

He had joined the company in England. His thick American accent never left him, but he was an ardent company member and hurled himself with great enthusiasm into a wide variety of parts. His playing the Prince of Morocco blacked up, with Shashi Kapoor cast as Gratiano, paled down, was typical of my father, who observed political correctness long before such a thing was considered important. He had a very genuine lack of prejudice when it came to nationality. 'All actors are the same,' he would cry. 'What the hell does the colour of their skin or the shape of their eyes have to do with it? Are we pretending to be someone else, or are we not? Typecasting is a bloody abomination!'

One of my early non-speaking parts was as Jimmy's small servant boy in *The Merchant of Venice*, a part invented by my father. I was blacked up to match him. I would simply follow the Prince on, take off his golden slippers, and placing them in front of me, stand looking out front, not moving for the duration of the scene, until the Prince, in a huff at making a bad choice of casket, thereby losing out on Portia and her fortune, strode off with the little page-boy in hot pursuit. Small pause, little page-boy rushes on again having forgotten Prince's slippers, says 'oh' at the audience, and clutching the forgotten gold slippers, rushes off again to the sound of gentle laughter – if he got the timing right.

Very impressed with the red pantaloons and the small embroidered waistcoat and gold turban, I enjoyed the first few performances immensely. But after a week or so, the long scene began to pall and although Jimmy was always sweet to me, joking and teasing me in the wings, once we went on stage he was fully immersed in his role and little Foo did not exist.

One particularly sweltering afternoon in Ajmer, I was standing on the stage of a boys' school as the little page-boy. Sweat was trickling down my chubby legs inside the pantaloons, and I was wishing I could be an ordinary little girl and not dressed up like a dog's dinner and told to stand still. I was lost in my wrath and self-pity, completely absorbed by aggressive thoughts, when suddenly I noticed that Jimmy had stopped speaking. I looked round, to a glare from Jimmy and muffled giggles from the boys in the front row. Then I realized, to my horror, that a large pink bubblegum bubble was fully inflated in front of my nose.

Shame of extraordinary proportions descended on to my tiny frame. I wished most sincerely to be swallowed up, made to disappear. This emotion was replaced in an instant by the panic of conflicting decisions. Should I pop the bubble, which might stick to my blacked-up face, run off stage, ignore the whole thing, or suck in the offending article, hoping that I could swallow it and not choke to death? In the end I removed the gum with my hand and kept it in my sweaty little palm until we left the stage. I was very unhappy. I had behaved in the most atrocious manner by going on stage chewing gum, and I had let down Jimmy and spoiled his scene. He was not amused, and neither was Mother. She waited until the end before silently giving me the 'look that froze the heart' in the dressing room.

I learnt to swim shortly after this, partly, I'm sure, to impress my friend Jimmy and try to gain back a modicum of his respect.

But I was still on the perimeters of the workings of the Firm, still spending my days with Mary playing in the jasmine-scented gardens of India without a care in the world. But my life as a little memsahib was soon to be interrupted by school time.

The question of how I might be educated loomed larger and larger, prompted partly by our regular visits to the Loreto Convents. There is a Loreto School for Girls in every city, some towns and all the major hill stations. At that time they offered a most exclusive and very expensive education to the daughters of the British Raj and the aristocracy and civil servants of India.

We had played at every one of the convents, where the nuns were always welcoming. But as I grew older they became increasingly concerned. 'Where will your little daughter go to school?' I would hear the nuns ask my mother over and over again. 'Why don't you give her to us? We'll gladly take her on.'

Mother would not think of losing little Foo to boarding: having left Jennifer in England during the war, nothing would induce her to leave me. But the constant worried inquiries about my education became embarrassing, and she started 'having a go' at Geoffrey. His ideas on anything were always left of centre and his response was typical. 'Formal education is a lot of bollocks!' he shouted. 'I should know, I've been in thousands of schools. If you know the works of Shakespeare and Milton, and the Bible, if you can read, if you have travelled the globe with your eyes open, what more can you require? Unless you want to be a bank manager or mend bicycles!' He thundered on: 'I am giving her the best education in the world, and teaching her a trade. I'm giving her her freedom. Freedom from wanting things. What do you want her to go to school for? She'll learn sod all!'

Mother persisted, as usual, until she got her way, and Geoffrey capitulated – in his own style. He finally agreed that I could go to school – not just to one convent but to all of them.

And so it was. Whenever we stayed anywhere for more than a few weeks, I would go to the local Loreto. The books would be the same, the holidays and the syllabus would coincide, I would make a lot of friends, and best of all, the nuns would not charge a single rupee. To this day I don't know how he swung that one, but Geoffrey and his troupe were much loved by the Loreto nuns, and I was made to feel most welcome.

There was, however, the issue of school uniforms. Each school had a completely different outfit to adapt to the wildly varying climates. A heated battle with my father ensued. I refused point-blank to set foot inside a classroom unless I had the correct gear.

'It's only a costume, Foo. Why don't you go in civvies and be different?' pleaded Geoffrey, not wanting to watch his hard-earned rupees disappear on a dozen different gymslips. 'That's the POINT,' I said stubbornly. 'It's the wrong costume and I want to look the SAME.' I was already feeling that I was the odd one out too often for comfort, and I would not give in this time.

'Come on then, you little monkey,' sighed my father. 'I'll get you the right stuff.....and a new tin trunk to carry it in.'

We set off for the shops in Bangalore's Victoria Crescent and returned an hour later with a big silver trunk painted with garish motifs and sporting my

first very own lock and key. Into this wonderful shiny box, I lovingly packed my new uniforms: the red and white woollies for cold Simla; the grey and blue pleated skirt and cardigan for Naini Tal and the navy gymslips for Darjeeling, with tie, blazer, woolly gloves and beret. A horrid khaki cotton dress for Karachi; a sweet gingham job for Bangalore; Bombay was smart beige and yellow; and so on.

And so my formal education began. Every time we moved on, I joined a different class in a different school. I got more and more used to 'catching up', and although the first few days were horrid, I was a cheerful child and made friends – though not long-standing ones. I liked being with my peer group and loved learning. When things got too tough, I had the alibi of being underprivileged and the ultimate get-out of being able to move on.

I especially enjoyed my schooldays in Bangalore. The most anglicized city in India, after Independence there was no wholesale repainting of street names, as there was in much of India. Queen's Road, Kensington Road and Brigade Road are all as they were. I went to the Sacred Heart Convent, where Mary would bring my lunch to school every day, hot from the hotel kitchen: rice and dhal, and a sweetmeat, all in a tiffin carrier with each item in its own compartment and the whole wrapped in a cloth. This she would lay out for me on the log table on the verandah, and then go and chat to the other ayahs who had done the same for the twenty girls in my class. It was here that I took my first exam – to my utter astonishment, and that of everyone else, I came first.

Laura recorded the incident in a letter home:

'Homestead', Residency Road, Bangalore

Dear Mother,'

Foo has just come in beaming with her school report! First! No one is more surprised than she is! This is so much better for her than it was in Karachi, when the only tests she did she was top in Urdu and bottom in English.

For a few years this unusual experience of the education system seemed to work for me. But Geoffrey was right. Apart from Hindi and Indian history, which I loved, I learned 'sod all'. And the uniform situation turned into a nightmare. As I started to grow, they were always too big or too small, or I ended up with combinations of both. Replacing every article every year became prohibitively expensive, so I constantly resembled Alice in Wonderland between bites: blazers down to my knees over a skirt that showed my knickers. It was agony. And it certainly did not help my concentration to think that I looked like a fat bag lady beside the delicate, wealthy and beautifully groomed girls of the convents.

Then one day I was literally thrown on to the stage. I must have been about nine years old and going to school at the Convent of Mary and Joseph in Byculla, Bombay. My father thought it a good idea to set me to work on Saturdays in my first speaking part.

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End of Episode 9