

White Cargo 6

Last time, we left the Kendal company back in India, touring endlessly, with six-year old Felicity (known as Foo) reunited with her ayah, Mary. Geoffrey led the company with huge enthusiasm for spreading the Word of Shakespeare's genius. Laura, his wife, (known as YoYo) was the power behind the throne, cool, unflappable, mothering the company.

Episode 6

While Geoffrey adored the travelling and footloose life free of possessions, Mother's attitude to being on the road was more qualified. She became expert at imposing a sense of normality and continuity wherever we went. In half an hour she could transform a tatty room in a guest-house into a cosy lived-in apartment. Out would come the throws and the family photographs, books would be laid out and 'things' littered all over the room 'to nicen it up.'

As the months of travelling turned into years, the essential few bags for costumes and clothes expanded to include tin trunks and boxes of books, bedrolls with pillows and sheets, heavy leather cases for ornaments and tablecloths.

'Bloody women!' Geoffrey would explode at some point on every journey. 'What in Christ's name do you need all this damn *junk* for? I spend a fortune on coolies to carry books you never read and clothes you never wear. I have one suitcase and I run the sodding outfit!'

Mother paid no attention to his outbursts, and the caravan of possessions grew steadily larger. Sometimes she would sneak a tip to the coolies or rickshaw men who laboured, sweating, under almost immovable boxes of books. They would salaam and bless her, as she turned to me with a 'Shhh. Don't tell your father.'

'I never tell him anything, Mummy, you know that,' I would reply. I never disobeyed her. She never raised her voice and there was no hysteria, just quiet control. While Geoffrey was a firecracker, liable to explode at the slightest hint of trouble, she was calm – though in reality she was every bit as forceful. She rarely lost her temper, and only once did she do so with me, when she took a Mason Pearson hairbrush to my bare bottom. Whatever it was I did, I never did it again.

A woman of infinite patience, she was especially good with children. When she was with me her concentration and commitment were absolute. She would read to me for hours. She, like Mary, was forever hugging and kissing, unlike my father, who restricted himself to a stiff pat on the head now and then.

I realize, looking back, that at this time in my life I was completely happy. Mary was my Mary. I worshipped my big sister, placing her firmly on a pedestal from which she was never to topple. Mother was Mother, and my father was Geoffrey, and he was something else. From my earliest years he treated me as an equal. He never talked down to me or altered his tone. He would ask my advice about tour dates and shows long before I was equipped to know the answer. If he got into a tight spot about money or conflicting

dates, we would go for a walk and he would sound me out, and even if he didn't take my advice, he pretended to, which made me feel important. I was the only one, apart from Mother, who stood up to him. I believed he really did value my opinion, and we had years of a very truthful and close relationship. But I didn't think he loved me very much. I did not mind. I had more love than I needed.

You were never much of a toucher. So it's been hard getting used to giving you the odd cuddle, and holding your one good hand. I'm still half afraid you'll jump up and shout, 'Stop being so bloody namby-pamby and pawing like a dog.'

Geoffrey was very Victorian in his attitude to affection, and how to show it. I can remember him holding Mother's hand only once, and that was at night when there was no one else there. But he dearly loved her and looked after her every need as best he could, showing his devotion by never letting her out of his sight, keeping her by his side, and bullying her every day.

Mother sailed through the travelling and performing the length and breadth of India, juggling everything with consummate ease. Then she got religion.

We first met Father Patrick Arango in Bangalore. A lovely man, intelligent, witty and very wise. Father Pat and my parents spent hours sitting on the veranda in the evening arguing about politics, life and literature. Geoffrey would often get bored and stomp off to do his letters or have a drink with the boys.

Mother began first by going to mass, then in the space of six months, converted to Catholicism. She played the part to perfection. A great many mantillas joined her wardrobe. Rosaries, a small crucifix and a Bible became her bedside companions. Soon she became impossibly virtuous and took to bestowing forgiving smiles even when there was nothing to forgive. Many a row ended with Geoffrey bellowing at her about her 'bloody daft saintliness' when in his opinion she was 'as wicked as a witch' and had 'evil thoughts'. This line of attack was intended to goad her into her old self, but for a while she was not to be goaded.

The embarrassment factor for me, however, became almost unbearable. I was used to Mother being glamorous and witty, and her sudden transformation was appalling. Gone were the snazzy slacks and Dietrich sunglasses, to be replaced by baggy skirts and frumpy bush shirts. She stopped her lifetime habit of Pond's Perfect Pink lipstick. Even her lavender eau de Cologne and April Violets perfume languished at the bottom of her suitcase – and that was the most alarming of all: she not only looked like a missionary, but she also no longer smelled like my mother.

Worse still, she started taking me to morning mass on Sundays. I did not mind the mass; it was her behaviour that made it an ordeal. Even as a child I realized that it was out of proportion to the event. She genuflected at everything. She knelt far longer than anybody else and in places where no one else did at all. When she went up for holy communion, I would say a heartfelt prayer that God would not allow her to go the whole hog and prostrate herself in front of the altar.

Halfway into this religious obsession, Jennifer was persuaded to join us on

Sunday. This only made matters worse, as she soon developed a habit of fainting dead away in the middle of the service. Almost on cue, just before the sermon, up to the pulpit would go the priest and, thump, down would go Jennifer. By now the combination of sister and mother would have turned me red with shame, and I would stand at a distance while she was patted and watered on the steps of the church. The next Sunday, kneeling between us and looking sweetly at the holy tabernacle, plop!, down she'd go again. In the end even Laura admitted defeat and reluctantly agreed to leave her behind.

Geoffrey had his own opinion, as usual, and goaded Jennifer with it. 'It's because you're bad!' he chuckled. 'God looks down and sees your rotten soul. He sees all your sins. He has seen you with ALL THOSE MEN! He knows.....' And he would roar with laughter.

Geoffrey could not care less about the state of anyone's soul, let alone that of my sister. But I think he had an inkling of what she was up to. I only wished that I had thought of it first.

In fact, Geoffrey had been a convert to the Catholic Church for many years, but his reasons were not simply religious, but rather more complex. His admiration for the nuns, priests and missionaries, who covered the Far East with their splendid schools, was tremendous. He also owed them his livelihood and needed their approbation to a certain extent. His love of pomp and ceremony made him enjoy the ancient and theatrical traditions of the Latin mass, and he had a very strong sense of moral values – even if it was a little hard to discern sometimes.

He maintained that human beings had a soul and that they needed to look to something other than themselves in order to be released from self-centred pettiness. His religion and beliefs, like so much of himself, he kept private. It was not surprising, then, that he reacted with such scepticism to Mother's religious fervour.

After about two years of this, and for no apparent reason, Mother suddenly returned to her level self again. The holy pictures were left inside the suitcase, the Bible and rosaries were joined by family snaps, and her beloved pipe lay once more at hand for the smoke before bedtime.

Her friendship with Father Pat, however, continued all her life as a strong and stable influence. Letters went between them every week for years to come. But as Geoffrey said, 'Thank God your potty phase is over.'

Can't kiss you today, Daddy, I've got a cold. And what's more, so have you. You have been wheezing away like an old broken instrument. I've been organizing your funeral. I feel you deserve a well-staged affair, since you are giving me ample time to plan it. So I've decided to bury you in Dorset, on the coast, overlooking the sea, with great big tree planted near you. I have spoken to the undertakers, who are not the usual grim-faced and depressing bunch, but jolly and positive. They will look after you and do things that will make us all feel comfortable. I will go down and look at the plot. That way I won't be caught out and have to decide things in between rehearsing a play and grieving..

And we don't want a repeat of Yo Yo's (Laura's) torturous journey, with the undertakers locking up her ashes over the weekend so she missed the flight to Bombay with you and the family, who were off to scatter them in the Goan

Sea. The ashkeeper had taken the weekend off and left town, and the key to the ash safe went with him. You and the three grandchildren were booked to fly out early on Sunday morning with Mother. I was in a show so unable to come. We waited in vain outside the man's house until the early hours of Sunday morning, but he failed to return and you flew off without her! A pointless exercise, but the tickets were paid for and booked, and off you went, leaving me to deal with the remains on Monday morning. After a great deal of high-voltage aggression on my part, YoYo was dispatched to join you all by 'special courier.' Apparently ashes of 'human origin' cannot by law be 'shipped', they have to be accompanied by a live person! So off she went, sitting on the lap of an out-of-work drummer, a nice young chap in leather trousers, with earrings and a pony-tail. He must have sat patiently with her for the nine-hour flight to Bombay. But how did he go for a pee? Did she go too? Or did he ask the passenger in the next seat to 'kindly hold on to this for me'?

He arrived in Bombay without a permit to land, so YoYo's grandson had to go through customs and collect her. All this ended in her being scattered on the sea in Goa, at sunset, as her firstborn daughter had been some years before. But what a fiasco to get her there. So I've decided you're staying here.

Letter from Geoffrey:

The Love House, Baga Beach, Goa, India
11th Feb. 1992

My Dear Felicity,

First I want to thank you for all you've done for us. You must have felt as terrible as I did and you conquered it bravely.

Yesterday the ashes were scattered on the waters – I could not feel sad – that was not YoYo at all – oh dear.

Now it is all over I feel desperate – It has been too long too long and I've been a brute to her, a selfish brute – and I'll never forgive myself.

YoYo was alive this time last week. Makes you think about it.

God Bless Us Everyone.

End of Ep 6