

A Rainless Place

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By Amer Hussein

1.

My father and my two older sisters shared memories of a distant place they'd lived in once. They'd talk for hours about Hyde Park and Stanmore, Selfridges and Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men and Noddy, crumpets, and strawberries with cream. It was, to us, insufferably exotic (though we didn't know the word). At the same time their talk made my younger sister and me feel excluded, and even provincial. We lived in Karachi, a hot city, where we ate oranges, banana, mangoes, papaya and custard apples, only knew the oases and the sea, couldn't understand what strawberries or crumpets tasted like, and, lactose-intolerant, hated cream. And if my mother decided to join the others to remember that winter day when she'd walked on a pond sheathed in thin ice and fallen in, we'd feel even more excluded. Since our only picture of snow was what we saw on Christmas cards: in a place that hardly knew rain, snow was as alien to us as chimneys and Santa Claus.

Our father received the Times, in gauzy sheets, every two or three days, and he'd discuss ballets and pantomimes with my sisters: one of their most vivid recollections was of being taken to see Russian dancers perform Swan Lake at the Royal Opera. (For us, entertainment, in those times without television, meant films, puppet shows, amateur theatricals, fancy dress parties and fairs.) Father also had letters from abroad with pictures of the Queen on their stamps. 'Does she rule us, then?' We'd want to know. 'No,' my mother said, irate. 'Why,' we'd ask, 'do we call her a queen?' 'She's the Queen of England,' we were told.

Was England in London? Was London in Pakistan? Or in India? We knew India was far away, because getting there required a drive to the airport, a wait in a lounge, a trip on a noisy plane, and a much, much longer drive into town once we reached Bombay. /p>

No, it isn't, it's much further than India, very far away. On that at least we could agree.

We saw the Queen in 1960, I think, when I was about five. She wore a yellow-petalled hat and waved to hundreds of bystanders from a car. My English sisters were taken to meet her; we weren't. As I remember, I didn't mind; I'd be taken to meet Sirikit of Thailand and Zhou Enlai of China in years to follow, and would feel quite silly garlanding the latter and his wife on the steps of a plane. In England, our mother was taken for a princess (which she was, in a way, though

she didn't like to be called that) or a movie star. (One day, she came across Louis Jourdain shooting for a film with Leslie Caron .She asked them for an autograph; they took out their pens and asked for hers). At home, she seemed quite normal, though she was different from most people's mothers. People often gasped at her beauty when they saw her; she sang very well, and frequently drove her little car up one-way streets.

My oldest sister had every Enid Blyton book that had ever been published, and inevitably we read them as we made the transition from picture books to more grown up tales of adventure. But though I couldn't understand the food they talked about - marmite and potted shrimps - their picnics seemed very adventurous in comparison to our sedate family outings when adults and children drove off together to the seaside or some green place. Then, the thrill of their mid-night feasts was something we couldn't replicate, as getting up to raid the fridge after midnight seemed an exceedingly tame act when the fridge was stocked especially for us with apples and pears and chocolates and cheeses, and some hapless servant might rise and rush to ask us what we needed, thinking we'd been underfed at dinner.

But though the Famous Five made our life seem unadventurous by contrast., reading about England made me no more curious than I was about China or Estonia. The first foreign city I visited, at Christmas when I was nearly eleven, was Rome, which I had wanted to see: when the chance came at the end of that Italian trip to visit London or Beirut, I preferred to go to Beirut because it was on our way home and I'd heard London's temperature was below freezing. But Andersen and the Brothers Grimm and the narratives in the Old Testament and the Koran I loved , until and beyond the time I graduated to the Iliad and the Odyssey and Plutarch's Lives, and later, courtesy of my sisters, Shakespeare and Tennyson and Wilde and Shaw . Recently, I questioned a friend from Karachi who said her vision of the world had been shaped by reading Enid Blyton and other British children's books. 'How,' I said, 'when our mental landscape was so different, could we feel inspired by the exploits of Dick or George or Fatty?' ' Blyton made me curious about other places,' she said, and I could recognise that instinct, but my curiosity about the world was sharpened by those headier texts I read when I was older.

Again, without knowing the word, I knew when I was about five that my father was a permanent expatriate. Born in Karachi, he'd grown up in many other places, and as a teenager he'd gone alone to England where he studied for several years, until in 1939 his father's anxieties about the war that was being waged took him away. Ever since, one of his regular residences had been a plane. And though he was very much a part of Karachi - it was hard to imagine the city without him, and when he was away on one of his very frequent trips, the space of his absence was larger than his presence, to be filled only by the extravagant gifts we knew he'd bring - he was always dreaming of other places.

I am evoking my father with a lot of words that begin with exes - exotic places, exclusive memories, extravagant gifts - but the only one of these ex-words he shared with my mother was expatriation. My mother was more immersed in my father's native city than he ever seemed to be. Apart from getting us to school on time, often driving or collecting us herself, then overseeing our homework, there were charities, art exhibitions, fashion shows, diplomatic

receptions and concerts. Or at home, the music lessons twice a week, or the occasional article she was bullied into writing by hand, and dictating over the phone, by my aunt or some importunate friend who worked for Dawn or The Morning News, that kept her busy from morning till, at times, after midnight. Then there were the huge family gatherings we hosted occasionally on Sundays, when all my father's cousins turned up for enormous meals.

It was rare for our mother to leave Karachi without all of us in tow. Her expatriation was of another sort. We knew she'd moved here as a bride in 1948, gone with my father soon after to London, and when she'd come back a couple of years before I was born - I understand this now - she'd made every effort to recreate a semblance of the landscape she'd left behind. An early memory of the first house we moved to in the late '50s is of a truck arriving to plant grass in our barren yard - I may be inventing this, but I'm sure that they chose the house because it was on a hill full of hedges and wild flowering bushes, with soil more fertile than the sand and rock that seemed to make up most of Karachi. And when I said, one day, that I remember that the garden grew lavishly green overnight, my father laughed. I wasn't far from wrong, my mother tells me today: the grass - imported, she thinks, from New Zealand - was of the fast-growing sort.

Try as she did, our mother's Karachi gardens could only create illusions of her native place: the air and the water were different. What we had was a case of artifice triumphant, making more beauty, perhaps, than the abundance nature allows. She had grown up in a region where vegetation was lush, trees very tall, and there were wells and running water at every corner. So the gardens she made combined natural resources - bougainvillea, cactus, frangipani, guava - with imported orchids and roses. The search for home was more a question of green motifs: grassy beds and shadowy places. In 1961 she moved us higher up the hill, to a house in which another expatriate had made a garden with terraces, arbours and bowers, and almonds and stunted orange trees in great coral-coloured pots, that probably evoked the greener places she'd left behind.

My sister, with their Anglophile ways, were on the other hand participants in a very local noise and glamour. They reached their teens in the new house, in '62 and '63 respectively, and studied in the international milieu of the Convent of Jesus and Mary, where I, too, was sent at the age of eight. Two or three times a year they'd have parties in the garden to which all their school friends, foreign or local, came dressed and made up to kill, and danced till their cars came to take them home at the Cinderella hour. They inhabited some private city within the city, their own particular teenaged fairground.

But to my mother the topography of sandy, stony Karachi, with its tall palm trees and stunted cacti, felt foreign: we were always tacitly aware of that. Of all her children, I at least inherited something of her estrangement from the city's climate. And all her children longed for rain as if we were born into intimacy with the rainy season, though we'd grown up in this rainless place: many of our games involved sprinklers, fountains, tubs and ponds to create illusions of the monsoon. Once when I was three or four there was a three-day downpour and the watermelon patch filled up like a pool, and we bathed with our mother in its tea-coloured water. It must

have been in May. Sometimes, though, on summer days when the heat was overpowering, or dust storms forced the city to shut down for the space of an afternoon, or clouds promised rain for three days at a time and never delivered a drop, our mother would admit she was missing her childhood home. We'd plead with her to make plans for our next journey.

2.

The places she'd take us to we could share with her: unlike London, they were three cities we knew well, the only otherwhere we had, and more exciting to us than unknown England or Enid Blyton. There was Bombay, that big, messy city which, like ours, was by the sea, but couldn't be more different in every other way; it grew upwards, and was hemmed in by its waters, whereas in Karachi houses were houses, smallish and detached and enclosed in walled gardens, and the sea was miles and miles away from where we lived. But Bombay was entertaining. My mother's sister lived there: her son was two years older than I was, and in spite of differences of character, he would, for many years, remain the closest surrogate I would ever have to a brother. You could see the sea from all the windows of their second floor flat. My mother's childhood friend lived only a few minutes' drive away with her daughters, whom we loved as if they were of our blood, though we didn't even share a religion. They were in glamorous Marine Drive, on the face of the sea.

More built up than our city, Bombay had cinemas a few moments' drive away from New Cuffe Parade where we stayed, and a club by a beach even closer to our block of flats; shopping for things modish or traditional was an hourly event. In Karachi, by contrast, we lived in fast-growing PECHS, a half-hour's drive away from the centre of town; getting to the cinema or the sea side was a long haul plan, and there was only a little market called the Nursery a short walk away from us at the foot of the hill, where everything from marzipan cakes to paperback novels and sanitary towels to sticky toffees and sharpeners with wiggly 3-D figures on them could be had. There was an ice cream parlour called Dew Drop Inn frequented by the more louche teenagers of the area, whom we knew as Teddies, in their skin-tight clothes; we could only drop in if we were in adult company, otherwise we'd have to send the driver in to buy us strawberry ice cream cones. No such strictures in Bombay, where cones could be had on every corner. It was as if we had strayed from a still and enclosed world into movement and expansion. Bombay people were louder and freer and more gaudy than we were, but also - at least, in comparison with the privileged class - spoke less elegant English, saw Hollywood movies and heard British pop (the Beatles, the Stones, and Sandy Shaw were more in vogue with us all then, in the mid-sixties, than American singers) later than we did; they still wore drainpipes when we'd migrated to flares.

But mother was always impatient to move on from Bombay.

Another city we knew well was Gwalior, where my mother's sister lived. Family weddings frequently seemed to happen here, as her daughters married and left, one by one, and her son brought his bride to take their place. You couldn't imagine a town less similar to Karachi - the

Gwalior house was an old white mansion with at least four courtyards, inner and outer, winding staircases, galleries and hidden passageways, surrounded by a babbling street busy with three-wheeled cabs, horse drawn carriages, and rickshaws. We had to switch languages here, practising our Urdu grown threadbare with disuse, with various members of the extended clan who would have found our English chatter a frivolous affectation. The city was surrounded by forest, ravines and rivers. Hunting duck and deer was a frequent pastime with women and men alike. (In her teens, my mother shot a crocodile; her older sister bagged a tiger.) There, we seemed to have gone back in time to the graciousness, the contingent rules and regulations of an era of noblesse oblige which, with all its sometimes welcome strangeness, had always been familiar from our parents' ways. But if, in Karachi, we'd tried to tell friends about riding elephants on wedding days, or shooting deer in bandit-infested forests, they'd have thought it all not only exotic but even more unbelievable than Enid Blyton.

Then there was the town my mother missed most of all: Indore, her home town, which I mention last because it remains, to me at least if not to all of us, the most important. There, the passage to another time was complete, but this, rather than calendar time, was the time of fiction, though I only recognised this in my thirties when I became a voracious reader of Urdu novels. To the children we were, it was a story that we were living rather than reading, living and also writing to read later, as if it were a diary, when we were back at home.

My grandfather, the patriarch, had his domain on the ground floor, which was at once drawing room, study and library, where books from east and west sat side by side: Annals and Antiquities of Rajputana next to Hawthorne, Fitzgerald's Khayyam elbowing Plutarch and an Urdu translation of Firdausi. He also had a room upstairs, overlooking the garden, in which he spent time until an injection left him, that man who'd walked several miles a day, unable to walk without great effort. His den was the central room in the front wing of the ground floor, which led into the garden. To its left, if you faced it from the inner courtyard, was my grandmother's realm. She held court from her four poster bed, with her books and a few treasured objects beside her. Not averse to certain western innovations if she found them comfortable, she had opted for tradition in her own room. The fine carpet on the floor was always covered by a crisp white sheet, littered with fat cushions, on which her children, grandchildren and guests sat around her. The only western intrusion in this room was the easy chair, close to the always open door, that she kept there for my grandfather's frequent incursions into her kingdom. (Once, she said she was taking her afternoon nap when she thought he entered and sat down, and lit a cigarette; she smelt the smoke of perfumed tobacco linger in the air. She didn't hear him leave. A little later, awake now, she saw him come in again. She apologised for not having roused herself before. I wasn't here, he said. Another incident, also in the afternoon, took place when in her sleep she felt his hand play with her silver anklet, and opened her eyes to find no one there.)

In the courtyard was a room that stood apart like a little pavilion, which was occupied by my grandmother's sister, another wanderer who moved from town to town depending on the season. She was a widow, and the clan's storyteller. Fiction or fact, you could rely on her to keep the records, or straighten the twist in the tale. Among the romances she told over three after-

noon sessions - she always stopped before sunset - were 'The Prince with the Needles in his Eyes', and 'The Patient Princess. ' (My older sister, a writer, would later develop and indulge a passion for collecting and retelling such tales.)

To the left of Grandfather's domain was my uncle's apartment, a little bastion of modernity within the timelessness of his family home. Furnished practically and smartly, it was remarkable, above all, for the range and number of books in it: in the bedroom, novels by Nabokov, Murdoch and Barth; in the study, volumes of Indian history, where I read enough about ancient and medieval times to get a high mark in an exam, without studying the set texts, when I was thirteen, and had then relocated, to a school which, though in India, was so far away in the South that it seemed to be in another country.

My uncle, like another of his brothers who lived far away in the Southern mountains and came home for summer and winter holidays, had chosen to be a teacher. He had three children, two girls and a boy. His oldest daughter was closest to my grandmother. Very tall with light brown hair that fell to her hips, her footsteps and her shadow seemed so essential to the corridors, courtyards and gardens of the house, that when, in 1968 at the age of eighteen, she left to marry our aunt's son in Gwalior, it seemed that, like my aunts before her, she'd take something away. Instead, she took something of Indore with her to her aunt's house, interlocking even more tightly the destiny of two houses and two families.

In some ways, life in Bombay and Gwalior resembled each other: drives, shops and the cinema, and always a lot of food. But the pace of Bombay was faster, and everywhere you had the sense of the city and the sea surrounding you; in Gwalior, the houses we visited were bigger, and often in quiet, leafy places, near rivers or lakes or hunting grounds. An endless cavalcade of guests and invitations was reminiscent of Karachi, but in Karachi you could have the occasional empty day too: not here.

In Indore, life's pace was tranquil, and for a city child restorative. You read, ate fresh fruit from the garden and honey from a farm on some family member's estate. Occasionally you drove to the centre of town. It was there that I discovered, at the age of nine, the numerous translations of Indian classics, the Ramayana and Kalidas's plays among them, that you could buy in cheap local editions from a bookshop called Rupayana, near the India Coffee House where, after your book-shopping, you could regale yourself on crisp dosa washed down with hot South Indian coffee. The neighbour's son, Kapil, who taught me to ride a bicycle and took me to see Hindi films on warm afternoons, remained my best friend for ten years, though I only ever saw him for two or three weeks a year, and would almost forget him when I went away. But every year he'd be there, in the courtyard, on his bicycle, calling out; and I would go down, take my seat behind him, and he would whizz us down the lanes into the centre of town. (Years later, something I said about life in a quiet place amazed a friend whose family was from Indore: 'It's a bustling big town,' she protested, 'not at all the sleepy place you remember').

In Gwalior, too, there was a bookshop - Sahitya Sadan - where you could buy Indian books. Here there were cheap editions of nineteenth-century French novels as well as Indian classics: Zola's Nana or France's Thais lowered at you from under curtains of blonde hair, looking like

Diana Dors or Belinda Lee in fancy dress. I think I bought my first copy of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* - an abridged edition - there. Such books nudged works by everyone from Sartre and Moravia to Pearl S. Buck and Marie Corelli and living Indian authors like Manohar Malgaonkar and K.A. Abbas on my aunt's bookshelves.

3.

I learnt to read randomly in Gwalior in 1964, carrying home an adult reading habit which my Karachi aunt, my father's sister, indulged by giving me *My Cousin Rachel* and *Gone With the Wind*

when I was ten - the latter causing me to wake up at night in panic, thinking the Yankees were coming, especially when, later that year, war broke out between India and Pakistan. That season, my mother, who'd tried to inculcate a taste for Dickens and the Bronte sisters in us, bought me a handsome edition of *War and Peace*: better an epic than a pot-boiler, and a racist one at that, she must have thought.

The Karachi aunt lived next door to us. Widowed young, she'd reinvented herself as a member of parliament, travelled frequently to attend its sessions, and remarried a man who lived in Pindi and visited her rarely. The arrangement seemed to suit her very solitary ways. When she was at home, she lived alone with a cocker spaniel and two parrots, all given to her by our father. Her library had everything in it - in expensive hardcover - from Isak Dinesen and Iris Murdoch to Flaubert and Pasternak (chosen, my sisters were convinced, by the Book of the Month Club). I was summoned into her presence to share her supper of soup, grilled meat and two vegetables, followed by fruit or creamy confections. I was rewarded with a book or two to take away for a week. She ran a glossy women's magazine which, at various times over about a decade, was managed by my mother and my two older sisters. We were taught to give her unstinting affection, since she had no children, and it took me years to realise how very little she had given any of us in return.

'When did you first miss Karachi?' My mother asked me not so long ago. 'Not Karachi, but the idea of a city of my own,' was my unpremeditated answer. It was long, long after leaving, when I'd spent half my life away, that I began to excavate a city sunken in my depths. The house and garden in Indore, on the other hand, and even the landscape of Gwalior, had always stayed in my consciousness. (When, in 1981, I'd revisited Bombay after a ten-year absence, it was as if I'd never left the place or the people there.) I do remember, at nine, on a trip through Bombay, waiting to go back home while the rain was relentless and my mother was lingering, but I knew it was late August, my father had taken my elder sisters home before their new term began, and the time had come for us to go. Was it my books I missed, or our house and garden? One or two friends, or the way I knew the city centre well enough to guide a driver anywhere I needed to go alone, most frequently a bookshop? (I knew the artery of roads and byroads around Elphinstone Street, Saddar and Bunder Road, all the cinemas and sweetshops and vendors of fruit and food, and was, under my father's expert tutelage, a seasoned shopper.)

But Karachi, which had given me my sense of city life, was never my only place; perhaps because of that I always felt slightly restless there. Was this, perhaps, a question of the city's rainless climate? Or the nine months I spent, cramped in my aunt's guest room, already an unwelcome guest in the city I should have called my own, while my mother struggled to stay on in what she felt was her children's hometown and encountered only resistance from many members of my father's clan, particularly his younger and most beloved brother? When my sisters and I left her there alone, before my thirteenth birthday, to join my father, it may have been to see whether we'd be happier, at least for a while, in our other monsoon world. For years I never looked over my shoulder at the city I had left behind. Karachi in the 70s and 80s remained a foreign place to me. When I went back for twenty days I was forty-one, and almost a stranger. I didn't contact my father's relatives, though one aunt forced me to meet some of them. (A Nicosia-born friend of mine, when I told her that I felt more at ease today in Delhi than in my native city, said: 'I feel that way about Istanbul. I'm definitely Cypriot, not Turkish, and you certainly seem more Pakistani than Indian. You and are I easiest, I think, in places that let us feel at home but lay no claim to us.' Perhaps she's right. But I'd slightly rephrase her words. I'm at my ease, too, in places that lay partial claim to me.)

So what did I miss about Karachi in those years I never thought about it? Did I miss my father's Westernised, English-speaking relatives, with their Cambridge degrees and garrulous ways? We lived separate lives, in different, distant parts of town, they in Clifton, Bath Island and Defence, we in PECHS. Apart from those family Sundays, the two big Eids were the major occasions for the extended clan to get together. That was when we saw the relatives we referred to us The Sindhi Cousins, who were gaudier, bawdier, and far more loving than the Karachi clan, with a gift for feasting and a love of music which meant that they invited some renowned singer to perform at every festivity. In Karachi, worship seemed tied to the cycles of the day and the calendar: you prayed when you saw the new moon, which announced the coming of Ramadan and of Eid, as the rising of the light announced the time to commit yourself to the day's fast, and the setting of the sun announced the time to break it with another prayer. So there was, in my mind at least, a connection between the sky and the seasons and God, Who remained an exterior and primordial being. I remember only one Eid in Indore, which, apart from a visit to the mosque for the men and special sweets, was as quiet as any other day. My grandmother prayed, without any ceremony, five times a day, as did most of my mother's people. Looking back, I have come to see that prayer there had ceased to be a ritual to become, instead, reflection, an intense and private duty which brought your Maker closer to you than your jugular vein. Now, in London, I often read the prayers I do at night, in a room where leaves press against the glass in which I can sometimes see the sky reflected, while I am still contained within the silence of walls and windows.

In Karachi, every rhythm of the day was broken by the telephone. There was a telephone in Gwalior, too, but because people came and went without announcing themselves it wasn't often used: I do remember my aunt, though, interrupted in a Mahjong game, calling out to me: It's for you. (I'd been called by Nina, a girl my aunt didn't really like, probably to arrange an outing to the cinema.) I was about to turn fifteen, and I didn't know that I'd never see Gwalior, that girl or my aunt again. (And what is the loss of a place compared to the grief of losing people?)

Grandfather, grandmother, aunt, cousin--I took an interminable journey that severed me from all of them. It was only when my grandmother died that India called me back in a voice so loud I had to listen. As it calls me back, time after time. But let me count the ones I saw again, in London or in India -aunt, uncles, cousins, friends - to console me for the ones I lost.)

There wasn't a telephone in Indore. You read and you talked and you listened to stories and played in the garden and in the cool of the night you went for after-dinner walks along the leafy lanes. Then, refreshed, you left. I never felt I'd have enough of this life until, in my fifteenth year, I stayed there for two months, and started to long for cityness again. It was as if I were shedding, cell by cell, my reason for belonging. By then I'd spent eighteen months in that small town in the Southern hills, and tasted the salt of foreign cities - Rome, Naples and Beirut; I'd left behind my birthplace for ever, and already knew I'd soon be moving on, to live in the rainy city my father and sisters had made their own so many years before, the city I had never seen.