**An elephant for breakfast**

‘Your average elephant just wants to be loved,’ says Dennis. ‘Give them affection, and pieces of fruit, and you can train them, easy. ‘

‘Really?’ Kate says. As a pickup line it is certainly original.

The old school bus lurches out of Victoria station, the motor making the sort of sounds you don’t want to hear in an engine that is meant to take you from London to Delhi. Even if the ticket has only cost fifty quid.

It is 1970, and Kate is sitting next to a sandy haired man in his late twenties, who seems friendly enough. Her travelling companion Caro has done better – she gets the good-looking guy, Duncan, with the guitar and the large black and silver ring.

The front half of bus is full, but the back half is taken up by accommodation for the two Australian bus drivers and a blonde woman. Is she their shared girlfriend whispers Kate to Caro, who raises an eyebrow.

‘I thought the pamphlet said *we have taken out half the seats to make more leg room for you*,’ Kate mutters to Dennis.

‘It did,’ he says. ‘Never trust the Aussies. Bunch of cowboys. Did you know elephants mate for life?’

The bus is green with cream accents. It looks almost vintage, a forties bus with uncomfortable seats designed to take children to and from school, not assorted eccentrics to India. Kate and Caro are on the hippie trail, although it is not called that now; the bus passengers are the pioneers creating the hippie trail. Although Hilda, an ancient woman, so Kate thinks, is travelling on her first post-retirement adventure.

It seems like only a few weeks ago that Caro and Kate sat in their shared kitchen in London having finished all their exams. ‘Are you going to apply for jobs?’ Kate asked Caro.

‘I’d like to go to India,’ she said.

‘But I’ve always wanted to go to India too!’ Kate said

They looked at each other. It was as simple as that.

And here they are. A few months later, a month long bus trip to India through Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan then India, with a job at the end.

Dennis brings Kate back to the present.

‘In India elephants have a handler for life, and they live a long time.’

Kate gives in: ‘Why do you know so much about elephants?’

‘Because I’m an elephant handler from Manchester Zoo and I’m going to pick up an elephant in India and ship her home.’

‘For real?’

‘For real.’

Kate turns around to grin at Caro. She winks back. This is an adventure. Two occupational therapists, just qualified, heading off to India, going to work in a leper colony. Never mind elephant trainers and guys with guitars, this is the journey of a lifetime. Two long-haired girls with hair parted in the middle, Kates’s brunette, Caro’s blonde, wearing hipster jeans, wide belts and T shirts.

Kate’s mother had asked – ‘Aren’t leper colonies infectious?’

‘Not any more, everyone gets treated but a lot of people haven’t got fingers and toes, or even noses, because they dropped off before they knew about treatment.’

‘Ugh. Why did you have to choose a leper colony? Why not an ordinary hospital?’

‘That’s where the jobs are.’

‘You promise to write every week?’

‘Every week Mummy. And you can write to me at the Post Restante, I’ll check the main post office in every town I have listed for you. The first one after Istanbul will be Delhi.’

The bus was already at Dover, and the bus trundles onto the cross-channel ferry. The white cliffs of Dover, those icons of Britain, recede into the distance. Kate turns to Caro in triumph. ‘We did it!’

‘Now it’s real,’ she says, leaning over the ship’s rail, looking at the grey frothy waters of the Channel.

It is when they get to Bulgaria that the problems start. If there ever was a hotel, there isn’t one now. ‘Sorry guys, you’ll have to sleep on the bus.’ Wayne, the taller of the two bus-drivers, leans against the bus door, and speaks in a nasal drawl.

‘There’s not enough room,’ Hilda says sternly.

‘Well, we’ll pull up next to a field and you can stretch out on the grass.’

Bulgaria in October is not a warm place, and with a sprinkling of snow even a warm sleeping bag is not quite adequate. Plus, Kate manages to set their part of the field alight.

‘Christ!’ Caro jumps up as the petrol stove tips over, *so convenient, the fuel is available everywhere* according to the man in the camping shop. Amazing how fast flames can spread in a Bulgarian field in the dark. They stamp and yell and throw the contents of their water bottles on it and it goes out, leaving a black unpleasant smelling patch of grass. They move, and Caro opens another packet of instant soup.

The first hotel they stay in is in Istanbul. There is an enormous bathroom and both girls are delighted at the prospect of a hot shower, with piping hot water supplied by a large rusty tank heated by a wood fire. As Kate leaves her grubby clothes on the floor and steps, pink and naked into the shower, she sees a movement out of the corner of her eye and shrieks – she has an audience of two men watching from the windows near the ceiling. Once spotted, they scramble down, and after loud complaints to the hotel manager Kate and Caro don’t see them again.

Kate loves the bazaar in the middle of Istanbul, the little shops where the owner sits them down and offers them tiny curved glasses of peppermint tea, or small cups of coffee flavoured with cardamon. Dennis and Kate have wandered off from the others; he is still valiantly wooing her with elephant stories, but she needs more romance than that, and then a carpet seller tempts them with his beautiful rugs.

He looks at Kate, at Dennis and then lays out a particularly beautiful red, blue and orange woven rug with a complicated pattern. ‘Look at the back,’ he encourages. ‘See how it is almost the same as the front. It’s the sign of excellent craftsmanship. I give you this,’ he strokes it, ‘for one night with her.’

Kate goes red. Dennis teases her by pretending to be tempted. Kate drags him off by the elbow as he declines the offer politely. The carpet seller calls after them. Kate doesn’t know whether to be flattered or enraged. ’Bloody hell, Dennis, that was a bit close. And it’s as if you own me!’ He shrugs and grins. ‘ I might give an elephant for you,’ he murmurs, looking into her eyes. Kate flushes red.

Clare and Duncan have a similar experience. ‘A trader in the bazaar offered two camels for me,’ said Clare. ’Do you think that’s less or more than a rug?’

Kate considers this thoughtfully. ‘About the same I reckon, but less than an elephant.’

The last stop for the group of passengers is the Pudding Shop, suggested by the energetic grey-haired Hilda, who has done more research on this trip than all the rest of them put together.

The Pudding Shop is a famous eating-place for hippies and beatniks, a place to exchange messages and information about travel and the hippie trail, and to eat sweet desserts overlooking the Blue Mosque. It is one of those places you have to go to, to add a notch to your belt, to say ‘I’ve been there.’

Caro and Kate choose a rice pudding with cinnamon on the top, and a chocolate pudding, both served in a small glass bowl. There is an exoticism in eating a familiar and yet more spiced version of something they know while looking at the pointed minarets of the Blue Mosque and the line of shoes outside. Kate thinks they are leaving the familiarity of Europe for the unknown of the East, and Istanbul is the gateway.

The next big city is Tehran, the capital of Iran. In early November as they get off the bus, in their jeans, they realize they are wearing the wrong clothes for this place, even though under the Shah of Iran women wear European clothing. But tight-fitting pants mean that the local men pinch them mercilessly as they walk along the street. They snap and slap the hands away and walk faster.

They are hungry, and it is Ramadan. All the restaurants and cafes are firmly closed until after sunset. But not all the nation is fasting – a guide leads a group of them down a narrow alleyway and knocks on the door. It is opened a crack; their guide gives a brief explanation in Farsi and they are welcomed in. The place is packed with men eating as fast as they can, against tradition and custom. They are served with the most delicious buttery rice and leave quickly. The atmosphere of anxiety and the fear of being caught is contagious.

Caro and Kate are sore in a number of ways. ‘Isn’t the bus an old-bone shaker?’ Caro complains ‘What with the bum pinching and being shaken about for hours on end as we drive for really long days I’m hurting all over. Even so I’d love to stay here longer.’

‘Me too. Aren’t they beautiful?’ Kate says looking up at the snow-capped mountains that rise above the city. But they have to move on, Wayne and Brett their drivers are relentless. It is obvious they want to get to Delhi as quickly as possible, often driving through the night, and if that means missing out on some of the most beautiful cities, like Isfahan, so be it. There isnt’t much the bus passengers can do, and as Hilda observes, the drivers would happily leave the whole bus load behind.

The relentless rush through Iran means they land early one evening at the border of Afghanistan, famous on the hippie trail. There is an experience, so Duncan tells them, that they have to be part of it to show that they are bona fide travellers. He pats his shirt pocket where he keeps his dope in a tobacco bag.

‘What do you mean?’ Kate asks.

‘Smoking marijuana behind closed doors is legal in Afghanistan. So the deal is, after they have ticked off your passport you light up a joint.’

‘Are you sure?’ Caro has visions of them being carted off to prison in the middle of the night.

‘Everyone talks about it. We have to do it.’

The soldiers as the customs point wave them towards a hut. It is dark and cold, but there is a fire in the hut, and lamps which create pools of light which light up two uniformed men sitting at a desk. One holds out his hand, and Kate gives him her passport that he goes through carefully, turning every page, while her stomach clenches with the familiar dread of officialdom. To her relief he stamps a page with a heavy metal stamp and hands it back, with a curt nod.

Duncan and Caro are already through. A certain amount of money has passed hands, and Duncan offers the customs officers a joint each. They all light up, and of course if it had been 2020 they would have taken a selfie. As it is the dope relaxes them and they giggle at the incongruity of the situation, then get back on the bus, reeking of cannabis.

They drive towards Kabul and stop briefly in Herat, Afghanistan’s second biggest city, where the road though the centre of town is still dirt. As they get off the bus a man standing on what could only be called a chariot, whips his way through the town, the horse galloping, his white flowing robes streaming behind him, the wheels kicking up a cloud of dust. As he passes Kate looks up at his turbaned head and glimpses a pair of glittering blue eyes and a powerful nose. Caro and Kate look at each other. ‘The men here are beautiful,’ she breaths. ‘Wow,’ Kate says.

A short stop, no time to see the mosques or museums, and then they are on the road again, driving on the straight road that has recently been built by the Russians. Some twelve hours later they enter Kabul and draw up outside a scruffy hotel where they are to stay for a couple of days. As they climb the stairs with their backpacks the smell of dope permeates the place. Voices speak in German, French, Italian, Swedish and with strong American accents. This is where the hippie trail pauses for a short time, before embarking on the last leg of the trip to India. In fact some people stay longer because the dope is strong and good, Caro hears, and they are reluctant to move.

An American woman with her hair scraped up in a ponytail, and wearing a bright kaftan calls down the stairs, ‘can anyone make fudge? I’m desperate for some fudge.’ She obviously has the munchies, and Kate’s grandmother’s recipe for fudge is one she easily remembers. ‘I can, but I’ll have to get the ingredients tomorrow.’

‘I’m Kitty,’ the woman smiles and gives Kate some cash to buy them. ’My boyfriend is hanging out for something sweet.’

The next morning Kate and Caro step out of the hotel to be greeted by a chaotic bustling city dominated by mountains covered in snow. Many women pass dressed head to toe in light blue chadors with just a grille for their eyes, while others are in European dress. ‘Must be stuffy wearing one of this,’ Kate says. They find their way to the market and buy sugar, loose in a bag, and some ghee. But they can’t find milk. Feeling hungry they buy some nuts. The man squatting on the ground swiftly makes a cone from a fine piece of paper torn out of the page of a book, and hands it over. When they have eaten the toasted almonds, Kate turns the paper over and finds it is an English maths textbook covered in algebraic formulas.

Rounding a corner they come across a man with some metal churns, and he ladles out some buffalo milk into a tin mug they brought with them. It smells strongly of earth and buffalo with a whiff of dung. ‘I’m not sure the flavour will be disguised by the fudge, ‘ Kate says. ‘Maybe we can use our cocoa to disguise the flavour.’

Caro and Kate retire to their room, a scruffy place with two sagging beds and Kate squats over the petrol stove, stirring the concoction. She remembers that the key point in making fudge is the temperature reaching the soft ball stage, when you beat it like mad. So she drips tiny drops of fudge into a tin mug of rather dubious tap water, until the little balls form, then beats it with a tin spoon with her glove wrapped round the handle.

She pours the fudge into the lid of the pan, and waits for it to cool, and cuts it into squares. She tastes it and it has a very strong flavour of buffalo. ‘I hope they’re too stoned to notice,’ she says to Caro and takes it upstairs to Kitty.

Kitty and her boyfriend are sprawled on the bed, surrounded by a thick fog of dope smoke. It looked like they are settled in for a long stay. ‘It’s the British fudge bearer,’ squeals Kitty, and grabs the tin. ‘Oh wow, this is so good,’ she exclaims, her mouth smeared with chocolate.

It won’t be the last cooking with strange ingredients Kate will do on this trip. And soon it will be time to move on.

Brett and Wayne have just told them they are behind schedule and Kate and Caro are furious. ‘Now the bus will drive through the Khyber Pass by night, so avoiding seeing the stupendous views and the famous winding road,’ grumbles Caro. Brett and Wayne couldn’t care less. The Khyber Pass, the barrier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, is the place Caro has been looking forward to seeing more than any other. As they rattle their way through Kate peers out the bus windows and sees dark walls of rock looming above them in the night, as they wind up and then down the endless sickening road into Pakistan and Lahore.

Lahore is green, and lush, and the treetops are full of parrots. But it is a fleeting visit, and they drive towards the destination: a day’s drive.

Wayne and Brett drop them at Delhi Post Office in the late afternoon and roar off in a cloud of exhaust. ‘Good riddance,’ Care and Kate agree, then farewell Duncan, Hilda and Dennis. ‘I hope you make friends with your elephant,’ Kate says to Dennis. ‘Thanks, it was good to travel together,’ he mumbles and wanders off. Kate often thinks later that if she had written down everything Dennis told her she could have written a best seller called *How to train an elephant.*

Duncan, unexpectedly, gives Caro his silver and black ring that she finds is reversible, and has a white and silver side. ‘It’s from Thailand,’ he says, giving her a swift kiss on the cheek. Hilda shakes their hands formally and wipes away a tear. ‘Have a good time, my chickens,’ she says, and walks off, carrying her canvas suitcase.

They pick up their post restante mail (five letters from Kate’s mother, four from Caro’s father) and hail a bicycle rickshaw to the address Kate’s uncle has given them. They feel overfed and large being wheeled along by a scrawny Indian in a white khurta pedaling hard. A wealthy Indian business colleague, Mr Seth, has told Kate’s uncle he will look after them in Delhi.

They are dropped at the door of an extremely large house with a magnificent garden, the beggars and the bustle left far behind. The door is opened and the two women are warmly welcomed. The mistress of the house, Mrs Seth cannot disguise her horror at their appearance: jeans and loose afghan shirts and tangled hair. She bustles them off to have a bath, and they reappear much later dressed in saris for their first meal in India. Kate manages to keep her beautiful deep pink one up, having been taught how to fold the skirt over a straight petticoat. Mrs Seth and her daughter took a long look at Clare’s blonde hair and fair skin and chose a yellow sari. It is not a flattering colour for an English rose.

It is their first day in India, a country that transforms them, politicizes them and educates them. But that is another story