

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Hundred-Foot Journey

Written by Richard C. Morais

Published by Alma Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

ALMA BOOKS LTD
London House
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

First published in India by HarperCollins Publishers India in 2008

First published in UK by Alma Books Ltd in 2010

First published in a mass-market edition by Alma Books Ltd in 2011. Reprinted 2012, 2014

This export special edition first published by Alma Books Ltd in 2014

Copyright © Richard C. Morais, 2008, 2010

Richard C. Morais asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-1-84688-336-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

Chapter One

I, Hassan Haji, was born, the second of six children, above my grandfather's restaurant on the Napean Sea Road in what was then called West Bombay, two decades before the great city was renamed Mumbai. I suspect my destiny was written from the very start, for my first experience of life was the smell of *machli ka salan*, a spicy fish curry, rising through the floorboards to the cot in my parents' room above the restaurant. To this day I can recall the sensation of those cot bars pressed up coldly against my toddler's face, my nose poked out as far as possible and searching the air for that aromatic packet of cardamom, fish heads and palm oil, which, even at that young age, somehow suggested there were unfathomable riches to be discovered and savoured in the free world beyond.

But let me start at the beginning. In 1934, my grandfather arrived in Bombay from Gujarat, a young man riding to the great city on the roof of a steam engine. These days in India many up-and-coming families have miraculously discovered noble backgrounds – famous relatives who worked with Mahatma Gandhi in the early days in South Africa – but I have no such genteel heritage. We were poor Muslims, subsistence farmers from dusty Bhavnagar, and a severe blight among the cotton fields in the 1930s left my starving seventeen-year-old grandfather no choice but to migrate to Bombay, that bustling metropolis where little people have long gone to make their mark.

My life in the kitchen, in short, starts way back with my grandfather's great hunger. And that three-day ride atop the

train, baking in the fierce sun, clinging for dear life as the hot iron chugged across the plains of India, was the unpromising start of my family's journey. Grandfather never liked to talk about those early days in Bombay, but I know from Ammi, my grandmother, that he slept rough in the streets for many years, earning his living delivering tiffin boxes to the Indian clerks running the back rooms of the British Empire.

To understand the Bombay from where I come, you must go to Victoria Terminus at rush hour. It is the very essence of Indian life. Coaches are split between men and women, and commuters literally hang from the windows and doors as the trains ratchet down the rails into the Victoria and Churchgate stations. The trains are so crowded there isn't even room for the commuters' lunch boxes, which arrive in separate trains after rush hour. These tiffin boxes – over two million battered tin cans with a lid – smelling of daal and gingery cabbage and black-pepper rice and sent on by loyal wives – are sorted, stacked into trundle carts, and delivered with utmost precision to each insurance clerk and bank teller throughout Bombay.

That was what my grandfather did. He delivered lunch boxes.

A dabba-wallah. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Grandfather was quite a dour fellow. We called him Bapaji, and I remember him squatting on his haunches in the street near sunset during Ramadan, his face white with hunger and rage as he puffed on a beedi. I can still see the thin nose and iron-wire eyebrows, the soiled skullcap and kurta, his white scraggly beard.

Dour he was, but a good provider too. By the age of twenty-three he was delivering nearly a thousand tiffin boxes a day. Fourteen runners worked for him, their pumping legs wrapped in lungi – the poor Indian man's skirt – trundling the carts through the congested streets of Bombay as they

offloaded tinned lunches at the Scottish Amicable and Eagle Star buildings.

It was 1938, I believe, when he finally summoned Ammi. The two had been married since they were fourteen and she arrived with her cheap bangles on the train from Gujarat, a tiny peasant with oiled black skin. The train station filled with steam, the urchins made toilet on the tracks, and the water boys cried out, a current of tired passengers and porters flowing down the platform. In the back, third-class with her bundles, my Ammi.

Grandfather barked something at her and they were off, the loyal village wife trailing several respectful steps behind her Bombay man.

It was on the eve of the Second World War that my grandparents set up a clapboard house in the slums off the Napean Sea Road. Bombay was the back room of the Allies' Asian war effort, and soon a million soldiers from around the world were passing through its gates. For many soldiers it was their last moments of peace before the torrid fighting of Burma and the Philippines, and the young men cavorted about Bombay's coastal roads, cigarettes hanging from their lips, ogling the prostitutes working Chowpatty Beach.

It was my grandmother's idea to sell them snacks, and my grandfather eventually agreed, adding to the tiffin business a string of food stalls on bicycles, mobile snack bars that rushed from the bathing soldiers at Juhu Beach to the Friday-evening rush-hour crush outside the Churchgate train station. They sold sweets made of nuts and honey, milky tea, but mostly they sold *bhelpuri*, a newspaper cone of puffed rice, chutney, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, mint and coriander, all mixed together and slathered with spices.

Delicious, I tell you, and not surprisingly the snack bicycles became a commercial success. And so, encouraged by their good fortune, my grandparents cleared an abandoned lot on

the far side of the Napean Sea Road. It was there that they erected a primitive roadside restaurant. They built a kitchen of three tandoori ovens – and a bank of charcoal fires on which rested iron *kadais* of mutton masala – all under a US Army tent. In the shade of the banyan tree, they also set up some rough tables and slung hammocks. Grandmother employed Bappu, a cook from a village in Kerala, and to her northern repertoire she now added dishes like onion *theal* and spicy grilled prawns.

Soldiers and sailors and airmen washed their hands with English soap in an oil drum, dried themselves on the proffered towel, and then clambered up on the hammocks strung under the shady tree. By then some relatives from Gujarat had joined my grandparents, and these young men were our waiters. They slapped wooden boards, makeshift tables, across the hammocks and quickly covered them with bowls of skewered chicken and basmati and sweets made from butter and honey.

During slow moments Grandmother wandered out in the long shirt and trousers we call a *salwar kameez*, threading her way between the sagging hammocks and chatting with the homesick soldiers missing the dishes of their own countries. “What you like to eat?” she’d ask. “What you eat at home?”

And the British soldiers told her about steak-and-kidney pies, of the steam that arose when the knife first plunged into the crust and revealed the pie’s lumpy viscera. Each soldier tried to outdo the other, and soon the tent filled with oohing and “cors” and excited palaver. And the Americans, not wishing to be outdone by the British, joined in, earnestly searching for the words that could describe a grilled steak coming from cattle fed on Florida swamp grass.

And so, armed with this intelligence she picked up in her walkabouts, Ammi retreated to the kitchen, recreating in

her tandoori oven interpretations of what she had heard. There was, for example, a kind of Indian bread-and-butter pudding, dusted with fresh nutmeg, that became a hit with the British soldiers; the Americans, she found, were partial to peanut sauce and mango chutney folded in between a piece of naan. And so it wasn't long before news of our kitchen spread from Gurkha to British soldier, from barracks to warship, and all day long jeeps stopped outside our Napean Sea Road tent.

Ammi was quite remarkable and I cannot give her enough credit for what became of me. There is no dish finer than her pearl spot, a fish she dusted in a sweet-chilli masala, wrapped in a banana leaf and tawa-grilled with a spot of coconut oil. It is for me, well, the very height of Indian culture and civilization, both robust and refined, and everything that I have ever cooked since is held up against this benchmark, my grandmother's favourite dish. And she had that amazing capacity of the professional chef to perform several tasks at once. I grew up watching her tiny figure darting barefoot across the earthen kitchen floor, quickly dipping aubergine slices in chickpea flour and frying them in the *kadai*, cuffing a cook, passing me an almond wafer, screeching her disapproval at my aunt.

The point of all this, however, is Ammi's roadside tent quickly established itself as a cash cow and suddenly my grandparents were doing extremely well, the small fortune they amassed the hard-currency residue of a million soldiers and sailors and airmen moving in and out of Bombay.

And with this came the problems of success. Bapaji was notoriously tight-fisted. He was always yelling at us for the smallest thing, such as dabbing too much oil on the tawa grill. Really a bit mad for money. So, suspicious of the neighbours and our Gujarati relatives, Bapaji began hiding his savings in coffee tins, and every Sunday he travelled to a

secret spot in the country where he buried his precious lucre in the ground.

My grandparents' break came in the autumn of 1942 when the British administration, needing cash for the war effort, auctioned off tracts of Bombay real estate. Most of the property was in Salsette, the largest island on which Bombay was built, but awkward strips of land and vacant lots on Colaba were also disposed of. Among the land to be sold: the abandoned Napean Sea Road property on which my family was squatting.

Bapaji was essentially a peasant and like all peasants he respected land more than paper money. So one day he dug up all his hidden tins and went, with a literate neighbour at his side, to the Standard Chartered Bank. With the bank's help, Bapaji bought the four-acre plot on the Napean Sea Road, paying at auction 1,016 British pounds, 10 shillings and 8 pence for land at the foot of Malabar Hill.

Then, and only then, my grandparents were blessed with children. Midwives delivered my father, Abbas Haji, the night of the famous wartime ammunition explosion at the Bombay Docks. The evening sky exploded with balls of fire, great eruptions shattering windows far across the city, and it was at that precise moment my grandmother let out a blood-curdling scream and Papa popped out, yelling louder even than the explosions and his mother. We all laughed at this story, the way Ammi told it, for anyone who knew my father would agree it was a most appropriate backdrop to his arrival. Auntie, born two years later, arrived under much calmer circumstances.

Independence and Partition came and went. What precisely happened to the family during that infamous time remains a mystery; none of the questions we asked Papa were ever given a straight answer. "Oh, you know, it was bad," he would say, when pressed. "But we managed. Now stop with the police interrogation. Go get me my newspaper."

We do know that my father's family, like many others, was split in two. Most of our relatives fled to Pakistan, but Bapaji stayed in Mumbai and hid his family in a Hindu business associate's warehouse basement. Ammi once told me they slept by day, because at night they were kept awake by the screams and throat-slitting taking place just outside the basement's door.

The point is Papa grew up in an India very different from the one his father knew. Grandfather was illiterate; Papa attended a local school – not very good, admittedly, but he still made it to the Institute of Catering Technology, a polytechnic in Ahmedabad.

Education makes the old tribal ways quite impossible, of course, and it was in Ahmedabad that Papa met Tahira, a light-skinned accounting student who would become my mother. Papa says he first fell in love with her smell. His head was down in a library book when he caught the most intoxicating whiff of chapatis and rose water.

That, he said, that was my mother.

One of my earliest memories is of Papa tightly squeezing my hand as we stood on the Mahatma Gandhi Road, staring in the direction of the fashionable Hyderabad Restaurant. Bombay's immensely wealthy Banaji family and their friends were unloading at kerb edge from a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. The women squealed and kissed and remarked on one another's weight; behind them a Sikh doorman snapped open the glass door of the restaurant.

Hyderabad and its proprietor, a sort of Indian Douglas Fairbanks Jr called Uday Joshi, were frequently in the society pages of the *Times of India*, and each mention of Joshi made my father curse and rustle the paper. While our own restaurant was not in the same league as Hyderabad – we served good food at fair prices – Papa thought Uday

Joshi was his great rival. And here now was this high-society crowd descending on the famous restaurant for a *mehndi*, a prenuptial tradition in which the bride and her women friends sit plumped on cushions and have their hands, palms and feet intricately painted with henna. It meant fine food, lively music, spicy gossip. And it most certainly meant more press for Joshi.

“Look,” Papa said suddenly. “Gopan Kalam.”

Papa bit the corner of his moustache as he wetly clapped my hand in his paw. I will never forget his face. It was as if the clouds had suddenly parted and Allah himself stood before us. “He a billionaire,” Papa whispered. “Make his money in petrochemicals and telecommunications. Look, look at that woman’s emeralds. Aiiee. Size of plums.”

Right then Uday Joshi emerged from the glass doors and stood among the elegant peach saris and silk Nehru suits as if he were their equal. Four or five newspaper photographers instantly called at him to turn this way and that. Joshi was famously smitten with all things European, and he stood perkily before the clicking cameras in a shiny black Pierre Cardin lounge suit, his capped white teeth flashing in the light.

The famous restaurateur commanded my attention, even at that tender age, like a Bollywood screen legend. Joshi’s throat, I remember, was lusciously wrapped in a yellow silk ascot, and his hair was airily combed back in a silver pompadour, mightily secured with cans of hairspray. I don’t think I had ever seen anyone so elegant.

“Look at him,” Papa hissed. “Look at that little rooster.”

Papa could not stand watching Joshi a moment longer, and he turned abruptly, yanking me towards the Suryodaya Supermarket and its special on ten-gallon vats of vegetable oil. I was just eight and had to run to keep up with his long strides and flapping kurta.

“Listen to me, Hassan,” he roared over the traffic. “One day the Haji name will be known far and wide, and no one will remember that rooster. Just you wait and see. Ask the people then, ask them who Uday Joshi is. ‘Who he?’ they say. ‘But Haji? Haji,’ they say, ‘Haji are very distinguished, very important family.’”

In short, Papa was a man of large appetites. He was fat but tall for an Indian, just six feet. Chubby-faced, with curly iron hair and a thick waxed moustache. And he was always dressed the old way, a kurta, over trousers.

But he was not what you would call refined. Papa ate, like all Muslim men, with his hands – his right hand, that is, the left resting on his lap. But instead of the decorous lifting of food to his lips, Papa stuck his head down in the plate and shovelled fatty mutton and rice into his face as if he’d never get another meal. And he sweated buckets while he ate, wet spots the size of dinner plates appearing under his arms. When he finally lifted his face from the food, he had the glassy-eyed look of a drunk, his chin and cheeks slicked with orange grease.

I loved him but even I must agree it was a frightful sight. After dinner Papa hobbled over to the couch, collapsed, and for the next half-hour fanned himself and let everyone else in on his general satisfaction with loud belches and thunderous farts. My mother, coming from her respectable civil-servant family in Delhi, closed her eyes with disgust at this after-dinner ritual. And she was always on him while he was eating. “Abbas,” she’d say. “Slow down. You’ll choke. Good Heavens. Like eating with a donkey.”

But you had to admire Papa, the charisma and determination behind his immense drive. By the time I came along in 1975, he was firmly in control of the family restaurant, my grandfather ailing from emphysema and largely confined, on

his good days, to overseeing the tiffin-delivery business from a stiff-backed chair in the courtyard.

Ammi's tent was retired for a grey concrete-and-brick compound. My family lived on the first floor of the main house, above our restaurant. My grandparents and childless aunt and uncle lived in the house one over, and down from them our family enclave was sealed off with a cube of wooden two-storey shacks where our Kerala cook, Bappu, and the other servants slept on the floor.

It was the courtyard that was the heart and soul of the old family business. Tiffin carts and bicycle snack bars were stacked against the far wall, and under the shade of the saggy tarp were cauldrons of carp-head soup, stacks of banana leaves and freshly made samosas on wax paper. The great iron vats of flecked rice, perfumed with bay leaf and cardamom, stood against the courtyard's opposite wall, and around these delicacies was a constant thrum of flies. A male servant usually sat on a canvas sack at the kitchen's back door, carefully picking out the black specks of dirt among the basmati kernels, and an oily-headed female, bent at the waist with her sari gathered between her legs, was brushing with a short broom the courtyard dirt, back and forth, back and forth. And I recall our yard as always full of life, filled with constant comings and goings that made the roosters and chickens jerk about, nervously clucking in the shadows of my childhood.

It was here, in the heat of the afternoon after school, that I would find Ammi working under the porch eaves overhanging the interior courtyard. I'd scramble atop a crate for a hot-faced sniff of her spicy fish soup, and we'd chat a bit about my day at school before she passed over to me the stirring of the cauldron. And I remember her gracefully gathering up the hem of her sari, retreating to the wall where she kept an eye on me as she smoked her iron pipe, a habit she kept from her village days in Gujarat.

I remember this as if it were yesterday: stirring and stirring to the city's beat, passing for the very first time into the magic trance that has ever since taken me when I cook. The balmy wind warbled across the courtyard, bringing the faraway yap of Bombay dogs and traffic and the smell of raw sewage into the family compound. Ammi squatted in the shady corner, her tiny wrinkled face disappearing behind contented claps of smoke; and, floating down from above, the girlish voices of my mother and aunt as they folded chickpea and chilli into skirts of pastry on the first-floor veranda overhead. But most of all I recall the sound of my iron hoe grating rhythmically across the vessel's floor, bringing jewels up from the soup deep: the bony fish heads and the white eyes rising to the surface on ruby-red eddies.

I still dream of the place. If you stepped out of the immediate safety of our family compound you stood at the edge of the notorious Napean Sea Road shanty town. It was a sea of roof scraps atop rickety clapboard shacks, all criss-crossed by putrid streams. From the shanty town rose the pungent smells of charcoal fires and rotting garbage, and the hazy air itself was thick with the roar of roosters and bleating goats and the slap-thud of washing beaten on cement slabs. Here, children and adults shat in the streets.

But on the other side of us, a different India. As I grew up, so too did my country. Malabar Hill, towering above us, quickly filled with cranes as between the old gated villas white high-rises called Miramar and Palm Beach arose. I know not where they came from, but the affluent seemed to suddenly spring like gods from the very ground. Everywhere, the talk was of nothing but mint-fresh software engineers and scrap-metal dealers and pashmina exporters and umbrella manufacturers and I know not what else. Millionaires, by the hundreds first, then by the thousands.

Once a month Papa paid Malabar Hill a visit. He would put on a fresh-washed kurta and take me by the hand up the hill so we could “pay our respects” to the powerful politicians. We gingerly made our way to the back doors of vanilla-coloured villas, the white-gloved butler wordlessly pointing at a terracotta pot just inside the door. Papa dropped his brown-paper bag among the heap of other paper bags, the door unceremoniously slammed shut in our face, and we were off with our rupee-stuffed paper bags to the next Bombay Regional Congress Committee official. But there were rules. Never to the front of the house. Always at the back.

And then, business done, humming a ghazal under his breath, Papa bought us, on the trip I am remembering, a mango juice and some grilled corn and we sat on a bench in the Hanging Gardens, the public park up on Malabar Hill. From our spot under palm trees and bougainvilleas we could see the comings and goings at Broadway, a spanking-new apartment building across the torrid green: the businessmen climbing into their Mercedes, the children emerging in school uniforms, the wives off for tennis and tea. A steady stream of wealthy Jains – silky robes, hairy chests, gold-rimmed glasses – headed past us to the Jain Mandir, a temple where they washed their idols in sandalwood paste.

Papa sank his teeth into the corn and violently mowed his way down the cob, bits of kernel sticking to his moustache and cheeks and hair. “Lots of money,” he said, smacking his lips and gesturing across the street with the savaged cob. “Rich people.”

A girl and her nanny, on their way to a birthday party, emerged from the apartment building and flagged down a taxi.

“That girl is in my school. See her in the playground.”

Papa flung his finished corncob into the bushes and wiped his face with a handkerchief.