
Opening Extract from...

Eden Gardens

Written by Louise Brown

Published by Headline Review

Louise

Brown

Eden Gardens

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
Headline Review
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 2609 9 (Trade Paperback)

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in well-managed forests and other controlled sources. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Chapter One

Maisy

In 1934 an earthquake tore an eight-foot-long gash in the wall of our flat, and a lump of masonry landed on Pushpa's head during the final tremors. Mam said the injury made our ayah simpler and slower. I doubt Mam was right about Pushpa, but I do know India's great disaster marked a divide in my life just as surely as it ripped a hole in the wall and put an end to the policeman's shouting. Pushpa leaned round the door to the living room in the moments before the quake began, watching a gangly British inspector speak to Mam. I peeped from behind Pushpa, mesmerised by the way the man's neatly clipped ginger moustache bristled with annoyance and excitement.

He coughed and cleared his throat. 'Mrs Brooks, you are well aware that it's unacceptable for British women to engage in immoral trade in India.'

Two young European constables flanked him. One smirked, the other stood rigidly to attention, his mouth wide open.

Mam threw back her head and laughed. 'What's wrong with having a few *chota pegs* with old friends? Everyone likes a little drink.'

The red beaded curtains dividing the living room from the veranda swayed, and I glanced away from the inspector as they began to dance and jump.

'Mrs Brooks,' the man continued, unaware of the rattling curtains, 'we've good reason to believe you are a prostitute and that you carry out your activities in this flat. Brothels may be legal in Calcutta, but only Indians and a few women from other nations work in them. We cannot tolerate British women in the same business. As I told you some weeks ago, our women must be beyond reproach.'

'Where's this gossip from?' Mam said, hands on her hips.

'Your neighbours.'

'You mean that toffee-nosed cow downstairs.'

The slack-jawed constable snapped his mouth shut and gazed past Mam, transfixed by the empty tea cups chattering on their saucers.

'We've heard a similar story from a number of residents in this mansion block,' the inspector said.

His loud, cold voice overlay a distant rumble, like a deep, angry growl and as the two sounds merged together I thought I'd wet myself in fright. I crossed my legs and clung to the back of Pushpa's sari, panicking because I was certain no one should wee themselves when they were eight years old, even if the floor was vibrating under their feet.

'They claim a stream of men visit you,' he went on, loving the sound of his own arrogant voice and oblivious to the shouts of alarm in the street. 'Your daughter no longer attends school and is known to run wild in the city. And, we're told, you are permanently inebriated.'

If he meant she was drunk, he was right. Mam had gimlets

with lunch, several 'special tiffins' in the afternoon, and we lost count of the number of large whiskies, called *burra pegs*, in the evening. She slept so heavily through the mornings that I couldn't shake her awake.

'You can't prove it.'

'Madam, you are a disgrace. It's outrageous that you conduct yourself in this manner in the heart of white town. Having said that, we are mindful of the embarrassment a scandal would cause, and so you and your daughter will be deported home along with the other undesirable characters who wash up on these shores.'

I didn't know what he meant by 'home'. Maybe he meant the Kalimpong home for abandoned European children where Mam warned I would be imprisoned by the Salvation Army's child-catchers if I strayed too far from the flat. Or perhaps he meant the home Father used to talk about: England, the wonderful place where King George lived and where the streets were always clean. I didn't want to go there, king or no king, because Queen Alexandra Mansions was my home and I'd never been outside Calcutta.

Although I wanted to stay, the flat seemed to be doing its best to get rid of us. The pedestal fan swayed and crashed on to the rug; Mam's bottles slid left and right on the sideboard before toppling to the floor with a crash. The whole mansion block shifted up and down and, with a groan followed by a crunch, a gap opened in the wall and then closed, leaving a crack that I could have pushed my arm through if I'd dared to try.

'Evacuate the building,' the inspector thundered.

Pushed and jostled by other frantic residents, we scrambled down the stairwell, a fine powder falling on us from the ceilings. In the street we pressed ourselves against the building,

Mam glaring at the woman who'd snitched on us and who was panting in terror, her eyes shut so tight it turned the lines around them into deep folds. Mam muttered that she was a bitch and she hoped a brick would land on her head.

No bricks fell, only a bit of masonry that glanced off Pushpa, grazing her temple and the top of her ear. A thin line of blood trickled along her jawline.

'It's an omen,' she cried. 'What tragedies lie ahead of us?'

'Shut up, Pushpa,' Mam shouted. 'I have this in hand.'

The earth steadied itself, my knickers were surprisingly still dry, and Mam, covered in a thick layer of white dust, smiled at the policeman.

Next afternoon Mam went to the police headquarters on Lal Bazar Street in her bias-cut, turquoise satin dress and came back two hours later looking surprisingly cheery. She winked at us, and Pushpa's stricken expression vanished in an instant. The policeman with the bristly, orange moustache called round that evening and spent a jolly time with Mam without once speaking in his stern voice. He enjoyed himself so much he was like a different man, and after all his hard work dealing with the effects of the earthquake he had to have a long lie-down in Mam's room. When he left shortly before midnight, Mam poured herself an especially large *burra peg*.

'Another job done well,' she said. Wrapping herself in a silk négligé that was starting to fray around the hem, she stretched out her legs on the chintz sofa and lit a cigarette.

We left Queen Alexandra Mansions three days later. Our new address wasn't on the other side of the world; it was on the

edge of Dharmatala, a different part of the city. The furniture was piled on to a couple of carts, known as *garries*, and I spent the morning feeding the horses with bits of carrot while they stood placidly in the road, their wee creating a frothy yellow pond. Father's teak writing desk, the beds, sofa, table and chairs, and most of the supplies from the storeroom, including all the tins of corned beef, were tied up with rope, Mam's cheval mirror balancing precariously on top and draped with the Christmas decorations. I was sad to leave, but Mam insisted the flat was likely to be demolished and that we needed to make a fresh start in a place where nosy neighbours wouldn't report us to the police.

The new home was part of an old house in an overcrowded street filled with other crumbling houses, bad smells and too many people. The wheels of the *garry* splashed through big puddles of brown water, the lane was strewn with empty coconut shells and the walls of the buildings were marked with dark red *paan* stains where natives had chewed and spat out betel nut. A toddy shop was tucked into an alley near the corner, and Mam said that was convenient; there'd be no more need to send the sweeper on long journeys to buy supplies.

'What a perfect place,' Mam said. 'We'll be set up nicely here.'

Our neighbours, most of whom were Eurasians, or what Mam called 'half-halfs' – half white, half brown – gathered to watch our belongings being unloaded. A little group of ragged Indian children looked on, too. A girl who was about the same age as me stared at my hair, golden-blond like Mam's, and cut so it brushed my shoulders. Hers was shiny and black and

reached all the way down her back in a tight plait. Even poor Indian girls had the most beautiful hair.

Mam said Father married her because of her hair; because she looked like a memsahib even if she didn't talk like one.

'He called me his English rose,' she declared. 'He said I was the loveliest girl to step off the boat.' That part of the story was absolutely true; in the days before the drink crept up and stole her looks, no one was as pretty as Mam. I imagined her stepping daintily on to Outram Ghat in her best violet dress and jaunty little hat, a parasol in her hand. Only hours after disembarking, her beauty had stunned all Calcutta and she was swept into a heart-stopping romance with my adoring father.

Of course, that's not the way it really happened. I pieced together the story from the rambling tales, sprinkled with odd words, which Mam told in a strange accent whenever she drowned her memories right the way through to the bottom of a bottle.

Mam arrived in the steam bath of Bengal in a third-class railway carriage surrounded by natives, bundles of clothes, a belligerent nanny goat, and several hens that roosted in the overhead luggage racks, their droppings sticking in the passengers' hair. She journeyed across the whole of India on a hard, unforgiving bench in the cauldron of May, the sun threatening to buckle the tracks while inside the train the passengers baked, the upcountry men perspiring so profusely that Mam kept a handkerchief soaked in cologne over her nose. The ceiling fan had long ceased turning and the block of ice placed in a zinc bath in the middle of the carriage provided no relief. The ice

melted quickly, the water slopping from side to side and spilling out of the bath with every turn and brake of the train. It ran over the floor, soaking Mam's only decent pair of shoes, while the goat chewed a hole in her handbag.

Mam had worked in a rough pub near the docks in Bombay and her rail fare to Calcutta was paid by the owner of a disreputable hotel off Park Street. He promised her a position as a barmaid on a much better salary, for which she was obliged to pour *burra pegs* of whisky while fighting off the advances of the patrons. Being a white barmaid in India was a rotten job, she said, but it was better than being a skivvy at home; domestic service in England was no different from slavery.

Mam never did any cleaning in Calcutta; she said she'd cleared up enough shit, including her own. She grew up in Leeds and became a reluctant housemaid shortly after her twelfth birthday. When the Great War broke out she joined the Barnbow munitions factory, doing all the risky jobs and getting a big bonus in her pay packet for volunteering to handle the explosives and pack them into shells.

'I worked day and night in nothing but my drawers and vest,' she said. 'The cordite turned my skin yellow, and thirty-five lasses were blown to kingdom come in an explosion in the room next to mine, but I swore, even when I was picking the bits of mashed flesh out of my hair, that I'd never go back to earning a ruddy pittance as a rich cow's servant.'

At this point in her story she'd lift up the bottle, look surprised to see it was empty and say, 'Who's been golloping me drink?' Then she'd weave her way to the sofa and search behind it for a fresh supply.

After the war Mam tried working in a factory with her sister,

Dolly, sewing ready-made clothes, and she did a spell in Schofields department store before she was sacked for being rude to a crotchety but esteemed patron. The job didn't pay enough, Mam said, to put up with all the bleeding rubbish you had to face, day after day, from customers who acted like they'd got sticks up their arses.

Britain in 1918 presented Mam with another, even more pressing problem: a frustrating lack of men. There weren't enough troops returning from the trenches to marry all the girls impatient for husbands and Mam had no intention of being a spinster; it wasn't in her nature.

'Only half the lads in our street came back,' she said. 'My brother Freddie had his head ripped open by a blinkin' shell, and they never found Jack. He vanished into the mud somewhere near Ypres.'

Mam kept a picture of Jack in a jewellery box on her dressing table, and she'd get it out now and then, usually at the point when the whisky slurred her speech so much it would have been hard for me to understand what she was saying if I hadn't heard it so many times before.

'He was the most handsome man I ever set my eyes on.' She'd gaze at the photograph of big, dark-haired Jack, a perfect young man in shades of sepia. I put my fingers in my ears to silence her next words because they embarrassed me and made me feel queasy. 'We were courting for months and you wouldn't believe what we did on his mam's sofa before he went to war. He had the most beautiful body; strong and pure white. He might have been only twenty but he was all man.'

I don't know how long she grieved for Jack and her brother, but Mam was nothing if not a fighter and so soon after the

war she filled a trunk, used the money she'd saved from packing shells, and boarded a cargo boat to India, telling everyone at home that she was on her way to a better place, somewhere far away from chilly Britain, somewhere she could be in the sun for a while, where she wouldn't have to slave all day for a stuck-up bitch. She was going to be a memsahib and have servants of her own. They laughed at her and said she was soft in the head and that she'd better tidy up her manners if she wanted to be posh.

Dolly scoffed. 'Don't be daft. Girls like us can't pass ourselves off as ladies.'

'You'll get yerself into trouble, mark my words,' her mam said. 'You've got ideas above your station, young lady, and nowt good will come of it.'

'She'll be back here with her tail between her legs before the year's out,' her brother Bert said.

'But I didn't listen to them,' Mam told me with glee. 'I said, "Just you watch me. I'll catch myself a rich husband, I'll have servants to wait on me and I'll never come back to a lousy dump like this."'

Mam's predictions were rarely correct: unlike her brother Freddie and the eternally young Jack, she did return to that street in Leeds. But for once she also proved her doubters wrong: after many false starts, she found a husband, and a servant, and her own place in the Indian sun.

I never had any contact with my family in England, not even a solitary birthday card, but I had a large family of sorts in India: I had lots of uncles, dozens of them, who visited in the evenings, each one on a different night. I rarely saw them when

I was small because Pushpa dragged me out of the bedroom while Mam, dressed only in her underwear, was getting ready to meet them, deftly applying powder and scarlet lipstick, her Apple Blossom perfume filling the room with fragrance. During the hot weather Pushpa settled me in my bed on the veranda and I lay listening to the clatter of carts and the tinkle of rickshaw bells. A cooling evening breeze sprang up and I grew drowsy watching the gentle sway of the tatties. The mosquitoes droned, flying cockroaches whirred past, and on good nights Mam's muffled laughter lulled me to sleep. Sometimes, I'd hear other less comforting noises, perhaps a strange cry from one of the uncles or an animal-like grunting that I felt, deep in the pit of my stomach, was something bad and dangerous. On those nights I buried my head under the pillow and screwed up my eyes as if it would help muffle the sound. When an uncle left early, Mam would come to wish me good night, stroking my hair and kissing me with the smell of whisky and cigarettes on her breath. The vivid lipstick had been wiped from her mouth but its pigment always stained her lips a pretty shade of red.

It was harder to keep me hidden as I got older, and I began to see a lot more of the uncles. I met Uncle Jim several times and was appalled by the state of his furred teeth. He dressed with the attention to detail required of a sergeant major, his teeth being the only things neglected by the carbolic soap, starch, and polish. The reek from his mouth was disgusting. I didn't know how Mam could bear to be near him, and I knew, beyond any doubt, that I could never do what she did.

'Thank God, he doesn't expect me to kiss him,' she said. 'And to think he goes on about Indians staining their mouths with *paan*. He's got a ruddy cheek.'

Most of my other uncles had far better teeth. They were British men in trade or in the army, or they were Scottish supervisors and mechanics in the jute mills. A few became regulars but all left eventually, returning home or moving on to the next posting, usually without saying a word of goodbye.

Some of the uncles complimented me when I passed the living room and they were resting on the sofa, holding their drinks. 'Aren't you pretty?' they said. Or they said things like, 'You're going to be as gorgeous as your mother.' At that point Mam ordered me to spend time with Pushpa or to read one of the books suggested by my tutor, Mr Banerjee, about people in England during the olden days – a place and time I struggled to imagine.

Bill was my favourite uncle until the day he put his hand up my skirt. He brought us expensive presents and Mam was sure he was going to ask her to marry him. He wasn't like the others, who visited for an hour or two; he wanted to stay with us, eat beef stew and steamed plum duff, and to talk to Mam about home, reminiscing about the frosty mornings and the way things were so well ordered. Mam said he was mad.

'What part of England did you live in, Bill? I remember frosty mornings when we'd scrape the ice off the inside of our windows, and the order of things was that I cleaned grates and laid fires while the ladies of the house slept until midday and went to afternoon teas and parties.'

Bill's eyes followed me closely and I wondered whether I reminded him of someone: perhaps I looked like his daughter or his niece. When he gave me presents he asked me to stand close while I opened them, the gift balancing in his lap. One

day when Mam went out to speak to another of the uncles who had stopped his car at the end of the lane, Uncle Bill asked me to sit on his legs and he tickled me until Pushpa came in and fixed him with a look. I was glad to go to my room because I didn't like the way Bill breathed or the roughness of the way he bounced me up and down on his knee.

About a year later he visited when Mam was shopping at Whiteaway's. Cook was at the market and Pushpa had gone to see her friend.

Bill leaned on the doorjamb and grinned. 'Aren't you going to invite me in, Maisy? Why don't you put the kettle on? I'm parched and could do with a cup of tea. I've been checking accounts at the docks all morning.'

He watched me making tea the way Pushpa taught me: the tea leaves, water, milk and sugar all mixed up in the pan and boiling gently to a rich brown syrup.

'You'd better watch it, making tea like that,' Bill teased. 'Next thing you'll be drinking it out of a saucer. You'll be turning native before you know it.'

I never worried about that. Although I spoke Bengali and some Hindustani, I couldn't be any whiter.

He stood so close to me I could feel the heat of his body and smell his armpits, his shirt damp with acrid sweat. It was a stink I knew from Mam's room after she'd been entertaining an uncle during the monsoon.

'When are you going into the business? You're old enough, surely? There's plenty of money in it for the right girl.'

He's joking, I thought. I was only twelve, though Mam often told people I was nine to make herself seem younger. Besides, Mam wanted me to marry an officer: she'd never allow me to

join her trade. And then, a second later, the man Mam thought would be my stepfather was behind me, kissing my shoulder and neck, breathing deeply, tobacco and tea combined in his hot saliva. He pulled up my skirt and yanked at my knickers.

I twisted round to escape, begging him, half in terror, half in revulsion, to stop.

'Come on, Maisy. You know you want it,' he said a moment before his wet tongue filled my ear. He grunted and pressed himself against me, his finger jabbing between my legs. 'Like mother, like daughter,' he groaned.

'Get off her, you filthy bastard,' Mam yelled, cracking a frying pan across his head. She'd dropped her bags of shopping by the door and was waving the pan at him.

Bill rubbed his head and laughed. 'You don't want me to get Maisy into the business too soon, eh? Worried about the competition?'

'No one messes with my daughter. I'll have the law on you.'

'You think the police will help you? They don't help prostitutes. You may be white but you're a cheap white whore. And there's nothing worse than that. The police prefer the black tarts because at least they're supposed to be cheap.'

'Clear off and die, Bill.'

'I'm on my way,' he said. 'You might think you're better than all these greasy niggers around you, but you're no different from them. I can buy them and I've bought you. You do as I say: undress, lie down, kneel and suck my cock. In ten years you'll be selling yourself to wogs. You'll be living in a filthy hut, sitting on the floor, eating with your fingers and stinking of garlic, and that daughter of yours will be whoring in Sonagachi along with all the other tarts.'