overland

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An Apollo Book

First published in the UK in 2024 by Head of Zeus Ltd
This paperback edition first published in 2025 by Head of Zeus Ltd,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PB): 9781801107402
ISBN (eBook): 9781801107419

Cover design: Simon Michele | Head of Zeus

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



Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

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The information in this book is as reliable as I can make it; as I've just mentioned, some of it is liable to change, rather abruptly. At the same time, some of the things I may mention as impossible, like restrictions on entering certain countries, can be overcome by persistent individuals.

Douglas Brown, *Overland to India: A Practical Guide to Getting There Through Istanbul, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and West Pakistan Cheaply, Happily and Unhassled*, 1971

PART 1

DOVER

The world was his oyster. That's what disappointed me about dear Fred, you know? The tabloids printed the scandal about him, ugly words, and, I have to admit, some of those stories had the ring of truth. So was I tempted to sell my own version of events? I'd have pocketed a small fortune back then: the girl who travelled the world side by side with Frederick Carruthers – the ringside seat – but I never would have sold a kiss-and-tell. Never considered it for a minute! He was one of my best mates. Naturally, I had my disappointments, nursed them even, on my return. But I kept quiet, I held to my side of the bargain. It's taken me all these years to put pen to paper.

And what a different world it was when we set out in 1970 – more than fifty years ago. Browsing on the internet, I've seen that there are a lot of us out there. The nostalgic boomers who made the journey, publishing memoirs and posting old photos. Some of those old guys converting their slides to modern formats; flashing their memories about. I went overland to India, they declare; I was here, I was there. Hats off to them. None of them could hold a candle to Fred; nothing to compare to our trip.

We had our ups and downs, it goes without saying, and it wasn't all plain sailing, that's for sure; there's always forks in the road. But we were young! And free! We were so lucky, rolling across borders as if we owned the place. That's what

bothers me about dear Fred. That he mucked it up so badly: he started out with every advantage, the whole world spread out in front of him. And all that talent. Such a waste.

I don't have children or grandchildren to dedicate this book to. There's no old man in my bed. Will people remember me? My kith and kin, my distant heirs? Will they find a place for me in the family tree? For who remembers an old aunt after she's gone? I'm a believer in correcting the historical record. This is my side of the story. My recollection of these events matters, you understand? I played my own modest part in history. So, do me one thing: promise me that our overland journey won't be forgotten. I've given strict instructions for these papers to be well-preserved. For posterity, a time when I'm no longer around. For future generations. And perhaps, a hundred years from now, some of you not yet born, you'll be handed down some of my valuables – Iznik tiles, maybe, left in a will – and remember this story, and all our misadventures. There are hard, dirty secrets of the heart in these pages, and some honest truths. I'll warn you now, I haven't spared your blushes.

I'm a simple nobody. Plain old Joyce. You won't find me in the newspapers. I'm not sure I'd recognise the girl who set out on that road trip fifty years ago now; Good Lord, to have those pins again, those pretty little tits. No one will tend my flame. I'm not delusional. I am unavailable in print, you won't find my fingerprints in the archives – but I was there, by his side, every single mile. I saw Persia in the time of the Shah, and the sun set over Kabul and the sun rise at the Taj Mahal. I was there too, and this is my story. And your inheritance.

1

London 1970

Kathmandu by van, leave August.
Share petrol and costs.

I didn't always look at the ads at the back of the paper. Hippies would have called it my karma. A lot of folks on the road used to talk about karma, as if it got them off the hook. I've never had much truck with that, as if it could all boil down to your past lives. Fred used to talk about karma, as if he didn't have control over his own destiny, when he had all those advantages and that golden aura. Handy way of passing on the buck, isn't it? You've got to make your own reality.

No, it wasn't karma.

I just skimmed down the small ads out of boredom; I particularly liked the miscellaneous section. Sometimes people offered up handsome pieces of old furniture, sometimes they advertised their lonely hearts. These words jumped out. A few years too late, my first thought; the Beatles had long been and gone. Everyone knew someone who'd come back from the hippie trail with dodgy bowels, claiming wisdom, and eased back into normal society.

I took the train into Clapham from Surbiton. Their gaff was on the southern side of the common, easy to find because its sheer side had been sliced away like white bread by a V2, leaving one beautiful old Georgian house. Chalk white, four storeys high, built for a family. Anton opened the door, his spectacles slipping down his nose, a book propped open in his hand, his fingers carefully placed to hold the page that he'd turned to, as if it was a matter of life and death, and looked at me thoughtfully, like there were hundreds of applicants and I wasn't the only one to inquire, to interrupt his day. He pushed the glasses up his nose.

I thought, at the time, that he owned that grand old house. He presided over the place, and there I was standing on the doorstep. What was I thinking, asking for a ride from this young bloke with a neat little beard? I wasn't fond of boys who spent too much time on their hair. That's just the way I was raised; I expected a man to be a real man. And here I was, asking a favour from this scholar in Oxford brogues, barely out of school. Inside it wasn't so fancy, though; it was makeshift, not quite a squat but uncared for, encrusted pans in the sink and what I now know to be called 'kilims' thrown over Victorian furniture.

You do realise, India is an awfully long way away. We stood there in that front room with all the crap cast about, old tennis shoes on the floor. So, why do you actually want to go? He looked sceptical, as if I wasn't going to cut it. I realised immediately that he wanted something intellectual in answer, so I tried to play ball. I guess I'd like to know more about the Hindis, I said. The Hindus – Hindi is a language, Anton retorted. I didn't think I needed to pass

a test, I replied. First impression: arrogant little twit. My face was burning with embarrassment at having been corrected, but he didn't seem to notice. I might not have all your certificates, but I know about real life, I thought. Anton peeved me; I wasn't used to being put straight by a student. No common sense, the sort of brains only good for a game show. He'd be one of those university toffs slamming down the buzzer.

Well, most of the countries we'll go through are Muslim. What about them, and the differences, Shia and Sunni? Did he want a dissertation? I felt like walking away at that point. Do you really want to know why I wanted to go? To get out of the bloody country, to get as far away from Surbiton as possible. But I couldn't say that. It's good to be a little prepared. I have some books you can borrow. But first you need to meet Vera. Come on, I'll take you to see her. Back out through the front door and round to a double-yellowed side road, a Land Rover parked badly across two spaces. Vera meet Joyce, Joyce meet Vera. Why don't you have a decko, check her out, see if she's what you have in mind? It's a long trip, he repeated. He opened the passenger door and left me with the Land Rover as if he'd shown me to a guest bedroom. I walked around the outside first, the paint the exact colour of mould on jam. The back was stacked with military surplus and unappetising boxes, dried food, tins of beans and canned meat. Spare tyre on the bonnet. It was a high step up to the rear door.

Inside it smelled – she, I suppose, smelled – of petrol, old leather and wet Labrador. There was a dirty mackintosh across the back seats, roomy as a garden

shed inside and no warmer. A split in the cushion leather where crumbling sponge was pushing through. I could fix that up, I thought, and I knew then that I could be useful to them too. The whole thing needed a clean; no one could be expected to see out of those windows. I climbed over the interior into the front, and the driver's seat was the best place of all. I was barely able to see the windscreen from behind the big black wheel. A solid, vulnerable vehicle, she'd been through a lot already: a warhorse. I liked her a lot more than her owner. You'll look after us, Vera, I thought.

Anton reappeared on the kerbside. There's one more thing. An important thing, essential actually. If you don't mind frightfully you'll have to come back another day, to meet Frederick. Anton looked around as if this Frederick might be there somewhere, under the piles of tarpaulin, though we both knew he wasn't. I clambered down. You have to meet Fred, he said, almost under his breath, as if nothing could proceed without his say-so. I'm afraid he's not here, though, so if you wouldn't mind terribly coming back tomorrow? We could meet at the Queen's Head at lunchtime?

The Queen's Head was a smoky institution on the corner of Clapham Common, the lounge bar's wallpaper flecked with emerald green. A regular talking in a low voice at the bar looked me up and down. I was squinting, after the street, a permanent fug, and somebody was singing a melody, a young boy alone in the back room. Initially, his voice slightly too high, but then he took a low breath and the sound became a long note, cracked at the edges, into profound sorrow, and all the time the thrum of the guitar,

and a melody picked along the edges of it. I knew some of those songs, wistful tunes by Joni Mitchell and Carole King.

No sign of Anton or his sidekick. I wondered if they'd decided against me. I was expecting two boys in spectacles. And all the time the singing went on and I waited at the bar for those boys, avoiding eye contact with the old punter. Half an hour, forty-five minutes, and I thought I'd been stood up and went to get my coat when Anton burst in, all earnest apologies, and said, immediately, looking around, but isn't Freddie already here? No, I've been standing here waiting for you both. My irritation might have been showing a little but Anton laughed out loud. Listen – didn't you hear him? And I tuned in again to the guitar strumming from the back room. The song had changed to a harsh repetitive chord, a variation on an old Dylan tune; it was 'Masters of War', if I recall rightly. Those bitter and twisted lyrics – about death planes and bombs, how the masters of war would never be forgiven – in that angelic voice rising high above the twang of notes.

A long-limbed boy, white-blonde, and absolutely absorbed in his own cosmos. Singing for the life of it, and only for himself. Anton said, Fred, you airhead, you were meant to meet Joyce – she's on board! He was sitting on a low-slung sofa, and he stopped playing and stood up – Fred was always a stickler for manners – the guitar dangling from a strap over his arm. He stood taller than I expected from his slender frame, golden flares sitting on his hips. He shook my hand. Cool, Joycie. Pleasure to meet you. Can you drive? Yep. Have you seen our splendid van? Yep. Seen that van and you still want to come? He started

playing chords again as if music could just strike up in the middle of a conversation.

When Anton returned with the white wine that I'd asked for, and accepted my warm coins in return, Fred lay back on the sofa near to me, his champagne-coloured hair reflected in the mirror behind him. He offered me a Rothmans. Has Anton been doing his Bamber Gascoigne impression again? I'm sorry, he loves to play quizmaster. They didn't teach Sanskrit at my secondary modern, I said. Just ignore him, you don't need to know anything, just come! Thanks – I was grateful – and we bumped glasses, and I looked into his radiant face. Anyway, why d'you want to come? He had a way of acting as if he'd known you forever, you could tell him anything, all the secrets of the world, all the sex and dark thoughts and dreams of escape, and as if he would listen to them all, and never blink first.

I had been working at the GPO for a few years, and then, that summer, I'd had to take a break, and since then my life hadn't quite got back on track. I'd gone back to plugging: *Who's dialling please? Long-distance? A reverse charge call for you, sir?* Maybe the long-distance calls piqued my curiosity. Now and again I had to interrupt, when it was a pre-paid call, or the line was needed for an emergency. Operator speaking: I am disconnecting this call. Voice neutral, above reproach. And the rushed words, before I snapped them off with a twist of the plug. And the funny thing is they never spoke to me directly, they never said, screw you, operator. They treated me as if I was above them, like I had a godlike power – and I guess I did.

Those foreign city names had made an impression

on me, no doubt about it. My father had recommended Premium Bonds for my savings, and I thought, sod that. And there was decay setting in, the end was nigh. We were being automated, made mechanical, STD – subscriber trunk dialling. The GPO kept celebrating how many countries could be reached, linking up the oceans, dialling directly, without the need for an operator! It was a good time to go.

They nodded; Fred looked satisfied, but it was clear Anton still had doubts about me, sitting prim in his chair with a half, and I wasn't sure we'd rub along so well together. But what choice did I have? To look at, they were like chalk and cheese. Anton was precise, neatly arranged, with a cropped black beard; Fred a sprawling giant next to him, with shoulders honed from rowing 'eights' at his notorious school. I decided then and there that as long as I was with Fred I could put up with his swotty mate.

So the thing you need to know about us is, I love Anton. Antonios Aziz, we love each other don't we, old fruit, Fred said, as if intuiting my doubts about his housemate, and he looped his arm around him tightly. He picked up a couple of darts and started hurling them at the dartboard. An erratic performance, making a hash of it, and laughing as he missed the centre. I will hand it to Fred, he did have *joie de vivre*. Come over here, you uptight bastard, he said, and then Anton was on his feet, playing too. I didn't play much as a kid, Anton said, as a dart bounced off the wall. Apart from with your todger, said Fred and they collapsed into laughter so much that Anton had to hold onto the side of the bar. Later I found out that Fred was the only person who could help Anton relax, to make him goof

around. They were a double act, a pairing, sun and moon. When I look back, they were as good as brothers. And on occasion, later, I was jealous, I'll admit, having never had any kind of closeness with Clive. Siblings weren't a joy in my experience. I sensed that, above all, they weren't really that interested in me.

You do know that Anton is the cleverest man you'll ever meet, Fred said to me then, even if he's officially the world's worst darts player. Shut up, Fred, said Anton, bashful and turning pink. He knows so much stuff it would make your brain burst if you knew it all, said Fred, and he really meant it; he admired Anton's talents, and he told me how on prize-giving days there'd be groans from the other boys because Anton would have yet another accolade to collect, for history, for literature, for Latin, shuffling up to the stage to shake the headmaster's hand. Fred sat there clapping loudly and cheering his friend on, bursting with pride. He can do anything he damn well wants. He could be a doctor, a translator for the UN, fancy that! How many young men can say that? He called Anton the Boffin, and Boff, and once some other traveller on the trail thought that was his actual name. Funny how much he liked Anton's conventional achievements, having turned his back on trying to acquire any of his own. I've ruled out college, said Fred, then Anton whispered, I think they've ruled him out, actually. The music was his calling; that was clear.

And why do you want to go on the road, Fred? I returned the question, leaning in as he lit my cigarette. Not much different to you. I want to get away, time for a clean break. He shook out the match. Ever had a heartbreak, Joyce?

But before he could tell me more, Anton returned with a second tray of drinks. Later, I knew that some words had been exchanged at the bar. There had been a murmured consultation, I'll never know what they discussed, did I cut the mustard? Did I have the grit? Would they be taking a risk if they brought a girl along? Was I a bore? Could they survive with me in the Land Rover for months ahead? I didn't look someone who would whinge or make demands, at least, that was my asset. And I had the petrol money, which counted most of all. Fred spoke up for me, I guessed, and he had the upper hand. The requirements were pretty minimal. Come to think of it, I never even knew if there had been any other applicants.

In any case, Anton had been talked round. We both recognised we'd have our work cut out, being cooped up together for months, but alternatives were thin on the ground. I'll stick by Fred's side, I thought, he'll be a hoot. We could leave Thursday week then? They hadn't asked me if I knew anything about exhausts or carburettors or tyre pressures; they had assumed that I wouldn't.

And there were things that I hadn't told them. What was there to tell? No man on the horizon. I had stopped looking. I was just a plain Jane. Plain Joyce. Nothing special. I did all the things that you needed to do: skirt above the knees, hair pulled back, black kohl pulled to the corner of the eyes, and I suppose I did have a kind of grace in my features aged twenty-four. I bloomed for a rose's span, for a journey's length. No spots. A tidy little waist. Even then, I was never going to be the best-looking girl in the room.

The thing is, I'd gone frigid. I didn't like it anymore.

Maybe there would have been a time, but by the time we started the trip, the thought of all that gooey muck and fingering about, like putting your hands in cake dough, well, it made me feel queasy. I didn't want to be touched, and if there was a flickering of interest in my body, unsteady and unreliable, it was like a pilot light ready to go out. I'd even gone off myself. I was no record-breaker, hadn't started until after school, and I suppose there had been a time when there was a thrill. I guess he'd known what to do with himself. Now I was nun-like. And the short hair was part of that. Men had to think twice; I could be mistaken for someone who'd taken a vow, and I was buggered if I was changing for anyone. I had zero intention of putting flowers in my hair.

So we were three. As thrown-together as any people ever could be. But there was one distinguishing mark which we recognised in each other immediately: the desire to flee. Perhaps now, when I consider matters with the wisdom of hindsight, and so many decades later, it was always more of a getting away than a going. We were longing to flee, to fly, to forget.