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Opening extract from

Anila's Journey

Written by

Mary Finn

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HOW TO BEGIN A STORY

THIS IS MY STORY and I think there is merit in setting it down, even if I am not a princess, or a magical bird, or a gentleman who has lost his ship and found a new land. When I am old I can shake my head at it. But it will still be true.

The only thing I would choose to change, and it is impossible, is that my mother be the storyteller, for she told the best stories in the world. Hers would begin with a stolen ring or the monsoon in its black cloak and boots coming, not in summer but in winter, everything out of order and impossible to put right. But they'd end with a wedding feast in a palace and all the devils tumbled backwards into the deep blue sea.

Ask her about our own story, however, and those devil horns would poke out of the water again, just high enough to trouble me. Life is different, she said, it's just a line painted on an egg and if you think it has a beginning or an end you are bound for a fretful journey.

She took up my pen one day and drew a line on one of the smooth white stones from the fountain in the garden. She turned the stone round and round again, drawing all the while, until the line made fine bands all the way from top to bottom.

"There's the end!" I said to her, triumphant, for she could go no further now. But she turned the stone again and I saw she had made a loop back to where she had set out, so that her line had not simply come to a stop.

"You see?" she said. "There is no place here you can say is the beginning or the end. That is the way our life is too, Anila."

She believed in the wheel of life, absolutely. I was not so sure about that, not even when I was little, but especially after I was eight or nine and there were enough beginnings and endings around us for dozens of stories. I was impatient when she would not see this.

"But I began when you met my father," I said to her. "And if that was an egg in your hand, not a stone, what if you broke it? Then you'd have a top and a bottom and a beginning and an end and a middle you can just pour away. Or turn into something sweet for eating."

She held up her hands as you do to play Ikri-Mikri-Cham-Chikri with a baby but she was trying to stop my words, not to play. By that time it was a rare thing to see her smile. She feared for me because of my boldness, and my thunderclapping, as it was called in the house with the fountain. But I only had a child's desire to understand what was happening all around me.

Yet when I try to begin my own story, to write it down, all in order, in this notebook, I find that my mother's belief in the wheel makes a lot of sense after all. How is it possible to cut into the line of life and say, here it is, this is where it begins? It is not possible but surely a writer has to stab at it, like a baby bird seeking the softest part of the shell.

THE SCRAP OF NEWSPAPER

SO I SHALL BREAK my egg and choose to open my story here. Not with the ring or the storm, but with the scrap of newspaper that dear Miss Hickey, my guardian, put into my hand the day before she took ship from Calcutta for Madras.

She came into the salon where I was sitting on the old fainting couch, my legs tucked up under me. It was the only piece of furniture left now in that huge yellow room and it felt like a raft in the emptiness, with my cast-off slippers for fish.

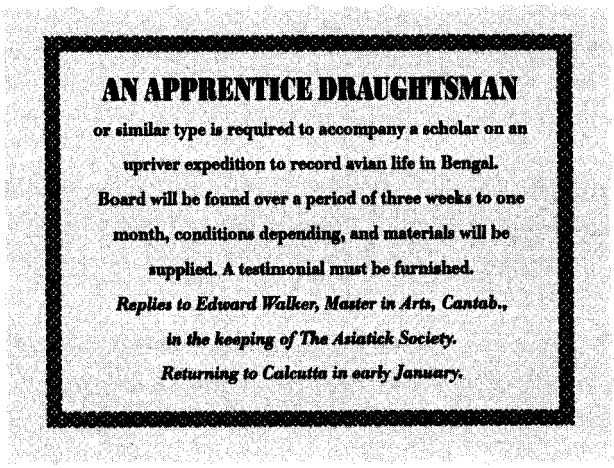
"Anila! There you are, my dear. I've made myself hoarse calling for you in the garden. Look, see what a blessed find I've made in just the last little while, going through the packing cases."

She stepped through the wide sun stripes cast by the windows where the dust hung, turning over as slowly as honey. There was a blaze of excitement on her face but all she had was a crumpled piece of newspaper, which she held out to me.

"We've had this in the house for a week or more," she said, "but I've only now seen it, stuffed as it was

inside the coffee pot, if you don't mind, and smelling of camphor balls so horribly besides. Imagine how my father's coffee will taste! Here, read it, child, don't let me ramble on, let me sit beside you on that battered old thing. You look very comfortable."

She sat beside me and smoothed her skirt. I could smell her English lavender water but also the strong whiff of camphor from the newspaper. It was a notice from *The Gazette*, torn from the pages that carried news of ships' landings and departures and the city's theatricals and balls. No wonder then that Miss Hickey had not seen it. She never read the notices.



I read the piece twice and I must still have been showing the whites of my eyes to it because Miss Hickey started to explain.

"Avian means birds," she said.

Well, I knew that much. After all, I was the Bird Girl

of Calcutta, according to Mr Hickey, the Famous Painter of Calcutta.

"And draughtsman means an artist, a professional kind of person. Apprentice, alas, means that there is not much to be expected in the line of fortune out of this. But never mind that, Anila. Here is an opportunity for you above all others. I know my father would write a testimonial for you if he were here, so I shall do so in his place."

She sat back and I had to turn a little to see her face. My brown sparrow of a guardian had a sweet little puckered mouth at the best of times, a butter-wouldn't-melt mouth, her father called it. But when she was intent on any matter that mouth settled into a straight line the way a monkey's does when it has a plan. It was settled now.

I hardly knew what to say. The day I found the courage to tell Miss Hickey that I would not travel south to Madras with her to join her father, she told me I had broken her heart. She still said these words, yet several times in the weeks since then she had astounded me with her practical ideas for my future. I could not see any such thing on this scrap of paper.

"But it says draughts*man*," I said, "so we can know for sure that this Mr Walker is not looking for someone like me. I'm not a man and I'm not English and he is surely looking for both of those things."

"Draughtsman is just a word like any other word, so it can be turned inside out like a suit of clothes. Never be outfoxed by a word, child. This Mr Walker may not yet be aware that he is looking for someone of your particulars, but he will be when he sees the birds you

can pluck out of the air with a pencil and a piece of paper. It will be our business to convince him."

Miss Hickey's mouth softened a little from its monkey lines.

"My word," she said, "when I think of you at your mother's feet, biddable as a lamb you were then, and drawing away with your little piece of charcoal..."

She stopped. In our household we were accustomed to talking easily about my mother but perhaps Miss Hickey felt that this was a dangerous time to call her to mind.

"Think, Anila," she said, very quietly. "You have not just your natural talent to support your claim but there is undoubtedly a certain liberty in your situation that I believe can aid you in this matter just as well as it might undermine you in other ways."

She took a breath. "That is, of course, if you will not finally reconsider and come with me in the morning."

The sly thing. This was the reason I had stayed all morning in the salon, though of course I had heard Miss Hickey calling me.

Her eyes were on mine, gimlets, though someone watching us might have said no, hers were blue and frank and pleasant while mine were the whetstones. I stood up from the couch and nearly fell, for pins and needles started to attack my poor legs.

Oh, but it was hard enough as it was! Ever since Mr Hickey had decided that there were too many new painters arriving every month in Calcutta and that he would make more money in Madras, my mind had had no peace. I could see every reason why I should go with these dear people who loved me, and only one

why I should stay.

There was such sense in leaving. The Hickeys were my protectors and I had no others in Calcutta who truly cared whether I lived or died. We had all seen the truth of that when Miss Hickey finally bowed to my mutiny. She began to trot me out then among her lady acquaintances, looking to find me a position.

How Miss Anila Tandy could read and paint and sing, goodness, every English child in Calcutta would cry himself to sleep if he could not win my company to his house as a teacher. And Mrs Panossian of the great store near the Bowbazaar, with her famous coffees and syrups and preserved fruits and flower waters all the way from Europe? She had to agree that those goods needed clever Anila's tending as surely as if they were goats on the road to perdition.

She sold me very well, Miss Hickey did, but there were no takers, not really. There was a promise from Mrs Deering that I might come and look after her little girl whenever the ayah would declare her weaned. No ayah existed who would be that stupid, of course. Mrs Panossian, who knew my story long since, leant across her gleaming dark counter and said I was welcome to come and work a day with her so she might judge if I were as good a totter as I was a dauber. Everyone else smiled sweetly at me, the jackal-coloured girl dressed that day in a frock, her braids tied in matching ribbons. One for her father, missing, one for her mother, dead.

Except the rector of St John's, of course. He saw through that frock so clearly I might as well have danced into his study wearing my mother's old bangles, and bells round my ankles. He stroked his long beard,

brown and grey underneath the snuff stains, and looked me up and down the way soldiers look at horses. Finally, the rector turned to Miss Hickey and asked her whether, as my guardian, she had a record or a witness to my baptism. This request made her turn so white I thought she would faint on the spot. But she stood up and told the reverend sahib that she had not yet stooped to stealing their faiths from other people and so we would bid him good-day. I was proud of her then, proud to have her fierce affection.

It was even better when she turned back to him at the door.

"Moreover, sir," she said, "I dropped my own baptismal name long since, when I was Anila's age. Helena is my own choice from my favourite of Shakespeare's plays and your church can claim no hand, act or part in it."

We had not seen him since. But of course he would have spread the story among his parishioners. At any rate, there had been no other offer that, as Miss Hickey put it, addressed my talents. So she had made her own secret arrangement with me. That was how things stood, I believed, but as the time for parting came nearer I felt as weak as a bird in a storm, and she was not much better, pushing me one moment, pulling the next.

So, what on earth should I think now about this Mr Walker and his expedition?

I began to walk the length of the salon, keeping my steps within the boards. Such strangeness the room had now, without any of its chairs and little tables, its rugs and tapestries and the pearl-coloured blinds. All the

good furniture had been taken away in the week past by coolies and wagons.

Those things had just vanished but the cherry harpsichord had left its claw marks on the floor, like the sulky monster it was. When the rains came not even Miss Hickey, who was a pretty player, could make music with it.

The walls too, bore traces. All Mr Hickey's paintings, both his own works and his collection, had been taken out of their golden frames and rolled up like rugs. I had helped with that, carefully wrapping the canvases in further rolls of stuffs, so they were safe as babies. Now you could see the different pale shapes on the walls where each picture had hung. But the two paintings I remembered best had never lived in this room at all.

"Anila, stop pacing like a creature in a menagerie!"

Miss Hickey stood up and caught my arm as I passed her again, holding me from my march.

"It seems impossible," I said to her. "But the drawing work is something I would enjoy. And you are right. I can do things that English girls might not."

"Child, there is nothing at all to lose by trying. Go and get your drawings collected now so that we may arrange them to best impress this Mr Walker. I am going up now to unpack some of my writing paper to write a testimonial for you. Truly, I feel something might come of this and it makes me feel a little more hopeful about your staying behind in this city of scoundrels. Think, if you can do this work, a recommendation from this gentleman might get you appointed as a drawing mistress, or a proper governess,

such a position that I have not found for you."

That was my Miss Hickey, my dear mashi. For that was what I liked to pretend she was, my aunt, though I had none. She always spoke in long and perfect sentences like a book, unlike anybody else I knew and not at all like her father, whose few words came out in explosions.

There was indeed only one reason why I would not go with them. As long as I had no news of my father, I would believe him to be alive. And if he was alive, he would return to find me. He had promised that, even though it was so long ago now. He knew nothing of the Hickeys or their kind of people, so if I were not in Calcutta how would he find me?

His words had left tracks as deep as the harpsichord's. As faint as the picture frames.

THE IRON TEA HOUSE

I WANTED TO REMEMBER the view from my window for ever.

"Why my father never painted this, I cannot begin to think," Miss Hickey said. "It makes such a fine picture all on its own say-so."

She stood beside me. Our work was done. My bird paintings were sorted and packed in tissue paper. Even the stitched sketchbooks made from my father's old Company papers were wrapped and put safe into one of the tin-lined drawing cases she had purloined for me. Then, sitting on my stripped bed, Miss Hickey had written her testimonial note.

The garden stretched away down, sloping to the river. Today the river was just a grey line under a huge pale sky. In the new year, when the sky brightened, the water would turn the colour of golden mud. Then, on a late afternoon like this, all the ships and boats on it would look hugged by the water, as if the water was their mother. Today they were just painted puppet ships, gliding past. Even the great ones going down-river had only a baby swell of canvas in their rigging.

We stared until two ships had crossed the window frame from right to left.

"My ship is moored so far downriver," Miss Hickey said, "it will take I don't know how long to reach her, with all the hazards and shallows."

She sighed.

Outside the evening crows were shouting.

Anila, my little bird, the crows begin to make dusk before great Surya himself feels tired.

Our garden was full of trees, over thirty different kinds, Mr Hickey said. Our neighbours grew neat grass instead, for their cricket games and garden parties. Their trees were prisoners in pots. They hid their dhobi washing tanks and their servants' huts behind stands of bamboo. Our garden had its own proud little village surrounded by flowering plants. It had a lily pond and a huge silk cottonwood tree that dropped enough cobweb-soft down every summer to stuff all our pillows and cushions.

But it wasn't always a peaceful place. The tall palmyras and neem trees groaned like devils when the storms came up the river or over the salt marshes. The winds snapped boughs off and threw hard fruits around until the doob grass had holes like bad skin.

Our house did not lie at the fashionable end of Garden Reach, where people kept their own boats to travel to and from the city. The Hickeys did not care to do this for the expense was great, and so our garden was enclosed and separated from the waterside by, first, an iron fence and gate, then by a hedge of red oleanders. Abdul the cook claimed that all this protection was a good thing because, far downstream where we

were, ghosts left the river every night. These were the ghosts of drowned people who tried to save themselves again and again until the dawn forced them to slip back under the water.

It was down there at the hedge that Miss Hickey's and my secret lay, so far down I could not see it from my window. The first time I saw the secret, I could not believe how it had escaped me before. I who knew the garden as well as every thieving mynah that came for our prickly plums, our mangoes!

"Well then, Anila," said Miss Hickey, one afternoon. It was a week or so after our unhappy visit to St John's. "If you are determined to stay here in Calcutta, we shall have to find you a house."

"A house?"

She was smiling her clever-me monkey smile which told me nothing, but in her garden basket she was carrying a couple of the syce's horse tools. She would say nothing more but hooked that firm little arm through mine and led me all the way down to the oleander hedge. She right-turned us there like soldiers, over to the corner where the greenery was thickest. She put my hand on it and I felt the softer growth. These weeds and fronds were scrambling upwards to cover something.

"Think of the Reverend's unpleasant facial hair trimmings," Miss Hickey said. "Then we'll have some pleasure in chopping them, don't you think?"

That made me giggle. Most of the growth could be pulled away without cutting, though when I had to slash some vines I thought of dirty snuff-brown whiskers dropping off. But Miss Hickey's words proved

clever because as the greens fell away we found bones underneath, though they were neither human nor animal remains.

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

What could anybody say to something so perfect?

It was a tiny house made of iron that stood clear of the ground on six legs. Once it had been painted dark blue but now it was mostly rusted. Two boxy steps led up to a tightly closed door. This door had glass fitted into it, very dirty glass, smeared and sticky except at the top where it was cut into odd shapes in jewel colours, greens, ambers, crimsons and deep, deep blues. Tatters of faded cloth hung down in the window frames instead of glass. Six spikes on the pointed roof matched the six legs underneath.

It reminded me of the fat rocket firework that Mr Hickey had brought home during last Kali Puja when the city was ablaze with lights and excitement.

"Look at it," Miss Hickey said. "All those sharp points and the glass lozenges and trefoils. Somebody pined for a Gothic fancy on the banks of the Hooghly and so here we have it."

"But nobody has ever had tea here, have they?"

"Well, not us anyway, dear, not in all the time we've been here. I let it go, there was so much else to be doing here. But this little house might be a godsend to you, Anila, if you do not find a position before my father and I leave."

My dear and proper Miss Hickey was saying such a thing about a house that looked like a firework?

She told me then that she had asked the syce to let loose his pet mongooses around the bottom of the

garden so that the area should be free of snakes.

"Zakar will be staying on here as horseman, you know, so that should be a consideration for you. He's no stranger and I believe he has a good heart."

I thought about glum silent Zakar, who loved horses more than humans, and I wondered.

Miss Hickey took a key from her drawstring waist purse. It could not have belonged to any other building but the little blue house because the top of the key was shaped into points just like the roof. She fitted it and it turned easily.

We stepped in.

Something skidded by us and out the door and there was a scurry that we couldn't quite follow in the half-light. I jumped back but Miss Hickey just poked her head outside again and said quite calmly, "That will be one of the mongooses. It must have taken up abode here."

I was not so certain myself that it had been a mongoose though the little creatures do move close to the earth, and fast, in just that way. I hoped it was, and nothing worse. But I was trying to understand what was happening under our feet. The iron floor seemed to be heaving. Miss Hickey made a disgusted noise and stamped her little slippered feet down like a horse.

"The place is teeming with insects," she said. "Take care they don't go up your legs."

Now that my eyes were used to the twilight inside I could see that the floor was crossed over and over with highways of ants and beetles, fleeing our feet. A spider the size of a lemon skittered into a corner. There was a strong smell of mice but I supposed the mongoose had

taken care of that job already.

"Well, indeed, it's not exactly the garden house of Eden, is it?" said Miss Hickey. "I shall have to send Zakar on a little expedition down here tomorrow. But look – what pretty drapes these were once."

On the torn strips of brocade you could still make out flowering trees, swallows and ladies and gentlemen in strange costumes crossing little humped bridges.

"I had a bedroom made up with chinoiserie like this when I was a girl in Dublin," she said, almost as if to herself. "It tells a story of two lovers. Do you see them there?" She laid a finger on one of the lady figures but the stuff came apart in her hand and crumbled, just like Mr Hickey's dried tobacco when he crushed it to fill his pipe. She dropped it.

"As you see, Anila, it's not perfect. But for a bolthole you could do worse. Nobody comes down here from the house and the oleanders conceal it."

"And I can sneak fresh water from the well in the garden."

She looked at me and her mouth suddenly twisted up.

"Oh, child," she said. "Do you really, really believe that your father will ever return to Calcutta? Else all this –" and she gestured around with her hands – "makes no sense, you know, and you should continue to be with us."

I could say nothing because my throat was dammed with a lump. There was such weight and certainty in Miss Hickey's kindness. I made as if to shrug my shoulders but she reached out her arms and embraced me. It was a very perfect action because neither of us could

see whether the other was weeping, and that was fine with me.

"Promise me just this thing, child," she said, letting me go at last. "You must follow us down to Madras within the half-year if your efforts to discover news of your father prove fruitless. Or at any time if your situation here gets parlous. I will leave a fiduciary note at the shipping offices for this very purpose."

All I could do was nod.

We left the little tea house then, locked the door, covered up our secret again with some of the Reverend's chopped green whiskers. Let *him* do some work for *me*, I thought. We went back to the house and set down again to the work of packing and labelling the best house goods and setting others aside for the servants.

But that evening Zakar was called into the house. He stood stiffly to attention in the pantry, smelling of horses, his stormy brows meeting in a line across his face. Miss Hickey told him what she wanted done at the bottom of the garden.

"Remember, silent actions breed the biggest rupees," she warned him at the finish.

Miss Hickey normally spoke quite well in Bangla, our beautiful language that the English call Bengali. But that evening I wondered if she knew that her warning words to Zakar sounded like something a dacoit might say in a fairy tale. I tried to picture tiny Miss Hickey as a thieving brigand holding a dagger. The strange thing was that it was not impossible to imagine this.

I quickly explained to Zakar that Miss Hickey considered that he was bound to secrecy. About cleaning

and outfitting my little house, and above all about my presence there. For this he would be paid. But he had understood, he told me. And then, when he was leaving the room, he winked at me, an unmistakeable wink under his black caterpillar brow. Zakar!

We were all dacoits in our separate ways, I thought. Miss Hickey with her fierce words and her belief that I could live like Mr Robinson Crusoe. Zakar with his thundery wink. And there I was now too, with my den down by the riverside.

Now, weeks later, looking down from my window, I knew exactly what was inside the little iron house. We had hung fresh curtains all round the window frames. They were not at all pretty ones as the China patterned drapes must once have been. They were made of heavy oilcloth to give me some protection from the elements and were a murky green to blend in with the oleanders. The floor was spread with clean rushes and there was a small round of woven coir matting laid on top of them. A string bed hung high off the ground from two of the iron supports, a red satin cushion from the salon making it bright as a bird's breast.

Miss Hickey had instructed Habdi, the kitchen boy, to find a clay oven in the bazaar and a basketful of charcoal and good firewood. When he looked confused she told him she wanted an oven just in case her ship should lack its own.

The only smells inside the tea house now came from the oleanders and, fresh on the breeze, the waterweeds and the river itself. I had placed my mother's little Durga altar on one of the windowsills. For years the old clay goddess had sat on my bedroom sill and had shared

my high view of the river. I thought she deserved to have no less in her new home. There was also a tiffin box with some cooked dal, a bag of rice, some eggs and a jar of English arrowroot biscuits. That was all, until I should carry down my bag of clothes and the drawings from the bedroom. I would sleep there tonight. Miss Hickey had insisted on that.

"So then at least I will know the first chapter of your new story," she said. But her tone was dull, not keen.