

Cochin 1937



Louise Maud, mother of Cyril, grandmother of Ian, great-grandmother of Pascal, stirred on her sickbed, the mosquito nets rippling in the morning sun. Nearing the end, and entering one of the wildest bouts of fever in her disease, she shuddered waiting for the next hallucination to come. Surely, this would be the opening to the afterlife and her pain and suffering would finish as she was transported to heaven or hell or wherever. The long low Portuguese villa in the Bastion Street house in Cochin was the final destination of the peripatetic Le Feuvre family, headed by her husband Percival. Long accustomed to shifting from post to post, out of station being a permanent condition for that family. Her second son, Cyril, was even born during a rough crossing from Ladakhshweep to Calicut. He was christened on arrival at the cathedral.

Sweating intensely with the fever now, she could not even bring herself to call for help. Suddenly the light coming from the window opposite seemed to shift perspective, imperceptibly and the room seemed to...flicker. The wallpaper patterns that had irritated her so intensely during her long, debilitating illness, forming into faces during bouts of fever, were fading. Instead the walls were becoming translucent, almost pure white. The she started to notice a kind of magic lantern show happening above her bed. Images of tall rectangular building, of a type she had never seen were appearing, with some kind of flying winches moving from side to side.

Then- there were people! In her room! European in appearance, wearing trowsers but native-style kurtas in Indian fabrics, looking at the walls, appearing to read things on the walls. What were they doing invading her room? Then one, a middle-aged man strode right up to her bed and – walked right through her! A sigh of relief engulfed her burning body and a sense of final escape came with her last breath as she drifted up to the ceiling, looking down at her pale, flaxen wasted body, her black hair spread around the pillow. The, suddenly it felt like a cord was drawing her back down to the room, escape was not yet to come. Looking down the man was still standing there. He looked very familiar.

She felt herself thinking of France, a place she had never been. But this man had. Wait! He felt herself re-entering her body. Suddenly lucid, she started writing on the paper pad by the inkstand.

Cochin 2025

Ian leaned forward, He read the label. ‘Symphony of the Flying Objects’ by Shubha Taparia (UK). It was found footage of London cranes during the construction mania of the 2000’s, clearly by a London-based Indian artist. He was retired as a curator now, but was still fascinated by contemporary art, particularly that from 2 decades ago. His era. He felt a slight breeze of cold air coming from...where? No AC in this room. His attention was drawn to a long groove in the wall, long painted gallery white. There was something- he felt a slight electric shock and there flooded into his mind the one photograph he had of his Indian grandmother, dead before the Second World War, Louise Maud McCune of Burmese and Scottish origin and married to Percival Le Feuvre, Deputy Postmaster of Calicut.

Louise was now facing the man, who to all intents and purposes resembled an older version of her son Cyril, off building bridges with the Army in Koonor. She had something important to say to him, but she could not remember what.

London 2037

The stranger was insistent. Circle requests, skype requests, holos, all manner of contacts. Pascal decided to simply ping him his cell. The call, non-holo, just audio, came 30 minutes later, an elderly man with that lazy, urban/rural Hampshire accent that typified the inhabitants of Southampton “Well, I haven’t got any room for it. It was never his in the first place...” A trunk, bearing the name of Cyril Le Feuvre. Somehow, his father had brought it home after the closure of Southampton docks. It had lain there in his

office for 60 years, unclaimed. Then gathered dust in the garage. The caller had narrowed the search down to the Anglo-Indian Le Feuvre family, considering the trunk had come from Calicut via Bombay.

“OK, I’ll come and get it.” Pascal headed to Kings Cross where he got the crossrail to Waterloo. The lines of refugees were spreading back from Eurostar, delaying him and making it difficult to enter the interchange. Pascal groaned. When would this filthy claustrophobic sprawly city, once the capital, seething with beggars, street slums, street drug and pharma dealers, New Russians in dronecopters and white refugees from the American Civil War become independent from Royal England and join the great cities of Europe again? He finally made the fast train to Southampton.

A strange city, totally rebuilt after the Second War, dominated by Universities and now walled, reached only after the shanty towns of Hampshire, through the ghost stations no trains stopped at any longer, gaunt white faces staring from improvised bonfires, holding weapons, sometimes. His father, Ian, now buried in the French countryside and still waiting for his European papers, had always hated Southampton and its pre-Third War smug stability, having been forced to leave London for there. His grandfather, Cyril had, ironically, arrived there as his first landfall in the UK and then ended his days there, struck down by an early heart attack. He refused to talk, apparently, to his sons and daughter about his early life in India. Now, his steamer trunk, which had travelled with him while a Sergeant-Major in the Royal Engineers from the Egyptian Front in 1947, long imagined lost, had turned up finally.

London, Southampton, 1959

The loud sound of the steam trains at Waterloo Station scared Ian as he held his father's hand, heading for the green painted Southern Railway carriages for Southampton. His father, a solid Englishman in a tweed jacket, unused to travelling with a child, was heading for Southampton docks to meet his brothers, travelling on newly independent Indian passports, for a retirement in a home country they had never visited.

Taking the bus down to the docks, the magnificent outline of the SS Oriana hove into view. Already a horde of well-dressed first-class passengers, mostly from South Africa, were jumping into shiny Hillmans, Wolseleys and Rovers.

Several hours later, Ian was waiting at the gates as his father was pleading with uniformed customs officials. Finally, his uncles and their families were allowed into Great Britain. His uncle Fergus was furious. "Damn chap treated us like natives! We are British, coming home, he had no right to question our nationality. All because those jumped-up Indian politicians made us take their passports after ruining everything with their 'independence'. Why is it so cold here?" Ian was horrified. Who were these tiny dark men, who were apparently his father's closest brothers? They reminded him of the brilliantined mobs of Indian youths who crowded on to the 321 bus to Watford, smelling of curry.

But sooner or later, he began to see them as his closest family and he grew to love them as they moved into Ruislip, finding that they were required to live in immigrant communities in the London suburbs. Realising now, they were not as 'white' or 'British' as they thought at 'home' his uncles gently

mocked their past, calling for ‘the sweeper’ and other servants in households where there were none. He began to feel certain solidarity with these displaced and deracinated uncles, retired after a lifetime of running railways, post offices and police forces. He himself had been called ‘Paki’ by his sharp-tongued suburban schoolfriends when his father, with his barely-discernible lilting Anglo-Indian accent attended school parents evening. He supposed it was better than the previous ‘yid’, caused by his hooked nose, broken in childhood and sallow complexion. At least he now had a real heritage. Paki it was, then, and he would spend the rest of his life travelling back to the lands his relatives had left forever, starting in his twenties.

Southampton 1947

Cyril gripped the rails of the ship approaching Southampton, now filled with bright lights after the blackout had been abolished. So this was the place. The Warrant officer handing him his papers in Cairo had indicated he had a choice. You can either be demobilised in Bombay or or go home to. Winchester. You are a British national. You have the choice. He had never seen England in his life. He sniffed the sharp, cold winter air. Just the acrid smell of oil and burnt coal here. That heady mixture of cooking fires, excrement and dung and spices, different in each city his family had moved to, was no longer there, along with the bitter personal associations some of the smells had. Thinking of the letter from his sister, safely stowed in the trunk, he thought, “lets try this ‘home’, without a smell, then”. India, or at least the community he had grown up in, was full of interfering priests, after his soul. At the age of 6, the Cardinal of Calicut had arrived in his parent’s home and put his Cardinal’s hat on Cyril’s fair curls— ‘that boy will go far’. He soon rejected the Jesuits and his fair curls turned jet black. Then the problems began.

Here it would be a new life, join a rowing club, get a steady job. He would never leave England again in his life and was thinking this when waiting in line for his trunk to be delivered back to him. The heavy-jowled chap with the West country accent, like something from a Thomas Hardy novel frowned and looked at his papers. “No trunk here. You said it was loaded in Cairo?” Cyril looked at the man, muttered. “Oh. It doesn’t matter” and walked out to find the railway station and a new life. The trunk was his past and he could leave it behind. ‘Wait a minute!’ the man called, don’t you want us to try to find it?

Cochin, 2025

Ian was sitting in the Decent Bar in Cochin, the fans whirring over his head as he tasted the first cold Knock-Out beer of the day. He was musing on his strange experience in the art gallery. Another drinker came and sat opposite him. There was always a lack of seating in this old-school mens bar. The stranger had the dark complexion of the Southern Indian, but when he introduced himself as Daniel Thomas, Ian realised he was in the presence of a Keralan Christian. ‘Another sort of Anglo Indian’ said Daniel who was already on his fourth Knock-Out and quite drunk.

Ian had already told him that his father was from this coast and was one of the left-over French, long since homogenised and anglicised by the victorious Imperial British. “But there are lots of your types here! Don’t bother with phones or holos. They don’t use them. They are old-school. Just walk down Bastion Street only and ask where the Le Feuvres live. They will tell you! The Le Feuvres will welcome you, isn’t it?. But walk there with presence, head high, shoulders straight and wear a coat only, not

shirtsleeves. Don't take your cycle as they will not respect you, isn't it? There are the most important Anglo-Indian family in this town! Just only now they sold their main family house to that big art dealer Geetha Ghosh, you probably visited, isn't it!" Yes I did, said Ian quickly. "You mean there were Le Feuvres living there". "Certainly. You must join them! They will invite you to the Anglo-Indian Ball only at the YWCA. But if you go..." Daniel was getting seriously drunk now "you must promise me you will not dance with my girlfriend. "Now I must go home to my wife. She will not forgive me for (here he mimed a raising of a bottle) and not going to the government shop to get her ration. I am trusting you to do the needful!"

Ian walked down Bastion street in a daze, thinking about the odd meeting with the Anglo-Indian and the strange sensation he had felt in the upper room of the Tahir Art Gallery, now revealed to be a former Lefevre home.

London, Southampton 2037

Once his London papers were checked at the station Pascal took the taxi through the red-bricked suburbs of Southampton. The man's address was in 'Shirley'. Why do they name suburbs here after women? The man was shabby, contented and had a lazy manner and smelled of hashish smoke. He had had a late, stoned night and had suddenly got into his head to find the real owner of the trunk after some extremely strong genetically modified skunk. He led him out to a garden shed in a small spare strip of land, identical to dozens of other narrow strips out the back, just enough room for pottering. It was buried under boxes of old tools. "Do you mind if I open it here?" Pascal asked.

Inside were many photographs of his grandfather and his relatives, on verandahs in India, in the club, smoking with friends. Then there were letters. One here: "Dear Cyril, I hope you have survived the war. If so, I must ask you something. Please do not send any more money. I have finally decided to do as Father Peter suggested. I will give my soul to Jesus and enter the convent. It is either that or walk the streets, since our stepmother asked me to leave. As you know, she does not want our father to continue to support our numerous family. I hope one day to visit you, wherever you end up, but I am afraid you will hate me, for I will be in a nun's habit." Leaving the remaining letters, thoughtfully, Pascal closed the trunk and headed for the docks, beginning his long and difficult journey back to Free Europe and his home by the river in South West France.

Bombay, India, 2002.

It was Ian's fifth visit to India. When Cyril died, he took the hundred pounds from the will and stood at the Elephant and Castle roundabout with his thumb out, heading for Dover, the ferry, the autobahns, Greece, Istanbul, Iran, Afganistan. Months late, after piggy-backing on the hippie trail (with a dapper Pakistani traveller in a suit, trying to get home to Lahore) he was in a sweltering telephone office in Bombay, 'No Sister Marie Helene is out of station, sir'. It was one of several attempts to find his aunt Louise. Now, he was in the office of the Slum School facing a fearsome nun in her eighties as a large desk with a number of antiquated telephones, with younger nuns scurrying about.

You! You! You! Get on the telephone and check Bandra, Pondy, anywhere out of station for a Sister Mary Helene! The imperious nun peremptorily sent the young Indian nuns scattering. We will find your Auntie!

They jumped into a taxi and went immediately to the hospital. The young nun at the reception desk barely glanced at Ian when he asked to see his aunt, a Sister Marie Helene. “Go right up, your Auntie is on the fifth floor”. “But, shouldn’t I call the ward? She is an old lady and has not seen me since a baby, Besides, I have just been put in contact with her by Sister Felicity, she may not even be my aunt”. Focussing now, the receptionist beamed – “But of course she is your Auntie. She looks just like you!”

He walked in to find a dignified, dark lady, being propped up in bed by a group of giggling young nuns chattering in Hindi, switching backwards and forwards to English, Daddyji style. She was clearly a ward favourite and the nuns were certainly not very religious or reverent, as nuns go. “Who...?” Seeing the obviously European tall man with the distinct family resemblance. “it must be Ian, it has been so long... You must excuse me, I haven’t spoken English for years”. “Yes, I have a picture of you, here visiting England when I was born” said Ian, showing her a picture of a young nun holding a baby in a suburban garden. “You came just in time, I’m for it, you know” “No no Auntie” twittered the young nuns, “You have many more years to live”.

They spent a lot of time that evening. Ian wanted to know all the circumstances that led up to his father’s refusal to return to India and the family circumstances that led to his aunt’s situation. “But now, you see, it was not so bad after all. After a lifetime of serving, teaching and nursing the church looks after you very well”.

“You, know, Auntie, my father refused to talk about India in any way, he said it was dirty, the people lazy and it smells”.

“That is not the reason, you know. Your father had a reason to escape India...”

London 2037



Pascal finally got the trunk up the stairs to his small one-bedroom flat overlooking the Regents Canal, which he had as a bolthole to do business in Royal England. Opening it, there was a faint smell of curry mixed in with a general mustiness. Some Kukri knives, some underwear, a couple of stiff white pressed shirts. And some photographs, the last evidence of his grandfather Cyril's life in India. A picture of him, looking hot and sweaty in the mess, whisky glass in hand, uniform dishevelled, a surrounded by others like him, a young woman beside him. He seemed to be among friends, but looked here far from the tranquil family man he remembered his grandfather to be. And a photograph of a small boy in a Cardinal's hat, a pair of fleshy male hands with rings, holding it on him. A strange tingling feeling came over him as he picked up the picture of who must have been his great Grandmother, Louise Maude McCune.

Cochin, India, 2025

Ian needed to go back to the Tahir gallery again. He felt there was something in that room waiting for him and the image of his grandmother was calling him. And there have been Lefeuvres there for generations, it turned out.

Ian reached down and stroked the groove in the wall – there was something, yes a rolled-up sheaf of what seemed to Indian writing paper with spiky handwriting. It had been painted over with the white gallery paint, He pulled it out, read: It began falteringly

“ I am Louise Maud McCune. I am dead but not dead enough, yet. I am nearly you may call a ghost, but I would prefer to call myself an unquiet presence.

While I was ensconced in my long illness, the Postmaster, Percival, a philanderer, was pursuing a series of amorous encounters with a Mrs Price, widowed, of England. I do not like to illustrate further but let it be known, even after visiting me on my sickbed in Bastion Street Cochin, my husband Percival was taking every opportunity to ravish this lady and she was actively encouraging him to do so. On one occasion I was able to slip from my sickroom and was trying to attract the attention of the sweeper, as there were a number of mouse-droppings beneath my bed, I viewed him having at her from behind in a cupboard, her skirts high and her legs akimbo. And her a proper lady of the Raj!

After I had died, he was forced to marry her and all my children disinherited. Floating above their bedchamber I heard her say. “Even

though you are a bit swarthy we'll make a proper Anglo gent out of you, Mr LeFeuvre". But first you'll have to forget about those chichis, those darky-whites you have spawned". At that point they proceeded to have relations again unwed, fully clothed, whilst pretending to the servants they were dining. Damn her to the depths of her whorish, dark snobbish soul! That was mainly the girls, as my sons Cyril, Bob and Oscar had all joined the army and police force and were already pukka gents. But her children, Anglos both, became LeFeuvres, inherited all our family money and, leaving the females as good as on the streets they took the family line to America, where I understand they have now prospered under the dictatorship. I now forgive them all, despite their sins and am pleased you, my descendants have returned to the country of our origin. I will now follow your river to the sea and will return to my origins and rest in peace. Thank you good sirs and madams. Your memories of this encounter will pass through this oriental sorcery to your grandfather, completing the circle. Please show this to your son and his son by the river in France, so my memory will finally be at rest. It will appear in the trunk, your son will seek it.

Thank you

Louise Maud McCune

Cochin 1937.

At this point the spidery writing on the silvery writing paper shuddered and vanished. Ian remembered the trunk.

Rob La Frenais ('Ian').

Cochin 2016