

*The modern country of Bangladesh, with its capital in Dhaka, is the eastern half of the area traditionally known as Bengal; the western half, with its part of India. Although the people of the two halves of Bengal speak the same language, they are divided by religion, the majority of the population in the east being Muslim, and the majority in the west Hindu. When the whole of this part of the world was part of the British Empire, Bengal was a single province. In 1947, when the British left, the British Empire in India was divided into two independent countries: India, with a largely Hindu population, and Pakistan, with a largely Muslim population. The latter consisted of West Pakistan (now Pakistan), and East Pakistan (previously the eastern half of Bengal, now Bangladesh). As a result of this division --- known as Partition --- many Muslims fled from India into one of the two parts of Pakistan, and many Hindus fled from the two parts of Pakistan into India. This exchange of population was very violent; it has been estimated that about 500,000 people were killed. More than a million people moved from East Pakistan to the western half of Bengal in India; the grandmother in the passage below was one of those people. In 1971, East Pakistan gained its independence from Pakistan and become Bangladesh.*

A few weeks later, at dinner, my father, grinning hugely, pushed an envelope across the table to my grandmother. 'That's for you,' he said.

'What is it?' she said suspiciously.

'Go on,' he said. 'Have a look.'

She picked it up, opened it and had a look inside. 'I can't tell,' she said. 'What is it?'

My father burst into laughter. 'It's your plane ticket,' he said. 'For Dhaka --- for the third of January.'

That night, for the first time in months, my grandmother seemed really excited. When I went up to see her, before going bed, I found her pacing around the room, her face flushed, her eyes shining. I was delighted. It was the first time in my eleven-year-old life that she had presented me with a response that I could fully understand --- since I had never been on a plane myself, it seemed the most ( 1 natural ) thing in the world to me that the prospect of her first flight should fill her with excitement. But I couldn't help worrying about her too, for I also knew that, unlike me, she was totally ignorant about aeroplanes, and before I fell asleep that night I made up my mind that ( 2a I would make sure ) that ( 2b she was properly prepared ) before ( 2c she left ). But soon enough it was apparent to me that it wasn't going to be easy to educate her: I could tell from the direction of the questions she asked my father that, (3)left to herself, she would learn nothing about aeroplanes.

For instance, one evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a schoolroom map, (4)she was not so much offended as puzzled.

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'No, that wasn't what I meant,' she said. 'Of course not. But surely there's something --- a fence perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just strips of empty land. Don't they call it no-man's land?'

My father was already an experienced traveller. He burst out laughing and said, 'No, you won't be able to see anything except clouds and perhaps, if you're lucky, some green fields.'

His laughter irritated her. 'Be serious,' she said. 'Don't talk to me as though I were a secretary in your office.'

Now it was his ( 5 ) to be offended: it upset him when she spoke sharply to him within my hearing.

'That's all I can tell you,' he said. 'That's all there is.'

My grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said, 'But if there isn't a fence or anything, (6)how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. (7)What was it all for then --- Partition and all the killing and everything --- if there isn't something in between?'

'I don't know what you expect, Ma,' my father said. 'It's not as though you're flying over the Himalayas into China. This is the modern world. The border isn't on the frontier: it's right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those official forms and things.'

My grandmother shifted nervously in her chair. 'What forms?' she said. 'What do they want to know about on those forms?'

My father scratched his forehead. 'Let me see,' he said. 'They want your nationality, your date of birth, place of birth, that kind o thing.'

(8)My grandmother's eyes widened and she sank back in her chair.

'What's the matter?' my father said in alarm.

With an effort she sat up straight again and smoothed back her hair. 'Nothing,' she said, shaking her head. 'Nothing at all.'

I could see then that she was going to ( 9 ) up in a hopelessness, so I took it upon myself to ask my father for all the essential information about flying and aeroplanes that I thought she ought to have at her (10) — I was sure, for example, that she would roll the windows down in mid-air unless I warned her not to.

It was not till many years later that I realised it had suddenly occurred to her then that she would have to fill in 'Dhaka' as her place of birth on that form, and that the prospect of this had worried her because she liked things to be neat and in place --- and at that moment she had not been able quite to understand how her place of birth had come to fit so uncomfortably with her nationality.

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