

Handle with Care

‘Where’s this from? Looks like Calcutta.’

The postman peered at the large brown paper parcel labelled ‘This way up’, ‘Fragile Please’, ‘Handle with care’, in large Sharon writing. It was her gap year and she was back-packing – currently in India. We had had several parcels – the last had been two tea services, miraculously all intact, wrapped in her underwear, though I was left wondering whether she had any underwear left.

While the kettle boiled, I unpacked the parcel carefully on the kitchen table. Everything smelled of cinnamon (or was it turmeric?) and each item was wrapped meticulously in Indian newspapers. Occasionally, as I smoothed the crumpled sheets of Urdu script, a notice in English leapt out at me. I sneezed a lot when I opened these parcels.

There was the usual pack of rubber banded travel tickets, notices of restaurants’ openings, entrance tickets for museums and craft exhibitions, together with promotional leaflets regarding tourist temples. Little notes directed me through the items.

‘Try this, Mom. Supposed to be good for diabetes’ – a fancy beaded bag containing a plastic bag of tea which looked like dried grass. The accompanying leaflet gave details of its contents, which read like a witch’s brew.

‘Bought this in a tiny market in the middle of nowhere’ was attached to the central item – a box wrapped in a fuchsia pink embroidered dupatta. I peeled away the flimsy scarf and draped it Muslim-wise over my head. The box measured about 8” x 10” – strapped around with bands of Sellotape. I gave up trying to tear it off and proceeded with the scissors.

The kettle boiled and so I made a cup of tea.

When I got inside the box, it was filled with half a tea towel and some bubble wrap. These revealed a beautiful green jade elephant – a gem of a memento – but as I extracted it, its broken rear leg remained in the box.

‘What a shame after coming all these miles,’ I said. Brian examined it. It was a clean break; Superglue was marvellous and it wouldn’t be a problem to repair. We put it on the kitchen shelf to await mending.

Eventually, Brian performed his Superglue magic and the elephant was propped for 24 hours’ convalescence before transfer to pride of place on Sharon’s desk, along with a wild assortment of other treasures, to await her arrival.

When she got home she relived the places where purchases had been made and each item triggered a different story. The green jade elephant had indeed been bought in a tiny market. She remembered clearly the man who sold it to her. She laughed as she recalled the haggling game – how the price had dropped dramatically, how she’d walked away several times and how he had run after her. As she held it and turned it in her hands in the sunlight, we waited for her comment.

‘Of course, it was dirt cheap because it had a broken leg!’

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