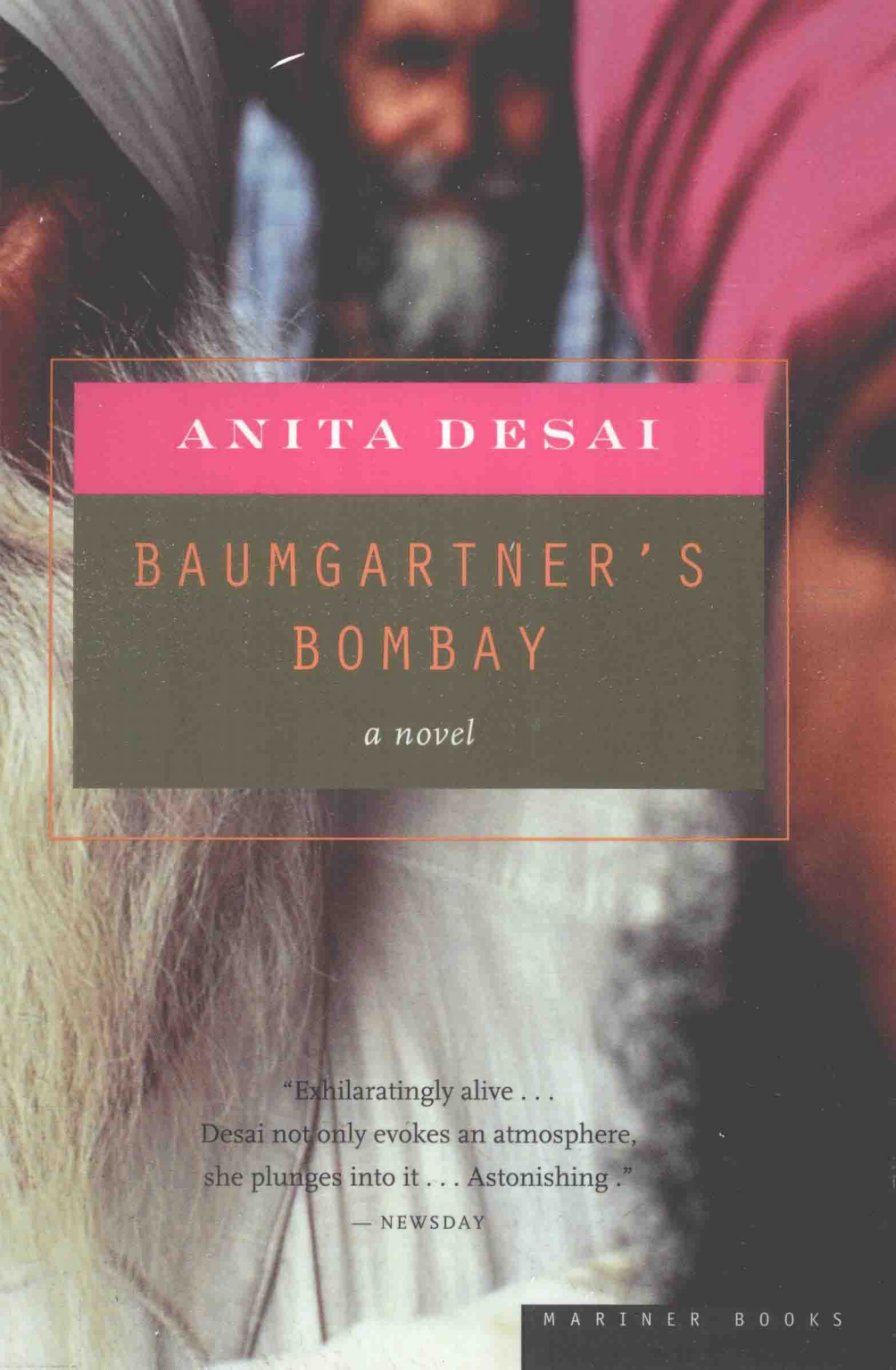

ANITA DESAI

BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY

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Anita Desai

Baumgartner's Bombay

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Voices in the City

Bye-Bye, Blackbird

Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Games at Twilight

Clear Light of Day

Village by the Sea

In Custody

Baumgartner's Bombay

Journey to Ithaca

Fasting, Feasting

Diamond Dust

I wish to express my gratitude to Girton College, Cambridge, for having provided me with a year of perfect conditions for work.

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored . . .

T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

CHAPTER ONE

Although she had fled the blood-spattered scene and fled the collected crowd of identical individuals – one-legged, nose-picking, vigilant-eyed – and hurried down the street at a speed uncommon for her, a speed no one would have thought possible on those high red heels that were no longer firm but wobbled drunkenly under the weight of her thick, purple-veined legs, Lotte slowed as she neared her door. Her body seemed to thicken and clot, her actions slowed till she was nearly at a standstill. She opened the door with fumbling, ineffective movements as though she had forgotten its grammar, her fingers numb, tongue-tied as it were. Entering the room, she shut the door behind her heavily, taking great care with the locks and bolts and chains, afraid the crowd might follow her, may even now be approaching her room, preparing to shoulder its way into it. When every lock was in place, she leant against the door in the theatrical manner that came naturally to her – pressing a packet of letters to her breast as years ago she had pressed a flower against a bosom still plump and warm, flounced with white lace and spotted with red spots, singing all the while to the stage-lights, her mouth open, a tunnel of red from which might issue either a trill or a howl. Pressing the bits of paper to her now shrunken and flabby bosom, she breathed long harsh breaths that rasped her throat.

They slowed themselves till her breath caught and snarled

itself in a sob. Then she moved, putting down the packet on the table and feeling her way to the stove. There she lit the gas flame and put on the small, dented kettle. While she did so she had something on which to concentrate, her lip held by one front tooth, and she did not need to think of anything. Not Hugo. Not God. Nothing. Her face drew towards its centre, all the lines around the eyes, the nose, the mouth, concentrating in a frown, as she found the coffee, measured it into a cup, laid it out on the table beside the packet of paper. Touching that with her small finger which she could not quite control, which gave a jerk outwards, wilfully, she let out the sob she had been holding inside her: Hugo, Hugo, *mein Gott*, Hugo, what's happened, *was ist dann, wie kannst du* . . . then bit her lip, brought all her fingers together, on to the kettle handle, lifted that and filled her cup. She warmed milk in a pan. She found the sugar bowl. Then put them all together – cup, coffee, milk, sugar – concentrating on her movements, not allowing another jerk, another sob.

Finally she lowered herself on to her chair at the table, to drink. But did not drink. The cup waited, the coffee steamed, together they invited. But Lotte had pushed the cup aside, swung violently round in her chair to the shelf by the table, let her hands hunt through the objects there, greasy and used and familiar, dropping and pushing them away till her fingers found the bottle she wanted. Wrenching off the top, she brought it close to her with one hand, found a stained, smeared glass into which she poured some gin, and drank, holding the bottle and the glass close to her breast to keep them from shaking or falling. Lotte's mouth, now crumpled and wet and quavering, and the glass and bottle, all held close to each other, for company, as if hunted, as if in hiding.

But finally she put them away from her, very carefully, on the table. Then picked up the packet and clumsily slipped off the narrow pink ribbon that held together the cards. For those were not letters, they were postcards except for one or two that had been folded for so long that the several sheets formed a single thickness, like a card. The writing was so faint, so

spidery, it formed a kind of skein or web, on the yellowed paper, and seemed closer to the drawing of an intricate plan than the lines of a language. She had to turn to the shelf again and from amongst the fallen and cluttered objects find the spectacles she hardly ever used because they pinched the top of her nose and left sore marks behind.

As she hooked them over her ears, cursing them out of custom, she told herself: Look at the dates, first look at the dates. Yes, as was to be expected from the appearance of the stiff, brittle bits of paper, the dates were of long ago, the long ago that Lotte hardly remembered – thirty-nine, forty, forty-one – just as she thought, suspected. They made her bunch her fingers, clutch her neck, as if she were choking. Then she had to settle the spectacles on her nose, so she could read.

'*Meine kleine Maus,*' '*Mein Häschen,*' '*Liebchen* . . .' she murmured the unfamiliar, unaccustomed German, those forgotten endearments, the antiquated baby-language, feeling them on her tongue like crystals of sugar. Her teeth shrank from impact with them. She read on and each line seemed like the other, each card alike: 'Are you well, my rabbit? Do not worry yourself. I am well. I have enough. But have you enough, my mouse, my darling? Do not worry . . .'

Do not worry, do not worry, Lotte mocked, spitting out those pieces of sugar as if they were glass and cut her. With the spit came laughter, and sobs. Little Mouse, *Mäuschen*, do not worry, I am well, I am well. She began to rub the back of her hand against her mouth, rub harder and harder till it hurt, and through the pain and the cries the words continued to come: *Meine kleine Maus, mein Hugo, Geliebter*, I am well and do not worry . . .

When she pulled herself together and saw what she was doing, what she had done, she found everything in a mess, reflecting her face, reflecting herself. The coffee spilt, the cards scattered, the bottle emptied, the glass lying on its side. A scene, in miniature, copying the scene at Hugo's that she had fled.

Getting up from the chair, she stood over it and stared, furious and frightened. She could not allow that here – Hugo had, *mein Gott*, Hugo – but she could not, she must learn, be careful, not allow . . . Forcing back her sobs and cries, she made herself pick up the cup, the glass, the bottle, put them away, wipe the table, pick up the cards, collect them in a packet, and sit down with them on her lap, as calmly, as soberly as she could.

She no longer looked at them. She stared out of the window, at the six panes of glass in three rows, two to each one. She stared at the view she faced every day over her coffee, her gin – the building across the court, its grey concrete walls ribbed with black drain-pipes, the doors opening on to balconies hung with washing, stacked with tins and boxes. Right at the top, a layer of sky. A blank sky, as always, with neither colour nor form. Empty. Afternoon light. Daylight. Perpetual light. And blankness. Even the sounds were perpetual, constant – the radio that blared, the woman that screamed, the children that played, the pots and pans that clanged. They made a wall themselves – of metal, always in commotion.

Lotte's mouth drooped. At the corners, moisture gathered, formed drops, slowly began to slide down her chin, adhesively. The chin shook, dissolved. Lotte began to shake. Her fingers tightened on the cards. Looking down, in order to avoid that sky, that window, that blankness, she tried to pick out the words from the spider's nest of ancient writing. She ought at least to find out who had written them, to Hugo. Sucking at her lips, she stared at the bottom of the first card, the second card, the third. Some were signed 'Mama'. Others 'Mutti'. Some 'Mü'.

Lotte pressed her fingers to her lips, to her eyes, to her ears, trying to prevent those words, that language, from entering her, invading her. Its sweetness, the assault of sweetness, cramming her mouth, her eyes, her ears, drowning her in its sugar. The language she wanted not to hear or speak. It was pummelling her, pushing against her and into her, and with

her mouth stuffed she moaned, '*Nein, nein, nein*, Hugo, no.' Her teeth bit on the crystals and her nerves screamed at their sweetness. All the marzipan, all the barley sugar, the chocolates and toffees of childhood descended on her with their soft, sticking, suffocating sweetness. Enough to embrace her, enough to stifle her, enough to obliterate her. Sugary, treacly, warm, oozing love, childhood love, little mice and bunny rabbits of love – sweet, warm, choking, childish love. Lotte wept and drowned.

* * *

When Baumgartner shut the door and came out on the landing, he had to take great care the cats did not slip out. Fritzi, still dragging his battered hind leg and with blood turned to a black and shining crust where his ear once was, had been indicating with increased impatience that he was ready for the streets again and tried to hobble out from between Baumgartner's legs, but was scraped up and returned to the dimness and safety of the flat, while Mimi had made a swift dart like a cobra's head for the exit but been pressed back gently with a murmur: 'Now you wait here, *mein Liebchen*, and I bring you something tasty – a piece of sausage, hah? *Blutwurst, Leberwurst, Bratwurst – was willst du*?' He laughed at his daily joke so that the warts on his nose all bunched together in a purplish lump that wobbled and his eyes disappeared in nests of wrinkles. Mimi was not amused, she was hungry and bit him sharply in the thumb. '*Ach, Liebchen*,' he moaned, drawing back the thumb and nursing it in his fist, 'that was naughty, was it not?' She withdrew, her back still arched in outrage, and he shut the door on her, assuring her through the crack, 'Something I will bring back for you, so be good now, please, for a little,' and made his way down the stairs.

They were ancient stairs, worn into hollows at the centre, and each heavy tread raised dust. He felt carefully for the safe hollow of each board as he went down, holding an empty plastic bag in his hand, reminding himself to be careful, not to

fall and cause trouble in his old age. Down in the hall which was unfurnished but for the cooking smells of the building that collected and boiled and steamed within its green walls, the watchman on his stool shifted his legs to let Baumgartner pass, smiling faintly out of politeness but with a twist of distaste at the corner of his mouth. The plastic bag was empty but the watchman knew how it would stink when he returned. Also, Baumgartner rarely washed his clothes; they emanated a thick, cloudy odour that he himself found comforting in its familiarity but some considered offensive. His eyes were short-sighted and blinked half-shut against the glare that thrust itself in at the door and so he did not notice that watchman's expression as he passed him on his perch under the wooden board that bore the tenants' names – Hiramani, Taraporevala, Barodekar, Coelho, da Silva, Patel – mumbled 'Good morning, *salaam*', and went down the steps into the street with his bag, uncertain as ever of which language to employ. After fifty years, still uncertain. Baumgartner, *du Dummkopf*.

The glare came from the sea, down at the end of the street, glittering solder in the morning heat and heavy and sullen at low tide, but Baumgartner did not turn his face in its direction. He had to look down and watch his feet as he picked his way past the family that lived on the pavement in front of Hira Niwas. They worked constantly at reinforcing the shelter they had built here, flattening out packing-cases for walls and tin cans for the roof, attaching rags to the railing around Hira Niwas and stretching them on to their own rooftop; yet it remained tremulously impermanent and Baumgartner took care not to run into one of the sticks that propped it up or the rope on which the washing hung. He had to avoid the gnarled and rotting feet of the man who always lay in a drunken stupor at this time of the morning, his head inside the shelter and his legs outside, like pieces of wood flung down, as well as the pile of cooking pots that the woman washed in the gutter so that they shone like crumpled tinfoil in the glare, and the heaps of faeces that the children left along the same gutter, and the

squares of greasy paper from which they had eaten their food the night before. It was a familiar sight to Baumgartner, as he was to them, with his plastic bag in his hand and his shoes slit at the sides for comfort, but they still had to watch each other, to be vigilant.

The woman, washing, automatically edged her sari over her face with a twitch of her wet hand as she did in the presence of any male; actually she hardly thought of Baumgartner, a lump in grey pants, as one: the gesture was a conditioned one, now instinctive. The child that had the straw-coloured and straw-textured hair of the famine-struck standing about its head like Struwwelpeter's in Baumgartner's nursery book, sat on its haunches, straining to defecate. It looked up at Baumgartner as it looked at all passers-by, its face clenched with the problem: should it sing out for money, for *baksheesh*, or not waste its small, painfully hoarded energy? In the case of Baumgartner, the problem was easily solved: he clearly had nothing to give, they all knew that, the family on the pavement that watched him set out daily with his plastic bag. So she drew the snot on her upper lip back into her nostrils with a contemptuous snort and began to wail for her mother who cursed her casually, simply as a comment on life, on all their lives.

Baumgartner knew that family as well as a devout Christian is familiar with the Holy Family in the cattle stall; he knew all the looks, the voices and words in their gamut. But he never walked past them, never turned his back without feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise, a brief prickle of – not exactly fear, but unease, an apprehension. He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the violence it bred – the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping. Now the effect of it all had become dulled, but in the beginning it had appalled, and he remembered that – how he had returned to Hira Niwas one night, soon after they had set up abode on the pavement, a part of the migrant wave from the drought-stricken countryside, refugees from famine, or riots, and the woman had been screaming as though run over by an

automobile. He had found a crowd of onlookers already gathered there, watching the man beat his wife with his fists and then kick her down, grab her by her hair and drag her up the street, swearing. 'What is happen?' asked the concerned Baumgartner of the watchman at the door. 'Is murdering her? Is police not come?' The watchman had shrugged – he did not consider Baumgartner worth talking to – but some of the onlookers turned round with amused looks and explained, 'Drunk man saying his wife behaving badly with other men, so he is beating her.' 'He is killing her,' Baumgartner bleated, wondering at their nonchalance. 'We better call police.' But no one moved. When the man began to beat his wife's head against the pavement so that the blood spilt and gushed he hurried up to him and caught him by his shoulder only to be flung off and hurled against the wall. Some in the crowd helped him to his feet, saying, 'Don't trouble, sir, no good people. Both drinking too much.' Baumgartner tottered to his feet and allowed them to push him away. He did nothing more, knowing himself incapable of anything, but although the man had been too blind with liquor and fury to know what he was doing, Baumgartner was sure he had taken note of his intervention. After so many years and so many similar scenes, he remembered the look that the man had flung over his shoulder at him when he had tried to intervene, and the yellow, blood-streaked eye of the drunkard, murderous. It still brought out the prickle, those beads of sweat on his neck, and he walked by, hunching his shoulders protectively, fearing them. They watched him fearlessly – to them he was nobody, an old man with an empty bag. Finishing with the pots, the woman spat into the gutter, then bent to pick them up.

Baumgartner did not turn towards the sea. That was for the evening, when the breeze came up with the tide, and the sun fell headlong into the waves, livid and melodramatic in its orange and purple flames, and people strolled, for pleasure, buying themselves peanuts to eat or coconuts to drink from, and one was not conspicuous if one loitered too. But now

everyone was out on business – cars and people had a purpose, everyone bustled, the vehicles became entangled in their hurry and horns hooted in furious impatience. The morning scene had no tropical languor for all that it was hot; the Bombay style was brisk, Baumgartner thought regretfully, brisk and businesslike.

He was very aware of his lack of business; if he were ashamed of it, he was relieved too, relieved not to join the crowd, the traffic, but to amble alone into the lanes and alleys that made off from the main road, and shuffle past the old dingy houses that no one bothered to paint, that stood perpetually in the shadows, and where life washed up in drifts, like debris. Scuffing through that litter, he turned into the dark doorway of the quiet and nearly empty Café de Paris.

Here he met with the first smile of the day, but so slight and sardonic and well concealed behind a bush of tobacco-coloured moustache, that he did not see it. Nor did the café proprietor's eyes reflect it; they were the bottomless pits of a cynic and a melancholic and so the smile was no more than a grimace. Baumgartner did not mind; he did not see, being still dazzled by the light of the streets, that explosion of light that his weak eyes could hardly tolerate. Groping for a chair, he lowered himself on to its comfortless tin seat by a marble-topped table, placing his hands on it for coolness and grateful for the green murk of the Café de Paris: Farrokh wasted little money on electricity.

'Tea, *sahib*? Coffee?' he asked as he came across since the waiter was still in the kitchen, noisily preparing the cutlery and the crockery for the day's custom. He leaned over the table, placing his raw, meaty hands on its edge and frowning at a smear of grease on the marble that he wiped with the napkin he carried on his shoulder.

'Och, Farrokh, so good. Yes, tea, pliss, tea is nice,' sighed Baumgartner, feeling the perspiration trickle down his neck and back, almost audibly. 'And something for the pussy-cats,

yes? You have something from last night, Farrokh?' he coaxed, edging the plastic bag across the table at him.

Farrokh gave another of his dour smiles that failed to light his eyes. He took the bag from Baumgartner resignedly and went to the kitchen door with it, handing it to one of the boys who worked there in striped underpants and tattered vests and with towels flung over their shoulders. Then he called back to Baumgartner, 'I'll have it ready for you later, I told them keep fish curry for you. It's hot. Your cats like *masala*, spice, chilli, turmeric, *jeera*, bay leaf?'

Baumgartner had no option but to smile and nod. He was in debt to Farrokh and the other restaurateurs who filled his bag for him with the remains of the food cooked the night before. Without their help he could not feed the cats that flocked to him in the alleys, knowing him to be the Madman of the Cats, the Billéwallah Pagal, or the sick and maimed ones he picked up from the streets and carried home to nurse, telling them they would have to leave when they were cured but never finding the heart to turn them out.

In return, he gave them his custom. He could not really afford to patronise cafés, however third-rate their quality and competitive their rates, but it was necessary to remain a customer, not to slip down to being a beggar. Baumgartner was not as unconscious as one might think of the dividing line. Planting himself heavily at the table and grasping the glass of thick, milky tea that had been set before him by the waiter's wet and dripping hand, he made himself play the role of customer. It would not do to smile and thank the waiter, he had to remember he was paying for what he got, remind them also that he would pay. In that comfortable knowledge he could raise his head after the first gulp and look across to the counter where, behind glass cases containing livid yellow queen cakes with pink icing and plates of fried salted savouries, Farrokh stood swatting flies. Over his head the tinsel garland he had hung around the tinted portrait of his god Zoroaster stirred and twinkled like a ring of bluebottles in the shadows. It was almost