THE BREAK MONSOON IN MEERUT

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The narrator and his friend arrived in Meerut, where a rickshaw boy took them to an old hotel. It was once run by an Englishman named Mr. P, but it had not operated as a hotel for years. However, Mr. P never removed the sign, and if guests arrived, he let them stay. He rarely spoke to anyone and stayed in his room, but they could always hear his radio playing BBC cricket commentary. The next day, they explored the city and visited the palace and cathedral built by Begum Samru, a well known warrior princess. But instead of remembering the historical sites, the narrator mostly recalled the extreme heat and humidity.That evening, they went to the Muslim quarter and enjoyed a delicious meal of partridge curry and kebabs. Later, they relaxed on the veranda with beer. The next day, after weeks of dryness, the long awaited rain arrived, sweeping through the streets, soaking everything, and bringing a fresh, earthy scent to the air.

The rickshaw boy rode swiftly to the hotel, the only 'English hotel' in Meerut, a building which was probably a barracks at one time, and was owned and managed by a middle-aged Englishman whom we saw, once, when we blundered into the empty building. Apparently, it *wasn't* a hotel anymore, but Mr P had never bothered to take the signboard down, and if somebody did turn up, as we had done (this only happened about once a year), then they were welcome to a room and the services of his bearer and of course morning tea and breakfast.

Mr P, who lived alone with his wireless, opened a musty room for us and told us to call for the bearer if we needed anything, or wished to pay our bill. During our two-day stay we never saw him again; he did not emerge from his room, just next to ours; but we heard his radio whenever we cared to listen, mostly relaying BBC cricket commentaries.

Some eighteen miles from Meerut were the remarkable 'Christian' warrior princess Begum Samru's palace and cathedral (she had built both in the very early nineteenth century). We decided to visit them the next day. We took the same rickshaw—the boy attached himself to us for the remainder of our stay—into town on a day so hot and humid that the palace made little impression on me. What does stay in my memory is the

restaurant that the rickshaw boy took us to that evening in the Muslim quarter. It served excellent partridge curry (partridges were plentiful around Meerut) and kebabs. We bought two bottles of beer, which we drank on the veranda back in the hotel, to the crackle and hiss and vaguely military music issuing from Mr P's radio.

Monsoon broke the next day, and my memories of Meerut, ever since, have always been associated with the first rains.

There had been no rain at all for over a month, so the rickshaw boy had told us. Now there were dark clouds overhead, burgeoning with moisture. Thunder blossomed in the air. The dry spell was over. I knew it; the birds knew it; the grass knew it. There was the smell of rain in the air. And the grass, the birds and I responded to this odour with the same sensuous longing. I went out to the balcony, and waited.

A large drop of water hit the railing, darkening the thick dust on the woodwork. A faint breeze had sprung up, and again I felt the moisture, closer and warmer.

Then the rain approached like a dark curtain.

I could see it marching down the street, heavy and remorseless. It drummed on the corrugated tin roof and swept across the road and over the balcony. It swirled with the wind over the trees and roofs of Meerut.