

Lancelot College - A Trilogy of Short Stories

Part Two: The Lost Suitcase.

During that Trinity Term of 1975 Peter Lightbody tendered his resignation at Lancelot College. Ever since the day he had read Richard Crouch's diary, the charismatic chemistry teacher could no longer truly enjoy his work at the Church of England school. Things just weren't the same.

Of course he kept a close eye on Richard, but the now thirteen-year-old seemed happy. He was sociable, got good marks in every subject except history and he was made captain of the after-school soccer team.

Many of the staff, parents and especially the boys he taught were very disappointed to see Mr Lightbody go. His plan now was to teach underprivileged children in Bombay, India. The pupils organised a farewell party for him and presented him with a special certificate and a beautiful Shaeffer fountain pen and a bottle of turquoise ink. As they said goodbye to him on the last day of term, Richard shook his hand and wished him well, somehow certain that the school would never be the same without him.

Throughout the summer vacation Peter Lightbody applied for teaching jobs in Bombay and made extensive preparations for his new life. He even tried to learn some Hindi.

Marion, his girlfriend, did not want him to leave but she was, on the other hand, not prepared to go with him. She knew when it was time for a relationship to end. She had dated a much older man for six years when she was in her mid-twenties. She knew that the relationship was over when he went out and bought a second-hand E-type Jaguar. One of her favourite refrains was: 'It is only when you split up from someone that you really begin to know who they are.'

Peter got a job quite quickly in a church school in a district of Bombay called Chembur. The pupils would not be underprivileged by Indian standards since underprivileged children in India do not attend school. But he had to start somewhere.

On 2nd November Marion dropped him off at Heathrow airport. As he handed in his overweight suitcase at the check-in desk, the pretty Air India assistant kept flicking through his passport.

‘You don’t appear to have a visa, Mr Lightbody,’ she said.

‘Visa?’ he asked, and added, ‘but what do I need a visa for? India is a member of the British Commonwealth.’

This was to be the first of many false assumptions that were to be challenged by his transplantation to a new culture.

‘So I can’t fly?’

‘You can fly, but when you get to Bombay, they will send you straight back. You need to go to the Indian Embassy and get a visa. You can get it today and then fly out tomorrow.’

Peter was at this point was more frustrated than disappointed.

‘Are things always this complicated in your country?’ he asked.

‘It’s not my country, sir. I’m Bengali,’ she replied with a smile that made her even more attractive.

Peter took the Piccadilly Line into London, queued for four hours in the ill-mannered, incomprehensible visa application process of the Indian Embassy and rang to change his flight booking. In the overcrowded embassy waiting-room a Sikh man with an enormous stomach sat down in Peter’s chair while he had gone to photo-booth.

‘Excuse me,’ said Peter. ‘I was sitting there.’

The man in the turban couldn’t understand him. Instead he pointed to his family who was sitting next to him tucking into a massive picnic of rice, dal, chicken, roti and samosas. The wife

offered Peter one of the samosas. Not wishing to seem ungrateful, he took it and ate it. It was actually very tasty indeed. At least he was going to enjoy the food in India.

He booked into a hotel near Trafalgar Square and called Marion to tell her the whole saga. She insisted on driving up to London to spend the night with him. In the afternoon he had chronic diarrhoea and had to spend several hours on the toilet.

When Marion arrived after work, they spent the evening watching TV. This was to be the last time that they ever slept together.

The next morning, back at Heathrow, Peter finally boarded the plane for the eight-hour flight. He was almost the only white man on the plane. An Asian medical doctor sat down next to him and commented, 'most white people fly with British Airways, you know.'

The Boeing 747 slowly filled with Indian families, all within enormous amounts of hand luggage. *Maybe they are all emigrating back to India*, he thought. Peter became nervous. He had heard of an Air India Jumbo Jet that could not take off because the payload was too heavy. But the doors finally closed and the crew made the safety announcement. All of them, male and female, looked like young fashion models.

During the very smooth flight the doctor explained that she was taking her bike in the hold to do a two-month tour of India, starting at Bombay. She explained many fascinating details about Indian culture, along with many dos and don'ts. The food arrived.

'European or Indian, sir?'

Peter had an uncomfortable flashback to the previous afternoon's samosa.

'European, please,' he replied apologetically.

When he came out of the airport at 1 am local time, Mr Chacko, the school head teacher, was waiting with a piece of A4 paper with 'Mr Lightbody' written on it in a black marker pen.

'Welcome to Bombay, Mr Lightbody! How very nice it is to have you here. We will take a taxi.'

A thin young Indian man wearing cream-coloured pyjamas came out of nowhere and, unsolicited, took Peter's suitcase and hurled it awkwardly on to the lopsided roof rack of the black and yellow taxi. Peter asked Mr Chacko whether the driver had any bungee ropes to secure the case.

'These we will not be needing,' replied the head teacher. 'Please do not worry yourself. Everything will be fine.'

The heat and humidity were almost overwhelming, and this was 3rd November at 1 o'clock in the morning. The Englishman was already bathed in sweat.

As the taxi drove out of the international airport on to the bumpy road, Peter wound down the window to let some air into the non-air-conditioned taxi. Unfortunately, he was sitting behind the driver. As the car suddenly took a sharp right turn, the driver cleared his throat as thoroughly as he could and spat out of the car window. Most of the phlegm ended up in Peter's face. He felt profoundly sick. He wiped his face with his damp shirt sleeve.

As Mr Chacko made small-talk, Peter looked out of the window and tried to process his first impressions. Alongside the road were men aimlessly pushing wooden carts, people sleeping, dogs sniffing in the ubiquitous piles of stinking rubbish. There were a whole families sleeping under the flyovers and men crouching down with their trousers pulled down, defecating at the side of the road. As they drove over a bridge, the black water smelt so strongly of excrement that Peter had to hold his nose.

'Bombay is a city that is never sleeping,' commented Mr Chacko.

Peter wasn't able to sleep either. His suitcase had slid off the roof of the taxi and there would be no way of ever finding it again.

Mr Chacko and his wife had kindly vacated their bedroom for Peter and slept on the tiled floor in the main room. But the fan in the bedroom above Peter's head was so loose and noisy that he turned it off and opened the window instead. Outside he could hear the endless tooting of rickshaws and the occasional, very loud firecracker. It was Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights,

and fireworks played an important role, even at four o'clock in the morning. By dawn he could also hear loud crows that circled around low in the foggy air, sharing the rubbish heaps with the dogs and many of the 18 million inhabitants of Bombay, the financial capital of India.

Mrs Chacko could not believe that Peter had turned off the fan and opened the windows.

'There are so many mosquitoes,' she exclaimed, moving her head from side to side. 'I hope you are taking your malaria tablets, Mr Lightbody.'

Breakfast was curried omelette, a kind of ground yellow rice dish that tasted like damp cardboard, and a warm, very sweet, pale-brown, milky liquid that the Indians call 'chai.'

'You must only eat things here if they have been fried or boiled. No ice, no fruit – except bananas – and you clean your teeth *only* with mineral water,' instructed Mrs Chacko in a rather stern, maternal tone.

After breakfast Mr Chacko took Richard in a rickshaw to visit the school. In the daylight Peter soon discovered that Bombay assaulted all of your senses simultaneously: taste, touch, smell, noise and sight. Peter had never known anything like it and was already thrilled to have made the move. There were shops and people everywhere. Small Hindu temples, more dogs, cows, men walking along holding hands, and children with no arms or legs carrying sleeping babies, their brown, pleading eyes and dirty hands outstretched whenever the rickshaw stopped at the traffic lights.

'Don't ever give them money,' said Mr Chacko, 'at the most carry some *Jelly Babies* with you. They know you are rich because you are white.'

At this very moment they saw an old man being run over by a large white Tata car. He was left lying in the street and no one bothered with him.

'A product of Hinduism, unfortunately,' commented Mr Chacko. 'There is no value placed on human life, thanks to the belief in reincarnation. That's why we must tell our children about the gospel. About a God who loves them and thinks that they so priceless that He would die for them.'

When they arrived at the school, Peter wanted to try out his Hindi and pay the rickshaw driver.

'Best not,' said his attentive guide, 'there is a skin tax here.'

The enormous school building was empty due to the Diwali holidays. Schools without pupils were like apartments without furniture, like a body without a soul, reflected the British school master.

'The building is used of course by two schools, the first one goes from 7 am to 1.30 pm and the second one goes from 2 pm to 9 pm. Our school starts first ... Ah, here is your classroom. There are only 38 children in your class but you may get a few more in the course of the term.'

Peter felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation as he glanced from the palm trees outside in the courtyard to the 40 single desks facing towards the blackboard. Above the door was a small wooden cross, and on the wall, to the left, a poster of a kitten playing with a ball of wool with a Bible quotation underneath: 'God works all things for the good for those who love him. Romans 8:28.' For the first time in his life Peter noticed that God's love is conditional.

Mr Chacko observed Peter looking at the poster and added, and as if he had only just realised, 'Oh yes. And on Sundays at 11 am our church meets here. You are a Christian, aren't you?'

'I believe more in the values than in God himself,' he replied. 'I hope that's okay?' he added slightly nervously. Mr Chacko screwed up his eyes and moved his head from side to side. Was that a *yes*? Or a *no*?

He took Peter next to his one-room apartment about half an hour away from the school building. Back in England Peter had looked forward to the romantic notion of living in a slum so that he could relate better to the pupils he was going to teach. When he shared this desire with Mr Chacko, the head teacher commented with deep assurance: 'that is not a good idea.'

As they climbed up the stairwell to the fourth floor of the new apartment block, its walls crumbling like digestive biscuits, Peter noticed the brightly coloured swastikas on the floor outside each door, made out of dyed sand. He couldn't help feeling that these were a bad omen. There was

also a curious mixture of dirty old sandals and newer Nike trainers in front of each home. Clearly whole families lived in these one-room apartments.

‘We have had it painted for you,’ explained Mr Chacko proudly, as he showed Peter the kitchen, the bedroom and the living room – all in one 15m² room.

‘We thought it best as the last inhabitant expired last month. He was also a teacher, a good man who has gone to be with the Lord. We have shifted most of his belongings. There are just a few books left.’

When Peter was left alone, he started to think again about how he was going to replace the entire contents of his suitcase. He was already so sweaty and dirty and had no change of clothes.

He decided to take a shower. The tiny bathroom – his only other room – had a sink, a blotchy mirror, a stool, an extra tap on the wall, two plastic buckets and a 15 cm hole in the floor that was evidently for both the shower and the toilet. Through the small open window he could see the building opposite, a building site under construction.

He hung up his clothes on the back of the door and tried to work out what to do with the two plastic buckets. The red one was a normal sized bucket and the white one was more like a kitchen measuring jug hung over the rim of the red one. There was only cold water too.

In the end, he filled the larger bucket with cold water and poured it over his head. At first it was such a shock as the freezing water splashed over his warm shoulders. But then it started to feel really refreshing. He filled the bucket three more times and then cleaned his teeth as best he could with his fingers. Unfortunately, he forgot about Mrs Chacko’s advice about using mineral water. For the next three days he lost 6 pounds in weight as he coped with chronic gastroenteritis. Without toilet paper, of course.

On Saturday Mr Chacko arrived with some new clothes, all of them three sizes too big, and offered to take him to church on the following day. Peter agreed.

When he arrived at the church meeting on Sunday morning he found the school assembly hall filled with what seemed to be about three hundred men, women and children. The service was

already in full swing and most people were dancing enthusiastically along to lively music played on the guitar, keyboard and bongos.

Many people greeted him warmly and after the music had stopped, Peter was invited on to the stage to be officially welcomed as the new teacher from England.

As he was called to the front, everyone cheered. He had a large, damp garland of real flowers placed around his neck and the congregation prayed for him.

A man on the front row got up and prayed loudly and excitedly, placing his warm hand on Peter's shoulder. The man who had led the dancing said, 'My brother has just brought a prophetic word over you. He says that he believes God is saying that He has brought you to India and marked you out for a special purpose. You have been unhappy in the UK but in India God will turn your mourning into dancing. You will be known as the "White Indian" since you will become like an Indian and the seeds of healing you will plant here will go out into all the world. God will use you mightily in this nation and you will see many people brought to the Lord. You will not leave this land until your work in the Lord is finished.'

Everyone cheered and Peter went back to his place, not sure what to make of having a fortune teller at church. The teenage boy sitting next to him ripped out a piece of paper from the notebook on his lap and gave it to him.

'Here. I have tried to write it all down for you.'

Peter skim-read the notes and was amazed at the neatness of the boy's handwriting and the accuracy of his spelling and punctuation. *The educational standards were much higher than in the UK,* he thought.

The meeting moved on to the sermon, which seemed to last at least an hour. The young Indian next to him translated it sentence by sentence into English. The gist was that God loved us and that He guaranteed to forgive us for anything we have done in the past so that we could begin a new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. After the sermon about twenty people went to the stage in order to be converted to Christianity.

'I'm Jaiveer,' said Peter's young translator. 'Would you like to have lunch with my family? I attend your school, in the ninth grade.'

Peter felt so affected by the church service that he wanted just to be on his own, but out of courtesy, he said yes.

Lunch turned out to be a picnic in the school hall. Everyone had brought their own food to eat or to share. Jaiveer's family had an amazing range of curry dishes, rice, chapatis and snacks. A very poor man with only one arm came and joined him. He ate as if he had not eaten for months. Peter took a risk on a samosa. It was one of the best taste experiences of his life. On his third bite, the church pastor came up to greet him.

'Best not to eat that,' he said, removing the delicacy from Peter's hand. 'It has been cooked at the roadside and you cannot trust the oil.'

A week later school started. He had given church and miss because he found it a little too long and intense.

His new class in Chembur Middle School was yet another unforgettable experience. When he walked into the classroom, all the uniformed children stood up and greeted him with a meticulous, eight-syllabled chorus of 'Good morning, Mr Lightbody.'

'Good morning, class,' he replied.

The thirty-eight pairs of brown eyes stared at him and eagerly awaited his next words.

'Please sit down.'

He spent the first morning getting to know a bit about each of his new charges and tried, with limited success, to learn their names. He told them about himself too. They were clearly very excited to have a white teacher from England and they could not stop asking him questions about the English way of life. They especially wanted to know whether all English teachers wore such baggy clothes and whether all English teachers had a large pink birthmark on the right hand side of their face.

Mr Lightbody played some interactive games with them and got them working in pairs and in groups and moving around the classroom. This was all the most amazing culture shock for them – albeit a very stimulating and enjoyable one – since they were used to sitting in rows and working on their own in complete silence.

After just a few weeks, Peter Lightbody was already beginning to feel at home, even though he missed some things about England, like smoked bacon and Cadbury's chocolate. And even though some aspects of life in Bombay remained a real challenge.

For example, there was the constant noise and heat from which you could never escape. Shopping was also an issue, not only due to the skin tax, but also because even buying some chicken for dinner meant choosing a live one from a battery cage, watching it have its neck slit open and head chopped off and then seeing it being plucked and its innards removed before you took it home to cook it. It wasn't long before Peter simply became a vegetarian.

Clothes shopping was also emotionally draining. During Diwali he had gone to a Western-style clothes shop near Vitoria Railway Station. The large shop window and the trees outside were wonderfully illuminated with fountains of coloured lights.

Peter passed by the two armed guards at the entrance and was at first pleased to see the wide selection of branded goods beautifully displayed in the air-conditioned shop. The Indian customers were clearly very rich, spending thousands of rupees while their black chauffeur-driven limousines waited for them out on the road.

Peter was about to select a pair of trousers from the rail near the window when he saw his reflection in the dark glass. For a brief, weird moment it felt as if his soul had stepped out his body in order to observe himself from the outside.

Who am I? he thought.

He looked again and saw the two images of himself in the double-glazed window.

Pensive, he looked down and saw three very young children, about four years old, standing outside the shop window wearing nothing but their dirty underwear. They were looking longingly

into the shop, not really at the cool clothes, it seemed, but at the impeccably dressed children of the wealthy families making their purchases.

Peter left the shop, empty-handed. He determined there and then that he was going to do something about this unbearably stark juxtaposition of rich and poor in the city.

The weeks and months went by. One morning before school Peter's sink was blocked. When he got help from a neighbour to unblock it, they found a dead rat in the U-bend.

'It has clearly been there for a while,' said the neighbour.

Now at least, Peter knew where the awful smell had been coming from. He had been trying to use his spray deodorant to cover it up, but that had only made the smell worse. The neighbour also explained how to use the two buckets for a shower.

Through the bathroom window the work on the building site had stopped. The workers stayed on the second floor, however, and made it their home. Their wives came and joined them, doing all the cooking and the washing. Children later appeared too and were there all day.

It was now May, the height of the Bombay summer. Peter assumed that the workers had stopped work because of the heat. He couldn't blame them. He was finding it unbearable to go outside in the daytime. It made him feel sick and dizzy. Fortunately, the school holidays were coming up and he would be able to take a break. His relationship with his class was growing stronger and stronger and he never ceased to be amazed at the assiduity and achievement of his young Indian pupils.

During the summer vacation he decided not to return to the UK. His correspondence with Marion had faded out within the first few months. She had found a new boyfriend, a car salesman. He rarely thought about her any more. Instead, he stayed in Bombay and spent his days travelling around this treasure-chest of a city. He ate a curry now for breakfast, lunch and dinner and his Hindi had become good enough to challenge the skin tax.

Jaiveer invited him to his home in a slum in the north of Chembur. To get there they had to walk over a piece of derelict land on which there were several heaps of multicoloured rubbish. In between the stinking piles of waste were filthy mattresses upon which slept young children, and next to them were topless women washing themselves with buckets of dirty water.

Some young girls had found some lipstick in a pile of rubbish and were painting their lips and cheeks with a bright red make-up. Looking like a grotesque mixture between a clown and a prostitute, they came running up to Jaiveer and Peter, laughing and asking for money. Jaiveer shooed them away.

‘The families living here cannot afford a home in the slum,’ he explained. ‘Come, we are nearly there.’

When they arrived outside Jaiveer’s home, Peter took off his shoes before going in.

‘There is no need to do that,’ said the young Indian, removing his own shoes and placing them outside the entrance.

Inside, Jaiveer’s mother and two sisters greeted Peter with a modest bow of the head and touched their chest with the palm of their left hand. They talked together for about an hour, during which from somewhere appeared a freezing cold bottle of Coca-Cola and an apple. Touched by their hospitality, Peter drank the Coke and even ate the apple.

Jaiveer then took Peter on a tour of the slum. Although all the homes looked dirty and makeshift from the outside, inside, like Jaiveer’s, they were well-equipped, clean and tidy. In many ways they were nicer than Peter’s apartment. Many families had connected a cable to a street light so that they had a source of free electricity, and many also had a television set. There was a tangible sense of community, and Jaiveer would often point out where there was a home of a family from the church.

Two years later Peter moved out of his apartment and into a home in the slums. He didn’t know anyone who approved of this idea and most Indians were bold enough to tell him that it was

a big mistake, a grave error of judgement. The only exception was sixteen-year-old Jaiveer who had committed himself to pray for the schoolmaster and who had remembered the words: 'You will be known as the white Indian since you will become like an Indian.'

When he packed his belongings into boxes, Peter came across the carton of books left by the teacher who had died. Many of them were biographies. As soon as he was settled in his new home, he began reading the books in the evenings during the heavy monsoon rains.

Two of the books really grabbed his attention and kept him awake at night. One told the story of Thomas Müller, a Christian with almost no financial resources who had founded homes for orphans, and the other was the life of William Carey, who had risked and lost his wife and family to bring the Bible, the printing press and modern industry to Bangladesh. Peter was moved and motivated by these inspiring narratives. They began to shape his thinking.

This next year was to be his last with his first class of pupils who were now already fourteen years old and who were going to move on to a new teacher. His girls and boys achieved very good grades in the public examinations and their parents thanked whichever God or gods and goddesses they worshipped for the gift of the white Indian with the pink birthmark.

Peter Lightbody knew, therefore, that this would be the best moment, if there was ever going to be one, to leave the school. His plan was to open a free school for children from the slums who would otherwise never have gone to school. He had written up hundreds of pages of plans, from the recruitment of teachers to the provision of free school dinners, from fundraising to forming a planning and implementation team.

His vision was so compelling that Indian men and women in Bombay together with old contacts in the UK gathered around him with considerable speed. By the time he left Chembur Middle School, his major challenge was to find an appropriate building or piece of land in such overcrowded, expensive city where corruption was a fundamental part of life.

One incredibly hot day in May an Indian businesswoman came to see him.

'I have a piece of land and an unfinished building for you,' she announced. 'The developers have run out of money and the municipal authorities want the project finished. They like your plan and want to move quickly. There are even builders on site ready to be paid and start work.'

Peter was somehow not surprised when he discovered that the construction site in question was the unfinished building opposite his former apartment.

As the money began to pour in from both India and the UK, the building project gathered pace. Within two years there were enough rooms ready to open the school the following summer: classrooms, science labs, the school hall, kitchen and dining area, toilets and offices and even a small medical area for sick children. The challenges had been enormous at times: faulty goods, cheating workmen, corruption and bribery in the municipal authority, to name but a few, and on top of all this Peter had experienced several bouts of serious illness. But at last the end was now in sight.

One Saturday evening Jaiveer came over to visit him. Peter cooked vegetable biryani for them and after the meal they chatted and drank chai together.

'Tomorrow you should come to church. We want to pray for you and the new school,' said Jaiveer.

'That would be good,' replied Peter. "I have to go to a team meeting at 9 am but will come along later, if that's okay?" Jaiveer shook his head from side to side. In India, Peter was now clear that that that was a *yes*.

On his way from the planning meeting to the church, Peter was stopped by a boy in the street who wanted to sell him a cheap toy. It was a soft rubber ball with lots of rubber strands sticking out that lit up with several bright colours when you squashed it in your hand.

'Look, uncle, for your children. Only Rs.100,' announced the young salesman.

As much as such incidents were still almost an everyday occurrence for Peter, they still tugged at his heart. He knew of course after all these years to say no, though he also had no sweets to give him.

'Please, uncle. Very good quality. Made in UK, uncle.'

Then Peter Lightbody had an idea, an idea that would one day answer the question about who he really was. An idea that would also, in the end, cost him his life.

He thought about buying the whole box of illuminated balls and giving them as a welcome gift to his first ever class of pupils in the new school.

If only he had paused for a second longer. If only Jaiveer had been with him. If only the boy had stolen Peter's wallet. But in one second the fatal mistake was made. The boy couldn't believe his good fortune.

'The whole box, uncle? But that would cost Rs.5000!'

Peter peered inside the tatty cardboard box. There were certainly no more than twenty toys in there, so the young salesman's maths was way out.

Peter looked the boy in the face and said, 'I will give you Rs.1000 for all of them.'

'Rs.2000 best offer, uncle,' he bartered, as he cheekily thrust two of the balls into the Englishman's pocket.

'Hacha, hacha! It's a deal, then,' concluded the teacher.

Peter took out his wallet and gave the boy Rs.2000, believing that nearly all of it would in any case end up in the hands of the boy's child-exploiting boss.

Peter took the box and continued on his way to church. As he should have known, the boy would either go and get all his friends to come and sell the gullible white uncle all of their boxes of unreliable toys, or try and get the box back as well as keeping the money, or follow the man to get more money out of him.

'Where are you going, uncle?' the boy enquired.

'I don't know,' lied to the teacher.

'I will come.'

'No. You go now. I have no more money,' he said, lying again.

Peter was now already regretting his unwise purchase and tried to think of ways to shake the boy off. He went into two shops and even up the stairs of an apartment block, pretending to visit a friend. Yet the boy kept waiting for him and, in the end, followed him to church.

The meeting had already started. Peter quickly found Jaiveer and whispered in his ear what had happened and asked for his help in getting rid of the boy. Jaiveer, who found it hard to believe that Peter was so weak-willed, agreed to help.

‘Abka na'am kya hai?’

‘Abishek,’ replied the boy, who enjoyed watching all the dancing and even seemed to listen to the long sermon, which was based on the words of Jesus from Matthew Chapter 25: ‘Whatever you do for the least of one of these in my name, you do it for me.’

Towards the end of the meeting the church prayed for Peter and for the success of the new school.

During the communal lunch after church, Abishek ate as if he hadn't seen food for a very long time. He told the story of the murder of his Muslim parents by Hindu extremists when he was only four, and of the recent terminal illness of his sixteen-year-old brother who had tried to care for him. Since then he had lived on the streets and sold toys for a child gang-leader. Peter felt as if were trapped in some kind of spiritual ambush.

Jaiveer's mother suggested that they take the boy home and look after him for a few days - until they could work out a better plan.

‘Maybe he can sleep on the floor in your home, Peter?’ suggested the concerned mother.

Peter mistakenly shook his head from side to side. In Bombay, that was of course a *yes*.

So, that Sunday evening, the eight-year-old boy who was to become the first pupil recruited to the new school, moved into the teacher's home in the slum. After Abishek had got undressed for bed, he took the Rs 2,000 out of his tiny pocket and gave the money back to his new landlord.

‘It can only be for one week, you understand?’ insisted Peter, as the boy lay down on a thin, straw mattress on the floor, and with a roof over his head for the first time in four years.

For the school project there now came, to Peter's massive frustration and disappointment, the biggest challenge of all. No-one wanted to come to the school!

In retrospect, it was so obvious that it was hard to understand how such a great planning team had not seen this coming. Why would the children from the slums want to spend six hours a day in school when they could spend all day playing on the streets? Why would their parents want to lose a source of income from their children who could be out earning money from sewing up clothes all day? Why did *anyone* need to go to school in the first place?

So, from summer to Christmas the new school building remained empty of pupils, like a home without furniture, like a body without a soul.

During this time the church prayed and the team came up with an idea. They decided to start up just one small first grade class with a mixture of children from the church and any of their friends from the slums who were willing to try out the new school.

It was also precisely at this challenging time that, one Sunday morning, Peter decided to become a Christian and to enter into a relationship with God. Or was it that God had decided to enter into relationship with Peter?

The whole church cheered and shouted. Mr and Mrs Chacko were delighted that the new school would have a born-again Christian principal after all, and Jaiveer smiled and thanked God for His wonderful Providence.

In the evening Abishek, who was, somewhat predictably, still living in the teacher's home, noticed a change in his uncle since the church service.

At bedtime he went and laid down next to him and thanked him for his great kindness.

For the first time in his life, Peter prayed out loud. The next morning would be Abishek's first ever day at school.

After he had prayed for him, Abishek fell fast asleep. Later, Peter picked up the boy's manikin-like body and placed it on to the straw mattress on the other side of the room.

The next morning after a breakfast of curried omelette, together with a kind of ground yellow rice dish that tasted really good, they both made their way in a rickshaw to the new school building.

As they left, Peter remembered to pick up the box of illuminated toys to give to the new pupils.

The press and even a television crew were present for the big occasion. The TV news woman interviewed Peter briefly and then the camera panned upwards and paused on the large rectangular sign above the main entrance. And there, in Hindi and in English, stood the name of the new school: 'Lancelot College, Bombay.'