Brian Sewell

THE WHITE UMBRELLA

Illustrated by Sally Ann Lasson

A Novel Insel

On a journey through Pakistan, Mr B, an unflappable English gentleman, spots a young donkey struggling under a crushing load. Her fragile legs tremble, her eyes plead for help. In a heartbeat, he makes a decision that will change both their lives: he will rescue her – and take her home to London.

But donkeys, as it turns out, don't fly. And so begins an unforgettable adventure: man and donkey, side by side, trekking across the Middle East and into Europe, step by improbable step. Along the way, they discover not just the kindness of strangers, but the sheer, kaleidoscopic wonder of the world itself.

A charming gift book about friendship, wanderlust, and the courage to follow one's heart – perfect for travelers, dreamers, donkey-lovers, and anyone who cherishes the kind of story you carry with you for a lifetime.

Brian Sewell (1931–2015) was considered "Britain's most famous and controversial art critic" (*The Guardian*). He also wrote several autobiographies and was known as a great lover of dogs and animals. He died in London at the age of 84.

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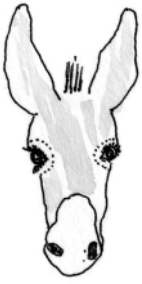

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Written with Hoffmann's Nicklausse at one elbow,
Blaise Cendrars at the other, and on my conscience
still, that donkey in Peshawar.

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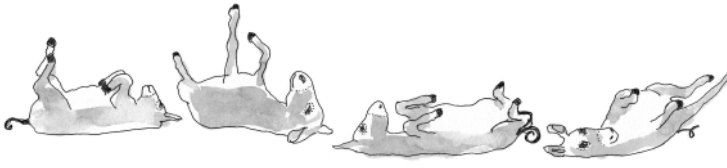
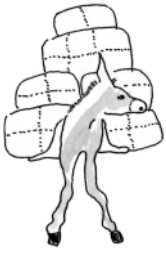


I
Mr B rescues a donkey foal

Mr B, a wiry little man of fifty with white hair, was sitting in the back of a big white Land Rover when he saw the donkey. It was early evening and the dense rush-hour traffic in Peshawar was moving at a snail's pace – which was just as well, for Mr B suddenly opened the door, leaped down onto the road and, without a word, sprinted away between the carts and lorries, the buses and the motorcycles.



His companions, a television crew from London – for Mr B was in northern Pakistan to make a film about that country's ancient history – were taken by surprise. Dominic, the youngest and least important of them, but the tallest and the most willowy, had the sense to jump out too and run after Mr B. They did not much like him. He was serious and knew a great deal of ancient history, but he failed to understand that in making programmes for television what he knew was of absolutely no importance and that, as a presenter, he was no more than the puppet of the director and the cameraman.

Within two days of reaching Pakistan they were hardly speaking to each other. The cameraman was only interested in filming the brightly-painted trucks and lorries that constantly thundered past with passengers clinging to anything that offered support for hand or foot. The director, if they encountered a buffalo or camel, at once ordered Mr B to clamber on its back; he was also compelled to eat food offered in the street or play musical instruments. Mr B, however, knowing that two thousand, three hundred years earlier Alexander the Great, the most formidable of heroes in the history of Ancient Greece, had marched his armies all the way from Macedonia to Pakistan, was anxious to know if any traces of that conquest still survived in modern language, customs or culture. Most of all he would have liked to find a fierce Pakistani warrior in the remoter regions of the Hindu Kush, capable of conversing with him in Ancient Greek – but for two long weeks Mr B had been allowed to find nothing of the kind and now was boiling over with frustration.

That they called him Mr B was an indication of the rift between them. Feeling deeply unfriendly toward him, they did not want to use his first name, and to have turned to the formality of his surname might have suggested that they held him in high respect for his knowledge – which was far from the case. It was young Dominic who, if truth be told, liked and respected him very much and perfectly understood the anguish that he felt when the programme that he had hoped to make faded into oblivion, who began to address him as Mr B, and then the others took it up. To call him Mr B was not aggressively unfriendly, yet suggested a certain distance, and Dominic could make it seem genuinely affectionate.

When Dominic caught up with Mr B, he found him with his arm around the neck of a tiny donkey, dabbing his handkerchief in four deep wounds on her back, from which flowed strong trickles of blood. These had been caused by a wicker 'saddle' used in Pakistan to provide a flat platform for the enormous loads that donkeys are often forced to carry. But this donkey, Dominic could at once see, was far too young to work. He could also see that Mr B was magnificently angry. 'I doubt if she is six months old. She may still be drinking her mother's milk. Any fool can see that the bones and joints of her legs are not properly formed …'

At this point the fat director and the cameraman, panting and drenched with sweat, arrived. Dominic explained. 'Leave the donkey and get back into the car,' demanded the director. 'Not without the donkey,' said Mr B, 'I can't and won't just leave her here.' As they argued, the volume of their voices rose and a ring of uncomprehend-

ing spectators formed about them. Reason dictated that they should leave the donkey to her fate and drive on to Islamabad where, next day, they were to board a plane to Heathrow, but Mr B was not a reasonable man – indeed, when provoked, he could be a most unreasonable man. 'We'll leave you,' threatened the fat director. 'Do,' Mr B replied with remarkable force and clarity for such a short and simple word. The cameraman took his arm, but Mr B shook him off. 'What will you do if we leave you?' asked Dominic very quietly. 'Walk home,' said Mr B, 'with the donkey,' a broad grin spreading over his face.

For a whole hour they wrangled and the crowd, bored by an argument in which no one was murdered or even came to blows, thinned until only Mr B and the television crew were left. Night fell, but not even the chill of darkness dented Mr B's determination. In the end Dominic fetched Mr B's luggage from the car and, into a small and comfortable knapsack that had been his companion on many earlier journeys and long-distance walks, helped him to pack only what was really useful. Into it went his sponge bag, scissors shaped for cutting fingernails, a fresh notebook, spare pens and everything that might keep him warm and dry. He remembered too to bring Mr B's umbrella – no ordinary umbrella, but one of strong white canvas on a frame of metal ribs exquisitely engineered about a stock as heavy as the strongest walking-stick, specially made for him ten years before, hardly a stone's throw from the British Museum, by James Smith and Sons (and Grandsons, Great-Grandsons and more and more, for they made

their first umbrella in 1830, the year that William IV came to the throne). The canvas was no longer white, for this was an umbrella that had crossed the Sahara and its sand-storms when Mr B was searching there for evidence of prehistoric human occupation, that had been with him in Pompeii and furthest Sicily, indeed everywhere from Barcelona to Baghdad, and had proved to be the Rolls-Royce of umbrellas.

'What shall we tell them when we get back to London?' asked the director, still not quite believing that this was about to be the parting of their ways.

'Tell them the truth – that I found a baby donkey and I am walking home with it.'

'You are mad,' said the director.

'Perhaps,' said Mr B, 'but it is a decent sort of madness of which you are incapable. We shall see you in a year or so.'

To this the director ungraciously replied, 'I don't care if I never see or hear of you again. You and your damned donkey.'

Dominic, last to return to the Land Rover, gave Mr B a hug and whispered, 'I'll tell the Foreign Office – and Mrs B, of course.'

II
Farooq the pharmacist

So there was Mr B, shivering a little in the cold that tumbles down on Peshawar from the Himalayas so that, though by day the temperature can be roasting hot to an Englishman, by night it can be as cold as Christmas. All this time the donkey foal had stood close to him, pressing, much as big dogs often do against their master's thighs. Feeling her shiver too, he pulled his one warm wind-cheating garment from his knapsack and, knotting the sleeves about her neck, just about covered her shoulders with it; then, taking the old leather belt from his trousers, soft with long use, he slipped this too about her neck like a dog collar and lead. All but one of the shops nearby had closed, but a bright light announced the exception to be a PHARMACY, and that was exactly what Mr B wanted.

He and the donkey crossed the road and stood politely at the door, for Mr B thought that a pharmacist might not be happy to have a donkey in his shop. When he called 'Good evening' to anyone who might be in its

depths, an old man with a neatly-trimmed beard came to the door. Mr B explained that he wanted something to disinfect the four wounds in the donkey's back, and then something more to protect them from flies as they healed. The old man was amused. He was so old that he could remember when Pakistan and India were one vast undivided country and it all belonged to the British Empire; he was so old that he had been to schools that were as English as any ancient grammar school in England and spoke a form of English as refined, grammatical and precise as Mr B's; and he was so old that he knew perfectly well that the English can be obstinate in their affection for animals.

His name was Farooq – which mightily amused Mr B, who had once encountered, when young and foolish, a deposed king of Egypt who bore that name; but to speak of this, he realised, was quite irrelevant and he kept his memory to himself.

Farooq instructed Mr B to take the donkey round the block to his back door, where the tumbledown shop declined into the lean-to shack that was its store-room; there he would tend her wounds. He swabbed them clean, deftly closed them with stitches (with not a whimper from the donkey – but then animals often instinctively know when humans are being kind to them, even if it hurts), and covered them with patches to keep the flies away. He thought she was perhaps only three or four months old, had certainly not finished drinking her mother's milk, should never have

been made to carry a load, and then he delivered his surprise – 'You realise, of course, that she is far too young to walk four thousand miles. You will have to carry her.' Though he said this with laughter in his voice and eyes, he could not have been more serious.

Farooq was Mr B's first stroke of luck. Before the evening was much older the pharmacist was making lists of things that would be good for the donkey to eat, and of other things that would upset her tummy. He stressed how much water she should drink – clean water from a bucket, not dirty water from a roadside pool. And he told Mr B that she should, as far as possible, walk in the shade – as, in nature, she would walk in the shade cast by her mother – and should not walk more than five miles in a day, and those five never in one unbroken journey. There were other instructions, among them a blanket to keep her warm at night, something waterproof to keep her dry in storms and perhaps a hat to shade her head, and as the list grew longer Mr B began to realise that his first assumption, that she would carry his luggage while he held the umbrella over them both and they walked twenty miles a day, was far from what was really to happen.

'How do you know so much about donkeys?' asked Mr B.

'Oh I'm so old that I date back to the time before the

car was everywhere, when every family had a donkey or two and we children all had to look after them. My mother always did her shopping on a donkey, and I and my brothers, when we were very small, often sat in front of her when she trotted off to market. Without cars the air in Peshawar was much cleaner in those days, but life could be very tough and short for donkeys, for almost all were made to work too hard. Your donkey, if you succeed in getting her to England, may be yours for thirty years. Our donkeys often lived to be ten or so, but most others were worked to death by five.'

'You must think me mad,' said Mr B.

'Not so,' replied Farooq with a wry smile as he set about trying to make a bed of sorts for the donkey with flattened cardboard boxes and other packing material. 'Shall we say eccentric? Now she must dine on what fruit and vegetables I have, and we too must have some supper.'

Farooq lived over the shop, the only member of his family to do so, for his wife had died many years before and his sons had better things to do than run a twenty-four-hour pharmacy. 'It is what I do,' he said when Mr B gently enquired why, at eighty, he chose to work so many hours. 'What else should I do? It is because I provide a service that we are having this conversation. Is that not good? Is that not better for you than finding the shop shut and your not knowing what to do with your sad little donkey until morning?' Then he offered Mr B a bed, but he, having in his mind determined that he would keep company with the donkey if Farooq was not offended, refused it and instead stretched out

on the shed floor among the cardboard boxes, next to the donkey, just as he did with his dogs in London – though there they were all on his big and very comfortable bed.

Mr B woke early, aching in every joint, and the donkey, hearing him get up, got up herself, unsteadily. She was, he realised, a bag of bones in which, when he ran his fingers over her skin, he could count every rib, her wobbly legs absurdly long supporting a body that at this stage was no bigger than that of an Alsatian dog. He measured every animal by the big Alsatian bitch waiting for him at home and, lifting the donkey (which she seemed not to mind), he thought their weights much the same. Outside, in the clear morning light, he saw how pretty she was, her coat as soft and silky as a whippet's – and he had a whippet at home too, matching her in exactly the same range of colours as the milkiest of coffees. 'With those long legs you have the makings of a ballet dancer,' he said to himself, 'and I shall call you Pavlova – Little Miss Pavlova until you grow up.' And his mind wandered with thoughts of another Pavlova, *the* other Pavlova, indeed, Anna Pavlova, a beautiful Russian ballet dancer who died on the day that Mr B was born, still so famous that balletomanes who could never have seen her dance and knew her artistry only from scratched and creaking films in black and white, still speak of her with awe.*

* For Anna Pavlova, *pav*-loh-vuh is the pronunciation preferred in ballet circles. The anglicised pav-*loh*-vuh should be used only for the pudding that bears her name.

When Farooq appeared with breakfast for Pavlova – a bale of fresh hay – he said, 'I have good news for you. A friend is driving to Quetta tomorrow to collect some stores for me and will take you with him. It will knock some five hundred miles off your journey, but it commits you to going south and then west-north-west across Persia – but only one border to cross. If you go north the journey is much shorter, but you may cross and re-cross a dozen borders, some of them – Afghanistan, Kashmir, Russia – dangerous and unpredictable. Any of these might mean arrest for you, and were you to be separated from your donkey, it would almost certainly be the end for her.'

Mr B wished that he had a map – and, indeed, he had one in his head, but all that he could clearly remember was that the great mountainous mass of Afghanistan (never a safe place for a solitary Englishman) was in the way. The simplicity of Farooq's longer journey appealed to him, for not only did it avoid the hard climbing and bitter cold of the mountains of the Hindu Kush (lower only than the Himalayas into which they run), he had only one (though rather large) country to cross before reaching the Turkish border, and in Turkey he had friends. 'Come,' said Farooq, 'we must go shopping for the journey.'

They bought a small plastic bucket from which Pavlova could drink, two flat plastic water-bottles as an emer-