



‘Sir, you want cool drink?’



The sun was already high in the sky when we arrived at *The Taj Mahal*. Clambering from the rickshaw, I noticed a young boy approaching.

“Sir, you want cool drink?”

Immediately I had images of a million stomach-churning bugs floating in cloudy liquid!

“No thanks. Maybe later.”

He persisted. *“Sir, you want cool drink? You come my shop.”*

We kept on walking towards the gates of the Taj. Moments later the boy was alongside my daughter Alice with another well-rehearsed opener. *“You like see Taj Mahal?”*

Without looking I could tell it was the same lad: the same croaky impish voice.

“Sir, I give umbrella ... free! Your daughter need umbrella sir; very hot inside Taj.”

Then we talked. His name was Vicky. He even spelt it out for us - V-I-C-K-Y - to make sure we got it right.



The Taj Mahal was mesmerising. We stayed through the afternoon - Alice busily sketching - until a magical glow reflected off the dome, before fading into the dusk. Vicky's broad grin was there to greet us as we made our exit, and we arranged to meet the next day.

Our young friend appeared the next morning, this time with his best mate, Shan. After that the four of us were inseparable, travelling the streets of Agra by bicycle rickshaw together.

Shan had a broad smile and eyes that glittered with an innocence matching that of Vicky's mischief. He was a simpler boy; the junior of the two. At a café stop Shan began giggling and whispering to Vicky.



"What did he say?" I asked, thinking Vicky could translate from Urdu.

"At times Shan can be very small," came the telling reply.

It was wonderful to watch them holding onto each other as we rode the rickshaws or walking arm-in-arm ahead of us, talking and laughing.



We went all over Agra, with the *rickshaw-wallah* at the sharp end working himself to a frazzle. But the man took it in his stride - or rather his peddling - often talking with the boys. Sometimes on hilly bits they'd jump down to push.

One day Vicky took us home. His Muslim family lived in a relatively large house, ten minutes from the Taj. Most of the men in his family worked in the marble inlay business and the front room was dominated by pieces of black marble with intricate designs.

In contrast, Shan lived towards the opposite end of the social divide. We visited in the



evening, climbing past cows on the ground floor, up a steep narrow staircase to the rooftop. And there we sat, sipping a deliciously spiced chai, with the Taj as the backdrop, and an Indian brass band playing in the street below. People were waving and shouting greetings from

other rooftops nearby. The feeling was electric!

On the day we were leaving our chaperones arrived early, to join us for breakfast. It was just five days since I first heard Vicky's words: *"Sir, you want cool drink?"* Now, it was as if we had known both boys for months.

"You come back soon," said Vicky, waving goodbye. *"Or I come UK. What you say?"*

Ever the joker, Vicky flashed that big broad smile ... and we left.

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