



REFLECTIONS

Easter in Bombay

BY VICTORIA HESS

Take New York City after a long garbage strike, add feral dogs and ravens to assure that the garbage is thoroughly scattered, and then consider the fact that a third of the people in Bombay (now Mumbai) had no access to toilets.

This was the city I moved to in 1993, with my diplomat husband and two young sons, and this was where the Easter egg hunt I planned for the consulate community took place in 1994.

In spite of the filth around us, I loved Bombay. We lived in a run-down building atop Malabar Hill, not far from the Hanging Gardens, where wealthy residents strolled in the early morning among the formal plantings. A mile away was the consulate general, the site for the hunt. I walked the streets endlessly, taking in the local color of the street barbers, snack vendors, holy men, elephants and produce baskets.

Sometimes, we would walk down Malabar Hill, along a small stream where men bathed — partially dressed — and women scrubbed saris and salwar kameezes (pant suits), then up a hillside staircase to a slum. There the tiny hovels were built side by side along narrow pathways with open sewers. Yet these were far better dwellings than millions had in the streets of Bombay. They were permanent, built of mud and brick instead of bamboo and cloth. And there were communal water faucets and toilets.

I would walk through this neighborhood with one son on my back and

The Easter egg hunters had stiff and unexpected competition.



the other hand-in-hand, and we would greet and nod at all the women and children, sharing our mutual pleasure at the unexpected.

Continuing on toward the consulate general, I would pass the Towers of Silence, where the Parsis, who do not believe in polluting the earth, air or water with interment or cremation, put out the bodies of their dead to be disposed of naturally. Non-Parsis were not permitted to enter the area, but when I visited a friend whose high-rise building overlooked the site, we could see, from 16 stories up, bodies laid out for the scavenging birds. Daily, we saw the dark shapes circling over the Towers.

The consulate general was a grand, colonial-era building built by the Maharaja of Wankaner. A high wall ringed the compound, cutting off the view of the ocean in back but enclosing a sizable lawn, gardens, tennis courts and playground. It looked like the perfect setting for an Easter egg hunt.

To prepare, I had collected hundreds of eggs from parents, some boiled and brightly dyed, others made of plastic and filled with goodies. On Easter Sunday, some parents and I arrived early to hide the eggs. The children, ranging from toddlers to

sixth-graders, waited impatiently outside the front of the building. Little did they know of the stiff competition they would face.

As soon as we started hiding the eggs, ravens and gulls began to dive-bomb the garden, and I had the feeling I was trapped in a scene from the Hitchcock film, "The Birds." These soaring garbage pickers saw the colorful eggs and decided it was supper-time. The plastic ones survived the onslaught, but the real ones were quickly reduced to fragments of white and yellow, with shards of colored shell scattered throughout the yard.

With horror, I realized that the ravens who were feasting on our Easter eggs that morning had probably eaten their last meal at the Towers. Screaming and chasing birds as we went, we worked fast to hide the rest of the eggs. Guarding our corner of the garden from the winged onslaught, we had the children conclude the hunt as quickly as possible, before the birds could finish it for them.

After it was all over, and the children were safely checking their goodies, I reclaimed all the plastic eggs. I left them in a basket in the Community Liaison Office, with an explanation about what to expect next year. ■

Victoria Hess was married to a Foreign Service officer for 15 years, during which time she served in six countries (Iraq, Germany, India, Pakistan, Zimbabwe and the U.S.) and lived in 13 homes. Victoria now lives in Jackson Hole, Wyo., with her sons.