AGE *OF* VICE

कलियुग

ALSO BY DEEPTI KAPOOR

A Bad Character

AGE OF VICE

कलियुग

DEEPTI KAPOOR

juggernaut

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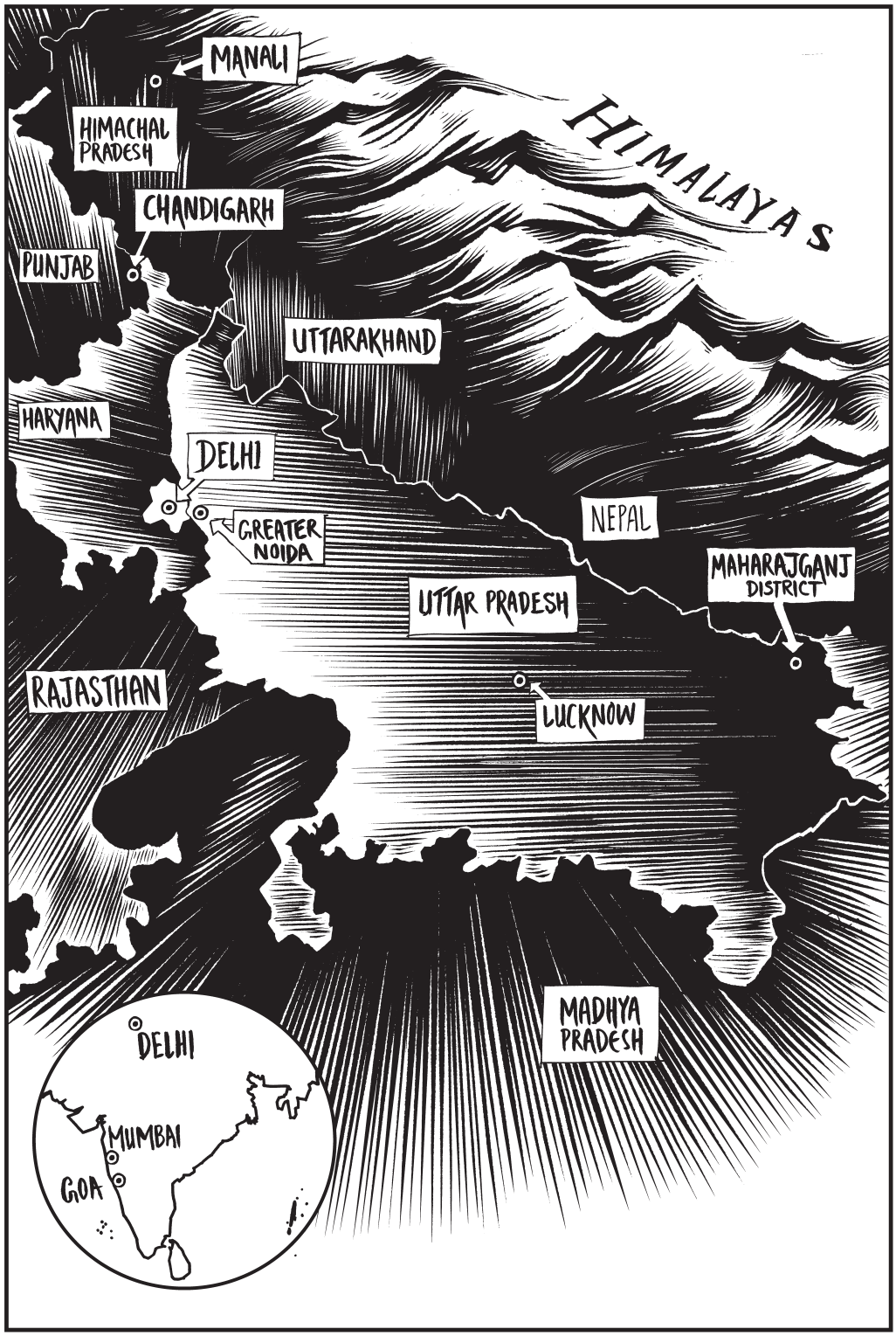
For *naga sadhus,* the *kumbha mela* disaster of 1954 was just another round of violence during an event predicated on violence among men whose profession was violence. If it was different, it was only because ordinary householders had gotten in the way.

—WILLIAM R. PINCH, *WARRIOR ASCETICS AND INDIAN EMPIRES*

And in consequence of the shortness of their lives they will not be able to acquire much knowledge. And in consequence of the littleness of their knowledge, they will have no wisdom. And for this, covetousness and avarice will overwhelm them all.

—THE *MAHABHARATA*



NEW DELHI, 2004

Five pavement-dwellers lie dead at the side of Delhi's Inner Ring Road.

It sounds like the start of a sick joke.

If it is, no one told them.

They die where they slept.

Almost.

Their bodies have been dragged ten meters by the speeding Mercedes that jumped the curb and cut them down.

It's February. Three a.m. Six degrees.

Fifteen million souls curl up in sleep.

A pale fog of sulfur lines the streets.

And one of the dead, Ragini, was eighteen years old. She was five months pregnant at the time. Her husband, Rajesh, twenty-three, was sleeping by her side. Both belly-up, tucked in with heavy shawls at the crown and feet, looking like corpses anyway save the telltale signs, the rucksack beneath the head, the sandals lined up neatly beside the arms.

A cruel twist of fate: this couple arrived in Delhi only yesterday. Taking refuge with Krishna, Iyaad, and Chotu, three migrant laborers from the same district in Uttar Pradesh. Each day these men woke before dawn to trek to the

labor mandi at Company Bagh, trying to grab whatever daily wage they could find—dhaba cook, wedding waiter, construction laborer—sending money back to their village, paying for a sister's shaadi, a brother's schooling, a father's nightly medicine. Living day to day, hour to hour, the working poor, struggling to survive. Returning to sleep in this barren spot after dark, beside the Ring Road, close to Nigambodh Ghat. Close to the demolished slums of the Yamuna Pushta that had been their home.

But the newspapers don't dwell on these three men. Their names vanish at dawn with the stars.

A police van with four cops inside arrives at the crash site. They climb out and see the dead bodies, and the wailing, angry crowd that now surrounds the car. There's someone still inside! A young man, sitting bolt upright, arms braced at the wheel, eyes shut tightly. Is he dead? Did he die like that? The cops push the rabble aside and peer in. "Is he sleeping?" one cop says to his colleagues. These words cause the driver to turn his head and, like some monster, open his eyes. The cop looks back and almost jumps in fright. There's something grotesque about the driver's smooth, handsome face. His eyes are leering and wild, but other than that, there's not a hair out of place. The cops pull open the door, wave their lathis thunderously, order him out. There's an empty bottle of Black Label at his feet. He's a lean man, gym honed, wearing a gray gabardine safari suit, hair parted millimeter fine, impeccably oiled. Beneath the reek of whisky there's another scent: Davidoff Cool Water, not that these cops know.

What they know is this: he's not a rich man, not a rich man at all, rather a facsimile, a man dressed in the imitation of wealth: in its service. The clothes, the well-groomed features, the car, they cannot hide the essential poverty of his birth; its smell is stronger than any liquor or cologne.

Yes, he's a servant, a chauffeur, a driver, a "boy."

A well-fed and housebroken version of what lies dead on the road.

And this is not his Mercedes.

Which means he can be hurt.

He sobs in oblivion as the cops drag him out. Bent double, he vomits on his own loafers. One cop hits him with his lathi, hauls him up. Another searches his body, finds his wallet, finds an empty shoulder holster, finds a matchbook from a hotel called the Palace Grande, finds a money clip holding twenty thousand rupees.

Whose car is this?

Where did the money come from?

Who did you steal it from?

Thought you'd go for a joyride?

Whose liquor is it?

Chutiya, where's the gun?

Fucker, who do you work for?

In his wallet there's an election card, a driver's license, three hundred rupees. His cards say he is Ajay. His father's name is Hari. He was born January 1, 1982.

And the Mercedes? It is registered to one Gautam Rathore.

The cops confer: the name sounds familiar. And the address—Aurangzeb Road—speaks for itself. Only the rich and the powerful live there.

"Chutiya," an officer barks, holding up the car's papers. "Is this your boss?"

But this young man called Ajay is too drunk to speak.

"Asshole, did you take his car?"

One of the cops walks to the side and looks down at the dead. The girl's eyes are open, skin already blue in the cold. She is bleeding from the space between her legs, where life has been.

In the station Ajay is stripped and left naked in a cold and windowless room. He's so drunk he passes out. The constables return to throw icy water over him and he wakes with a scream. He is seated, and they press his shoulders against the wall, pull his legs apart. A female constable stands on his thighs until his circulation goes and he roars in pain and passes out once more.

By the next day the case has gained traction. The media is appalled. At first it's about the pregnant girl. News channels mourn her. But she was neither photogenic nor full of promise. So the focus shifts to the killer. A source confirms the car is a Mercedes registered to Gautam Rathore, and this is news—he's a fixture of the Delhi social scene, a polo player, a raconteur, and a prince, genuine royalty, the first and only son of a member of Parliament, Maharaja Prasad Singh Rathore. Was Gautam Rathore driving? That's the question on everyone's lips. But no, no, his alibi is watertight. He was holidaying away from Delhi last night. He was at a fort palace hotel near Jaipur. His current location is unknown. But he has released a statement expressing his horror, sending his condolences to the deceased and their kin. The driver, his statement reveals, only recently began working for him. He seems to have taken the Mercedes without Gautam's knowledge. Taken whisky and the Mercedes and gone for an illicit spin.

A statement from the police confirms as much: Ajay, employee of Gautam Rathore, stole a bottle of whisky from Rathore's home while his employer was away, took the Mercedes for a joyride, lost control.

This story becomes fact.

It settles in the papers.

And the FIR is registered.

Ajay, son of Hari, is booked under Section 304A of the Indian Penal Code. Death due to negligence. Maximum sentence: two years.

He is sent to the crowded courthouse and presented to the district magistrate, the magistrate takes two minutes to send him to judicial custody with no consideration of bail. He is driven with the other prisoners on a bus to Tihar Jail. They are lined up for processing; they sit in sullen rows on wooden benches in the reception hall, surrounded by placards with rules hammered into the damp, pockmarked plaster of the walls. When his turn arrives, he's taken into a cramped office where a clerk and a prison doctor with their typewriter and

stethoscope await. His possessions are laid out once more: wallet, money clip containing twenty thousand rupees, the book of matches bearing the name Palace Grande, the empty shoulder holster. The money is counted.

The clerk takes his pencil and begins to fill out the form.

"Name?"

The prisoner stares at them.

"Name?"

"Ajay," he says, barely audible.

"Father's name?"

"Hari."

"Age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Occupation?"

"Driver."

"Speak up."

"Driver."

"Who is your employer?"

The clerk looks over his glasses.

"What is the name of your employer?"

"Gautam Rathore."

Ten thousand rupees are taken from his money, the rest is handed back to him.

"Put it in your sock," the clerk says.

He is processed and sent to Jail No. 1, led through the courtyard to the barracks, taken along the dank corridor to a wide cell where nine other inmates live crowded and packed. Clothes hang from the cell bars like in a market stall, and the floor inside is covered with tattered mattresses, blankets, buckets, bundles, sacks. A small squatting latrine in the corner. Though there's no room left, the warden orders a small space to be cleared out for him on the cold floor next to the latrine. But no mattress can be spared. Ajay lays the blanket he's been given on the stone floor. He sits with his back to the wall, staring vacantly ahead. A

few of his cellmates come and tell him their names, but he says nothing, acknowledges nothing. He curls into a ball and sleeps.

When he comes to, he sees a man standing over him. Old and missing teeth, with frantic eyes. More than sixty years on earth, he is saying. More than sixty years. He's an autorickshaw driver from Bihar, or at least he was on the outside. He's been here awaiting trial for six years. He's innocent. It's one of the first things he says. "I'm innocent. I'm supposed to be a drug peddler. But I'm innocent. I was caught in the wrong place. A peddler was in my rickshaw, but he ran and the cops took me." He goes on to ask what Ajay is charged with, how much money he has hidden away with him. Ajay ignores him, turns in the opposite direction. "Suit yourself," the old man cheerfully says, "but you should know, I can get things done around here. For one hundred rupees I can get you another blanket, for one hundred rupees I can get you a better meal." "Let him be," hollers another cellmate, a plump, dark boy from Aligarh, who is picking his teeth with a piece of neem. "Don't you know who he is, he's the Mercedes Killer." The old man shuffles off. "I'm Arvind," the fat boy says. "They say I killed my wife, but I'm innocent."

Out into the courtyard, break time. Hundreds of inmates piling out of their cells to congregate. Men size him up. He's something of a celebrity. They've all heard about the Mercedes Killer. They want a closer look, judge for themselves his innocence or guilt, see how tough he is, how scared, decide where he could belong. It only takes a minute to recognize he's one of the innocent, a scapegoat for a wealthy boss. Men try to prize this truth from him. What was he promised to take the fall? Something sweet? Money, when he gets out? Or will his sons and daughters be sent through school? Or did it come from the other side? Was his family threatened? Was his life in danger? Or was he just loyal?

Representatives from the gangs that run the jail approach him in the yard, in the dining hall, in the corridors, canvass his support, present their pitch. The Chawanni gang, the Sissodia gang, the Beedi gang, the Haddi gang, the Atte gang. The dreaded Bawania gang. The Acharya gang, the Guptas. As an in-

nocent man, as a man unaccustomed to the criminal life, he will need protection. He will soon become a target for extortion if he does not pick a gang; without a gang's support, a man will rape him soon enough, a warden will have him transferred to a cell, alone with another cellmate, he will be his sport, no one will come when he screams. And they'll take whatever money he has. They offer this as sage and neutral advice, as if they were not the threat. He is pulled this way and that. What money do you have? Join our gang. Join our gang and you'll have security. You'll have a mobile phone, pornography, chicken. You'll be exempt from the "freshers party" coming your way. Join our gang and you can fuck, you can rape. Our gang is the strongest. You should join us before it's too late. He ignores each pitch. By the time he returns to his cell, his blanket has been taken away.

He prefers to be alone and in pain anyway. The horror of the dead follows him inside, he mourns them as he breathes. He refuses all the gangs, snubs the emissaries and their overtures. So on the second day, outside the pharmacy, alone, just after he's been called to visit the doctor, three men from another cell converge on him. They stick out their tongues and remove the razor blades they keep in their mouths; they set upon him, slashing at his face and chest and the forearms he raises to protect himself. He takes the cuts in penance, making no expression of pain. Then his patience finally snaps, breaks like a trapdoor. He shatters his first attacker's nose with the heel of his palm, takes the second man's arm at the elbow and snaps it at the joint. The third he sweeps down to the floor. He snatches one of their razors and takes it to this man's tongue, slicing it down the middle, squeezing the squealing prisoner's jaw open with his grip.

He's found standing over them, splattered in blood, the prisoners howling in pain as he's locked in solitary in a daze. They beat him, tell him he'll be there for a very long time. Once the door shuts, he goes wild, snarling and slapping and kicking the walls. Screaming without language. Incomprehensible words. He cannot control his world.

He imagines the end. Everything he is and all he's done. But no. The next morning, the door is opened, new guards enter. They tell him to come with them. He'll shower first. He's shivering naked and raw. When they approach, he curls his fists, back to the wall, to fight. They laugh and throw him fresh clothes.

He's taken to the warden's office. A pleasing spread: freshly cut fruit, paratha, lassi. A vision of paradise. The warden asks him to sit. "Have a cigarette. Help yourself. There's been a mistake. I wasn't told," he says. "If I'd been told, this would never have happened. Really, no one knew, not even your friends. But things will be different. You'll be taken to your friends here now. You'll be free, within reason. And this unfortunate business with those other men, this will be forgotten. They could be punished. Only, you punished them yourself, didn't you!? Quite a show. Oh, and this money, it's yours. You should have said something. You should have made it clear. You should have let us know. Why didn't you let us know?"

Ajay stares at the food, at the cigarette pack.

"Know what?"

The warden smiles.

"That you're a Wadia man."

MAHARAJGANJ, EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH, 1991

AJAY

(Thirteen Years Earlier)

1.

What you have to remember is that Ajay was just a boy. Eight years old and malnourished. Barely literate. Watchful inside the sockets of his eyes.

His family was poor. Wracked by poverty. Living hand to mouth in a hut patched with dried grass and plastic sheets on raised ground above the floodplain, by the ears of sarkanda beyond the shadow edge of the village. Father and mother manual scavengers both, scraping shit from the villagers' dry latrines with slate and hand, bearing wicker baskets on heads, to be dumped on farther ground. Pissing and shitting in the fields before dawn. Pissing after dark. Growing meager leafy vegetables in the filthy runoff. Drinking water from the brackish distant well so as not to pollute the common source. Knowing their limits. So as not to invite death upon themselves.

Ajay's mother, Rupa, is pregnant again.

His elder sister, Hema, tends to their goat.

This is Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Nineteen ninety-one.

The foothills of Nepal rise in the north.

The moon is visible long after dawn.

Before Ajay took a breath he was already mourned.

2.

It's nineteen ninety-one and the district is in dire need. The upper-caste landlords and their cronies thrive. The boy treks each day to the government school, an aging, unloved shell; a false hope of concrete without doors; wooden windows shuttered, splintered, and full of holes; rooms too small for the many children, snot nosed, hair combed, hair oiled, scrappy uniforms kept clean, fighting a threadbare tide. The teacher is missing, often drunk, often runaway, often collecting his government salary at home. Ajay is poor, less than poor, shunted to the back with the other Valmikis, with the Pasis and Koris, shunned, ignored. At lunch they are made to wait apart, on rocky ground, while the caste children sit cross-legged in rows on the smooth platform taking their meals on banana leaves. When their meals are over, it is the outcastes' turn, their portion meager, watered down. After lunch Ajay is put to work. He sweeps the floor, removes dried shit from the corners, sweeps lizard shit from the ledge. One day a dead dog lies beside the boundary wall, bloated and rotten and snakebit. He is made to tie string around its hind leg, drag it away.

In the afternoon heat he returns several kilometers home to help Hema with the goat. Past the Hanuman temple, past the boys playing cricket. He keeps a safe distance. Three years ago he made the error of picking up a stray ball, throwing it back with all his might. The ball was shunned like a leper, and Ajay was chased through the fields. He escaped across the sewage ditch. They told him: Touch the ball again, we'll hack off your arms and legs, set fire to them, throw you in the well.

It's nineteen ninety-one and his father has gotten into some kind of trouble. Their goat has broken free from its tether and entered a villager's field to eat the spinach there. Ajay and Hema retrieve it, but the owner of the field comes to know. He arrives late afternoon with the village headman, Kuldeep Singh. Kuldeep Singh brings with him a handful of eager goons. In their

presence the landowner demands an explanation where none will suffice, while Ajay's father, all sinew and bone, begs forgiveness when none will come. It's the goat they deal with first. In clairvoyance, it spits and snorts and rears and brandishes its horns, so the goons shy away. It takes Kuldeep Singh to push them aside, to bring his brutish club down swiftly on its head. The skull cracks, the goat teeters on the void, legs folding—it looks, for a moment, like a newborn trying to walk. Kuldeep Singh places his knee on its head and slits its throat with his blade. Exalted by the hot blood, the goons move in on Ajay's father. They drag him to the ground, hold him down by his shoulders and knees, and take turns beating the soles of his feet with bamboo sticks, graduating in their zeal to his ankles, his shins, his knees, his groin. They deliver heavy blows to his groin, his chest, his arms. His wife and daughter cry out, wail, beg them to stop. Ajay turns to run, but he's held fast by Kuldeep Singh as he goes. Those heavy hands grip his shoulders. The breath of tobacco and liquor is a sour perfume for his nose. Ajay turns away, directs his eyes at the pinkish sky, but Kuldeep Singh twists his head so he must watch.

His father falls into a fever, bones purpling into dusk. In the morning, in despair, his mother turns to the local moneylender, Rajdeep Singh, begging enough to take her husband for treatment to the government hospital twenty kilometers away. Rajdeep Singh grants her two hundred rupees at 40 percent interest after a humiliating negotiation.

When Rupa reaches the hospital, the doctors refuse to admit her husband unless they are paid up front in full. They take 150 rupees, then leave him in a ward unattended. He slips from this world by midnight. She drags his body back herself, strapped to a wooden sled in the dark, reaching home after dawn. Denied access to the village's burning ground, they cremate him themselves with collected oil and cheap wood on a pyre near their home. There's not enough wood to finish the job. The stench is unbearable. They dig a shallow grave beside the woods and bury his charred remains there.

Next day, Rajdeep Singh's men come round to remind Ajay's mother

what is owed. The goons surround Ajay's sister, pass lewd comments, suggest what she might do. Ajay watches hidden and mute among the stalks of the neighboring field. There's a cockroach in the cracked earth beneath his feet. He covers his ears to block the cries and stamps the cockroach into the dust. And then he runs. When he returns two hours later, his sister is sobbing in a corner of the hut and his mother is stoking the fire.

A few hours later, the thekedar—the local contractor—turns up. He offers his condolences and, knowing their parlous state, suggests he pay off their debt in full himself. They can pay him back in one simple, honorable way.

3.

Ajay doesn't get a say. The next morning before light, he is loaded into the back of a Tempo carrying eight boys he's never met. It's an old vehicle with a battered cabin and a greasy cage fitted behind that has a roof open to the stars so its human cargo can see but dare not risk escape. Ajay has nothing to show for himself save his old clothes and a soiled blanket. His mother and sister stand at a distance, then turn and walk away. The engine idles on the dirt track beside the gully. Then the contractor climbs in and the assistant climbs in and they drive from the crawling light along a potholed track toward a black horizon pierced by stars. Ajay sits catatonic among the sullen and shivering boys. A patchwork of blankets barely keeps them warm. They huddle together on the cab side of the cage, facing east, watching their homes recede, waiting for dawn.

They stop at a busy dhaba just before sunrise to piss. A mindless tube light gathers yearning moths. Steam escapes resting truckers' mouths. In minutes the sky has turned pale and the landscape grows distinct. Vehicles trundle down the highway. Wheat fields stretch in the mist on either side. The contractor's assistant, a wiry, dark, pockmarked man with a twisted

mustache and a long face and narrow eyes, opens the back of the cage. He warns them not to run as he leads them to the trench to piss, and to make certain of this, he stands behind them toying with his knife. The fog sweeps in more heavily, the sun briefly appears as a pale silvery disk, then vanishes. Locked back inside the truck, the boys are given roti and chai as the thekedar and his assistant sit at one of the plastic tables in front and order aloo paratha.

This is the moment.

One of the caged boys, pigeon chested with curled hair, once passive, leaps up and scales the cage, throws himself down. He's running along the earth before anyone can react, down and running toward the backside of the dhaba, hands reaching out instinctively to grab him, but the boy slips through and leaps over piles of garbage, then over the stinking ditch into the shrouded field. The thekedar's assistant is quick on his feet, his plastic chair falling as he gives chase—running alongside the toilets, jumping over the ditch himself, pulling his knife. And then both boy and man are gone. The truckers, the dhaba workers, the boys, all watch expectantly in the direction of the escape, peering into the gray expanse, cocking their eyes to hear. Only the thekedar, a man of great experience, sits calmly sipping his chai.

Five minutes pass with no sign.

Normal life resumes.

Then there's a paralyzing scream, an outrageous howl somewhere in the fog. All the stray dogs begin to bark.

When the assistant comes back panting, alone, his white undershirt is flecked with blood. He spits on the ground and sits without a word.

No one dares meet his eye.

He finishes his chai, eats his paratha.

The moment is seared into Ajay's brain.

The mist in the fields rises and fades.

They drive all day and the sun grows sharp, burns captive the whole world through its towns with dusty junctions of trucks and vegetable stalls.

Some of the boys begin to stir as if waking from drugged sleep, whispering among themselves, trying to shield themselves from the glare of the sun and the dust and wind. Ajay squints and talks with no one; he tries to remember his father's face, his sister's face, his mother's face. He tries to remember the road home. In the afternoon he wakes without realizing he'd fallen asleep and sees a city with wide boulevards and grand buildings and gardens of bright blooming flowers, a world he thinks is a dream.

When he wakes once more, it's nearly sunset and they are on a narrow road rising into a mountain range, with a tumbling bank of scree at the right and rolling hills behind.

He looks at the eyes of the other boys and finally speaks.

"Where are we?" he says.

"Punjab."

"Where are we going?"

One nods above. "Up there."

"Why?"

The boy looks away.

"To work," another says.

They breach the mountains late that night, rising into the foothills, crawling the switchbacks there, the Tempo ascending no faster than a mule, its engine straining against the gorge torrent and the pitch dark. As they plateau, a humming sheet of river stalks their side. The moon shows again, waxing to full, the tall sky incandescent. But beneath the gliding fleet of cloud, there's blackness, grotesque shapes, dead drops, a world of shadow, the lull of the engine. The temperature drops and the boys draw close for warmth, rattling bones in cages, bracing themselves. Then the lava hours of nightmare begin, the ceaseless rise and rise, the sudden fall, hour upon hour wrapping around valleys and hairpins, with air so cold it scars, Ajay holding on for the next bend, for the plateau, for the sun to rise and spread itself on the unseen river, to be returned home, for his mother to wake him up from sleep, to drag dead dogs from school.

Then tendrils sprout and the night is done, the yolk of a sun cracks over the peaks and the blue death that filled the final hours is cast away. Pure light and the victory of dawn. Ajay examines the faces of the blinking boys, stirring dazed within their blankets. Faces older: fourteen or fifteen, a face that is younger, maybe seven. Checking to see if they have changed. They have not. But they have passed through a portal.

There's no hope of home now.

The truck stops for breakfast at a chai shop cut like a grotto into a sheer rock face high up on a mountain beside a shrine to the local deity, with barely enough room on the road for two vehicles to pass. Across the way, a soft river flows deep inside a gorge. The assistant leaps from the cab, stretches his arms in the air, lights a beedi, and wanders to the edge, where white-painted stones guard against the drop. He cleans his nails with his pocketknife and spits into the void as grooming monkeys hiss their bare fangs and lope off to the next bend.

The boys still sit inside.

The dead engine is the loudest sound in the world.

The thekedar greets the chai wallah as he works the vat on a paraffin stove. The assistant returns from the edge to sit with him, flipping open the cage on the way. The three men gossip, catching up on the latest comings and goings on the road.

The assistant whistles at the boys. "Stretch your legs, go piss. You won't get another chance soon."

The men are relaxed, the incident at the dhaba the previous morning forgotten.

There's nowhere for the boys to run or escape to this time.

So they climb out and mill aimlessly, staring up at the corridor of limestone, taking in cool lungfuls of clean air. Ajay hears the river, out of sight, pouring from the top of the world.

One of the boys, the youngest maybe, the seven-year-old, walks over to the edge.

Ajay watches him stand there transfixed, balancing on the very edge, looking down.

Until the assistant grabs him by the arm and yanks him back.

And they're on the road again.

By ten the sun is harsh. Blankets worn loosely are turned into shade.

Flashing through the Himalayas.

Free of the night.

Ever more lost.

Now they sleep.

By midday the Tempo reaches a beat-up market town in a hot valley choked with grease and engines, a dumping ground inside the mountains, a bowl of filth. They cross a small rocky river snagged and dammed with garbage, the low metal bridge across woven with prayer flags. They join a new road out of town and follow the river upstream through the pines. Small grassy islands break the river's flow. North, through the breaks in the resin-scented trees, snowcapped mountains soar. A new colossal range, an impenetrable white wall. Ajay falls asleep again and dreams of his father carrying a basket on his head, his body below completely charred.

In the afternoon the truck approaches a large town wrapped in a forested hillside. It guards the mouth of a long steep valley slashing far ahead through the earth. Waterfalls hang above, splashing and easing through the rocks, joining the meandering river, turning it wild. Villagers wash their clothes a little downstream, whipping the fabric against the boulders. The truck turns a bend and the river is deadened by the heavy pine. They weave past neat wood-clad buildings, pulling into a parking space within the trees.

Just like that, the engine cuts, a new bereavement—the boys blink and stand unsteadily, like men coming ashore after months at sea.

A crowd is already waiting for them. The thekedar jumps out of the cab all businesslike, spits paan, and removes a small pocketbook. He wastes no time calling out names, while the assistant opens the back of the truck and hands the boys over, one after the other. Small disputes flare, money changes hands. Bonds that had barely formed are newly broken. A light rain starts to

fall, and Ajay crouches in the cage, waiting. One by one, the boys are taken away. For the remaining three, an auction begins.

4.

Ajay is sold to a short, fat man with ruddy cheeks and fine clothes and a pompous air. "You can call me Daddy," the man says, taking Ajay by the hand, leading him to the nearby autorickshaw stand. "And your name is?"

But Ajay can't answer. He's too fixated on the shock of a big man holding his dirty little hand.

They ride up the east side of the valley in the back of an autorickshaw. The town folds away below in diminishing curves. Out the canvas flaps of the rickshaw, the higher ranges reveal themselves, glaciers like jewels, shining in the heavy rain that has started to fall. Ajay sits silently, pressed into the seat, shivering, while Daddy perches forward chatting with the driver. A few kilometers up, a smaller, more peaceful settlement emerges, a village dotted with dark houses in the old mountain style—thatched roofs, heavy stones, timber frames, ornately carved wooden balconies going to seed. They are threatened by new bullying homes of concrete, with piles of river sand under plastic sheeting next to piles of stone.

The rickshaw deposits them at what looks like a small cottage built on the hillside, but when they stand on the road, Ajay sees it stretches five stories down, as if leaking down the mountain in a landslide. They rush inside the top cottage along a short, bare passageway, emerging through a heavy wooden door into a place of light and warmth, a large, cluttered room with floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides that look out at the panoramic wonder of the valley. The room is full of sofas and woven carpets and ornaments and artifacts, the centerpiece a huge wood-burning stove waving tentacles of pipes vanishing into other rooms, while one belches smoke through

a vent beside the window and into the sky. A huge vat of milk bubbles on top of the stove. The room is creamy with the smell.

A woman, plump and pink and fragrant, more glamorous than any Ajay has ever seen, stands up and smiles.

"This is Mummy," Daddy says, holding Ajay by the shoulders.

"Hello," Mummy says, extending her rosy hand. "What's your name?"

"Go on, take it," Daddy says.

But Ajay only stares.

"What's his name?" Mummy says, straining to hold her smile.

"Shake hands," Daddy says. "See." He takes Mummy's hand and shakes it. "Like that."

Ajay looks up at Daddy and grins stupidly.

"Have you eaten?" Mummy asks Ajay in a baby voice. "Will you have chai?"

Ajay only grins.

"He's shy," Mummy says, as if diagnosing a patient. She bends her knees and examines him a little closer. "Are you sure he can speak?"

"Of course he can speak," Daddy says.

But Ajay doesn't say a word.

"I doubt he can read or write," Daddy says. "But he can speak. Can't you?"

"Didn't you check?" Mummy says, mildly annoyed.

"He was the only one left," Daddy says.

"What's your name?" Mummy asks again, taking both his hands.

Ajay is mesmerized.

He whispers, so inaudibly he cannot be heard.

Ajay.

"Again?" she says, turning her ear to his face with a smile.

"Ajay," he says.

"Ajay!" she exclaims, victorious, pushing herself to her feet, repeating it as if it were the finest name in the world. "That's very sweet."

"I told you he could speak," Daddy says.

"Why don't you show him to his room?"

He leads Ajay back out; instead of joining the road, they turn round the side of the building, down a set of stone steps protected from the rain by the overhanging roof, past a series of small grassy terraces, all the way to the ground floor of the building, five stories down, and enter a room seething with damp, as if the rain-soaked earth threatened to spring through the bare concrete. It's a storeroom of junk and bags of cement with a grimy mattress and a few blankets.

"This is your room," Daddy says. "And here's the key." He hands Ajay the key. "Take care of it; if you lose it, you can't lock your door."

Ajay stares at the key in his hand.

"The bathroom is there," Daddy says, pointing to a door. "There's soap inside. Wash up and take rest. It's one now. I'll be back to get you at five, when you'll start work."

Ajay is staring at a shelf next to the mattress that holds some personal effects, two T-shirts, a school notebook, a deflated football, a wind-up duck on wheels, and a frosted mirror.

"You can take those," Daddy says, looking back in from outside as he closes the door. "They belonged to the last boy."

He falls asleep among the blankets, the motion of the Tempo still beating in his heart.

When he wakes, it's stopped raining, it's silent, and there's a weird glow throbbing in the dusty glass of the small window floating above the junk. He doesn't know where he is, then it slowly comes back to him, the journey receding like a dream, only the room solid, disconnected from everything else.

He lies motionless a long time in the blankets, his mind a bird sleeping above the ocean as it flies.

The sun is falling behind the mountains across the valley, the clouds have lifted to reveal a pure blue. The grasses of the terraces bristle with droplets. Loneliness throbs out of the building above. He climbs the steps

to peer in, but the lights are off inside the main house. Now he doesn't know what to do. All the houses up and down the mountainside seem abandoned. So he returns to his room and covers his head with the blankets and waits.

"Have you washed your hands?" Daddy says.

Ajay lies and whispers yes.

"Wash them again."

It's the mantra of the house.

Wash your hands. Wash them again. Wash your feet, wash your clothes. Wash your snotty little nose.

Ajay is being fed. Daddy encourages him to eat. "For the work," he says, "you need to be strong. Eat rice with salt and ghee, drink milk, don't skimp on the good things, there's ghee and milk to spare."

Now he's being told about the work. He absorbs it all impassively.

Daddy has a small farm an hour's climb through the woodland in a high meadow. Ajay is replacing the last boy. His job is to tend to the milk, to make ghee, and to take care of the household chores, make breakfast, sweep and mop the floor, wash the clothes, tend to the fire, prepare lunch, and when lunch is finished, wash the dishes. He is given his own plate and cup and bowl and spoon.

"Do you know how to cook?" Daddy says.

Ajay shakes his head.

"Then you'll learn. Starting now. And tomorrow, after breakfast, we'll go to the farm."

Mummy shows him how she makes dinner that night, chicken curry, aloo gobi, palak paneer, rice. He gawps at the wealth of ingredients, the indulgent spicing, the spoonfuls of ghee. Mummy is a generous cook, a patient teacher. He is given drops of things to taste on the back of his hand, looking up as his tongue explodes each time with wide eyes of disbelief.

"Look at his smile," Mummy says. But Daddy is buried in the paper.

When it comes to the rotis, he is ordered to make them himself, and they are declared good, though he is too thrifty with the salt.

Now he is shown how to lay the table, how to arrange the serving spoons, the bowls, the plates, and when dinner's ready, he is asked to sit with them at the table.

He doesn't know how.

"Sit," Mummy says, pulling the next chair out. "Right here."

He climbs up the chair, gazing at her.

"Now, serve yourself," she says.

He looks at them both hesitantly.

"Go on."

He reaches for a serving spoon, clumsily bringing small portions to his plate, Daddy pretending not to watch as he spills food along the way.

When Ajay's plate is dotted with small mounds, Daddy finally succumbs to the urge to intervene. "You need more than that," he says, heaping large spoons of rice and dal on Ajay's plate and topping it all with spoonfuls of ghee.

"Isn't it the best ghee you ever tasted?" says Mummy.

"Yes," Ajay whispers.

He's never tasted ghee before.

"Your father died," Daddy says, as if his father had called on the phone to relay the news. "And your mother needed you to help her in the best way you can."

He is establishing a history.

"So you came here to work in order that everything at home would be OK."

Ajay just stares.

"Your mother doesn't have to take tension anymore. Your family is happy because you work."

Ajay pictures his mother's face, waiting in the dark as he's loaded into the Tempo. He pictures his father's smoldering corpse. He sees the wheat fields,

he turns and runs away from his sister's screams. He crushes a cockroach with his bare feet, repeating in his head the names Kuldeep and Rajdeep Singh.

"I know you come from a place," Daddy says, "where they hold many backward customs and beliefs. Many rules and customs that are true to the reality of your world. But we're free of that here, and so you are free now. Do you understand?"

He looks from Daddy to Mummy, to the embers of the fire, to the chicken curry.

"In our household," Daddy says, "we have different rules. It doesn't matter where you come from. We're all human beings, and all humans are the same. Do you know what that means?"

Ajay says nothing.

"It means if anyone asks who you are and where you come from," Daddy goes on, "you tell them this: I come from a Kshatriya household."

Ajay lowers his eyes to the plate.

"Say it," Daddy says, elongating the words. "I come from a Kshatriya household."

Ajay looks to Mummy; she nods at him encouragingly.

"I live in a Kshatriya household," he whispers.

"No," Daddy says. "You come from one now, OK?"

Ajay nods. "I come from one."

"Very good," Daddy says, job done. "Now eat."

He tries.

He makes a ball of rice and dal. Stares at it.

But he cannot lift it to his mouth.

He seems paralyzed.

"What's wrong?" Daddy says, putting his spoon down pointedly.

"What's wrong, child?" Mummy leans toward him so he can whisper in her ear.

After he speaks, she looks at Daddy with troubled eyes.

"He wants to know," she says gently, "if he can eat down there"—she pauses and shifts her eyes—"on the floor."

Daddy takes a long deliberate breath that communicates his feelings better than any words.

"I told you," he says to Mummy.

"I know," she replies.

"Very well," he says to Ajay, switching back to Hindi. "Take one of the metal plates and go."

Ajay jumps down from the table and fetches one of the cheap metal trays. He transfers the contents of his china plate and loads up some more chicken and hurries to the corner of the kitchen, where he sits cross-legged, with his back turned, stuffing his face. It's more in one meal than he's eaten in a week—he feels that his stomach will burst.

After dinner, when Mummy and Daddy are resting, he is charged with doing the washing-up. When everything is clean, Mummy shows him how to make warm milk with turmeric.

"The day starts at five," Daddy says, as Ajay squats drinking his haldi doodh by the fire. The heat is hypnotic. He has the urge to lie down and sleep right there. But when it's done, he's given sandals and sent down the cold steps, shivering in the damp air, locking himself in the room, covering himself with as many blankets as he can find, lying in the grief-stricken dark, waiting for dawn.

5.

Winter is ending, spring is coming, the snow is clearing, and the cattle will be taken to graze again soon. At the farm he is shown the cows, taught how to give fodder to the animals and clean out their sheds, take them for milking, tie them up to graze. Every morning Ajay must run up and fetch