RUN AND HIDE

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juggernaut

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For J. H. B.

PART ONE

One

During Aseem's first days in prison, I lull myself into sleep every night with a vision: I am swimming across the clear calm surface of the sea until I am far from the shore, and then, turning and lying on the water, my face to the sky, I let myself sink.

The trail of breath-bubbles fading, the water penetrates my nostrils and mouth and gradually fills my body until I am heavy and falling soundlessly, deeper into the endless blue.

I am asleep before my body comes to rest on the messy floor of the sea.

That's how I used to lull myself to sleep as a child; and if I feel compelled to speak to you of those times, and to pick out of the past those scraps you overlooked in your own book, and unearth memories that I long suppressed, it is because they foreshadowed everything that happened between us.

I am sure I'll fall into the wrong tone, and risk provoking your disgust and anger; but I must speak, too, of Aseem. My first friend and early protector, he not only introduced me to you; he also encouraged me to pursue you, before so violently and inextricably knotting all our destinies together.

Aseem, who saw himself as a mascot of triumphant self-invention, loved initiating his friends into his dream of power and glory. He presented it, in fact, as an existential imperative, ceaselessly quoting V. S. Naipaul: 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.'

It won't be easy, he would say, for self-made men of our lowly social backgrounds. He would cite Chekhov – how the son of a slave has to squeeze, drop by drop, the slave's blood out of himself until he wakes one day to find the blood of a real man coursing through his veins. He would become very emotional speaking of the struggle to take ourselves seriously – which he said came before the struggle to persuade others to take us seriously, and was more exacting.

He always seemed so fluent and so certain; I couldn't argue with him. It is only in retrospect that I can see the danger Aseem never reckoned with: that in our attempts to remake ourselves, to become 'real men' simply by pursuing our strongest desires and impulses, with no guidance from family, religion or philosophy, our self-awareness would narrow, the distortions in our characters would go unnoticed, until the day we awaken with horror to the people we had become.

The warning signs were there the very first time I met Aseem. I never told you about it during all the conversations we had about him, Virendra and the others when you were researching your book: how on our first night at IIT we were awakened by hollering men long past midnight from the deep sleep that follows nervous exhaustion and herded into a crowded seniors' room, where the blast of cigarette smoke was strong enough to knock you down, and where a student wearing a lungi that exposed his thick hairy legs shouted *'Behenchod'* with a Tamil accent, and asked us to strip and get down on the floor on our hands and knees.

This was Siva; heavy-set, his big round shaven head seemed to sit necklessly on his shoulders. He was furious, or feigned great fury, because the three of us had somehow missed a broader corralling of freshers that night.

'You sister-fuckers,' he shouted from his bed, where several

of his friends lounged, their bespectacled eyes looking on us with malign inquisitiveness. 'You think you don't have to give us your introduction! Tell me, who the fuck are you? And I want you to bark like the good little dogs you are!'

From our canine posture, we intoned, simultaneously:

'I am Arun Dwivedi, Mechanical Engineering, All India Rank 62.'

'I am Virendra Das, Computer Science, All India Rank 487.'

'I am Aseem Thakur, Mechanical Engineering, All India Rank 187.'

We barked as Siva's cronies dissolved into giggles, and Siva himself emitted that booming laugh that you would hear many years later, when gathering material for your book, in those conversations taped by the FBI and leaked by his defence team to journalists.

Virendra, Aseem and I had met earlier that day in the student hostel assigned to us. So much already bound us together. At some point in our early teens, when our school grades started to show promise, our parents had decided that they would go into debt, skimp on clothes and food, and deny education to our siblings, in order to put their sons in the Indian Institute of Technology and on the path to redemption from scarcity and indignity.

For years afterwards, they told us that they were slaving from morning to night to give us the chance in life they themselves had never had. Our gifts of memory and concentration turned out to be a curse; the immense effort to enter the country's most prestigious engineering institution destroyed our childhoods, stuffing it with joyless tasks and obligations, and the dread of failure.

Now, our long wait, after passing the world's toughest and most competitive examinations, was finally over. On our first

meeting, however, we barely exchanged a word. Overwhelmed initially by our achievement of fulfilling our early promise, we had been quickly demoralised into silence by seeing our ideal in the harsh light of day.

Peeling paint, naked light bulbs, croaking fans and the rainwater in the puddles jumping with mosquito larvae seemed to suggest that we had barely made it out of our dire lower-middle-class straits (I hadn't known, in those days before Google Images, what to expect of the portal to the world's richness.) The walls of our room were distempered sallow, with marks where oiled heads had rested, and smudges where mosquitoes had been squashed; the concrete floor of a pebbly roughness was encrusted with irremovable dirt, and in the darkness below our cots the layers of dust looked like velvet rags.

The dining hall with its dangerously swaying ceiling fans was on that first day a swirl of fathers in broad-lapelled blazers with brass buttons and thickly padded shoulders that left their hands lolling uneasily by their sides, and mothers unsteady on their feet in Kanjivaram and Benares silk saris and heavy gold jewellery, wearing smudged lipstick in the inexpert way of those who never wear it – people finally trying on self-satisfaction after subjecting themselves and their children to years of brutal fear and anxiety.

The air was full of the chemical tang of Old Spice aftershave and the flowery scent of Pond's talcum powder, suggesting, together with the dressed-up men and women, an attempt at celebration.

A staleness still lay over the hall, with chipped Formica tables and sooty blue walls, where flies escaping the fans bided their time.

Virendra, Aseem and I were among the very few newcomers unaccompanied by parents that evening. Our fathers and

mothers knew better than to betray our origins at this crucial first step in their sons' ascent to respectability. On examination day, my mother had held a day-long Satyanarayan puja at home; and my father had paid for me to send him a telegram from Delhi when the results of the Joint Entrance Exams came out.

On receiving it, my mother told me, he had run around the railway station he worked at, distributing besan laddoos from an open box – to people probably as bemused by his extravagant elation as I was to hear of his transformation from sullen brute to deliriously proud father.

When the train taking me to my first semester at IIT Delhi pulled away, he waved. His lips moved, perhaps to say something, something that could not easily be put into words, then or ever: that I now belonged to a world that had scorned him. He would never dare come to Delhi while I was there; my mother could not even dream of the prospect; and I felt grateful for their psychic fetters every time I imagined them at the IIT's gates, asking in their dehati Hindi for me.

Many students would be ruthless in this regard. I remember the fair-skinned Bengali who boasted of his ancestral links to Rabindranath Tagore and a long familial connection to Oxford. Betrayed into ordinariness by the sudden appearance of his mother, a dumpy and dark-skinned little figure, who squatted on the ground on her haunches as she waited outside his room, he tried to present her as his housemaid.

Aseem kept his own parents at a distance, to maintain his fiction that his father was a very important railway official when he was only a junior engineer, and, perhaps, also to hide the fact that his parents, whom he ardently disliked, were bigots, determined to never allow Dalits and Muslims to enter their home.

I was nervous on that first day for a reason I could not dare

reveal to anyone then. I had seen Virendra's surname next to mine on the bulletin board, denoting his ancestry among the pariahs who skinned the hides off dead cows, and were strictly untouchable, even unapproachable, for upper-caste Hindus.

A few minutes later, he stumbled into my room, weighed down by an olive-green bedroll and a tin trunk, on which his name was painted in Hindi in white, with curlicues aiming at a 3D effect.

Thin and small-boned, he wore polyester bell-bottoms and a blue nylon bush shirt. His shoes had been rubbed to a shiny black; and the buckle of his very broad belt, also black, showed two brass snakes in a headlock. In his small eyes above a snub nose and tidily trimmed thin moustache from Raaj Kumar films in the 1950s there was a startled blankness, and he filled the tiny listless room with a smell of coconut oil as he stacked his books and magazines – general knowledge guides and old issues of the *Competition Success Review* – on his desk and carefully placed a brush and tin of Cherry Blossom black shoe polish underneath his bed.

As he unpacked, the small golden watch on his slender wrist softly clinking, he revealed some more familiar emblems of a low-caste, semi-rural existence: a diamond-shaped hand mirror; a coarse-textured blanket; a framed portrait of Hanuman on one knee, ripping his chest open to reveal Ram and Sita enthroned inside; packets of Maggi noodles and a tin of desi ghee to garnish the thalis of the hostel mess.

I had made it to IIT, as they say, on 'merit'. I had an unimpeachably Brahmin surname, thanks to my father's efforts, and much fairer skin, attesting to birth among the highest born, and could even wear the janeu on any occasion that required me to bare my torso. But with Virendra in proximity, the hard-won security of my Brahmin lineage began to seem fragile.

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Naked in Siva's room that night, amid a squalor of cigarette smoke, discarded chicken legs and empty bottles of Old Monk rum, and jeering men in dirty white vests and thick glasses, I felt completely exposed.

There had been a power cut and several streams of perspiration slowly coursed down my bare back before dropping on to the floor; the sweat rolled down my forehead, too, and from time to time I had to shake it off.

I became aware of a strange eye looking up at me; Virendra had taken off the watch that hung like a loose bracelet on his wrist – a HMT woman's watch, I noticed, on a thin fake-gold strip – and kept it on the very top of his pile of clothes, shoes and belt. From there, the middle of a coiled serpent, the ticking circlet stared at me, as if alive.

Lying back on his bed, underneath a pin-up of Cindy Crawford cupping her breasts, Siva kneaded his calves (years later, he would lavish a hundred thousand dollars at a charity gala in New York to sit next to the supermodel), as he shouted, 'Look at your shoes, as black and shiny as your face.'

There was a pause, in which I wondered why Virendra had worn his formal shoes to Siva's room in the middle of the night.

Siva shouted again, 'Where are you from, kaalu haramzada, blackie bastard?'

The question was aimed at only one of us.

'Mirpur, sir,' Virendra said in a reedy voice that made Siva and his friends dissolve into laughter.

'Where is Mirpur, saala chamar?'

'Basti in Gorakhpur district, sir.'

'Where is Gorakhpur, kaalu . . .'

I could see the halting place on the way to nowhere, shacks of tin and rags around a bus stop, a sugarcane crushing factory exhaling foul-smelling smoke in the near distance, and

an artificial tank with bright green water choked by floating hyacinths, in which emaciated black-grey buffaloes stand perfectly still.

'OK, OK, enough geography,' Siva said. 'Gaana gao, saala chamar.'

After the briefest of pauses, Virendra started to jubilantly sing, '*Waqt ne kiya kya haseen sitam . . .*'

There was an explosion of laughter, and smaller bursts of mirth followed as a dauntless Virendra went on.

I heard Siva say, 'Panditji, please provide English translation.'

How little could he have known of the relief the honorific for Brahmins brought me.

'Sir,' I said, looking down at the floor, 'it means, "What a beautiful revenge time has taken, I am not who I once was, nor are you." '

My voice came out far too loudly. A couple of men cackled.

'What a fucking depressing song,' Siva said, eliciting more laughter. 'OK, OK, enough singing, Kaalu chamar. Ab chalo, Panditji ki gaand saaf karo.'

In his accent, his vicious command sounded as though he was asking a waiter for extra chillies with his thali.

His friends fell about, and it occurred to me that they might have also been laughing at his Hindi, sounding as he did like the comical South Indians found in Bollywood movies.

There was a pause as Siva took out from his pocket a folded white handkerchief and mopped his rotund face, polishing, at the very end, the tip of his nose.

I was wondering about that gesture when he said that Virendra could only enhance his karma, and avoid rebirth as a Dalit, by licking clean a Brahmin's anus while Aseem could aim at promotion from Kshatriya to Brahmin by jerking off at the spectacle.

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You would have done more with this scene in your book than Aseem, who put it in his most recent novel. I noticed the spiral-bound manuscript remained unread in the pile of books on your side of our bed in London. I opened it one day, and then quickly buried it at the bottom of the stack; the character providing the novel's love interest – a young journalist from an upper-class Muslim background, educated at an Ivy League university, who won't drink water that hasn't been boiled or filtered, and smokes when she is nervous – was at least partly based on you.

Aseem was more inventive with his male lead, a Dalit student based on Virendra. He wished to show, in gritty social-realist style, the degradation of low-caste Hindus; and, accordingly, in his version of our first day at IIT, he turned all of us into Dalits, transposing the scene from IIT Delhi to a medical college in Ranchi.

The Dalit student based on Virendra became a victim of rape; his persecutors, placed behind drifting veils of beedi smoke, were uniformly upper caste and unsmilingly vicious small-towners from Bihar. And Aseem, in deference to a left-leaning Geist, turned Virendra into a Maoist ideologue, a charismatic spokesperson for a guerrilla outfit fighting mining corporations and their mercenary armies in Central Indian forests.

Virendra, as you know, took a wholly dissimilar path after IIT. But Aseem's exaggerated description of the atrocity inflicted on him was no sin against verisimilitude.

You were too young then, and probably don't know how commonplace, much more than today, lynching, blinding and rape of Dalits were in the darkness of the villages and small towns we had emerged from.

Politicians promising greater affirmative action and self-respect to low-caste Hindus were yet to become prominent.

Until then, the well-born Hindus could torment their upstart competitors without fear of reprisal or backlash. And Siva could always claim, in the unlikely event of an inquiry by IIT's administrators, that he was merely indulging in a rite of initiation that all new students underwent.

'Let's go, let's go, kaalu chamar, aage bhado, Panditji is waiting!' he shouted.

'Hey, Sai baba,' he addressed Aseem, whom he had told to kneel naked behind Virendra. 'What are you waiting for? Please get working on your pride and joy.'

'And, Panditji' he abruptly turned to me, 'please drop that miserable expression. I want you to look happy at this purification of your essential organ.'

His friends laughed a bit more at this, and Siva again took out his white handkerchief and mopped his face and polished his nose.

There was no recalcitrant pause from Virendra. I felt him move crab-like into position behind me, and then his thin bristly moustache was imprinting itself on my buttocks, his furtive tongue was leaving moist trails across their soft skin, and, trying to follow Siva's command and feign elation, I didn't know where to look, down at the coarse-grained floor, where the merciless eye of Virendra's watch stared back at me, or up at the boisterous faces below Cindy Crawford's breasts, two of them frantically chewing bubble gum, as Siva shouted, 'Faster, faster, behenchod, kaalu bastard.'

After four hours of this, punctuated by deafening and spine-chilling screams from elsewhere in the hostel, where other freshers were being ritually humiliated, we returned to our room.

Siva turned out to be overly fond of the ritual he had conceived; and our ordeal continued in his room for a few more nights. I came to know well the poster of Cindy Crawford, how the drawing pins holding it in place had grown rusty, and

how its edges curled inwards morosely, revealing the abraded plaster of the wall. I came to recognise Siva's handkerchiefs, all daintily lace-edged. I can recall today the smell of cheap rum, and the sight of a rusty electric hotplate with naked wires and a plastic tea-strainer languishing in a dented saucepan in one corner; and I could not forget for a long time the ant that once kept scurrying about my knees before Virendra, quietly hectic behind me, mashed it into the floor and flicked the corpse off his fingers.

The skin on my knees and elbows broke; my eyes stung with cigarette smoke and lack of sleep; and for weeks afterwards my buttocks kept clenching and unclenching at their memory of Virendra's tongue. Aseem complained that his penis was sore for weeks afterwards, and that his foreskin bled.

Much more damage was inflicted on Virendra's frail body.

Occasionally, I heard stifled sobs on the other side of the room. And I once heard Aseem say, referring to Siva, 'What a rakshas.' Any expressions of fellow feeling or sympathy would have been superfluous, and none ever passed between us.

This would shock you, but then nothing in our lives had made us expect kindness from strangers. In Aseem's novel, the atrocity inflicted on Dalit students catalyses their radical political consciousness. In reality, none of us wished to or could break out of our assigned positions in the pecking order.

After all, those in Virendra's caste cluster had their own untouchables, people to terrorise and quell. In a year's time, we would have the opportunity to sit where Siva and his friends had sat, supervising the abasement of a new batch of freshers.

And then we knew that what awaited us in the future, if we remained imperturbable while both suffering and inflicting atrocity, was membership of the most superior caste: that of people who never have to worry about money.

Our habits of self-preservation had been forged early in our childhood, soon after starting the long preparation for IIT. We knew that we had no choice but to conserve our efforts; remain indifferent to all personal suffering and dishonour until at least the summit of security seemed within reach; and we knew, too, that four years at IIT would be the most gruelling part of this ascent.

Still, for months after that first night – long after Siva had ceased to call us to his room and began to appear less a demon than a Computer Science student of genius and an extravagantly generous figure, free with his notes to all and sundry, and the blunt features on his large round head welded into one impression of solidity and warmth – I would open the door to my room, half-anticipating the sight of Virendra's thin body dangling limply from the ceiling fan.

Suicides were common at the engineering and medical college. Virendra proved to be among those for whom humiliation was an expensive luxury. Opening the door to his putative corpse, I would mostly find him at his desk, bent over his Manufacturing Process homework, GRE practice tests or a copy of *Competition Success Review*, underneath the garlanded portrait of open-chested Hanuman on the wall.

His face seemed tighter, even obstinate, as though the weight of his impersonal will to succeed had settled even deeper into it.

He had attended coaching classes for the IIT entrance exams for much longer than any of us. Having barely scraped through, he would continue to struggle to raise his grade point average each term; and he held his pen in a clenched fist and drilled it into paper as though it was a weapon in a war with no mercy for the loser, where failure meant expulsion to his home: the room in the basti where young pigs and mangy dogs nuzzle mounds of trash, and bony black sheep rub themselves against a rusty water pump.

It was with a resolute bearing that he sat cross-legged on the floor, whisking a brush over his shoes, rubbed coconut oil in his scalp, holding in one hand his diamond-shaped mirror (which cracked after a few months, cleaving his head into uneven halves), or scrubbed his torso with Lifebuoy soap in the shower; it was with the agonizing intentness of someone teetering on the edge of non-comprehension that he took notes in one class after another, and read, lying on his side, the *Manorama Yearbook*, while intermittently rubbing his chilblains in that damp room.

Indifferent to the small joys of most students – rock bands, carrom and ping-pong contests, debating and quiz competitions, girl-watching at SPIC MACAY concerts and at the Priya cinema – he was diverted only by the old copy of *Playboy* featuring Kim Basinger on the cover that, troubled by bedbugs one evening, he found Aseem had concealed under his mattress.