



THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2019 —

Longlist

My Father's Garden

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My Father's Garden

by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar



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An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

lover

Samir slumps beside me as his arousal wanes. Getting him erect when he's this drunk is sometimes difficult, but I like doing it: massage his gym-toned shoulders, kiss the inside of his thighs, stroke and suck him. The first time we had sex, I had loved looking into his intoxicated eyes—the surprise, the hesitation, the escape in them. When he returned for more, I knew I had to keep him, whatever it took. Men are hard to find, and he was one to die for. I lick his sweat-soaked chest with its day-old crop. I lick his tits. 'Maadarchod,' he grunts. I lick his abdomen, stick my tongue into his navel. He jumps up. I laugh. He hates being touched there. 'Sudhrega nahin, laura ka baal!' Later, when things changed, when I understood he wouldn't love me, but still craved him, he would still say this, and it would be as if nothing had changed: 'Sudhrega nahin.' No, I haven't reformed. Men are hard to keep. Dick-hair have a chance. And whores, bitches, cunts. Randi, kutiya, choot. He had many names for me when we fucked. Endearments that made me dizzy; I had learned to find pleasure in self-abasement. 'Neeche ja,' he says now, and I go straight to where I should have earlier. I pull down his foreskin, with its tiny mole on the right side, and I lick. 'Maa-dar-chood.' It takes a while. But then he's ready again, and he holds my head still. 'Lie down. Lie down on your stomach.' He folds my left leg at the knee and pins my right leg straight. He's so strong, this

man who lifts and pumps iron, that I can't move even an inch. 'Saali, next time I want it shaved,' he commands, and begins. I feel like I might bleed and ejaculate at the same time. Is it pain? Pleasure? I don't know for sure. All I know is that at this moment he's all mine. After he slumps over me, we remain motionless for a while, his naked skin against mine, in an embrace that I wish could last forever. He rises. I hold his arm. 'Don't go. Lie down with me for a few more seconds.' He moves away, wipes his penis with an old newspaper, drinks a litre of water without stopping for breath, gets dressed and sprawls out on a chair in front of me. I watch him and hold out my hand. He doesn't take it. 'This is too much hard work, boss,' he says. That he calls me 'boss', the traditional way in which a junior addresses his senior in the medical college we both attend, gives me a chill. What am I doing, fucking a junior? I'm twenty-seven, a year older than him, already in my housemanship while he has yet to clear his degree exam. Also, he is a Mahato, from a different 'phylum'. I am an Adivasi. And if having an 'intimate' Mahato friend were not bad enough, I was also letting him screw me. It was I who started this relationship, drew him to me. A spark of shame races through me. 'Please wash yourself.' He covers my naked body with my chadar, the brute in him gone. 'Don't go.' 'I have to.' 'Why are you being so gentle now? You're so rough when we're doing it.' 'When we do it again, I'll be rough.' 'When?' 'Next time.' He gets out of the chair and leaves, shutting the door behind him. I wait until I'm sure that he won't return, then I wrap a gamchha around me and head to the bathroom. I grip my penis. I see both of us sweaty and pumping. I smell his sweat, alcohol, cigarettes, oil. Maa-dar-chood, his voice rings in my

head as I come. After a year at university in Lucknow, I had arrived in Jamshedpur, to join medical college. My father had called me and said, 'Medical mein tumhara ho gaya hai. Your medical admission is through. Pack your bags and come home.' I said goodbye to Lucknow, collected my documents from the offices of the university, and reached Ghatsila. The very next day, family and friends accompanied me to Jamshedpur. It was quite sudden. And all I could understand was that I had been accepted into the medical college on a quota. At the college, I was whisked off to various offices and hostels so that the necessary formalities of admission could be completed. For the first time in my life, and certainly not the last, I understood the clout my father wielded, for all of his dissatisfaction at having been a failure at politics. Through my adolescence I had watched him withdraw into himself, become bitter and silent. But he had risen from the ashes for his son; it was an opportunity to flex some political muscle that still remained. Perhaps in securing my future, he was also trying to tell himself that he wasn't finished yet. Or so I hoped. I loved my father, I would let him shape my life. Because I knew that in a deep, fundamental way, I would never be the son he wanted. Used to the relatively relaxed atmosphere of a degree college in Lucknow, medical college was a completely new experience for me. For the first couple of years there were regular classes which we were constantly dashing to attend; the syllabus was vast and immersive, and the examinations and tests constant. Yet, in those first years in Jamshedpur I felt liberated. Studies aside, there were the joys of a new place which were waiting to be explored. Slowly, I learned to quell the misgivings I had about my desires, about how my father, my parents,

might judge me if they knew. I sought and found love, and love, of sorts, found me. It began with Sunil Besra, in my first year. He was my classmate, just a couple of months older to me, and a Santhal like me. He played badminton and football, loved photography and junk food, read Osho, watched BBC, and had 'Veni Vidi Vici' printed on the front licence plate of his flaming red Pulsar 150. He made me read Tagore's stories to him because he loved to hear me read them aloud. My voice suited Tagore's prose, he'd say. We went to book fairs together and bonded over Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray and Rituparno Ghosh. He wanted me to teach him proper Santhali, for he was from the Santhal Pargana and I thought his Santhali was crass. Before each football match, he'd ask me to keep his glasses because, he said, 'I trust you.' We were friends for a little over two years before we became lovers. The suddenness of it took my breath away. At school in Ghatsila, all of my grand love affairs had played out only in my mind. And Lucknow was an alien city which had to be negotiated with great care. It allowed me space to have crushes, to discover sparks, but not much more. In Jamshedpur, I was on familiar ground. At least that is what I thought. It was one of those hot summer afternoons when nothing much seems to happen and the whole world sleeps only to escape the heat. Sunil and I were preparing to go out—I don't remember where, perhaps to an air-conditioned movie hall where we could spend a few hours in peace. I was lying on Sunil's cot, waiting for him to change his clothes. He walked in from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. But, instead of wriggling into his underwear underneath the towel, he held it open and flashed me. He then came up to me, held my

face in his hands, and kissed me. His lips were like juicy orange slices. He played with my tongue, inserting his into my mouth, our teeth colliding. I guided his hands to my breasts and he squeezed them. I asked him to suck my tits, to bite them. He licked them first, lap lap lap lap, like a pussycat finishing a bowl of milk; then he bit them. And when I had squealed enough, he directed my hand to his penis. 'Give me a BJ,' he demanded. Sunil's penis was like a porn star's, hard and straight like a flashlight. When I took him, he sighed and combed his Dhoni-like nape-length hair back with his fingers. 'Should I?' he asked courteously before he came. 'Hmm...' I signalled with my right hand. Spent, he lay curled into himself. 'I'm sorry,' he said to me, head turned to the other side, not facing me. What was he sorry for? I didn't understand. 'It's okay,' I said, inching closer to him, touching his back. He shrugged me away. 'Go,' he said. 'I wanted to—' 'No,' he insisted, louder, his head still turned to the other side. He was quite sure he'd be the man in this. It didn't matter to me, I was happy. But it wasn't just that. 'Please,' he said, 'Before someone sees us, leave.' We always met in his room, and it never took long. I'd lent him my disc of Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri*. The memory game in the movie, which the characters play in the forest as a way of passing time, became foreplay for us. 'Sex,' he'd say. 'Sex, dick,' I'd respond. 'Sex, dick, semen.' 'Sex, dick, semen, erection.' 'Sex, dick, semen, erection, orgasm.' That's as far as we'd get. Aroused, we'd undress and get down to business. One night, he took a video of me giving him a blowjob. I stopped when I realized. 'Fuck,' I said. 'What are you doing?' He said softly, shrugging, 'Taking a video.' I was shocked, but only for an instant. I trusted him. How else

does one love? I smiled. ‘Do I look good?’ He smirked and pushed my head down. Even after Sunil and I became lovers, he made sure we were not seen together in public. He wouldn’t even acknowledge me if I met him in class or in the corridors. Whenever he needed me, he’d give me a call. A missed call, usually at four in the morning— he studied late into the wee hours—when nearly everyone in the hostel was asleep. The song ‘Childhood’, from the soundtrack of the movie Mandela used to be my ringtone then. 4 a.m. My heartbeat would race as I peered into the display. Sunil. If I took his call, the conversation would be just two words. ‘Come.’ ‘Yes.’ I would apply Johnson’s Baby Oil on the parts he’d soon touch, spray deodorant on my neck, chew two gums and, making sure there was no one in the corridors, creep stealthily past the rooms of doctors staying up late studying for the entrance exams to post-graduate courses until I reached his room on the second floor. If we hadn’t started fucking, I think Sunil and I would have remained friends. The sex changed all things. We no longer discussed Rituparno Ghosh’s films. I no longer read him passages from the stories I wrote, from the books I purchased. We no longer exchanged DVDs, attend film festivals, raid roadside paav-bhaaji stalls, or talk to each other in chaste Santhali. I didn’t really care. Just days before he left the hostel, after I went down on him, he told me that he was planning to get married to a girl he’d chosen. She was a doctor, too, a beautiful Santhal woman with a broad smile. ‘Please,’ he begged, ‘don’t spoil my marriage.’ I was miserable after he left. I was angry. I didn’t know why. I didn’t know at whom. Maybe at Sunil. I threw things, broke things, I once splashed hot tea on myself. I cried, lying on my bed, all alone in my room,

hoping that someone might hear, hoping that I might be able to talk with someone. But talking wasn't therapy. Corex was. I couldn't sleep until I had gulped down a mouthful of Corex. I bought phial after phial, hoping all the time that Sunil would return to me. Pfizer should have awarded me a certificate for being their most loyal customer. Corex made me sleep, but it made me even more miserable. It made me groggy, for one, and it gave me constipation, for that is one of the side effects of that syrup. I was walking through my Corex haze, expecting Sunil to jump out of a corner and surprise me when I fell in love with Lucky, another of my classmates. If ever there were fights in the college, mostly during annual festivals, with outsiders who came in drunk, Sunil and Lucky would be among the first to jump in. They'd grab the collars of the intruders and, without giving them a chance to explain, shower volleys of punches and kicks on them. Lucky and I became close because of our shared love of travel. Jamshedpur was a new town for both of us and there was lots to explore. We would go on long bike rides and get drunk together in the resorts near the Subarnarekha River. He had a habit of chewing Rajnigandha and Tulsi, something I found quite uncouth, but which I later came to love. 'Why do you have to chew that?' I asked him. 'Have you seen a scooter being filled?' 'Yes.' 'What do they do?' 'Well, they fill it up with petrol. Then they put Mobil into it.' 'Rajnigandha is my petrol and Tulsi is my Mobil. My fuel and lubricant.' Lucky was like a child; he collected Nagraj, Dhruv and Doga comics and constantly played games on the desktop computer he kept in his room. He loved dogs and had two at home, a purebred and a mongrel. He scandalized me by saying that he gave his dogs alcohol to

drink. He danced with the hired dancers at our college festivals, flipping notes at them with his forefinger from a pile he held in his palm, matching them step to step as they gyrated to Bollywood item songs—‘Babuji zara dheere chalo’—and crude Bhojpuri numbers—‘Sai-yanji dilwa maange le gamchha bichhai ke’. His dream woman, however, was Amrita Rao’s character in Vivah, the ideal wife and daughter-in-law. He had a pencil sketch of hers pasted to a wall of his room. He always had several female friends at the same time, but only one special friend to whom he couriered stuffed hearts and teddy bears. When she came to town he arranged for a hotel room for the two of them. Lucky had wide shoulders, a broad chest and bulky, muscular arms. He kept his back straight and his buns were taut and squeeze-worthy. He kept dumbbells under his bed, and a baseball bat for emergencies. Smarting from the hurt that Sunil had inflicted upon me, I fell for him. Our first night started out in a bar, a small dark place where people came to quickly get drunk and left. Samir—a little slimmer in those days, a regular gym-goer who rode a simple Hero Honda Splendor, and who was seriously in love with a woman classmate of his—had come with us, though I barely knew him then. Samir and Lucky were thick friends, even though Samir was junior to us. To this day I don’t know why I did it. Maybe I had sensed something in Lucky which told me that he was attracted to me. It is possible too that I was projecting my desire and my need on to him. Or it was simply the alcohol, which had made me uninhibited and bold. I slipped off my sandals and touched Lucky’s crotch with my toes under the table. He spread his legs wide, nodding his head. Samir watched us in dazed amusement, innocent faced and

wide-eyed. At that time I was still the stern senior with him. ‘Kya dekh rahe ho?’ I asked. He said with a deadpan expression, ‘You are touching boss’s dick.’ Lucky and I burst out laughing. Afterwards, Samir went off to his room and I went to Lucky’s. He took off his clothes and wrapped a towel around himself. ‘Can I kiss you?’ I asked. ‘Yes,’ he said. We thrust our tongues into each other’s mouths, enjoying each other’s velvetiness. ‘I want to fuck you,’ he said. I took my clothes off and oiled myself. He found Khaled’s ‘Didi’ on his desktop and slipped on a condom. Didi, didi, didi, didi didi zeen iddiwaah Didi waah, didi, didi deedi ha zin didi It became our fuck-song, matching the rhythm of our bodies. Lucky and I would ride on his black Pulsar 150— with ‘IN-SANE’ written on its front number plate— to a dhaba outside town for beer and rum. On the way back, I’d fondle his chest and crotch, quickly removing my hands on seeing the headlights of an approaching vehicle. We would return to either his room or mine and do it wherever we could. On the bed, on the floor, against the wall. It was exciting at first, but I soon grew tired of it. Sex with Sunil had been tender at times, it certainly had a decorum to it. Sex with Lucky was wild. We would bite, scratch and hit each other. Also, very soon after we began sleeping with each other, I started to get the feeling that Lucky was using me. That he was with me only for alcohol, and the endless eating out in dhabas and restaurants all over Jamshedpur. ‘Daaru,’ he’d demand, showing up at my room with only a towel wrapped around him. If I refused, he would force his way in anyway. He would take off his towel as if he were doing a Chippendale act, remove my shirt, suck on my tits till we fucked. I would pay for his drinks. This continued until,

one night, I got fed up. He had come to my room demanding yet again that we go out drinking. I refused and, as was his habit, he took off his clothes thinking, obviously, that I would soon give in to him. Once he was naked, he started undressing me. I held his hand and said, 'No, Lucky. Not tonight. I am not going anywhere with you.' He put his clothes back on. 'Besra's gone,' he sneered. 'I'll go too. Let's see if you find someone better.' Then he left, banging the door behind him. ~

There's something about a man who pumps iron and has rippling muscles and four-pack abs. It is taken for granted that he fucks well.

There were always people talking about beefy Samir in the hostel; about his conquests—women who worked at gents' beauty parlours; horny, fullbodied bhabhijis; nurses. Lucky had challenged me to find someone better and I decided it would be Samir—I'd show Lucky just how much better I'd done. Samir also had loutish charm, and I have always been attracted to the wrong kind of people. Although I had barely spoken with Samir— except for a few social niceties—I did not hesitate to invite him to my room one evening, and he did not hesitate to accept the invitation. He wasn't the same Samir who'd seen me toeing Lucky's crotch. This Samir was a broken man. He'd failed to clear few of his exams and had been made to repeat a year; his girlfriend had left him for a senior; he had stopped going to the gym and had grown a paunch—though his body was still worth a second look—and he was drinking heavily. He plopped himself on a chair. 'Hi boss,' he said. 'Lucky boss talks about you all the time. Why don't you go and see him?' Lucky now worked in a different hospital in a different part of the town. Samir spent all his evenings drinking with Lucky in his flat. I

ignored his question. 'You tell me,' I asked, 'which girl are you seeing these days?' He smiled coyly. 'She's a nurse in Lucky boss's hospital.' 'How did you do it?' 'In the missionary position. Me on top.' He'd misunderstood my question but ah! I could imagine. A few days later, I invited him out for drinks. We were both high on cocktails of vodka and rum when we returned to my room. I hugged him and said, 'I want to kiss you,' my palms sweaty at propositioning a junior. 'What?' he asked, surprised. I didn't repeat myself, I only grabbed his head, stuck my lips to his and sucked hard. He sucked me in return and, when we were done, I told him, my heart beating hard at each word, 'I want your cock.' 'What?' This time he smiled, incredulous. I started to pull down his fly. 'Wait, wait. Careful.' He unzipped his jeans himself. He wasn't wearing underwear. I discovered later that he never wore any, because according to him, that gave him a sense of freedom. He was already hard, and sighed when I held his penis. But when I pushed the foreskin back, he said, 'No, no, boss. Not right, we are both ladka.' 'That's okay,' I said and slid out of my trousers and underwear. My palms were still sweaty and my stomach was tied up in knots, but now, I couldn't tell if that was because of nervousness or anticipation. 'Come,' I said, leading him by the hand to my narrow bed, but someone coughed in the corridor just then and frightened, he put on his jeans and ran away. Only to return a few minutes later. 'I want to eat an ice-cream. It feels good after alcohol.' I gave him a hundred rupees. That evening, Lucky called me. Samir must have told him. 'Child abuse?' he asked. 'No,' I said, without a hint of shame or contrition. 'Consenting adults.' To my surprise, Samir came to me the next morning. I woke up and there he

was, sober and ready. 'You know boss, lubrication is very necessary,' he said, as if taking up a conversation we had left unfinished. I undressed and bent on all fours. He undressed and slipped on a condom. With his pumped-up chest and biceps, he looked like a model for one of the protein supplements that bodybuilders eat. The only thing that spoil the effect was his small paunch. 'Badhiya gaand hai,' he said, stroking and admiring my buttocks. 'Lie down.' What? Lie down? He'd crush me. I preferred some liberty of movement. 'Lie down.' He was already on top of me, his lips on my nape. 'It's better—' 'Shut up and lie down.' He put his weight over me and pinned me down. 'There's no time.' No one had ever used force with me. Samir did, and I found that I liked it. I offered myself to him, holding nothing back. Samir was magical. He made me forget Sunil, and Lucky's taunts. I would return to the hostel from work, smelly from delivering babies in the labour room and the OT and, instead of taking a shower and changing into clean clothes, I would go to his room on the second floor and suck his dick. At other times he would wait for me or pick me up from work and we would go out to drink. We came back late at night and slept in my room on the ground floor, fucking before sleeping, fucking after waking up in the morning. I wondered about the other women in his life but kept quiet about it. Sometimes, though, I grew proprietorial. I was his first and only Facebook friend, but when, after a few months, spurred by a new-found confidence at having cleared his exams, he started adding more friends, the thought of sharing him made me so jealous I unfriended him. He had no idea till I told him, and he seemed unfazed. Facebook wasn't that important to him, nor was my friendship. But

when I told him why I had unfriended him on Facebook, he told me grandly, 'You can unfriend me, but I'll never leave you, jaanu.' He then took me in his arms and kissed my cheeks. I had reason to be insecure for now he had a serious girlfriend now. A girl he called 'Moti'. She would usually call at midnight, many times when I would be with him. He would instantly turn into a gentleman. However long it took, he would patiently hear her day's complaints—a missed bus, a taxing training programme, indigestion—offering soothing words at intervals. I knew he'd never tell me her real name. All I knew was that she lived in Santhal Pargana, a night's journey from Jamshedpur; she worked in a bank; and—like me—she too helped him with money and found his snoring annoying. I consoled myself with the thought that while Moti was waiting for her Samir, I was the one having sex with him. They called Samir the Salman Khan of our medical college. He was such a huge fan of Salman that he had built his body like the star, walked, talked and danced like him, and, in the last year, had also started drinking like him. The juniors idolized him, posing for photographs with him, their shirts off, flexing their biceps. These photos got enthusiastic comments on Facebook, praising his body and comparing him to his hero. Among the juniors he had one other nickname, Doga, the buffed anti-hero character of Raj Comics. His waist had thickened from the drinking but his chest and biceps were still hard as rock. I'm a couple of inches taller than Samir. One day, when we were walking together, he stared at me and said: 'You're taller than me!' 'Yes, I am,' I said proudly to tease him, straightening my back to look even taller. As he dejectedly turned his eyes away from me, I smiled, put my arm into

his, and said: 'Look, all of Sallu's heroines are taller than him. Aishwarya, Sushmita, Katrina, and that Sangeeta Bijli. Okay?' He looked straight at me for a second or two, then smiled. 'You're right,' he said happily. 'After all, I am Salman.' The front license plate of Samir's bike—a huge blue Pulsar 200—read YUVRAAJ, after the film starring Salman Khan. Except, the film's title had an extra V. I told him he should fix it. He thought about it. 'I will need some money for it.' 'How much?' 'I think... five-hundred will do.' Even as I handed him the note, I knew he wouldn't correct the spelling. I could see that giving him money was almost the same as buying alcohol for Lucky, perhaps even worse, but I was past caring. For Samir was all over me, on my body, inside my head. I tried at first to keep it physical, but he captured my mind. He would call me whenever he needed me, even when I was at work. He would come piss-drunk to my room and bang on the door, or bellow my name in his sexy voice, loud enough for the entire floor to hear. Secretly, I loved it all. One day, he promised to take me to a beautiful place, with hills on both sides and a road running in-between, but the scoundrel that he was, Samir ended up taking me to Lucky's flat. Later, 'The Place' became our code-word for Lucky's flat: an idyllic road, bounded by hills, stretching endlessly into the horizon on which he would ride his bike, with me on the pillion, holding on to him. We sent Lucky to buy alcohol—Blender's Pride for both of them and Smirnoff or White Mischief for me—and we had sex on Lucky's bed. We spread newspapers on it so that the sheet wouldn't be dirtied. When Lucky returned, he saw his bed nicely made up and balls of newspapers in his dustbin. Of course he understood. 'Saala, haraami log,' he told us.

Samir giggled shyly. I said, 'At least we didn't dirty your bed,' and laughed. Samir and I were usually out of our hostel until 2 or 3 in the morning. He was an expert biker, even when drunk up to his eyeballs—he would ride at 60–70 kmph and dodge 10-wheeled trailers. I would just hold on to him, to my dear life. We went to risky places. Lonely spots by the Subarnarekha and the Kharkai rivers, places where we wouldn't go—or, rather, where he wouldn't take me—when sober. He would turn around and kiss me. I would unzip his fly and fondle him. Yet he would keep riding and I would keep fondling him. It was a miracle that we didn't have an accident, the police didn't catch us, and thugs didn't stop and rob us. Samir had several friends. Sometimes he would bring a car and we would go out for night drives. He would drive. I would unzip him and suck him off. We sometimes got more adventurous and made out in public places. Outside the motorcycle parking of our hostel. In a corner outside the hostel mess, with the mess staff and our colleagues going in and out. On the terrace of our hostel. On nights when I couldn't sleep after sex, but he would be snoring happily and naked in my bed, I would lock him from the outside to go to the common room of our hostel and talk with the others, smoke a cigarette, watch TV. I wondered if they knew what was going on between Samir and me. Then, on feeling sleepy, I would return to my room and find Samir lying spread-eagled on my bed, snoring deeply, his penis a small black bud. I would snuggle into whatever space he allowed me. As always, he would get up at 6 a.m. I would, too, because my position on the bed was so precarious, even a slight touch would have woken me up. His eyes still closed, he would hug me from the

back, tight, sticking his penis between my buttocks. Eyes still closed, half-asleep, he would say to me groggily: 'Condom la.' I would quickly get up, undress, throw him a Moods and lubricate. Once he finished, he would pee out of my window, drink an entire bottle of water, dress up, and leave. I couldn't concentrate on anything, and worried that I'd end up neglecting myself and my work. Samir lied to me, made up stories about himself and the women he'd had. He told me he also dealt in arms, that he knew the Naxalites and the coal mafias of Dhanbad, that the scar he had on his shoulder was where a goonda had touched him with a burning cigarette, and that he had beaten that goonda to a pulp. He later told me that the scar was self-inflicted, because he wanted to have a scar like Salman Khan had. With each story I desired him even more. And I knew, or tried to convince myself, that there was some good in him. First, Samir got up at 6 a.m. Sharp. This was perhaps a remnant from his serious body-building days. Even if he hit the sack at 2 or 3 a.m., he would be up at 6 a.m., fresh as a flower. Second, Samir was a typical Virgo—very fastidious with how he carried himself and how he kept his room. His life would be in a turmoil, but not the hair on his head. If Salman Khan took his hair seriously, so did Samir. Salman straightened his hair (for London Dreams and Wanted); Samir did the same. In Dabangg, Salman returned to keeping normal, combed hair; Samir followed suit. If I pulled at his hair during sex, he would get angry. Afterwards, the first thing he would do was fix his hair. He would throw cigarette stubs and his clothes all over my room, but kept his own room very tidy. There would be cigarette holes on his bed-sheet, but it would be spread neatly. If he fucked me on his bed, he

would make sure to straighten out the sheet even as I was lying upon it. He looked smashing in jeans and T-shirt but, being a doctor, he believed in wearing mostly formal clothing. Sharply tailored, ironed shirts and trousers; shiny, polished leather shoes; a big wristwatch; the Ray-Ban sunglasses that I had gifted him on his birthday. Third, Samir loved children, and they loved his muscles. During paediatrics duty, I once heard him singing a Salman Khan song to a child with Down Syndrome because he wanted to see if children with Down Syndrome really liked music. Of course, the child was laughing in delight. And one day, we were hosted by a ward-boy from our hospital. He had a teenage daughter—who served us tea and arrowroot biscuits—and a son aged seven or eight. While I quite unthinkingly dipped my biscuits in the tea and gulped them down, Samir had the presence of mind to call the small boy to him, ask him his name, which school and class he was studying in, and offer him all his biscuits. The boy laughed happily and took all of them. Fourth, Samir was actually caring. During a Saraswati Puja at our college, he remembered to bring a box of prasad for me. I wasn't expecting it at all. I was not even at the puja. But Samir returned from the puja on his Yuvraaj with two boxes of prasad placed on his lap, one for himself and the other one for me. 'Aap ke liye,' he said as he extended a box towards me. I had every logic to believe Samir was ordinary, just like all of us. But he somehow seemed special. The things he did, the things he said, the way he carried himself. The more I tried to understand him, the more I started losing myself to him. I would wait for him night after night, for the roar of his bike, up until one or two in the night when he finally knocked. 'I'm very tired today.' He

came in smelling of alcohol one night and lay prone on my bed. 'I'll massage you.' He stripped and I poured Johnson's Baby Oil all over his back. I started with his thick, burly shoulders, huge enough to hold up the world. Soon, once I'd aroused him enough, he was upon me, wrapping his beefy arms around me. I moved down his back, the moles and scars I knew so well. I could have told him apart from all the men in Jharkhand by those moles alone. 'Lower,' he mumbled. I parted his buttocks, rubbed oil in the softness of his crack. His buttocks had gooseflesh. Dot dot dot dot... I poked each, counting them. I parted his buttocks and licked. He rose on all fours, exposing himself. 'You look beautiful,' he told me tenderly after we'd finished. I smiled. 'Boss,' he said. 'Why do you call me that?' I asked. 'Okay, sorry,' he said. 'Jaan.' 'Yes?' 'I need some money.' 'How much?' 'Two thousand.' 'Two thousand?' I turned towards him. 'I gave you that much two days back. What do you want this for?' 'I've borrowed some money from a friend. I need to return it.' 'Okay. Take my card.' When he returned after fifteen minutes, I said to him, 'You always talk about your friends. You never take me to meet them.' 'Why? Why do you want to see my friends?' 'Why shouldn't I?' I reasoned. 'I've got every right to meet whoever you meet.' 'They're not good people,' he said. 'They're gangsters, they've got guns.' 'And they'll shoot me, right?' 'You don't understand, jaanu.' He came and sat by my side, stroking my naked back. 'I can't let you meet them. It won't be right.' 'Forget me then.' I turned over to the other side. 'Jaan.' He shook me. 'No.' 'Fine, I'll take you.' 'Today.' 'Today?' 'Yes, today.' 'Okay,' and after a pause, 'today.' I waited the whole day. He didn't show up. I called him. 11.30 p.m.

‘Some of my friends have been caught drinking on the road. I’m at the thana to get them released.’ 12 midnight. ‘I’m arranging money for their bail.’ 12.45 a.m. ‘I’m talking to the bada-babu.’ 1.15 a.m. No answer 1.25 a.m. This number is busy. Please try later. 1.30 a.m. This number is switched off. 1.45 a.m. This number is switched off. 2 a.m. This number is switched off. He arrived in the morning, sober, bathed, chewing Rajnigandha-Tulsi. ‘Sorry, jaanu.’ ‘Not this way. I’ll meet your friends.’ ‘Look, it’s not—’ ‘Either you take me or you leave.’ ‘Your duty?’ ‘I’m not going to work today. I’m going with you.’ He stood at the door, speechless, while I pretended to be busy. ‘Tum samajhti nahi hai, pagli.’ Yes, the foolish girl did not understand. She didn’t want to. ‘Hum ko nahi samajhna hai,’ I said sternly. ‘Okay,’ he said meekly, and then he told me the rules. ‘There, you are not to do what you do with me here.’ ‘What is that?’ ‘The place where we’re going, the people there see me as a leader. I’m respected there. I have an image to maintain. And you have to give me some money.’ ‘Okay.’ The place was a dam resort on the Subarnarekha some thirty kilometres outside town. His friends, I saw, were from the working class. There was Samir’s friend from school, a transporter who was a Karmakar; and four Adivasis who worked for the transporter. We were later joined by a few students from a local engineering college—all Samir’s friends and fans from the gym—and two of our juniors from the medical college. Only the transporter called Samir by his name, everyone else called him ‘boss’. I wondered what Samir was trying to do. Laying the field for a possible political career he so often boasted to me about? And what kind of respect was it if it came from a bunch of friends and yes-men? Everything about him was so

mindboggling. The juniors were surprised to see me. They couldn't believe I had come with Samir because I was seen as posh, reserved, and—well—delicate. 'Aap yahaan?' they asked. 'With Samir boss?' I couldn't explain my presence. 'Yes, boss wanted to see this dam,' Samir said, though they didn't seem entirely convinced. Alcohol saved the day. After they started drinking, my presence was no longer an issue. I didn't drink; I wanted to stay in my senses, to observe, to take notes. They talked about the transport business, big money, women, other men's wives, the whores of Jamshedpur. Samir and the transporter were the most boisterous of all, flaunting their political reach, their contacts with the police top brass. I was treated with respect because I was Samir's guest. I was given the best chair to sit on; a separate plate to have the chicken chakhna from while they attacked the common platter; sealed Bisleri bottles while they drank from jugs. What am I doing here? I wondered about my place in that unlikely company, my situation, the pains I was taking to be with Samir. Drunk, Samir was his usual boisterous self. 'Haraamkhor! I eat zinda maans!' Sunil wasn't like this. There was a silent humility to Sunil, a determination to reach his goal without needing to talk about it or flaunting his contacts. Samir was the opposite. I had heard him answering evasively to phone calls from his family. His family perhaps knew what all he was up to. Drinking, spending himself. How did they take to all that? I wanted to know all about Samir. Now that I had met his friends, I wanted to meet his family. If only getting him to take me to see his family were easy. Getting to his friends had taken me two days of tantrums and a decent sum of money. I had heard Samir mumble in his sleep, an insecure soul

inside a cocky body, living in the present, planning his survival second by second. He abused people in his dreams. Which people were these; I couldn't understand their names. Maadarchod, bhenchod, gaandu... He spoke such words in his dreams. Samir never slept peacefully. Sometimes he slept with his eyes open; sometimes he turned to one side, his body held up on his elbow; sometimes on all fours after I rimmed him; sometimes with me sitting on top of him, pumping while he just snored. I stuck to Samir's instructions and kept my hands off him among his friends. But when we sat down to dinner at a dhaba after drinks, all of them made Samir and I sit separately on one side of the table while they sat on the other side. Samir brought his chair close to mine. Smoking a Navy Cut, he placed his arm around me and squeezed my shoulder. I wondered if others were watching. Yes, they were, but they were busy with their backslapping and laughs. I removed his hand from my shoulder, putting on a straight face. Someone was playing a Sadri folk tune on a mobile phone. Iskool kay tame pay, aana gori dame pay Fair girl, bunk your school and meet me at the dam Samir raised his bodybuilder's arms and waved them above his head. He knew I loved watching him dance. 'What is that, boss?' one of our juniors asked. 'I am trying to do the chhau.' He grinned. 'A very famous dance they perform in Saraikela district. I'm doing it for boss.' He put his arm around me again. 'Looks like Salman's dance to me,' the junior quipped. 'Arrey, why not?' Samir said animatedly. 'I'm Salman. That Tere Naam is the story of my life.' Tere Naam. This was the seventieth time I was hearing Samir announce that the story of the film paralleled that of his life. I made a face. 'And here is my Katrina,' he whispered into my ear

and kissed it. 'I hope you are not bored.' 'No.' I shook my head. 'How are you feeling?' 'Very happy.' 'You like my friends?' 'Yeah, but they're not dangerous at all.' 'You've seen nothing.' He grinned. 'That's why I was avoiding bringing you here.' 'I'd have come anyway.' 'Why?' 'Because I love to meet people.' 'Yeah?' he smiled.

'Yeah.' He lowered his head and kissed my neck. Later, when I went to wash my hands, he chivalrously accompanied me to the bathroom and kissed me on my cheek. I couldn't tell if anyone noticed or not. Actually, I didn't care. I needed Samir, I had him, he was kissing me in full view of his friends. What else did I need? 'Boss,' Samir told me one night, 'I want to do something with my life. I want to become a good man.' 'You will,' I ran my fingers through his hair, one of those rare occasions when I could do it, since he was in that contemplative mood, so vulnerable, so unlike Samir, the Samir the world saw. 'I am a very bad man. I don't like myself.' 'No, you're not bad. I wouldn't have liked you then.' He sat up on his elbow and touched my face. Then he lay down. I placed my head on his chest. He took my Nokia and clicked a picture of us together. Then he undressed and I began massaging him. 'Jaan, will you keep on massaging me like this?' he asked. 'Marry me,' I said, 'and I'll live with you.' 'Only if you were really a woman,' he said tenderly, as if he meant it. At about midnight, as usual, his mobile rang. He grabbed his trousers and, covering his crotch, rushed off into to a corner. 'Moti!' he slurred into the phone, trying to sound sober. 'Had your dinner, darling?' I covered myself with the blanket and watched him fumble with his clothes, as if the girl he was talking to would jump out of the phone and catch him red-handed. 'Not slept yet? Why, love?

... Waiting for my call? ... Sorry, jaan, very sorry ... I was busy ... Had your medicines? ... Go to sleep, you have work in the morning ... I'll come to you soon, very soon.' He was upset after the call. I sucked him: a hurt, half-hearted blowjob. I massaged his back as he snored. I tried to check his call list but his phone was password protected. I picked up his wallet to go through it and found the receipt of the watch that Moti gifted him on his birthday, the same year I had gifted him the Ray-Ban. It was a Timex which he wore at all times, even in bed. But what hurt was to see both the Timex and Ray-Ban receipts tucked together. But what ultimately shattered me was that Samir never kissed me. Never. He would kiss my neck, my back, my cheeks, my nipples, my abdomen, that place near my lips, even my buttocks, but not my lips. I longed to be kissed on the lips. Every time I would ask him, 'Why don't you kiss me?' he would say, 'A kiss is for someone special.' ~

Jamshedpur is connected to my hometown of Ghatsila by train, a distance of about forty kilometres. Among the regulars on the train is a group of hijras. They walk up and down the compartments, asking for money from the passengers, sometimes quietly, sharply clapping their hands sometimes, making a scene. They know which passengers are regulars and generally leave them alone. I used to be a regular passenger on that route. The train would be crowded most of the time so I would not get a seat. I would be squeezed in the aisles or standing near the doors. The hijras would make their way through the coach, asking for money. They would just pass me by even though I would be standing right in their way. While I was doing my housemanship in the hospital, my father called me to say that I should appear for the Department of

Health exams. If I passed, I would become a government doctor. My father's word was command, at home, and in my life. I sat for the exams, and passed. It would take some time for my place of posting to be confirmed and I was suddenly at a loose end. Sex with Samir was just that, sex. But I wanted more. I wanted him to be mine, I wanted him to kiss me, to say that he loved me, and only me. None of these would ever come to pass. I made a hard decision: I resolved to leave Jamshedpur immediately and go to Ghatsila, to my parents' house. When the notification of my posting arrived, I would travel from there. In a very significant way, my father had precipitated one more turning point in my life. Samir saw me off at the railway station on the day I left, sweet and caring in that masculine way that had always swept me off my feet. That morning, I had eaten him and afterwards, asked him for one farewell kiss on the lips. He had refused. Of course he said would stay in touch. And I knew it was a lie. There was a V-front brief which he had left behind in my room one night after having sex with me. It never struck me to ask him why he had been wearing it that day. Perhaps he wanted to give me something to remember him by, because he was done with me. I brought it along. In the train, the hijras again passed by my side. The train wasn't crowded that day, and I had found a seat by a window, but the hijras still did not seek money from me. That day, I thought about their lives, these hijras. I wondered if they were in relationships and if their relationships were permanent, complete. I wondered if they too lived with a piece of cloth that smelt of the sweat and semen of a lover who couldn't be, wouldn't be, theirs. I got a posting in a hospital in Pakur and moved there. I tried to keep in touch

with Samir but he remained elusive. I stalked him on Facebook, saw him making friends, sent him messages, and then, one day, he blocked me. I gave up, and for several years, we did not speak at all. There was no phone call, no text, nothing. I got information about him from others, and, all the while, I yearned to hear his voice, to smell his smell. Of course I knew that not even a trace of our relationship remained, but a tiny hope lived inside me. It grew and grew and became unbearable until, one evening, I snapped under the weight of that monstrous hope. There were a lot of things going on in my mind and I was feeling so defeated I ran a knife over my wrist. I slept through the pain, hoping never to wake up again, but I woke up the next morning, saw a blob of congealed blood near my bed, and I realized how stupid I had been. I returned home, to my parents. During that period of recovery, I decided I had to go meet Samir. I did not know what to expect from the meeting. I did not even know what I wanted from him exactly. I only went with some faith in my heart that I would be able to meet him. I went to him with all my wounds; some open, some healing. He was shocked, as I had expected him to be. He freaked out. 'Kya banjhi-banjhi kaam karte rahte hain aap? Kaahe kiye aisa?' he screamed at me. Why did I do it? What could I tell him? That I was happy I could shock him? That it was my revenge for seven years of anxious, sleepless nights? None of it was true, some of it was true. He regained control of himself soon enough. This wasn't the Samir I had left behind, a man with loutish charm, obsessed with his hair. This Samir was formal, serious, grown up. He had a job now, his hair was cut short and combed so neatly that not one strand stood out. A formal-looking ballpoint pen

was clipped to the pocket of his formal shirt, the type of shirt doctors are expected to wear. Instead of jeans, he had on a perfectly stitched pair of trousers. To me, Samir had always been bright and special. But today, I could see him shining with confidence. Even the scare that I must have given him did not dim his shine even a bit. ‘Why did you do this?’ ‘Because I was very sad and had no other way,’ I said. I was not calm inside, but made sure to keep the despair out of my voice. ‘Will hurting yourself give you a way?’ he asked, calmly. I hate thinking about it this way, but I was secretly and intensely envious of him. How could he be at peace? I was envious of his calmness and his happiness. I was suffering away from him, how could he be happy away from me? Had he found someone? Was he seeing someone? Was it Moti, was she really enough? I was lonely, why wasn’t he? Did he have a platinum spoon in his mouth? If I was suffering, why wasn’t he? Or was he not happy but only pretending to be? I did not seriously believe I had mattered so much to him that he would be unhappy without me, but life made me unhappy, every hour of living made me unhappy, this was the condition of life, and if this was so, why wasn’t everyone drowning in misery, why wasn’t he? And he had said he did not like himself. Samir was, is, and will remain a conundrum however hard I try to understand him, like that Salman Khan character in Kick who says, ‘Main dil mein aata hoon, samajh mein nahin.’ It was a very brief meeting which neither of us wanted to extend. I returned home. I had never imagined that one day I would receive counselling from Samir but, on my way back, after he had told me that I was a good person, that I was special, I found myself happy—though the feeling lasted only a couple of hours. I

realized that I had made a lifeboat of just two kind words from Samir. It was a compromise, and a sorry one. For what I really wanted was him. I wanted Samir, entire. Not his words but him. His body, his breath, his entire being. I wanted a completion that I would find nowhere, with no one. I was meant to sink, I was sinking. As I made my way back to Pakur, I found myself crying on the train. I was tortured by my inability to tell my parents about my choices, by the thought of the pain and disappointment I would cause them if I spoke the truth, by my inability to accept what I did not want to accept. All of it, everything that I felt and was yet to feel, was flowing out of my eyes. I must have known a storm was coming, because I had worn dark glasses that morning. And I took care to see that my face did not contort. I made no sound. The group of hijras came into the coach I was in. They came near my seat but did not ask me for money. Maybe they still remembered that I was a regular passenger. Maybe they recognized me despite the shades on my eyes. Something came to my mind then: I took out my wallet and handed over the first currency note I could grab. I realized that it was a hundred-rupee note only when a hijra began counting change. They held ninety rupees before me. Ten rupees was what they took from people. I looked at the money but did not look up, afraid that they might see me crying. 'No, keep it all,' I said. 'Should I?' 'Yes.' The hijra was perhaps surprised, but they took the note. At a connecting station, I was standing near an Uber pick-up point. A driver passed me by lugging two huge bags. A young woman followed him. She had a bag slung from her shoulder and was dragging a large suitcase with wheels. Following that woman was a couple: a man and a woman, frail with

age, walking slowly, cautiously. The man was holding the arm of the woman and it was hard to tell who was supporting whom. It was a reality I felt I could only aspire to, growing old with someone whom I could trust. Who would offer me an arm when I was sixty? Whom would I offer mine? Standing beside that Uber pick-up point I felt like bawling my heart out. My parents' faces flashed in my mind, Samir's face flashed in my mind. Time passes and things get better; wounds heal and some things are forgotten. After four months, I had some official work in Jamshedpur, after which I was going back home. I boarded the train. Once again, I couldn't find a vacant seat so I stood near a door. The same group of hijras passed me, asking people for money. I immediately took out my wallet, though they hadn't asked me for money, and handed over a ten-rupee note to the hijra standing close to me. It was the same hijra I had given the hundred-rupee note to. I wasn't crying this time. I wasn't wearing shades. I was as happy and peaceful as I could reasonably be. The hijra took the note from me and asked, 'Pooa hai?' I think I knew what that question meant. But I did not know what to say. They waved their hand vertically, twice, before my body, and asked again, 'Sab pooa hai? Complete hai? Kuch missing toh nahin hai?' 'Na, na, kuch missing nahin hai. Sab complete hai,' I said with a start. 'All okay. Nothing missing,' I added in English, as if that would convince her. With great tenderness on her face, they placed a hand on my head, touched my cheek and walked away. I stood there wondering if everything was really complete, if I was whole.

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