

JEERA PACKER

दा जीरा पैकर

PRASHANT YADAV



FINGERPRINT!

Dedicated to
Radha Yadav,
the fieriest lady I have ever known,
and Bindra Prasad Yadav,
a pretty darn cool man.
And to that cosmic accident that made you my parents.

Published by

FINGERPRINT!

An imprint of Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd.

113/A, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110 002,

Tel: (011) 2324 7062 – 65, Fax: (011) 2324 6975

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ISBN: 978 81 7599 418 8

Processed & printed in India

PROLOGUE

I once changed the history of Uttar Pradesh
with a gun and a finger.

One shot, one man.
Right man, wrong man.

But that was thirty years ago.

I shot people through their heads then.
I pack jeera in a basement now.

SERENDIPITY

The sharp, stale smell of jeera dust rises in a grey haze as I push fifty-odd grams of the condiment into pouches, and then fold the top and seal it with the candle flame flickering nearby.

Ah, the candle . . . Do you know that hell smells like burnt candle wax? And that any hell worth its fire doesn't need chains? Even when mine gives me a full day off weekly, I return in less than two hours. I should have been watching TV or sleeping right now, because on Mondays I take an off from the shop. But I came back. Jaya smiled and I returned to what I do every day. Pack jeera.

How I wish this candle trips over and burns the nearby pile of newspapers and then this entire sack of jeera, or even these flour bags nearby. Or the entire shop.

How I wish I could do something else to feed my family. Sorting, sifting, weighing, and packing condiments, sitting on the front counter for hours,

smiling at the customers, giving out candies against change . . . for how many years can you keep digging the same drain and not drown in its debris?

True, it pays our bills; we live in an apartment, travel AC three-tier (though the last time was five years ago), go to malls, and drive a car. Twenty-seven years ago, when I had pimples and shot people for a nod from Dada, I could not have dreamt of all this.

But neither could I have dreamt of this sameness. The same apartment, the same shop, the same stuff in the shop, the same timings, the same customers, the same chair, the same counter, even the same lizard on the same front wall. All-powerful, all-pervasive sameness this, it drags me in even on my day off, and I too come back, tail wagging like a pet Pomeranian.

Can there not be a better way to earn a living than counting jeera seeds?

The way Jaya runs the shop, she doesn't need me. We did start this shop together but I have, over the years, been reduced to a spare wheel, free to roll all the revolution I want in my life and the world. However, all I do is bear this terrible sickness in my stomach every morning, drag myself out of bed, and pack jeera in the dark, damp basement.

This, when I know I have been lucky. How many assassins ever manage to dodge the ever-lurking death from psychotic bosses, ruthless police, deadly foes, and deadlier friends? How many of them get to live a normal life with a wife, a son, and a departmental store in a respectable locality?

I thank Him everyday. But, the Lord too needs to understand. Twenty years of packing jeera in a departmental store is too high a price for good luck.

The candle flame does its slow dance as I heat the open end of yet another pouch with fifty grams jeera. But I manage to push it too deep into the flame this time, and the fire pierces through the

polythene film and reaches the condiment. The stench of burnt plastic mixes with the stink of burning jeera.

I throw the half-burnt pouch down and stomp it with my slipper. The ember goes out but a thick, winding column of smoke snakes upwards. It smells like rotten red chillies thrown into a burning tyre. The half-digested breakfast of aloo paratha jumps up in my stomach right up to my throat.

Enough!

I blow out the candle and come upstairs.

Jaya sees me from her perch on the counter and smiles. She knew I would quit and come up anytime.

“Go upstairs, sleep over,” she says.

Only the sick and the lazy sleep in the day. I am neither.

She reads my thoughts.

“Go to Kondli. Rice stock is out and delivery boy will come only day after tomorrow. Take the van.”

I smile, thanking her for this new adrenalin bursting assignment. She smiles back, perhaps thinking I really like it. Good.

I pick the car keys from the counter and step out.

When in a frying pan, thank your stars. You will reminisce about it moments later, when you fall in the fire.

The traffic crawls like a crippled dog recovering from a bad hangover. Cars, bikes, and tractors, coming from all directions, have blocked the thin wedge of the road, competing like a mixture of rice, wheat, and gram in a water-clogged kitchen sink. They squeal and squeak in frustration, drag a couple of feet in spasms every five minutes, and then stop. The shrieks of impatient horns collude to create their own symphony from hell; the perfect background score for the joyride my holiday is turning out to be.

The car behind me lets out a prolonged honk. The ugly noise renders through the air like a half-dead jackal bawling on a broken public address system.

I summon all my patience, acquired through years of handling a hyperactive rebellious son, and breathe out “Hold on, man!” as I adjust the rear-view mirror to check out who it is. A white Toyota Fortuner with a red beacon.

There, the democracy!

A mini-giant of a man scowls on the driver’s seat. A white kurta-clad burly man mumbles on the front passenger seat. I bet there are a few potbellied good-for-nothing cops too on the back seats. Backyard bullies on an officially sanctioned power trip, duly stamped and authorized, propped up on my own tax money. And I am expected to let them walk all over me and then genuflect in gratitude. Bloody parasites!

But, twenty-plus years of *bhujia* selling have given me tremendous forbearance. Twenty years ago, this smart-ass would have at least been punched in the face and made lighter by two teeth and half a cup of blood.

The driver honks again. A lack of response from me has, perhaps, hurt his pride.

I clench my jaw to control the heavy rush of blood to my temples even as my entire body tightens up on reflex. My regular irregular exercise has kept me in pretty good shape—thick arms and deep chest on a strapping six-foot frame. No one messes with me on the road. That red beacon is the only reason why the driver is playing I-have-got-a-bigger-dick with me.

But I resist. I pretend not hearing him. Again.

The car ahead shakes its boot, lets out a thick puff of black smoke, and pushes forward. I, too, release the brake pedal and stop just short. The white Fortuner doesn’t move. Then all of a

sudden it leaps forward and screeches to a stop inches away from my rear fender.

My face twists in rage as I turn back and glare at him through the rear windshield. The driver looks straight at me.

“Are you fucking blind?” I shout at the top of my voice. He holds the stare but doesn’t say anything. Perhaps he didn’t hear.

The cars begin crawling again. I release the pedal, the car creeps up two feet and stops.

“Bastards,” I fume. “They deserve to be hung upside down and slapped with shoes till they realize they did not descend on a gold cradle from a different heaven.”

A shrill hooter tears through the air.

A blunt spear of humiliating sound pierces my ears. A surge of rage shakes my entire body. In one swift motion I turn off the ignition, leap out of the car, slam the door shut, and dangle the keys in front of him.

“Fly, motherfucker!” I yell as I gesture with my hand, the thumb and the little finger outstretched like the wings of an aeroplane.

He looks at me, perhaps puzzled.

Then the rear doors open and four constables come running towards me with their guns in position.

The old-timer street fighter in me kicks in. I spread my legs apart, plant the rear foot firm on the ground and keep the front foot light.

“What? Shoot me?” I yell at the policemen again. “Come on! You think the road belongs to your fucking father?”

The cops pause for a second and then one of them steps forward. With two stars on his shoulders, he looks like their senior.

“What’s happening? Move the car,” he bellows.

They haven’t fired yet. Hell, they can’t, at least not in public. Our eyes meet. “Here, take this.” I fling the keys to the senior cop who catches it in an instinctive swoop. “Do it yourself.”

He pauses, unable to figure out what to do next. I wait for him to make his move.

The front passenger door opens and a heavy man in a squeaky clean white kurta and a grey half jacket steps out. The cops get aside in obsequious deference.

“Yes, what is the problem?” A deep baritone booms with surprising politeness.

Yeah. So, here comes the big dog. Bastard! *Come on now, you motherfucker.*

Tall, large frame, slight paunch, heavy face, thickset features, standard-issue moustache, and a scar just below the lower lip.

Our eyes meet for a half second but in that half second I see a montage of several old images float in his eyes. I shake my head but the images stay. Is that *him*?

“Yes, what’s happening . . .” He starts off sharp but doesn’t finish. Something on my face slows him down as he stares at me, as if trying to read the expiry date from the fine print on a label.

The two of us now stand face-to-face, looking at each other in confused inaction.

“You . . .” he says.

“Lal Mani?” I ask at the same time.

He nods. This is indeed him. Lal Mani Singh.

Twenty-five years. Twenty-five fucking years!

We shot together, we fought together, we drank together, we went to jail together, we even got out together. The fact that I breathe today, and he too, owes itself to us having been *together*.

A furious mix of emotions storms through my head. The boy who brought my wife, then Jaya Tiwari, clad in a burqa on his bicycle to the abandoned Jumna theatre before we eloped. She, the daughter of Tung Nath Tiwari, or TNT as everyone called him, a rich government contractor, and I, no match for her. Lal Mani

Singh, then a dedicated disciple, a useful apprentice, and a brother in the way only men who face death together can be.

And here we stand square, looking at each other like idiots, too dumbfounded to react.

I look into his eyes, which look distant. I search for anything familiar but find several unknown shades. And then it appears, the same old glint.

He stretches his arms wide as he breaks into a broad smile. I step forward. We hug.

“Where were you, *bhainchod*?” he asks.

“How have you been?” I reply.

He turns to the senior cop. “Take sahib’s car out.” The officer nods like a devotee as he gets in my car and revs up the engine.

The Fortuner behind lets out a long hoot. The policeman in my car starts slowly but pierces through the jam much faster than I could ever have. The red beacon and the occasional hoots convince everyone else to shrink in the nearest corner and let the ultra-humans pass.

Lal Mani Singh, the big guy, the minister. I shouldn’t be shocked. Of course, I read about it in the papers. It should be perfectly all right. Why then is my heart rattling my rib cage?

He puts his arm around my shoulder as he says, “*Kaisa hai*? How are you?”

“I am fine. I am good. I mean, after so many years and like this . . .” I struggle to say anything coherent. I mean, I taught him to fire a gun as a boy, took on five giant parking lot attendants for him and ended up with broken ribs, spent two years in the same jail cell. And now he stands here, after twenty-five years, riding a minister’s car.

“Wow. This is just amazing,” I tell him, still confused with shock, awe, and perhaps, pride.

“It is,” he smiles. “We need to sit together. Tell me when I should come home.”

“Anytime, brother. You don’t need to ask when to come,” I say. “I still can’t believe we are meeting like this.”

He talks in a measured tone, smiles like important people do, but radiates the same, familiar warmth of the old. He has changed, of course. Age and then the compulsions of being an important politician. Lal Mani of the old would have been jumping like buttered popcorns on hot plate.

“It is unbelievable. Give me your number. I will call,” he says.

We exchange numbers as we cross the narrow bridge and reach the other side. He takes out a Benson & Hedges pack and offers. I pull out a cigarette.

“You have changed your brand,” I say and at once regret my stupidity. The whole point of becoming somebody is to change your brands.

He smiles back as he pulls one cigarette for himself and offers me a light. We both blow hot grey smoke in the air.

The cars have crossed the jam. The policeman comes up, after parking my car to a side and hands over the keys.

“I’ll call you. Let’s meet one of these days,” Lal Mani says, stubbing his cigarette.

I smile as I see him get into his car. Then I get into mine.

The Fortuner starts and moves past me. He waves as his car crosses mine.

I, too, start but cannot move.

It can’t be surprise, for I knew he had become a minister, but seeing him here, with his ministerial armoury and entourage, has done something. Peeled old scabs, pricked forgotten wounds, and perhaps also dug ancient graves. Thorny skeletons I buried with great effort are now out in full fury, drunk on sadistic glee.

Lal Mani Singh—the boy who would drop his gun when required to shoot, stammer in front of anyone wearing a clean shirt or shoes; the puny pest who everyone thought was too weak to amount to anything ever! My bad pupil now sits high up in the stratosphere.

Dada too never liked him, or trusted him. If Abdul it were, I could understand, but not this *gandu*. No. Not from any angle. Not by a long shot.

Tiny drops of sweat erupt on my brow. Violent palpitations rock my chest and bright, multi-coloured stars hop and jump in impromptu little dances in front of my eyes. I cannot go to Kondli now. The shock is too big.

I make a U-turn and speed off back home.

2

BALAM THANEDAAR

Professor Madan Mohan knew very well how Sanjana Singh looked.

He had seen her blockbuster *Balam Thanedaar* fifty times in places varying from Rampa Talkies in Gorakhpur to the VCR at his village *Pradhan's* house. The way she swayed her hips, bit her lips, and winked, wearing just a towel fresh after a bath, gave him goosebumps even to this day. Years ago, when his own hormones sufficed to fuel his mojo, he would even ask his wife to sing '*Mila re meet mere mann ka*' in the throes of deep passion.

Thirty years had passed but like teenage love it still felt as real.

Today, as the Minister of State for Urban Development *and* as the CM's brother, he stood at the airstrip to welcome the same Sanjana Singh as his party candidate and to escort her for nomination filing. Countless butterflies did their own '*Mila re meet mere mann ka*' dance in his stomach while he

reminded himself every sixty seconds that he was now a sixty-year-old grandfather and not a pimpled teenager. She herself had begun doing mother and sister roles, even as she explored a second career in politics.

The plane had landed half an hour ago but madam had not come out yet. The professor didn't mind, even though he looked at his watch every fifty seconds and then at the huge crowd of supporters. He knew these idiots would not give him a chance to even ask her name in private.

And then she appeared. Flanked by two security guards in safari suits and two bouncers in black T-shirts, she waved in his general direction as she walked towards the crowd with quick steps.

That was Sanjana Singh!

That was *the* Sanjana Singh?

Dark shades covered her eyes and a thick cotton sari hid all those curves the professor longed to see. But he still noticed that she had gained very little weight from her *Balam Thanedaar* days. Though a shade disappointed, he let out an audible cold sigh. A young party worker heard him and said, "Indeed, sir, madam is an item even today."

The professor hadn't expected anyone to hear his private appreciation of the lady, let alone exclaim in agreement. He turned back and glared at the youth. The boy blurted out an awkward apology and disappeared in the crowd.

The professor turned back again and saw Sanjana Singh, now less than two feet away, walking straight towards him. With wide-eyed astonishment, he half extended his hand towards her and tried to say hello. However, the million-watt radiance oozing out of her angelic face blinded him. Perhaps everyone else noticed his mouth wide open and hand half-outstretched for a shake. Sanjana Singh paused for an awkward moment and then walked straight past him. By the time the professor returned to his senses, she had

already got into the waiting SUV, with all her bouncers occupying the rear seats. He dashed towards the vehicle but the bouncers banged the car door shut before he could reach.

He bared his teeth in a sheepish grin and nodded. “Go ahead. I am in the other car.”

Sanjana Singh flashed a half-smile from the other side of the car window. The professor’s heart skipped a beat as he kept staring at the receding car through the dust.

Sexy Sanjana had come within an inch of him, even smiled at him. If his luck worked, he would get a chance to shake her hand today!

What hand, what smile, and what a woman!

“Sir, let’s go,” his driver called from behind the wheels. The professor remembered he too had to reach the DM’s office. Sanjana would file her nomination papers and then address the party workers. She had campaigned in the last two elections but her real political journey would start now.

On reaching, the professor raced straight to the nomination room, but the emaciated, friendly guard at the gate stopped him. “Sir ji, only two people at the time of nomination. DM sahib is very strict.”

The professor thought for a moment and decided against creating a scene. Classy girls hate rowdy boys, he thought. Spotting a random party worker standing close by, he fumed, “Couldn’t you have waited for two minutes? What does the poor madam know about filing nominations?”

The worker mumbled, “Madam was in a hurry so . . .” But by then the professor had walked away.

The next half hour felt like a lifetime to him. He counted each one of the sixty seconds making up every excruciating minute. After full thirty-seven minutes the door opened and out stepped Sanjana Singh with her lawyer in tow.

This time the shades were off and her big, bright eyes glowed with the light of a thousand moons on a dark night. She smiled as she looked around and started towards an open jeep outside the office compound. Once again she did not notice the professor.

Two back-to-back disappointments in less than an hour were too much for the professor. What use was his being a minister *and* the CM’s brother if he couldn’t get her to so much as smile at him once? He could not let this chance go.

He followed her with big steps. Pushing through the thronging party workers, policemen, and onlookers, he struggled hard to keep pace with her. But his heart broke when he saw her just two steps away from the jeep. He cried out in desperation, “Sanjana ji, one minute!”

She turned back and, thankfully, slowed down.

The professor caught up with her and mumbled something. She couldn’t hear in the loud noise and leaned in to hear him better. As she did, the professor saw the *pallu* of her saree move just a bit. The goddamned pin on her shoulder didn’t allow the *pallu* to fall down as it had in the ‘*Jiya dhadke hamar saiyyan*’ song from *Sali Bina Gharwali*, but for the professor it was more than he could ask for in his wildest dreams. All the blood in his body rushed to his head, making him see stars as that angelic face, that smooth skin, came just a couple of inches from him. The mesmerizing fragrance from her hair flew him off to a giant bed of clouds in a celestial garden amidst moon and stars. She sang ‘*Jiya dhadke hamar saiyyan*’ and jerked her wet hair spraying tiny water droplets on his face. Time stood still and he didn’t realize how and when his arm went round her head, pushed her towards him, and his parched, thirsty lips planted a sloppy, awkward kiss somewhere between her cheek and ear.

His heartbeat came back when he felt a sudden jerk to his hand.

She shook his hand away with a violent thrust and leapt into the car with a swift movement.

“*CHALO!* Go!” she ordered the driver.

The professor mumbled from behind. “All the best, madam, all the best.” The district president pleaded, “Madam, won’t you address the workers?”

She shouted at her driver instead. “Didn’t you hear? Start the car and move.”

The driver obeyed. The SUV shook as the engine revved and sped off. Only dust remained along with disappointed party workers.

The professor, however, still floated with the stars. He had just kissed the sexy Sanjana, the woman who had given him sleepless nights years ago as he burnt the midnight oil flipping through grainy film magazines as a young MA student. Though the kiss had lasted for less than a few seconds, no one could take it away from him. He had indeed kissed Sanjana Singh. He smiled as he licked his lips to savour the aftertaste.

Just then his phone rang.

Dada Calling flashed on the screen. Dada, his younger brother *and* the CM.

“Hello,” he gushed.

A brief pause. Then Dada’s voice tore through. “Bhainchod, if you can’t control your fucking stick, why don’t you cut it off and feed it to the crows?”

The professor felt like he had crashed straight from the heaven on to the hard road outside his office on Vikramaditya Marg. He couldn’t say anything.

The awkward pause lingered on for a second or two. “What the fuck did you do to the heroine?”

How does he know? So soon? wondered the professor as he stammered, “Nothing, brother. Nothing happened at all. What’s the—”

“You are all over the TV,” screamed Dada. “The whole world is seeing your antics.”

Ab, media! The professor sensed an opening to build his defence. He said, “But, Dada, it was nothing. It is these media people, they always—”

But the other side went silent. The CM had cut the call.

TV channels flew with the story in no time. *CM’s brother molests actress Sanjana Singh in a campaign meeting.* The video grab played nonstop on every channel. Lakhs of shares on Facebook coupled with juicy comments made the professor the hottest topic in the country for at least half a day. #TharkiProfessor climbed to the top of Twitter trends in no time. TV anchors fumed in their talk shows while NGO activists, women’s commission members, out-of-work actresses, flop writers, and other jobless people of every colour heaped the choicest abuse on Dada and his party.

Any other time and the party would not sweat it; such things happened. No one remembered them by the time election came. But now, with election so close, damage control had to be quick.

The party released a denial in no time. “The professor considers her as his daughter and he was just wishing her luck. The party respects women and has always led the fight for women’s rights. No one has done as much as we have for women’s safety and equality.’ Amenable journalists were asked to go easy. Sanjana Singh was asked to come out and give a statement of her own: ‘He is an elder. Nothing of this sort happened. He was giving me his blessings and the media is making an issue out of a non-issue.’

Lal Mani Singh, as the only party MLA presentable enough for TV channels and sensible enough to negotiate cunning questions by journalists on live TV, hopped from channel to channel lamenting

how low the opposition had stooped to resort to such a disgusting canard. He would then go on about the party being a family and its history of fighting for women's rights.

He prided himself on being Dada's favourite trouble-shooter. The video left no room for doubt—the professor had grabbed her, she had pushed his hand and walked away in disgust. To defend him despite the video required a special talent. Lal Mani let out a smug smile. He deserved it.

But all that invective and high-voltage hyperventilation for over six hours on eight channels had wrung all energy out of him. It was half past midnight when he got into his SUV to go home. He pushed his seat back, tilted the backrest and reclined, eyes closed. He had heard more abuse today on national TV than he had from his wife in their twenty-eight years of togetherness.

'Highly condemnable, despicable show of parochial, predatory mindset towards women.'

'But didn't the CM, who is from this party, once say that if women want to feel secure, they should stay at home?'

'Yours is a party of regressive misogynists, Mr. Lal Mani Singh.'

'Is there a place for such hooligans in public space?'

'They should be locked in a cage and thrown into the Arabian Sea.'

In fact, even Sanjana Singh had taken two hours to agree not to file a molestation case and issue a statement denying the incident. Lal Mani had convinced her by making the professor hold his ears and say sorry in a closed room and by agreeing to finance her next movie as a state initiative for national integration, along with offering her a minister's post if she won.

Throughout the day Lal Mani had issued statements to journalists—cajoled some, threatened others—and done everything possible to get the news off air and also to project an affectionate family image.

His eyes now stung with fatigue as he lay in the car, satisfied with his brave effort. He dozed off within minutes as the SUV cruised through the city roads. The driver woke him when they arrived at his home.

Half-asleep, he walked towards his bedroom, only to find it locked from inside. He frowned. Malti never locked the door. He knocked. No response.

He knocked again. This lazy woman, he thought. Must be sleeping like a dead buffalo. She has absolutely nothing to do except sleep and eat.

No response.

He gathered all his energy and shouted, "Malti, open the goddamned door."

Nothing happened for a while and then he heard random noises from inside, and then approaching footsteps followed by a loud sob and a noisy wail.

He creased his brow in anger. Not the best time for new-bride tantrums.

"What is this, Malti? Open the bloody door," he said, furious.

The latch turned, the door opened, and out emerged Malti, much larger than her true size, with her hair open, spread all over her face, eyes red and swollen, ready to pop out any moment, and face twisted with visceral rage. As she saw him, she screamed, "Why have you come here?"

Lal Mani Singh forgot his anger. Was everything okay? Or had the beautician overdone her hair?

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"So, what was the colour today?" she shouted. "Red, black, or did she forget to wear one?"

He stood still, staring at her like an idiot, too shocked to react.

Her fury continued to rain fire. "Go and get into the ghaghra

of that poetess,” she continued, shivering with tremendous anger, like a human grenade ready to explode.

Fuck! How did she know? He summoned all softness he could and whispered, “Ah, these press people. After all these years you believe what they write? Haven’t you seen how these guys wag their tails for a chicken bone and booze bottle?”

But she pushed him with a hyper violent force.

He fell a few steps back and would have fallen on the floor had he not held the sofa armrest in time. He gnashed his teeth. “*Bhain ki Lau*—” but before he could complete she threw something on the floor.

It split into three parts on impact—a back lid, a front panel, and a battery. A cell phone. His old cell phone.

How the hell did it fall in her hands? Had she read all their messages?

“That whore sends you love and kisses and you ask her what colour is her basement today?” she screamed one final time and slammed the door in his face.

He looked around the empty living room. He knew the servants would have woken up and would have enjoyed the show. And that she would not listen to him; not tonight. And that he would have to sleep on the sofa.

He threw his briefcase aside, picked up a scotch bottle from the bar, and gulped a large helping in one go. The stinging taste of the alcohol burnt his throat but cooled his head.

“Why doesn’t the bitch die?” he murmured as he switched off the lights and fell onto the large sofa in the living room.

SMOKY PATHAN

I hate apartment basements every time I see the inch-thick layer of dust on my Royal Enfield Bullet. Fine, I am taking it out today after full three months but isn’t living in gated communities all about keeping dirt away?

Of the twenty-year-old vintage, with the engine of the old, gear on the right, brake on the left, my Bullet packs a mean punch. Every time I ride up the basement ramp, I feel as conspicuous as a bottle of Coke in a crate of Limca. Because in that stretch, due to some strange acoustic dynamics, the regular thumping beat of the bike turns into enormous demonic thunder and echoes through the building like a lonely buffalo coughing in a giant, empty drum.

Today, the beast will go out for a ride in the sun. I plan to meet Abdul Khan, the best Bullet mechanic I know, my friend of the old, and the third musketeer of Dada’s erstwhile shooting squad. I meet him every seven or eight months but today I will peek in. Perhaps deep enough.

That perennial laughter on his face, that everlasting mirth, even in the squalor of that squatted hutment in the middle of acres-wide illegal Bangladeshi slum. I want to see if that laughter wilts just a little on learning of Lal Mani's cars and guards and guns and flags.

I want to see how real his laughter is.

The bike starts with only a few extra kicks, much like an old lover ever ready to forgive and embrace. It pulsates into motion, glides over the basement ramp, out of the apartment gate, and onto the road.

The gentle rhythm of movement, throaty thumping beat, top view of the world, and a serene drifting in timelessness—nothing matches the slow orgasm of a Royal Enfield at 30kph in third gear!

Abdul comes from a lineage of Pathans from Dhanbad. His father ran away decades ago to escape the bloody coal mafia war that wiped out almost all the men in the family, and set up a bicycle repair shop in Ghaziabad. But teenaged Abdul found fixing punctures too tame for his liking. A free-willed boy with flaming ambitions and no aversion to violence, he joined Dada's team of musclemen and rose fast to prominence.

Three of us formed Dada's final solution to any problem not amenable to cajoling, bargaining, or mere threats. Abdul led from the front as the indomitable tiger with superhuman courage. I did precision shooting and took down men from half a kilometre with a Dragunov SVD 59 sniper rifle. And Lal Mani Singh, an almost friend with no particular skill and a diffident, awkward persona, brought us tea and cigarettes when not being pushed around by us; a total tag along, tolerated only for amusement during the hunt.

I turn the bike in the narrow lane that emerges from the main road connecting Sadar Bazar to Bus Stand. Rows of broken cycle

rickshaws tied together with several bicycle chains line up one side of the road while shanties, makeshift tea stalls, and a series of auto repair shops dot the other.

As I manoeuvre through the overflowing human life from the slums on to the road, a massive flex board emerges from behind the trees: *Abdul Khan Bullet Mistri*.

Four Bullets stand parked between the road and his shack, made of bamboo, hay, and an occasional patch of plastic sheet. A fifth stands undressed—its petrol tank, gearbox, and engine open, strewn all around it—marking the other end of Abdul's territory.

I recognize the teenage boy sitting on his haunches tightening the gearbox screws with the focus of an artist.

"Where's papa, Chintu?" I ask as I park the bike.

He turns around, nods a polite *namaste*, and points to inside of the shack. "Just coming."

The ramshackle hut serves as the workshop, storefront, social hangout, rest house, and sometimes even an extension of his house for Abdul.

I sit down on the broken chair with three legs, with two half-brick pieces pushed beneath the broken metal stump making the fourth one. A wooden *divan* with a grimy folded mattress on one side and a blanket on top serves as the observation post cum retiring room for Abdul as his son Chintu works hard on the bikes. Across the cot, in a corner, lies a huge dump of old and rusted motorcycle silencers, luggage carriers, mud guards, and back rests—accumulated over past several years, waiting for the right customer in pursuit of an attractive enough bargain.

Everything seems identical to when I was last here six months ago. Only, I can't see Abdul as yet.

Abdul differs from your stereotypical seven-foot Pathan, willing to kill or die for his friend, singing 'Yaari hai imaan mera' every two minutes, in that he is not seven feet. And that he never

sings. But he will anyway kill or die for you if he counts you as one of his own.

Very much a friend you would love to get drunk with and a brother you would want to take along in a fight, he is cheerful in a noisy way and a firm believer in man's own power over his destiny. And a non-believer in a way only poets can be.

Like Mirza Ghalib. "I am a Muslim but I drink five times a day while my wife does all the *rozhas*," he says.

The plastic sack curtain rises and out he emerges. His eyes glitter on seeing me.

"How are you?" he says. We shake hands as he sits down on the wooden diwan, turns around and shouts looking at the nearby tea stall. "Gyan, send two cups of tea."

He then pulls out a plastic pouch from beneath the newspaper on the wooden cot, and takes out some dried ganja leaves on his palm. Crushing them with his thumb and picking and throwing out the seeds as he looks up.

"Give this bike to me," he grins as his thumb keeps grinding the weed. "Eighty thousand."

Ah, there again. Every time I visit his shop he starts with an offer to buy my bike.

I smile. "Don't want to sell."

He doesn't protest. He knew the answer all along.

He fishes out a cigarette, presses out the tobacco off the open end on to the ground, and pushes the last remnants of tobacco on his palm. Then he mixes the tobacco with crushed ganja leaves, fills them up in the cigarette to finish a functional joint, and offers it to me.

I take the joint, light it up, and pull in a deep drag. The warm smoke goes deep inside and the burnt smell of ganja wafts in. I hold the smoke for a while, breathe in through the mouth, and then let out a prolonged exhale. A thick column of smoke rises up

to fill the inside of the shanty. I take one more drag before I give it to Abdul.

A little boy in a soiled vest walks in with two cups of tea. I pick them, sip one, and put the other beside Abdul. The boy leaves.

Abdul closes his eyes as he sucks on the joint.

"I met Lal Mani," I drop the bomb.

Abdul takes in the smoke and looks at me as he exhales. Then he takes one more drag.

No reaction?

I stare at him. He knows I want my answer.

He passes on the joint to me and calls in his four-year-old eighth son. "Bobby, come here."

The boy, in a squeaky clean blue T-shirt, cheap denim jeans, and shoes, comes running.

"Son, what did you eat today?" he asks. "Tell uncle."

The child looks down, shakes his head in a rhythm only four-year-olds can, and says, "Goat."

Abdul looks at me. "Today morning, he said Papa I want to eat goat, so I got half a kilo meat and got it cooked."

I pull two drags in and pass the joint back to Abdul while wondering how much would each, in a family of ten, get out of half a kilo mutton.

He puffs on the joint and says, "I work hard, drink booze worth five hundred every day, rear eight children, and feed them meat every day. I never go to any motherfucker to beg. My neighbours burn in envy." He pauses for effect, exhales, and then mocks his neighbours: "*They cook meat everyday.*" Again, he takes a long drag on the joint. "Motherfuckers. Why does your ass burn if I cook meat every day?" He pauses again as he takes the last drag and throws the butt to a corner.

Little Bobby, bored already, runs away to play with another kid of the same age in the nearby auto repair shop.

“I don’t touch the bitches,” he says, pointing to the latest model of the city cruiser Thunderbird, launched by the same company, Royal Enfield. “The engine is fucked up. If I get a chance to meet the company folks, I’ll tell them they are fucking the bike.” He pauses. “Chintu works on them. I only work with the old Bullet.”

I cannot decide if I really am nodding or if the ganja is making me feel that I am nodding.

He continues. “Look, I am a Pathan’s child. I live with my head held high. Not afraid of any motherfucker and not going to any motherfucker for help.”

The world feels light all of a sudden. If you have nothing to beg for and no one to fear, how does it even matter if someone else carries an army of commandos and ministerial bootlickers?

“But he was a *chutiya*,” I let out a half-hearted protest.

Abdul doesn’t register it.

“This last week, I bought an Electra, ’85 model. There, the black one outside.” He points to the new bike. “Now, I will go to Dhanbad on that.”

I look at him in amazement. He looks happy in an absolute way. You cannot argue with a perfectly happy man.

“Abdul bhai,” greets a short, stocky man in mid-twenties as he walks in.

Abdul smiles. The new entrant hoists himself on the wooden counter that holds tools, old tyres, tubes, and sundry boxes. Abdul throws the ganja pouch at him. He pulls out a *chillum* from deep within a drawer on the wooden counter, taps it twice, blows it, and then begins preparing the ganja for a chillum round.

“You know Modi?” Abdul is now going into the storyteller mode. “Not the politician but the industrialist. Modi of the large mills?”

Of course I have heard about him but I don’t know if he asked me, so I stay silent.

But he doesn’t need an answer and rants on. “I met a guy who has the silver of Modi’s father and now Modi wants to buy it back. But he is not ready to return it even for crores of rupees.”

The chillum maker jumps in as he tears open a *bidi* and mixes the ganja in the tobacco. “You may be a billionaire but you can’t take back your family silver,” he grins. “Now, go fuck yourself.”

Idiots, both of them. Empty pride of someone who doesn’t amount to anything himself.

I cannot take it, so I interrupt.

“So what?” I ask. “Modi is such a big industrialist, he has everything in life. Why would he even bother if someone has some old utensils his grandfather boiled tea in?”

Abdul seeks to explain. “No. Modi’s father needed money so he mortgaged his utensils to this person. Now, Modi has made a lot of money and wants his utensils back but this guy says no. Even for crores. Such a huge insult! You can’t even get your father’s silver back? We had a man in our village who held Tata’s family silver. Tata may be the richest in the world but this man is bigger than him.”

The chillum maker taps the chillum like a contented artist and offers it to Abdul. Abdul passes it on to me. I nod in acknowledgement. Lighting a chillum is the highest honour.

I suck hard on the chillum as the maker holds a lighted matchstick at its other end. The tobacco and ganja mix lights up. Three short drags and then a long one and I exhale thick grey smoke like a steam engine breathing smoke in overdrive. I follow it up with another long drag and pass it on to Abdul.

The potent mixture hits straight up. My head goes dizzy and eyes blink faster.

“All of this is useless, Abdul. How does it matter?” I ask. “You do well in life, you can do so much. Even if an idiot somewhere

claims to hold a pan which he says belonged to your grandfather, who cares?”

Abdul takes drag after drag in merry abandonment. The chillum maker gets impatient at what he perhaps sees as my refusal to see the point. “It’s like if I kidnapped your father and locked him and if you are not able to free him, isn’t it an insult to you?” he says.

I ignore his stupid argument. Meanwhile, Abdul passes on the chillum to him and he gets busy puffing it.

I turn to Abdul, his silence over my last comment cements my upper hand. I move in to seal my victory. “The world has reached the moon,” I say. “Look at what people all around are achieving and we talk of three-hundred-year-old pots and pans.”

Abdul looks at nothingness for a while, as if considering the merits of what I just said, then shakes his head. “*Shaan badi cheez hai*. Honour above all else.”

I smile. We both knew he would say just that.

The chillum maker finishes off in three long drags. Our heads do their little dance—where the head shakes ever so slightly to each side as if connected with a very tight spring to the rest of the body. I close my eyes. The universe lights up in fiery red and bright yellow against a dark canvas. The steady sound of street traffic settles in a constant drone. Nothing else moves.

And then I remember. Time to leave.

I pull myself up on my feet but Abdul taps my hand. I slump back onto the three-legged chair. He gives the chillum maker a fifty-rupee note and asks him to get cigarettes and tea. The man leaves.

Abdul turns to me in all seriousness. “Stay away from them. They are motherfuckers.”

I try to open my eyes, heavy as a sack by now. They blink

more than they open. I see Abdul as a quick succession of still photographs.

“Who are you talking about?”

He continues in his own vein. “Look, you had your father-in-law. He sold Chaudhary Market to that motherfucker Dada to buy your freedom. But for me . . .”

My head jerks in shock. Dark canvas, yellow, and red, all disappear. The music of the street traffic stops. Chaudhary Market? My father-in-law sold his premium property to Dada?

“What did you just say about Chaudhary Market?” I ask.

“Why, don’t you know that TNT sold Chaudhary Market to Dada for peanuts to set you free?” he asks in a tone that smacks of accusation.

“No,” I say.

“Well, you had suddenly disappeared after the release from jail. TNT, who was Dada’s good friend, asked him to let you go and not come after you,” Abdul continues. “Dada asked for Chaudhary Market and TNT had to agree.”

I sit up straight and hold myself steady. Almost. The haze has vanished and I can see the world again. In all its clarity. Abdul would not lie. I can understand TNT not telling me but why didn’t even Jaya ever tell me?

And all this while I thought Dada had just smiled and blessed his best disciple good luck for a clean life. I did suspect that his friendship with TNT had something to do with it, but Chaudhary Market?

Abdul has more to say.

“I was released a week after you. I went straight to Dhanbad because my grandmother had died, didn’t talk to anyone about it.” He pauses then goes on. “This bastard sent a hit on me the same night.”

“What!?”

“Yes. He sent men to kill me. They fired at our house and burnt it down. We got saved because all of us were in Dhanbad.”

“Bhainchod,” I say like a mad man. “Dada sent a hit on you? Why would he do that?”

“How do I know?” Abdul states with an impassiveness only he can muster. “Possibly he thought I too was leaving him like you.”

My mind spins like camphor in a bowl of water. My rich, snooty contractor father-in-law threw away prime property to secure my release. My wife never told me about it. My guru, my mentor, exacted the biggest pound of flesh he could to let me live and sent killers after my best friend. Both of us had killed several times for him and escaped our own death by a whisker to save him.

I pick the water bottle nearby and empty it.

“That’s why I say,” Abdul finishes, “stay away.”

I take a few deep breaths, then ask, “Why did you come back? Wouldn’t he come after you now?”

Abdul’s entire body tenses up. Like a tiger who can never let another’s roar go unanswered, he says, “I am a Pathan’s son, bhainchod. Won’t die like this.”

“But still,” I insist. Both he and I know that a hot lead piece coming out of a gun muzzle doesn’t care for your parentage.

He sobers down. “I was away for a long time. Settled in Dhanbad but then got fed up. Every one was an uncle and every second old man was a grandfather there. Came here seven years ago. No one knows who I am anymore.”

Then, after a pause, he adds, “Twenty-thirty years is a long time. Now that the *madarchod* is the CM and stays in Lucknow, he wouldn’t be bothered about such an old story.”

The chillum maker returns with a pack of Gold Flake. The same tea boy follows, this time with four cups. We light a cigarette each and sip on the hot, sweet liquid with a sick sticky taste.

Fifteen minutes later, as I manoeuvre my bike through running street kids, flying chicken, rickshaws, cycles, and scooters, Abdul’s parting gift of a fresh joint safe in my shirt pocket, only one question runs through my mind: TNT sold Chaudhary Market to save my life and Jaya never even mentioned it to me!