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A *Granta* Best Young British Novelist 2013

Sunjeev
Sahota
The
Year
of the
Runaways

'All you can do is surrender, happily, to its power'
Salman Rushdie



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think what he might be thinking, but this was the first time she'd seen him in five days, since the night of Avtar's collapse.

'I thought you'd be at work.'

'I'm on lates. I'm going in an hour.'

She nodded. 'Will you – will you let me in?'

He turned sideways on and she stepped past. He'd moved his mattress into the alcove, beside the chimney breast. A dirty plate lay beside it, a spoon atop that.

'How's the patient?' she asked.

'I've not seen them.'

'They're only in their room.'

He nodded, said nothing.

'This is for your boss,' and she held out an envelope. 'Avtar gave it me yesterday. So thank you. For the doctor.'

'Wasn't me.'

'Still.'

Too scared to dial an ambulance, Tochi had called Malkeet, who rang back a few minutes later to say a doctor was on his way and what payment they were both expecting.

'I'll leave it here,' Narinder said, placing the envelope on the windowsill.

'Thank you.'

She smiled flatly and nodded to leave. He wanted to punish her for denying them a chance. He wanted to hold her thighs apart and suck her cunt into his mouth. He wanted to make her happy. His hands jerked out of their pockets.

'Kanyakumari,' he said.

She turned round.

'Where I'd go if I could go anywhere.'

'I don't know it.'

'It's at the end of India. Nothing but sea from there.'

'It sounds very beautiful.'

'I wouldn't know.'

She tilted her head to the side. 'Why there?'

'Because it's the end and there can be no more false dreams.'

'Only real ones? Then are they still dreams?'

'I'm leaving,' he said.

'To go there?' she asked, lightly mocking.

'I'm leaving here.'

She didn't seem surprised. 'When?'

'Maybe two weeks. After Christmas.'

He was very dark, much darker than Randeep, and shorter, but he looked strong. The tendons in his neck stood out. Twenty-one, twenty-two. One or two years older than him, anyway. So another he'd have to call bhaji.

'I've got a spare mattress in the van. He'll be staying in yours, OK, Ronny?'

It wasn't really a question but Randeep said he was absolutely fine with that.

He and Tochi carried the mattress up the two flights and leaned it against the wall. They'd have to take out the wardrobe first.

'Wait,' Randeep said and placed his suitcase to one side, out of harm's way.

'Cares more about that fucking suitcase . . .' Vinny said.

They bullied the wardrobe out and shoved in the mattress and then Vinny said he had to go.

'Have a beer,' Gurpreet said, joining them on the landing.

Vinny said he couldn't. 'Was meant to be back an hour ago. She'll have the face on enough as it is.' He turned to the new guy and made a star of his hand.

'Five sharp, you understand? These lot'll show you the ropes.'

When the three of them were left, Gurpreet folded his arms on the shelf of his gut, slowly. 'So. Where you from?'

Tochi walked into the room and closed the door. Gurpreet stared after him, then pushed off the banister and huffed downstairs.

Randeep waited. He wanted to make a good first impression. He wanted a friend. He knocked and opened the door, stepping inside. The guy looked to be asleep already, still in his clothes and boots, and knees drawn up and hands pressed between them. He'd moved his mattress as far from Randeep's as was possible in that small room: under the window, where the chill would be blowing down on him, through the tape.

'Would you like a blanket? I have one spare,' Randeep whispered. He asked again and when he again got no reply he tiptoed forward and folded out his best blanket and spread it over his new room-mate. Downstairs, there were still two rotis foil-wrapped in the fridge. He heated them straight on the hob. He liked the froggy way they puffed up. Then he coated them with some mango pickle. He didn't want to join the others in the front room, where he could hear the TV blaring, but he didn't want to disturb his new room-mate either. So he stayed there, marooned in the middle of the kitchen because there wasn't a single clean

'I'm sorry about my dad,' she said. 'He's overprotective. After everything that's happened.'

She was trussed up in scarlet clothes and gold jewellery, chunni twisted vine-like across her throat. Only her eyes gave away her age – some fourteen years on Tochi.

'Do you want to get married?' she asked.

'I don't think your father's going to let that happen.'

'It's my decision.'

Tochi nodded.

'Your Panjabi's different.'

He nodded again.

'It doesn't bother me, you know. If you're not Jat Sikh. Been there, done that.' She added, 'T-shirt so wasn't worth the effort.'

What a ridiculous situation. Sitting here with this middle-aged woman who had to dress for the part of a virgin bride. He supposed it was the same for her as it was for him, that she too felt the grand impossibility of trying to recast her life. He could hear their voices through the door, the father's especially.

'He sounds angry,' she said. 'Maybe you should go.'

He stayed where he was. He'd see it through to the end.

It wasn't the father, though, it was Auntie who flung open the door and charged towards him. 'Is he right? What are you?'

'I am a man,' Tochi said.

'Don't get clever. You a chamaar?'

Tochi stood up. 'I've told you what I am. Now give me what you owe me.'

And this – this demand – seemed to enrage her further, and her eyes widened horribly. 'You bhanchod cunt! You dirty beast! What do you think you are?'

'Davinder,' her husband said, a hand on her shoulder. But she wouldn't be restrained.

'To think we trusted you. To think we let you into our home. Marry my niece? Go back to cleaning shit, you dirty sister-fucking cunt.' She spat at his feet. 'Go on. Get out of my home. I said get out!'

Uncle passed him a few notes and Tochi turned to leave.

'Get out!' she screamed. 'You people stink the whole world up!'

She knocked once, then opened the door. He was lying in the squashed centre of his mattress, an arm across his forehead. Even in the dark she could see that his eyes were open. She remained in the doorway.

‘Leave me alone.’

She didn’t move.

‘Don’t you ever ask me to go there again.’

She nodded. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Can I just ask you a question?’

‘Please,’ she said, but in a voice full of anguish, as if she knew what lay ahead. And yet still she had come. She knew what was going to happen to her and still she’d come.

He spoke evenly, as if detached from every word. ‘Where was God when they set me on fire?’

‘Please, Tochi.’

‘When they knifed my sister’s stomach open?’

‘Tochi.’

‘When they cut off my fifteen-year-old brother’s balls?’

Her tears were falling. ‘I don’t know. I really don’t know.’

‘Where was your God when I couldn’t even tell my parents’ bodies apart?’

She carried herself down the stairs and into the kitchen. She tried the switch – she needed light, this darkness was plugging up her throat – but nothing happened. Water, then, and she gulped down a glass, breathing hard as she chucked the last inch down the sink. She turned round, tentatively, as though afraid of what awaited her. The room was still. The clock said it was a quarter past midnight. The blinds made a cage on the wall. She checked the silver tin in the cutlery drawer: empty. She fumbled about under the sink and found a box of candles, lit one straight from the hob and stood it on a red saucer in the middle of the table. She sat down. The candle cast the room in antique grace. She closed her eyes and bowed her head and brought her hands together on the plain wood of the table. She could feel her breath shaking inside her. *I am the dust at your feet. I am the dust at your feet.* She couldn’t hear Him. *I am the dust at your feet. I am the dust at your feet.* No. No Him, him, no one, nothing. Only black silence and dead space. Her hands were trembling. She tried again. She couldn’t. Birds flew past her shoulder and crashed through the wall. A river rushed out of her chest. The words dried away.

She raised her fingers to her head, to her turban. She lifted it off and put it on

Tochi, in the yard. He looked like he'd only come out to catch some air, head tipped up. He remained in that pose for several minutes, unmoving, as if in some staring contest with the sky, and then he zipped up his jacket, decisively, and went to work.

Avtar climbed to the landing and tried Tochi's door. It was locked, so, limping slightly, he fetched the metal pole from his rucksack. The first lock broke away and he listened out, for Randeep, for the girl. Nothing. He broke off the remaining two and then the gentlest of touches sent the door swinging open and he walked right into Tochi's room.

He called Bal, the five thick rolls of money stuffed into his jeans pockets.

'Come and get your money.'

'Great. We'll be there tomorrow.'

'Now. I won't have it tomorrow.'

Bal arranged for one his local cousins to meet Avtar outside the gardens.

Avtar passed the cash over. Then he waited. He sat in the kitchen with the lights off and he waited.

Tochi stopped off at the station – he needed his tickets to London – but the counters were all closed, the green blinds laddered down. He spent some time trying to work the self-service machines, then gave up and went back to the house. He unlocked the kitchen door, not flicking the switch. He could see Avtar sitting there, at the table. Tochi said nothing and went through the beads and up the two flights. He saw that his door was broken. Inside, the bottom drawer of the wardrobe had been pulled out, the dummy panel smashed through. He went downstairs.

'Give me my money.'

'It's gone.'

'Give me my money.'

'I said it's gone.'

'Where's it gone?'

Avtar stared. 'You stole my job. I stole your money.'

'Where's it gone?'

'Fuck you.'

Tochi punched him, his knuckles slamming into Avtar's cheekbone. 'Get me my money.'

His nose was bleeding. His face ached. 'Fucking thieving chammaar.' He spat in Tochi's face and charged forward. But he was weak now, his blows thin, and Tochi easily pushed him off.

'Get me my money,' he said again, drawing his fist back behind his head and driving, extending it into Avtar's stomach. Avtar heaved his head snapping

EPILOGUE

Tickets. She double-checked the reservation, what time she had to be at St Pancras, then slotted the orange cards back into her purse and put the purse under her pillow. Her suitcase was packed and ready at the side of her old dressing table. She went downstairs. The dishwasher needed emptying and after that she wiped down the kitchen surfaces. There was enough milk to last them another day and the fruit bowl held plenty of bananas, the only food that had never got stuck in her father's dentures. She wasn't sure why she still bought so many. She wrung out the dishcloth, left it by the sink, and went down the hall and into the front room.

'I'm still not happy about you going on your own,' Tejpal said.

'I'm sure I'll be fine.' She sat on the sofa, her reflection warped in the fifty-inch TV screen that dominated the room.

'We could have scattered the ashes here,' Tejpal said.

'It's not what he would have wanted.'

'Then maybe take Sabrina with you, if I can still get a ticket.'

Sabrina, Tejpal's wife of four years, looked up from her iPhone. She seemed horrified, as if she'd been asked to donate a limb. 'I really don't think so.'

'And what was wrong with Heathrow?' Tejpal said. 'Why are you going all the way to Manchester?'

'Maybe she's meeting someone,' Sabrina suggested, laughing. 'A secret affair. How funny would that be?'

'Sabrina!' Tejpal said. 'Don't be so rude.'

Sabrina sighed luxuriously and as she stood her emerald sari shimmered against her long brown arms. 'I want to go. The table's booked for eight.'

He started to lace up his shoes, presenting everyone with a view of his head. Forty this year, he was receding determinedly. So much so, it looked as if he'd taken to some sort of spray-on thickening agent. Narinder smiled discreetly and bent to her newspaper. She read a paragraph, until she felt forced to look up again, and saw Sabrina mouthing something to Tejpal. And then Tejpal spoke:

'Narinder, actually, I wanted to say that while you're away we thought we might get the place valued. You know, to get an idea.'

She nodded. She wasn't surprised. She'd overheard Sabrina on the phone to one of her friends about the matter, about getting out of this dreary old house, about the problem of the sister. 'That sounds good,' Narinder said.

'We've not decided anything, so I don't want you to worry. And of course you're part of this family as much as anyone.'

'But we wanted to be upfront with you,' Sabrina said, taking over, as if she thought her husband was russyfooting. 'We want to move closer to my family.'