

Chapter One

That morning the past spoke to me through a face. Mohan's face. I'd come out of the mouth of a Delhi metro station and was getting ready to cross the street when I saw him on the other side. He was standing on the pavement and peering at me through his round glasses. Two decades had passed since we last spoke in Gandhi Colony in the nineties. Yet he looked exactly the same. The white loincloth, the worn sandals, the sad smile... They were all there.

The rest of the world disappeared the instant we locked eyes. It was as if someone had thrown a switch to turn off the traffic, the billboards, the shopfronts, and every other face on the street. I didn't even feel the weight of the bag digging into my shoulder. The sight of Mohan had taken over my senses. I was impelled towards him like someone bound by a spell. It took an angry car horn to snap me out of it. I blinked to find myself standing in the middle of the road with the tumult of the street blaring all round me. A furious driver was glaring at me from behind the wheel of a Toyota compact that had screeched to a halt a few inches away. I raised a hand in apology and removed myself from the path of the car. When I looked for Mohan, he was nowhere to be seen.

I hadn't thought of him in years. Or, for that matter, of anyone in Gandhi Colony. Now the old faces were returning. So vividly that I could see the whites of their eyes. Before I knew it, they'd begun talking. Conversations from many years ago sounded in my head. I'd never thought I'd hear them again. Until that morning when the past decided to speak.

I had no idea that Gandhi Colony existed when I came to Delhi in the summer of 1990. The plan was for me to stay at my uncle's house while pursuing a bachelor's degree in economics at Delhi University. My father was dead set on making me an accountant. I was just as determined not to become one. The day after I reached Delhi, I wrote home to say that I was

going to study English literature instead. That was what I'd wanted all along. But I'd been unable to say it to Papa's face.

As I was writing the letter, I could see Papa's long, flat face grow longer and flatter as he inhaled its words. By the time he'd finished reading his face, that culminated in a dark mole at the end of a non-existent chin, reminded me of an exclamation mark. He stared disbelievingly at the words, before springing from his chair to hustle from his general merchant's shop to one of Ashaghar's few STD phone booths from where you could call long distance. As I waited for that call, Papa's face remained frozen in exclamation-mark mode in my head. The call came five days after I had posted the letter. The landline connection between Delhi and Ashaghar was dodgy at best and the static-ridden telephone line ate up half of Papa's words. I didn't have to hear too many to figure out what he was saying, though. He was telling me to stop this madness immediately and go back to becoming an accountant.

Once he had vented his spleen, Mummy came on.

"Your Papa says he won't give you a single paisa if you don't do what he says," she said.

I'd already thought long and hard about that one and decided Mummy would never let Papa cut me off without a penny. Of course, I didn't tell her that. Instead, I invoked her unshakeable faith in God. "I'm sure God won't let that happen," I said.

There was a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the telephone line. "You don't make your mother's life any easier," she snapped before hanging up.

Papa wasn't one to give up without a fight and Uncle found himself in the middle of the crossfire. Uncle was a plodding government clerk who believed the best way to live was to lie as low as possible. But he was Mummy's younger brother and could do little except

acquiesce when Papa exhorted him to talk to me. Uncle's idea of a talk went something like this:

“Vaibhav beta, please think everything over once.”

“I already have, Uncle.”

“Okay, then I have nothing more to say.”

That wasn't good enough for Papa who'd tell him to talk to me again. The next few days passed with Uncle and me re-hashing our lines. In the end, I decided it was best if I stopped living at Uncle's house and moved to a rented barsati. In 1990 all you could build above two stories in Delhi's residential areas was a single room with a terrace that was known as a barsati. Since a barsati cost far less to rent than a flat, it was home to a legion of struggling writers, artists, and musicians. I figured if they could survive there so could I. Uncle was far too relieved to quibble; he greenlit the idea immediately and even offered to help with the rent.

Next morning, I began scouring the city for my barsati. I worked from a list that Uncle had acquired from a real estate broker. In a bid to save money, I stayed away from auto rickshaws and taxis. The day was spent squeezing myself in and out of DTC buses that were yet to be air-conditioned and were packed with sweaty bodies crushed against each other. The mop of black hair on my head was soon drenched with sweat. The searing breeze stung my sandalwood-colored face and my throat was parching no matter how much water I downed. Yet I flowed with an enthusiasm as irrepressible as the Delhi dust that refuses to settle even on a still day.

By the afternoon I needed every bit of that enthusiasm. I'd been told that the places I was visiting were within my budget of five hundred rupees a month. When I got there that wasn't the case.

“Five hundred rupees? No.”

“But I was told...”

“Are you hard of hearing? *Nahin*. This is Delhi not the back of beyond.”

Where the rent wasn't an issue something else was wrong.

“College student, no, friends come late at night, girlfriends, parties...Not for us.”

“Sir, I can assure you...”

“*Nahin*, I'm sorry.”

Then there was something for which I was completely unprepared. A square-faced man inspected me with a pair of hooded eyes. “Are you a Sikh?” he asked.

I was surprised. I didn't have a turban or a beard. “Do I look like a Sikh?”

“These days many of them are pretending to be normal people, cutting off their hair, shaving off their beards. One must be careful. The last thing I want in my house is a terrorist.”

That was my first inkling of how much Delhi had come to resent its Sikhs. There wasn't a single Sikh in Ashghar. There the Sikh militancy existed as a remote news item that sounded on the radio when a bomb went off or someone important was gunned down. In Delhi it was as palpable as a gun held to your head. Less than a decade had passed since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by two Sikh bodyguards in the heart of Delhi. A day after the assassination, an army of vengeful goons took to the streets to teach the Sikhs a lesson. Within a few days they massacred thousands of Sikhs and burned down their homes and businesses. Delhi had borne the brunt of militant anger since then. Gun-toting policemen prowled its streets. Metal detectors frisked outside its buildings. Police roadblocks sprang up as its streets emptied after dark.

“I'm not a Sikh,” I said.

But the man had made up his mind. He said no with a shake of his head.

As I made my way to the next place on my list, I decided to point out that I wasn't a Sikh upfront. No one in Delhi would have heard of a remote small town like Ashaghar. But they'd know the state where it was located.

"I'm from Bihar," I told my potential landlord.

He glared at me. "You Biharis are a bunch of thugs. Get going before I have you thrown out."

As I stood gawking at him, he mistook my amazement for obstinacy. "Purshottam, Suresh," he called out.

I beat it before the reinforcements arrived.

Evening had begun to gather in the sky by the time I reached the Guptas' bungalow in Jawahar Nagar. A maid in a green salwar kameez answered the doorbell. She asked me to wait outside while she got her mistress.

Ten minutes drifted past before the front door finally opened. It was the maid. She had come out to collect the washing from the clothesline slung across the garden. She must have caught the disappointment on my face when I realized it was her instead of her mistress.

"Madam will be along soon," she said. Her voice was kind. Perhaps she already knew how this was going to turn out.

Soon a rotund, round-eyed woman wrapped in a blue sari filled the doorway. She cast a contemptuous look at my dust-covered shoes, sweaty shirt, and faded jeans. "The place is taken," she said before shutting the door in my face.

The weight of the day's rejections bore down on me as I turned to leave. I didn't have it in me to visit the next place on my list. I barely had enough in the tank to haul myself back to Uncle's house.

"Babu," it was the maid who was still in the garden.

"Yes."

“We don’t have a barsati in our colony. And our colony is not high class like this neighborhood. But you will get a room there.”

By now I didn’t give a damn about barsatis or how classy the neighborhood was. I just wanted to find a place to live.

“Where is it?” I asked her.

“Not far from here. It’s called Gandhi Colony. Go there and ask for Jogi.”

A dirt track, no more than twenty meters long, separated Gandhi Colony from Jawahar Nagar. I crossed it with weary legs to find myself in the colony’s main alley. It was dusty and unpaved like the ones that branched out to its right and left. Over the years, it had morphed into the colony’s market. The homes huddled in the smaller alleys branching off it.

Two lines of shops faced each other across the main alley. They were housed in squat wooden sheds or simply had a roof made up of a tarpaulin sheet held up by bamboo sticks. The path running between them was chewed up on both sides by street vendors selling produce from wooden carts shored up by bicycle tires. The heat was receding, with evening settling in, and the market was filling with people. I had to jump out of the way of jangling bicycles and belching motor scooters looking to squeeze through the crowd. One driver swung around to admonish me. “Do you have eyes or buttons? If you want to die, go die somewhere else.” I held up a hand in apology and edged forward the best I could.

Halfway down the alley stood a skeletal arjun tree shorn of leaves. A low concrete platform encircled the tree trunk. A picture of the god Ram was propped up against the trunk. The image resembled the actor who had played him in the television show based on *The Ramayana*. Fresh marigold garlands swathed the picture and diyas flickered in front of it. People were pausing to fold their hands before going round the tree. It felt strange to see a tree named after a character in *The Mahabharata* housing a temple dedicated to a god from

The Ramayana. I wondered if someone had got their epics mixed up. I didn't get to wonder for long. A prod in the back told me to get going.

Two men accosted me right after I passed the arjun tree. They were rakishly thin with pointy heads, long noses, and beady eyes. Even their unsuccessful attempts at growing a beard were identical right down to the thinness of the fuzz. It would've been hard to tell them apart if they didn't dress so differently. Aslam was all in white—kurta, pajama, and skull cap—while Kishore had donned the saffron robe of a sadhu and sported an emphatic tilak on his forehead. Both thrust a pamphlet in my face. Aslam's pamphlet came from the Mosque Preservation League and had to do with preserving the mosques that Kishore's organization, the Temple Reclamation Front, wanted torn down and replaced with Hindu temples. Kishore's pamphlet explained that these mosques needed to be removed so that the temples, on whose ruins they had been constructed, could be restored.

Normally, I would have waved them away. The hard look in their eyes made me think otherwise. I accepted the pamphlets, thinking I'd throw them away later. Kishore and Aslam glared at each other before stalking off in opposite directions. I was relieved to see them go.

I tucked the pamphlets in my trouser pockets and moved forward. A stone bust of the Mahatma stood a few feet ahead. I'd never seen him without his bamboo stave. Its absence seemed to rob him of his authority. The ragged marigold garland he was wearing did not help. His mouth looked like it had eaten a lot of dust over the years and the rest of his face was chipping away and littered with bird droppings, most noticeably on the glasses. There had been a time when the people of Gandhi Colony would stop to fold their hands to the Mahatma. Now the folded hands were reserved for Ram. The neglect had to be demeaning. Maybe that was why he looked forlorn.

The lights went out as I passed the sad Mahatma. Nobody seemed to notice. The generators stuttered to life. Gandhi Colony might have been electrified, but the supply was so

erratic that most shops had bought diesel generators. The rattle from those second-hand contraptions added a nagging backbeat to the usual cacophony of noise. Radios were playing everywhere you could imagine—on shop counters, in people’s hands, in shirt and trouser pockets. The hum of voices would die out when the alley emptied and the number of vehicles diminished in the afternoon. But the radios kept going in full voice right through the waking hours. They had myriad personalities. There were radios for whom speaking was such an effort that they’d cough like old men chockfull of phlegm before spewing out something intelligible. Others had to be tapped, patted, or backslapped out of their stubborn silence. And then there were some whose volume knob had frozen on maximum to leave them hollering. I still have no idea how they were hushed for a few hours every night.

A short man with a pointed face and a mouth left red by chewing betel sidled over. The smell wafting from him reminded me of a garbage bin. Later I learned that he was a garbage man who had been known as AIR or All India Radio for so long that no one remembered his real name.

He asked after my business with a betel-stained smile. I told him I was there to see Jogi. “Which Jogi?” he said.

Confused, I uttered, “What?”

“There is Jogi the Rajput, Jogi the Sikh, Jogi the carpenter and Jogi the electrician.

Which Jogi?”

“I-I came about a room to rent.”

“Ohh,” he drew out the oh as he examined me from head to foot. “Why, you don’t have a home?”

The question caught me off guard. It was a few seconds before I said, “I’m a college student from Bihar.”

His eyes narrowed. “No relatives in Delhi that you can stay with? Or did you run away from home?”

What kind of question was that? AIR laughed at my bemused face. “The room belongs to Jogi the Rajput. You’ll find him there.”

He gestured in the direction of the dhaba at the end of the main alley. I could feel his eyes boring into my back as I walked away. I thought he’d follow me, but he went in the opposite direction.

In a neighborhood where space was gold dust, Jogi’s dhaba was almost as big as a penalty box on a soccer field. It had no walls, simply a roof of tarpaulin sheets held up by bamboo sticks. The seating area was stuffed with as many rickety tables and wobbly straight-backed chairs as could be crowded in. Jogi lorded over it from a charpai placed right in the middle. A cash box squatted beside him with a garlanded picture of Lakshmi propped on it. An incense stick smoked at the goddess’s feet. After completing a transaction, he’d fold his hands to the goddess before placing the money in the cash box. One time, when I noted that Rajputs preferred deities that were far more martial than the goddess of wealth, he said, “What to do, sir? It’s the times. This is not the age of the warrior. It’s the age of the bania. Whoever has the cash rules. Money is the true sword and spear.” When I told him that I was poor despite being a bania, he merely shrugged his shoulders and looked away. His way of dealing with anything that challenged his view of the world was to set it aside.

That day he was laid out on the charpai that had sunk under his weight. His white kurta rose and fell in tune with the rattle of his snoring. He was oblivious to the flies crawling over his face or buzzing about the wiry hair poking out of his ears. The looseness of the kurta didn’t hide his massive shoulders. Add his luxuriant moustache and you’d think he was a subedar-major in one of the Rajput regiments in the army.

I hovered in front of the charpai, wondering how to rouse him from his slumber. A fly did the job for me. It slid through the hair coming out of his ears to settle on his eardrum. Jogi emerged from his nap with a curse. He slapped away the fly and started muttering to himself. Amidst all that, he caught sight of me. Still scratching his ear, he sat up to sit cross-legged in the middle of the charpai and inquired after my business with a movement of his hand. I told him I'd come about the room he had to rent out. The fluster on his face vanished to be replaced by a big smile. He quit scratching his ear. "Hey, Chhotte," he shouted.

A small, dark boy who worked in the dhaba as a server came running.

"Bring a chair."

Chhotte arrived with a white plastic chair that looked so flimsy I wondered if it would collapse under my weight. I sat down and winced as it sank under me.

"What are you standing about for?" Jogi said to Chhotte. "Go get a chai." He turned to me with a smile, "What work do you do?"

He was sizing me up even as he was speaking. The process stalled when I mentioned I was a student at Delhi University. His smile froze before coming back to life. It wasn't as wide as before but somehow seemed more genuine.

"Make the chai special," he called over his shoulder. To me he said, "I'm honored to meet you, sir."

I was far too surprised to say anything.

"One of the great regrets of my life is that I didn't study much," he started. He paused as my chai arrived. His face darkened when he saw it had been served in a glass.

"Didn't I tell you the chai was special?" he barked at Chhotte.

"It's okay," I cut in.

Jogi ignored me. Wagging a thick finger at the boy he said, "When sir comes he is to be served chai in a cup with milk and sugar on the side. Do you understand?"

The petrified boy nodded before rushing off to find a cup. Jogi turned to me with a shake of his head. “He is a mochi by caste, so naturally his head is empty. Back in the village he’d be a true mochi and spend his day working on shoes. But here in the city...” He paused suddenly, his face tightening. “What is your full name?”

“Vaibhav Kumar Agrawal.”

“*Agrawal*,” his face relaxed. He was clearly relieved that I was upper caste like him.

“Consider the room yours, sir,” he smiled.

I was taken aback. We hadn’t even spoken about the rent. Jogi seemed to read my mind. “Don’t worry about the rent, sir.” He glanced furtively to his right and left before leaning forward. “You see, sir, my bitia,” a smile bigger than any I had seen creased his face when he mentioned his young daughter, “I want her to study, do something with her life. But there is very little I can do to help her and my wife is even more uneducated than me. If you could come by in the evenings and help her with her lessons.”

I had feared that I’d have to scrounge to earn my keep and here the remedy had landed in my lap. It wasn’t hard to say yes.

As we shook hands, he said it was best if I didn’t mention this arrangement to anyone. I nodded.

That was when I realized that I hadn’t even seen the room.