

# INDIA CALLING

AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF  
A NATION'S REMAKING

ANAND GIRIDHARADAS



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*To*

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*Mama and Papa and Rukmini,*

*for*

*roots and stories, laughter and love*

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# Dreams

As my flight swooped down toward Bombay, an elderly Indian man leaned over and asked for help with his landing card. We started talking, and he asked why I was visiting India. Actually, I'm moving to India, I told him. His eyes bulged. They darted to my American passport on the tray table and then back up at me.

"We're all trying to go that way," he said after a moment, gesturing toward the plane's tail and beyond it, the paradisiacal West. "You," he added, as if seeking to alert me to a ticketing error, "you're going this way?"

And so it began.

I was twenty-one and fresh out of college. My parents had left India in the 1970s, when the West seemed paved with possibility and India seemed paved with potholes. And now, a quarter century after my father first arrived as a student in America, I was flying east to make a new beginning in the land they had left.

\* \* \*

The first thing I ever learned about India was that my parents had chosen to leave it. They had begun their American lives in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, called Shaker Heights. It was a sprawling neighborhood of brick and Tudor houses, set on vast yards, with the duck-strewn ponds, meandering lanes, and ample sidewalks that had lured millions of Americans into suburbia.

In Shaker Heights the rituals of my parents' youth quickly confronted new ones. Suburban Cleveland was not a place where one could easily cling to the Old Country or take refuge in multiculturalism. So they dug in, assimilated, gave my sister and me childhoods with all the American fixin's. Making snowmen with carrot noses. Washing our Toyota Cressida on Sundays, me in diaper, working with a watering can. Playing catch with a vinyl baseball mitt. Trying in vain to build a tree house. Catching possums in baited cages. Meandering through summer block parties, where the rules of normal life seemed suspended: the roads were emptied of cars; fire engines rode up and down and could be boarded at will; there were more bubbles and balloons than your cheeks could blow.

Shaker Heights was a warm and generous place. Family was the only community that had mattered in India; in America, my parents discovered the community itself: the people who shared recipes, gave them rides, taught them the idioms they didn't know, brought them food when they were sick. It was perhaps the grace of this welcome that inoculated them against the defensiveness and nostalgia that so often infect immigrants. They still loved India, but they never looked back. They spoke often

“Indian values,” but these were abstractions meant to suffuse our being rather than commandments live in this way or that. They accepted and came to savor the American way of life.

And yet we were unmistakably Indian, too. Indianness in those days was like a secret garden which the society around us lacked access. You needn't have gone there if you didn't want to, but was there, a hidden world of mysteries. We had a past that others didn't; we had our little secrets of what we ate and wore when we attended a family wedding; we had dinner table stories about places and people from an almost mythical past. We had history, history being the only thing that America's abundant shores could not offer.

We were raised with a different idea of family: family as the fount of everything, family as more important than friends or schools or teachers could ever be. We were raised with an Indian docility; we didn't hit or fight; we didn't play contact sports such as football or hockey but stuck to swimming and tennis. We didn't—not then and still not today—call our parents by their first names or curse in their presence. We got paid for losing teeth but not for doing chores. (“Should I start charging you for cooking?” my mother would ask.) We wore American clothes around the house and to school, but we were asked to wear Indian clothes for weddings and other important occasions. We ate *baingan bharta* and *rajma chawal* and *mutter paneer* on some days and penne with tomato sauce on others. We ate meat only occasionally at home, and usually just chicken, but in restaurants we were free to explore the animal kingdom. My mother observed the Indian festival of *karva chauth*, in which women fast for their husbands' prosperity and well-being; in their American rendition of it, however, my father fasted for my mother, too.

And so I grew up with only a faint idea that another country was also somehow mine. My notion of it was never based on India's history or traditions, its long civilizational parade; it was a first-generation idea of a place in our shared past, nostalgically shared but blessedly past. It came not through anthems and ritual feasts and the taut emotions of an Independence Day, but through the stories we were told at meals and on holidays and the characters within our extended clan. As I conjured up the country, I squeezed these things for all the juice that they possessed, searched for meaning where it may not have been, deduced from personal history the history of a people. I forged a memory of events I didn't witness, from times and places I didn't know.

Reflected from afar, India was late-night phone calls that sparked the fear of a far-off death. It was calling back relatives who could not afford to call us. It was Hindu ceremonies with rice, saffron, and Kit Kat bars arrayed on a silver platter. It was the particular strain of British-public-school-meet-Bombay-boulevard English that my parents spoke, prim and propah. It was the sensible frugality of getting books from the library rather than the bookstore and of cautious restaurant ordering—always one main course less than the number of diners, with the dishes shared communally. It was observing that none of the Indian-Americans around us were professors or poets or lawyers, but rather engineers or doctors or, if particularly rambunctious, economists.

Once every two or three years, we would fly east to India. The country offered a foretaste of itself in New York, in the survivalist pushing and pulling to board an airplane with assigned seats. On the

other end of the voyage, coming out of the plane door, the machine-cooled air vanished at our backs and the hot, dank, subtropical atmosphere drank us in. The lighting went from soft yellow to cheery fluorescent white. I remember the workers waiting in the aerobridge, smaller, meeker, scrawnier than the workers on the other end, laborers with the bodies of ballerinas.

Consumed on these visits east, India was being picked up from the airport by my grandparents in the middle of the night. It was cramming more people into their little Maruti than that car could safely hold. It was cousins who knew how to slide their posteriors forward or backward in the car to make such cramming possible. It was the piping-hot *aloo parathas* that my grandmother unfailingly cooked for us upon arrival. It was sideways hugs with my female relatives that strove to avoid breast contact. It was the chauvinism of retired uncles who probed my aspirations and asked nothing of my sister's. It was the ceaseless chatter among the women of making jewelry, making clothes, making dinner. It was the acceptability of reporting toilet success and toilet failure at the breakfast table.

I had the feeling in those days that we, the departed, were doing India a favor by returning. We used to pack our suitcases with gifts of what could not easily be obtained in India, from Johnnie Walker Black Label whiskey to Stilton cheese to Gap khakis. In a young child, this ferrying of goods fed a notion of scarcity in the motherland, casting us as benefactors from a land of abundance. My cousins used to ask me on these December visits if I felt Indian or American, and I remember sensing how much their self-esteem was riding on my answer. With a proudly defiant tone, I always replied "American," an answer that I knew would hurt them; this was because I felt so, and because I felt that to answer otherwise would be somehow to debase myself, to accept a lower berth in the world.

India felt frozen. It was frozen in poverty, and I sensed, even as a child, that everything was shaped by scarcity: the pushing to get on the airplane, the reluctance of the wealthy to spend the most trivial sums of money, the obsession with lucrative careers and snobbery toward other pursuits. India was frozen in socialist bureaucracy, so that it was advisable to have an uncle working in the ministry if you wanted a phone connection before next year. It was frozen in beliefs: I quickly tired of going to yet another dinner party where yet another retiree would drink one whiskey too many and take me aside to condemn an imperialistic and materialistic America whose foreign policy choices, he seemed to imply, were basically my fault—even though I was ten years old, yawning, and up way past my bedtime. To this day, I cringe every time I hear the words, "Why is your America supporting Pakistan?"

"Yes, Uncle," I feel like saying, "the State Department got the idea from me."

India was not supposed to feel foreign to me. I looked Indian, was raised by Indian parents, mingled in America with their Indian friends, and grew up devouring Indian food, having *rakhi* tied on my wrist by my sister, and wearing fresh clothes and lighting candles every Diwali. But in India all this dissipated, as if these ways of being Indian brought me no closer to India itself.

Inevitably, time soothed some of these surface irritations and culture shocks. What endured was a wordless revulsion, deep and inarticulate, at what seemed to be the wastage of human possibility in India. Here was a great civilization of the world, once among the wealthiest and most powerful

nations, and yet, in ways that I was only beginning to grasp, so many were trapped in their boxes: the schoolchildren with brains crammed full of notes, fearful of voicing an opinion in front of the parents; the elders whose doctrines about marriage and childbearing seldom budged, no matter how the world changed; the women to whom few listened, no matter the wisdom of their words. India, in my limited and impressionistic view, seemed a land of replicated lives, where most people grew up to be exactly like their parents—cracking the same jokes, bearing the same prejudices, pursuing vocations not too far afield.

The place seemed to function on low expectations and almost otherworldly powers of acceptance. The dinner party conversations were dull and repetitive and sprinkled with awkward silences; but people accepted. There was only one television channel, beaming tinny and overacted shows that no one with broader choices would ever watch; but people accepted. The poverty—those children with puffed-out bellies and matted hair on the streets, and whose skin color and facial features were jarringly similar to my own—was bloodcurdling; but people, the poor themselves and my well-off relatives, accepted. Women seemed to accept the normalcy of being told that their skin was too dark, that their weight should be increased or decreased, that they should marry this man or that one. People with vegetarian parents seemed to accept that they, too, must be vegetarian. The children of Hindu refugees from what became Pakistan accepted that it was their duty to carry forward their parents' hatred of Muslims. History was heavy. The old went unquestioned. Resignation choked dreams.

The country that gathered in my mind over the years was contradictory and complex and yet also oversimple: it seemed to be a place kind and decent, generous and sacrificial, repressed and narrow, wretched and hopeless; a land short on dynamism and initiative, long on caution, niggling judgment, subservience, and fear; a land where people didn't come into their own as they did in America; a land that had ultimately failed to persuade my father, who loved it dearly, to stay.

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A wall of wet, smoky night air hit me as I came out of the terminal in Bombay. The orange of the streetlamps' glow, ripened by smog, told me at once how far I had come. A quarter century had passed since my parents left India, and now I was reentering it to fulfill promptings of my own.

A year earlier, in 2002, I had visited Bombay and Delhi on a vacation from college. I was traveling alone, not with my family, and for some reason I felt a personal connection with the country for the first time. I saw new flecks in the landscape that suggested a turning: a cousin in Bombay took me to a Barista espresso bar with a guitar hanging on the wall and to a nightclub called J49, packed with fashionable young people drinking and smoking and dancing without care; I found an Internet cafe near my grandparents' home in Delhi, which made me feel less cut off than on past visits. But it was also that I was growing up, learning about the world, and realizing that India was no longer an embarrassing and frustrating place, but rather one that needed to be understood.

I visited a slum in Delhi where my grandmother did charitable work. In a diary, I wrote of a place that was "visually splendid, meaning economically ravaged," its homes ranging "from upscale brick



middle-class mud to impoverished plastic.” When I read my words now, I sense a young man awakening to the reality he has neglected. “So much of the world, so much of what happens, seems irrelevant,” I wrote, “when you watch a 4-year-old boy, scantily clad, with bruises on his face bringing a bottle to the tap and waiting thirstily for replenishment.”

I wanted to be a writer after college, as the overwrought prose of my diary suggests, but as graduation neared, I saw no easy way into the profession. With the memory of my visit still fresh, an alternative idea came to me: I could move to India. On a whim, I applied to work at the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, where my father had gotten his first job in America. I was offered a position and chose the Bombay office because I loved the city and because I had few relatives there. I was determined once in India to escape the cocoon of extended family and pave my own road, to discover my roots on my own terms.

When I landed in Bombay on that orange night, a driver dressed in white was waiting at the airport holding a placard with my name. He was to bring me to the Peregrine, the McKinsey “guesthouse” for out-of-town consultants, where, to save money on hotel bills, the company made employees who worked together by day share apartments by night.

It is frightening to land in a city at night and see it lifeless just when you need proof of its life. The cars had mostly deserted the streets; the workaday ruckus of buying and selling stood suspended; not a restaurant or bar was serving. But I woke up the next morning and gazed down on a heaving, boiling maximal Bombay. The city was like one of those meals so intricately arrayed on the plate, so intimidating that you hesitate to bite into it: millions of human creatures moving by train, bus, car, and foot through their morning routines, opening shops, sweeping sidewalks, giving money, taking money, stopping for a jolt of morning tea. At first, I enjoyed the small mercies of India from the safety of my room at the Peregrine: cooks who made me omelets and processed my laundry, servants who made my bed. Slowly, it became my base for brief incursions into Bombay. I learned the city through small tasks. I had two suits made at Raymond. I met the few people I knew in town for dinner. I went to see my future office, opened a bank account, and bought a cell phone from a traveling salesman with Nokias stashed in a gray briefcase.

Later I began making my forays into the Bombay throng. The instant I left my home, a glaze of sweat coated me. I dissolved into the city’s layers of humanity: the frantic bees of the new middle class, tethered by hands-free devices to their just-bought phones, streaking through the crowd faster than the crowd was willing to move; the lowly but securely employed office clerks, known to the bosses as “peons” or “boys,” men carrying plastic bags instead of briefcases, bush shirts untucked, feet spilling out of rubber sandals; the impoverished flotsam of the city who moved slower than the common speed, their black hair rendered brown by a lack of nutrients, begging sometimes but mostly just drifting; the hawkers of fruits and vibrators and books; the touts and the vagabonds; the striving and the resigned; the migrants and the deeply entrenched; the weather-beaten and the freshly perfumed.

As I neared the end of my three comfortable weeks at the Peregrine, granted by McKinsey to help

me settle in, I was thrust into reality, which always begins with house hunting. A mustachioed motorcycle-mounted broker named Salim found me a place within my budget. It was a “PG,” paying-guest apartment, which meant that it was a room in someone’s house, sealed off and rented on the black market. It was the size of a spacious bathroom, located in the Churchgate area, and made for a humble home, with its fluorescent light, its plastic counters, its too-small bed, its gritty cockroaches.

But I wouldn’t be spending much time in the room anyway. McKinsey’s business model is to send young people like me, barely aware of what a business model even is, to work with clients in their far-flung headquarters. You can transform a company, they say, only by inhabiting it, dining with its employees, weaving yourself into its fabric. This was a polite way of saying that I now had to live during the week in Ahmedabad, a textile-weaving industrial city in the state of Gujarat, and return to Bombay (where I knew nobody and had nothing to return to) on weekends. This might have seemed a fair deal to anyone unfamiliar with Ahmedabad. It is the leading city in a puritanical, overwhelming vegetarian, prohibition-dry state whose most recent bout of fame was for a days-long extravaganza of religious violence that had killed some two thousand Muslims and scores of Hindus the year before my arrival. To make matters worse, my client was a drug maker whose managers spoke in an indecipherable pharmaceuticalese of APIs and NDAs and DTC marketing and whose mission was about as inspiring as Ahmedabad’s nightlife.

In my first days at work in Ahmedabad, I used to go to the restroom as often as possible, just to escape. People spoke a variant of English that I didn’t understand: they said they were “on tour” when you called to arrange a meeting (they had not joined the Rolling Stones but were traveling); they pressed three fingers together and asked you to wait “two minutes” (they meant an hour); “Please do the needful,” they would say when they wanted you to take care of something; there would be “an S & M meeting with PRP in second half” (an afternoon sales-and-marketing meeting with the chairman identified by his initials). Further, the man in charge of “S & M” was a tall, razor-bald man named Ganesh, after the Hindu elephant god, who was rumored to wear a pistol tucked into his sock. At meetings, you thought twice before questioning his numbers.

The most mystical new concept, though, was “native place,” which I eventually discovered was the village where my ancestors had most recently milked cows, even if “recent” meant the year 1500.

“Where are you from?” a typical conversation would begin.

“Washington, D.C.” (My family had left Shaker Heights when I was seven years old and eventually settled just outside the capital, in suburban Maryland.)

“Yes, yes, that is OK.” *Pause.* “But where are you *from*?”

“America.”

“No, no. That is very good. In fact, my brother is in New Jersey, Trenton. I have been to USA, New York, and California also. Twice.” *Pause.* “But what I mean to say is, What is your native place?”

“I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in the Midwest.”

“No, no—your *native place*. Basically, you are an Indian only, no?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“So what is your native place? That only is what I’m asking.”

“My parents grew up in Bombay.”

“So, basically, you are a Maharashtrian. But your name, Giridharadas...”

“Actually, I’m half Tamil and half Punjabi.”

“Tamil and Punjabi!” my interlocutor would exclaim, eyes bulging at the thought of such brazen regional miscegenation. (Tamil Nadu is in the southern extreme of the country, jutting into the Indian Ocean; Punjab is high in the north, abutting Pakistan.) “But how could that be?”

“They met in Bombay.”

“So basically—basically, you are a Punjabi, correct?”

“Well...”

“Basically, your father is a Punjabi.”

“No, my mother is Punjabi.”

“OK, I see, I see. So your father is a south Indian?”

“Exactly.”

“OK, OK, OK.” *Pause. Relief. The pigeon had been pigeonholed.* “So, basically speaking, you are south Indian.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

Of course, some of the new language was familiar from my parents’ usage—“chockablock full,” “prepone,” “piping hot”—and now had to be relearned as assiduously as it had been unlearned by a first-generation child eager to downplay his differences in America.

On most days in Ahmedabad I ate a plate of *bhel puri*, tamarind-laced street food, for lunch. On special occasions we did the all-you-can-eat at U.S. Pizza, which was located in a nearby mall and which, name aside, packed as many Indian ingredients and spices into its pies as was chemically possible. Slowly I got used to evening *samosa* breaks, to the incessant male touching and hand holding, to the fact that no one listens to you in India until you are old enough to use a cane. After dusk, the McKinsey team would retire to the hotel. Most of my Indian colleagues were graduates of the same engineering school who had then earned MBAs from the same business school, and they shared an intricate, impenetrable culture. This involved several men sitting on a bed, having tossed their shoes and socks onto the floor, drinking as their fingers rifled through their toes. They would make raunchy jokes that were not actually that raunchy, because the closest that many of them had been to a woman was the telling of a raunchy joke on a bed with a bunch of other men.

In America, Indians were repressed by the standards of the general population. We were the nerds, the model immigrants who toiled while others indulged. Now in India, though I remained the same person, I was surrounded by people considerably more repressed than I. One colleague told me that he would like to move to America but feared his wife’s becoming liberated. Another colleague, nearing thirty, told me that her parents had given her much freedom and that she would never violate it by kissing her fiancé before the wedding. So I took on a new role, which was stunningly unfamiliar to me: that of Funmaster. I became the guy who could score alcohol from bootleggers in Gujarat. My colleague

huddled around me on Mondays to ask what scandals I had caused on the weekend, such that I was almost tempted to invent some. I became a jester, a light guy in a serious group, when I had always been on the serious side in America. To be Indian-American in America and Indian-American in India was to be, because of how others saw you, two different people.

On my visits east as a child, we had always been lovingly received by relatives, lavished with food and hugs and time. We were made to feel like heroes. And perhaps I returned to India with a quiet expectation that the country was mine for the taking, that I could reclaim it whenever I wished, that it would welcome me effusively, would need me and make space for me. But the reception was distinctly cooler than I expected. My colleagues felt, and not unfairly, that they had worked harder than I had to reach the same point. I had been admitted to an American university with a double-digit acceptance rate, they to Indian institutions that took in 1 percent of a vast applicant pool. I had traveled the world, eaten in fancy restaurants, studied the mind-widening liberal arts, and done internships, and so I had a facility with aspects of our work that most Indians could not possess: how to conduct myself at a business dinner, or converse confidently with a senior partner, or connect an idea to some recent happening elsewhere in the world. They admired me for this, but they also seemed to resent what felt to them like profiteering from my family's desertion.

But, more than that, India had simply changed. There was a new self-confidence in the country now, and Indians didn't need their émigrés anymore. The country was its own ecology now, was less of a colony, with its own logic and its own pride. Now that it suited me, I was claiming myself Indian, but Indians were no longer scrambling to claim me. I began to realize that those two-week winter-vacation trips in childhood belonged to a vanishing age when Indians had been cut off from the world and insecure, and they had unfolded in a family context in which love could be taken for granted.

"The skeptics who abandoned ship in the '60s no longer know where either home or heart is," Shobhaa Dé, a popular newspaper columnist, wrote in her recent book *Superstar India*. " 'We are Americans,' they once used to boast, proudly telling us deprived folks about the glory that is the USA. Armed with work permits and green cards, they'd arrive for their annual 'staying in touch with the motherland' trips, with countless complaints on their lips." And: "The rest of us would be made to feel diminished on several counts for lacking the 'guts' to pick up lives anew in the land of milk and honey." Now, she noted, the children of the departed were returning because the "party's over" in the West. "But sorry," she says, "nobody wants latecomers to the one happening in India."

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One of my clearest impressions about India as a child was that my parents' stories would have been impossible had they stayed. Of course, such a vision was self-serving, for it made a virtue of our displacement. But I looked at my father, a management consultant whose talents would later reveal him to be a masterful writer and wonderfully empathetic teacher, and I knew that in India he could never have dreamed of a career in such things. His father was an engineer whose sons became

engineers. They did not question. Likewise, my mother found in America a new liberty to fashion life undefined by others. She had known little freedom in India to live and spend her time as she pleased. Older relatives would comment on the complexion of her skin. She was scolded about what she ate and what conditions were folklorically believed to flow from her eating habits. In America where no one judged or supervised her, where my father was too busy eating her cooking to notice whether she was eating it, too, my mother found herself newly enchanted by the taste of food.

They had met in French class, the two of them. My father had never studied the language but needed some bon mots for his job selling Indian trucks and buses in Francophone Africa; my mother, studying French in college, was burnishing her spoken skills. It was he, knowing nothing, who raised his hand constantly, becoming the teacher's pet, and she, knowing it all, who sat in silence, taking notes of an eager engineer. The most she allowed herself was to stop her parents' chauffeur-driven car every day at the bus stop where he was waiting and offer him a ride. My father showed none of her restraint. He asked her out again and again, accepting rejection each time. He brought his gold medal from business school to class one day and pulled it slyly out of his pocket to show her. She beamed with admiration, but that was all.

My mother had good reason for her coyness. She was Punjabi, from the very north; he was Tamil from the very south. She told herself from the beginning that it could never work between them. Even if she let her mind go there, she knew it wouldn't happen in the end. They came from different universes, and she didn't want to lead a good man on.

Her parents were refugees of partition, the traumatic moment in 1947 when the subcontinent was cut in two by the departing British and a chunk of northwestern India became, overnight, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Her parents, my Nanu and Nani, grew up in Lahore, in comfortable and educated families that suddenly lost their possessions and their bearings in the world. In a newly independent India, their families, like so many Punjabi families, began anew, educated themselves, slogged the way back into the affluence and respectability that their families had known on the far side of the freshly drawn frontier. Partition's wound had become all but invisible for them by the time my mother was born, in 1955.

My mother's family lived in southern Bombay, the rarefied tip of a rarefied island city, where Nanu worked for Hindustan Lever, the Indian arm of the global Unilever enterprise. They did not feel wealthy, for few did in that age: at times, my grandmother's budgeted grocery money would dry up early, and she had to borrow from the allowance money she had earlier given her daughter. But the world was cosmopolitan and open. Nanu and Nani traveled the world on company-paid business trips, dining in Trafalgar Square in London, seeing the Lido in Paris, even attending a strip show in Amsterdam. Sitting on white cane chairs on his veranda, Nanu would leaf through one newspaper after another and by noon could dissect the politics of any country with more sophistication than many of its own citizens. He wore impeccably cut blazers, and his talk was peppered with "Well, you know when I was in London in '57..." My grandparents lived in some of Bombay's finest buildings, including a famous seaside property called Bakhtavar. There they entertained my grandfather

equally worldly colleagues with tumblers of whiskey as the velvet whine of Miles Davis's trumpet slid along the walls.

My mother grew up strong. She was a charismatic leader among her peers, staging play organizing projects, raising money for charity; she was fiercely protective of her younger brother with whom she shared a passion for jazz and rock and roll. She read books by Enid Blyton and Jane Austen and W. Somerset Maugham, and listened to the regular Western music hour on All India Radio as well as to Hindi film songs.

But the Westernization and modernity of their setting could be something of an illusion. Miles Davis notwithstanding, my mother was subject to the same culture of *izzat*—honor—that her mother had grown up with in Lahore, eased but never lifted with each successive generation of women. Running through the stories my mother would later tell of India was a theme of stifling, needle repression. As a teenager and even into her twenties, she was seldom allowed to go to parties. On one occasion, the adults let her and her cousins go to a discotheque, but on one condition: they had to take their towering, white-*sari*-clad, widowed grandmother along. (So deprived were they of entertainment that they accepted this deal.) As my mother got older, she was forbidden to go out to meals with male friends. Her mother feared that “society” would talk.

In her twenties, working as a French translator, my mother was the only woman in her office who was not a secretary. Starved gazes would follow her short hair and almond eyes as she navigated the desks. Some men showed interest in her at work, but she gave them no thought, for she quietly assumed that her parents would arrange her marriage and, with it, the rest of her life: in all likelihood to some nice Punjabi boy who would also live in Bombay, whose parents would distantly know her parents, who wouldn't upset the mango cart. The notion of marrying otherwise or, stranger still, migrating to America would have seemed far-fetched to her at the time. It would take a man no less persuasive than my father to bend her mind.

He lived close by and a world apart. He came from a family of Tamil Brahmins, a caste that deserved its reputation for piety verging on sanctimony and purity verging on the total absence of fun. There was little whiskey and even less Miles Davis in their home. His father was a stern, brilliant engineer in the Central Indian Railways who would rise to become one of its highest officials. That was the archetype of the Indian paterfamilias: staunchly protective of his family, emotionally remote, verbally economical, above the fray of daily life, functioning like a chief justice who framed his family's values and monitored their compliance. He married a cheerful wife, tender and docile and eternally absorptive of his temper, who raised their four sons and one daughter with a gentleness and permissiveness that were rare in India.

My father, the middle child, spent much of his childhood in boarding schools, with his parents moving constantly for railway projects, and in those schools he forged a steely self-reliance that was also improbably un-Indian. When at home, he entered and left the apartment as he pleased. He played Ping-Pong and badminton and, in later years, bridge with friends whom his parents did not vet. He was trusted to fend for himself or lean on his siblings for help with homework or getting to after-school

activities. I knew, from my mother's stories and those of others, that this style of childhood was not typical, that the norm was guilt-tripping micromanagement. When he would return to India later in life, the deep patience he showed in America would crack when faced with the endless interference in other people's affairs that was so endemically Indian but so foreign to him.

The story of his childhood shaped my earliest narratives about America, where he would one day choose to make his life. He had fallen for America and thrived there, I believed, because he had known freedom and self-determination as a child. I began to see those traits as peculiarly American, and I began to see my father as an American separated at birth from, and later reunited with, a land to which he naturally, psychologically belonged.

His path to America was through education. Education was every generation's duty to its progeny in the Indian way; the rest was in the progeny's hands. This idea was passed on to my sister and me in America. Sports, television, talking on the phone after school—these were the indulgences of Americans, of a land of plenty. For our family, learning was everything; homework came first; books being sacred, were never to be left on the floor. But it was a lesson that my father had learned the hard way. In an early grade, he fared poorly in virtually every class. He brought home his report card which had to be signed. His father flew into a rage, tearing the paper to shreds and spewing words that have remained with my father to this day: "I have no money to leave you. All I can give you is an education." In an instant, my father learned the concept of accountability: no one would tell him how to organize his Thursdays, but if he messed up at year's end, he would suffer for it.

That incident became a point of no return. My father studied like a monk from that day forward, threading the successive needles of India's higher-education system. He trained for a year to get into the Indian Institutes of Technology, the country's ultra-selective engineering school, and he did. He attended a leading business school and topped the class. He struggled, fought, succeeded. But then, when he entered his middle twenties, all that drive and energy, the fruits of a bitterly learned lesson, collided with the stagnancy of a country that was not making the fullest use of its people.

It was the 1970s, and he worked in the export division of the Tata conglomerate, based in Bombay. It was a period of social and political turmoil known as the Emergency, in which massive civic unrest had prompted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to suspend the constitution and take matters into her own hands. The society was tense; mass sterilizations were in progress, opposition leaders languished in jail, and protest was being squelched. But it was not politics that drove my father away. It was that he saw no future in a company where, as in most Indian companies of the era, success favored the tenured. Longevity, not talent, ruled. He saw his superiors, twenty years ahead of him in line, and concluded that he didn't want to spend his life becoming them. The thought was reinforced on those mornings when he trudged through the monsoon to work, as those executives, encased in their company cars, streaked through the water past their drenched trainees.

And yet he began to think about America almost casually, for he was not raised to ponder introspectively. He had heard of people crossing that ocean; some friends were applying to study at Harvard Business School. Why not? A photograph from his farewell party at Tata shows a young man

almost unrecognizable from the seasoned, worldly man who would become my father—beaming, skinny, fresh-faced, innocent, with curly black hair. He is receiving a leather jacket as a parting gift about to embark on what my young mind would come to see as his actual life: a new beginning in a continent of new beginnings.

My mother had given him no reason to stay. Now he was gone. He wrote her regularly from Boston, and she wrote back. Their friendship deepened. He found a job in Cleveland as graduation approached and returned to India for a summer break before starting his new job in America. Two years had passed, and my parents' correspondence had worked its effects. When at last he asked my mother to marry him on that trip, in the dark of a cinema, it took days of stunned silence before she found her voice, but in the end that voice said "Yes." Her parents, who she feared would oppose her marrying outside the tribe, were broader minded than she realized, and they were impressed by my father's education and temperament. The world was changing, and Harvard graduates, whatever their family histories, were now a marriageable clan of their own. They were wedded ten days later, in my grandparents' home in Bakhtavar, because it was impossible to rent a venue so hurriedly. My father left immediately thereafter for America, alone, while my mother waited months for a visa. Her first steps outside India would come in leaving it for good.

So started their lonely, thrilling adventure. It was not long before my mother was backing a red Oldsmobile, larger than many Indian dwellings, down an icy driveway in Shaker Heights, not long before my father, with his Indian accent, was counseling the executives of America's leading companies. They learned together to drive, to shop in malls, to paint a house. The women in the neighborhood would stop to ask my mother the meaning of the red dot on her forehead; one preempted her by suggesting that it was blood from a hole in her head. She learned from an elderly Jewish neighbor the recipe for cheesecake. They found a regular restaurant they favored, Pearl of the Orient. They shoveled snow for the first time in their lives. They began a family.

What distinguished them in my eyes from the Indians in the Old Country was their perpetual growth and self-renewal. They discovered new music that was not their own music, new food not their own food. They took up new styles of dressing. They soaked in the world. They allowed their ideas to be upset by better ideas. They clung to pieties that made sense and jettisoned those that didn't. They kept reinventing themselves, discarding the invention, starting anew. My father would become an entrepreneur, then a human-resources executive, then a PhD candidate in his fifties, then a professor. My mother, who began as a homemaker, would learn ceramics, become a ceramics teacher, and then a school administrator. They moved us from Ohio to Paris, then back to Ohio, then to the suburbs of Washington, D.C. They refreshed themselves constantly and, what's more, came to see such refreshment as life's very goal.

It was extraordinary, and ordinary: this is what America did to people, what it always has done. They raised us with this borrowed heritage of self-invention. It was not our Indian heritage, a heritage they sought by and large to preserve. But this was one sphere of American life where the Old Country's values were not permitted to intrude. We were taught to respect our elders as Indians did, to



sacrifice for family in the Indian way, to abstain from America's addictive consumption. But we were taught time and again to invent ourselves, to write our own stories. They never pushed us, as other Indian parents did, to become engineers or doctors: to do so would have stripped us of the liberties that they had come to savor for themselves. They selected for us not the math-and-science magnet schools that émigrés adored, but liberally minded private schools that taught painting and history and literature, instilling in us the sense of open-road possibility, of the worthiness of multiple alternative existences, that their own childhoods had lacked. In high school, when I was reading *The Great Gatsby* and becoming enthralled by the novel's seductive, ominous vision of self-invention, my parents were paying steeply for me to become everything India taught the young not to be.

And so it was strange that now I had come to reinvent myself in, of all places, India. It was not fate that they or I could have imagined. I wondered at times if they felt abandoned, not just by me but also by the invisible forces of history that make countries rise and fall. And I thought to myself: they left that frozen land for us, if they built from scratch a new life in the West for us, if they slogged, saved, sacrificed to make our lives lighter than theirs, what did it mean when we returned to the place they left?

\* \* \*

At first, India had felt alien to me: alien in its crowds and strange phraseology, alien in its probing of my native place, alien in its lack of enthusiasm for my arrival. My old lenses were still in place—India the exhausting, difficult country—and so I saw only what I had always seen. In fact, working at McKinsey shielded me from India's hardships, and I sensed after a time that this was part of the problem. Working in business, I was prancing on the surface of things, not going below and confronting what had fascinated, angered, and humiliated me about India all these years.

Writing would turn out to be a worthier mode of confrontation. I had, of course, put my writing dreams on hold after college. But a year into living in Bombay, I was becoming restless and the dreams stirred again. I had written freelance articles for *The New York Times* starting in my last year of high school and continuing through college, and I treasured the paper. I had tried, without success, to write for the *Times* from India fresh from college. One year into living in India, there were new possibilities: the company had acquired full control of the *International Herald Tribune* as its global edition and needed new correspondents in Asia. After some interviews in Paris and New Delhi, and a test article about the names "Mumbai" and "Bombay," I was hired as the company's first Bombay-based correspondent in modern times. I was not sorry to say good-bye to consulting.

I plunged into my new life as a newspaperman and dove deeper than before into India. I filled my shelves with books on India, and on the weekends I would sit with a dozen titles on my bed, as though their presence alone would teach me about caste, Indian democracy, Kashmir, the leading industrialists. I began to study Hindi. I made a list of all the people whom I thought I should know in Bombay and went to see them one by one. I pressed everyone I could for story ideas.

All of this early commotion reflected an insecurity: it was terrific to have gotten the job, but ho

was I supposed to explain to others a country that I had yet to explain to myself? I eventually realized that ignorance could be my ally: it was my own burning need to understand India that told me where to roam and what to ask. I traveled from one end of the country to another, from Ladakh in the north to Madras in the south, testing the India of my childhood imaginings against the new realities. My work took me to mosques and temples and churches, bleak villages and hungry slums and lavish apartments in Delhi and Bombay, mom-and-pop grocers and glass-and-steel-wrapped software companies. I began my own Indian existence, learning to forge Indian friendships, to love an Indian woman, to haggle in the sweaty bazaar.

India was changing when I arrived, and it continued to change dramatically, viscerally and improbably. The freeze I had sensed as a child seemed to be thawing. It was partly the enormous physical churn: the quantities of earth being moved, the malls and office towers and gated communities being built, the restaurants opening, the factories pumping out cars, the blue jeans being sewn. It was the new verticality of the big cities, the slum dwellers in Bombay moving into towering apartments financed by New York investors, the mushrooming of village backwaters into congested satellite cities such as Gurgaon and Navi Mumbai and Electronics City. It was the villagers who had been moved off their land so that Tata Motors, the once-stagnant company where my father worked whose lifeless culture had pushed him toward America, could build the world's cheapest car, priced at a little more than \$2,000.

To the world, the car became a symbol of India's stirring, and its story hints at what had turned India. It was not that the old constraints had lifted. The bureaucracy, the corruption, the tax code, the labor laws, the poverty, the potholed roads—these burdens endured. But in my father's day, such hindrances might have been interpreted as an excuse to make shoddy products. Yes, the vehicles are rickety, but India is a very poor country—what to do? A generation later, those same constraints were interpreted in a fresh way. They were unique hardships that gave Tata a special opportunity to build a world-beating car. Because Indian roads were bumpier than the West's, the suspension system had to be even better. Because income levels were low, Tata had to innovate twice as hard to rein in costs—installing one windshield wiper, not two; a hollowed-out steering shaft to save steel; a rear-mounted engine no more powerful than a lawn mower's. It was not so much India's context that had changed. It was a new style of hopeful defiance.

The deepest change that I witnessed in India was not in what its factories were building or what its programmers were coding. It was in the mind, in how people conceived of their possibilities: India now seemed to know that they didn't have to leave, as my father had, to have their personal revolutions. Children of the lower castes were hoisting themselves up, one diploma at a time. Women were becoming breadwinners through microcredit and decentralized manufacturing. The young were finding in their cell phones a first zone of privacy and individual identity. Couples were ending marriages no matter what "society" thought, then finding love again. Servants whose mothers and grandmothers had been servants were deciding that their daughters would not be servants, enrolling them in private English-language schools. Vegetarians were embracing meat, and meat eaters were

turning vegetarian, defining themselves by taste and trend, not by caste and faith.

What seemed in decline, in short, was what had most afflicted me about India once: that serene acceptance by people of life as it merely is.

Newspaper and book writers were breathless about the pace and scale of change in “the new India.” It was a seductive story of a country unbound, an elephant stirred, a planet-changing model of democracy, pluralism, and growth. The truth was subtler. India’s economy was not growing as fast as it could. The country was cutting the poverty rate gently, but nowhere near enough. It was trading anew with the world, but only at a fraction of its potential. It was flexing new muscles overseas militarily and diplomatically, but only sporadically and aimlessly, with little sense of what kind of power it wanted to become. But one thing needed no such qualification: India was erupting in dreams.

It was the dream to own a microwave or refrigerator or motorcycle. The dream of a roof of one’s own. The dream to break caste. The dream to bring a cell phone to every Indian with someone to call. The dream to buy out businesses in the kingdom that once colonized you. The dream to marry for love, all the complicated family considerations be damned. The dream to become rich. The dream to overthrow the rich in revolution.

These dreams were brilliant in some instances and in others delusional. They were by turns farsighted and far-fetched, practical and impractical, generous and selfish, principled and cynical, focused and vague, passionate and drifting. They were tempered by countervailing dreams and, as everywhere in India, by the dogged pull of the past. Some were changing India palpably; others had no chance from the beginning. But that was never the point. It was the very existence of such brazen, unapologetic dreams, and their diffuse flowering from one end of India to the other, that so decisively separated the present from the past—and separated the India my parents had left from the India which I had now returned.

The Indian revolution was within. It was a revolution in private life, in the tenor of emotions and the nature of human relationships. The very fabric of Indianness—the meaning of being a husband and wife, a factory owner or factory worker, a mother-in-law or daughter-in-law, a student or teacher—was slowly, gently unraveling by the force of these dreams, and allowing itself to be woven in new ways.

\* \* \*

Such dreams throbbed aboard the Pushpak Express, which for six dollars in third class ferried migrants from the impoverished northern heartland of India to coastal, moneyed Bombay.

Four years after my initial airplane trip from America, I was setting out on a twenty-four-hour train journey that possessed a certain resonance with that earlier voyage. I had come from privilege in America, whereas the migrants were preparing to join Bombay’s vulnerable underclass of taxi drivers and shoe polishers and grocery delivery boys. But in the hope that they placed in the city, in the displacement and bewilderment that they felt, in their exhilaration and fear, they reminded me of the young man who had come to Bombay in 2003 and who was swallowed, as they soon would be, into it.

terrifying and enthralling maw.

On the platform of the train station in the provincial capital Lucknow, flickering machines offered to weigh passengers for one rupee, about two cents. Burlap sacks sat filled with grain, sent by gau farmers on the plains to paunchy shoppers in the cities. Vendors sold toys, eggs, vinyl belts. A woman wearing no shoes fingered her cell phone. Migrants squatted, quietly waiting for the train, as coolies in red jackets flitted across the platform, promising to secure a seat. To ignore them was to risk standing for twenty-four hours. I promptly paid their fifty-rupee charge.

Clickety-clack-clickety-clack, the Pushpak lumbered in. The hordes rose and, with the train still decelerating, mob rule erupted. New acquaintances, in friendly conversation a minute earlier, now pushed one another. An infant, clinging to her father's back, was not spared flying elbows as travelers vied to fling themselves through the door of car Number 05407. When we entered, there was, in fact, a great surplus of space.

The train was a carnival of commerce. Hawkers of *samosas* and *pakodas* and *vadas* came aboard at station stops, screaming their sales pitches. The most impressive vendors were those of tea. As the train hurtled past a green blur of corn and wheat, I saw one standing in the doorway, with neatly parted hair atop his wiry frame. He waited for the perfect moment, then suddenly he jumped.

But he did this to live, not die. Having popped out of the door, he clung to the knobs of the train's exterior with one hand. His other hand clutched a vat of scalding tea. He glided like a climber across the train's skin, one foothold to the next. He crossed the steel beam between the cars like a tightrope walker. Then, arriving at the next car, he repeated his pattern and ducked inside yelling, "*Chai! Chai!* Get your hot *chai!*" Such acrobatics were not required on other trains or in that train's first- and second-class cars, which were connected from the inside. But, as if to replicate on board the castles and regimes they were fleeing in their villages, the men of third class were cut off from the carriages of the better born.

Deepak Kumar was riding in third class without baggage and without a ticket. He owned nothing more than the pants and plaid shirt he was wearing, his cell phone SIM card (with no phone), his wallet (with no cash), his address book (with no contacts), and a talisman around his neck. He was eighteen, and his light, watery eyes gave him a raw beauty. His fingers were thick and darkened with days' worth of grime. His brown cowlick flailed in the wind as he sat in the train door, watching the landscape fly past.

He had grown up in Delhi. Some years earlier, his mother had died. When his father remarried, the new wife saw him as a holdover from an ousted regime and began to taunt and beat him. "She swears at me," he said. "She abuses me. She says to me, 'You're not my child.'" His father, working nights as a security guard, was seldom there to intervene. Not long before, Deepak had gone to Lucknow to visit his uncle. While there, he received a phone call from childhood friends who had migrated from Bombay in search of work. When they heard the sadness in his voice, they urged him to join them in the city. At first, he thought the idea fanciful. His father and stepmother relied on his income, and he lived under their roof.

But he called back three days later to say that he would be in Bombay by week's end. His friend promised to meet him at the station. And now, aboard this train, the gravity of his decision was sinking in. He was quieter than the migrants who had gone back and forth many times. He kept himself. When he began to tell me his story, and got to the part about abuse, his eyes swelled with tears. The migrants around us, hearing this, swung into a routine that almost seemed practiced. Some clowned around to make him laugh. One held his hand. An older migrant named Alok launched into funny stories about his own travails in Bombay. Everyone seemed to say, "We went through this, too. You will survive."

It was Alok's third migration. Deepak's story brought back memories of his own first time. "You see in the movies Bombay, Bombay, Bombay," he said, striking a different cinematic pose at each utterance of the city's name. "So people think, 'I want to go to Bombay.' "

"Bombay is our *sapna nagar*, the place of our dreams," Alok went on. His own dream had once been to become a movie star and work with his greatest idol, the actor Amitabh Bachchan. But now reality had set in. "Everyone goes there and thinks that Amitabh Bachchan will stroke your hair and say, 'Son, how you doing?' But you go there, and you don't even meet him." Alok was wearing a skin-tight zipped-up turquoise sweatshirt. He had worked variously as a parking valet and a waiter. "We are poor, so we don't have any hands to hold, any connections to use, any high-ranking friends," he said. "So we must do it all alone. And nothing in the world can be done all alone."

"Dreams don't go away in Mumbai," he said a few moments later. "They just get smaller."

And yet there were more and more of these dreams. It was said that thirty-one new migrants were arriving in an Indian city every minute. Two out of three Indians still lived in the villages, and the slow emptying was predicted to continue for forty years. It promised to rewire the basic patterns of Indian life: from rural to urban, familial to atomized, from the stoicism of the village to the burning aspiration of the city. The passengers in the railway car were rolling from a warm collectivism into a cool new anonymity. But on the train, in these last few hours, collectivism had its last hurrah. To ride the Pushpak Express was to realize that India remained in so many ways a village-reared nation: the effortless involvement of people in other people's lives, the ceaseless generosity.

The quarters were tight. A baby lay across her mother's lap sipping bottled milk, her legs dangling across a strange man's thigh; he said nothing. Two men facing each other had drifted off to sleep. They appeared not to know each other, but one suddenly woke and nudged the other with his foot in request, wordlessly, some room to rest his legs. The other man reciprocated, and they returned to sleep, their feet now on each other's seats. Throughout the journey passengers switched seats, moving from the benches to the bunks and back. Strangers used one another's backpacks as pillows. As an outsider, I found it hard to tell which clusters of passengers were journeying together and which had met on board.

As the train left the Gangetic Plain, dipping through Kanpur, Bhopal, and Khandwa, then into the wine country of Nashik and toward Bombay, visible misfortune bled into a new rural plenty. The fields turned lusher, plot sizes swelled, and commodities such as wheat gave way to grapes and other

cash crops. Bombay released sneak previews of itself with occasional mansions in the middle of the fields, the weekend homes of the wealthy. And before long, we pulled into a station on the margins of the city, and the urban overtook us. Trains whizzed by every minute: the constant click-clack of wheels on tracks; then the slums came, their bright washing on display; and then, at last, the terrifying, exhilarating Bombay throng.

It was into this throng that I had been swept four years earlier. I remembered staring out from the Peregrine's windows and down into the vital, menacing city, too fearful to touch it. I remembered my first bewildered strolls through the crowded streets, the fresh sweat on my arms, and the hope and terror in my heart. As the Pushpak Express pulled in that night, I felt in small measure like a newcomer once again. I wondered what it was like to be a first-time migrant on that train, awakened by roosters all your life, protected by bonds with a dozen relatives, and then flung into this maelstrom of concrete and glass and seawater—this island city of nineteen million people who got here before you.

Upon arriving, Deepak's friends were nowhere to be found. We looked everywhere, on the platform, in the waiting area, in the departure zone. I had heard too many stories of desperate migrants whisked into the grimy underside of the city in circumstances like these. So I took him to the station supervisor and asked about cheap nearby hotels. I gave Deepak my phone number and a few hundred rupees for a room. I kept my phone audible that night. But I imagined him getting absorbed somehow into the rapids of the city. I never expected to hear from him again.

Shortly before nine the next morning, the phone rang. It was Deepak. He said that he had found his friends outside the station the next morning. They had come the night before, failed to see him, and returned again in the morning. Deepak thanked me for the room. Now his Bombay adventure would begin. Once again, I expected him to disappear. But he called again the next day, and then again a few days later, and again and again and again.

He spent the first many days roaming around Bombay with his friends, seeking work as an electrician. Jobs were scarce, and he felt intense pressure to find something quickly. He decided to settle for a steadier, salaried position wrapping takeaway packages in a canteen. He rented a bed in a tiny, dark room, which he shared with other migrants. When I took him to dinner at the Leopold Cafe six weeks after our train voyage, I learned that he had bought himself English textbooks soon after arriving and was spending an hour or two with them each night after work. He had acquired a taste for tourism, having already visited famous sites, such as Elephanta Island, that I still hadn't seen after four years.

I could track Deepak's progress through the consistency of his cell phone number. When he was doing well, earning regular money, his number stayed the same. When Bombay rattled him, his number changed: it was a pay-as-you-go connection, and if he did not recharge it for several weeks the number lapsed. He thrived for a time. He quit his first job and found work as an in-house electrician in an affluent apartment block. His number held. But some months later he began to call from a new number each time. I now had half a dozen Deepaks in my phone address book: at first,

labeled them “deepak new” and “deepak new new”; then, becoming wiser, I used “deepak september” and “deepak october.” At one point he told me that he had been forced out of the electrician job and was at risk of losing his room. He sounded desperate for the first time since that night at the station. I felt an awkwardness as I faced my choices. Should I help him, as I was inclined to do? Or should I guide and advise him but let him figure out Bombay on his own? Would my subsidy help or hurt?

One of India’s puzzles is that the country is overrun by workers who cannot find jobs and employers who cannot find workers. I sent an e-mail to friends who ran businesses, asking if they needed someone. Several messages fired back, and Deepak was soon working in a modish home-decorating store. I didn’t see him for a long spell, and when we finally had dinner again, a year after our initial encounter, he was a new man. He spread his arms across the adjacent chair at the café and slouched on his seat; he seemed cocky, in a nice way; he showed me none of the deference that I had seen on the train. He had saved up thousands of rupees, more than many Indians will ever have in reserve. He was teaching himself conversational English and insisted on answering my questions, posed in Hindi, in the new language he was learning. He said that he had found a girlfriend; he boasted that she was a student at one of Bombay’s best colleges, whose father was a businessman with a house on a posh Bombay boulevard. (But I wondered, because he never made her available for a meeting, despite several requests.) Deepak had plans: he was going to bolster his English, then seek a respectable office job. The girl might be flush with love for him now, but Deepak knew that he needed to be bigger to hold her.

I felt great pride in him. He seemed to distill, in a single being, the new sense of hope gusting through India. Some months passed. Then one day I went to buy something at the store where he had worked. I hadn’t seen him there the last few times, and I asked the manager about him. He took me aside and, measuring his words carefully, told me that Deepak had been fired for stealing. He had taken some bottle openers from the store, which a manager found stashed nearby. They had warned him, but he had stolen again, and so he was dismissed.

And, in hindsight, it was only at this moment that Deepak’s story became an all-inclusive story about the new India. Only at this moment did it possess the full range of realities. There was the ambition and confidence and sky-wide sense of possibility. The tendency toward exaggeration. The faith in self-improvement. The idea of the man without context, the man all his own. The drift toward bewildering big cities. The dashed hopes in those cities. The fraying family and the new rootlessness. Love for its own sake, defiant and boundary breaking. And, amid the dreams of progress, the absence of any restraint on those dreams, of people or rituals or convictions that might have anchored Deepak. It might have inspired him to ask whether it was worth it, after all.

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The India I grew up with was made in my mind. Now I had to confront the reality of the country it had become. It was a thriving, bustling land, redolent more of the future than the past, hopeful, desperate, wise, naive, raring to go, full of dreams. And it was through my encounters with Indians and the

dreams that my old India was slowly revealed to be a country of illusions.

I had forged a whole nation from the fragments of things briefly seen and merely heard. I had absorbed all the simple verities: Indians are simple; Indians know sacrifice; Indians obey elders: the nation as Aesop's fable. But these accustomed ideas were rooted in earth that was moving now, and they were ideas that I believed in part because I needed to believe them, needed some grand narrative to justify, in retrospect, the bend in my family's history.

These ideas had great power to distort, as I had been reminded in the hours before boarding the Pushpak Express. I had gone to see the house in Lucknow where my mother's grandparents once lived. I had tracked down its address and wanted to visit a place whose grandeur lingered in my memories.

My great-grandfather had been a big businessman, and my great-grandmother a woman about town, with a fiery, *sari*-swathed presence that terrified and quickened everyone. My mother used to tell me stories of visiting the Lucknow house as a child, sleeping outdoors with cousins under mosquito nets and the vast sky. Food flowed like water there, and the corridors bustled with servants. My secondhand memories had them as handsome, hair neatly parted, wearing starched white. Badé Nani, my great-grandmother, with her two patches of undyed hair near her temples to disguise the greyness of the rest, was known for her gardening skills and her swollen roses. No one entertained as she did, my mother used to say. The Prakashes were somebody in Lucknow, we were told: everyone—carpet sellers, local potentates, other well-born families—would have known us. Men crisscrossed the subcontinent to seek the hands of the Prakash daughters.

A childhood's worth of breakfasts and dinners, of mealtime family reminiscences, had given me a picture of that house. It was a folk memory, inherited rather than directly recalled, but its colors remained vivid in the mind. And now, four decades after we surrendered that house, three decades after my parents surrendered India, I finally saw it. When I arrived, a towering, turbaned Sikh guard stopped me. I told him that the place once belonged to my family, which confused matters further: a phone call and logbook entry were now in order. And then I walked toward a vast structure, labyrinthine like a palace, with roofs of many heights. A sign welcomed me to the road-building division of the government of Uttar Pradesh, a state known more for its divisions than its roads.

The foyer announced itself with a vast swirling staircase, as if to reassure that the memories of grandeur didn't lie. In the hallways through which hot meals once coursed, civil servants now shuffled with files, planning to fill potholes. The courtyard, once home to roses and jasmine, was flowerless. I later discovered, when relaying my impressions to my mother, that its size had been curtailed apparently to create more office space.

My arrival caused something of a flutter in this sleepy agency, and word soon reached an important man there. He came to see me and told me that he had known my great-grandparents. He first worked for Badé Nanu in his company, then switched to the agency when my family, struck by financial distress, sold the government their home. He was an accountant, and very old, less of a bridge to the past than a reminder of how far past it was.

When I returned to the car, the driver told me that I had narrowly escaped a confrontation. A few



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