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Pankaj Challa

The Bridge

Editors' Award
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In front of him was the Mughal bridge with crumbling, sand-colored turrets. Ali Mansur had been directed here by a seller at a nearby crossroads, who told him that there was a makeshift market on this bridge, more forgiving to all manner of people than the big bazaars. The bridge was closed to traffic, and domed turrets lined the street on each side, like rows of standing men. Below, there was a murky stream, its banks filled with discarded clothes and white plastic bags gleaming in the evening sun. Ali walked by a big power generator, which roared and sputtered and throbbed on the roadside. Naked light bulbs dangled from a lattice-work of electric wires built up by the sellers. The lights above his head and the noise reminded him more of a wedding party than a vegetable market. He thought of his wedding from two years ago—and the first image in his mind was not of the band playing film songs, nor of Reena's shy, smiling face, but the plate of *alu gobi* curry at the wedding feast, and next to the potatoes and the cauliflower, the carrot *halwa*. Now, all along the length of the bridge, on both sides of the street, vendors had set up their makeshift stores. In heaps, potatoes, red onions, and leafy greens were laid out on the ground, on top of canvas sheets. The air smelled of wet leaves and rotting greens. Unlike in Lakhimpur, here all the vendors were in trousers, nobody in a dhoti, and the laborers too—and a young laborer, in dusty sandals, blue trousers and a checked scarf around his neck, stood peering into his cell phone, punching keys.

Ali had arrived that morning in the night train from Bihar, with his wife and one-year-old son. They couldn't get a place to stay, so they'd settled themselves in a street corner near other migrants, some of whom had been there for months or even years, living in pitched tents on the footpath by the railway station. No tent for them yet, but they'd found a shady spot under a tree. His wife was waiting for him there still, with the luggage, and the baby—he pictured Reena in her veil with her nose-ring, the little one in her lap, clutching the end of her sari. He'd been able to rent a cycle rickshaw with the help of a man near the railway station, and a day's work in the streets left him with twice the amount from daily labor in the sugarcane fields—though most of this money had gone into the payment of rickshaw-rent, and he was left with only a few rupees to shop for food. He wished he could pick up extra cash by working well into the night—but no evenings yet, the owner had said, because he was new to the job, and so Ali had to

return the rickshaw early. He hadn't saved even some of the money he'd made in the morning. At lunchtime, he'd come upon laborers seated on the sidewalk enjoying a game of cards, and he joined them. At first, he bet small amounts, and then, after being taunted, risked everything and promptly lost all his money. He had to skip lunch before returning to work.

He hadn't eaten yet. Beyond the hunger, he was afraid of failing in the move to Delhi. Already in the train, the dread had started—he heard it in his heartbeat. When in the grip of fear, he felt it throb at a point below the chest, as if something inside was tapping the rib with a knuckle—and there, he could feel it now, palm on rib, a bit to the side. Why did the heart beat differently when you were afraid? As if it left its groove in the chest and knocked against someplace else in the body, petitioning for help.

None of his ventures in Lakhimpur had amounted to anything. The Chowdhry landlord dismissed him from field labor because he did not stand up, as custom required him to do, when the man walked by on the cattle path—Ali was taking a break in the shade of trees, nursing a splitting headache, having had too much to drink the previous night. Then he was hired to poison rats at the Thakur's farm. But he bungled it because he could not achieve the right balance of delectable bait-food and poison—the rats thrived on the food and did not die. He managed on daily labor for several months before marrying Reena, and afterwards sold palm wine and palmyra cakes. He tied up red clay pots at the trunks to collect the sap, harvested the pots of wine. Reena made the palmyra cakes for the market, mixing the ripe fruit with wheat flour and baking on the stove. A pretty woman, Reena, but a lousy cook, and too many of the cakes were left unsold. That same summer, a liquor shop opened in Lakhimpur, and palm wine sales dropped, everyone preferring whiskey and rum in glass bottles, some of it locally made and quite inexpensive.

The palm wine and palmyra cakes had been Reena's idea. He had married her for her beauty, going against the advice of the *najoomi* palmist, who said she would bring bad luck, as she did not match up well with his own birth star, not a particularly prosperous one to begin with. He told himself he shouldn't be swayed too much by astrology, but the foreboding remained: that in all his endeavors in life as a man, he was going to lose. Even after the baby, Reena worked in the fields, brought home more money than him, and as if because of this imbalance, they began to quarrel. They lived in a small neighborhood of Shia Muslim laborers. For months at a time when he and Reena were hardly together, he started secretly visiting a woman in a nearby hut whose husband was away on business. Until he was

found out by the woman's neighbor—who had come in one night to borrow oil for a lamp. The husband, on returning, stood outside Ali's hut, with a few other men holding wood torches, threatening to burn it down. They packed up the next day, finally deciding to leave Lakhimpur, a move they'd long been considering, for they owned no piece of land or property there, as even the hut was rented. On the train, Ali and Reena resolved to make a new beginning, for themselves, for the child.

On the roadside, a vendor in a white shirt, his sleeves rolled up, sat on an overturned milk crate, sorting ribbed gourd. In the back, up against the turrets, stood carts with empty milk crates and gunny sacks full of more vegetables. Ali remembered his last meal from the previous night in the train, a plate of puris, and almost smelled the curry. His hunger made him dizzy, and looking at a potato with patches of dirt still sticking to the skin, it seemed to him as though Reena had already cooked it, seasoned it with *garam masala*. He stooped to inspect the quality of the produce, lost balance, and fell on the potato heap.

"Get out of here, you drunk." The seller shoved him.

"I'm not drunk, just tired," Ali said, standing up. "How old are these?"

"They just came in."

"They look stale," said Ali.

"Stale! Are you blind? Go to the government hospital and get your eyes examined."

"How much are these potatoes?"

"Twenty rupees a kilo."

"Give me a quarter-kilo then," Ali said.

"A quarter-kilo?" said the seller, widening his eyes. "What are you, a rat? I will not sell a quarter-kilo. Minimum two kilos. Get out, don't waste my time."

"Please listen to me, brother. This is my first day in Delhi—"

"I will NOT entertain solicitations for FREE merchandise!" The seller turned to attend to his other customers.

"No, no, I'm not a beggar," said Ali. "Please listen to me—"

"Madam," the seller said to a tall lady in her forties, a cloth bag in the crook of her elbow, who was helping herself with the produce. "Let me do it for you."

She straightened. She reminded Ali of the Thakur lady in the village—except she, like all landed folk there, rarely visited the shops in person. Sellers would call at her house, or she'd send a servant to the market.

"Ramu, you said you'll get fresher supplies last time."

"Just some water-parched ones here and there, madam."

She shook her head. "You said you'd get better ones and they're worse!"

"I will pick out the good ones for you personally—see?" He held out a plump root, and started sorting through the heap. "How many kilos you need?"

"Give me ten kilos."

Nearby, a boy was urinating on a domed turret, humming a tune, varying direction, as if trying to get as much of the surface wet as possible.

The lady turned away and said, "My husband says I'm mad to come to this market—and I sometimes think he's right. You see, I've been shopping here since I was a little girl—used to come here with my mother. It was so much cleaner then."

The seller picked up discarded maize husks from the ground and hurled them at the boy. "*Saala chutiya.*" He turned to the lady again. "Yes, you shop here, madam, because your family has always come here. I'm also here for the same reason—family tradition. My grandfather was a vendor in this market. We sell, you buy."

"What I love about Delhi," Ali said, "is how a lady like you mixes and moves with people of all kinds, shops in the same place." But no response from her.

The seller started sorting, weighing the greens, filling the bag the lady handed to him. Money changed hands and she moved away, the bag at her elbow, tufts of carrots sticking out.

"Your name is Ramu, eh?" Ali said. "A friend's name in Lakhimpur is Ramu too. A good name." The vendor picked up a mug, and sprinkled water on the produce with his fingers. "Brother, why can't you sell me a quarter-kilo?"

The seller stood up and yelled. "Did I not tell you to clear out some time ago?"

"I asked you decently—why should you insult?"

"*Chal nikal.*" The seller spoke as if to a dog.

"What a sister-fucker!" said Ali.

"What did you say?"

Ali quickly moved away, and the seller hurled a potato at him. Ali picked it up and laughed—it was completely and thoroughly rotten, shrunk. He hurled it back, hitting the seller on the stomach. The seller threw a stone, and Ali dodged it, running out of range. He slowed down to a walk—after that quick burst of energy, he felt drained. His head throbbed,

knees almost buckling under him. He wandered on the bridge then, and almost before becoming fully conscious of it, in a flash, he passed through a succession of vendors—one shook his head at his request, the other ignored him, a third showed him the road, a fourth yelled "police!"

He stopped, leaning against a turret. The surface of the turret was finished with lime-plaster, and up close the original pale pink could be seen, only now it was muddied, or in patches faded almost to white, worn by age and weather. His elbow rubbed against the turret, rough to the touch, sandy bits of plaster falling to the ground, sprinkling dust onto his bare ankles below his folded-up blue lungi. In the distance, he could hear a peanut cart-man, the sound of the spatula against the roasting bowl—the scrape and clang, like the ringing of a bell. Reena would not touch peanuts as they didn't agree with her, and so this was not an option. Still, he was tempted to satisfy his hunger—but he'd get only a handful of peanuts with his money. Any food in a packet was never enough, not even biscuits, for if he started eating, he did not feel capable of stopping and saving anything for her. So he'd better not eat at all, but instead find something to take back. If he could get it, maybe boiled eggs with rice—but Reena had pledged a devotion with their Sufi Pir in mind, and had foresworn all non-vegetarian food, including eggs, until the end of the year, for the benefit of the move. The day's verdict was undeniable: he would lose again, here in Delhi too, just as in other places, other jobs, and a nameless panic built up inside. He felt the heartbeat in his stomach now and in his throat—and he sat down on the ground beside the turret and cried, covering his face with his towel.

The evening deepened, the corner of sky orange-pink, like the hem of one of Reena's saris. He got up and took aim at a heap of black garbage bags down on the canal bank: if he hit it, the move was a success. If not ... He watched the arc of his stone travel towards the target—but in the distance, already disappearing into shadow, he couldn't see if he made it.

Below, a tawny dog with a bitten-off tail and bare patches in its fur, the skin black underneath, sniffed at something on the ground and bolted when a pig with bristling black hair emerged from the bog, grunting. A boy with headphones over his ears waded through the reeds, sorting, picking, collecting choice pieces of garbage into a large sack so he could sell it to someone who bought junk.

"Oye, son!" Ali called out to him, clapping. The boy looked up, slid off the headphones. "Where can I buy something like those? I long to hear the songs of Mohammad Rafi."

“What?”

Ali indicated his ears. The boy pointed into the distance—perhaps towards a bazaar beyond.

“How do you like Delhi?” But the boy had gone back to work. “I think,” yelled Ali at the top of his voice, “Delhi is full of pig shit.” He broke out into convulsive laughter.

He leaned over the balustrade, looking at the thick piers the bridge rested on, made of rubble stone set in lime mortar, with elegant pointed arches in between. At one time, perhaps, a clear rivulet flowed underneath, originating from the desert hills in the west and joining the river Yamuna, bisecting the heart of an ancient *Dilli*. If this were Mughal times, he wondered, would he have driven a *tanga* cart? He might have returned home at dusk then with the smell of hay and a healthy horse as a companion. But nowadays with a rickshaw, you worked alone on the streets, at the mercy of a cycle chain that sometimes got stuck, and you had to untangle the link with a stick and grease-blackened fingers. But who knew of the troubles of horse-cart drivers? There was no telling if things really were better or worse in the past—all you had was this world and life in front of you. And there were times during the day when he felt a kind of elation at being in Delhi, on the wide tree-lined streets near Lodhi gardens, the ancient, narrow lanes near Nizamuddin *dargah*, rose petals on the pavement.

Why had it never occurred to him give up cards, as a token of his determination to succeed in the move, just as Reena gave up non-vegetarian food? Indeed she was a bigger person than him, and he felt ashamed of himself then, reminded of his indiscretion. There was never a lack of desire for Reena, and he’d never before deceived her, had never intended to. Was it unhappiness, self-loathing, spite, that made him do it? He resolved that at the next Muharram, he’d join the procession of mourners, whip himself on his bare back—a hundred lashes.

Having finished picking, the boy with the headphones slung his sack over his shoulder, and following the edge of the canal, walked under a newer bridge opposite. It had multiple lanes in either direction and arched high above the stream, as if to escape the overwhelming stench. Shiny sedans glided over smoothly, and at great speed. “Now, that’s something!” Ali let out a loud whistle, with his fingers in his mouth, as if he were in a film theatre.

Farther down the bridge, a Muslim man in a long muddy salwar stood with clothes hanging on his person: long lengths of fabric in red, green, checkered blue, draped over his outstretched arm, and shirts on hangers. Ali saluted the man with a *salaam*.

The man nodded and resumed his spiel. He spoke as if reciting a verse: “Hear hear, colors will last like a faithful wife—buy a long strip of thirty meters of this soft soft cloth, make a lovely lovely wardrobe for your family—kurtahs lungis towels napkins bed sheets knickers frocks ...” When a slender young woman in a green salwar and veil passed by, he stopped his recital and stared after her, saying, “Hai Allah, kill me now.”

Ali laughed and thumped himself over the heart. The man smiled—despite his rich beard, clearly he was very young, in his late teens. “*Mian*, I’m a married man,” he said to Ali. And as if in remorse or to simply rest, he lowered his clothing-laden arm, using the other hand to stop hangers sliding off.

“Me too, *Mian*,” Ali replied. “Me too. Dreams respect no vows. *Khuda hafiz*.”

Ali approached the shop of a butcher. Chicken carcasses dangled by the leg on a wooden crossbeam, and he wondered when he’d be able to afford a piece, while black kites hovered overhead, swooping to grab morsels or scraps of skin, their shrill cries like whistles.

Near the edge of the market, a boy in a Nepali cap sat amidst the produce, yelling at the top of his tinny voice; he was not much older than ten. He had a vermilion mark on his forehead and a tuft of hair on the back of his head: a little Hindu priest.

“Eighteen! Eighteen! Eighteen-a-kilo!”

“Oye, son,” said Ali. “You here all alone! Where is Ma and Papa?”

“Some of us,” said a neighboring seller, looking at Ali, “are keeping an eye on him, you know.” Customers had gathered in front, and the seller turned to his business.

“Are you helping that seller?” Ali asked.

“No,” the boy said. “I’m the vendor.”

“Amazing!” Here was a mere child with nobody else in charge—and Ali could not resist. The neighbor had turned away, and when the boy was not looking, he slipped a handful of small potatoes and a brinjal into the pouch tied around his waist.

Ali looked up at the light bulbs illuminating the bridge. “Does this place ever close, do people ever go home?”

“It’ll close,” said the child, “eventually.”

A seller walked by, dragging a gunny sack. “Oye *chhotu*,” he said to the boy. “Everything alright?”

The boy smiled brightly. “First-class, Kishan *chacha*, first class!”

"Your uncle?" Ali asked.

The boy shook his head. "No, that's Kishan *chacha*, the owner. He's down the road." Untangling bundles of coriander, he asked, "When did you arrive in Delhi?"

"Today," Ali replied. "And how did you guess? Is it my lungi—"

"How you folks crack me up—have you ever heard yourself speak?"

"My accent?"

"The accent, words, the dialect, everything!"

Ali felt surprised then, that he'd never thought of it this way—of being marked an outsider the minute he opened his mouth! But thankfully, as a rickshaw puller he wouldn't need to talk much.

The neighbor was looking at them, adjusting his seat, an overturned milk crate, turning a little towards them, the plastic scraping against the gravel.

"Boy," the neighbor shouted from his seat. "Where did you get those tindora? So green and fresh."

"Kishan *chacha* gets them," he replied. "From the other side of the Yamuna."

Even though the man had to shout to be heard between customers, he still spoke. "By the Yamuna river, eh—nice! My supplier is west of Delhi, near the desert hills—even on the first day the cabbage leaves wilt. Dry land, dry produce."

When the boy got up and bent down to fill a customer's bag, the neighbor was looking at the boy—and Ali felt there was something wrong in the man's gaze, the way he ran his eyes up and down.

"You know that man?" Ali asked.

The boy shook his head. "My old neighbor shifted to another market a few days ago, and he took his place."

"You okay all by yourself, then?" After the theft, and perhaps because of it, he felt solicitous towards the boy—a thief's bond, as if in a kind of gratefulness it drew you closer to the one you stole from.

"Absolutely," the boy replied. "I'm safe here. Kishan *chacha* will return, a little later tonight. We can't leave anything in the market, so every night we pack up and take everything with us in the cart."

Ali sat on a rock, tucking up his lungi at the waist.

"The lungi must keep you cool," the boy said.

"Yes, but I've seen others wear jeans. I'll try it sometime." He stretched his legs out in front. "I'll sit here a moment if you don't mind."

"I will not hand out free supplies, don't even think it."

"I'm just sitting here," Ali said.

Bhajan recitals had started for the Dashara festival: someone was singing in a hoarse voice in the loudspeaker from a Durga temple at the crossroads, praising the goddess for killing the demon Mahisha. Ali pictured Durga, she with the many arms who rode a tiger. In the fields, Muslim or Hindu, all showed reverence to her; she protected everyone from snakebites.

There was a long drawn-out train horn—and thoughts of Reena and the baby returned to him. His son would not be crying, for he did not wail much. Hopefully the baby would go to sleep without trouble.

"For Dashara," the boy said, "it's ten days of recitals for the goddess."

"Funny how different numbers are sacred in different faiths. Ten must be significant for Hindus—while for the Shia twelve is sacred, after the number of imams."

"Well, for us too. For one thing, the Kumbh Mela fair is every twelve years."

"Oh, that gathering of people by the Ganga? Such masses of people. To wash away sins, wasn't it. I respect that. Of course, you're only a boy—such matters are not for you."

"I've had the thread ceremony. See?" He reached under his shirt and showed his sacred thread, holding it by the thumb and index finger. "I understand washing away sin. In Pokhara, I do morning ablutions in the temple pond."

Ali laughed. "Oh, my little priest." The boy's name was Bishnu.

He then spoke of his experiences to Bishnu: the renting of the rickshaw, the various trips as a hired rickshaw puller, the struggles to figure out directions in this new place, and finally the unsuccessful effort to buy vegetables.

Bishnu said, "Well, if you talk like that people will only think one thing."

"What do you mean?"

"All sad and oh, I'm new to this big bad city ..." he mimicked in a forlorn voice, gesturing with his hand. "Don't tell them your story. No stories. That's what beggars do. Just ask directly."

"You got hold of my accent correctly."

"You're from a village in Bihar, correct?"

Ali nodded, and the boy smiled, a dimple in his cheek. "I knew it."

"You're very smart and talented. You should go to school, not sell vegetables among the pigs and dogs."

"Next year. I'm going to a school next year." There was excitement in his voice.

Customers came and went, and the boy conducted business efficiently. Between sales, Ali said to him: "I asked in any number of direct ways at first, in other markets before this—I put down the money I had and hardly used any words. Only at last, bewitched by hunger, I spoke in the lament you're teasing me about. Not that people in the city are heartless. If a wretched one were to approach me, I also would push them away. There is of course wretchedness in the villages too—more trees and fields and open spaces than here, but for all that, no paradise. Or why else would so many of us trek so far away from home?"

Bishnu looked at him then. "You speak just like my uncle."

"And where is he?" Ali asked.

"Back in Pokhara. Nepal. He's a very wise man. A cattle farmer."

Ali chuckled. "Perhaps I'm a wise man too, after all, if wisdom accrues through failure."

"I still can't believe you were able to rent a rickshaw right away. It takes people days and days, going here and there, pleading with people."

"It took less than an hour," Ali said. "I asked a few rickshaw pullers near the station, and one of them set me up with the same merchant he rents from."

"You're very lucky," said Bishnu, sprinkling water on the greens. An everyday word—but it seemed strange in application to him, and Ali felt disembodied from himself for a moment, as if the person who had just been called "lucky" was not himself but someone else in his place.

The warm glow of the Petromax lamp was on their faces. The neighbor still watched them, but now sat on the far side of his produce, where customers had collected. As people walked by, the boy continued announcing, "Closing price—must sell tonight, grab before closing, kilo sixteen, sixteen kilo."

There was a briskness to the transactions now, and the shoppers were mostly men in a hurry; many didn't bother to pick and choose, nor check the scale whether the vendor was cheating.

Bishnu was saying: "The city is not such a hard place after all. You work and you have enough money to eat, and maybe in a few months you'd get to run your rickshaw in one of the big bazaars. In your village you always make the same money, here you get the chance to grow."

"Chance to grow. Yes sir, big man. You're hardly ten years old, but I'm glad I spoke to you." He breathed in deeply, and patted the budding merchant on the back.

And Ali felt that a good conversation, as the elders said, was like a nice

meal, filling you up inside—and satisfied something within you. The surest sign of this, it seemed to him, was the quietening of his heartbeat. He put his hand on his rib for the telltale throb of fear—but no, it was calm. Surely the fear would return again, as it always did, tomorrow or the day after or a week later, but for the moment, he felt free.

"I became big fast," said Bishnu.

"Don't grow up so quickly. The best time in life is childhood. I'm sad that your Ma and Papa are making you work all alone."

Without replying, Bishnu got up, tossing the shawl over his shoulder. One by one, vendors all around them started packing up, loading pushcarts, and wheeling them away. A seller across the street, pulling his cart, passed them and said, "*Sab thik-thak, beta?*"

Bishnu waved at him. "Kishan *chacha* will be here any minute." Something about him, perhaps the way he talked, or seeing a child behave like someone older, totally shamed Ali of his little act. He pictured himself returning the produce, saying, "A couple of these had rolled off the edge." But then he didn't. And the vegetables in the pouch would be hardly enough for one person. Another handful was needed for Reena. When Bishnu was filling up a mug with water from a bucket, Ali picked a few small brinjals from the heap, slipping them into the pouch. That's when he heard the scream. "Thief!" It was the neighbor, and he'd grabbed Ali by the neck.

"Stealing from a child, eh? Shameless rascal!" He boxed him on the ear. A customer had stopped at the neighbor's, and was looking at them.

"See, son, good that there's a grown up like me keeping watch over you. Ruffians like him will take advantage."

Ali tried to break free, but the man's grip was firm, and he continued hitting him.

"Let him go," Bishnu said.

"The thief robbing you in front of your own eyes."

"He's my customer. Let him go!" The boy pulled Ali free. "You have a buyer waiting for you—Kishan *chacha* will take care of me. I'll be fine, thank you."

The man released Ali. "I'm right here if he tries any funny business." The neighbor returned to his seat to help the customer.

"Thank you," Ali said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Are you crazy?" Bishnu spoke in a sharp whisper. "First day in the city, and you want to end up in jail? Who'll rent you a rickshaw after that? How much did you take—show!" Ali revealed the contents of the pouch, and the

handful of brinjal in his grasp—his hand still would not let them go. He plucked the note of ten rupees wedged in his waistband, and gave it to the boy.

“You do have money—then why did you steal?”

“Only enough for a quarter-kilo, if you’ll sell.”

Bishnu shook his head, taking out his weight-balance. “Great buyer of a *pau* kilo.” He took Ali’s vegetables, weighed and wrapped them in a piece of paper.

“Why are you talking to that village lowlife?” It was the neighbor. He’d begun packing up his produce, loading his cart. He said to Ali, “Hey you, clear out, damn you!”

There were no more customers, and Bishnu too started re-bagging the vegetables into large gunny sacks, tying it with string. Ali helped. They gathered and folded up the canvas sheets, piling them up beside the turret. If he still couldn’t find a place to stay in the coming days, perhaps he’d need to get such sheets for tent fabric in the future. Ali stacked milk crates in the back, while Bishnu swept away leaves and crumpled paper in the front.

“Looks like Kishan won’t be coming today,” the neighbor said, walking up to the boy.

“He’s probably delayed, but he’ll be here,” Bishnu replied.

“No, he must have slipped out early to get a bottle of drink. Poor man, a lot of stress, the fluctuating prices of vegetables. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.” The man put his arm around Bishnu.

“He does not drink anymore,” Bishnu said. “He’ll come by very soon.”

He pinched his cheek. “Oh—you’re so beautiful.” He then pulled Bishnu to himself, and as he tried to break free, slipped a hand inside the boy’s shorts, cupping his naked buttock, squeezing it in his fat hand.

Ali lunged forward, lifted the man away, and kicked him in the stomach. But the man rushed at Ali and the two men locked arms, wrestling. He was bigger and heavier, and pushed the exhausted Ali all the way to the turret. Even though he was receiving blows to the stomach and chest, Ali still clung to him and wouldn’t let him go. Pinning him against the turret, the man rained punches all over his body until Ali had to let go and cover his face and head with his arms.

“Look,” shouted Bishnu, “there’s Kishan *chacha!*”

Kishan was wheeling a pushcart, coming up the road on a trot. He was shouting, “I’m here, *chhotu.*” The man tried to run away, but Ali tripped him with his foot, and he fell face down onto the dirt.

Kishan pulled up into the light, looking suspiciously at Ali—who held

up his hand and told him what happened. Kishan ran up, knelt down, and slapped the man on the cheek. “You come near my boy again, I’ll kill you, you hear? And I’m telling all the other sellers.”

“Kishan *bhai*, forgive me—don’t tell, they’ll kick me out, please don’t.” They left him there in the dirt and returned to the circle of light around the Petromax lamp.

While Kishan loaded the gunny bags onto the cart, Ali sat near the turrets with Bishnu, who was shaking. The man had gotten up and was wheeling his cart away, the wheels screeching and groaning. “And put some goddamn grease on the wheels!” Kishan said.

Bishnu stood up, brought out a shiny stainless steel cash box from under a pile of empty gunny sacks, and gave it to Kishan. “I did good.”

“You did wonderful, *chhotu,*” said Kishan, taking the box. “But no more alone in the evenings.”

“As you say, Kishan *chacha.*”

“I’m down only at the other end of the bridge,” said Kishan, as if to himself, counting the cash. “Not too far, but far enough!” Ali wondered, why did he deputy the boy here in the first place—it must be tempting to make twice as much money, in two places.

“Thank you, Ali *bhai,*” Kishan said. “I’m never this late—I was held up, a customer kept talking and would not leave. You can come here any time, and I’ll sell you vegetables.”

Kishan closed the cash box and took it over to the light, locking it with a key from his pocket. Was tonight an omen for the move? Ali couldn’t say. But here he was, limbs intact, a job to go to in the morning—and before leaving for work, for a moment, he’d hold his son in his arms.

“Damn, boy!” Kishan said then, and whacked Bishnu on the back of the head, and Ali felt his stomach lurch. “What did I tell you, never to put the new cash box in the dirt—there’s a fucking big scratch on it!”

“I’m sorry. I’ll never do it again.”

Bishnu got on the wooden board of the cart, settling himself between the bags, legs dangling over the edge. He was crying, but then he wiped his tears with the back of his hand. Kishan pulled the cart away.

As they separated into the darkness, Bishnu held up a hand and said to Ali, “The night guard on the road to the station might ask for a tip for festival season or some such. Don’t give him anything.” With the crowds gone, for the first time the immense width of the bridge became visible. Ali pictured a *tanga* horse-cart in Mughal times rolling away, kicking up dust, the sound of hooves on the ground.