

# Freeschool Street

A Novel

by

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## **Calcutta, 1991**

### Chapter 1

Raju looked down at the headlines of the day's newspaper and felt fear clench his belly. After all, it was not every day that a twelve-year old saw himself proclaimed dead on the front page of *The Statesman*.

Usually Raju liked the task of collecting the paper for his boss, the owner of Lakshmi Khadi House, where Raju had now been working for four years. As the youngest employee of the store, it fell to Raju to walk down the narrow stairs of the babu's house, through the street-level shop to the stoop where *The Statesman* lay waiting, and then retrace his steps and deposit the paper on the Formica coffee table in the boss' living room. After a decent interval, it was also his job to secretly bring the same paper, crisply unread, back down to the store to be used to line the shelves or to wrap around the shop's specialty, the handloom kurtas. Everyone knew that the boss did not read the paper, that he had no interest in struggling through the complex English sentences when he could just as easily learn the essence of the news in Bengali on the radio. The paper was bought for show, to demonstrate the babu's superior educated status to the other shop owners on Freeschool Street. It was only Raju, picking up *The Statesman* everyday, who flipped through the pages, trying to make sense of the words. Usually, he did not have much luck. Having completed class two in his village's school, Raju only knew the alphabets, the spelling of his name, and some simple words.

So it was ironic that the only name he could spell – RAJIV - strung together with one of the few words that he could comprehend - DEAD! - had caused such intense, though momentary, consternation in Raju's belly.

Raju was not a boy given to fanciful thinking. His young life was tightly in place and no amount of fantasizing could change his reality. But Raju was superstitious. Four years of erratic sales in the shop had prompted a strong belief in omens. So when he saw the announcement of his own death, his instinct was to counteract, with reason, the power of the printed word. "No one calls me Rajiv," he said aloud. Already his initial shakiness was fading, his buoyant optimism was reasserting itself. "How can it be me, when it's not even my name anymore?"

Raju's mother had called him Rajiv, even though it was too fancy a name for his village. It was the name of an educated man - a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer - and his mother had chosen it deliberately, hoping that Raju's life would catch up with his appellation. But it had not worked out like that. Instead, he had come to the city at the age of eight accompanied by his uncle. It had been the first time that he had taken a train, and waiting in the station at his village with his clothes tidily folded into a plastic bag, Raju had felt both nervous and anticipatory. He was going to live in Calcutta. He was going to earn a living just like an adult. Raju's mother, waiting at the platform to see off her son, had looked wan and tired – she had cried as she had served him his rice that morning, averting her face so that Raju would not see her tears, and had combed his hair for him after his bath, even though Raju was now old enough to take care of himself. It had not been his mother's idea to send Raju to work. If she had had her way, Raju would have remained in the village, going to school until the age of sixteen and maybe even to

college afterwards. Her dream was that one day Raju would be an educated man, perhaps a schoolteacher or a post office clerk, working set hours, receiving a monthly salary, and gaining the respect of the other villagers. She had often shared those dreams of the future with her son. While other boys were being told fairy tales, Raju was told stories of how he would go to college and make a great success of himself. “You’re the moon in my sky, Raju,” his mother would tell him when he was little, hugging him close at night, “You will study hard and do well in school, and when I am old, I shall see my little Raju become a principal of a big school.” Sometimes his mother bought the newspaper, just to show Raju the pictures of students who had topped especially difficult exams. “One day, I will see your picture in a paper like this,” she would say, her eyes glowing in her thin face. Raju had also looked forward to that day when his photo would be printed in the newspaper. But now, look! Instead of the details of his award, here was his own name, proclaiming his death.

On the stoop, Raju suddenly shivered. “But it’s really not my name any more,” he repeated, sounding much too insistent even to his own ears, swallowing the panic that rose in his chest. Was it not true that these days everyone called him Raju? “Rajiv” was considered too sophisticated for a scrawny, dark-faced shop-hand with eyes so bright and a grin so impudent that the boss was constantly cuffing him on the head to make him look serious.

Raju was aware that his superstitious dread of the front page of the paper was silly. “No one calls me Rajiv, number one,” he said to himself, continuing to count out the reasons why he should ignore the portentous headline and pick up the paper. “Number two, it’s only about a dead politician who had the garbage luck of being in a

bad place at a bad time.” For Raju had already heard the news: Rajiv Gandhi, gentle, youthful, educated, optimistic, had been blown into smithereens by a garland-giving girl far away in the south of India. It was the reason why Raju’s shop was going to stay shut for today, and possibly for many days this week. “Number three, who would want to kill me anyway?”

Still, Raju resolved to be careful today. Despite the unexpected holiday, he would stay quietly indoors, not dashing about in the streets with the other children who worked in the shops along Freeschool Street. He would listen to the boss and not venture outside. Maybe the babu was right - who knew, there might be riots in the streets, big fights like those in the Amitabh Bachchan movies, with cops shooting at gangsters and cars being set on fire.

Raju stood wistfully, imagining the pot-holed roads full of policemen, the shops set alight, and the *twoo-twoo-twoo* of the fire engines. It would have been fun to have seen such excitement on the dull streets of Calcutta. But no. He would stay indoors and away from danger. It would be best to stay around the babu, sharing the boss’s worries about what would happen if the store remained shut for an extended period of time.

But what to do about the paper? Raju would never shirk his job; he was a conscientious worker, up at dawn to sweep the store and tidy the shelves. Then he would make the tea - with sugar and milk for the boss, plain brew for the workers - and deliver it person to person, earning ruffled hair and head pats. After that, Raju would take a shower, offer an incense stick to the portrait of babu’s late father, bring in the paper, and open the store. Raju never failed to do what he was told, which was why the boss had recently promoted him from a sweeper to a salesman, with a new salary of three hundred

rupees – though Raju was told to say it was five hundred to anyone who asked. Yet, this morning, he had been quivering on the stoop, staring at the headlines for nearly thirty minutes while there was work to be finished upstairs.

This will not do, Raju thought. He quickly made up his mind. He would leave *The Statesman* where it was. If Raju distracted the babu with questions about the money they would lose in the single missed day, the boss would not even notice the paper's absence. What was the big deal anyway? Everyone knew that the politician was dead. What more was there to read? Raju turned away from the doorstep. He knew the paper would disappear in a matter of seconds – in Calcutta there was always someone ready to take away the leavings of others.

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“Bengalis are too timid to riot,” Jita argued yet again this morning.

“They rioted well enough in 1942,” Ashoke replied, turning the pages of *The Statesman*. The front page featured a black and white picture of Rajiv Gandhi's funeral pyre with widowed Sonia and the children watching the flames.

“Bapi! That was almost fifty years ago!” Jita cried. “Forty-nine, to be perfectly exact.” She had inherited the turn of phrase from her mother and the love of mathematical precision from her stepfather.

“Hmmm.” Ashoke sipped tea from his gold-edged porcelain cup, and Jita knew that she was not going to win this argument. Even though the post-assassination curfew had lifted in Calcutta, the city was uncertain of its peace. There were still riots in Punjab and Bihar, places that felt very far away to sixteen-year old Jita, who really could not

understand why her normally indulgent stepfather was being so unreasonable. Her mother, Suhashini, glanced at her with sympathy, but Jita remained distraught. Her summer vacation was ruined.

So now Jita whiled away the afternoon on the terrace, her elbows dimpled with the patterns of the wrought-iron railing. She glumly watched the activities in Deshapriya Park - ragged, homeless children playing football, and shirtless peddlers resting under the gulmohur trees. Parallel to the park, with its asphalt melting in shiny patches, ran Rashbehari Avenue where she could see the silver-and-blue state buses operating on their regular schedule, and a hand-drawn rickshaw ferrying a middle-aged woman back to her home or maybe to the market.

Things were totally back to normal, Jita thought, squinting into the sun. Bapi lived in some other world. Truly, these had been the worst holidays. Her school had cancelled the class trip to Goa, crushing Jita's dreams of swimming in the ocean and lazing about on the beach with her best friends. Instead of the much-anticipated vacation, here she was, stuck at home.

Below the terrace, the vast house was silent and dark - the slatted wooden windows shuttered against the relentless Calcutta afternoon, the curtains still in the airless quiet. The maids had retired to the veranda, leaning against the cool metal of the grills, cracking betel nuts and gossiping quietly. Jita's mother Suhashini was in the big room, asleep or reading.

Jita should have been asleep too, taking her after-lunch nap. But Jita never needed to rest. From her post on the terrace, she spotted a man making his way across the dusty expanse of Deshapriya Park. Often, he paused to look up at the burning sky, not with the

distress of a native Bengali, but with interest and curiosity. He was clearly foreign. One of those odd birds of paradise who find their migratory way to India, the bands of foreign-born *desis* who vacation each winter in Calcutta. But what was he doing here in June? The stranger was wearing a black T-shirt when any Bengali with half a brain would wear pale cotton kurtas and know to walk along the shade trees instead of crossing the park through the center, as this idiot was doing, venturing out during the hottest part of the day – surely even a *firangi* had to have more sense.

Out of lazy curiosity Jita watched him - even from a distance, he was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen. She leaned over the railings to see him cross the road, and amazingly, make his way to her own front gate. The young man - for now he was close enough for Jita to see that he was in his late twenties - drew a scrap of paper from his pocket, consulted it and as he reached for the bell, Jita heard the silvery chimes ring out melodiously through the house.

When she finally comprehended that the address that the stranger sought was her own, Jita rushed from the terrace, scalding the soles of her bare feet on the burning cement, and sped down the marble stairs. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down her cotton dress, mimicked her mother's gracious expression and opened the door.

The man smiled before he spoke. Ducking his head, he wiped off the sweat that had trickled onto his lashes.

“Sorry to bother you like this,” he said in an American accent, “but I’m Anil Banerjee, visiting from California. I was wondering if Suhashini Chaudhuri is home? I’m her nephew – Raja Banerjee’s son.” He made a mess of her mother’s name. Yet, incredibly, and for the first time in her teenage life, Jita found herself tongue-tied. She

had not expected to be related to this hunk and his introduction was a bit of a shock. Flapping her arms in the general direction of the front room, she fled with a burning face to find her mother, annoyed at her inability to construct a sentence.

Her mother had already begun to make her way down the stairs to greet their unexpected guest. With a saffron sari wrapped about her long frame and her hair a gleaming rope that fell down her back, Suhash blinked her sun-dazzled eyes at the stranger, and flashed her signature “welcome to our home” smile. Looking into Anil’s stunned face, Jita felt a rush of satisfaction at the effect of her mother’s beauty mingling with her own stirrings of wistfulness.

Her mother was saying, “Really? *Rajada*’s son? Yes of course, how like him you look. When I last saw you, you were only a boy.” Speaking English for Anil’s benefit, Suhash had taken on what Jita teasingly labelled her posh British accent – which she used whenever she spoke of her student years at Oxford or of Jita’s father, Rabin, who apparently was also Anil’s uncle. Rabin had died such an impossibly long time ago that Jita mostly forgot that her father had ever existed, but at odd moments, she would play around with the idea of how different her life might have been had Rabin not died in such an irresponsible manner, and she, Jita had grown up in surely more exciting Oxford.

Had their life continued on in England, Jita thought irritably, she would not have been dispatched to wake the maids for such an appallingly late lunch, and upon her return with a glass of lemonade quaking on a flowered saucer, would not have found her mother and Anil comfortably conversing in the front room. Feeling rather squashed at the ease and elegance of the other two, Jita tried to insert herself into the conversation.

“So what brings you to Calcutta, Anil? Vacation?” Jita asked. She deliberately did not append *da* – or big brother – to her guest’s name as convention dictated. Had Bapi been around, he would have corrected her.

“I wish!” Anil said, looking at her at last. “I guess for vacation I would have visited in winter, as my *Lonely Planet* tells me to - it’s so much hotter than I expected it to be. I’m actually here on work – my first job after journalism school.” Anil paused to gulp down his lemonade while Jita tried to not stare at his slender, long-lashed face. “I’m supposed to write about the socio-economic situation in India. California’s had this sudden influx of Indian engineers, and my paper wants to increase readership among them. I was picked because I speak Hindi,” Anil explained. “Mom made sure I learned Hindi and Bengali. All those lessons are finally paying off.”

“But why Calcutta?” Jita questioned, finally shedding her awkwardness. “Why not Delhi or Bombay? Bombay’s pretty great.”

“Because I have family here. And I’ve actually visited Calcutta before – I was seven and my parents had a wedding to attend in the city,” Anil paused, looked at her mother who opened her mouth to speak, but seemed to think better of it. “It was a fantastic trip, staying up late, eating too much, riding my bike around the house without anyone telling me off, but then I got really, really sick – typhoid from contaminated water – and had to be hospitalized for weeks. My parents never let me visit India again. But I always intended to come back and get to know my family, get acquainted with you guys.”

“Us?” Jita asked, incredulously. Out of the corner of her eye, Jita saw her mother’s expression of amusement. Jita returned her look, grinning; it’s a legitimate

question, she communicated wordlessly to her mother, with a brief one-shouldered shrug. Her mother shook her head imperceptibly. No rudeness to guests, her gesture said. Jita rolled her eyes, but sank down into the cushions. Her mother was right. No rudeness to guests.

“I’ve always wanted to get to know my Indian family.” Anil was smiling, oblivious to the exchange. “Dadubhai’s not getting any younger, and I wanted to spend some time with him. I wrote to him to say I was coming but my letter seems to have gotten lost in the mail. I called him this morning – he was very surprised to hear from me so unexpectedly – but he’s invited me to have lunch with him next week. I’m really looking forward to it. I’ve heard so much about him from my Dad. Besides, I’m intrigued by Calcutta, it seems such a storied city – the British capital...”

“The capital moved to Delhi, Calcuttans were too troublesome - too many freedom fighters.” Jita interrupted, flaunting her knowledge of Indian history. “Like Dadubhai,” she added, referring to the fact that her grandfather had joined the Independence movement in the 1940s.

Suhash smiled and stood up. “Please, you should eat your lunch before it gets cold.”

The small group proceeded to the dining table and after lunch, Anil left, promising to be in touch.

From the living room window, Jita watched as he descended into the street. He looked in the wrong direction and sauntered across Rashbehari Avenue, causing a taxi to come to an abrupt halt. Jita felt quite certain that they’d never see him again – he’d move to Bombay as soon as he figured out how dull, dull, dull, Calcutta was. Jita stayed by the

window, watching her newfound cousin cross the park, as her mother went in search of the maid. “The dishes need clearing, and the roses are drooping,” Suhash said to no one in particular, pausing at the foot of the stairs, fingers on the polished balustrade. She picked up the vase of roses and looked absently at the door from which Anil had just departed. “He does have a passing resemblance to your father, Jita, especially around the mouth, when he smiles. It’s a bit disconcerting, really.”

And then she shook her head and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Jita in her seat by the window, feeling confused and faintly guilty - but for what, she could not quite say.

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