

LAPTOP

By Ardashir Vakil

It was already dark when Keshav was woken from his snooze by the cooing of pigeons. Their tight, stretched-out moans reminded him of the prostitute girl he had been with earlier in the day. He smiled; in his mind's eye, he was still looking at her rouged cheeks, the tiny beads of sweat above her cherry lipstick, the dimple on her slender chin. Though he knew the moans were part of her job, his performance today had pleased him and he almost allowed himself to believe her expressions of pleasure were genuine.

His first encounter with Gopi had taken place more than three months ago. He had to call it an encounter because he wasn't able to finish what he had paid for. Since that transaction, a month after he had arrived in Mumbai, he had been going back to Nayyar's brothel almost every other day.

The brothel was conveniently located - only ten

minutes' walk from his father's workplace where Keshav was living - tucked aſway, at the bottom of an alley so narrow and crowded with shop fronts, you wouldn't know it existed unless you had been directed there. He'd been shown it by Som, a friend he had made at the computer studies college.

With his fingers, Keshav slowly, repeatedly, combed his glossy, black hair sending ant-like currents running over his scalp. As he lay here in the shared servants' *kholi* at the back end of this large, plush apartment where his father worked as a servant from early morning to late at night, he imagined Gopi also lying down in her cubicle in the brothel at the end of the alley - not with the various customers she was obliged to entertain, but sort of lying down with him, or rather, at the same time as him, minus the ten minutes of walking that divided them.

In his mind, he could make that space disappear; all the physical objects that lay between them – chairs, tables, doors, houses, trees, birds, walls, shops, buildings, bus stops, streets, people, lanes, cars, buses, cycles, motor rickshaws, – all these things could be made insubstantial, as if a huge wave had washed them away. Leaving only

Gopi and him lying together in their separate beds. He could see her now; her cheeky rice-white grin, her neck, so thin that he could almost encircle it with one hand, her teasing slaps. In his newly devastated world, only he would have the privilege of her lovely smile, her bodice, her little girl's feet stretched out, reaching only three-quarters-way down the bed.

Though she said she was 19, her slight frame, her tinkling, glass bangles and her playfulness, reminded him of his sister, before her face had turned blank. Gopi's face was animated, affectionate, but sharp. That's probably what made her so popular with the men who came to *Nayyar's*. Often, he had to wait for Gopi to finish with another customer before it was his turn. If only he could make it so that right now, for instance, she were also thinking of him at the same time as he was thinking of her; if he could make that happen, life would be perfect.

Again, he tickled his scalp with his fingers. He wished he could – perish the crazy thought, but he couldn't, so he let it run on – find a way to make Gopi his wife. If he could get them both working for someone like Mrs Shroff, his father's employer, who never need know what Gopi's old

job was, they might together be lying down on the floor of some corridor or servants' *kholi*. But then, what if she couldn't stop herself selling her body to the male servants sleeping next to them? That image curdled his fantasy and brought him back to the present.

He was lying on a double-layer of cardboard on the floor in the corner of this servants' room in Mumbai while his older sister was in Bilimora, her husband's village. An overripe smell came from Keshav's dank armpits. He hadn't changed his shirt in three days. It was May, month of murderous heat and sleep oiled by sweat. In the village, at least he would be able to search out a breezy spot under the trees, downwind from the *nala*. He imagined himself sitting there with his fellow- truanter, Dilip and Manga, enjoying the ripples of cool air that would bring different smells, sometimes of soap from the nearer reaches of the stream where their mothers or sisters washed clothes and sometimes the whiff of piss or shit from further downstream, where, every morning, they all - women and men on separate banks - went to do *sundaas*.

Soon, some half-blind grandfather would hobble into the grove of trees, a corner of his *dhoti* in his hand and shoo Keshav and his friends away, as if they were cows who had wandered into the wrong field. '*Hut, hut!* Lazy idiots! Get up, go to your studies, dammit!' As they sloped off to a different part of the grove, the naughty one, Dilip, would shout, '*Arre, Muraji bhai, tamaru lungi uttrijai!* Look out, old man, your *lungi* has slipped down!'

Keshav blinked from one vision to another, back to this afternoon's pleasure. Gopi had such a spongy bum. Going into her was soft, and satisfying, like a meal he remembered from long ago: the balls of rice mixed with dal his mother's fingers had plied him with when he was a little boy.

The first time he had gone into the brothel in Kamthipura, there were some half a dozen girls in the three-storeyed building that was leaning forwards over the alley like an old man who needs a stick to prop himself up. Nayyar, the Keralite oaf who ran the place, had barked, 'Boy, you take this one, she will show properly what to do, okay? Don't look so worried, boy, everything will become good.' How had Nayyar, with his glowering dark face and his burly arms, guessed it was his first time?

Once in the cubicle, Keshav watched the slender girl expertly rip a condom from its square package. 'Pencil *nikal!*' – 'Out with your pencil!' – she had ordered. Then, after a strong hand-pump to make him hard, she had unfurled the condom onto his pencil and said, 'Front or back?' When he looked unsure, she had rolled down onto her back, beckoned him to advance between her legs, '*Aa jao ither,*' and, guided him in without fuss. Immediately, looking straight ahead, he had begun galloping towards his climax.

'*Arre, aste kar, chukrum!* Slow down, crazy boy!' she said, pushing on his right shoulder. To stop himself, he thought of school pencils being sharpened. Then he thought of his mother's face. He thought of his sister. He wanted to make this first experience memorable. And, he wanted his money's worth. In trying to hold himself back, he slipped out of her, and the condom almost slithered off. The girl had giggled. 'Why are you laughing?' he had said in Hindi. She answered in his mother tongue, Gujarati, but with a different intonation, 'You're tickling me! *Chee!* Now look what you've done. This one is ruined, it won't go back on. I'll have to chuck it. You need to you pay me extra ten rupees for the new one.'

While Gopi replaced the *Nirodh*, Keshav picked up music coming from the next cubicle:

*Ganga,
aayay kahaay say,
jaayay kahaay ray,
lehray paani may
jaise dhup chaaow ray.'*

[Ganga, where do you come from/ where do you go?/ Your waves catch the sun/ and the shadows as you flow.]

Strange to hear a religious song in a brothel. It made him think of his mother who liked to pray to Krishna, her sad face floating up. He tried to block out the singing, when, after a swift replacement by the girl, he resumed his bumping down and up on her like when he was a little boy terrified to be riding pillion on the child-molesting landowner's motorcycle. He felt his face scrunch up with fatigue. The girl was making a poor effort to contain her spluttering laughter. It was embarrassing. His arms, placed on each side of her torso, ached like he was trying to do press-ups. He was only used to masturbation, so much easier, and more enjoyable than this discomfiting exercise. But then, a surprise – in a trice, the girl had flicked off the front-hooks of her turquoise blouse, letting him gaze at her loosened breasts. He was mesmerised by their mango shape and the way they jounced from side to side as if hungry boys in the village were shaking the branch from which these fruit were hanging.

At that first meeting, he remembered the questions Gopi had asked him.

'When did you come to Mumbai?'

'About four months ago. I'm staying with my father who works as a servant for a rich Parsi family.' He had stopped his press-ups, looking at her breasts had made him hard, but using his arms to keep his torso erect was hurting his weak elbows.

'Just a *baccha*, you are! Don't you have any shame coming here and indulging in these dirty practices?'

'You're a kid too!'

'Go, go! Finish off now, otherwise that black devil will come and throw you out and hurt my ears with his shouting.'

'Do you have to do it with him too?'

'No way, he's a sister-fucking *hijra*. Can't get it up unless he's got a coconut shoved up his arse.' Her little arm came up and she slapped him lightly, lovingly, on the chin. They both sniggered. Keshav was limp again. Another condom spoiled.

'What gives you money to come here? You got a job? Hope you're not using your father's salary!'

'I'm studying computer science in a college.'

'*Wah re wah!* Big man, *hain na?* Can't even keep your *lauda* hard and you want to study computers now.'

'What's the name of your village?'

'What do you care?' she snapped. He didn't know, he was just trying to talk. There was a banging on the cubicle door. 'Hey, Gopi! Tell the boy, if he wants more, he will have to pay more, or return another time.'

'Hurry up, damn it,' otherwise he'll take double money.' Keshav had grabbed his grey half-pants off the floor and pulled out a hundred rupee note. 'Take this for another session.'

'Are you sure? I can just...' she said, peeling off the condom and taking hold of his pencil, 'bring your water on, then you can keep your money and come back another day. She started her hand-pump and he closed his eyes, but he was feeling too tense.

'It's ok. I've got some money, I can pay another hundred.'

'No, no, don't do that. I'll give him a shout.' She went to the swinging shutter, opened it and screamed. '*Kaka!* two minutes longer...customer will come, he is having a

problem.' She giggled. 'He will come, don't worry!' She said the last line in Malayali to placate the Keralite brothel keeper. Gopi grabbed, from a hook on the wall, a damp, green and white hand-towel and wiped him down. 'Don't worry this is clean.' Then she had poured some oil from a medicine bottle and started massaging his penis in long slow movements relaying it from one hand to the other.

'This will work, don't worry.' She was expert, but mechanical, though he told himself that because he was a Guju like her, she was putting in a little more personal effort for him. It wasn't having much effect.

Bemused, he looked at her face where he noticed some marks of acne on her cheeks. And yet, she had such lovely brown eyes lit up by chinks of green in the middle of her pupils, almost luminescent, like the stray cats that slunk in and out of the back entrance to the servants' quarters. But the cats carried sad looks of hunger and fear while Gopi's eyes sparkled. They reminded him of the multi-coloured glass bangles his sister used to collect in a wooden box when they were children. Gopi's face had the same look of mischief as his sister's when she chased him round the bushes of their village, playing catch the thief

and other games – even in this huge, unfriendly city of Mumbai, Gopi had somehow kept the glint his sister had long since lost.

‘What are you looking at, stupid? Something wrong? My work is not good enough for you, or what?’

‘Can I take a selfie picture of you and me?’ he had her asked that first time.

‘No way! Are you mad? I know your types. You’ll put it up on *FaceBook* to show to your friends. I don’t want people to see my photo.’

‘*Kasam*, promise, I won’t do that. I just want it for myself.’

‘Go, go! Lots of fellows like you come wanting pictures – then they will try and sell them somewhere.’ Some even say, ‘I lovey to you!’ because they have seen all that in the cinema. When I say, “*Chul, hut!*” they try and make me take naked action pictures with them, to sell on Internet. But what they don’t know, if I’m in trouble, I can make the sound of a smashed plate. I have practised it. One screech of mine, and Kaka will come running in here with his big coconut chopper. And don’t think he won’t slice your head off like the top of a *naryal* – one neat chop

and then he'll bury it in the sand on Chowpatty Beach. No policeman will come running to look for you.' Again, her tiny palm swished across and caught Keshav a neat swipe on the cheek. The slap relaxed him. Made him feel almost brotherly towards her. 'But just tell me your name, so I can ask for you next time.'

'Not meant to exchange names, but because you are Guju like me, I'm going to tell you. My name is Gopi.' Another hand-tinkle to his chin.

She reached for his pencil again, but before she could restart, the shuttered swing-door opened and the grim-faced Nayar said, 'Time's up, train has left the station. Boy, you need to get out now. Customers are waiting in line.'

Gopi gave him a frightened sideways look, 'I'm coming now,' she said. Then, while hooking up her blouse, she grabbed a hairbrush and took short swipes at her long hair. '*Jaldi kar*, soft boy, belt up your pants! Come back and see me another day. If I'm busy, you ask *Kaka* for my name, and then wait till I finish with previous customer, ok? Come on, come on, pull up your *chuddis*, *phut a phut*. I've got to carry on working. Don't feel ashamed, okay?

Next time will be much better.’ She flashed him a smile and pushed him out through the wooden shutters.

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He’d got his selfie with her. More than one. Over these past three months, they’d taken lots of pictures of each other on their phones. Some together, some of Gopi in Hindi-film seductive poses, some of her pouting, making strange faces or even being serious. Best of all, though, were the ones of her feline eyes that seemed to smile on him with special fondness. He had put one of these as his screensaver on his shiny new red and silver laptop that he had bought at *Happy Computers* with Mrs Shroff’s money.

But he was careful not to take any lewd photos of Gopi: there was only one picture of nudity; a selfie of him with his shirt off sitting next to Gopi who was in her skimpy green blouse. He’d saved it onto ‘Photos’ on his laptop, so he could delete it from his phone.

The thought of his new laptop, especially the large screen shot of Gopi made him go hard with pleasure. He would love to show it off to the boys in the village. He

could send a picture via his mobile, but he didn't want to attract attention. They would wonder where he got the money to buy it from, they would be jealous, try and spoil things, find him out – spread rumours. Rumours that, after all, wouldn't be far from the bloody truth.

They were horny bastards in the village, but he wouldn't mind treating Dilip and Manga to one of those whores – not Gopi – but one of the Nepalese girls at *Nayyar's* - hardly the cleanest or the best, but it wasn't a twenty rupee caged whorehouse either. His friend Som, who had shown him the place, had advised him to go with as many different girls as he could, and to help with the process to always take a few glugs of some cheap vodka, 'White Mischief, 180 ml quart, only 125 rupees. Gives at least three good highs!' the friend had said. 'And it doesn't make your breath smell before or after. Without booze, you might get nerves, or start feeling sorry for the girls,' he warned Keshav. 'Also, don't ever touch the small tea-glasses of *bewda* they offer you for free before you go in – God knows what battery liquid they put into those drink. It stinks, and it's just meant to make you spurt – then you don't get the full enjoyment for your money.

Keshav was playing with himself. It was 10.15 pm, Still half an hour before the servants normally gathered for their night-time meal, so he needed to hurry, his father would soon come into this corner room to call for him.

He masturbated at least twice a day, some of the time just to get rid of a hard on. Sometimes, he had fantasies about the Shroff family's teenage daughter, Zarine: she would call him into her bedroom and offer him sex; he would get her pregnant. And if she did, then what? He stayed with his picture of Zarine's fair-skinned thighs which she often displayed, walking around in revealing shorts or tantalising skirts.

Having wiped himself down, he waited for his father's arrival. The prospect of having to eat more than a few bites of any food always made him feel sick. He was thin, he liked being skinny, he liked his crooked, double-jointed elbows. He preferred fasting to eating.

He had liked certain foods when his mother was alive. She used to feed him, sometimes with her own hands, triangles of blackened *rotlas* sweetened with *gur*, and her *poha*, the beaten rice she toasted for their breakfast, its yellow grains had a special scent that he had never been

able to find again. He couldn't tell if it was the aroma of the food or the special smell of her fingers, and the smile she gave him when he ate that he was yearning for. But she was rarely happy. So many girls in the village were like that – joyful until ten-years-old – laughing, skipping, playing the fool, but then, after ten, most of them changed, like with Vandana, his sister who, in her teens had taken on a permanent cloudy, vacant look. And when she wasn't doing chores, she lay on the bed sort of sprawled to one side, her head resting on her thin arm just staring out in front of her. It was not exactly pain, it was a kind of numbness to life. A response, maybe, to the sexual insults she had suffered. He didn't want to ask. A lot of that stuff went on in the village. He could not bear the knowledge. His father and uncle managed to marry her off at fifteen to a boy in, Bilimora, a neighbouring village. The dowry payment was six months of Bhagwan's salary, which he borrowed from the memsahb, to be paid back in instalments. Same memsahb, who was now giving him the money for his college fees.

He liked to remember his sister when they were children, when her eyes still had a gleam and she ran in

figures of eight between the trees. They played games with colourful marbles and flower-shaped ten paise coins in the baked mud outside their hut until their clothes were dusty and damp with sweat. Most of that was before his mother died, before the small bumps appeared in Vandana's blouse and then, a little later, the vacant look.

These damn memories! Keshav wanted to halt these thoughts. They didn't help, they stopped him from seeing clearly and doing what he needed to do without his conscience, or the image of his sister or his father getting in the way. He had a word for these 'thinking jags' – *bakwaas*. He'd heard people use that word in Mumbai, *bakwaas na kar!* Thoughts like these are like *bakwaas*: talk, made up of words and images that are nonsense: a waste of time and energy. No one ever made money from thinking. He stroked his scalp with his fingertips. No one got sex from thinking. Your cock goes soft when you start thinking. Thinking is a racket to make me go on being poor. It stops me taking things and getting rich. It stops me enjoying the thrill of fresh banknotes in my pocket. The crisp, new hundred rupee notes that I can hand out to Nayar to get my sweet Gopi, time after time.

His father crept in and switched on the single bare bulb that hung from the ceiling of the *kholi*. Bhagwan always wore a kindly, hangdog expression. His characteristic gesture was a gentle circular movement of the head to show assent. If he bore malice, he took great care to keep it deep inside him. If he disagreed with anyone, it was with a bent torso and a smile. Keshav could not imagine him really angry. It was as if his father had locked away all extremes of emotion and decided, quite firmly, to tread the middle ground.

Bhagwan's behaviour irked his son, because the way Keshav read that slightly downcast look was: 'I am defined by the service I do for this family, giving my labour to this family, saying yes to everything they ask me to do.' His father often used to intone, 'What is there to do now? Whatever the hardships of life are, they are natural, they must be borne. There is no alternative. We must accept our lot.' Keshav saw himself as one of those black

hexagonal kilogram weights on the shopkeeper's scales, adding to the burden that his father appeared, willingly, to carry.

'The others are about to serve up food. Come along, Keshav, have some rice and dal.'

'No, I don't want to go in there and eat with them. They don't like me. Couldn't you just bring me a small plate here?'

It was important he wasn't seen in kitchen too much, only when he was needed, but he knew that he shouldn't ask his father to wait on him; the other servants already disapproved of Bhagwan spoiling his son. He was a compliant man with everybody. That's what people liked about him. 'Bhagwaan!' they called out, 'come and do this and come and do that. Just look at this mess! Could you clear it up, quickly. Do some *jhadoo* here, wipe this stain, sweep that dust, get me a *nimboo pani* with two spoons of sugar, *jaldi!*' No please, no thank you. And now Keshav too was taking advantage of the good nature of his father.

'Bhagi, how are you, Bhagi?' Zarine, would say to him, stroking his hair with genuine affection. And his father, twice the girl's age, would smile at her shyly. He

spoke no harm of anyone. He just got up from whatever he was doing and mouthed, 'Yes sir, yes miss, coming now, it will be done now.' Dozing, brushing, shaving, shitting, whatever he was doing, he stopped and ran off to see what was the matter. What does memsahb want? What does baba want? What does beebi want? The house was a great big elephant of desires, it could never be fed fast enough, never be satisfied. But Bhagwan would never stop trying.

Keshav decided to face the heat in the kitchen. He put his laptop to one side and sprang to his feet, ran his fingers in short sharp shocks through his hair, slipped on plastic sandals, and sidled down the corridor to the table where the three other servants – Labhu, Nitin and Tunda – were already bent over steep-sided metal plates, scooping rice, dal and rotlas into their mouths. They ate with vigour: noisily absorbed in the pleasure that a pile of rice allowed them at the end of a long day. At the centre of the table there was a small dish of green chillis, slices of pink onions and leftovers from the Shroff's dinner - fish and *bhindi* curry. To Keshav, the fish smell was pungent, the *bhindi* slimy, both unappealing.

'Come, sit,' said Labhu, a dark, bony fellow with a crazy cackle, the only one whom Keshav liked. His father beckoned him to the empty stool. Though he had been living here for almost four months, he still did not feel relaxed to be eating with the rest of the servants. They tolerated him like an unwelcome guest. But then, they had worked for this food with their constant scurrying, fetching and serving for this family. He was just staying here as his father's son, sharing their rationed grains, for free: a parasite, feeding of the parent tree. Worse than that; poisoning the tree.

When he'd washed his hands and sat down, his father uncovered a plate on which he had saved some dal and rice. Keshav bent over the food. With his fingers he slowly scooped the rice over the splutter of dal. He hid the yellow lentils under the mound of fluffy white grains pretending to himself it was like a golden treasure that he was burying and then slowly digging out. He repeated the process while putting very small amounts of the food into his mouth so as not to appear ungrateful. He imagined the dal as the money he had secreted away in the inside seam

of his hand-me-down rucksack; the money given to him by Shroff memsahb to pay his college fees.

He always needed to conjure up some kind of game to make himself swallow. All he wanted, was to consume just enough to keep his body functioning. One day, he thought, I might put myself up as a specimen - go without food for days and days, turn myself over to one of those travelling showman from distant parts of India that used to come to our village with scrawny monkeys and medical powders to cure every kind of sexual ailment.

'I said to Memsahb,' Labhu broke in, 'I said, whatever you want, whatever you say, I'm willing to do it, but please don't bring a woman to work in this house. No, no!' he shook his head, 'we don't want a woman here, that is the truth. Women cause trouble. Not that I have anything against them. Truth is, my wife is a good woman. But that is in the village, I'm talking about the village. Here, in this wild Mumbai city, no chance! She wouldn't like it, she couldn't stand it. No way! And we wouldn't like it either.'

Keshav's mind turned to his mother. Dead nine years. How she had held on to his hand till the end; even his

nine-year-old boy self could tell there was a part of her that had lost the desire to continue. All the witchcraft remedies brought to relieve her of her fever would do no good. Others cried, and some pleaded with his father to take her to the town to the proper doctor's clinic, but there was no money, and Bhagwan was already heavily in debt. When she died, and all through the meagre cremation rites, Keshav didn't cry, his heart stayed like a stone, crouching as close as he could to his mother's pyre, getting hotter and hotter in the flames until he felt his skin might melt like wax and trickle down his arms and face. He had caught her fever. It lasted for a week, and though he survived, it marked the end of appetite for him. When she lived, he was hungry, mainly for the food she cooked, but also for the food his friends shared, or when they were lucky enough after some religious festival, to have some t biscuits or sweets. After she died, and after his fever, eating became a chore.

As if reading his thoughts, Labhu said to Keshav's father, 'It was sad, sad for this boy of yours, losing his mother so young, wasn't it?' Bhagwan nodded his head modestly, 'Nothing could be done. They tried everything,

what can you do, this is the way things happen, isn't it?'

Keshav wanted to shout at him, "'They tried everything!'"

Who is "*they*"? What did *you* do? Did *you* try everything?'

Speaking in between mouthfuls, Bhagwan said, 'After that, anyway, his older sister took over. She did a good job of looking after him, that I have to say. But then I had to bring him down to the city, what can I do, I have to try and find a job for him. I really appreciate all of you being kind to him, letting him share, making room for him here in our *kholi*. Don't think I don't see that!'

The youngest fellow, Nitin, an envious, clever man with womanly full lips, whom Keshav liked least of all, said, 'Yeah, that is also true. We can't just go on having him living here, feeding him for free, like this.' Then, for maximum effect, with his fingers he rolled a huge ball of mixed rice, dal and vegetable into his mouth, and turned to Tunda, the least confident of the three and asked, 'What do you say, huh, Tunda?'

'Haanh, no doubt about it, what you are saying is the truth.' Echoing others, being Tunda's main mode of response. Here we go, thought Keshav, this is why I would have been better to stay hungry in the *kholi*. But

thankfully, Labhu came to his defence by skilfully deflecting the subject away from the food issue, 'But one thing I have to say, it's really good that Memsahb is paying for Keshav's college fees. Whatever you say about her - she does a lot of *kit-kit* and *nakhra* - but truth be told, she's a good woman, I have to give her that. Much better than other employers. That I have to say, truth of the matter, to find another employer in the city who would act like that, Bhagwan, paying for your son's education and board, who would look after your son like that, would be impossible.'

'That is also definitely true, no doubt about it,' said Tunda. He tilted his head back and tipped a stream of water into his open mouth. 'I mean, you could get more money, more salary than she gives us somewhere else, but her heart is full of pity for us. She shows us a lot of *daya!*'

'Haanh, haanh, Tunda, *daya* and all that is well and good but it doesn't buy *rotis* does it?' said Nitin. He was the youngest, had the best education and could read and write in English and Gujarati. Considering all this, as Mrs Shroff's driver he often complained about being both underpaid and under-appreciated. 'She has been very kind

to Keshav, paying all his fees at the college, but what about if I wanted to go to college? Or, if your son wanted to go to college, Tunda, would she pay then? It's only because Bhagwan is her favourite that she is putting her hand in her pocket,' he gave a cynical laugh and used the English word, 'favourite' but he pronounced it more like 'faybhorit'.

Keshav stayed quiet. So as not to appear rude, he copied his father's bowed head and its slow rotating movement. This topic came up a lot and he wanted it to stop. He wanted to squash the tail of the lizard that still moved after its body was lopped off. He was still picking up tiny discs of lentil and mashing them into his rice to the point of disintegration – moving little flecks of gold and white around the plate, pretending to eat so he didn't have to speak.

'Haanh, and what about his new laptop?' Nitin said looking at Keshav with a twinkle in his eye. 'Have you heard, his college has given him that! Can you believe that!'

'Wah! This college of yours is really amazing!' Tunda said. 'Do they give all the students new laptops?'

'No, only students who have paid their fees on time.'
Keshav said quietly.

'How long will they give it to you to keep?' He could tell that Nitin and Tunda had discussed this beforehand and they were enjoying this interrogation, this humiliation in front of his father.

'As long as the course lasts, nine months or one year,' Keshav replied, again, as meekly as he could.

'And what if you run away with it? Then what, haanh?'

'They have this address' his father said. 'They will send someone round.'

'Yah,' said Nitin, 'but someone could just give a fake address. I don't want the police around here, that's for sure. Next thing, Bhagwan, they'll be putting us all in jail and beating us up, the way they always do. No questions asked.' The men were moving around and clearing up now. Keshav quickly slid his uneaten food in the bin. But eagle-eyed Nitin, spotted him and started to tut and shake his head. 'Look at these modern-day children. In our time, we would never dream of wasting a single grain of rice. And if we did, our Pappa would give us a beating to remember.'

Keshav had found a college nearby in Grant Road East, Maulana Shaukatali Road, on the edge of Kamathipura, the red-light district where Gopi worked. It gave itself the grand title of 'Jehangir Peerboy College of Computer Technology' which of course impressed Mrs Shroff who who did not know that it was only two streets away from what had become Keshav's favourite haunt. 'You see, we Parsis have been giving money to charitable educational trusts in Bombay for more than a hundred years,' she boasted.

The college was two small computer rooms with seven or eight narrow desks and a tiny office for administration, but it produced a glossy brochure and its website – www.peerboyjehangir.com had a picture of a group of black-gowned students waving square hats in the air, like graduation shots Keshav had seen in Hindi movies. The Principal gave him a brief application form one half of which detailed the fee structure over twelve months: Rs 2,400 monthly and a deposit of Rs 9,200 was

required up front. His father had taken the brochure with the fee-structure sheet to memsahb. She had summoned them both to wait outside her bedroom. After standing in the corridor for half an hour, Mrs Shroff allowed a space for their petition to be heard. They were called in to her bedroom. There she had asked Keshav some abrupt questions, (which he was better used to by now), unclasped the gold button of her black handbag, counted out and handed over to Bhagwan a stream of five hundred rupee notes from a thick bundle. She asked Keshav to bring her a written receipt for the deposit and the first months fees. And then she admonished him to work hard and make her father proud. Keshav had never seen such large amounts of money so close up, handled with such ease and confidence by anyone, let alone a woman. But then, in his perception Mrs Shroff was not really a woman, more like some alien and alarming androgynous Amazonian creature from another planet. When she exhibited signs of womanliness, he registered them with a kind of inner disbelief. No woman in his seventeen years of growing up in his village came near to Mrs Shroff's bizarre ways of speaking and acting.

It reminded him of what a frightening experience it had been to be interrogated by Mrs Shroff in her bedroom for the first time. He had felt as if he had crossed the ocean and fallen on the shore of a foreign country. He had seen people like Mr and Mrs Shroff in films and in images on the internet and on advertising hoardings, but never in person, never in flesh and blood. Mrs Shroff, this fair-skinned giant of a woman, dressed in some kind of coat with a blue background that showed large green flowers was preparing and eating her breakfast. The gown was wrapped around her with a belt and only reached her knees; hard for Keshav to avert his eyes from the hem that kept falling open and giving up a glimpse of her bare thighs. Mrs Shroff had a stern look that especially when she dropped onto her nose the spectacles sitting on atop her round bush of black hair. When she had looked at him straight in the face, he felt terrified. He had kept his head bowed and watched the strange way she ate her breakfast – cutting a papaya in criss-cross lines with her silver knife and then carving under the flesh so each of the squares popped up easily onto the small fork. It reminded him of

pictures he'd seen of scientists in a laboratory with gloves and plastic glasses.

'What will he do here all day?' She addressed Bhagwan who was standing just next to his son while continuing to pop squares of livid orange fruit into her mouth. Sometimes, in the gaps, she took to reading a headline from the newspaper on her lap, leaving father and son to stand there waiting and wondering what to do or say next. While all this was going on, her husband, Soli Sahb, who was hurrying in and out of the bathroom in various stages of getting dressed for work kept one eye on the proceedings.

'What's your name?' he shouted.

Keshav managed to whisper an answer, but he wished his father would just answer all the questions. Memsahb spoke such a shrill kind of Gujarati. Unlike Gopi's way of speaking which Keshav thought added a lyrical softness to their language, this Parsi woman's endings sounded harsh and aggressive. She sounded like an owl hooting, every word and every repetition – she liked to repeat herself - louder than the last.

'What will you do here all day? You can't just lie in the *kholi* *wasting your time!*' He didn't know what to say. His father spoke for him.

'No, Memsahb, he will help out with the cleaning and other jobs.'

'Arre, Bhagwan, we have more than enough servants in this house. I certainly can't pay any more salaries. Can you cook anything, Keshav? Did you ever teach him how to make any basic food, Bhagwan? Our Parsi *dal chaval patio*, for instance? He must make himself useful.'

'Memsahb, after his mother died, his didi, my daughter, did all that, all the housekeeping chores.' There he goes, thought Keshav, using my mother and sister to extract pity from this woman.

'No cooking at all? Well, high time you teach him something, so he can make himself useful in the flat, at least in helping you servants with your meals or something. Something useful, he must do. Bhagwan! All of you learned, he should also learn. When we have people for dinner parties and all, we need someone to help in the kitchen, basic things like chopping onions and all that. Ask the Mistry, he will know. And he should help you with

-serving at the table. Please teach him how to do that, at least. Otherwise, how can I let him stay here?’

‘I want him to find a job, Memsahb. Please, if you know anyone who could help by giving him a job I would really really appreciate it.’

‘But what kind of job will he be able to do? What class did you study till in school, what’s his name again - Kundal?’

He still couldn’t find his voice. ‘He must have reached standard nine,’ said Bhagwan, before prodding Keshav’s shoulder, ‘Speak, say something, baba, answer Memsahb’s questions. Don’t just stand there looking dumb!’

‘Why did you stop school?’

‘After eighth standard, he would have had to travel to Bilimora every day to go to the SSC school. It’s far away, we would have had to buy him a bicycle for which there was no money, memsahb.’

‘So? Why didn't you send him? You should have sent him, you should have told me, Bhagwan. You know sahb will always pay for education. We would have paid the fees. We would have bought him the bicycle. What is there in that? I don’t like giving money for weddings and all

that, but education is another thing. You know how important education is.' The last sentence was said in English with great emphasis and volume. She often punctuated her speech with English words and expressions, only some of which Keshav understood, the others he learned to work out by her expression and the emotion she conveyed through her voice. She spoke of school and bicycles as if they were minor choices to be made in their lives. He wished that were true. He wondered if she knew how difficult it was for his father to come with a begging bowl to ask for a bicycle or, as he was doing now, gently manipulating her into a position where she would find it hard to refuse him the fees for Keshav's computer course at Peerboy College.

The truth was Keshav hadn't much desire for college education. He skipped classes in the village school whenever he could. He did badly in all his subjects except mathematics. All he wanted was to come to Mumbai and find a way to make money. Most of the books that they had to learn by heart, he did not understand, and anyway, they didn't show him how to get rich. He wanted money. All his friends were the same; they wanted money. You

couldn't buy anything with times-tables and stories with smiling families and happy endings – pictures of fair-skinned people who didn't look like anyone in the village, or, for that matter, like the gigantic couple in this bedroom with their overflowing clothes, perfumes, lipsticks, books and paintings.

Still, he had learned to read and write basic Gujarati and could even understand a small range of English sentences. Some of his friends had been good at English, but he was too shy to try speaking more than some basic sentences – the only subject he was really interested in was computers. And there was only one desktop computer in the village school which their teachers barely knew how to use. He wanted to know how computers worked, and most of all, he wanted to own a computer, preferably, a laptop.

V

So now, three months into his stay and much sooner than he could have imagined, Keshav had his own laptop. On his return from the kitchen-humiliation, he lay down in the

corner of the servants' *kholi* on the thin layer of plastic-covered cardboard. With his neck on a grimy pillow jammed against the wall, he carefully prised open the shiny red HP ENVY 13 inch screen, placing it on his stomach as if was a small table. He went on his FaceBook account to check if he had any new posts and then he started watching a football match between Shakhtar Donetsk and Rapid Wien in the UEFA Champions League. Luckily, from this spot in the corner of the *kholi* he could just pick up a decent signal from the Shroff's wi-fi. Just days ago, he had started a conversation about football with Rustom in which he had praised the team and the manager of Man Utd, the team Rustom loved. Afterwards, the twelve-year-old, couldn't refuse him the Wifi password - 'jumboshroff747' - which he had now saved on his machine.

His father came back into the *kholi*, leaving the others sitting on the balcony outside, still talking and smoking beedis. Soon, Nitin and Tunda would retire with their bedding to the living room floor where they would watch TV and fall asleep. Keshav pretended not to notice his father who seemed to be searching for something.

'Can you show me the receipt for this laptop?' he pointed at the computer with his long index finger.

'The college didn't give me a receipt.'

'There has to be a receipt. If the college gave it to you, then where is the paper, the *perchee* to show for it? They must have given you something.'

Keshav didn't speak. He was bad at knowing what to say when he felt exposed.

'Why have you dragged our name into the dust? This is a sin you have committed!'

'What sin?'

'I don't know. I don't want to know. All I know is that it is going to bring shame on me. Do you think the others don't realise that you have stolen from somewhere to buy this laptop? Everyone knows colleges don't give out laptops like samosas!'

His father's eyes were glassy, fearful, stricken with the betrayal of his son. He held Keshav in a defeated, mournful gaze; a look his son remembered from the days when his mother had been very sick in the village. Bhagwan's dark pupils had got even darker, it was like looking into deep

wells. Keshav sensed in them a sorrow that was worse than anger.

Why wasn't his father beating him? The first thing that parents in the village did when their children were caught, or suspected of doing anything wrong, was to thrash them. The first thing the police would do when they took him in was break his bones with their *lathis*, and probably worse, abuse him sexually too. But his father was limp, he was squatting on the floor now, looking sorrowfully at the piece of paper Keshav had given him: the actual receipt to his purchase of the HP laptop from 'Happy Computers'. His father had been born with a woman's heart, or perhaps Keshav thought, he had let himself take on the submissive role of his dead wife. Whatever it was, Bhagwan did not know how to hit or hurt anyone.

Keshav wished his father would slap him round the face, at least. Instead, now, there were tears in his eyes. 'I don't know what to do with you.'

'Let me go home, I'll go to Didi's village. I'll leave tonight.'

Bhagwan wiped his face, over and over, with a long yellow rag. 'Ok, go to sleep then. I'll wake you later.'

At 3.30 am, his father shook him by the shoulder.

Bhagwan's eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

While his father sat up and rubbed himself awake, Keshav packed his few belongings in his rucksack and crept in the dark to the small toilet at the back of the servant's quarters, perhaps for the last time. He found what was left of his fee-money hidden under the bottom lining of his rucksack, rolled up the notes and stashed them into the front of his underpants, so he could feel them next to his skin. Keshav had the HP wrapped in a plastic bag in his rucksack. Bhagwan was so tired and confused, he had forgotten the most basic thing, which was to ask Keshav for the laptop. Perhaps, Keshav thought, he had guessed how much it meant to his son and couldn't bear to make him part with it.

When they reached Dadar station at 4.15 am, there were already workers carrying bales of coriander, spinach and other vegetables on their head, waiting for the first

train carriages to take them to the big markets at the centre of the city. There were families who had been sleeping on the concourse of the station all night. Some of them were already performing ablutions in various corners of the station. The coffee and tea stall owners were slowly lighting up their stoves. Keshav bought a ticket with his own money and then made to bend down and touch his father's knees to show he was sorry. That's when his father remembered: 'Where did you leave the laptop?'

'It's under my pillow where I normally keep it,' Keshav said. Then, without waiting to catch his father's eye, he turned and jogged towards the platform where his train, the Vadodra Express was coming in. When the train stopped, Keshav stood back and let the crowds rush off fighting against the pushing and shoving of the passengers who were trying to throw themselves on. He heard the warning whistle, but he stood his ground. At 4.35, when the train left the station, Keshav wasn't on it.

Almost five hours later, 9.30 the same morning, Keshav was standing in front of *Nayyar's* brothel in Kamathipura. It was way too early for any business, but he was willing to wait. He had already spent four hours loitering around the entrance to Dadar station. The first hour he had felt a pang of remorse for lying to his father and giving him the slip. But, as he grew tired, watching the place fill with people until, even crouched down by the wall, he felt like he would be knocked over or squashed by the rush of travellers, the guilt faded. The din of a thousand commuter voices, to one who had barely slept the night before, was torture.

Squatting at the edge of this immense river of humans flowing to and fro, with the stolen laptop like a bomb in his backpack, he felt as if wherever he hid, people would be pointing at him, shouting his name, wanting to catch, beat and imprison him. It had been such a relief, even in the gathering heat of a May morning, to make his way onto the sunlit roads and walk the few miles southwards back towards Kamathipura and to slip into the narrow gully, the way he always did. Now, he was standing

outside asquare tea stall from where he could keep an eye on the entrance to *Nayyar's*.

While he waited he worried. Did anyone know where he might be? Did his father or any of the other servants know that he used to come to this place?

He stood at the metal counter and ordered a plate of *poha* and some tea so as not to irritate the owner of the stall by waiting around and taking up space. When the hot dish was slapped down in front of him, the rising steam from the yellow rice brought with it a surprise: that same nutty aroma he remembered from his mother's feeding fingers. With his nose bent low, he nibbled at the flattened rice, not for the food, but to keep the smell coming. It was as if through the whiffs and tastes from each bite, especially if he closed his eyes, he could see his mother's outline. So, it wasn't just her fingers, something here, in this dish, fried up in this slit of Kamthipura, so faraway from their village home, gave him the same feeling of satisfaction. Eating slowly, he savoured every last grain of the turmeric-stained rice and drank three glasses of the hot, sweet tea while he waited.

At 11.15 on his mobile, Gopi came out of *Nayyar's*. She looked different in a loose black *kurta* and baggy grey *pajamas*. Not dressed for the job. Not made up. Seeing her like this, he felt that twinge, 'Why don't you just come run away with me to the village?' he wanted to propose. 'Or, *chul*, let's go, live in some other village, or, best of all, somewhere in this city where no one knows us?' Idiotic, pointless thoughts again. He knew she would laugh at him and anyway, it would just double their trouble adding a knife-carrying pimp to the policeman already in pursuit of him.

He had texted her, so she wasn't surprised when he walked up alongside. 'What you doing here at this time?' She looked at his cap and said, 'What have you done?' He got straight to the point. 'I have something for you.' He took out the plastic bag which advertised womens' clothes.'

'What is it? I don't wear saris.'

'My laptop. The one you liked.'

'Why are you giving it to me?'

'My father and the other servants got to know.'

She paused. 'Won't they help you?'

'No, my father is sure he will lose his job. The Parsi woman will make sure the police come to arrest us both. My father probably wishes me dead under a train or something.'

'So, what will you do?'

'I will probably go to my sister, though I don't want her husband and her to get into trouble. Or, I'll hide somewhere.'

'They will find you. Anyway, why are you giving me your laptop? I can't help you, you know.'

He looked at her as if to say, 'Do you want me to say that Hindi-film phrase like the other men?'

'Gopi, if you don't want it, sell it and keep the money. Maybe I will be able to return here and see you in a few months time, I hope.'

'I don't want any trouble.'

'Don't worry. I made sure no one from the house knows I come here.'

'What about Coconutwala?' They were standing in a noisy spot on one side of the lane, in the shade of an open-fronted lean-to shed with a corrugated plastic roof. Two men were sorting onions and potatoes into gunny-

sacks on the floor, right next to which was a counter of a bank. 'State Bank of India: Foreign ...' Keshav couldn't read the word beginning with R that came after Foreign.' Two clerks were sitting behind the counter dealing with a queue of customers.

'Why should anyone know about him? Why should anyone ask him?' Gopi pulled him by the sleeve further into the darkness, behind the old men sitting, unconcerned, on the floor surrounded by the piles of onions they was sorting. 'Hey, is there something else going on? Are you trying to trap me?'

'No, *mera kasam!* I'm telling you the truth. I told you about all this *laphra* from before, didn't I?' He combed his fingers through his hair. She had always liked the way he did that. 'If you don't want it, I'll just go.' He made as if to return the plastic bag to his rucksack. 'I just thought...'

'Ok, ok. I believe you.' She twisted off two glass bangles from her wrist. Here, you keep these. Hope they bring you good luck.' She started to tie back her hair which had fallen loose from its bun. 'I'd better go now. Give it here.' She took the plastic bag without looking inside it. 'I'll keep it under my bed for a while. If the police

come, I'll just hand it over to them and say you left it here and I don't know anything about it. I won't sell it immediately, let's see what happens.'

Then she gave him the lightest pair of slaps on the edge of his chin. And he heard a catch in her scolding voice, 'You know what, you're an idiot! Next time, don't steal from your owner. Don't steal from your father's owner. Steal from somewhere no one knows you and then you can escape. Poor chap, you are. Go, go! You better run now.'

He turned to leave, but after a few steps he felt her hand on his arm. 'Wait. Go and stand in the back as if you want to have a piss. I'll come back in five minutes.'

He found a small brick wall behind the hut and sat down on it. His body ached. He noticed a man come through, walk round to the far corner where a half-built structure stood. Partially hidden, the man relieved himself on the wall. Keshav sat and watched pie-dogs lying in a small circle in the middle of the lane. The young one had an open wound on one thigh that flies were buzzing around. The other two dogs, looked like the mother and father,

were sniffing around the bloody scar. Keshav thought they would probably have to watch the disease slowly killing their child.

He knew his own father would be deep in trouble by now. The worst part was the shame. The family shame. He wished he could take his father's place and suffer the beating his father would certainly receive from the police. Then he stopped the flow of his thoughts and just sat on the wall and waited.