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Opening Extract from...

Odysseus Abroad

Written by Amit Chaudhuri

Published by Oneworld Publications

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A Oneworld Book

First published in Great Britain and the Commonwealth by
Oneworld Publications, 2015

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A CIP record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78074-621-0
ISBN 978-1-78074-622-7 (eBook)
ISBN 978-1-78074-698-2 (TPB export)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd,
Padstow, Cornwall

This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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In Baba's memory, with gratitude and love
And for Rinka, who wanted this book

Contents

'. . . I have tried to be as faithful to my recollections as I possibly could be. No doubt the unreliability and capriciousness of memory have led me to run together certain incidents and occasions, and to confuse some of the people involved in them. But if I have done these things, they have been done inadvertently. At no point have I deliberately departed from what I remember, or believe I remember.

At the same time . . . I wanted not only to tell the truth, as far as I knew it, about experiences I had been through or people with whom I had been involved, but also to produce tales, real stories, narratives which would provoke the reader's curiosity and satisfy it; which would appear to begin naturally, develop in a surprising and persuasive manner, and come to an end no sooner or later than they should.'

—Dan Jacobson, *Time and Time Again*

'As for these changes in me, they are the work of the warrior goddess Athene, who can do anything, and makes me look as she wishes, at one moment like a beggar and at the next like a young man finely dressed. It is easy for the gods in heaven to make or mar a man's appearance.'

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

'I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or the other Western nation might have.'

—Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition'

1

Bloody Suitors!

He got up at around nine o'clock with the usual feeling of dread. He threw off the duvet. Still unused to being vertical, he pounded the pillow and the sheet to ensure he'd dislodged strands of hair as well as the micro-organisms that subsisted on such surfaces but were invisible to the naked eye. He straightened the duvet, tugging at it till it was symmetrical on each side. He smoothed the sheet, patting it but skimming the starchy bit—a shiny patch of dried semen, already quite old—on the right flank of where he'd lain.

The anger inside him hadn't gone—from the aftermath of the concert. He'd watched it six days ago on TV: Africa, London, and Philadelphia conjoined by satellite. He switched it off after three quarters of an hour. By the time the Boomtown Rats came on, and the sea of dancing people in Wembley Stadium was being intercut with Ethiopian children with innocent eyes and bulbous heads, a phrase had arisen in his consciousness: 'Dance of death'. Didn't the exulting crowds in Wembley and in Philadelphia see their heroes' and their own complicity in the famine? But surely this line of thought was absurd, maybe malicious, and to interpret in

such terms an event of messianic goodwill, meant to bring joy and food to Ethiopia, nothing but perverse? So what if it brings a bit of joy to Londoners as well? Is that what you're resenting? He'd discussed it with Mark while having lunch in the Students Union Building; and Mark, in the incredibly tolerant way of one who's brushed aside death (he was a cancer survivor; his lower left leg was amputated), and who saw his friend's madness for what it was, said with self-deprecating reasonableness: 'I think *any* kind of effort that brings relief to Africa is all right.' 'Can one make an aesthetic objection, though, however awful that might sound?' Ananda had insisted. 'Can an aesthetic objection go beyond what might seem morally right? That all those people cheering and dancing in Wembley Stadium, all of them thinking that by dancing to the music they were doing those starving children a good turn—that it made it quite wrong and macabre somehow, especially when you saw the faces of the children?' Mark smiled a smile of understanding—and of one who knew death's proximity. As for Ananda: his own position on this matter underlined to him his isolation from the world—from London, for that matter.

*

That feeling had come to him at other times, when he'd seen the necessity for certain actions and yet couldn't participate in them—including the great march that took place a

couple of years ago soon after he'd arrived here as a student. He remembered his first awkward hour in the college—joining the other first years for the freshers' get-together in the Common Room on the second floor of Foster Court, ascending the stairs under a painting by Whistler, and ending up informing a bespectacled girl with a Princess Di haircut that the Sanskrit *prem* meant both carnal desire and love, that there was no separation between the two in 'Indian culture'. The girl had smiled distantly. Only a week or two after his arrival, the news of the imminent cruise missiles had gathered force, leading finally to the march. He didn't want to die and he didn't want the world to blow up (as it seemed it any day would), but he couldn't spend too much time thinking of the shadow of death hanging over mankind. Yet he didn't quite admit this to himself. It was his uncle, who'd come to see him the next day in Warren Street, who'd said, while watching the Hyde Park-bound procession on TV with Monsignor Kent in the foreground (a touch of revolutionary glamour it gave to this man, the word 'Monsignor'):

'They're not getting to the root cause. They're concerned about the symptom.'

This was uttered in the droopy-eyed, amused way in which he spoke aphorisms containing a blindingly obvious truth ignored by everybody.

'Symptom?' said Ananda, challenging his uncle, but part of him chiming in.

'The nuclear bomb's only a symptom,' repeated his uncle,

almost contemptuous. 'Getting rid of it won't solve anything. Arrey baba, they have to look at the root cause.'

*

He pottered about for three or four minutes, making wasted journeys in the room, before parting the curtains and lifting the window a crack. In crumpled white kurta and pyjamas, he looked out on the street and on Tandoor Mahal opposite, unconcerned about being noticed by passers-by below. It was striking how, with the window even marginally open—heavy wooden windows he had to heave up or claw down, and which he was unused to (they made him fear for his fingers)—sounds swam into the studio flat, making him feel paradoxically at home. His mind was elsewhere. He was aware that the house itself was very quiet. The only time there was a sound was when he walked about, and a floorboard groaned at the footfall.

Upstairs, they'd sleep till midday or later. He knew when they were awake because of the sporadic bangs and thuds that announced movement. It was as if the person who first woke up didn't just get on their feet, but stamped on the floor. The noise they made wasn't intentional—it was incidental. It wasn't directed against others because it bore no awareness of others. It was pure physical expression, made by those whose heads didn't carry too many thoughts—at least, not when they woke and became mobile again.

* * *

He hadn't slept well. This was the norm; partly, it was the recurrent hyperacidity, which had him prop up two pillows against the wall—that made it difficult to sleep too—and, cursing, reach in the dark for the slim packs of Double Action Rennie he kept at his bedside. The taste of the tablets—with associations of chalk powder and spearmint—stayed with him slightly longer than their palliative effects.

But mainly it was the neighbours. They hardly slept till 3 or 4 a.m. There were three people upstairs, but also, often, a fourth. Vivek Patel, who wore pleated trousers and was lavish with aftershave; he wore accessories too—chains around the wrist, fancy belts etcetera. He had a lisp—or not a lisp, really, but a soft way of saying his t's that was both limpid and menacing. His girlfriend Cynthia stayed in the same room. She was Bengali, but from a family of Christian converts. Cynthia Roy. She was pretty and a little cheap-looking, with her bright red lipstick and simper and the thick outline of kohl, and with her sheep-like devotion to Vivek. Cynthia was a new kind of woman—a social aspirant, like her boyfriend—that Ananda couldn't really fathom, especially the mix of characteristics: newfangled but unintellectual, independent but content to be Vivek's follower. Anyway, Ananda barely existed for her. Someone had said she liked 'tough men'. Vivek wasn't taller than five feet seven or eight, but he was

probably tough—because he was broad. In spite of his chains and aftershave, he had a swift, abstracted hammerhead air. Ananda had overheard him say 'Fuck off, fuck off' to Walia, the landlord, after the payphone incident—uttering the admonishment in his calm musical manner ('Fukko, fukko') to which Walia clearly had no answer. Walia had nevertheless reclaimed the payphone coin box and carried it downstairs and out of 16 Warren Street. But in all other ways he was toothless before Vivek Patel because Vivek's father, an East African businessman, was an old contact of Walia's. Patel Senior lived in Tanzania. From there, he'd sent forth two sons, Vivek and Shashank (who stayed in the single room next to his older brother), to study at the American Management School in London. Shashank looked like Vivek in a narrow mirror: he was slightly taller, paler, and a bit nicer. He spoke with the same lisp—which could have been a hallmark of Tanzanian Gujaratis. On his lips, it sounded guileless and reassuring. He'd told Ananda in the solemn way of one gripped and won over by a fiction that the American Management School offered genuine American degrees. This was the first time they'd discussed education and pretended to be high-minded students of a similar kind—to have different aims that somehow nobly overlapped and converged in this location, despite the signals to the contrary. *No wonder they don't have to study. Besides, who comes to London to do management?*

* * *

The dull pulse-like beat started at eleven o'clock at night. It was a new kind of music called 'rap'. It baffled Ananda even more than disco. He had puzzled and puzzled over why people would want to listen and even move their bodies to an angry, insistent onrush of words—words that rhymed, apparently, but had no echo or afterlife. It was as if they were an extension of the body: never had words sounded so alarmingly physical, and pure physicality lacks empathy, it's machine-like. So it seemed from his prejudiced overhearings. But down here he couldn't hear the words—only the beat and the bass note. It wasn't loud, but it was profound, and had a way of sinking through the ceiling into his body below. Each time it started, his TV was still on, and he'd allow himself to think, 'It's OK, it's not so bad really, I don't know why I let it bother me. I can ignore it.' This gave him great reassurance for a few minutes. But the very faintness of the pulse, and the way it caused the remotest of tremors—so remote he might be imagining it—was threatening.

He could cope with it while the lights were on; he could see it in perspective (how do you see a sound?) as one among other things. When he switched off the bedside lamp, the faraway boom became ominous. Its presence was absolute, interior, and continuous, erasing other noises. In a darkness outlined by the perpetual yellow light coming in through the curtains, he waited

for sleep. But more than sleep, he waited for the next sound. That vigil subsumed questions that came to him intermittently, and which lacked the immediacy of *When will they turn down the music?*—questions like, What am I doing in London? And what'll I do once I'm back in India? What do I do if I don't get a First; will a 2:1 suffice? Of course I won't get a First—no one does. When will the *Poetry Review* send me a reply? I've read the stuff they publish—chatty verses are the norm—and they should be struck (at least some lonely editor tired of sifting through dry, knowing poems by English poets) by my anguish and music. Such thoughts occurred to him during the day but were now set aside in the interests of following—in addition to the bass beat—the movements upstairs. These were abrupt and powerful, as they were when the Patels first woke up at midday, and separated by typical longeurs of silence—and immobility. The gaps were excruciating, because it was then that Ananda concentrated hardest, avidly trying to decide if activity had ended for the night. By now the music would be so faint that he'd have to strain to hear the dull electronic heartbeat. But strain is what he wanted to do; to devote, eyes shut, his whole imagination to this exercise.

*

It was odd. He hadn't realised till he moved to this flat that floorboards could be so porous; and that this perviousness was an established feature of English coexistence. 'But we were

colonised by them,' he thought. 'How is it that our cities are so different? How come I'm so little prepared for here?' He briefly sought but couldn't find a connection between London and Bombay—except, of course, the red double-decker buses and postboxes. It made him ill at ease—over and above having to swallow the insult of having been ruled by this nation! A nation now in turmoil, with Arthur Scargill browbeating television anchors, and the indomitable grocer's daughter unleashing policemen on horses on the miners. Ananda himself was barely aware that it was all over, that the red-faced Scargill's time was up, and that his refrain, 'At the end of the day', had caught up with him sooner than you'd have guessed two years ago. Ananda was disengaged from Indian politics but dilettantishly addicted to British politicians—the debates; the mock outrage; the amazing menu of accents; the warmth of Tony Benn's s's and his inexorable fireside eloquence; the way he cradled his pipe; the wiry trade union leaders, blown into the void by Mrs Thatcher's booming, unbudging rebuttals. It was a great spectacle, British politics——and the actual participants and the obligatory ways in which they expressed disagreement ('That is the most ridiculous tosh I've ever heard'; 'Excuse me, but I belong to a family that's been working class for generations') was even more entertaining than the moist nonsense that their Spitting Image counterparts regularly sputtered.

*

Class! He'd hardly been aware of it before coming to England—which was not so much an indication that it didn't exist in India as of the fact that the privileged were hardly conscious of it, as they were barely conscious of history—because they didn't dream they were inhabiting it, so much did they take it for granted. History was what had happened; class was something you read about in a book. Living in London, he was becoming steadily conscious of it, and not only of race, which was often uppermost in his mind. Who had spoken of the 'conscience of my race'? He couldn't remember. It sounded like a bogus formulation—probably some British orator, some old fart, maybe Winston Churchill. Then again, maybe not. Could it be a poet? Poets said the oddest things—odd for poets, that is. He'd discovered that the words he'd ascribed to some populist sloganeer and even, unconsciously, to Marx actually belonged to 'A Defence of Poetry'; there, Shelley had proclaimed: 'The rich have become richer, the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the State is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism.' How astute of Shelley to have noticed; and to have made that throwaway observation well before Marx made his advent into London! Marx had come here in 1846, and Shelley's Defence was published in 1840, belatedly, nineteen years after it was composed; had the bearded one noticed it, picked it up, investigated—did Marx read poetry? Did he like poets? Certainly, it appeared to Ananda that, in England now, the rich had suddenly become richer—but

he could be wrong; he was no good at economics; his sights were set on the Olympian, the Parnassian: especially getting published in *Poetry Review*. He had a notion that the poor were becoming poorer, though he didn't connect this with the pit closures. His uncle had been made redundant. Serves him right. Poor man. But, if you thought about it, there was money about and people were celebrating it, the pubs in central London near his studio flat looked less despondent and ruffianly, they'd become smarter, even the curry as a consequence of this new financial self-confidence was in ascendancy, not the old spicy beef curry and rice he'd tasted first when he'd visited London as a child, nor even the homemade Indian food that left smells in hallways which white-skinned neighbours complained of, but a smart new acceptable curry, integer of the city's recent commercial success and boom. Even before he'd journeyed to England this time, to start out as a student, he'd heard that money was flowing in from North Sea Oil. Lucky bastards. Lucky for Thatcher—like a gift to her from Poseidon, or whoever the appropriate god was (he was poor in Greek mythology). Poseidon had also given her a hand at the Falklands, a war the British should have lost if only because they were British—he was angry about that. Lucky island, with more than its fair share of windfalls, rewards, and fortune. In his own land, all three million square kilometres of it, they'd dug and drilled but couldn't find a single vein of oil there, nor in the oceans surrounding its deceptively plump finger-like

promontory from which Sri Lanka seemed to trickle off like a drop of water. This happy breed of men, this little world. This precious stone set in the silver sea. They were doing all right.

*

He didn't feel prosperous. That's because he wasn't. His father was going bankrupt paying for this studio flat—and for his tuition fees which (since he was an Indian) were a few thousand pounds while domestic students paid nothing. Thatcher was responsible; but he bore her no personal ill-will—he was willing to overlook some of her shortcomings for being so integral to the great British show. When he marvelled at her emphatic delivery, sitting in front of the TV, it was her performance he was concerned with and not her words—nor did he connect her directly with the murderous fees his father was paying.

Carrying more than 500 dollars when you were abroad violated FERA regulations; so his father had devised the following method around them. Ananda's uncle disbursed monthly largesse among relatives living in Shillong and Calcutta—mainly in Shillong, with straggly families displaced during Partition—the principal sum going to an older brother. This made Radhesh (his uncle) feel kingly, and succumb to the tribulations of being a king on whom many were dependent. He could never forget the irony that the family—including this older brother—had dealt with him in his childhood

largely with remonstrances, seen him as a bit of a loafer, and that he, buoyed up by the British pound (even though he'd recently been made redundant), was now helping them. 'The reason I didn't marry,' he claimed in one of his monologues, 'was because *I*'—he patted his frail chest lightly—'wanted to be there for my family.' *That's not entirely true. You are, and always have been, afraid of women.* Now Ananda's father made all those payments to those remote towns in the hills; the equivalent amount was transferred monthly from Ananda's uncle's National Westminster account to Ananda's. In this manner, FERA (Foreign Exchange Regulations Act) was subverted but not exactly flouted, and Ananda's low-key, apparently purposeless education was made possible. It was an arrangement that both satisfied and exacerbated his uncle. His aristocratic urge to preside and dispense—trapped within his slight five-foot-eight-inch frame—was appeased, but his precious need for privacy (he was a bachelor, after all) was compromised.

Because of the paucity of money at any given time (though Ananda didn't consciously think himself poor; he'd been born into comfort, and, since affluence is a state of mind, he possessed a primal sense of being well-off), Ananda had to ration his recurrent expenditure on lunch, dinner, books, and pornographic magazines. The last comprised all he knew at this moment of coitus. They were a let-down. He anyway suffered from a suspicion that the women were only pretending to enjoy sex, and this consciousness was a wedge between

him and his own enjoyment. He required pornography to be a communal joy, shared equally between photographer, participant, and masturbator. But his suspicion was reinforced by Thatcher's repression of the hardcore. The men's penises, if you glimpsed them, were limp. There was hardly anything more innately biological and morosely unsightly than a limp penis. Meanwhile, the women's mouths were open as they lay back in their artificial rapture. Nevertheless, he pursued his climax doggedly and came on the bedsheet.

Last night, he'd brought home the first of his two customary Chinese dinner options—mixed fried rice and Singapore noodles—from the restaurant on Euston Road. The other side of that road was so still and dark (notwithstanding the sabre-like hiss of passing cars) that it might have been the sea out there for all he knew. By day, an unfriendly glass-fronted building reflected the rays of the English sun; neighbouring it was a post office. Whenever he was in the Chinese restaurant for his fried rice or Singapore noodles in the evening, it was as if these were a figment of his imaginings—until he'd seen them both the next day when he crossed the road to Euston Square. The restaurant last night had been almost empty, and the staff were as distant as ever and didn't let on that they were familiar by now with him and his order (both the Singapore rice noodles and the fried rice were one pound fifty) and with his timorous aloneness. They hardly made any attempt at conversation; presumably because their vocabulary was so austerely functional. England and its tongue refused to rub