PENGUIN BOOKS

RUN, REBEL

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For

Joe

and

all the women and girls who dare to rebel.

PENGUIN BOOKS

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RUN REBEL

Manjeet Mann

PENGUIN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

A wound.
Triggered
by a beating.

It grew.
Thriving
on neglect.

It swelled.
Flourishing
on her spine.

When ripe,
a clotted
blister.

It.
Crippled.
Her.

Weighing down
on her
too-small

frame
for her
adolescent age.

My. Mother.
Sat
hunchback,

working.

Silent.

Ignored and ignoring
pins of
prickly pain pulsing.

What's wrong with your daughter?
a neighbour asked.

She's not
sitting or standing upright?
It's been weeks.

My grandmother
looked at
my mother

as if she were
observing her
for the first time.

My grandmother

fell
to
the
floor.

Crumpled like a sheet
falling from
a washing line,
my mother tells me.

Slumped
on the back
of a motorbike,

my mother travelled
along dusty dirt tracks,
through several Indian villages

to the nearest hospital.
The poison
drained.

The rotten flesh
carved,
gouged,
burrowed
out.

My mother
concealed her
anger.

Her mother
showed no
remorse.

The wound –
now
a scar.

The size
of a fist.

A crater
buried between
shoulder blades.

It is the curse of being a girl,
my mother tells me.

You are the property of your
parents, husband, brothers.
You endure,
never question it.

I question it.

ONE

RESTLESS

ANATOMY OF A REVOLUTION STAGE 1

People feel restless.
Held down by
restrictions,
forced to
accept
less.

Preparing to fight,
accepting all
they will
lose.

BOUND

Built-in fear
of our families,
the community,
we are **o**bserved
thro**u**gh the gaze of others.
Socialized into tracking each other.
Friends, neighbours, family.

Is she where she should be?
Should she be out this late?
Who is that she's walking with?

Watching.
Mo**n**itoring

and **d**ying to get out.

I AM 1

Bewakoof.
The Punjabi word for
stupid.

I.
Am.
Stupid.

Nikame.
The Punjabi word for
useless.

I.
Am.
Useless.

My name is
Amber Rai.

Amber.
The stone of
courage.

The soul
of a
tiger.

Rai,
from the Sanskrit *raja*.
A title of honour.

A leader.
A king.
A chief.

But
at home

I am
stupid
and
I am
useless.

BURDEN

No one wanted my mother.
No one wanted her mother,
and no one wanted her mother.

It goes on and on
now and
way back then.

No one wanted Ruby.
No one wanted me.

My sister Ruby and I
have heard
the stories.

The sadness that
cloaked
our births.

The prayers
and temple visits,
wishing,

wishing
we would come out
as boys.

So we are born
in all our
feminine form

and reminded
of our
burden

every day.

We are obedient.
We are small.
We are quiet.

To prove
we are
not

a burden.

We are still reminded
that we are a
burden.

It eats away at you.

CONFUSED

If girls are never wanted,
how do you expect
to get

your
precious
little
boy?

MY VOICE

No matter how small or quiet I am expected to be,
I find my voice on the running track. It's where I'm truly alive.

Words boomerang from trainer to tarmac. Creating
ripples in every corner of my body until all

knock-downs, run-ins, face-offs and scraps
have been twisted wrung exhausted

up

up

and released up
into the clouds and sky above.

DREAMS

So simple. To run.
A professional athlete.
It's a stupid dream.

Ruby's dreams were crushed.
She was overpowered, tamed.
She chose not to fight.

Mum must have had dreams.
She's never spoken of them.
Must be too painful.

Dad sleep-talks his dreams.
They keep us awake at night.
Dreams trapped in nightmares.

PREDICTION

Home
is not
where my
heart is.

Freedom
usually comes
at a
price.

I am restless,
my feet
need to fly.

It's only
a matter
of time.

Correction.

I *fear*
it's only
a matter

of

time.

FIRST DAY BACK

I leave for school earlier than usual.
Meeting with Tara and David at our secret place.

My stomach doing flips holding in – excitement.
Not seeing them over the summer makes holidays – unbearable.

Correction.

Not seeing David over the summer makes holidays
HELL ON EARTH.

I turn out of my estate, take in the tree-lined street that surrounds me and leave the looming high-rises behind.

THE ESTATE

Palm Wood Estate
is one of the roughest
and biggest estates
in the country.

Streets in the sky dreams
turned to
sinkhole nightmares.

THE GRASS IS GREENER

I stride past
the bookies,
the chippy,
the newsagent's.

Get to our secret place – quicker.
See Tara and David – sooner.

Turn on to streets that
enjoy sky and
green spaces.
Breathe air that

suggests it's cleaner,
pass houses that promise
better futures and
shops that

promise healthier
hearts and minds,
as the eyes of the
high-rises
fade

into

the

distance.

OUR SECRET PLACE

St Martin's Church
dominates the skyline.
A thing of beauty
in a place that
has been 'voted'

Britain's

worst town.
Unhealthiest town.
Grimmest town.
And – the latest –
most deprived town.

An unfair review
of a town that's
split in two.
St Martin's stands
at the divide

between council tenants
and homeowners.
Between the unemployed
and the employed.

A divided town
where prosperity
and poverty
are neighbours.
A postcode lottery
cementing futures.

At St Martin's
none of that matters.
It's neutral, it's beautiful,
it's safe.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

If I stand on the toilet in our house and look out of the bathroom window,
I can see it.

Ruby and I would rush to tiptoe-peek out of the window
when the church bells rang on a Sunday morning.

In religious studies we were told the spiritual weight of a church bell
could drive away ‘evil spirits’ and storms.

Hypnotized by the melodic chimes, we stood transfixed.
Our toes numbing on the cold plastic rim as

we prayed the bells would drive away the tempest
that engulfed our own home.

SECRET CORNERS

St Martin's has many hidden places
concealed by oversized gravestones.

I head towards our secluded corner, screened in
on *three* sides and camouflaged by a giant oak.

I can hear their voices. I poke my head round.
Tara squeals and jumps up and down.

AmberAmberAmber!

She grabs me and gives me
the biggest squeeze ever.

I've missed your beautiful face!

Tara is the only person who calls me beautiful.
I try and believe it.

David holds out his arms.

**Sister from another mister,
come here!**

He gives me an almighty hug, which makes my
heart do a little flip.

Bro-ther f-rom a-n-oth-er mo-th-er!

I can barely get the words out, David's embrace is so tight.
He smells of strawberry chewing gum and Lynx.

I take a moment to try and breathe him in
and sink into his shoulder.

Being with these two grounds me
like the giant oak that shields us.

I feel rooted and protected as he
stands in front of me, his hands still on my arms,

grinning, chewing and smelling great.
He looks different. Slightly more tanned,

streaks of blond in his dark hair.
His eyes wider, his lashes longer.

He looks way hotter than I remember him six weeks ago.
Waaaaaay hotter. I didn't think that was even possible.

Hot,
I say.

Not in my head but out ***loud.***

What?

Tara, staring at me, staring at David
for way too long.

Hmmm?
Nothing.
I'm just hot.
Are you hot?
I'm really hot.