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Animal's People

Indra Sinha

EDITOR'S NOTE

This story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur. True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed. Difficult expressions which turned out to be French are rendered in correct spelling for ease of comprehension. Places where a recording was stopped and later recommenced on the same tape are indicated by gaps. The recordings are of various lengths, and the tapes are presented in the order of numbering. Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter.

A glossary has been provided.

Information about the city of Khaufpur can be found at www.khaufpur.com

TAPE ONE

I used to be human once. So I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being.

'So sweet you were, a naughty little angel. You'd stand up on tiptoe, Animal my son, and hunt in the cupboard for food.' This is the sort of thing they say. Only mostly there wasn't any food plus really it isn't people just Ma Franci who says this, she doesn't even say it that way, what she says is tu étais si charmant, comme un petit ange méchant, which is how they talk in her country, plus I'm not really her son nor any kind of angel but it's true Ma's known me all my life, which is nearly twenty years. Most people round here don't know their age, I do, because I was born a few days before that night, which no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget.

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'Such a beautiful little boy you were, when you were three, four, years. Huge eyes you had, black like the Upper Lake at midnight plus a whopping head of curls. How you used to grin. Tu étais un vrai bourreau des coeurs, your smile would break a mother's heart,' thus she'd talk.

I used to walk upright, that's what Ma Franci says, why would she lie? It's not like the news is a comfort to me. Is it kind to remind a blind man that he could once see? The priests who whisper magic in the ears of corpses, they're not saying, 'Cheer up, you used to be alive.' No one leans down and tenderly reassures the turd lying in the dust, 'You still resemble the kebab you once were...'

How many times did I tell Ma Franci, 'I no longer want to be human,' never did it sink in to that fucked up brain of hers, or maybe she just didn't believe me, which you can understand, seeing it used to be when I caught sight of myself - mirrors I avoid but there's such a thing as casting a shadow - I'd feel raw disgust. In my mad times when the voices were shouting inside my head I'd be filled with rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs. The list of my jealousies was endless; Ma Franci, the other nuns at the orphanage, Chukku the night watchman, women carrying pots on their heads, waiters balancing four plates per arm. I hated watching my friends play hopscotch. I detested the sight of dancers, performing bears brought by those dirty buggers from Agra, stiltwalkers, the one-leg-and- crutch of Abdul Saliq the Pir Gate beggar. I envied herons, goalposts, ladders leaning on walls. I eyed Farouq's bicycle and wondered if it too deserved a place in my list of hates.

How can you understand this?

The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift my head I'm staring into someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's, below the waist. Believe me, I know which one hasn't washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides whose faint stenches don't carry to your nose, farts smell extra bad. In my mad times I'd shout at people in the street, 'Listen, however fucking miserable you are, and no one's as happy as they've a right to be, at least you stand on two feet!'

Don't worry. Everything will get explained in due course. I'm not clever like you. I can't make fancy rissoles of each word. Blue kingfishers won't suddenly fly out of my mouth. If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it.

TAPE TWO

First thing I want to say, it's to the Kakadu Jarnalis, came here from Ostrali. Salaam Jarnalis, it's me, Animal, I'm talking to the tape. Not the one you gave. That one no longer works, rain got at it, black lumps are possibly scorpion-shit. I had to hide it after you left, I put it in a hole in the wall. Long it stayed there, I never used it like I promised, now it's fucked, I guess you are thinking what a waste of shorts.

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My story you wanted, said you'd put it in a book. I did not want to talk about it. I said is it a big deal, to have my story in a book? I said, I am a small person not even human, what difference will my story make? You told me that sometimes the stories of small people in this world can achieve big things, this is the way you buggers always talk.

I said, many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same, Zafar says such words are like shadows the moon makes in the Kampani's factory, always changing shape. On that night it was poison, now it's words that are choking us.

Remember me, Jarnalis? I remember you, the day you came here with Chunaram. How did you make the mistake of hiring that sisterfuck as your chargé d'affaires? With him it's anything for money, didn't he charge people to watch him rip off his little finger? I guess you weren't to know that collecting foreigners is a sideline of his. Daily he goes to meet the Shatabdi, waits on platform one, exact spot where the first-class air- conditioned bogie stops. You'll have got off the train looking clueless. Well, what else is Chunaram for? 'Yes please, want a taxi? Need a hotel? Best in Khaufpur. See the city? Want a guide? Need translate? Jarnalis?' Once he knew why you'd come he'll have promised to show you everything. The really savage things, the worst cases. People like me.

'This boy,' he'll have told you, 'he lost everything on that night.'

Such a look on your face when he brought you here, as you pushed aside the plastic sheet, bent your back through the gap in the wall. With what greed you looked about this place. I could feel your hunger. You'd devour everything. I watched you taking it in, the floor of earth, rough stone walls, dry dungcakes stacked near the hearth, smoke coiling in the air like a sardarji doing his hair.

When you saw me, your eyes lit up. Of course, you tried to hide it. Instantly you became all solemn. Your namasté had that tone I've come to know, a hushed respect as if you were speaking a prayer, like you were in the presence of the lord of death.

'Jarnalis,' Chunaram informed me, giggling like he's found a bag of gold, I'd already guessed.

'Speaks no Hindi,' says Chunaram. 'Animal, there's fifty rupees for you, just keep talking till the tape stops.'

'What should I talk about?'

'Usual, what else?' He's already backing out the door.

Oh your face, when he buggered off. Such alarm. But see, Chunaram has other things to do, he has a chai shop to run. When he gave you his salaam, did you see his nine fingers?

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So then, what was to do? You were sitting there gazing at me in a ghurr- ghurr kind of way, as if your eyes were buttons and mine were buttonholes.

I said, 'Don't fucking stare or I won't speak.' I said it in Hindi, I'm not supposed to let on that I know some Inglis, Chunaram gets an extra bunce for translating. You gave a thumbs-up, carried right on staring. I called you a wanker. You nodded, smiled at me. Khaamush, silent then I'm. After some time I've joined another silence to the first.

Inside your skull thoughts were scrabbling like rats. I could hear them like voices in my own head - why has this boy stopped talking, queer as a winged snake is he, leant against the wall with such a look on his face, would be handsome if he weren't so sullen, what a chest he has, deep as a wrestler's, how does it spring from those twisted haunches to which are pawled legs like hanks of rope, oh god, his ribcage is heaving as if at any moment he may vomit, maybe he is ill, boy what is your problem, alas, my wordless enquiries cause his convulsions to grow worse, I think he may be going to have a fit, what will I do if he dies, oh dear, my further anxious attempts to communicate, with twisting 'wherefore' hand motions and raising of eyebrows, seem to cause violent shudders, bugger's lips are writhing in some kind of agony, should a doctor be called, where can one find a doctor in this place, where the hell am I anyway, what the fuck am I doing here?

Actually, Jarnalis, I was trying not to show that I was laughing at you. After that, what else, I talked. Your tape crawled. Then you were happy, this is what you had come for. You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jarnaliss. Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story. Ous raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night.

You listened politely, pretending to follow, smiling now and again pour m'encourager, as Ma Franci would say. You were so fucking sure I was talking about that night. You were hoping the gibberish sounds coming from my mouth were the horrible stories you'd come to hear. Well, fuck that. No way was I going to tell those stories. I've repeated them so often my teeth are ground smooth by the endless passage of words.

With no Chunaram to tell you what I was saying, I could say anything. I could sing a filthy song:

I may be just a twisted runt

But I can sniff your mother's cunt

Hahaha, oh dear, your face, you were wondering, the song this boy is singing, with such a nasty tune, what is it, sounds like a lament, but pourquoi il rit? You scribbled

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something in your book. Let me guess. 'Animal chanted a poem, probably a traditional song of mourning, just now he was crazy with grief.'

Jarnalis, you were such a fool. The best thing about you was your shorts. Six pockets, I counted. Two at the side, two on the front, two on the arse. With shorts like those a person does not need a house. From one pocket you fetched out a pack of cigarettes and from another a shiny lighter, it made a grinding noise when you flipped it, and a flame sprang up. I coveted that lighter, but more than that I craved your shorts.

Thus and thus time passed, Chunaram returned reeking of apologies and strong liquor, some Inglis gitpit passed between you. He said, 'I shall listen to the tape.' The thing squeaked like a rat having its back broken and I heard my own voice earning fifty rupees.

Well, Chunaram was appalled. He started shouting, with great tappings of the brow and circlings of the temple. 'You cretin! You are not right in your head. You have not said what's wanted.'

'Did as bid.'

'You must do it again. You must tell the real stories.'

'Balls to you!' says I with wanking gestures. 'Did I ask you to go and get drunk?'

'You miserable boy,' yells Chunaram, 'Who's going to pay for this foul- mouthed shit? Why didn't you just spout the usual?'

I've thought about this. 'It is usual for me.'

'Mother's cunt? Where do you get that from, you twisted little bastard? Next time I ask you to record a tape, keep your mouth shut.'

After this, Jarnalis, I'm not expecting you back, but you show up next day with grinning Chunaram qui me dit que Jarnalis wants you to carry on telling your story.

'Don't ask me why,' says he. 'Yesterday what you said, I thought it was one of your fucking madness fits, I admit I was wrong it has done the trick now I'm thinking it's this jarnalis who's cracked.' He shrugs and gives a thook onto the floor. So smug does he look that there and then I decide to teach the fucker a lesson.

'I'm done talking to tape mashins.'

So then Chunaram's wheedling, pleading with me. 'Think of the money. Jarnalis is writing a book about Khaufpur. Last night he had your tape t ranslated. Today he comes saying he has never found such honesty as in that filth of yours. Really I think he is mad, but listen how I buttered the shaft, I told him that you are an orphan of that night, you grew up in a crazy franci situation, you used to live on the streets like a dog, you are a unique case. Jarnalis really wants your story, this could be a big business, don't fuck it up.'

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'Well,' says I, pretending to consider it. 'No.'

'Listen, you can string it out. Make ten tapes. Why ten? Twenty. I will treat you to free kebabs at my place as long as it lasts.'

Wah Jarnalis, big money you must have offered him, his kebabs are famous throughout Khaufpur, well, at least in the Nutcracker, which is our part of Khaufpur, but one more look at his greedy face convinces me.

'Salty fucks to you, I won't do it.'

So Chunaram's shouting again, I am giggling, you're meanwhile wanting to know what's going on. Chunaram does some Inglis guftagoo, then he's back to me. 'Jarnalis says it's a big chance for you. He will write what you say in his book. Thousands will read it. Maybe you will become famous. Look at him, see his eyes. He says thousands of other people are looking through his eyes. Think of that.'

I think of this awful idea. Your eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head. Their curiosity feels like acid on my skin.

'What am I to tell these eyes?' I demand of Chunaram. 'What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this? Do these eyes shit on railway tracks? When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? These cuntish eyes, what do they know of our lives?'

'Don't talk that way,' says Chunaram, casting a fearful glance at you. 'Think of kebabs. Plus,' he says with a nod at my rags, 'you can buy a good shirt and pant, go to the cinema every night, take the best seat, kulfi eat.'

With Chunaram everything is a question of money, I'm about to tell him to stick it up his cul when a notion occurs.

Chunaram falls into a rage. 'You idiot,' he cries. 'This deal is nestling in my palm. Why ruin it with stupid demands?'

'It's my story. If he doesn't agree, I will not tell it.'

'Have some sense,' says he, 'how can I ask such a thing?'

'Je m'en fous you nine-fingered cunt.'

I know Chunaram won't give up, he lives for money, but as he speaks to you every word is a stone in his mouth. I catch his thoughts, badmaash boy, too much cunt, fucking boy, francispeaking, got too grand, bastard. Mixed in with this is allwhat he's saying to you. I know most of the Inglis words, those I don't know spit their meanings into my ear. C'est normal. Since I was small I could hear people's thoughts even when their lips were shut, plus I'd get en passant comments from all types of things, animals, birds, trees, rocks giving the time of day. What are these voices, no

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good asking me. When at last I told Ma Franci about them, she got worried, soit un fléau soit une bénédiction, curse or blessing, that's what she said. Well, she should know whose own brain's full of warring angels and demons. She took me to a doctor, it's how I met the Khã-in-the-Jar, which I'll tell about later, but the voices, some are like fireworks cracking the nearby air, others are inside me, if I listen carefully I'll hear them arguing, or talking nonsense. Once I was looking at Nisha, this voice says, the hair pours off her head like history. What the fuck does that mean? I don't know. Some voices are slow like honey melting in the sun, Elli and I saw a locust spread scarlet wings in the Nutcracker, it was crooning 'I'm so gorgeous.' I said aloud, 'Yeah, till a bird sees you.' Such a look I got from Elli. She was interested in my voices, being a doctor with a mission to save, even shits like me. I will get to Elli soon, too the Khã-in-the-Jar, but right now I'm telling how Chunaram's thoughts were giving him a headache. Poor bugger was rambling like a lost soul, he did not want to put my demand to you, at one point he grew so confused he forgot to speak Inglis, whinged in Hindi, 'Don't get offended by what this idiot is asking.' Then I knew greed had him by the ear.

'Sir,' mumbles Chunaram. 'Sir, I am so sorry, this boy says that if he talks to the eyes the book must contain only his story and nothing else. Plus it must be his words only.'

Only his story? His words only?

'Sir, he is a beastly boy, but it's a good story.'

Jarnalis, your brow creases, strange figures dance on your forehead. You gitpit with Chunaram, who pleads, 'Drop this demand. It's impossible. This jarnalis already has a plan for his book. It is already agreed. Jarnalis talks of an agent, plus a type called editor.'

Makes no sense. How can foreigners at the world's other end, who've never set foot in Khaufpur, decide what's to be said about this place?

'I guess the way it works,' says Chunaram, 'is jarnalis bribes agent, agent bribes type. Business, na?' He gives a laugh, smirky bastard thinks he's won.

Well, I'm in a shining fucking rage, here and now I will cut the throat of this plan. 'Give me the address of this editor type, I'll send a letter! I'll say this Jarnalis should not be allowed to tell my story. Comes here strutting like some sisterfuck movie star. What? Does he think he's the first outsider ever to visit this fucking city? People bend to touch his feet, sir, please sir, your help sir, sir my son, sir my wife, sir my wretched life. Oh how the prick loves this! Sultan among slaves he's, listens with what lofty pity, pretends to give a fuck but the truth is he'll go away and forget them, every last one. For his sort we are not really people. We don't have names. We flit in crowds at the corner of his eye. Extras we're, in his movie. Well bollocks to that. Tell mister cunt big shot that this is my movie he's in and in my movie there is only one star and it's me.'

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'I'm not saying all that,' says Chunaram, but we both know he must, it's Animal he's dealing with, not one of his stooges, no one can get the better of me, I do what I want.

How often have I watched Chunaram make deals? After all the talking, there is always a silence as money changes hands, notes are counted, folded, put away. What is that hush? Jarnalis, I will tell you. On your side it's shame because you know you're paying shit for something priceless. Chunaram has no shame, his silence is delight, he has taken a fortune for a thing he considers worthless.

So then there's silence.

'One more thing, he must give me his shorts.'

Two days pass, comes Chunaram with a bundle. Inside is the tape mashin and many tapes, folded on top are the shorts. First thing I do is put them on, they are too big but by tying string I make them tight. There's a lump in one of the pockets. I put in my hand, out comes the shiny lighter. There's a picture of a cannon on it, plus some writing. Holding it to the light, I make out Inglis letters. PHUOC TUY so I guess that's your name, it's Phuoc Tuy. On the other side in Hindi is my name, ANIMAL, so then I know you've given me your lighter too. Chunaram reads the letter you sent. 'Animal, you think books should change things. So do I. When you speak, forget me, forget everything, talk straight to the people who'll read your words. If you tell the truth from the heart, they will listen.' There's a lot more like this, then a good bit, 'The shorts come from Kakadu where there are crocodiles.'

Such a fool you were, Jarnalis. Gave your shorts but left Khaufpur with nothing. Not a single tape did I make. Not one. Chunaram said if you are not going to use the mashin, I'll sell it, so I hid it in the wall where the scorpions live, from then till today solid time has passed, you must be wondering, why is this putain telling his story now? What's changed? What happened?

What's changed? Everything. As to what happened, well, there are many versions going round, every newspaper had a different story, not one knows the truth, but I'm not talking to this tape for truth or fifty rupees or Chunaram's fucking kebabs. I've a choice to make, let's say it's between heaven and hell, my problem is knowing which is which. Such is the condition of this world that if a creature finds peace, it's just a rest before greater anguish, I do not know what name you could give to the things I have done.

Jarnalis, I'm a hard bastard, I hide my feelings. Ask people they'll tell you I'm the same as ever, anyone in Khaufpur will point me out, 'There he is! Look! It's Animal. Goes on four feet, that one. See, that's him, bent double by his own bitterness.' People see the outside, but it's inside where the real things happen, no one looks in there, maybe they don't dare. I really think this is why people have faces, to hide their souls. Has to be, or every street in Khaufpur would be a passage through hell, which Ma Franci says it is anyway, except she sees angels suffering, I see panicked humans. One night Farouq and me, we'd drunk a lot of bhang, about enough to get you on

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first name terms with god, we were ogling women in Naya Bazaar, as I looked at passers by their faces vanished, just disappeared, I could see their souls. Most were ugly, some shone like green birds, but all without exception were full of fear. I told this to Farouq and said, 'Look at my soul, tell me what does it look like.'

'Your soul?' He began laughing and couldn't stop. 'Your soul, my dear, is a tomb, even god can't see inside.' This happened on the night of Holi, when he was trying to get me laid.

Jarnalis, there's a lot to tell, it wants to come out. Like rejoicing, the world's unspoken languages are rushing into my head. Unusual meanings are making themselves known to me. Secrets are shouting themselves into my ear, seems there's nothing I cannot know. Ssspsss, haaarrr, khekhekhe, mmms, this is how the voices are, often I'll babble aloud the things they tell me. 'Tu dis toujours des absurdités,' Ma says, smiling, the rest just shrug, 'Fucking boy, crazy as fishguts. Sees things, hears voices that aren't there.' Well, I do see them, I do hear. To deny what you do see and believe in things you don't, that you could call crazy. Some believe in god whom they've never seen, who never says hello. In each other's dreams we are all fucking fishguts. It's better I speak these things to the tape.

Hah! This story has been locked up in me, it's struggling to be free, I can feel it coming, words want to fly out from between my teeth like a flock of birds making a break for it. You know that sudden clap of wings when they take off in a hurry, it's that sound, listen, clap, clap, clap.

Pandit Somraj's good friend, the poet Qaif Khaufpuri, when he grew old his poetry dried up inside him, an ulcer came on his leg, an open mouth that wouldn't go, one day it began reciting such sweet verses, his poems were trying to burst their way out of him.

Same way is this, a story sung by an ulcer.

My friend Faqri gave me this mashin, batteries I stole from Ram Nekchalan's shop, he can't say anything to me. Now the tape is running. I'm remembering the eyes that hide inside your eyes, you said I should ignore you and talk straight those who'll read these words, if I speak from my heart they'll listen. So from this moment I am no longer speaking to my friend the Kakadu Jarnalis, name's Phuoc, I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words.

Now I am talking to you.

I am saying this into darkness that is filled with eyes. Whichever way I look eyes are showing up. They're floating round in the air, these fucking eyes, turning this way and that they're, looking for things to see. I don't want them to see me, I'm lying on the floor, which is of dry dust, the tape mashin is by my head.

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The instant I began talking the eyes came. I tried to hide. For some time I stayed silent. The eyes remained, they were wondering where the words had gone. They watched quietly, blinking now and again, waiting for something to happen.

See, it's like this, as the words pop out of my mouth they rise up in the dark, the eyes in a flash are onto them, the words start out kind of misty, like breath on a cold day, as they lift they change colours and shapes, they become pictures of things and of people. What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies.

I'm looking right now at my feet, which are near the hearth, twisted they're, a little bent to one side. Inside of left foot, outer of right, where they scrape the ground the skin's thick and cracked. In gone times I've felt such hunger, I'd break off lumps of the dry skin and chew it. Want to see? Okay watch, I am reaching down to my heel, feeling for horny edges, I'm sliding the thumbnail under. There, see this lump of skin, hard as a pebble, how easily it breaks off, mmm, chewy as a nut. Nowadays there's no shortage of food, I eat my feet for pleasure.

The hearth near which my feet are resting is of clay shaped somewhat like, like what, I've never thought of this before but it's like a yoni, which is a cunt, I don't know another way to say it, there's a gap you feed in hay, twigs etc, then put bits of dungcake and sticks to get a fire, which I've one burning. Outside the sun has yet to show its face. I can hear people passing, going for dawn shits on the railway line. They'll be well wrapped up this morning, blanket or thick shawl. The poor sods who are on the street must cover themselves in what they can find. Winter nights here you can freeze. That night they say was a night of great cold. Zafar used to say that as people were breathing clouds of mist out of their mouths that night, they little knew what kind of mist they'd soon be breathing in.

The eyes are watching people breathing mist. Stupid eyes, they don't know what the mist does to the people, they don't know what happens next. They know only what I tell them.

In this crowd of eyes I am trying to recognise yours. I've been waiting for you to appear, to know you from all the others, this is how the Kakadu Jarnalis in his letter said it would be. He said, 'Animal, you must imagine that you are talking to just one person. Slowly that person will come to seem real to you. Imagine them to be a friend. You must trust them and open your heart to them, that person will not judge you badly whatever you say.'

You are reading my words, you are that person. I've no name for you so I will call you Eyes. My job is to talk, yours is to listen. So now listen.

My story has to start with that night. I don't remember anything about it, though I was there, nevertheless it's where my story has to start. When something big like that night happens, time divides into before and after, the before time breaks up into dreams, the dreams dissolve to darkness. That's how it is here. All the world knows the name of Khaufpur, but no one knows how things were before that night. As for

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me, I don't remember any time before my back went bad. Ma Franci would talk, proud as if she were my real mother, of how I used to enjoy swimming in the lakes behind the Kampani's factory. 'You'd dive right in, with your arms and your legs stretched out in one line.' Whenever she said this I'd feel sad also angry. I still dream of diving straight as a stick into deep water leaving my crooked shadow behind.

On that night I was found lying in a doorway, child of a few days, wrapped in a shawl. Whose was I? Nobody knew. Mother, father, neighbours, all must have died for no living soul came to claim me, who was coughing, frothing etc plus nearly blind, where my eyes had screwed themselves against the burning fog were white slits bleached on the eyeballs. I was brought to the hospital. Was I Hindu or Muslim? How did it matter? I was not expected to live. When I did, they circumcised me, if I was Muslim it was necessary, if I was Hindu what difference did it make? After this I was given to the nuns. I grew up in the orphanage. I do not know what religion I should be. Both perhaps? Neither? Or should I listen to Ma Franci, loves Isa Miyañ, he said 'forgive your enemies, turn the other cheek'. I don't fucking forgive. I'm not a Muslim, I'm not a Hindu, I'm not an Isayi, I'm an animal, I'd be lying if I said religion meant a damn thing to me. Where was god the cunt when we needed him?

I was six when the pains began, plus the burning in my neck and across the shoulders. Nothing else do I remember from that time, my first memory is that fire. It was so bad I could not lift my head. I just couldn't lift it. The pain gripped my neck and forced it down. I had to stare at my feet while a devil rode my back and chafed me with red hot tongs. The burning in the muscles became a fever, when the fevers got bad I was taken to the hospital, they gave me an injection. It did no good. After that my back began to twist. Nothing could be done. It was agony, I couldn't straighten up, I was pressed forward by the pain. Before this I could run and jump like any other kid, now I could not even stand up straight. Further, further forward I was bent. When the smelting in my spine stopped the bones had twisted like a hairpin, the highest part of me was my arse. Through flowers of pain I could make out an old woman kneeling by my cot, wiping my head and mumbling strange words in my ear. Her skin was wrinkled as a dried apricot, so pale you could see clear through it, she looked like the mother of time itself. This was Ma Franci. She already knew me well, but this is my first memory of her. Ma stroked my face and comforted me in words I did not understand. Tears were falling down her face. Mine too. This feverish dream gradually faded and became my new life.

On my hands I learned to walk, my legs grew feeble. My hands and arms are strong, my chest is strong. The upper half of my body is like a bodybuilder's. I walk, also run, by throwing my weight onto my hands, hauling feet forward in a kind of hop. It took a long time to master this new way of getting about. Maybe it was months, maybe a year. When I could run I ran away because the teasing had begun.

The orphanage kids started calling me Animal one day during a round of kabbadi. You'd think such a tough game I'd have difficulty playing, but with my strong shoulders and arms I was good at catching opposing players and wrestling them to the ground. One day I grabbed this boy, he kneed me in the face. It hurt. I was so

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angry I bit him. I fastened my teeth in his leg and bit till I could taste blood. How he yelled, he was howling with pain, he was pleading, I wouldn't stop. I bit harder. The other kids started shouting, 'Jaanvar, jungli Jaanvar.' Animal, wild Animal.

Another time, I'd have been about eight or nine, we'd gone to swim. Just now I mentioned lakes, really they're clay pits behind the Kampani's factory where bulldozers would dump all different coloured sludges. These pits are massive, the water in them stinks, but when the rains come they fill up and become proper lakes with reeds etc. Since rain water is clean people would wash their cows and buffalos, we kids would jump in, splash around in the water. I could no longer dive or swim, I'd wade up to my neck, but my arse stuck out of the water.

One day we were lying on the grass in hot sun, drying off. A girl about my own age, she pushed me and left the prints of her muddy fingertips on my body. The mud dried pale on my skin. She said, 'Like a leopard!' So then they all dipped their fingers in the clay and covered me with leopardy marks. 'Animal, jungli Animal!' The name, like the mud, stuck. The nuns tried to stop it but some things have a logic that can't be denied. How do you shit, when your your arse is up in the air and legs too weak to squat? Not easy. What do you look like as the turds tumble from your hindquarters? Like a donkey dropping dung, when I walk, it's

feet on tiptoe

head down below

arse en haut

thus do I go

In my street years I hated to see dogs fucking, my mates would shout, 'Hey Animal, is this how you do it?'

They'd make a fist, ram two fingers in and out with loud sucking noises, then let on the fingers were trapped, they'd yell, 'Hey Fourlegs, you get glued up like this, you and your girlfriend? You and Jara?' Never have I been able to cope with teasing. I'd lose my temper, fataak! I know how to fight. Early in life I learned to look out for myself, to put myself first, before all others and every other thing. Who else was going to stick up for me? It's a bad idea to attack an opponent who can kick shit out of you, I got a few beatings, but if they know you'll fight back, people mostly leave you alone. Plus I used to bite. Maybe they were afraid of getting rabies.

Jara's my friend. She wasn't always. We used to be enemies. In the days of living on the street we were rivals for food. We used to work the same territory, the alleys behind the eating houses in the old city. We'd get there late evening when the waiters were tired and would sling the day's scraps at, rather than in, the bins. Such delicacies we fought over, bit of naan, thrown-down banana skin, with nub of meat going gooey brown where someone had not fancied it. I might arrive to find Jara

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crouching over some prize, a bone to which clung a few shreds of mutton, a splash of daal. Or I'd be there first, slobbering over a choice morsel, and look up to see her eyes fastened on mine, drooling from the back corners of her mouth. I was scared of her. Of her sharp teeth, her orangey-brown eyes in which there was no friendliness. She'd lie and watch me until hunger drove her forward, crouching on her haunches, a low growl, rrrrr, starting in her throat. I came to know that snarling mouth quite well. A long curved tooth in her lower jaw had lost its tip. When she got close enough for me to see that tooth, I'd back away.

One day, I found a thing with flies sticking to it like peppercorns, fish- snout with backbone protruding behind, a fair slab of flesh, brown with masalas, lying on a bed of rice, remains of someone's dinner. I'd begun making a feast of it when I heard her growl. The fish was too good to give up. I stuck firm as she made her approach, the lips lifted over those evil yellow teeth. She started all that rrrrr business. I don't know how, but some rebellion ignited inside me. On all fours I rushed at her snapping my jaws, growling louder than she, the warning of a desperate animal that will stick at nothing. She turned and slunk back a few paces, then lay down again, giving me a reproachful look.

She was as thin as me, her hide shrunken over her ribs. A pink sore on her nose was leaking some clear mess. With my own body pumped full of victory I suddenly felt sorry for her. I fed myself then moved off, gestured for her to come close. 'Eat!' She licked her lips, wagged her tail so hard her whole backside shook. Man, what a dog. A yellow dog, of no fixed abode and no traceable parents, just like me. After this we always shared. I named her Banjara, gypsy, free spirit, because she belongs nowhere and everywhere is her kingdom.

Jara and me, one day we are up to our tricks outside a cafe where I've not been before, it's not one of my usual dirty dabas. This is a smart coffee- house with a garden and a big sign saying Coca Cola, I can't read the sign but I know what it says. These girls are sitting at a table under a tree, drinking lassi. Three girls, college students by look. Often they'll be quite generous, so I've started my patter about how we are perishing from starvation etc, at a sign from me, Jara, canny bitch, rolls on her back and plays dead.

One of the three gets up. Comes out, stands looking at the dog and me. Some girls primp themselves up like film stars with kajal round the eyes, long sleek hair and all, this one isn't like that. Her hair looks like it hasn't been oiled for a month, kameez and scarf don't match, nose is a touch too long. She doesn't smile, doesn't offer money. She doesn't do any of the things people normally do when I pester them. She's frowning, all serious.

'Pretty clever. Did you teach her?'

'For five rupees she'll whine the national anthem.'

'Is begging fun?'

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Well, this catches me, no one's ever asked such a thing before. This girl bends to pat Jara and her hair falls over her face, pretty she may not be but there's a sweetness in her which you sometimes see in people without looks.

'Is it fun to be hungry?' I reply. 'No, so then don't mock, give me five rupees.'

'Not I,' says she, chewing her lip. 'You've a look of mischief about you, I've seen you before. You roam round the city doing scams.'

'What scams? If you won't give five rupees at least give a smile.'

'You like winding people up. I think you enjoy being annoying.'

'It's all they deserve. People are cretins.'

'Cretins? So is that what makes it fun?'

'Fun was your idea, not mine,' I say, liking this girl. Most people who talked to me just told me to fuck off.

'Get off with you, you're up to all the tricks. I'd be surprised if you go hungry.'

'What do you know about it?'

But she was right. I was well schooled in street work. My teacher was Ali Faqri, he'd in turn been trained by the prince of scams, Abdul Saliq the Pir Gate beggar. Faqri told me to stop creeping round behind the eateries. There, if I was caught arse-up in the bins, best I could expect was disgust maybe a kicking. 'Go round the front,' Faqri said. So I began parading up and down in view of the clientele, nothing puts a person off their food more than a starving Animal watching every mouthful. The proprietors hated me but they'd give me hand-outs rather than have me upset their customers. I got the same left-overs, only this time served nicely in a bowl. In this way I learned that if you act powerless, you are powerless, the way to get what you want is to demand it.

'I'm Nisha,' says this serious girl. 'What's your name?'

'Animal. Now you have to guess why.'

'Okay Animal, you're bright, you could do something more useful than this.' Nisha told me that if I came to her father's house, which was in a part of Khaufpur known as the Chicken Claw, she would find me some work to do.

'And,' says she, 'you can meet Zafar.'

I was stupid, I should have been warned by the way she spoke his name, but already I was walking in dreams.

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'Come tomorrow at noon. I'll give you a meal. You can eat it in our garden. The dog too.'

* * *

Well, Eyes, I guess you want to know what happened next, but while I've been chatting with you the sun has risen, it's dropped down through the hole in the roof, making the floating dust catch fire. The thousand eyes have begun to fade, they are melting away or else somehow merging into just one pair of eyes, which are yours. You and me, we're alone together now, but I can't keep going. I'm tired of talking, tape's nearly gone, mouth's dry, I should make chai, plus it's past time for my shit.

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