HOT STAGE

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A BOREI GOWDA NOVEL

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With gratitude and love for Jayanth Kodkani—friend
for almost three decades and first reader of all my
writing, and for telling me all those years ago,
'Isn't it time you thought of getting your work published?'

'I may have described it as, "Just sit quietly and look innocent."'

Michael Minerva, defence attorney, Chi Omega Trial
Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes

'I am drunk, Inspector, to-day keep your hand off me.
Inspect me on the day you catch me sober.'

Wafā'I Ahmad Haji, *Baburnama*

PROLOGUE

1

27 NOVEMBER 2012, 3 P.M.

A grimy nylon string dangled from a hook in the ceiling that was once the colour of ivory but was now an indeterminate brown. The man standing inside the bar-counter cage grabbed a piece of newspaper from the bunch of squares shoved onto a nail on the wall.

The punter tossed his first cutting of Old Admiral brandy down his throat as he watched the bar attendant hold aloft a boiled egg on a piece of paper and use the string to slice the egg so that it burst into bloom. He marvelled, as he always did, at the artistry. The egg was no longer an egg but a frangipani flower with fat white petals and a yellow heart. He watched the man sprinkle onto it a mixture of pepper and salt from a greasy blue plastic bottle.

Gulping his second cutting, the punter took the paper plate heaped with the sliced egg. He ate it slowly, relishing each bite. The egg-flower followed the Old Admiral into a happy place inside him.

He gestured for a refill. This time a 90 ml, he indicated with his thumb and forefinger. The brandy sloshed against the glass as he walked to the island of tables at the centre of the bar. He

plonked himself down in a chair. He had had a good day and had decided to treat himself to an afternoon of pleasure. He looked up, still flushed with a sense of well-being, at the man seated opposite him.

'Namaskara,' the punter said, jumping to his feet and joining his palms together to indicate his total subservience. He gave the man a nervous smile as he took his glass and himself to one of the counters that ran alongside the wall of the dark, dingy bar.

He stared at the brandy in his glass and told himself that he was lucky to have got away without having his nose broken or his teeth on the floor. No one sat at Oil Mill Jaggi's table. Not unless he invited you to.

There was a time when Oil Mill Road was just a road. No one knew it by name. People coming in from the city took it to get to the newly built Jal Vayu Vihar, an apartment complex for naval and air force officers. The army, not to be left out, had set up Sena Vihar across the road, soon turning Kammnahalli into this bustling area with people from different parts of India and foreign countries. It was difficult to walk through this stretch without running into Arabs, Africans, Koreans and God knows who else, the punter thought. Not that it bothered him one bit. He liked crowded places.

But Oil Mill Road was still his territory. He knew most of the shop owners by name and could even squeeze them for a 'temporary loan; return guaranteed'. The punter felt like he belonged there. Usually. But not this afternoon. The presence of Oil Mill Jaggi had unnerved him and made it seem as if he was trespassing in an area he should have steered clear of.

The curtains parted and a man walked in. Even though it was three in the afternoon and the sharp light of the November sun blazed in the street outside, the punter felt a chill down his spine. He recognized the man by face. He wasn't a regular at this bar or at any other. But the punter knew him; knew of him. He was called Military. He didn't speak much but you knew when Military was

in a good mood. For he would sponsor a drink for anyone who caught his eye. You also knew when Military was in a bad mood. The punter had seen him smash an argumentative drunk's face into the wall and drag it against the surface, all without a bead of sweat popping up on his brow.

Military walked to Oil Mill Jaggi's table and sat across from him. He gestured to the man in the cage.

'Jaggi,' Military said. 'What are you doing here?'

Oil Mill Jaggi shrugged. 'Do I need to state the obvious?'

'Don't forget... it's a big day—the day after tomorrow. This isn't when you drink yourself into a state where you don't know your elbow from your knee.'

Oil Mill Jaggi narrowed his eyes, and then, as if he had changed his mind, ignored the presence of the glass with some alcohol in it and said blithely, 'Chill, Military. I haven't been drinking. This is where I come to think.'

The man frowned. 'My boss won't like it.'

'Your boss and I go back a long way. Long before you started calling him boss.' Oil Mill Jaggi yawned loudly and stretched. 'Relax and have a drink, Military. Why are you getting so worked up? Or is it that you don't trust me anymore?'

'It's big stakes, Jaggi. I can't relax. I have a lot riding on this,' the man said, pulling out a chair.

'You will be a rich man and so will I,' Oil Mill Jaggi said and pushed the plate of mudde and mutton curry from the next-door Naidu restaurant towards him. 'Or we will be fucked. It can go only two ways, so why stress?'

Military looked at the ragi balls as if they were pieces of dog turd and said, 'I just had lunch. Besides, how can you eat this? It gets stuck in the throat.'

Oil Mill Jaggi flexed his enormous biceps at Military. 'Mudde is what began this and mudde is what keeps it going.' He tore a piece off the purplish brown ball, daubed it in the mutton curry, forked a piece of meat with his fingers and popped all of it into his

mouth, almost defiantly. Then he swallowed it with a convulsive movement of his throat.

The punter would have liked the mudde. He looked at it hungrily. And without thinking, he let his gaze wander to Military. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met. His two cuttings dissipated into a thin vapour of fear.

The punter took his glass and moved to the farthest end of the counter. Any further and he would be in the toilet. But it was best to keep his distance from those two, he decided. He didn't want to be accused of listening in. Or get caught in between if the two of them broke into a fight. The punter wondered at their power equation. It was hard to tell who feared whom and who would survive if they got into a fistfight.

He saw Military toss his rum down his throat and leave the bar, squeezing Oil Mill Jaggi's shoulder on his way out. A little later, Oil Mill Jaggi followed. The punter heaved a sigh of relief and finished his drink in one gulp. What a waste of money! He had treated himself to a better brand instead of his usual Silver Cup. It felt like he had drunk one quarter of rasam rather than brandy. 'Thoo, bosadi magane,' he swore, spat into his hand and wiped it on his shirtsleeve. There was something immensely satisfying about calling those two men sons of a whore. It didn't make up for the wasted afternoon but it was some compensation, he told himself.

Then, because it was prudent to do so, the punter drew out a brand-new razorblade still in its sleeve from beneath the multiple red threads wound tight around his right wrist. He took the blade out and popped it into his mouth. It would buy him enough time to escape and flee if either of them decided to pounce on him for being in the bar when they were there.

The punter chewed on the blade as he walked on to Oil Mill Road with the furtive step of a rat on the prowl.

2

29 NOVEMBER 2012, 2 A.M.

It had been a joke between his wife and him. She called his night wheeze a cat and now he thought of it as just that, except he had chosen to give it a personality: A raggedy, saffron-coloured cat; yellow eyes; a pushy beast; rasping and yowling even as it dragged its claws through his ribcage and tickled his throat with its tail.

All evening the cat had stayed in its place. All evening it had done nothing but purr. And he had thought that there it would stay, without troubling him.

Why did it always choose to stir at two in the morning, he asked himself as a bout of coughing racked him. He turned on his side slowly, hoping it would offer some relief. But the cat and cough persisted.

A ball of viscous phlegm filled his mouth. He tried to swallow, but it was too thick and slimy. He should have accepted his daughter's offer of placing a spittoon near the bed. 'Mary will clean it up in the morning,' she had added.

Instead, he had glowered at her and asked, 'Do I look like a feudal landlord to you?'

It was inevitable that he would have to get up, he thought, as the ball of slime wobbled within his mouth. He kicked the quilt off slowly and turned on the bedside lamp. His glasses were by the pillow. He pushed them onto his nose and sat up carefully. He counted under his breath: one to sixty, as he had been told by his doctor in Dharwad.

Another bout of coughing erupted, and the ball of phlegm escaped his mouth, splattering on the floor. He wondered if he should wipe it clean. It would dry on its own in a bit, he decided. And if it didn't, tough luck. No one expected anything better from eighty-three-year-old men except that they be doddering, clumsy fools.

The bruises on his arm and wrist hurt dreadfully. There was an open wound where the skin had been scraped off on the heel of his palm, and a welt on the side of the palm. He blew on it. Then he touched the scratch on the side of his neck. It stung as well. Somewhere in the bathroom cabinet was a bottle of Nebasulf. If he could summon the energy to get up, he would dust some of it on the scratches.

He reached for the shawl slung on the bedpost. Despite the sweater he wore, he felt the cold deep in his bones. The shawl would help. It had belonged to his wife, Kausalya. Why did she have to die before him? So very selfish of her.

He nudged his slippers towards his feet and slipped his feet into them. He reached for the Vicks bottle at his bedside and popped it into his pyjama shirt pocket. Then he stood up and reached for his walking stick. One step at a time. He inched his way through the corridor to the kitchen, switching on the lights as he walked. The tip-tap sound of the brass cap of the walking stick on the terracotta tiles echoed through the quiet of the November night.

He paused at the bathroom and went in, fumbling with the pyjama fly. He didn't always wear his pyjama bottoms but tonight the chill had seeped through from the floor into his shins. He had pulled them on reluctantly but was now glad for it as a draught from somewhere froze his ankles.

He held his flaccid penis in his hand and aimed it into the bowl. Each time he hoped that by some miracle of mechanics a steady stream of urine would arrive. Each time it dribbled, paused and dribbled. His bladder would never feel empty again, he told himself in disgust. And you really should shave, he admonished the mangy old man staring at him from the mirror on the bathroom cabinet. But the thought of lathering his face and using his old-fashioned razor without nicking himself seemed too much of an effort. He washed his hands. There was grime stuck under

his fingernails from the fall. For a moment, he wondered why he was standing there. He remembered the anti-bacterial powder he had intended to use on the scratches. He had almost forgotten about that. He sighed and reached for it.

He had planned for every contingency he could think of. He had put aside money for building the house on the land he had bought on the outskirts of Bangalore many decades ago and for house repairs when the need would arise; his daughter's education and her wedding; and his retirement, hospitalization and funeral. All that was left to do was bequeath his books to the library of the college he had reigned in for several years. First as principal and then as Professor Emeritus. But he hadn't foreseen this. The debilitating of the self with age. Of how, at eighty-three, he would be so incapacitated that what had once been commonplace would somehow turn into a feat.

He washed his hands. The trickle of water from the tap made him want to pee again. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter past two. He would try peeing again before he went back to bed, he decided.

In the kitchen, he found the electric kettle. His wife had hankered for one after she had discovered a tea-making tray in a hotel they had stayed in while at a conference. When Kausalya was alive, she had never got around to using it, but now it seemed it was all they used: the electric kettle, teabags, coffee sachets and milk powder. So much easier, Appa, his daughter said, as though she was the one who had to make it. What was he paying that flibbertigibbet maid for, he wondered as he plugged it in.

If his daughter really cared about him, she would have moved in here with him and looked after him. Instead, she had asked him to move in with her. He didn't want to be an appendage in that household. Why couldn't she see that? 'Bitch,' he said aloud. And then, because it didn't seem adequate enough as an insult, he muttered, 'Fat, rich, selfish bitch.'

The kettle wouldn't work. The power was off and the house was running on the back-up. He sighed and found a steel vessel. It was big, with an open mouth. It would be ideal for the steam inhalation that he needed to do if he planned to get some sleep tonight. He knew that his daughter would nag him for having used it. Your sambar will smell of Vicks now, she would grumble. 'Fuck off,' he said aloud. It felt good to hear it being said in his speaking voice, which even at eighty-three was loud and strident.

So he said that and a few other expletives he had only read in racy novels while he waited for the vessel to fill. As he struggled to carry the full steel vessel to the stove, he called out for Mary Susheela. When she didn't respond, he called her a few names too. Then he remembered the events of the evening. He wished he hadn't frightened that idiot woman off. It was all his daughter's fault.

It was meant to be a little experiment to validate the paper he was writing, 'The Hegemony of Hearsay in Right-wing Thought'. Besides, it had felt absurdly youthful, uncomfortable as it had been, to crouch on the steps beyond the back terrace, waiting for Mary Susheela to step out. No matter how many times he had told her to put the kitchen waste into the compost pit dug especially for it, she liked to fling everything over the parapet wall onto the slope below. There was a spot she seemed to prefer, he realized, as the stench of rotting food and kitchen waste from the ground hurled up his nostrils. Several sturdy hibiscus bushes grew there. He had found the perfect spot.

As he had expected, she came to the head of the steps to throw out the dinner debris. His heart had beat faster but she hadn't seen him. The wall light barely reached the edge of the cemented terrace and the bulb on the lamppost attached to the wall was flickering. He was well hidden on the fourth step.

As she began to toss the food he had abandoned on his plate, he had reached out and pressed down his late wife's upper denture

on her ankle. He hadn't meant to press so hard, but the angle he was crouched at made his feet wobble precariously, and to stop himself from falling at her feet he had put his entire weight on his arm to steady himself. Even then, he should have resisted from pressing the dentures down into her flesh so hard. But the thought of the oversalted, tasteless rasam and the under-sugared, watery coffee she thrust under his nose every day rose to the surface as an acid reflux of desperate fury. Only the old know the helplessness of being too frail to demonstrate anger, he would tell himself several times a day. But in that moment, rage lent iron to his trembling fingers.

Mary Susheela screamed loudly and kicked out to lob away whatever had sunk its teeth into her. Professor Mudgood felt himself totter with the force of the movement. His arm slammed into the rusty iron pipe that was the handrail, and it broke his fall. The hibiscus bushes alongside the handrail rustled as his shoulder crashed into them. They cushioned the impact. He grabbed the handrail to steady himself, even as he felt a bit of the step give way under his feet.

The woman screamed even more loudly as she heard what seemed like rustling and slithering. 'Snake, snake...' she hollered at the top of her voice. His daughter, who was in the work area attached to the kitchen, had dropped the clothes she had been stuffing into the washing machine and rushed towards Mary Susheela. She hurried the distraught woman indoors.

While the women's voices rose, he had examined the dentures. The bloodstained teeth grinned at him. He laughed aloud. A little wheeze of a laugh, for laughter too had gone the way his mobility had. He had hauled himself up with a great deal of difficulty, thrust the denture into his waistcoat pocket and reached for his walking stick slung on the handrail. He shuffled up the steps, holding on to the handrail and hoisting himself up with the walking stick, one step at a time. His arm hurt where he had taken the impact of the handrail, and the skin on the heel of

his palm had scraped off. But a wicked chuckle escaped his lips and accompanied him. On to the back terrace and around the house to the front verandah. The giant avocado tree alongside cut the light from the verandah and he stumbled again in the dark, knocking a stack of terracotta pots. Which fool had kept pots on the walking path?

It had been a cold night and he hadn't thought of wrapping his muffler around his throat. He had known even then that the feral saffron cat would keep him awake at night.

His daughter had burst into the verandah a few minutes later. 'Mary has been bitten! I don't know what she is going to need... anti-venom, rabies shots or just a tetanus shot... I can see teeth marks, so I am not taking any chances. I have put a tourniquet above her ankle for now,' she had said.

He had stared at her, trying to get his breath back. He lurched, and as she reached to steady him, he had clutched her forearm.

She had squealed in pain. 'Look what you've done, Appa,' she snapped, peering at the finger marks on her forearm.

'Don't fuss. It will heal in a day or two.' Why on earth was she acting as if he had bitten her?

His daughter had glared at him and said furiously, 'Does nothing matter to you unless it concerns you, Appa? Did you hear what I said? Mary has been bitten!' She repeated it so loudly that their nearest neighbours, the nuns who lived an acre away, would have heard it too.

He had glared back at her. 'I heard you,' he said. 'Look, I have scraped my wrist and scratched my neck. Is there any of that antiseptic powder? Why isn't that idiot Paul Selvam coming anymore? He needs to prune the bushes, and the backyard is a jungle...' He examined his wrist and blew on it. He looked up and added, 'And at my age, I don't give two hoots about anyone. All that is important to me is my life's work.'

His daughter had stared at him with a strange expression. Why did she look so incredulous? She was getting fat, he had thought,

taking in the yellow and green kameez that ballooned around her. Her rich, real estate developer husband would soon start looking elsewhere if he hadn't already. She had been a pretty child but now she reminded him of something else. Then it came to him. 'You are beginning to look like a Dalda tin,' he had said. 'If you don't look after yourself, your husband will find himself a bit on the side. Or worse, a slender young bride.'

She had glared at him as if she couldn't believe what she had heard. Then she had snapped, 'Go to hell!'

She had turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her. Why was she acting as if he had said something offensive, he had wondered. People didn't like hearing the truth. They preferred to believe what they thought was the truth.

His daughter had bustled the moaning Mary Susheela into her car and driven away with a screech. That had been a few hours ago. He could already see the rumours shaking themselves off every parthenium plant on his land: Mary was bitten by a scorpion; Mary was bitten by a bandicoot; God knows what bit her. They say that the land is haunted. Haven't you heard the strange noises that emerge on new-moon nights? Haven't you heard Mary had something going on with the old man? It is actually a stab wound by her angry husband. Professor Mudgood chuckled at the thought of how hearsay would soon be treated as fact.

The water began to bubble. The lid on the saucepan clanged. He turned off the stove and waited. The light on the power plug turned red. The power had come back. He would make a cup of tea for himself after the steam inhalation. Perhaps he could add to the notes for the talk he was scheduled to present at the Town Hall along with a compendium of other speakers, including a strident student leader from JNU, a movie-star-turned-citizen-rights advocate, a playwright and a political satirist.

He had titled his talk 'Why I Am Not a Hindu'. It was expected that he would lambast the Hindutva movement that was gaining

momentum and support by the day. He had already called them 'fascist' at least a few times. His assistant, Gurunath, had left in a huff that morning. The idiot had taken umbrage at the point of view of the paper. 'It's one thing that you are playing with fire, sir,' Gurunath had said. 'But I don't agree with your politics and I can't work for a man whose politics are diametrically opposite to mine.'

'Really, and what is your politics? Decimating the minorities? Crony capitalism? Gagging freedom of expression?' he had retorted.

Once, he may have held back. Not anymore. He was too old to care and too frail to negotiate sitting on a fence.

His hand hurt when he lifted the saucepan of water. He placed it on the kitchen table near the wall and found a towel in the work area where the washed clothes waited to be ironed and put away. The back door was open, he saw. Mary Susheela in her consternation had forgotten to latch it. He grimaced as he pushed the bolt up into the latch.

He sat on the chair and drew the saucepan closer to him. He opened the Vicks bottle and drew out a blob on the tip of his index finger. He flicked it into the water carefully before pulling the towel over his head as he inched his face towards the rising fragrant steam.

A scurrying noise made him look up. Was it a mouse? What was that Yeats poem?

> Now strength of body goes;
> Midnight, an old house
> Where nothing stirs but a mouse.

He put his glasses back on. But the lenses were fogged with the steam. He took them off to wipe them. That's when he saw the shadow. 'Who is there?' he asked in the loudest voice he could

summon. He put his glasses back on and smiled at his own fancifulness. Next he would start seeing ghosts.

He removed his glasses again and placed them on the table alongside the cauldron. He pulled the towel over his head again. Suddenly, an excruciating pain tore through him as something struck the side of his head. He felt himself slump against the wall.

Several minutes later, Raghava Mudgood stirred. He groaned as he raised his head. What had happened to him? How had he lost consciousness? Did he have a blackout? But the side of his head throbbed. He felt nauseous. He tried to hoist himself up, but he couldn't. His hand hurt and he couldn't put any pressure on it. He whimpered, 'Kausalya,' and tried again to sit up straight.

He felt someone loom behind him, and before he could put his glasses on to see who it was, his head was being pushed into the cauldron of hot water. The heat cut through the pain and he tried to drag his face away from the vessel, when something or someone—man, beast or ghost—pushed his face into the saucepan of scalding water.

He struggled, but the hand held him down. His hands groped for anything he could find. He heard his glasses shatter on the floor. Water entered his nostrils and mouth and burnt the skin on his face. He clawed at whatever it was he could reach to escape the grip. The table, an arm, life itself.

After a few minutes, he stopped struggling. It was 2.45 a.m., 29 November 2012.