The White Tiger

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Extract

The First Night

For the Desk of:

His Excellency Wen Jiabao,
The Premier's Office,
Beijing,
Capital of the Freedom-Loving Nation of China

From the Desk of:

'The White Tiger'
A Thinking Man
And an entrepreneur
Living in the world's centre of technology and outsourcing
Electronics City Phase 1 (just off Hosur Main Road),
Bangalore, India.

Mr Premier,

Sir.

Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.

My ex-employer the late Mr Ashok's ex-wife, Pinky Madam, taught me one of these things; and at 11:32 p.m. today, which was about ten minutes ago, when the lady on All India Radio announced, 'Premier Jiabao is coming to Bangalore next week', I said that thing at once.

In fact, each time when great men like you visit our country I say it. Not that I have anything against great men.

In my way, sir, I consider myself one of your kind. But whenever I see our prime minister and his distinguished sidekicks drive to the airport in black cars and get out and do *namastes* before you in front of a TV camera and tell you about how moral and saintly India is, I have to say that thing in English.

Now, you *are* visiting us this week, Your Excellency, aren't you? All India Radio is usually reliable in these matters.

That was a joke, sir.

Ha!

That's why I want to ask you directly if you really are coming to Bangalore. Because if you are, I have something important to tell you. See, the lady on the radio said, 'Mr Jiabao is on a mission: he wants to know the truth about Bangalore.'

My blood froze. If anyone knows the truth about Bangalore, it's *me*.

Next, the lady announcer said, 'Mr Jiabao wants to meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success from their own lips.'

She explained a little. Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, *does* have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology. And these entrepreneurs – *we* entrepreneurs – have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now.

You hope to learn how to make a few Chinese

entrepreneurs, that's why you're visiting. That made me feel good. But then it hit me that in keeping with international protocol, the prime minister and foreign minister of my country will meet you at the airport with garlands, small take-home sandalwood statues of Gandhi, and a booklet full of information about India's past, present, and future.

That's when I *had* to say that thing in English, sir. Out loud.

That was at 11:37 p.m. Five minutes ago.

I don't just swear and curse. I'm a man of action and change. I decided right there and then to start dictating a letter to you.

To begin with, let me tell you of my great admiration for the ancient nation of China.

I read about your history in a book, *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East*, that I found on the pavement, back in the days when I was trying to get some enlightenment by going through the Sunday secondhand book market in Old Delhi. This book was mostly about pirates and gold in Hong Kong, but it did have some useful background information too: it said that you Chinese are great lovers of freedom and individual liberty. The British tried to make you their servants, but you never let them do it. I admire that, Mr Premier.

I was a servant once, you see.

Only three nations have never let themselves be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia. These are the only three nations I admire.

Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our

erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore.

By telling you my life's story.

See, when you come to Bangalore, and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window, while holding up a bootlegged copy of an American business book, wrapped carefully in Cellophane and with a title like:

Ten Secrets of Business Success!

or

Become an Entrepreneur in Seven Easy Days!

Don't waste your money on those American books. They're so *yesterday*.

I am tomorrow.

In terms of formal education, I may be somewhat lacking. I never finished school, to put it bluntly. Who cares! I haven't read many books, but I've read all the ones that count. I know by heart the works of the four greatest poets of all time – Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib, and a fourth fellow whose name I forget. I am a self-taught entrepreneur.

That's the best kind there is, trust me.

When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful (though probably least known) businessmen, you will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man.

The century, more specifically, of the *yellow* and the *brown* man.

You and me.

It is a little before midnight now, Mr Jiabao. A good time for me to talk.

I stay up the whole night, Your Excellency. And there's no one else in this 150-square-foot office of mine. Just me and a chandelier above me, although the chandelier has a personality of its own. It's a huge thing, full of small diamond-shaped glass pieces, just like the ones they used to show in the films of the 1970s. Though it's cool enough at night in Bangalore, I've put a midget fan – five cobwebby blades – right above the chandelier. See, when it turns, the small blades chop up the chandelier's light and fling it across the room. Just like the strobe light at the best discos in Bangalore.

This is the only 150-square-foot space in Bangalore with its own chandelier! But it's still a hole in the wall, and I sit here the whole night.

The entrepreneur's curse. He has to watch his business all the time.

Now I'm going to turn the midget fan on, so that the chandelier's light spins around the room.

I am relaxed, sir. As I hope you are.

Let us begin.

Before we do that, sir, the phrase in English that I learned from my ex-employer the late Mr Ashok's ex-wife Pinky Madam is:

What a fucking joke.

*

Now, I no longer watch Hindi films – on principle – but back in the days when I used to, just before the movie got started, either the number 786 would flash against the black screen – the Muslims think this is a magic number that represents their god – or else you would see the picture of a woman in a white sari with gold sovereigns dripping down to her feet, which is the goddess Lakshmi, of the Hindus.

It is an ancient and venerated custom of people in my country to start a story by praying to a Higher Power.

I guess, Your Excellency, that I too should start off by kissing some god's arse.

Which god's arse, though? There are so many choices.

See, the Muslims have one god.

The Christians have three gods.

And we Hindus have 36,000,000 gods.

Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arses for me to choose from.

Now, there are some, and I don't just mean Communists like you, but thinking men of all political parties, who think that not many of these gods actually exist. Some believe that *none* of them exist. There's just us and an ocean of darkness around us. I'm no philosopher or poet, how would I know the truth? It's true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work – much like our politicians – and yet keep winning re-election to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year. That's not to say that I don't respect them, Mr Premier! Don't you ever let that blasphemous idea into your yellow skull. My country is the kind where it pays to play it both

ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.

So: I'm closing my eyes, folding my hands in a reverent *namaste*, and praying to the gods to shine light on my dark story.

Bear with me, Mr Jiabao. This could take a while.

How quickly do you think *you* could kiss 36,000,004 arses?

*

Done.

My eyes are open again.

11:52 p.m. – and it really *is* time to start.

A statutory warning – as they say on cigarette packs – before we begin.

One day, as I was driving my ex-employers Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam in their Honda City car, Mr Ashok put a hand on my shoulder, and said, 'Pull over to the side.' Following this command, he leaned forward so close that I could smell his aftershave – it was a delicious, fruitlike smell that day – and said, politely as ever, 'Balram, I have a few questions to ask you, all right?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'Balram,' Mr Ashok asked, 'how many planets are there in the sky?'

I gave the answer as best as I could.

'Balram, who was the first prime minister of India?'

And then: 'Balram, what is the difference between a Hindu and a Muslim?'

And then: 'What is the name of our continent?'

Mr Ashok leaned back and asked Pinky Madam, 'Did you hear his answers?'

'Was he joking?' she asked, and my heart beat faster, as it did every time she said something.

'No. That's *really* what he thinks the correct answers are.'

She giggled when she heard this: but *his* face, which I saw reflected in my rearview mirror, was serious.

'The thing is, he probably has… what, two, three years of schooling in him? He can read and write, but he doesn't get what he's read. He's half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I'll tell you that. And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy' – he pointed at me – 'to characters like these. *That's* the whole tragedy of this country.'

He sighed.

'All right, Balram, start the car again.'

That night, I was lying in bed, inside my mosquito net, thinking about his words. He was right, sir – I didn't like the way he had spoken about me, but he was right.

'The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian.' That's what I ought to call my life's story.

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office,

triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half-hour before falling asleep – all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with.

The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced.

But pay attention, Mr Premier! Fully formed fellows, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, join companies, and take orders from other men for the rest of their lives.

Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay.

*

To give you the basic facts about me – origin, height, weight, known sexual deviations, etc. – there's no beating that poster. The one the police made of me.

Calling myself Bangalore's least known success story isn't entirely true, I confess. About three years ago, when I became, briefly, a person of national importance owing to an act of entrepreneurship, a poster with my face on it found its way to every post office, railway station, and police station in this country. A lot of people saw my face and name back then. I don't have the original paper copy, but I've downloaded an image to my silver Macintosh laptop – I bought it

online from a store in Singapore, and it really works like a dream – and if you'll wait a second, I'll open the laptop, pull that scanned poster up, and read from it directly…

But a word about the original poster. I found it in a train station in Hyderabad, in the period when I was travelling with no luggage – except for one very heavy red bag – and coming down from Delhi to Bangalore. I had the original right here in this office, in the drawer of this desk, for a full year. One day the cleaning boy was going through my stuff, and he almost found the poster. I'm not a sentimental man, Mr Jiabao. Entrepreneurs can't afford to be. So I threw the thing out – but before that, I got someone to teach me scanning – and you know how we Indians just take to technology like ducks to water. It took just an hour, or two hours. I am a man of action, sir. And here it is, on the screen, in front of me:

Assistance Sought in Search for Missing Man

General Public is hereby informed that the man in the picture namely Balram Halwai alias MUNNA son of Vikram Halwai rickshaw-puller is wanted for questioning. Age: Between 25 and 35. Complexion: Blackish. Face: Oval. Height: Five feet four inches estimated. Build: Thin, Small.

Well, that's not *exactly* right any more, sir. The 'blackish face' bit is still true – although I'm of half a mind to try one of those skin-whitener creams they've launched these days so Indian men can look white as Westerners – but the rest, alas, is completely useless. Life in Bangalore is good – rich food,

beer, nightclubs, so what can I say! 'Thin' and 'small' – ha! I am in better shape these days! 'Fat' and 'potbellied' would be more accurate now.

But let us go on, we don't have all night. I'd better explain this bit right now.

Balram Halwai alias MUNNA…

See, my first day in school, the teacher made all the boys line up and come to his desk so he could put our names down in his register. When I told him what my name was, he gaped at me:

'Munna? That's not a real name.'

He was right: it just means 'boy'.

'That's all I've got, sir,' I said.

It was true. I'd never been given a name.

'Didn't your mother name you?'

'She's very ill, sir. She lies in bed and spews blood. She's got no time to name me.'

'And your father?'

'He's a rickshaw-puller, sir. He's got no time to name me.'

'Don't you have a granny? Aunts? Uncles?'

'They've got no time either.'

The teacher turned aside and spat – a jet of red *paan* splashed the ground of the classroom. He licked his lips.

'Well, it's up to me, then, isn't it?' He passed his hand through his hair and said, 'We'll call you… *Ram*. Wait – don't we have a Ram in this class? I don't want any confusion. It'll be *Balram*. You know who Balram was, don't you?'

'No, sir.'

'He was the sidekick of the god Krishna. Know what my name is?'

'No, sir.'

He laughed. 'Krishna.'

I came home that day and told my father that the schoolteacher had given me a new name. He shrugged. 'If it's what he wants, then we'll call you that.'

So I was Balram from then on. Later on, of course, I picked up a third name. But we'll get to that.

Now, what kind of place is it where people forget to name their children? Referring back to the poster:

The suspect comes from the village of Laxmangarh, in the…

Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness.

But this is not a time of day I talk about, Mr Premier!

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river.

Which black river am I talking of – which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it?

Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness.

One fact about India is that you can take almost anything you hear about the country from the prime minister and turn it upside down and then you will have the truth about that thing. Now, you have heard the Ganga called the river of emancipation, and hundreds of American tourists come each year to take photographs of naked *sadhus* at Hardwar or Benaras, and our prime minister will no doubt describe it that way to you, and urge you to take a dip in it.

No! – Mr Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.

I know all about the Ganga, sir – when I was six or seven or eight years old (no one in my village knows his exact age), I went to the holiest spot on the banks of the Ganga – the city of Benaras. I remember going down the steps of a downhill road in the holy city of Benaras, at the rear of a funeral procession carrying my mother's body to the Ganga.

Kusum, my granny, was leading the procession. Sly old Kusum! She had this habit of rubbing her forearms hard when she felt happy, as if they were a piece of ginger she was

grating to release grins from. Her teeth were all gone, but this only made her grin more cunning. She had grinned her way into control of the house; every son and daughter-in-law lived in fear of her.

My father and Kishan, my brother, stood behind her, to bear the front end of the cane bed which bore the corpse; my uncles, who are Munnu, Jayram, Divyram, and Umesh, stood behind, holding up the other end. My mother's body had been wrapped from head to toe in a saffron silk cloth, which was covered in rose petals and jasmine garlands. I don't think she had ever had such a fine thing to wear in her life. (Her death was so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable. My family was guilty about something.) My aunts – Rabri, Shalini, Malini, Luttu, Jaydevi, and Ruchi – kept turning around and clapping their hands for me to catch up to them. I remember swinging my hands and singing, 'Shiva's name is the truth!'

We walked past temple after temple, praying to god after god, and then went in a single file between a red temple devoted to Hanuman and an open gymnasium where three body builders heaved rusted weights over their heads. I smelled the river before I saw it: a stench of decaying flesh rising from my right. I sang louder: '… the only truth!'

Then there was a gigantic noise: firewood being split. A wooden platform had been built by the edge of the *ghat*, just above the water; logs were piled up on the platform, and men with axes were smashing the logs. Chunks of wood were being built into funeral pyres on the steps of the *ghat* that went down into the water; four bodies were burning

on the *ghat* steps when we got there. We waited our turn.

In the distance, an island of white sand glistened in the sunlight, and boats full of people were heading to that island. I wondered if my mother's soul had flown there, to that shining place in the river.

I have mentioned that my mother's body was wrapped in a satin cloth. This cloth was now pulled over her face; and logs of wood, as many as we could pay for, were piled on top of the body. Then the priest set my mother on fire.

'She was a good, quiet girl the day she came to our home,' Kusum said, as she put a hand on my face. 'I was not the one who wanted any fighting.'

I shook her hand off my face. I watched my mother.

As the fire ate away the satin, a pale foot jerked out, like a living thing; the toes, which were melting in the heat, began to curl up, offering resistance to what was being done to them. Kusum shoved the foot into the fire, but it would not burn. My heart began to race. My mother wasn't going to let them destroy her.

Underneath the platform with the piled-up fire logs, there was a giant oozing mound of black mud where the river washed into the shore. The mound was littered with ribbons of jasmine, rose petals, bits of satin, charred bones; a pale-skinned dog was crawling and sniffing through the petals and satin and charred bones.

I looked at the ooze, and I looked at my mother's flexed foot, and I understood.

This mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of black ooze. She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes

were flexed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in, sucking her in. It was so thick, and more of it was being created every moment as the river washed into the *ghat*. Soon she would become part of the black mound and the pale-skinned dog would start licking her.

And then I understood: this was the real god of Benaras – this black mud of the Ganga into which everything died, and decomposed, and was reborn from, and died into again. The same would happen to me when I died and they brought me here. Nothing would get liberated here.

I stopped breathing.

This was the first time in my life I fainted.

I haven't been back to see the Ganga since then: I'm leaving that river for the American tourists!

… comes from the village of Laxmangarh, in the district of Gaya.

This is a famous district – world-famous. Your nation's history has been shaped by my district, Mr Jiabao. Surely you've heard of Bodh Gaya – the town where the Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism, which then spread to the whole world, including China – and where is it, but right here in my home district! Just a few miles from Laxmangarh!

I wonder if the Buddha walked through Laxmangarh – some people say he did. My own feeling is that he ran through it – as fast as he could – and got to the other side – and never looked back!

There is a small branch of the Ganga that flows just

outside Laxmangarh; boats come down from the world outside, bringing supplies every Monday. There is one street in the village; a bright strip of sewage splits it into two. On either side of the ooze, a market: three more or less identical shops selling more or less identically adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes, and jaggery. At the end of the market is a tall, whitewashed, conelike tower, with black intertwining snakes painted on all its sides – the temple. Inside, you will find an image of a saffron-coloured creature, half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite god in the Darkness. Do you know about Hanuman, sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion.

These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us, Mr Jiabao. Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India.

So much for the place. Now for the people. Your Excellency, I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarh is your typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables, and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties our prime minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends.

Ha!

Electricity poles – defunct.

Water tap – broken.

Children – too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India.

Yes, a typical Indian village paradise, Mr Jiabao. One day I'll have to come to China and see if your village paradises are any better.

Down the middle of the main road, families of pigs are sniffing through sewage – the upper body of each animal is dry, with long hairs that are matted together into spines; the lower half of the body is peat-black and glistening from sewage. Vivid red and brown flashes of feather – roosters fly up and down the roofs of the houses. Past the hogs and roosters, you'll get to my house – if it still exists.

At the doorway to my house, you'll see the most important member of my family.

The water buffalo.

She was the fattest thing in our family; this was true in every house in the village. All day long, the women fed her and fed her fresh grass; feeding her was the main thing in their lives. All their hopes were concentrated in her fatness, sir. If she gave enough milk, the women could sell some of it, and there might be a little more money at the end of the day. She was a fat, glossy-skinned creature, with a vein the size of a boy's penis sticking out over her hairy snout, and long thick pearly spittle suspended from the edge of her mouth; she sat all day in her own stupendous crap. She was the dictator of our house!

Once you walk into the house, you will see – if any of them are still living, after what I did – the women. Working in the courtyard. My aunts and cousins and Kusum, my granny. One of them preparing the meal for the buffalo; one winnowing rice; one squatting down, looking through the scalp of another woman, squeezing the ticks to death between her fingers. Every now and then they stop their work, because it is time to fight. This means throwing metal vessels at one another, or pulling each other's hair, and then making up, by putting kisses on their palms and pressing them to the others' cheeks. At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede.

Men and boys sleep in another corner of the house.

Early morning. The roosters are going mad throughout the village. A hand stirs me awake… I shake my brother Kishan's legs off my tummy, move my cousin Pappu's palm out of my hair, and extricate myself from the sleepers.

'Come, Munna.'

My father, calling for me from the door of the house.

I run behind him. We go out of the house and untie the water buffalo from her post. We are taking her for her morning bath – all the way to the pond beneath the Black Fort.

The Black Fort stands on the crest of a hill overlooking the village. People who have been to other countries have told me that this fort is as beautiful as anything seen in Europe. The Turks, or the Afghans, or the English, or whichever foreigners were then ruling India, must have built the fort centuries ago.

(For this land, India, has never been free. First the

Muslims, then the British bossed us around. In 1947 the British left, but only a moron would think that we became free then.)

Now the foreigners have long abandoned the Black Fort, and a tribe of monkeys occupy it. No one else goes up, except for a goatherd taking his flock to graze there.

At sunrise, the pond around the base of the fort glows. Boulders from the walls of the fort have rolled down the hill and tumbled into the pond, where they lie, moist and half submerged in the muddy water, like the snoozing hippopotamuses that I would see, many years later, at the National Zoo at New Delhi. Lotuses and lilies float all over the pond, the water sparkles like silver, and the water buffalo wades, chewing on the leaves of the lilies, and setting off ripples that spread in big V's from her snout. The sun rises over the buffalo, and over my father, and over me, and over my world.

Sometimes, would you believe, I almost miss that place.

Now, back to the poster –

The suspect was last seen wearing blue chequered polyester shirt, orange polyester trousers, maroon colour sandals…

'Maroon colour' sandals – ugh. Only a policeman could have made up a detail like that. I flatly deny it.

'Blue chequered polyester shirt, orange polyester trousers'… er, well, I'd like to deny those too, but unfortunately they're correct. Those are the kinds of clothes, sir, that would appeal to a servant's eye. And I was still a servant on

the morning of the day this poster was made. (By the evening I was free – and wearing different clothes!)

Now, there is one phrase in this poster that does annoy me – let me go back to it for a moment and fix it:

… **son of Vikram Halwai, rickshaw-puller**…

Mr Vikram Halwai, rickshaw-puller – thank you! My father was a poor man, but he was a man of honour and courage. I wouldn't be here, under this chandelier, if not for his guidance.

In the afternoons, I went from my school to the tea shop to see him. This tea shop was the central point of our village; the bus from Gaya stopped there at noon every day (never late by more than an hour or two) and the policemen would park their jeep here when they came to bugger someone in the village. A little before sunset, a man circled around the tea shop three times, ringing his bell loudly. A stiff cardboard-backed poster for a pornographic film was tied to the back of his cycle – what traditional Indian village is complete without its blue-movie theatre, sir? A cinema across the river showed such films every night; two-and-a-half-hour fantasias with names like *He Was a True Man*, or *We Opened Her Diary*, or *The Uncle Did It*, featuring golden-haired women from America or lonely ladies from Hong Kong – or so I'm guessing, Mr Premier, since it's not like I ever joined the other young men and went to see one of these films!

The rickshaw-pullers parked their vehicles in a line outside the tea shop, waiting for the bus to disgorge its passengers.

They were not allowed to sit on the plastic chairs put out for the customers; they had to crouch near the back, in that hunched-over, squatting posture common to servants in every part of India. My father never crouched – I remember that. He preferred to stand, no matter how long he had to wait and how uncomfortable it got for him. I would find him shirtless, usually alone, drinking tea and thinking.

Then there would be the honk of a car.

The pigs and stray dogs near the tea shop would scatter, and the smell of dust, and sand, and pig shit would blow into the shop. A white Ambassador car had stopped outside. My father put down his teacup and went out.

The door of the Ambassador opened: a man got out with a notebook. The regular customers of the tea shop could go on eating, but my father and the others gathered in a line.

The man with the notebook was not the Buffalo; he was the assistant.

There was another fellow inside the Ambassador; a stout one with a bald, brown, dimpled head, a serene expression on his face, and a shotgun on his lap.

He was the Buffalo.

The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him.

The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village.

His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. When he passed by women, his car would stop; the windows would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long, and curved, like little tusks.

The Raven owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their flocks. If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven.

The Buffalo was greediest of the lot. He had eaten up the rickshaws and the roads. So if you ran a rickshaw, or used the road, you had to pay him his feed – one-third of whatever you earned, no less.

All four of the Animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh – the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. Once upon a time, the children of the four Animals went around town in their own cars; Kusum remembered those days. But after the Buffalo's son had been kidnapped by the Naxals – perhaps you've heard about them, Mr Jiabao, since they're Communists, just like you, and go around shooting rich people on principle – the four Animals had sent their sons and daughters away, to Dhanbad or to Delhi.

Their children were gone, but the Animals stayed and fed on the village, and everything that grew in it, until there was nothing left for anyone else to feed on. So the rest of the village left Laxmangarh for food. Each year, all the men in the village waited in a big group outside the tea shop. When the buses came, they got on – packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs – and went to Gaya; there they went to the station and rushed into the trains – packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs – and went to Delhi, Calcutta, and Dhanbad to find work.

A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh. There was fighting and wailing and shrieking. My uncles would resist, and managed to keep some of their money, but my father got peeled and skinned every time. 'I survived the city, but I couldn't survive the women in my home,' he would say, sunk into a corner of the room. The women would feed him after they fed the buffalo.

I would come to him, and play around with him, by climbing his back, and passing my palm over his forehead – over his eyes – over his nose – and down to his neck, to the little depression at the pit of his neck. I would let my finger linger there – it still is my favourite part of the human body.

A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. *Ours* are different. My father's spine was

a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks. The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen.

My uncles also did backbreaking work, but they did what everyone else did. Each year, as soon it began raining, they would go out to the fields with blackened sickles, begging one landlord or the other for some work. Then they cast seed, cut weeds, and harvested corn and paddy. My father could have worked with them; he could have worked with the landlords' mud, but he chose not to.

He chose to fight it.

Now, since I doubt that you have rickshaw-pullers in China – or in any other civilized nation on earth – you will have to see one for yourself. Rickshaws are not allowed inside the posh parts of Delhi, where foreigners might see them and gape. Insist on going to Old Delhi, or Nizamuddin – there you'll see the road full of them – thin, sticklike men, leaning forward from the seat of a bicycle, as they pedal along a carriage bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh – some fat man with his fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries.

And when you see these stick-men, think of my father.

Rickshaw-puller he may have been – a human beast of burden – but my father was a man with a plan.

I was his plan.

One day he lost his temper at home and began yelling at

the women. This was the day they told him that I had not been going to class. He did something he had never dared do before – he yelled at Kusum:

'How many times have I told you: Munna *must* read and write!'

Kusum was startled, but only for a moment. She yelled back:

'This fellow came running back from school – don't blame me! He's a coward, and he eats too much. Put him to work in the tea shop and let him make some money.'

My aunts and cousin-sisters gathered around her. I crawled behind my father's back as they told him the story of my cowardice.

Now, you may find it incredible that a boy in a village would be frightened of a lizard. Rats, snakes, monkeys, and mongooses don't bother me at all. On the contrary – I *love* animals. But lizards… each time I see one, no matter how tiny, it's as if I turn into a girl. My blood freezes.

There was a giant cupboard in my classroom, whose door was always slightly ajar – no one knew what it was there for. One morning, the door creaked open, and a lizard jumped out.

It was light green in colour, like a half-ripe guava. Its tongue flicked in and out of its mouth. It was at least two feet long.

The other boys barely noticed. Until someone saw my face. They gathered in a circle around me.

Two of them pinned my hands behind my back and held my head still. Someone caught the thing in his hands, and

began walking toward me with slow, exaggerated steps. Making no noise – only flicking its red tongue in and out of its mouth – the lizard came closer and closer to my face. The laughter grew louder. I couldn't make a noise. The teacher was snoring at his desk behind me. The lizard's face came right up to my face; and then it opened its light green mouth, and then I fainted for the second time in my life.

I had not gone back to school since that day.

My father did not laugh when he heard the story. He took a deep breath; I felt his chest expanding against me.

'You let Kishan drop out of school, but I told you this fellow had to stay in school. His mother told me he'd be the one who made it through school. His mother said—'

'Oh, to hell with his mother!' Kusum shouted. 'She was a crazy one, and she's dead, and thank goodness. Now listen to me: let the boy go to the tea shop like Kishan, that's what I say.'

The next day my father came with me to my school, for the first and last time. It was dawn; the place was empty. We pushed the door open. A dim blue light filled the classroom. Now, our schoolteacher was a big *paan*-and-spit man – and his expectorate made a sort of low, red wallpaper on three walls around us. When he went to sleep, which he usually did by noon, we stole *paan* from his pockets; distributed it amongst ourselves and chewed on it; and then, imitating his spitting style – hands on hips, back arched slightly – took turns spitting at the three dirty walls.

A faded mural of the Lord Buddha surrounded by deer and squirrels decorated the fourth wall – it was the only wall

that the teacher spared. The giant lizard the colour of a half-ripe guava was sitting in front of this wall, pretending to be one of the animals at the feet of the Lord Buddha.

It turned its head to us; I saw its eyes shine.

'Is this the monster?'

The lizard turned its head this way and that, looking for an exit. Then it began banging the wall. It was no different from me; it was terrified.

'Don't kill it, Daddy – just throw it out the window, please?'

The teacher was lying in one corner of the room, reeking of booze, snoring soundly. Near him was the pot of toddy he had emptied the previous night – my father picked it up.

The lizard ran, and he ran behind it, swinging the pot of toddy at it.

'Don't kill it, Daddy – please!'

But he wouldn't listen. He kicked the cupboard, and the lizard darted out, and he chased it again, smashing everything in his way, and yelling, 'Heeyaa! Heeyaa!' He pounded it with the pot of toddy until the pot broke. He smashed its neck with his fist. He stamped on its head.

The air became acrid: a stench of crushed flesh. He picked the dead lizard up and flung it out the door.

My father sat panting against the mural of the Lord Buddha surrounded by the gentle animals.

When he caught his breath, he said, 'My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine – at least one – should live like a man.'

What it meant to live like a man was a mystery. I thought it meant being like Vijay, the bus conductor. The bus stopped

for half an hour at Laxmangarh, and the passengers got off, and the conductor got down to have a cup of tea. Now, he was a man all of us who worked in that tea shop looked up to. We admired his bus-company-issue khaki uniform, his silver whistle and the red cord from which it hung down from his pocket. Everything about him said: he had made it in life.

Vijay's family were pigherds, which meant they were the lowest of the low, yet he had made it up in life. Somehow he had befriended a politician. People said he had let the politician dip his beak in his backside. Whatever he had to do, he had done: he was the first entrepreneur I knew of. Now he had a job, and a silver whistle, and when he blew it – just as the bus was leaving – all the boys in the village went crazy and ran after the bus, and banged on its sides, and begged to be taken along too. I wanted to be like Vijay – with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, and people looking at me with eyes that said, *How important he looks*.

2 a.m. already, Mr Premier. I'll have to stop for tonight fairly soon. Let me put my finger on the laptop screen, and see if there is any other useful information here.

Leaving out a few inessential details…

> … **in the Dhaula Kuan area of New Delhi, on the night of 2 September, near the ITC Maurya Sheraton hotel**…

Now, this hotel, the Sheraton, is the finest in Delhi – I've never been inside, but my ex-boss, Mr Ashok, used to do all

his late-night drinking there. There's a restaurant in the basement that's supposed to be very good. You should visit it if you get the chance.

The missing man was employed as driver of a Honda City vehicle at the time of the alleged incident. In this regard a case, FIR No. 438/05, P. S. Dhaula Kuan, Delhi, has been registered. He is also believed to be in possession of a bag filled with a certain quantity of cash.

Red bag, they should have said. Without the colour, the information is all but useless, isn't it? No wonder I was never spotted.

Certain quantity of cash. Open any newspaper in this country, and it's always this crap: 'A *certain* interested party has been spreading rumours', or 'A *certain* religious community doesn't believe in contraception.' I *hate* that.

Seven hundred thousand rupees.

That was how much cash was stuffed into the red bag. And trust me, the police knew it too. How much this is in Chinese money, I don't know, Mr Jiabao. But it buys ten silver Macintosh laptops from Singapore.

There's no mention of my school in the poster, sir – that's a real shame. You always ought to talk about a man's education when describing him. They should have said something like, *The suspect was educated in a school with two-foot-long lizards the colour of half-ripe guavas hiding in its cupboards…*

If the Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within a paradise.

There was supposed to be free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three *rotis*, yellow *daal*, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw *rotis*, or yellow *daal*, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money.

The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money – he said he hadn't been paid his salary in six months. He was going to undertake a Gandhian protest to retrieve his missing wages – he was going to do nothing in class until his pay cheque arrived in the mail. Yet he was terrified of losing his job, because though the pay of any government job in India is poor, the incidental advantages are numerous. Once, a truck came into the school with uniforms that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighbouring village.

No one blamed the schoolteacher for doing this. You can't expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet. Everyone in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for having got away with it so cleanly.

One morning a man wearing the finest suit I had seen in my life, a blue safari suit that looked even more impressive than a bus conductor's uniform, came walking down the road that led to my school. We gathered at the door to stare at his suit. He had a cane in his hand, which he began swishing when he saw us at the door. We rushed back into the class and sat down with our books.

This was a surprise inspection.

The man in the blue safari suit – the inspector – pointed

his cane at holes in the wall, or the red discolourations, while the teacher cowered by his side and said, 'Sorry sir, sorry sir.'

'There is no duster in this class; there are no chairs; there are no uniforms for the boys. How much money have you stolen from the school funds, you sister-fucker?'

The inspector wrote four sentences on the board and pointed his cane at a boy:

'Read.'

One boy after the other stood up and blinked at the wall.

'Try Balram, sir,' the teacher said. 'He's the smartest of the lot. He reads well.'

So I stood up, and read, '*We live in a glorious land. The Lord Buddha received his enlightenment in this land. The River Ganga gives life to our plants and our animals and our people. We are grateful to God that we were born in this land.*'

'Good,' the inspector said. 'And who was the Lord Buddha?'

'An enlightened man.'

'An enlightened *god*.'

(Oops! Thirty-six million and five—!)

The inspector made me write my name on the blackboard; then he showed me his wristwatch and asked me to read the time. He took out his wallet, removed a small photo, and asked me, 'Who is this man, who is the most important man in all our lives?'

The photo was of a plump man with spiky white hair and chubby cheeks, wearing thick earrings of gold; the face glowed with intelligence and kindness.

'He's the Great Socialist.'

'Good. And what is the Great Socialist's message for little children?'

I had seen the answer on the wall outside the temple: a policeman had written it one day in red paint.

'Any boy in any village can grow up to become the prime minister of India. That is his message to little children all over this land.'

The inspector pointed his cane straight at me. 'You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?'

I thought about it and said:

'The white tiger.'

'That's what you are, in *this* jungle.'

Before he left, the inspector said, 'I'll write to Patna asking them to send you a scholarship. You need to go to a real school – somewhere far away from here. You need a real uniform, and a real education.'

He had a parting gift for me – a book. I remember the title very well: *Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*.

So that's how I became the White Tiger. There will be a fourth and a fifth name too, but that's late in the story.

Now, being praised by the school inspector in front of my teacher and fellow students, being called a 'White Tiger', being given a book, and being promised a scholarship: all this constituted good news, and the one infallible law of life in the

Darkness is that good news becomes bad news – and soon.

My cousin-sister Reena got hitched off to a boy in the next village. Because we were the girl's family, we were screwed. We had to give the boy a new bicycle, and cash, and a silver bracelet, and arrange for a big wedding – which we did. Mr Premier, you probably know how we Indians enjoy our weddings – I gather that these days people come from other countries to get married Indian-style. Oh, we could have taught those foreigners a thing or two, I tell you! Film songs blasting out from a black tape recorder, and drinking and dancing all night! I got smashed, and so did Kishan, and so did everyone in the family, and for all I know, they probably poured hooch into the water buffalo's trough.

Two or three days passed. I was in my classroom, sitting at the back, with the black slate and chalk that my father had brought me from one of his trips to Dhanbad, working on the alphabet on my own. The boys were chatting or fighting. The teacher had passed out.

Kishan was standing in the doorway of the classroom. He gestured with his fingers.

'What is it, Kishan? Are we going somewhere?'

Still he said nothing.

'Should I bring my book along? And my chalk?'

'Why not?' he said. And then, with his hand on my head, he led me out.

The family had taken a big loan from the Stork so they could have a lavish wedding and a lavish dowry for my cousin-sister. Now the Stork had called in his loan. He wanted all the members of the family working for him and

he had seen me in school, or his collector had. So they had to hand me over too.

I was taken to the tea shop. Kishan folded his hands and bowed to the shopkeeper. I bowed to the shopkeeper too.

'Who's this?' The shopkeeper squinted at me.

He was sitting under a huge portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, and I knew already that I was going to be in big trouble.

'My brother,' Kishan said. 'He's come to join me.'

Then Kishan dragged the oven out from the tea shop and told me to sit down. I sat down next to him. He brought a gunnysack; inside was a huge pile of coals. He took out a coal, smashed it on a brick, and then poured the black chunks into the oven.

'Harder,' he said, when I hit the coal against the brick. 'Harder, harder.'

Finally I got it right – I broke the coal against the brick. He got up and said, 'Now break every last coal in this bag like that.'

A little later, two boys came around from school to watch me. Then two more boys came; then two more. I heard giggling.

'What is the creature that comes along only once in a generation?' one boy asked loudly.

'The coal breaker,' another replied.

And then all of them began to laugh.

'Ignore them,' Kishan said. 'They'll go away on their own.'

He looked at me.

'You're angry with me for taking you out of school, aren't you?'

I said nothing.

'You hate the idea of having to break coals, don't you?'

I said nothing.

He took the largest piece of coal in his hand and squeezed it. 'Imagine that each coal is my skull: they will get much easier to break.'

He'd been taken out of school too. That happened after my cousin-sister Meera's wedding. That had been a big affair too.

*

Working in a tea shop. Smashing coals. Wiping tables. Bad news for me, you say?

To break the law of his land – to turn bad news into good news – is the entrepreneur's prerogative.

Tomorrow, Mr Jiabao, starting again at midnight I'll tell you how I gave myself a better education at the tea shop than I could have got at any school. Right now, though, it's time for me to stop staring at this chandelier and get to work. It is almost three in the morning. This is when Bangalore comes to life. The American workday is coming to an end, and mine is beginning in earnest. I have to be alert as all the call-centre girls and boys are leaving their offices for their homes. This is when I must be near the phone.

I don't keep a mobile phone, for obvious reasons – they corrode a man's brains, shrink his balls, and dry up his semen, as all of us know – so I have to stay in the office. In case there is a crisis.

I am the man people call when they have a crisis!

Let's see quickly if there's anything else…

… any person having any information or clue about this missing man may kindly inform at CBI Web site (http://cbi.nic.in) e-mail ID (diccbi@cbi.nic.in), Fax No. 011-23011334, T No. 011-23014046 (Direct) 011-23015229 and 23015218 Extn. 210 and to the undersigned at the following address or telephone number or numbers given below.

DP 3687/05
SHO – Dhaula Kuan, New Delhi
Tel: 28653200, 27641000

Set into the text of the notice, a photograph: blurred, blackened, and smudged by the antique printing press of some police office, and barely recognizable even when it was on the wall of the train station, but now, transferred onto the computer screen, reduced to pixels, just an abstract idea of a man's face: a small creature with large, popped-out eyes and a stubby moustache. He could be half the men in India.

Mr Premier, I leave you for tonight with a comment on the shortcomings of police work in India. Now, a busload of men in khaki – it was a sensational case, after all – must have gone to Laxmangarh when investigating my disappearance. They would have questioned the shopkeepers, bullied the rickshaw pullers, and woken up the schoolteacher. Did he steal as a child? Did he sleep with whores? They would have smashed up a grocery shop or two, and forced out 'confessions' from one or two people.

Yet I bet you they missed the most important clue of all, which was right in front of them:

I am talking of the Black Fort, of course.

I begged Kusum many times to take me to the top of the hill, and through the entranceway, and into the fort. But she said I was a coward, I would die of fright if I went up there: an enormous lizard, the biggest in the whole world, lived in the fort.

So I could only watch. The long loopholes in its wall turned into lines of burning pink at sunrise and burning gold at sunset; the blue sky shone through the slits in the stone, while the moon shone on the jagged ramparts, and the monkeys ran wild along the walls, shrieking and attacking each other, as if they were the spirits of the dead warriors reincarnated, refighting their final battles.

I wanted to go up there too.

Iqbal, who is one of the four best poets in the world – the others being Rumi, Mirza Ghalib, and a fourth fellow, also a Muslim, whose name I've forgotten – has written a poem where he says this about slaves:

They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world.

That's the truest thing anyone ever said.

A great poet, this fellow Iqbal – even if he *was* a Muslim.

(By the way, Mr Premier: have you noticed that all four of the greatest poets in the world are Muslim? And yet all the Muslims you meet are illiterate or covered head to toe in black burkas or looking for buildings to blow up? It's a puzzle, isn't it? If you ever figure these people out, send me an e-mail.)

Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave.

One day Kusum found out about me and the fort. She followed me all the way from our home to the pond with the stones, and saw what I was doing. That night she told my father, 'He just stood there gaping at the fort – just the way his mother used to. He is going to come to nothing good in life, I'll tell you that right now.'

When I was maybe thirteen I decided to go up to the fort on my own. I waded into the pond, got to the other side, and climbed up the hill; just as I was on the verge of going in, a black thing materialized in the entranceway. I spun around and ran back down the hill, too frightened even to cry.

It was only a cow. I could see this from a distance, but I was too shaken up to go back.

I tried many more times, yet I was such a coward that each time I tried to go up, I lost my nerve and came back.

At the age of twenty-four, when I was living in Dhanbad and working in Mr Ashok's service as a chauffeur, I returned to Laxmangarh when my master and his wife went there on an excursion. It was a very important trip for me, and one I hope to describe in greater detail when time permits. For now, all I want to tell you is this: while Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam were relaxing, having eaten lunch, I had nothing to do, so I decided to try again. I swam through the pond, walked up the hill, went into the doorway, and entered the Black Fort for the first time. There wasn't much around – just some broken walls and a bunch of frightened monkeys watching me from a distance. Putting my foot on the wall, I

looked down on the village from there. My little Laxmangarh. I saw the temple tower, the market, the glistening line of sewage, the landlords' mansions – and my own house, with that dark little cloud outside – the water buffalo. It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth.

I leaned out from the edge of the fort in the direction of my village – and then I did something too disgusting to describe to you.

Well, actually, I *spat*. Again and again. And then, whistling and humming, I went back down the hill.

Eight months later, I slit Mr Ashok's throat.