

Chapter 2

The elder Jitendranath Bandhopadhaya, or Jitu Banerjee for short, inherited from his father both cardiomegaly and a veneer of patriotism. “The Indians invented indoor plumbing,” he would say, “the Indians invented agriculture, the Indians invented Differential Calculus,” but these were just phrases he had heard, and he passed them on as though recycling unwanted clothes to goodwill. Like Chandra, his earliest memory was of emigration. When Admiral Mountbatten took to the radio, addressed the subcontinent in measured and unhurried tones, and declared with imperfectly concealed pique that “the only alternative to coercion is partition”, his parents understood but Jitu did not yet appreciate that at the instant their beloved India achieved independence on the 15 of August 1947, they would become homeless. World War II had remade many maps, and the largest mass migration in history was but an aftershock, and far from the epicenter, of the great seismic events of the day. Jitu’s father was already middle-aged at the time of partition; when he was born, Victoria was still Empress of India. He was a man of modest wealth, but it was all bound up in real estate properties which he was forced to abandon or sell for a fraction of their former value. He lost in quick succession his fortune, his composure, and his appetite, contracted dysentery during the move to Calcutta, and died within a week of their arrival. Jitu and his mother were adopted into an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins who lived in Barobazar near the University, and who treated them with the kindness and condescension due their diminished status.

Jitu called his cousins 'brother' and 'sister'. He enjoyed sharing a bedroom, but was kept awake at night by the howls of jackals displaced by the endless construction work. He played cricket with his brothers in the street with linen cloth balls and wooden sticks, and they took turns to be Bhausahab Nimbalkar or Donald Bradman — a hit on the leg side was six and out — while his sisters cooked and cleaned and sewed and gossiped. He ate toffees or jamun fruit, repaired bicycles for pocket money and watched Raj Kapoor films at the Prabhat cinema hall on the Mahatma Gandhi Road. He was generally shy. But when he was twelve an older 'brother' gave him an orange cardamon halwa cookie for the Holi spring festival; there was a pebble of bhang inside and Jitu was overcome with glib sentiment. He danced and sang and recited couplets he had memorized from the Mahabharata for the ceremony of the sacred thread, and fell head first into a large tub of fresh water obtained for the festivities.

At University he studied Electrical Engineering, and bummed around with a group of student activists, one of whom was a Communist — a committed follower of Shripad Amrit Dange — who liked to say that "the Indians invented Marxism", and who nagged Jitu until he agreed to distribute trade unionist literature on the campus. This he did without much enthusiasm, and when at the end of a long day he was confronted by his fellow student Padma Rajagopal, who proceeded to lecture him in an unbroken tirade that lasted more than fifty minutes, Jitu admitted he hadn't actually read any of his pamphlets. At which point he readily chucked the remainder in the bin and accompanied Padma to the India Coffee House, where they sat on chairs in the lee of the spiral staircase by the kitchen, wreathed in the smoke of black coffee and baked fish, and she explained Marx and Rabindranath Tagore and Jayaprakash Narayan to him until the wee hours.

They were soon married; Padma's father considered his paternal obligations discharged with the purchase of eleven bedsheets for her trousseau, and she was welcomed into Jitu's extended family. Independent and free-thinking before the wedding, Padma out of deference to tradition gradually submitted to the gentle chauvinism of her new relatives, carefully folded her ambitions, wrapped them with muslin and slivers of soap and

put them away with the summer clothes at Diwali, and assumed a diminished role in her new husband's thoughts and ideas. Tanisha was born in 1965 and Chandra four years later.

Whatever she might later recall, her little boy rarely gave Padma grief, but was from the first pliable and eager to please. She pinched his cheeks till they smarted, and cluck-clucked "puchuchuchu" or "bachachacha", and he cooed and chuckled and twinkled, delighted with Mama's delight in him. He was colicky, it was true, but it was Tanisha as often as Padma who nursed him and dandled him and rubbed his tummy to ease the bubbles up or down. And it was Tanisha who minded him when he played on the grass in the Maidan and rescued two-tailed spiders from the midday heat by ferrying them on long Frangipani leaves to a nearby puddle, until dozens had drowned and it was time for supper.

Because Jitu was so easy going, and because he rarely showed any signs of ambition, his extended family were taken by surprise when in 1974, perhaps inspired by an echo in the calendar, he took it to his head to emigrate once more. He confronted with an equanimity verging on negligence the mountains of paperwork, the endless meetings with officials and other bureaucratic hurdles in the way, but fortune rewarded his innocence, and he was shortly granted a preferred-skills visa. Tanisha was excited by the thought of her own room. Padma was apprehensive, but out of solidarity she affected a calm and poise she did not feel. Jitu in turn, when he finally began to intuit the scale of his undertaking, peeked back at her from time to time to restore his optimism.

Chandra was told they were all going on holiday. If he was good, they might get a cat. He retained flashbulb memories of the flight: the thick blue-green weave of the aisle carpet; a fat bald Caucasian with a sunburn who poked out his tongue and made funny faces; the artificial twilight of the overhead lights; the stench of nicotine that wrapped them all like a coarse wool blanket suddenly pierced by the sharp tang of coffee in blue plastic jugs on the morning breakfast cart. One memory, false but especially vivid, was of being swaddled and gently eased into an overhead locker to sleep.

“Now we are all Americans,” said Jitu. But he couldn’t look them in the eye while he said it.

The passage of time during their first five years in New Jersey could be measured either by Jitu’s receding hair or expanding waist. He bought a Buick and a colorful paisley necktie and settled into a life of comfort and monotony. Shortly after arrival he discovered a McDonalds in a strip mall on his commute, and became addicted to Quarter Pounders, a secret he imagined he kept from Padma, who was a strict vegetarian at home. He never noticed that it was she who periodically tossed out the styro-foam boxes that littered his dashboard and turned it into a pastel oyster bed. Tanisha made friends easily at school. But when a playmate pointed out her bushy eyebrows and hairy arms she became self-conscious and took to wearing long sleeves year round, even when they went to the Jersey shore during the summer. She grew terrified of tanning, and wore a hat and stayed out of the sun in pursuit of ‘lighter skin’. The cat became a yorkie named Dickens, who chased cottontails and black racer snakes that sometimes came in the yard, and liked to tinkle in Mama’s flowerbed. In short, they had their own version of the American immigrant experience: unique and universal, trivial and profound.

Jitu introduced Chandra to ethics and Euclidean geometry. He was eclectic, and preachy from a lack of strong personal conviction, but the boy took him terribly seriously. “Model yourself on Jesus Christ,” he said, “model yourself on Krishna, model yourself on Prince Siddharta. Remember, the workers have nothing to lose but their chains.” Though Padma thought him foolish, she was loath to contradict him.

Only once did she confront him openly.

Chandra was nine years old. At that time in New Jersey, India was in Africa, and brown kids of all races were welcomed with even-handed bigotry. Some pushed back or took it out on other ethnic groups, but Chandra found it easier in general to play the clown; for example:

“Hey darky, you been rolling in dog shit?”

To which he might reply: “I don’t know wop you’re talking about. Oh, does that make you snigger?”

And then one Saturday evening in April when Dickens was in a frenzy of barking, Tanisha came into the kitchen in a state of great excitement, and found Chandra on the floor assembling his new Meccano set. Finger to her lips, she led him to her bedroom. She had a huge grin on her face and Chandra began to smile in anticipation, wondering what she had to show him. She led him to the window, where the sound of the barks grew louder.

“Look in the yard!”

He looked.

By the light of the full moon they could plainly see their neighbor Frank MacMurty, unsteady from too much vodka in his Shirley Temples, who had wandered into the wrong yard. Softly warbling the *Recondita Armonia* from *Tosca*, pants around his ankles, he pissed a wavering stream that fell softly on the geraniums. Dickens ran in tight figure eights, happy for a chance to play second piddle to his new friend, as his yelps gathered to a crescendo. Frank braced himself, adjusted his hips and let out a sustained high B flat which he held for several seconds, which propelled Dickens into ecstasies of sympathetic ululation. Chandra collapsed in silent laughter. He held his sides and shuddered until he began to cramp. Half an hour later he was still convulsed, and when Tanisha asked if he was okay he could only reply, weakly “hoo-hoo-hoo.”

He went to bed with a smile on his face, and was still in a goofy mood the next afternoon, when he and Anand Ramakrishnan went to the Seven-Eleven for cola slurpees. On the way out they were ambushed. Jimmy and Simon deAngelo were a couple years older and went to their school, and a skinny kid called Joel Fabrizi had cigarette burns on his face and forearms, and, rumor had it, was once detained by the cops for setting fire to Boxwood hedges around the neighborhood. Jimmy got Anand in a headlock and lifted his feet off the ground while Simon held Chandra down. Joel was all set to start laying into Anand when Chandra had a brainwave, emptied his bladder and began to wail theatrically,

“Look at me, I peed my pants! I peed my pants!”

Simon let go in disgust, but Jimmy and Joel found this hilarious, and

even Anand began to point and laugh. By Monday it was all over the school, a smirking whispering hubbub that erupted sporadically into open braying. Cornelius van Horne, who had older brothers, coined the epithet "premature evacuator," earning him cheers and high-fives from Chandra's friends and foes alike.

But worst was the reception at home.

"Shameful, shameful," said Jitu, "soiling yourself like a dog. Where is your pride? Where is your dignity? When you are unclean, you are impure to God."

"Baba, leave him be," said Padma, "look how miserable he is."

"Such dirty behavior, it shows a lack of breeding. People will say we raised a wild animal."

"Baba, can't you see: what he did was out of pity and friendship. It was an act of courage."

"What courage? A brave man stands up to bullies. A baby wets his diaper."

"That's enough Baba. And if you're so offended by this whole business, maybe you could remember to lift up the toilet seat next time you go."

This left him speechless. Chandra too was so astonished he forgot to cry, and looked on with his mouth set in an 'O'. Padma herded him into the kitchen. She bent down and dried his tears. He went to snuggle her but all of a sudden she slapped him. She frowned, kneeled down and held him tightly by the arms so it pinched.

"Chandra," she said, "let this be a lesson to you. Don't ever expect the world to reward you for making a hard choice."

The matter was apparently dropped. But Jitu nursed a pearl of resentment. In some vague, unarticulated way he felt that Chandra still had something coming to him, and he cast about for a something of the right size and shape.

He got his chance when Chandra turned ten, and the family planned

a trip to Calcutta to visit their relatives. Chandra's views of India were barely more informed than those of his schoolmates.

"Do they have electricity?"

"Well duh."

"Is there McDonalds?"

"Yeah, but it's vegetarian 'cos they're all Hindus." This seemed plausible.

"Do you ride elephants?"

"Dude, that's like a hundred years ago!"

"When do they celebrate fourth of July?"

Chandra's first impression of Calcutta was of overpowering heat. And the noise. And the stink. Jitu got a Mercedes from Hertz to impress his relatives, but the air conditioning broke the minute they drove it out of the rental lot. He overcompensated by turning up the radio especially loud, which annoyed everyone in the car — Jitu most of all — except for Chandra, who was mesmerized by his first taste of Ravi Shankar.

Jitu's cousins, nieces and nephews all came out to greet them. There were hugs and screams and kisses. The family's tartan suitcases, purchased specially for the trip, were carried ahead to their room. There was a big feast, at which Jitu made a tear-filled speech, and as soon as it was over they all began to get on each other's nerves. Tanisha, who was secretly flirting with bulimia, resented having so many extra dishes to wash. Chandra found the spices unfamiliar and the food gave him gas, so that he stuck to naan smeared with ghee, and fruit, and boondi raita. Jitu offered to drive his cousins around in the Mercedes, but the neighbor down the street already had a grey 280 SL with a top speed of 190 kilometres per hour. To hide the dismay of alienation, his cousins and he told increasingly cruder jokes at dinner, laughed louder, and got drunker than Chandra had ever seen.

Jitu by degrees gave up on his extended family and decided instead to expose Chandra to his cultural heritage. They visited the B.B.D. Bagh,

with the old Lal Dighi in the middle filled with what Jitu insisted had once been clear, sweet water. Chandra admired the high domed roof of the General Post Office while Jitu told him of the infamous Black Hole of Calcutta, the dungeon where the troops of Siraj ud-Daulah confined a hundred and fifty British prisoners of war, captured when the Bengali army stormed Fort William, in conditions so awful that all but twenty-three of them died overnight from suffocation and heat. He told this story, not without pride, in a tone which suggested he was imparting a significant moral.

Then Jitu took him to visit the Raj Bhavan, a palace so opulent that its construction — Jitu claimed — nearly bankrupted the East India Company. Chandra initially took Curzon's birdcage lift for a torture chamber and in any case preferred to wander the grounds, where he gawped at a hoopoe that he mistook for a woodpecker as it waddled past and made a soft 'hud-hud-hud' noise, and was dazzled by the pendant yellow clusters on the flowering laburnums.

They took a trip to Belur Math, but on the drive back traffic was diverted and somehow they ended up by a shanty town in a dump on the outskirts of Tikiapara where there was a leper colony.

Jitu was struck by an idea.

"We should get out and take a look. This is India too."

Thirty years later Chandra still had lucid memories of the pit toilets and open sewer and the stench of diarrhea, a lunar landscape of mounded dirt, plastic, white garbage bags, cinder blocks that propped up sheets of corrugated iron, a crow perched on a plastic tent leg thrust into a rubber tire; and roaming about the women, the children, the men whose hands curled backwards like warped timber planks with black twisted knuckles, yellow fingernails or stumps or festering sores, a man who squatted on the ground and dragged a stick of chalk between his middle and ring fingers on a stone floor, his brother who used his lips to twist off the lid of a PET Fanta bottle filled with dirty water held between two elbows, a woman with a cloudy yellow eye and a shiny grey iris that stared open while the other eye blinked and mashed her two

hands together like a single flat fungus held to her chest, two teenage boys laughing, each trying to trip the other while their aunt swore at them and made threatening gestures, a mummified old lady with a decaying spleen that wrote its corrosion on her philtrum between a big squat jaw and tiny nose where the skin drew tight and puckered like a chimpanzee's muzzle.

Chandra reeled. A little girl of six or seven in an orange dress, with a jeweled kundala in the pinna of her left ear and weeping sores on her scalp approached them. She stared up at Chandra, hands clasped behind her back and said: "I love you."

"Here are your brothers," said Jitu, "here are your sisters."

Chandra didn't need to be told. His mouth was puckered tight, a lump of stone ribboned with horror and self-recognition stuck in his esophagus, and something rank burst open at the base of his skull. He was silent in the car ride home and toyed with his food through dinner. He excused himself and went early to bed. When they checked on him they found him asleep but curled up very small. Jitu, sensing he had gone too far, did not bring the episode up then or later.

"What happened? What's wrong with Chandra?" asked Padma.

"Oh, he's just homesick. We'll be going home in a few days and he'll perk up then."

But he did not perk up on their return, and things did not go back to the way they were. Jitu bought Chandra a new BMX. It was stolen by a gang of older kids a week later.