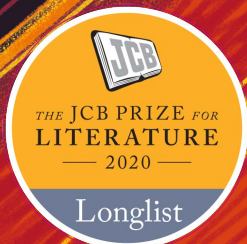




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A BURNING



A Burning

by Megha Majumdar



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

JIVAN

“YOU SMELL LIKE SMOKE,” MY MOTHER SAID TO ME.

So I rubbed an oval of soap in my hair and poured a whole bucket of water on myself before a neighbor complained that I was wasting the morning supply.

There was a curfew that day. On the main street, a police jeep would creep by every half hour. Daily-wage laborers, compelled to work, would come home with arms raised to show they had no weapons.

In bed, my wet hair spread on the pillow, I picked up my new phone—purchased with my own salary, screen guard still attached.

On Facebook, there was only one conversation.

*These terrorists attacked the wrong neighborhood
#KolabaganTrainAttack #Undefeated*

*Friends, if you have fifty rupees, skip your samosas
today and donate to—*

The more I scrolled, the more Facebook unrolled.

*This news clip exclusively from 24 Hours shows how—
Candlelight vigil at—*

The night before, I had been at the railway station, no more than a fifteen-minute walk from my house. I

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ought to have seen the men who stole up to the open windows and threw flaming torches into the halted train. But all I saw were carriages, burning, their doors locked from the outside and dangerously hot. The fire spread to huts bordering the station, smoke filling the chests of those who lived there. More than a hundred people died. The government promised compensation to the families of the dead—eighty thousand rupees!—which, well, the government promises many things.

In a video, to the dozen microphones thrust at his chin, the chief minister was saying, “Let the authorities investigate.” Somebody had spliced this comment with a video of policemen scratching their heads. It made me laugh.

I admired these strangers on Facebook who said anything they wanted to. They were not afraid of making jokes. Whether it was about the police or the ministers, they had their fun, and wasn’t that freedom? I hoped that after a few more salary slips, after I rose to be a senior sales clerk of Pantaloons, I would be free in that way too.

Then, in a video clip further down the page, a woman came forward, her hair flying, her nose running a wet trail down to her lips, her eyes red. She was standing on the sloping platform of our small railway station. Into the microphone she screamed: “There was a jeep full of policemen right there. Ask them why they stood around and watched while my husband burned. He tried to open the door and save my daughter. He tried and tried.”

I shared that video. I added a caption.

Policemen paid by the government watched and did nothing while this innocent woman lost everything, I wrote.

I laid the phone next to my head, and dozed. The heat brought sleep to my eyes. When I checked my phone next, there were only two likes. A half hour later, still two likes.

Then a woman, I don't know who, commented on my post, *How do you know this person is not faking it? Maybe she wants attention!*

I sat up. Was I friends with this person? In her profile picture she was posing in a bathroom.

Did you even watch the video? I replied.

The words of the heartless woman drifted in my mind. I was irritated by her, but there was excitement too. This was not the frustration of no water in the municipal pump or power cut on the hottest night. Wasn't this a kind of leisure dressed up as agitation?

For me, the day was a holiday, after all. My mother was cooking fish so small we would eat them bones and tail. My father was taking in the sun, his back pain eased.

Under my thumb, I watched post after post about the train attack earn fifty likes, a hundred likes, three hundred likes. Nobody liked my reply.

And then, in the small, glowing screen, I wrote a foolish thing. I wrote a dangerous thing, a thing nobody like me should ever think, let alone write.

Forgive me, Ma.

If the police didn't help ordinary people like you and

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*me, if the police watched them die, doesn't that mean,
I wrote on Facebook, that the government is also a
terrorist?*

Outside the door, a man slowly pedaled his rickshaw, the only passenger his child, the horn going *paw paw* for her glee.

LOVELY

SUNDAY MORNING! TIME TO GO TO ACTING CLASS. With my hips swinging like this and like that, I am walking past the guava seller.

“Brother,” I am calling, “what’s the time?”

“Eight thirty,” he is grumbling, because he is not wishing to share with me the fruits of his wristwatch. Leave him. I am abandoning my stylish walk and running like a horse to the local railway station. On the train, while I am touching my chest and forehead, saying a prayer for those poor people who were dying a few days ago at this very station—

“Who is pushing?” one aunty is shouting. “Stop it!”

“This hijra couldn’t find a different compartment to hassle?” the peanut seller is hissing, as if I am not having ears.

Nothing is simple for a person like me, not even one hour on the train. My chest is a man’s chest, and my breasts are made of rags. So what? Find me another woman in this whole city as truly woman as me.

In the middle of this crowd a legless beggar is

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coming down the corridor, sitting on a wheeled plank of wood which he is rolling on everybody's feet.

"Give me one coin," he is whining.

People are yelling at him.

"Now you need to pass?"

"No eyes or what?"

"Where will I stand, on your head?"

Now he is also shouting back, "Let me cut off your legs, then you see how you manage!"

It is true to god making me laugh and laugh. This is why I am liking the local trains. You can be burning one train, but you cannot be stopping our will to go to work, to class, to family if we have them. Every local train is like a film. On the train, I am observing faces, body movements, voices, fights. This is how people like me are learning. When this train is swaying, picking up speed, wind whipping my hair, I am putting my fingertips on the ceiling, making my body straight and tall for Mr. Debnath's acting class.

*

AT MR. DEBNATH'S HOUSE, he is resting in a chair, drinking tea from a saucer. That way the tea is cooling fast and he is not having to do *phoo phoo*.

I have heard of acting coaches who are taking advantage of strugglers. But Mr. Debnath is not like that. He is having morals. In his younger days he was getting a chance to direct a film himself, but the opportunity was in Bombay. So he was having to go to Bombay for six months, minimum. At that time his old mother was in a hospital. What kind of monster

would abandon his mother to chase his dreams? So he was sacrificing his own goals and staying with his mother. When he was telling us this sad story, it was the only time I was seeing him cry.

Next to his feet are sitting six other students. Brijesh, who is working as an electrician; Rumeli, who is selling magic ointment for rashes; Peonji, who is working as a clerk in the insurance office; Radha, who is studying how to be a nurse; and Joyita, who is doing bookkeeping in her father's pen refill business. Nobody is really sure what Kumar is doing because he is only laughing in answer to all questions.

We are all saving and saving, and handing over fifty rupees each class.

Today, in this living room which is our stage, we are pushing the dining table to one side, and practicing a scene in which a man is being suspicious of his wife. After some, if it can be said, lackluster performances, it is my turn. I am placing my phone on the floor to record myself for study purposes, then going to the center of the room and rolling my neck, left to right, right to left. Mr. Debnath's deceased parents, please to pray for them, are looking at me with strict faces from photos on the wall. I am feeling hot, even though the fan is running on maximum speed.

Time for my artistic performance. This time my partner is Brijesh, the electrician. According to the script that Mr. Debnath is giving us, Brijesh, now the suspicious husband, is having to hold my shoulders forcefully, angrily. But he is holding my shoulders too lightly. I am being forced to leave my character.

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“Not like that!” I am saying. “If you are holding me like a petal, how will I have the strong feeling? You have to give it to me, the anger, the frustration! Come on!”

Mr. Debnath is approving of this. If you are not feeling it, he is always saying, how will your audience be feeling it? So I am hitting Brijesh’s shoulder a little, making him a bit angry, showing him that he can be a little more manly with me. He is mumbling something, so I am saying, “What? Say it loudly.”

After a long time Brijesh is finally saying, “Uff! Don’t make me say it, Lovely. I can’t do this marriage scene with a half man.”

At this time the clock is gonging eleven times, making us all silent. My cheeks are getting hot. Oh I am used to this—on the road, on the train, at the shops. But in my acting class? With Brijesh?

So I am just throwing away his insult. It is garbage.

“Listen, Brijesh,” I am saying, “you are like my brother. So if I can act romantic with you, then you can also act romantic with me!”

“That’s right,” Mr. Debnath is saying. “If you are serious about films, you have to be fully in your role—”

He is giving Brijesh a real lecture. When he is pausing, you can even hear the ticking of the big clock on the wall.

Finally Brijesh is joining his hands to beg forgiveness from me, per Mr. Debnath’s suggestion, and I am having a few tears in my eyes also. Rumeli is blowing her nose into her dupatta. Mr. Debnath is

clapping his hands and saying, “Channel this emotion into your scene!”

The moment is full of tension. The other students are putting their mobile phones away when I am roaring: “You have the audacity to hit a mother!”

This character’s rage, I am feeling it in my chest. This living room, with chair and table pushed to the corner, with cabinet full of dusty teddies, is nothing less than a stage in Bombay. The tubelight is as bright as a spotlight shining on me. Outside, a pillow filler is walking by, twanging his cotton-sorting instrument like a harp. Only windows, with thin curtains, are separating me from the nobodies on the street.

Then, holding the emotion but lowering my voice, I am delivering the next line: “Have you not fallen from your mother’s womb?”

Brijesh: “Mother, hah, as if you have that dignity! You think I don’t know about *him*?”

Me: “I swear it’s not what you are thinking. Let me explain. Oh, please give me one chance to explain.”

Brijesh: (stone-faced, looking out of imaginary window)

Me: “I was never wanting to talk about my past, but you are forcing me. So now I have to tell you my secret. It is not me who has been with that man. It is my twin sister.”

What dialogue! The scene ends.

My palms are chilled and sweating. But my heart is light like a kite. There is thundering silence in the room. Even the maid is watching from the doorway, both broom and dustpan in her hand. Her jaw is

falling open. Seeing her, I am feeling like smiling. I am finally coming out of the scene and back into the room.

Mr. Debnath is looking a bit crazed.

“This is how you do it!” he is whispering. His eyes are big. He is trying to put on his sandals and stand up from the chair, but one sandal is sliding away every time he is putting his foot on it. Never mind, he is looking very serious.

“My students, see how she used her voice?” he is saying. “See how she was feeling it, and that feeling was being transferred to you?” Spit is flying from his mouth, showering the heads of his students.

Radha, who is sitting below him, is tearing a corner of the newspaper on the floor. Then she is wiping her hair with it.

Almost one year ago I was coming to Mr. Debnath’s house for the first time. He was asking to take my interview in the street. Because—he was saying, this was his explanation—the house was being painted, so there was nowhere to sit.

Rubbish. Where were the painters, the rags, the buckets, the ladders?

I was knowing the truth. The truth was that Mrs. Debnath was not wanting a hijra in the house.

So I was standing in the street, making sure a passing rickshaw was not hitting my behind. Mr. Debnath was saying, “Why you are so bent on acting? It’s too hard!”

My kohl was smearing and my lipstick was gone on some cup of tea. My armpits were stinking, my

black hair was absorbing all the heat of the day and giving me a headache. But this was the one question I was always able to answer.

“I have been performing all my life,” I was saying to him. I was performing on trains, on roads. I was performing happiness and cheer. I was performing divine connection. “Now,” I was telling him, “just let me practice for the camera.”

Today, I am standing up and joining my hands. I am bowing. What else to do when there is so much clapping? They are clapping and clapping, my fans. My bookkeeper fan, my ointment-seller fan, my insurance-clerk fan. Even when I am waving my hand, smiling too broadly, saying, “Stop it!” they are going on clapping.

JIVAN

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, THERE WAS A KNOCKING. IT was late, two or three a.m., when any sound brings your heart to your throat. My mother was shouting, “Wake up, wake up!”

A hand reached out of the dark and dragged me up in my nightie. I screamed and fought, believing it was a man come to do what men do. But it was a policewoman.

My father, on the floor, his throat dry and his painful back rigid, mewled. Nighttime turned him into a child.

Then I was in the back of the police van, watching through the wire mesh a view of roads glowing orange under streetlamps. I exhausted myself appealing to the policewoman and group of policemen sitting in front of me: “Sister, what is happening? I am a working girl. I work at Pantaloons. I have nothing to do with police!”

They said nothing. Now and then a crackle came from the radio on the dashboard, far in front. At some point, a car filled with boys sped by, and I heard

whooping and cheering. They were coming from a nightclub. The doddering police van meant nothing to those boys. They did not slow down. They were not afraid. Their fathers knew police commissioners and members of the legislature, figures who were capable of making all problems disappear. And me, how would I get out of this? Whom did I know?

LOVELY

AT NIGHT, AFTER THE ACTING CLASS, I AM LYING IN bed with Azad, my husband, my businessman who is buying and reselling *Sansung* electronics and *Tony Hilfiger* wristwatches from Chinese ships docking in Diamond Harbor. I am showing him my practice video from the day's class, and now he is saying, "I have been telling you for hundred years! You have star material in you!"

He is pinching my cheek, and I am laughing even though it is hurting. I am feeling peaceful, like this thin mattress on the floor is our own luxury five-star hotel bed. In this room I am having everything I am needing. A jar of drinking water, some dishes, a small kerosene stove, and a shelf for my clothes and jewelry. On the wall, giving me their blessings every day, are Priyanka Chopra and Shah Rukh Khan. When I am looking around, I am seeing their beautiful faces, and some of their good fortune is sprinkling down on me.

“AZAD,” I AM SAYING this night. My face is close to his face, like we are in a romantic scene in a blockbuster. “Promise you will not get angry if I am telling you something?”

I am taking a moment to look at his face, dark and gray. Some long hairs in his eyebrows trying to escape. I am having difficulty looking eye to eye for these hard words.

“Aren’t you thinking,” I am saying finally, “about family and all? We are not so young—”

Azad is starting to talk over me, like always. “Again?” he is saying. I am knowing that he is annoyed. “Was my brother coming here?”

“No!”

“Was my brother putting this rubbish in your head?”

“No, I am telling you!”

Why Azad is always accusing me of such things?

“Everyone knows it is the way of the world, Azad,” I am telling him. “Yes, the world is backward, and yes, the world is stupid. But your family is wanting you to marry a proper woman, have children. And look at me—I can never give you a future like that.”

Immediately, I am regretting. This is a great big mistake. I am wishing to be with Azad always, so why I am pushing him away?

*

ACTUALLY, AZAD IS RIGHT. His brother was coming one night. He was coming before dawn, ringing the

bell, banging his fist on the door. He was making such a racket the street dogs were barking *gheu gheu*.

When I was finally leaping out of bed and unlatching the door, Azad's brother was immediately shouting at my face, "Whatever curse you have given him, let him go, witch!"

"Shhh!" I was saying. "Be quiet, it's the middle of the night!"

"Don't you tell me what to do, witch!" he was screaming, wagging a finger in the air. One man pissing in the gutter was looking at him, then at me, then at him, then at me. Otherwise, all was quiet and dark, but surely everybody was hearing everything.

"You have trapped him!" this brother was screaming. "Now you have to free him! Let him get married like a normal person!"

I was only standing, holding the open door. "Calm yourself," I was saying quietly. "You will make yourself sick."

I was wearing my nightie. My ears were burning. The whole neighborhood was learning my business. Now this was making me angry. Who was giving this good-for-nothing brother the right to shout at me in front of the whole locality? All these people were hardworking rickshaw pullers, fruit sellers, cotton fillers, maidservants, guards in the malls. They were needing sleep. Now what respect was I having left in their eyes?

So finally I was shouting back some rude things. I don't like remembering them.

*

“OKAY,” I AM ADMITTING to Azad now. “Fine, your brother came. He was saying to me, ‘Lovely, I know your love is true. My brother refuses to even eat if you are not there. But please, I am begging, talk to him about marriage and children, for our old parents’ sake.’”

Azad is looking at me. “My brother? Said that?”
He is not believing his ears.

“Yes, your own brother,” I am saying. “So I am thinking about it.”

A spider with thin brown legs is crawling through the window. With all eight legs it is exploring the wall. Both of us are watching it. When Azad is getting up and about to slap the spider with his shoe, I am saying, “Leave it.”

Why to always ruin other creatures’ lives?

“No!” Azad is saying. “I am not going to follow such stupid rules! I will marry *you!*”

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