



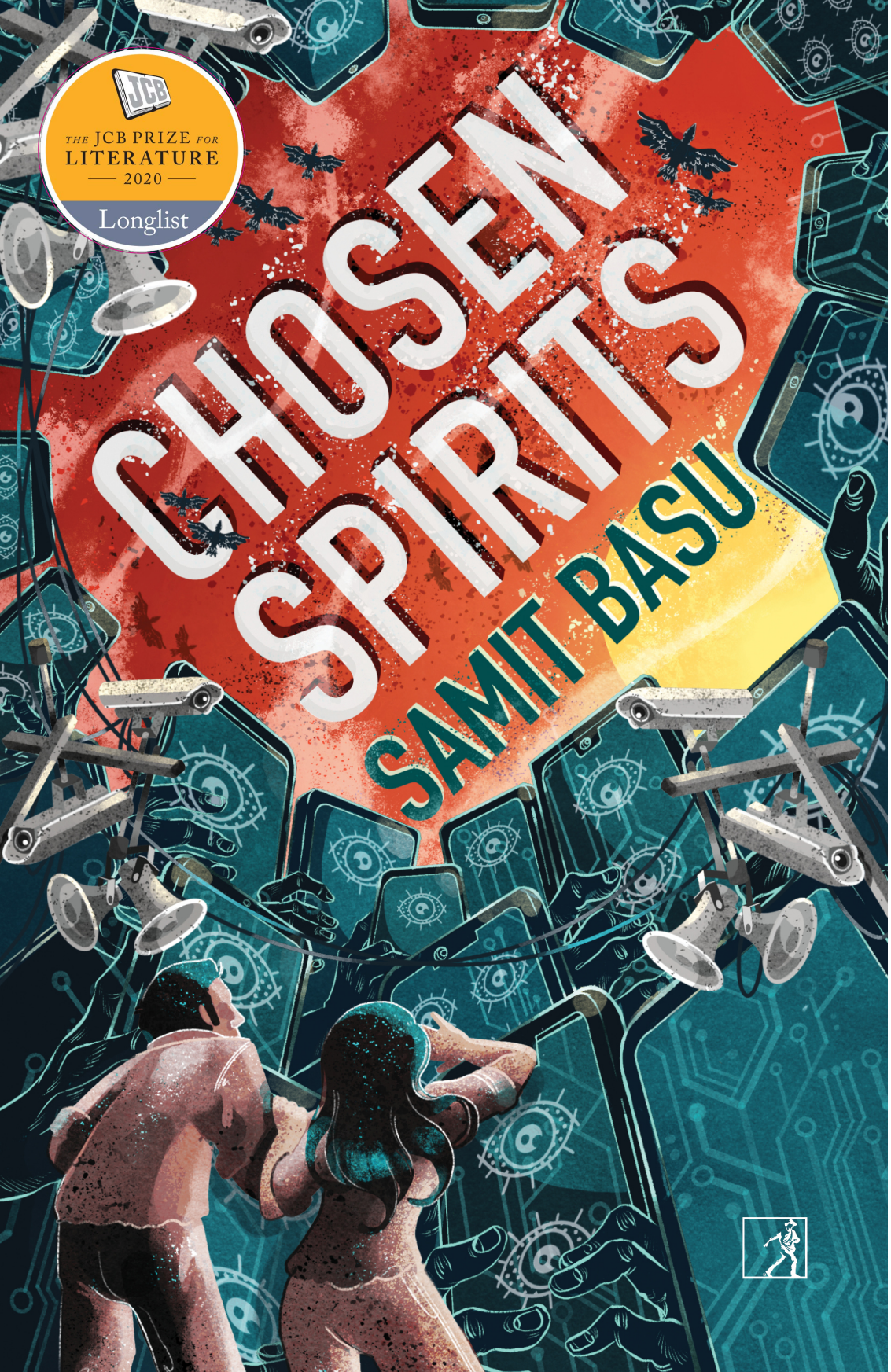
THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE

— 2020 —

Longlist

# CHOSEN SPIRITS

## SAMIT BASU



# Chosen Spirits

by Samit Basu



*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
**LITERATURE**  
— 2020 —

An exclusive extract from  
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

## CHAPTER ONE



Sometimes Joey feels like her whole life is a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips, mostly of her looking at screens or sitting glazed-eyed at meetings. As a professional image-builder and storyteller, she finds the lack of structure even more offensive than the banality of the material. She's always taken pride in her instinct for cuts and angles and rhythms in the wildly successful stories she produces—one day, one perfect day, her life will be just as award-worthy.

As she heads into the park near her parents' house for her regular Sunday morning run—actually the first in three months, but she's finally managed to wake up early this time, it's usually way too hot to be outside the house by the time she reaches Little Bengal for her weekly visit—she finds herself idly building another montage in her mind. A classic training sequence, where she builds an incredible body through first failing and then succeeding at the same task, intercut with determined running, some weights, an optional animal sidekick, rounded off with a motivational hope-hop soundtrack. Even the idea is tiring, and she considers going straight to her parents' house, it's already hot enough to make her eyes twitch.

Instead, she goes through her fitness checklist: headphones in place, cooling sportswear hopefully working as much as possible in Delhi, smog mask already making her face sweat, water bottle and pepper spray in the right slots on her smartbelt. A few stretches, and she's off along the jogging track, keeping a wary eye out for battling stray dogs and monkeys lurking in the trees. The track's distance markers are all in place: the fascist uncle laughing club shouting religious slogans while leering at her, the neighbourhood wives ambling along in large groups shouting to be heard over the blaring music on their phones, workers attempting their weekly repair of the park's mysteriously smashed surveillance cams.

She sees the kolam on her third lap, when she slows down for a second to catch her breath. It's a simple one, a basic floral pattern with embedded hashtags drawn on a cement patch next to a manhole cover in blue chalk. Joey quickly checks to see the nearest park cam is disabled, takes a picture of the kolam, and uploads it to a decoder app which tells her in a second about the protest it's an invite for: another slum is being evacuated by the police and builder militia. It's not far, it's the neighbourhood where Laxmi, her parents' domestic helper, used to live before she moved to Kalkaji with her boyfriend, a Cyber-bazaar shop-owner. The app tells her this protest's potential bloodshed rating is 'Extremely High'. There's a cheerful wiggly blood-drop icon.

On her wrist, her smartatt pulses: a stress alert. The smart tattoo's a new design, her skin's still red around it. A cute elephant-butt pattern that amuses Flowstars and makes funders think it's a Ganesh tribute—Joey has always known how to bridge worlds. She rubs her wrist to stop the alert, but her Narad has woken up on her phone.

—Joey, good morning, are you all right? she messages.

Joey gestures at the phone, I'm fine, go to sleep, but Narad sends her a stream of loving emojis and virtual hugs.

—Should we go through some basic stress-relief exercises and techniques?

—No.

—I see you are at the park. Great work on your daily step-count! Should we do some fun yoga?

—No.

—I have set up a loveable dog GIF blast every half hour. You are loved.

Joey pockets her phone and takes a few deep breaths. But it's too late: as her playlist starts up again, the beat is exactly the same as the drums that were playing at the protest she'd been to, and she's right back there, hearing the students chant, wishing she knew all the words, staring in growing fear at the riot police amassing behind the barricades, at the water cannon behind them.

She'd been fifteen, and her first board exams had been around the corner, so her mother hadn't wanted to take her along. But her father had insisted: 'This is a historic moment, and she needs to be out on the street, she needs to see there are people like us there,' Avik had said. The protest was at Jantar Mantar, against the first wave of discriminatory citizenship laws, and their privilege had kept them perfectly safe. She'd made a poster, something meme-friendly, she can't even recall what it was. What she remembers most was the energy: young men and women, not much older than her, rising up with the tricolour to try and save the country, the Constitution, the unity that India was founded with... that the regime was trying so hard to destroy. Her parents had seemed

strangely thrilled—that evening, after an epic journey home in the cold, they’d explained they’d thought they were alone, that most people in the country had been swallowed up by a tide of bigotry and hate. They’d never been happier being proved wrong.

She’d gone to a few more protests with her parents, before they’d insisted she stop coming along and focus on her studies, and they’d all pretended this had nothing to do with large-scale attacks on students around the country, that Avik and Romola hadn’t held each other and cried when they watched news of police storming hospitals and libraries, that images of battered and blood-drenched students hadn’t flooded Joey’s private messengers. That things weren’t about to get a lot worse. That a day wouldn’t come, soon after, when Joey wasn’t allowed to leave her house and her parents didn’t know whether to blame the pogrom or the pandemic, because they’d known the end times were coming but hadn’t known they’d be multiple choice.

But a decade later, Joey’s memories of those days are happy and hopeful, full of an energy and a sense of belonging she hasn’t felt in years. It had taken a day for her to become an expert on identifying propaganda and its unlikeliest distributors. She’d quickly learned the words to ‘Hum Dekhenge’ and all the trickiest protest chants—she still remembers them, though she’s smart enough not to say them out loud. She’d held her mother’s hand at a reading of the Preamble to the Constitution at India Gate, while news filtered in of police brutalities and illegal detentions at a less privileged march. They’d brought in that new year at Shaheen Bagh, with a crowd of people, all ages, all religions, all classes, standing together, singing the national anthem, reclaiming

the flag—Joey had wanted to go and sit with the women at the heart of it all, the now-legendary women of Shaheen Bagh, wanted to go sit with her mother and be offered biryani and companionship by strangers, and huddle under a blanket and sing songs of hope and revolution. But there had just been too many people between them and her. They'd stood at a bonfire, watching their breath steam, wrapping their gloved hands around warming cups of tea. There were doctors and volunteers and biscuits and packets of medicine and students with candles, and signs in many languages, and more strength and solidarity and heartbreak in the air than Joey could breathe in.

She'd decided, that night, that she wouldn't leave. That she would stay in India, in Delhi, and belong as hard as she could. Many years, many goodbyes and many regrets later, she still cannot accept that she made a huge mistake. But sometimes it feels like everyone she thought she'd grow up around has left—so many of her peers, the generation her parents learned to admire as the children of blood and fire who were paradropped straight out of their adolescence into a citizen's uprising against totalitarianism, simply got tired and faded away, or changed into something unrecognisable. Like Shaheen Bagh, which now exists only in memory—she knew nothing of it before the protests, and refuses to learn its new name. Was it even real?

She's tried, over the years, to find out what happened to the student leaders she grew up admiring, those clear-eyed, calm, incredibly brave women and men who stared down thugs with batons and marched in straight lines chanting in perfect unison towards armed police, but there aren't any clear patterns. Some disappeared into detention centres,

or off the map, to other countries or the hinterlands. Some disappeared altogether, and it was dangerous to even look them up online. Many were still around, struggling through the feudal systems of one political party or another and slowly transforming into the politicians they'd loathed in college, or working regular-person jobs like Joey's, trying to pretend the light in their eyes hadn't dimmed, that they hadn't given up. She'd helped a couple find jobs last year. She hadn't asked them the one question she'd wanted to, the one everyone in the country had asked at some point: Did we win? I thought we'd won. Didn't we win?

'Don't make the same mistakes we did,' her father says to her, even now, years too late. 'This country lied to us, told us we'd be a part of the world, told us things were changing. They're not. We'll miss you terribly. Get out.' He'd been saying this ever since she told them, after college, that she didn't really want to escape abroad. Her mother had just held her close, and had said she was delighted not to lose her, and things would turn out well in the end. But each weekend, when Romola asks Joey about work, Joey can see her mother feeling guilty, for absolutely no reason.

It's mid-morning when Joey finally decides to go indoors and get some fresh air. She enters her parents' flat and tiptoes past their bedroom towards hers. They're unnaturally quiet—by this time, they're normally sitting at breakfast ready to complain about how late she is.

'They're not home,' Laxmi calls from the kitchen. 'They went for a job interview.' Her brother's home, though, she can hear snores emanating from his room. Laxmi emerges with breakfast on a tray: she insists on cooking everything by hand, ignoring the plaintive beeps of both the food processor



and the smart-fridge. She looks at Joey enquiringly and holds out an arm, but Joey hasn't brought her laundry with her this week.

Joey shows Laxmi the photo of the protest kolam from the park, and raises an eyebrow. Laxmi shakes her head.

'I'm thinking of going,' Joey says.

'Not for you, didi,' Laxmi says. 'There will be blood, and no cameras.'

'Are you going?'

'Yes.'

'Then I want to come too.'

But Laxmi shakes her head firmly. 'Raja and his boys will look after me. Didi, when it is time for you to come to one of these, I will tell you. Not safe for you now.'

They've had this conversation before, and Joey wonders, as she digs into her breakfast, if Laxmi can tell how relieved she is each time, and whether she'll actually make it out of the door the day Laxmi tells her she's needed, if any of the courage she'd thought she'd had in her mid-teens still lingered inside her.

By the time her parents return, Joey's already finished lunch and is fast asleep on the living room sofa, while the TV plays her long-abandoned must-see streaming list. It's not her parents who wake her up though: it's her smartatt, which sends a tingle up her wrist, overriding her sleep settings, to warn her that a Favourite Contact is calling for the third time. Her parents wave encouragingly at her as she stomps by them, glaring at her buzzing phone, wiping drool off her chin. Of course it's bloody Indi, avatar swaying cockily as he smiles, hey girl. Her Narad pops up on the screen, raises an inquisitive eyebrow at her: Indi loves surprise video calls, but

she shakes her head, gesturing towards the audio-only option. Narad shrugs, and disappears to argue with Indi's AI.

'We had a lovely lunch at the mall,' her mother says to her back. 'Lebanese.'

'That's nice,' Joey says. 'Did you get the job?'

'Actually I was the one who applied,' Avik says. 'But they—'

Narad appears to let Joey know Indi insists on video, but she's not having it. It takes three rounds, but Indi finally agrees to voice.

'I had an amazing idea,' he says. 'So, when we meet the SachVoice guys, we—'

'It's Sunday, Indi,' Joey says. 'Do you have a medical emergency?'

'Listen. This is how we're going to play it—'

She disconnects, wondering as she does every week why he feels compelled to do this, she's told him so many times it isn't cute. Indi doesn't call back. He has plenty of other people to bother, and the idea he's about to suggest is one she sent him weeks ago.

She clears her throat, and turns to her parents again, noting with some relief that they've occupied the sofa and turned on TV news. Relief not because of the news, which is never good, but because she hates hearing about how difficult it is for her parents to find good jobs.

Today's news crisis is the discovery of an automated ship in the Indian Ocean swarming with East African climate change refugees, clinging on to the deckless craft like ants in the rain, preferring to risk incredible dangers crossing to unknown lands instead of being slaughtered by European vigilante pirate crews. Her brother's clearly messed up the

family TV content filters, it's pretty obvious why he would want content filters off on the biggest screen in the house, but her parents shouldn't be seeing this much death. Fortunately there are no dead babies today, but before Joey manages to turn the screen off the damage is done: already images from a concentration camp in Assam and a lynching near Kolkata have burned themselves into their brains. She's grown up with pictures like this, sometimes the faces in the news have been people she's met, but her parents have to be sheltered with filters: she and Rono must protect them from the psy-op epidemic of confusion and rage that still threatens to engulf the whole country, hoping all the while that the Residents' Association's guards keep the street outside their balcony free of blood.

Her parents hadn't had steady work in years: they'd lost their high-paying jobs over the span of a single week while Joey was in college, when the economy had gone over a cliff: her father over a Facebook rant and her mother because she hadn't understood that it was a loyalty-based economy now, and hadn't been able to adjust when an oligarch bought her ad agency. She suspects neither Avik nor Romola feel particularly good that their daughter works for some mid-level oligarchs, but it keeps her safe and pays the bills, and all the non-oligarchs are broke.

Joey switches her parents over to her streaming account, sets them up on a nostalgic sitcom binge, and slides on the sofa next to them, hoping to slip into her standard Sunday rhythm of sleeping through the day, there's nothing like the background buzz of her family's voices to help her catch up on her weekly sleep quota. The TV's on a bit too loud, but her high-decibel tolerance has always been impressive, there's not

been any choice on that front really. The problem is that she's been having too many Real Thoughts since morning, thanks to that bloody kolam, and real sleep hovers frustratingly out of reach. Instead, she can feel a massive headache building, heralding the arrival of her nemesis, the brain-fade that envelops her most days, every time she manages to take her mind off work for five minutes.

She doesn't even notice when she breaks her weekend phone-avoidance rule, or how much time she spends wandering the corners of the web: she gets lost, as usual, and has no idea why she's reading an article about 20s AI music, when her smartatt pulses: screen haze alert. The new smartatt itches less than the last one, but she still has to physically stop herself from scratching convulsively at her left wrist every time it tingles. The first time she'd had a smartatt done, she used to wake up every morning with abrasions on her wrists, from clawing at the tattoo in her sleep.

Narad sends her support-signs again, but she finds herself yearning for non-Roy humans, for her college squad, her own women. Every weekend she promises herself she'll stay out of the Flowverse until work calls again, but she's never made it. The truth is, watching the perfectly curated lives of people she actually knows has never caused Joey the anxiety attacks and melancholy that affect everyone she knows: it's because Joey has always had a secret system, one that she believes led her to her often soul-destroying line of work, that allows her to succeed at it without becoming the kind of monster she's seen her peers transform into.

It's quite simple: Joey has mind-tricked herself into believing that all the people whose Flows she watches actually work for her, perform for her like her actual Flowstar

clients—she’s delegated the task of having life experiences to them. Every perfect yoga pose, every bright-eyed dog, every star-struck new lover, every impeccably plated meal exists at her command. She’s commissioned each live holiday, each luxury sunset, each lavish wedding, each impressive run-map, outsourced every new baby, every inspirational thought, every life hack, every make-up tip. Flow-makers owe her their abs, their afterglows, their banter, even their families.

There’s only one person this trick never works for, and that’s Toons, her oldest and closest friend, now wandering around the world with her diplomat family, being a poet-dancer-painter-3D-print-sculptor-fashionista-genius, setting performance goals she wishes her Flowstars could match. Toons isn’t on her phone at all times any more, eager to over-analyse the minutest details of her life: she said new government instructions to diplomat families are to minimise private conversations because they’re targets for world-class hackers, and that she’d gotten into enough trouble over the years for being more radical-leftist than a diplomat’s daughter was allowed to be, but Joey can’t help feeling her best friend’s left her. Toons was her life-management app, her aesthetics pop-up, her live-location watcher, her inactivity warning notification, and all she has left is Narad, a very poor substitute. Narad couldn’t absent-mindedly fix her hair.

Most people find gossip groups comforting after subjecting themselves to Flows, but for Joey it’s the opposite. The industry Fetch-boards where people post anonymous insider accounts are difficult because you have to filter for lies, sales, ongoing vendettas and cliques, and hidden political connections. Worse, you have to spend a lot of time reading wild industry conspiracy theories: going by the stories posted

about her on the Flowverse Fetch-board, the truth/absurd lie ratio is about 1/7.

On her actual-friend-groups, she's intimidated, as always, watching the people she's grown up with trade stories not about their lives or the news, but about a host of people they all seem to have in common: Delhi's most influential personal stylists, most politically connected yoga teachers, most distress-sale-aware real estate agents, flash-gathering photographers, insider-trading accountants and inner-circle caterers. She wants to apply her delegation brain-trick here but can't: they're not finding these people at her command; they're clearly all part of a vast conspiracy to exclude her.

It's taken her a few years to understand why she's so bothered by this set: in a world where most public news is a lie and everyone's Flows curate only their successes, humans who move around the city sharing stories from the houses of the powerful are valuable in their own right, power accessories her circles are eager to collect. Smaller groups circle the larger friend-groups like seagulls, filling in anecdotes about common friends who recently had a bitter fallout over a handsome dog-walker. She'd heard the rich had always been like this, but to see her own friends do this is still surprising. It's some sort of Delhi thing, clearly, this low-level court intrigue: her Mumbai friends are the opposite. They keep recommending and trying to share their amazing acupuncturists, past life therapists and crystal healers, and complaining that no one wants them.

She doesn't remember when she last logged in to her own Flow, so she does, just staring into the cam, smiling a little, then adding a few pictures of herself in a sari that she'd worn to a wedding and saved for a time like this. It's Sunday afternoon, so she doesn't expect anyone to actually see it, but

she reminds herself to switch her stats-optimising brain off, it's not about her, it's never been about her, and a few people send love, enough love to curl up, turn off her phone and fall asleep.

She awakens to the sound of strangers shouting, and for a second she thinks she's dozed off in the middle of a shoot, and leaps up in blind panic, but it's just her brother, arguing on his headset as he emerges into the living room with an open tablet, a cabal of other teenagers on speaker yelling at him to get back in their game, speaking in tongues absolutely no adult can comprehend. She waits for him to go away, but he stands in front of her. It is possible he's trying to communicate.

'What time is it?' Joey asks, blinking furiously.

'We have to talk,' Rono says. 'Actually, you have to talk to the parents.'

'Why? What did you do? I don't have any money.'

'I don't need your money. You have to tell them I'm dropping out of school.'

She starts to tell him she's doing nothing of the sort, but Rono has things to say, and proceeds with the grim determination of a mainstreamer newshost. Broken exams, corrupt admissions, no jobs, the future is Blockhead mixed-reality self-teaching. It's a monologue he's been working on for a while, but Joey's had years of experience avoiding professional speech-makers, and a lifetime of ignoring Rono.

'No,' she says finally. 'Tell them yourself.'

'They don't understand me.'

'No one understands you, Rono.' He treats their parents like infants: mumbles at them in teenspeak, then repeats himself, louder and slower, when they ask him what he meant. She's not surprised they lose their minds.

‘Shit, they’re doing it again. Go stop them,’ Rono says, looking at their parents’ bedroom.

‘Rono, you are not dropping out of school and I’m not—’  
‘Forget that. Just listen.’

She can hear raised voices, and they’re talking about... Kashmir? Joey races towards their room. Left together unsupervised, they’ve started again: escalated some possibly unemployment-related argument into a full-scale fight about the State of the Nation. And in the heat of the moment, they’re likely to say things they’ll both regret. She barges in and makes the standard gestures—they stop immediately, and stare back at her with their usual mix of rage and shame.

It’s not really their fault, it’s hard for the middle-aged to change. She’s seen the way they used to live. Before the Years Not To Be Discussed, before every smart person in the country had removed their opinion archives from their first-gen social media accounts, her mother had saved screenshots of her favourite posts—not just hers and Avik’s, but the unwise outpourings of their whole generation, the collected unfiltered rants of a large cross-section of analog dinosaur kids, people who had actually used landline telephones, cassettes, and other relics now immortalised in nostalgic T-shirts. Joey still goes through Romola’s screenshot archive sometimes and shakes her head at their foolishness every time: they gave away so much about themselves, all for free, just shovelled all their personal data into the maws of the open internet.

Joey can’t imagine what that must have been like, the freedom to criticise the powerful and corrupt in your own homes. Nothing that had happened since—not the blasphemy laws in several states, not the mass de-citizenings, the voter-list erasures, the reeducation camps, the internet shutdowns, the



news censors, the curfews, not even the scary stories of data-driven home invasions, not the missing person smart-scrolls on every lamp-post—had succeeded in convincing Romola or Avik that the world had really changed, that the present was not merely a passing aberration. She knows they try their best to learn the new world and each week's new set of New India rules, but then they forget. They still think their privilege keeps them safe.

The last decade has been more or less a lab-rat experience for her parents: the Years Not To Be Discussed have spun Avik and Romola around and presented them hoop after hoop to jump through, treadmill after treadmill to run on, so even in these shiny New Hope years they seem hesitant, afraid. On her fiftieth birthday Romola had told Joey that while the party was great, the cake was unnecessarily passive-aggressive. She simply couldn't understand how fifty could be the new thirty-five and the new seventy at the same time. Her children, fortunately, have never grown up with this primitive faith in single realities.

Joey diverts her parents down with the easiest available distraction—guys, you have to see this puppy adoption show—and leads them back to the TV, wondering all the while whether there's an invisible sign on her forehead saying 'Will Solve Your Crisis For Free'. But it works: soon her parents giggle on the sofa, accidentally mirroring each other as they lose themselves in their smart pacifiers. This counts as a win. They've been prevented from ranting about this government, or any of the last few. There will be no van full of murderers pulling up outside their house today.

She's explained to them a hundred times that she isn't paranoid, and that there are examples of people disappearing

every day for saying the wrong things, if only they'd learn to see. That earlier, before the 20s, they could do the whole 'free speech' thing because they weren't important enough to bother the powerful, or insignificant enough to erase without anyone noticing, and also, most importantly, because surveillance used to be run by humans in the good old days.

It's your own house spying on you now. The walls really have ears. You could avoid nosy neighbours, or be wary around potential access-caste climbers. She'd tried and failed to make Avik understand that his new toothbrush heard every word he said and had been listening very carefully since he was tricked into buying it, trying to see if what came out of his mouth was as filthy as his teeth: his chief interest seemed to be learning whether his farts were being recorded and sent to data tracker centres via space. Romola's fascinated by the idea that anything she says or types is travelling around the world, going to places she'll never manage to physically visit, but can't process the idea that it isn't just the government snooping any more, but a peak-traffic cluster of corporations, other governments, religious bodies, cults, gangs, terrorists, hackers, sometimes other algorithms, watching you, measuring you, learning you, marking you down for spam or death. They'd explained to Joey years ago, when successfully persuading her not to go to farmhouse parties with her wilder classmates, that in New New Delhi, the only crime was nonconformity, and conformity was a fast-shifting, ever-angry chimera that must be constantly fed. Joey had learnt that lesson well—too well, she often worries—but her parents hadn't listened to themselves.

She wonders when their roles reversed, whether her parents were hustling her into running things at least two decades too early, each time she delivers her weekly safety

lecture—every stranger who comes to the house might be a secret agent of a data mining company, planting tiny cams and mikes for their employers. They always hear her out patiently, but when the attack happened just last month, it was Laxmi who found the tiny molka cams under the kitchen sink, not her parents. It was Laxmi who'd pushed them into searching the whole house for cams and mikes, Laxmi who'd found them all, except one, because her father had taken charge of inspecting his own bathroom and had continued to send unknown eyes images of his ass descending like a magnificent eclipse on the commode for two whole weeks. They knew who'd planted the molka cams too, a house-cleaning crew they'd hired off an app. But every complaint they'd made had disappeared into the void. Laxmi had muttered a lot about punishment, if any, going only to the cleaners, who weren't the ones perving on their victims, and that no one knew what young girls in the slums went through with these cams.

They say they've seen all this before—the fear of speaking out, the fear of people around you, the fear that you'd wake up one morning to find you'd lost everything—no bank account, no citizenship, no job, no rights. It's fear they live with, just like the fear, in their twenties, of a terrorist bomb in every market, every empty car, back when terrorists and the government were on different sides. Letting this fear get to you, letting it dictate your actions, isolate you, leech away your life... those were the things they have learnt to overcome.

'At some point of time there's so much fear that all of it just disappears. Then you just let go of all fear and do whatever needs doing. Your generation taught us that, Joey,' her mother had said with extreme firmness once. 'That's how the generation that freed India lived their lives. I'm sorry, but that's how your generation must live yours.'

‘I’m not talking about saving the country, Ma,’ she’d said. ‘I’m talking about not having 1234 as your password. About not saying anything that means any of your IDs gets cancelled and we have to spend years getting it back.’

‘I’m not going to just sit and watch other people because I’m too scared to do anything,’ Romola had said. ‘You shouldn’t either.’

But there was nothing that Romola could actually do. And after a friend’s daughter had disappeared, a few days after attending a protest against the demolition of her school, Romola had given up the idea of taking to the streets.

What frustrates Joey now is that Avik and Romola refuse to follow even the most simple safety protocols—treating every text exchange like a public performance, speaking in metaphors, changing speech patterns, even basic deliberate mispronunciations and typos—it’s all too much work. ‘My language learning ended with emojis when you were still in school,’ her father had said. ‘It’s too late now to learn all these new dances. And you keep forgetting that those bastards in the... fine. Tweedledum and Tweedledee have been defeated. Mogambo is dead. The Nat, no, the Talib, no, the... damn it, the Death Eaters have gone away.’ Though the Death Eaters, they all know, haven’t gone anywhere. Their masters no longer need them for distraction or land grabs, so they’ve just grown smarter, and stopped hogging all cameras, and sent their killer hordes into the shadows, a receding tide of hate and violence leaving broken cultures and blood-feuds in their wake that will haunt every neighbourhood in the country for generations. Now they conduct their savagest acts in parts of the country where no one dares to record them—or even whisper about them.

‘In the towns of Uttar Pradesh’—Romola’s stand-in post-apocalyptic wilderness of choice—‘they never knew privacy or freedom, so they never mourned their loss. We thought we had them, so it’s a little difficult for us, no?’

‘As it is I have had to stop going out because smog reduces brain activity,’ her father says. ‘I have to air-seal the whole house.’ He often complains that his life has turned into some kind of totalitarian reality show: she’s fairly sure he still doesn’t understand that managing one is his daughter’s job.

Her father’s running joke is that she is living proof of the theory of evolution—he spent his life never knowing how to work his contacts in a bubble of endless possibility, but she was pragmatic enough to recognise the worst job market in history and pick a smart job, even if it meant working with her college ex.

‘My daughter is a Reality Controller,’ he always says. ‘Her parents are reality deniers.’

Her actual designation is Associate Reality Controller now: it was Senior Reality Manager a month ago. She still can’t say either without cringing.

She wakes up again in her bedroom, with no memory of when and how she got there. At times like this, she looks forward to getting back to work: the constant adrenaline rush of Flow-running clearly keeps her at least vaguely conscious of where she is and why. One of her pet nightmares is waking up in a lab to find someone had hacked her brain, that the gaps in her memory were because someone was literally stealing her time. Sometimes she wants to play back her fantasy montage of her life, just to see what it was she actually did on Sundays, to make sure she wasn’t possessed by some malignant spirit. She catches herself wondering whether it would be possible

to actually produce, procure and view 24/7 surveillance of herself, the ultimate real-time selfie, and realises this is how she actually spends her time: she just wastes it.

When she shuffles out to the living room again, she finds her parents still on the sofa, arguing amicably with Rono about the various negatives of his dropping out of school and embracing a freelance hacker-for-hire life. Even though he doesn't turn towards her as she draws closer, she can sense him getting a little more dramatic, a little more articulated: these performances are always aimed at Joey. She hates it when Rono does this, though it's nice to see her parents sit next to each other for once, united by their desire to encourage their eccentric-potential-genius son. Her mother, despite of her lifelong expertise in praising Joey only when absolutely forced to, often shows a suspiciously voluble appreciation for Rono's ingenuity and cunning, and Joey is convinced it's all orchestrated: she can feel her parents glancing towards her too, star-parents in waiting at their baby's audition. She's seen so many friend-groups try this down the years.

Rono thinks the only thing keeping him from being a top Flowstar is his sister's stubborn refusal, despite years of evidence, to accept his brilliance and sign him up as a client. He thinks she's jealous.

He's been performing for her—subtly, he thinks—every Sunday for months. His thoughts, his gamefeeds, his teen life and feelings. His friends, their on-point banter on topics both incredibly intimate and strikingly global-trending. Their various short-form-video friendly shenanigans, pranks, fails, vox pops with unfriendly passers-by, SoDel metro-rap, a spectacularly botched attempt at neighbourhood parkour.

Under Joey's horrified eye, he's started to wear his best clothes at home, clean himself up, figure out his best lighting,

customise his dialogue patterns to multiformat-friendly soundbytes. Last weekend, he'd even worn his precious screenshirt, running a slideshow on his chest that ran low-reses of his artiest photography projects, QRs embedded, while he played his guitar in the living room. And Rono handles it better than his friends, who often drop in casually to just hang out and deliver scripted Flow-coms. If only it were just the teenagers. She's seen it happen to everyone she meets: the switch from general performance-under-possible-surveillance to performance-for-talent-audition.

Even Laxmi provides her City Life Insights from time to time, didi, you know how it is for street people like us in the big city. But Laxmi's fortunately not interested in a Flow career of her own: if life had dealt them different cards, Joey could actually see her as a fellow reality controller. She often shows Joey indie Flows from the slums, or low-income immigrant neighbourhoods like nearby Kalkaji: a lot of protest rap, graffiti, tech-education videos, some street sports. Joey's spent many fascinating weekend hours watching Laxmi's curations: she never asks Joey to sign up any of her friends, and is always eager to learn what she'd have done if she were in charge.

She'd tried to hire Laxmi once, to set up a whole new category of Flows for her, but Laxmi had refused, and she hadn't pushed it. Again, as always with Laxmi, there was always secret relief: Joey couldn't imagine how her family would get along without her.

She can hear her mother calling her name, drawing her attention to something smart Rono just said, but she feels the fade rising up inside her again, watches the dull filter descending between her and the room. She's overcome by

the urge to go outside, and half-runs towards the balcony, but when she pulls at the balcony door Narad pops up, and tells her the air quality outside is hazardous. She'll have to put on a mask. She doesn't want to put on a mask. Not to go to the bloody balcony. She leans on the door, the glass is smudgy. Outside, an ad-drone floats by, announcing discounts on massages by trained young girls. Sparks fly as it flies past a dangling, disconnected electric supply wire. Their block has private power backup now, board-supply electricity is increasingly unreliable, and then, of course, there are special occasions, like the time six months ago when a local industrialist's son decided to test-ride his new Swiss jetpack and got stuck in the wires that criss-crossed the road just two streets down, killing himself and shutting down half of Little Bengal for days.

A defiant pigeon stares back at Joey from the ancient bel tree that stands opposite their house, a miraculous survivor of years of street reconstruction, a far too frequently used symbol of hope and resilience for her whole family. She'd recently heard a take on how women should sleep with men who knew the names of trees, which indicated a deep connection to nature. But Joey doesn't know the names of trees herself, so how would she know if these men were telling the truth? As a child, she used to be terrified of the bel tree every time it bore fruit, always picturing those rock-hard green spheres smashing her skull as she crossed underneath. Romola would make her a summer drink from those fruits, a sticky, pale yellow sludge with lots of ice, and she'd never told her all through school that she absolutely hated the taste, that she always imagined her own pulped brain in the glass.

In the distance, a patriotic song announces the arrival of the local Residents' Welfare Association's guard troop: already,



one neighbourhood uncle after another is emerging from a nearby balcony, smog-mask in place, to salute the troops as they pass by. Only the very top-most uncles in the RWA pyramid get to write inspirational messages on the whiteboard at the block's gates: the rest must content themselves with feeling the fire rise once in their loins once a day as the guards march past, before they return to their houses to bully their families, emerging only when the night water-supply siren goes off, to stand in gargoyle-like vigil near their water tanks, waiting in lonely gauntness for the sequence of groans and gurgles that announce the arrival of the day's quota of rust-coloured sludge.

Their block's guard army has covered itself in glory recently, winning a pitched battle with hired water-mercenaries from a raiding Kalkaji block who were trying to divert a water-truck shipment. They're all dressed as Independence-era Netaji troops, their shout-out to Bengali pride slightly diminished by the printed posters on their backs advertising discounts on paneer specials at a nearby Pure Veg restaurant. Most of the guards are very young, boys displaced from some burned-out village, or tossed out of some horrific brain-wipe camp, and pressed into service. Better in uniform than not: this same cluster of boys would have made Joey very nervous on the street if they weren't saluting her as she passed. They're armed with batons and riot shields, not the 3D-printed handguns that the more up-market guards in Joey's own neighbourhood carry, but their weapons are enough to cause serious damage. Laxmi's told Joey that private RWA armies have their own version of football leagues going on: there are star guards transferred from neighbourhood to neighbourhood at exorbitant prices, even coaches and military strategists who

run a guard league from the Culture Colonies. Her parents are glad Little Bengal's guards are relatively cheap: guard-army upgrades and water-protection bribe surcharges have been the key reason for South Delhi's ever-increasing rents since the mid-20s. Joey doesn't know how long she's been standing by the balcony door now. Being home is not unlike being at work, it's relentless, it's exhausting, except people listen to her at work, they're paid to, and she has a little more control over the programming.

—You seem stressed, texts Narad. Would you like to go to the kitchen? I've made you some iced tea.

Joey stumbles towards the kitchen. Her family is at it still, it's like they're on loop. Laxmi looks at her with concern as the processor pings to announce completion, and offers to pour her tea out, but Joey waves her and her concerns aside. The tea is good. Staring at the cubes floating in it is even better. Narad blows her kisses from her screen, and the processor's humming again, and she doesn't know what Narad's making now and a little worried because she knows she's going to like it.

'Am I depressed?' She whispers to Narad.

—No. Would you like to-

She taps Narad silent.

Her parents are very pleased when Joey interrupts them with a tray full of smoothies, and want to talk her into hosting an intra-family debate about Rono's future, but Joey's done. She tells them she'll see them soon, and trudges off towards her bedroom. She wishes, later, that she hadn't, because if she had just pretended to care about whatever it was, if she'd just crashed on the sofa and snored until dawn, she wouldn't have been nearest to her father's phone when the message came. She wouldn't have been the one who saw it. She wouldn't have had to tell her father that his oldest friend was dead.

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