



Milk Teeth

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THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2019 —

Longlist

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by Amrita Mahale



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An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

PROLOGUE

SOMETIME LATE IN THE AFTERNOON, a man rang the bell at the Desais' ground-floor flat in Asha Nivas and asked if Mr Desai was at home. Any Mr Desai, father or son. When Mrs Desai said no, her husband was out, and both their sons lived abroad, the man handed her an envelope. A message for her husband. She asked him who he was and he repeated, Aunty, just give the envelope to Uncle. Somewhat alarmed, she reached for the door, but he stretched out an arm to keep it open. No strain or effort, just a hand on the door.

Don't worry, he will know who it's from. A smile spread slowly across his face like a spill. Okay, Aunty, see you. As he spoke, the man balled his right hand into a fist, then straightened two fingers before her frozen face. He tapped this fin-ger-gun on his temple, twice, and grinned, feasting on her terror before he dashed out of the building.

The envelope, which she didn't dare open till her husband was back from the market, contained a folded sheet of checked paper; it appeared to have been torn hurriedly from a child's maths notebook. Scrawled in an unintelligent hand were two words: GET OUT.

Part One

IRA & KARTIK

MATUNGA, THE YEAR IS 1997, a muggy evening in late April.

The milky clouds of the past weeks had curdled into thick cheese, blotting out the evening sun, raising hopes for a spell of unseasonal rain. The air felt slightly stale. Being outside was like taking an evening local train cramped up against a mouth breather. Yet, on the terrace of Asha Nivas, thirteen residents had congregated—ten men, two women and a child—representatives from the ten flats in the building. Among them, Ira Kamat and Kartik Kini. Each resident had brought along a chair to sit in; you couldn't simply plonk yourself down, the terrace was not what it used to be. The floor was missing several dozen tiles, and the ones that remained were cracked or chipped. The whole building had an air of disrepair, but it was the terrace that bore the brunt of the landlord's neglect. Many of the men had come to the meeting wearing lungis, some also donned undershirts with sweat towels on the shoulder—the neighbours had known each other for twenty, thirty, forty years, there was no need for niceties—and they all wore grave expressions. They had been “summoned by Mr Desai to discuss and dissect that event, the ultimatum. Bipin Desai, a retired electrical engineer, had been leading the residents' efforts to negotiate a redevelopment deal with their landlord. That it was his flat that was targeted made sense; that it had happened at all did not.

‘This goondagardi is unacceptable,’ said Mr Desai. ‘We are all decent family people. How dare he send a goon to the building?’

‘Absolutely ridiculous,’ Mr Naik barked. The Naik family of seven (father, mother, son, daughter-in-law, grandchild, grandchild, daughter) lived in the flat across the terrace. It was a one-bedroom flat, and how the

family had grown to seven with such a shortage of privacy was unclear. ‘If he wants to scare us into taking his rubbish deal, does he think a man miming a gun with his hand is all it will take!’

‘I hope he thinks it’s enough,’ Kusum Kini pointed out. ‘Who knows what he will send next time—I certainly don’t want to find out.’

Mrs Kini was the only woman at the council, apart from Ira. She was a couple of years shy of sixty—older than the afternoon’s victim, who was too shaken to attend—but it was hard to guess her age. Her hair was impeccably dyed. She did not have those tell-tale burnt orange roots, nor was her crown the too-dark coal that bled into the forehead like a child’s colouring. She was said to use only a natural black shade of dye from an expensive French brand. In some ways, age had improved her appearance. Her long face had finally started to look regal, its expanse cut by fine lines that announced a life of more laughter than worry. Kusum Kini had once been notorious in the building. She was called pickle-tongued and too proud, was envied for her wardrobe full of chiffon sarees with matching bindis and purses. The peerless chiffons had given way to cottons, but her pride was intact, for she was also the mother of the building’s most successful export, Kartik Kini. But that her neighbours were comfortable with.

‘Now the question is,’ Kartik’s mother continued, ‘how do we make sure this does not happen again? Should we go to the police?’

‘The police is always mixed up in this, Kaki,’ said her neighbour Ajit Shanbhag. ‘Why don’t we approach the Shiv Sena office? Last year, my wife’s mangalsutra was snatched by two men on a motorcycle and they got it back in two days—with no leads. Just two days.’ He held up two fingers. Of all its current inhabitants, the Shanbhags had lived in Asha Nivas the longest. Ajit was the first resident to be born in the building, and now he had two teenagers of his own.

‘Why fight violence with violence—what does that achieve? You know, a dharna outside his house might shame the landlord into apologising.’ This was Professor Rajwade, the Desais’ ground-floor neighbour. A principled, ponderous man, he was the building’s newest tenant, and had lived in Asha Nivas for nine years.

Kusum Kini cut him off with a snort. ‘Really, Professor, you and your non-violence!’

‘Me and my non-violence? We and *our* non-violence.’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ she said impatiently. ‘Ira, don’t you work closely with the municipal corporation? Surely you know the right people who can bring this landlord to his senses.’

That was the reason Ira was attending the meeting—she was a reporter on the municipal beat for a city newspaper—but she had not spoken at all so far. She had tried to keep up with the drama unfolding before her, but her attention was tied up with one man among those present, the friend who had returned after years. Each time she looked at him, her mind leaped across memories: a gun pointed at her own face a long time ago, the weapon and its wielder stripped of power only moments later, a power they had swapped back and forth for years.

It was not clear to Ira how Kartik, gang-leader, first friend, fabulist, had become this shy, self-conscious man of thirty. She would have asked him herself but in the week since he had returned to Mumbai, they had spoken only once. Not spoken really, just exchanged flat pleasantries. She had run into him on the stairs a couple of times after that but he had rushed ahead each time, making a great show of appearing absorbed in his thoughts. Only once did she know that he was not pretending: when she saw him walk up slowly, dragging his fingers along the banisters, even drumming them absently every three or four steps, just like he used to as a

child.

Knowing this would discomfit him, Ira looked in his direction every now and then and threw him wide, impish smiles, while his gaze remained tentative, hovering a few inches beyond her even when he smiled back from four chairs away.

I do, Kusum maushi, my BMC contacts can certainly help,' Ira said. 'But I should first talk to the landlord, no? See what he has to say?'

'I already said I called him. He denied he had anything to do with it,' said Mr Desai. 'I suspect this was a builder's doing.' Builder? What builder? This new angle provoked a round of murmurs. 'He has been trying to get us out for five years. Do you think he has not had talks with any builders? We all know how these builders are. I think we should take another look at his proposal.'

'Builder or landlord, nobody can threaten us like this. We have rights as tenants. Not to mention that this kind of intimidation is completely illegal. If he doesn't back down, I promise I will make it a page one article.'

Her bluster amused her. It had been two months since she'd had a story on the first page. Still, she wanted to make a good impression on Kartik, show him that she had made something of herself in the years he had been away.

Kusum Kini smiled at Ira before turning to Mr Desai. 'There is no question of looking at his proposal. I don't think we should settle for anything less than a new flat. Right, Ira?'

Ira smiled but made it a point not to nod. Her father would throw a fit if he heard that she had publicly agreed with Kusum maushi on this matter. He wanted nothing to do with these negotiations, he wanted to ally with neither camp. Shankar Kamat claimed he only wanted to enjoy retirement in peace, at least for a few years.

‘A larger flat,’ added Mrs Kini.

Ajit Shanbhag and Mr Naik made noises of agreement while Mr Desai frowned. Professor Rajwade shook his head sadly. Alliances were already forming, dissolving.

Ira knew that in the weeks to follow, every conversation in Asha Nivas would course back to the gun incident. Occasionally directly, she imagined, like while talking about the monsoon and how much worse the building would get after another season of neglect by the landlord, that desperate and shameless man who had sent a gunman to scare families he had known for decades. More often that course would be winding: for instance, chitchat about tax returns would become a discussion on standard deductions and life insurance premiums, then someone might bring up a relative who had become an LIC agent, how the job entailed being pushy, showing up at people’s houses to sell insurance policies, sometimes uninvited. And at the mention of any uninvited visitor, the interloper who had visited Mrs Desai would come up again. This incident was going to become a fold in the dull pages of their days; no matter how one flipped through the volume, one would land on this dog-eared episode.

Monsoon would arrive in a little over a month. Patches of moss had already started to sprout on the low wall around Asha Nivas. Over three months of rains, the green-grey would spread, devouring all spaces in the ceramic lattice that covered this wall: tiles with bright images of gods, goddesses and gurus, even a mosque or two. The pantheon had been installed the year before to dissuade passers-by from urinating around the building. No one wondered what it meant for the residents of Asha Nivas to live their lives with the backs of two dozen gods turned on them.

The gods had smiled upon Sundar Sadan next door, the first building in the lane to be torn down and rebuilt. After its redevelopment, it had a new name too. Belle View. Every flat in the six-storey Belle View had window grills: metal bars flowing this way and that, no two windows identical. Each window wore its ornamentation as a badge of distinction, a mark of the riches it contained. The most visible riches were the shirts, nightgowns and brassieres hung to dry in the windows.

Unlike its neighbour, Asha Nivas was rent-controlled. Most tenants paid a few hundred rupees in rent, less than a hundredth of the going market rate for a flat in Matunga, or any other part of central Mumbai. The landlord had been negotiating with the tenants for years, tempting them with a lump sum settlement which swelled every year, but so had real estate prices and the expectations of the tenants. When his incentives failed, he slowed down the regular repair work and maintenance, eventually stopping altogether. He hoped that the crumbling shared areas would finally drive his sticky tenants out, so he could replace the portly three-storey with a modern mid-rise like Belle View next door. Now it appeared that he was willing to adopt more desperate measures.

Just before the meeting wrapped up, evening prayers started at one of the nearby temples, the sounds of cymbals and singing mingled with that of bells. Some of the meeting attendees folded their hands and bowed their heads. The less pious felt obliged to follow. Ira promised again to talk to her contacts at the municipal corporation who were well-versed in these matters. The neighbours got up and started to leave, dragging their chairs behind them.

Professor Rajwade had cornered Kartik and was holding forth to his class of one. 'We think our privilege shields us from the violence of the city, and it does, of course, but there are limits to it. Think about the horrors the poor have had to face for years. Not only real guns but worse—bulldozers, arson, riots. The claim for space in this city has always been in the realm of self-reliance, you know, and self-reliance means struggle, and the struggle has reached our doorstep. What do you think the '92 riots were—an armed struggle for space! How long could we middle-class people have shut the violence of the city out?'

Switching to Marathi, he added that the link between land and violence was the theme of a paper he had been working on for a few months, for a sociology conference at Kartik's alma mater in Powai. It was an international conference, he beamed.

Ira, who had been eavesdropping, was greatly amused. Shut the violence of the city out, what was the professor talking about! It was his teenage daughter who had invented mosquito cricket—where every mosquito swatted was a run, and three no-kill claps in a row got you out—and the bloody game had spread through the building faster than malaria. Next door to the professor, Mrs Desai, otherwise a paragon of wifely stoicism, was known to stamp on cockroaches repeatedly till they had disintegrated into atoms. Upstairs, the Shanbhag children fought among themselves to drop live crabs into boiling water each time their mother cooked kurlle ambat. Meanwhile, the Ganesans had a leather chaabuk hanging in their hall. Mr Ganesan liked to joke that the sight of this horse-whip alone had got his daughters through college, first-class with distinction, and then straight to their husbands' homes without detours, and he had never had to even take it off its hook. And what about the wife-beaters, the dog-kickers, the tyre-slashers and rabble-rousers, how common

those afflictions were. Rage and bloodlust thrived here, casually disguised as order, as eccentricity, as sport and hobby.

Kartik was listening to the professor and nodding earnestly. He held a chair in each arm. There was more muscle on his sloping shoulders than she remembered. Gone was the neat side parting of his childhood, his thick hair appeared uncombed but not untidy. She was going to wait for the professor to finish speaking, but when she caught Kartik's eye, she saw his face twitch and read in his expression a plea to be rescued. This was her chance. He lit up with relief when he saw her walk towards them.

'Hello, Uncle, what are you two talking about? Kartik, you picked an exciting week to come back, didn't you?'

'Good evening, Ira. I was telling Kartik about a paper I am presenting at his college next month. Such irony about this gun situation in the building, it's the very subject of my paper: space and violence.'

'Space and violence? It's about Star Wars?'

From the corner of her eye, she saw Kartik cringe.

'What? No—oh! Ira, you are too funny. I meant space in the city. Land, homes, plots.'

'In that case, we must have a longer discussion—you know about my reporting on slum demolitions, right? But let's not bore Kartik. How about I come over on Sunday? Tell Auntie to make sabudana vadas for me.'

Kartik saw an opening. 'Best of luck for the conference, Uncle. Ira, "do you need help carrying your chair? Here, let me help. I can stack these two, no problem.'

He grinned, suddenly friendly. Only because he saw her as the lesser of two evils, she thought, feeling a nip of irritation.

'You are welcome,' she said after the professor left.

‘It looks like you are going to save the building too—look at you, big-shot reporter and all.’

‘We know who the real big shot is, scholar.’

He winced, and shook his head lightly. Kartik had once topped every subject, every exam in school, scoring perfect marks in the most insuperable of classes. While parents chanted the word fawningly, scholar, scholar, making it a cudgel to hold over their children’s heads, the harangued kids had flipped it into a term of scorn with a little turn of tone. Such a scholar. Ira knew how much the word vexed him. He once told her it sounded like a disease. Cholera. Sclerosis. Scholar.

‘Finally,’ she said.

‘Finally what?’

‘I finally get to talk to you. Or do you have an errand that you forgot about?’

‘No, no such thing, of course not.’ But the way he said no-no-no made her think that that had indeed been his plan. ‘How have you been, Ira?’

Finally, but after so many years, where does one even begin?

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