



THE FAR FIELD



MADHURI VIJAY

'Ingeniously conceived
and elegantly written...a
first novel of startling
accomplishment.'

PANKAJ MISHRA

The Far Field

by Madhuri Vijay



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
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— 2019 —

An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

CHAPTER 1

I am thirty years old and that is nothing. I know what this sounds like, and I hesitate to begin with something so obvious, but let me say it anyway, at the risk of sounding naïve. And let it stand alongside this: six years ago, a man I knew vanished from his home in the mountains. He vanished in part because of me, because of certain things I said, but also things I did not have, until now, the courage to say. So, you see, there is nothing to be gained by pretending to a wisdom I do not possess. What I am, what I was, and what I have done—all of these will become clear soon enough. This country, already ancient when I was born in 1982, has changed every instant I've been alive. Titanic events have ripped it apart year after year, each time rearranging it along slightly different seams and I have been touched by none of it: prime ministers assassinated, peasant-guerrillas waging war in emerald jungles, fields cracking under the iron heel of a drought, nuclear bombs cratering the wide desert floor, lethal gases blasting from pipes and into ten thousand lungs, mobs crashing against mobs and always coming away bloody. Consider this: even now, at this very moment, there are people huddled in a room somewhere, waiting to die. This is what I have told myself for the last six years, each time I have had the urge to speak. It will make no difference in the end. But lately the urge has turned into something else, something with sharper edges, which sticks under the ribs and

makes it dangerous to breathe. So let me be clear, here at the start. If I do speak, if I do tell what happened six years ago in that village in the mountains, a village so small it appears only on military maps, it will not be for reasons of nobility. The chance for nobility is over. Even this, story or confession or whatever it turns out to be, is too late. My mother asleep. The summer afternoon, the sun an open wound, the air outside straining with heat and noise. But here, in our living room, the curtains are drawn; there is a dim and deadly silence. My mother lies on the sofa, cheek pressed to the armrest, asleep. The bell rings. She doesn't open her eyes right away, but there is movement behind her lids, the long return from wherever she has been. She stands, walks to the door. Hello, madam, hello, hello, I am selling some very nice pens— Good afternoon, madam, please listen to this offer, if you subscribe to one magazine, you get fifty percent— A long-lashed boy with a laminated sign: I am from Deaf and Dumb Society— “Oh, get lost,” my mother says. And shuts the door. Somebody once described my mother as “a strong woman.” From the speaker's tone, I knew it was not intended as a compliment. This was, after all, the woman who cut off all contact with her own father after he repeatedly ignored his wife's chronic lower back pain, which turned out to be the last stages of pancreatic cancer; the woman who once broke a flickering lightbulb by flinging a scalding hot vessel of rice at it; the woman whose mere approach made shopkeepers hurry into the back, praying for invisibility; the woman who sometimes didn't sleep for three nights in a row; the woman who nodded sympathetically through our neighbor's fond complaints about the naughtiness of her five-year-old son, then said, with every appear-

ance of sincerity, “He sounds awful. Shall I slit his throat for you and get it over with?” This was the woman whose daughter I am. Was. Am. All else flows from that. When she died, I was twenty-one, in my last year of college. When I got the call, I took an overnight bus back to Bangalore, carrying nothing but a fistful of change from the ticket. Eleven people came to her funeral, including my father, me, and Stella, our maid, who brought her youngest son. We stood near the doorway, wedged between the blazing mouth of the electric crematorium and the March heat. The only breeze came from Stella’s son, who kept spinning the red rotors of a toy helicopter. The evening after the funeral, after everybody had gone, my father shut himself into his bedroom, and I left the house and walked. Between the two of us, we had finished several pegs of rum and a quarter bottle of whiskey. I found myself standing on a busy main road with no recollection of having arrived there. People flowed around me, shops and bars glittered and trembled, and I tried to think of the future. In a few days, I would return to college; my final-year exams were just weeks away. After that? I would pack up my things and return to Bangalore. After that? Nothing. A bus rattled past, mostly empty, only a few tired heads lolling in the windows. A waiter in a dirty banian dumped a bucket of chalky water onto the road in front of a restaurant. Earlier that day, while a gangly priest droned on and on, my father had overturned my mother’s ashes into a scummy green concrete tank, and then he had continued, somewhat helplessly, to hold on to the clay urn. Without thinking, I snatched it from his hand and dropped it onto a rubbish pile. It was something my mother herself might have done. The look on the vadhyaar’s face was of shock and faintly delighted disgust. I waited for my

father to bring it up later, but he didn't. I stood in the same spot until the waiter, now with two other men, emerged from the restaurant. They were dressed to go out, in close-fitting shirts lustrous as fish scales. They passed right before me. I heard a scrap of their laughter and tensed, ready for a fight, waiting for the leer, the catcall, the line from a love song. But instead they crossed the road and were gone. Though he insisted on all the right rituals for my mother, my father claimed to have shed god and Brahminism long ago, in his own youth, finding a substitute in engineering, Simon and Garfunkel, *The Wealth of Nations*, and long-haired college companions who drank late into the night, filling the room with Wills smoke and boozy rants about politics, both of which eddied and went nowhere. Three years of a master's degree at Columbia left him with a fondness for America, especially her jazz, her confidence, and her coffee, which, he liked to say happily, was the worst he'd ever tasted. When he returned to India, he worked for a few years; then my grandfather, as had always been the plan, provided him with the capital to start a factory manufacturing construction equipment, and, when that foundered and fell apart, more capital for a second factory, which flourished. My father, in those years, liked to speak of rationality and pragmatism as though they were personal friends of his, yet it was he who inevitably rose to his feet at the end of our dinner parties, who raised his glass and declared, blinking away tears, "To you, my dear friends, and to this rarest of nights." He had the intelligent man's faith in the weight of his own ideas, and the emotional man's impatience with anyone who did not share them. As he grew older and more successful, his confidence did not change; it merely

settled and became wider, a well-fed confidence. Only my mother could make him falter. She had, apparently, made him falter the day he arrived on a brand-new motorcycle to inspect as a potential bride the youngest daughter of a mid-level Indian Railways employee. He saw a woman standing barefoot on the street, wearing a shabby cotton sari. He asked if he was in the right place, and my mother replied, "Certainly, if what you're here to do is look ridiculous." My father used to love to tell this story, and also to tell how she had rejected suitor after suitor before him, one for asking about her family's dental and medical history, one for inquiring whether the dowry would be paid in gold or cash, one simply for smiling too much. I have no way of knowing if any of this is true, since my mother never told stories, least of all about herself, but I've heard they went on a walk, during which my father outlined his plans for his life: grow the company for a couple of years, have a child in three, maybe another child the year after. At the end, he paused for my mother's reaction. "Well, you do talk a lot," she said thoughtfully. "But if you're going to be working all day, I suppose I won't have to listen to most of it." My mother, with her lightning tongue and her small collection of idols on a shelf in the kitchen. My mother, with her stubborn refusal to admit the existence of meat or other faiths, who crossed the street when we passed a halal butcher with his row of skinned goats, their flanks pink and shiny as burn scars. My father did not eat meat either, but he was quick to add that it was personal preference; according to him, there was "no logic-based argument against the consumption of meat." I myself had sampled bites of chicken and mutton, even beef, from friends' lunch boxes, and, apart from an initial

queasiness, I liked them all. The one time I made the mistake of telling my mother, she held out her arm and said, "Still hungry, little beast?" She could be vicious, and yet there were times, especially in a crowd, when she was pure energy, drawing the world to herself. She was already tall, but at these times, she became immense. Her mouth would fall open, and her crooked incisor, which looked like a single note held on a piano, acquired an oblique seductiveness. Men approached her, even when I was present. During a function at my father's factory one year, his floor manager tried to flatter her. "That's a beautiful sari," he said, his eyes on her breasts. The floor manager was an energetic stub of a man, who had been with my father since the beginning, had slept on the factory floor so they could save on a watchman. I had attended his son's birthday parties. Now he was looking at my mother's breasts. She was eating a samosa from a silver-foil plate, and there were crumbs on her cheek. Without pausing in her chewing, she said, "The conference room is empty. Shall we go?" The floor manager swallowed hard then glanced at me, as if I, a child, might tell him what to do. He sputtered something about getting her another samosa, and almost tripped on his flight to the buffet table. My mother shot me a quick, arch look before walking away. It was only when she prayed in front of her idols that she shrank, became a person with ordinary dimensions. Every morning, she tucked flowers around their brass necks and lit the blackened lamp and stood for a minute without bending or moving her lips. My father wisely refrained from making his usual speech about the irrationality of organized religion, and she, in turn, chose not to point out that his beloved college LP collection, carefully dusted and alphabetized, was as

good as a shrine. Likewise, my mother never insisted that I prostrate myself or learn the names of her gods, though I sometimes wish she had. She never forbade me from joining either, but it was implicit. And in that lay the fundamental irony of our relationship, and the clearest evidence of how she saw the world: my mother considered me, her only child, a suitable accomplice for the greatest secret of her life, but when she prayed, she wanted to be alone. Here is another story my father once loved to tell: When I was about two, I went through a phase where I belonged, body and soul, to him. I screamed bloody murder if he was in the room and not holding me, bloodier still when my mother tried to take me from him. I tolerated her while he was at work, but barely. One afternoon, seeing I was in a rare, calm mood, she hustled me out to go grocery shopping with her. It was a mistake. While she swiftly chose flour and oil, biscuits and tea, I'd started to whimper. By the time she was ready to pay, I'd launched into a full-blown tirade, howling, hitting her on the side of the head, clinging to any stranger that passed by. My mother was finally forced to ask the shopkeeper if she could use his phone. She called my father and explained, and thirty minutes later, he burst in with outstretched arms. He carried me home, a shameless, grinning trophy, while my mother trailed behind us, lugging the groceries. I don't know when my allegiance shifted, when I went from being his to being hers. All I know are the facts: I was my father's daughter first, and then I became, gradually and irrevocably, my mother's. It's hard not to wonder how much might have been prevented if only I had loved him more, or, perhaps, loved her a little less. But that is useless thinking, and perilous. Better to let things stand as they were:

she, my incandescent mother, and I, her little beast.

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