Note to the Reader

This book would not exist were it not for the generosity of several Delhi residents who agreed to discuss with me their lives, thoughts and experiences. These were often intimate discussions, which is why I have changed all names (except of public figures), and, in some cases, other identifying details. I request readers to respect the candour of these people – who sometimes took personal risks to speak to me – and not to attempt either to identify them or, where it is known, to reveal their identity.

In a place – and a world – where a person's intellectual power is judged so much on the basis of their facility with the English language, I have chosen to make all characters in this book speak the same, standard, English so that their widely differing relationships to this language do not themselves become the issue. In reality, English was the second or third language for many of these individuals, and they did not speak it in this standard way; others did not speak English at all, and our interviews were carried out in Hindi. (In these latter cases I had the assistance of an interpreter.)

In Indian parlance, large amounts of money are measured in 'lakhs' and 'crores'. A lakh is 100,000 rupees (Rs), or approximately US$2,000. A crore is 100 lakhs, or 10 million rupees:

US$200,000. I have preserved these terms, which carry so much of the flavour of Indian financial discussion.

In certain places in the world, a 'bungalow' is a modest, even derisory, single-storey dwelling. In their colonial possessions, the British used this word to apply to the self-contained houses they built for their administrators, which were often, contrastingly, generous and grand. This is the usage that persists in modern Delhi – whose British-era centre is full of such houses – and in this book.

Capital is about the members of that rising, moneyed section of the Indian urban population who see themselves as the primary agents – and beneficiaries – of globalisation. It has become common to refer to these people as 'the new Indian middle class', and I, too, employ this phrase. But while their lifestyle has come to bear some resemblance to that of the 'middle classes' in Europe or America, the phrase sits uncomfortably with the Indian situation. At the time of writing, those Indians whose families earned more than Rs 500,000 [$10,000] per year represented less than 10 per cent of the population, which meant that 'middle-class' accoutrements and ideas belonged, in the Indian context, to the elite. Since the Indian economy was being restructured around the spending power of this emerging class, and since this entailed conflicts over land and resources which often punished the much greater number of the country's rural poor – many of whom earned closer to $500 per year – it is important to retain this sense that the interests of the Indian middle classes were not lowly or innocent. The phrase 'bourgeoisie', in fact, which I also sometimes use, more accurately described their condition. At the same time, however, many of those who thought of themselves as 'middle class' did so because they identified with the hard-working, socially constructive overtones of the phrase, and because they wished to differentiate themselves from another, even smaller, elite – far richer and more powerful than they: moguls from the political and business classes, many of whom they regarded as selfish, reckless and fundamentally destructive

to society. This distinction is also significant, which is why I generally follow the conventional terminology of 'middle classes' and 'elites' – even though the 'middle classes' are not really in the 'middle' at all.

Landscape

March is the prettiest month, bringing flawless blooms to the dour frangipanis – which are placed artfully around the compound, in pleasing congruity with the posted security guards, who wave me on as I drive up to the house.

The day is done. Evening flowers have come into their own, and the air tides with scent. Ahead of me, under a velvet sky, the glass mansion glows like a giant yellow aquarium.

I park my car according to instructions, and walk out along the low-lit paths. At every corner a guard awaits, and directs me to the next. They pass me on, the guards, one to another, with walkie-talkie confirmations crackling back down the line. I arrive at the house.

The building is like two space stations, one glass and one stone, crossing over each other. One of them floats free of the earth, a shining bridge to nowhere, its underside glinting with landing beacons.

Everything is improbably pristine. The corners are straight and sharp. No gravel spills from the decorative channels that border the path.

The guards instruct me to walk through the house to the swimming pool at the back. They indicate a spot-lit passageway. The sliding doors are drawn half across, blocking one side of

the entrance: I set off through the other, open side and – do I hear the guards' warning cries before or after? – walk straight into a sheet of plate glass, so clean and so non-reflective that even though I have just staggered back from it, even though I have just bent double, clutching my crumpled nose, I still cannot tell it is there.

The guards are laughing. One of them runs to assist the idiot visitor. He advises me to enter the passage not through the glass but through the door – a normal door, nothing sliding about it. He demonstrates to me a how a door works so that I do not injure myself again.

I pass through the house. A hall sweeps away from me, done up like a designer hotel. Velvet lampshades in high-frequency colours hang from the high ceiling. Designer couches are clustered here and there around crystal tables. On the walls hang enormous canvasses painted with the kind of energetic soft porn you see on posters for DJ dance nights. Lounge music plays from speakers hidden throughout the building.

I come out on the other side of the house, where everything is lit by that secret, erotic blue that rises from private pools at night. I am led to a poolside seat. A glass is placed in front of me with a sealed bottle of water.

"Sir will be with you in a minute."

In a city of euphemisms, this place is called a 'farmhouse'.

Nothing is farmed here, of course. But when, in the 1970s, the Delhi elite began seizing swathes of land to the south of the city to build private estates, the entire belt was reserved, according to the regulations, for agriculture – and, with a pang of propriety that touched the names of things even if it could not touch the things themselves, they called their new mansions 'farmhouses'. This was especially important since many of the first farmhouses were built by the very bureaucrats and politicians who had made

the regulations, severely correct individuals for whom irregularities in the names of things were an offence to the dignity of their office.

In the decades since then, the farmhouses to the south of Delhi have not only increased in number, changed hands several times, and ultimately acquired the legitimacy that accrues to every land grab once enough time has passed. They have also come to epitomise the lives of the city's rich and well-connected, whose astonishing parties, car collections, sculpture gardens and loping Australian wildlife would be inconceivable except in the context of such fantastic estates. In no other Indian metropolis does the urban elite bask in such pastoral tranquillity: this is an idiosyncrasy of the capital. It is striking in fact how Delhi's rich, a quintessentially metropolitan set of people, who have made their money by tirelessly networking in the capital's many clubs and corridors, eschew the urbane. They do not, as the rich do in Mumbai or New York, dream of apartments with sparkling views of the city from which their fortune derives. They are not drawn to that energy of streets, sidewalks and bustle which was so heroic a part of great nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities. No: the Delhi rich like to wake up looking at empty, manicured lawns stretching away to walls topped with barbed wire.

Modern Delhi was born out of the catastrophe of India's partition, whose ravages turned its culture towards security and self-reliance. The compounds in which its richest citizens take refuge from society are only the most extravagant manifestations of a more widespread isolationist ethos. Delhi is the pioneer, after all, of India's private townships, where life is administered by corporations and surrounded by fences, and where one is cut away, therefore, from the broad currents of the country. Gurgaon, the Delhi suburb established by real estate giant DLF in the 1990s, is the largest such township in Asia, and now has imitators all over the country. An expanse of fields until thirty years ago, Gurgaon's looming apartment blocks and steely towers now look as if they have emerged from a computer game set in some

super-saturated future. Gurgaon makes no pretence of being a 'public' space: the great numbers of the poor who clean and guard its houses and offices, for instance, cannot live there. To live in Gurgaon is to live in a housing complex protected from the outside by security cameras and armed guards, where residents pay corporations to service all their fundamental needs: garbage collection, water supply and even, in the frequent event that state-owned electricity fails, electricity generation. It therefore appeals to a group of people for whom the corporation has come to seem a far more fertile form of social organisation than the state, and who seek out enclaves of efficient, post-public living.

The place where I now sip my bottled water is venerable. For far in excess of a millennium, men and women have made their lives on the soil where my feet now rest. From my seat by the pool I can gaze up at the soaring trunk of the Qutab Minar, the triumphal tower built in the wake of an ancient conquest of Delhi by central Asian invaders: massive and serrated, it has punctured eight centuries of evenings like this, the only man-made thing, even now, to make any claim on these fallow skies.

In this landscaped compound, every attempt has been made to carpet over the land. But in the nearby woods and wastelands, by the sides of all the roads hereabout, ornate tombs, palaces and mosques press up from the obstinate past – and, waiting here in the gathering night, I sense, even through the hard crust of twenty-first century cement, ghosts rising from the earth, the spirits of those who, for hundreds of years, herded cattle, raised crops, worshipped gods, built settlements, made song, petitioned rulers, buried their dead. Just here, where these mute paths now run perfectly level, on this soil now sealed with emerald lawns.

From the chlorinated depths of the pool rises something else: the recollection of a dream. Eight centuries ago, a few paces away from here, the sultan Iltutmish lay sleeping. Suddenly the doors of his slumber burst open – and there before him was the Prophet Mohammad mounted on the winged steed of Heaven, Buraq. Buraq looked at the sultan with a face that was sometimes

man, sometimes woman and sometimes horse; the quivering of its mighty wings produced an indomitable gale. The sultan felt he was being called and, as horse and rider withdrew, he followed them. When they reached a certain place, the horse struck the earth with its hoof, and from the ground spurted a jet of water.

And the chamber of the dream closed again.

In the morning, the sultan went to the place where he had been led in the dream. When he arrived, he saw on the ground a sign – the imprint of Buraq's mighty hoof – and he gave orders for the digging of a new reservoir. Before long there was built a magnificent lake with a mosque in the centre, accessible by boat; there were grand villas all around the waterside, and a vast encampment for all the musicians needed to entertain such an assembly – and the people gave thanks for their ruler's wise and glorious works.

Iltutmish also constructed a five-storey-deep step-well nearby, surrounded by colonnaded terraces where townsfolk could meet and chat by the water. A second step-well, conceived on an even more lavish scale, was sunk next to it a couple of centuries later, so that this place of blistering summers became famous among travellers for the abundance of its water.

The reason these tanks were so bountiful had to do with their position. They were situated at the end of the long and rocky slope that channelled water down from the Aravalli mountains, the ancient range which gnarls India from the state of Gujarat almost all the way to the city of Delhi. In this landscape of brush and dust, moreover, the wells were placed in a forest whose densely rooted soil did not blow away or silt up the system but held water like a sponge and even filtered it in the process. For such reasons, these community tanks were full of water for more than six centuries. As late as the 1960s, they provided sport to local boys who performed the startling feat of diving to the bottom to fish out coins.

Now they are just dry craters in the ground, littered at the bottom with plastic bags and dead pigeons.

It is not just that groundwater levels have plummeted in these decades of ever more intensive extraction, when the number of those packed together in this baked place edges towards the twenty millions. It is also that these wells depended on a delicate and extensive field of capillary action, which has since been carved up by the superstructure of modern life. The profusion of concrete surfaces prevents water from being absorbed into those capillaries, which anyway are greatly depleted by the disappearance of the forests. Industrial drainage systems carry water away from its ancient courses. Tarmac roads interrupt the age-old seep.

The crackle of such ruptures is barely audible to the modern ear. These recent impositions are so much a part of our being that it is difficult for us to appreciate the greatness of the other, alien, arrangements with which they have done away. We are programmed to consider pre-modern engineering infantile, and to treat with scepticism the phantasmagorical dreams of medieval emperors. But when you watch women in the contemporary city gathering water for their families from dripping pipelines or from flooded potholes, the majesty of the dream, and the great works performed in its name, can impress itself upon you again.

Is it because of this history that it feels so deeply *apt* to sit next to this swimming pool? Pools, after all, have been Delhi's salvation for centuries. And in our superstitious epoch when water is faith, not science, when the old tanks stand dry, their technology forgotten, when house dwellers have little clue where their water comes from, when everyone is desperately pumping from the earth whatever they can while they still can – there is something decadently exquisite about this calm and pregnant pool.

Rakesh comes out to meet me at a jog. We have not met before. He exudes immediate charm, which derives partly from the way he throws himself into our encounter, holding nothing back. He looks me straight in the eye as he talks and he frequently slips

my first name into the conversation. He arranges wine for me, and makes sure I like it. Such manners are de rigueur for Delhi businessmen, masters of persuasion – but I enjoy them nonetheless.

"Frankly, I was trying to dodge you for some time," he smiles. "I never talk about myself or what I do. I don't do anything for the world to know about it. If I do something, I do it for myself, I do it for my family and I do it for my friends. For nobody else. I don't give a fuck what anyone else thinks."

Two plates of assorted hors d'oeuvres are brought. One each.

"But then I spoke to Mickey. We discussed you. He said you were okay. So I decided to tell you my story."

What surprises me about Delhi business families is how few levels of formality there are. Doors are securely closed until they are not – and then everything is open. If you have come with the approval of a friend, you are automatically a 'bro' – as the slang goes. This is the clannish ethos, by turns charming and infuriating, by which so much of the city functions.

In these inclusive times, it should be said, it is increasingly appropriate to address a woman as 'bro'.

"I've never liked America," says Rakesh. "I didn't finish my studies there. I finished them in England. Plus I had family in England; in America I was very far from home. But generally I've never liked the American culture. It's too opportunistic. Too lacking in *culture*.

"When I finished my Bachelor's in business, I was supposed to come back from England and join my dad. But I didn't want to come back. Luckily we had a close family friend from Delhi who ran a clothing company in Amsterdam. Very different to what my dad does and to what I'm doing now. He gave me a two-year internship over there."

He speaks fondly about his own past. In the distance, his wife walks hand-in-hand with their toddler son around the compound's marble paths.

"Then my dad came to Amsterdam to talk to me about

coming back. I was very happy in Amsterdam but he more or less convinced me to come back. Well, not *more or less*. So that's when I joined him in the automotive business. And I thought, '*I don't know anything about the automotive business.*' I told myself that the best way to learn is to actually make the product with my own hands. So I did that for exactly a year and four months. I worked as a fucking operator on the shop floor. My decision, completely my decision. Because that's the only way I was going to learn.

"Nine months I spent in Japan. In a place called Hamamatsu, about an hour and a half from Tokyo, which is the headquarters of Suzuki. I tell you, that was my – that kind of learning I could never fathom without – I mean today, sitting here, if I hadn't done that, I would be a different man. Unreal, man – I used to wake up at five, I had a room so small that you couldn't fit an ironing board in it – you know, the Japs are very strict on discipline.

"The company I was working for had just begun an alliance with my dad. We had this beautiful relationship because as soon as I got there – usually the Japs are very reserved and everything – the president adopted me as his own son. My desk stood right next to his. They worked open-plan: no cubicles. This was a 300-million-dollar company at that time – I'm talking 1990. But my desk was only for writing my reports in the evening. All day I spent in the workshop, the store and all that."

Rakesh's family has been in the north Indian jewellery business for the last century and a quarter. He emerges from a community of traders for whom business has been far more than a means of making a living: it is an ethos, a form of life, a social identity. His merchant forebears were involved in commercial networks that extended not only across the Indian sub-continent but also along the trade routes leading west to Arabia and Africa, and east to China. These networks were constituted of singular business practices, designed to transcend the gaps of trust arising both from the fact that they comprised many different

communities, religions and languages, and from the nature of the jewellery trade itself. Because of the very high value of the goods involved, there was at every link in the jewellery supply chain an issue of credit: merchants could usually not pay up-front for the goods they received. The entire transnational system therefore depended on traders handing over extremely valuable goods in return for nothing except the promise of payment in the future. The problem was obvious: how could anyone be sure that the merchant to whom one had given such credit would ever show his face again?

There were of course penalties for defaulters: the entire trading community would cooperate to ensure that such people were made to pay for their violations – or at least that they never trade in that place again. Merchants also invested heavily in their own reputations, which translated directly into commercial opportunity. They lived magnificently, so that all would know they were financially sound. They gave money to mosques and temples and the poor, they employed poets to eulogise their wealth and integrity, and they made a big show of wounded pride in their negotiations – "Me? You would think this of *me*? You do me wrong."

Most of all, however, they found ways to broaden purely commercial relationships into other forms of interdependence in order to make double-crossing difficult or impossible. They would bind their partners to them with gifts, favours and hospitality – and even through the intermarriage of their families. They would extend to each other a kind of intimacy that was spoken about in the language of friendship or even brotherhood – and indeed it had precisely those depths and qualities unless something went wrong in business. There was not really an 'outside' to the life of business: the household and family were set up to support and enhance it – and to provide trusted partners and heirs – while the pursuit of friendship and social life was never entirely separate from the project of cementing the relationships necessary for commerce.

Such an ethos has been modified but not replaced among the business families of this part of the world. It is striking how many of them found their inspiration in the Japanese corporations that were so significant to the development of Indian industry in the 1980s and '90s – for, vast as these were, they worked according to small-scale principles of hospitality and loyalty that Delhi businessmen could understand and respect. American corporations, on the other hand, seemed, for all their evident dynamism, distastefully distant and ungenerous at the personal level. If contemporary Indian business can seem like a bewildering mesh of personal connections and nepotism, this is in part a legacy of once-august traditions of transnational commerce, which, though they have been overshadowed by the supposedly universal corporation, still give form to the business culture.

"My dad left the jewellery trade and ran a successful fabrics business with his brother until 1993, when they had an amicable separation: 'You have a son, I have a son: let us go our separate ways.' How decent is that? So my dad set up a new business manufacturing seating systems for cars. Later on he got into making automobile mirrors. Then we set up the plastics division in 1999 when I went to apprentice in Japan. He gave me full charge of setting up the plastics division and the headliner division."

"What's headliner?"

"It's what you have on the roof interior. It's like fabric but it's not fabric. It's a full thick composite – it's polyurethane, it's non-woven, it's a lot of things – they're sandwiched in a process, then they're pressed, they're cut by a water-jet cutting machine and then they're finally finished. It's not a simple thing.

"Our turning point was in 2005. Before that we had only one client – Maruti Suzuki – and we were strategising to see how we could expand. We got the opportunity to acquire a metal components company, one of Suzuki's joint ventures. You need to know that when Suzuki came into India, there was no

supply chain and they had to develop it for themselves. To develop a supply chain they had to motivate people. To motivate people they did joint ventures. One of the joint ventures was my dad's. And this company we acquired, which made fuel tanks, exhaust systems, suspension, axles, was another. That acquisition expanded our client base. Now we supply five or six big car companies."

Darkness has fallen by now, and, through the panoramic windows of the house, the interior burns with light. Rakesh points out his father, a powerful man, still in his prime, as he walks through the lounge. Three generations live together in this house; business families are powerfully committed to such traditions.

"Currently we're a 2,600-crore company and I'm aiming to double that in the next four years. That's over a billion dollars. Do you realise what that means? It took us sixteen years to get to where we are, and I'm going to do the same again in four. Some of this will come from strategic acquisitions and the rest from organic growth – it's all laid out in my medium-term plan.

"Two years from now I'm looking at 30 per cent of revenues from outside India. Right now it's about 5 per cent. Because there's so much growth in this market you don't need to look outside. And we're still preparing to have the kind of solid base we need to go global. It's not so easy to go global. There are acquisition opportunities coming my way every day but, you know, the easiest thing to do is just take them and then later on you'll get fucked. We'll do it when we're ready for it – we're preparing to make acquisitions in the Middle East and Europe but only when we know it really makes sense."

"Who owns your company?"

"Over a period of time it's gone completely professionalised, we have a management board, supervisory board and all that. But ownership is very clear. The metals division, I own, 100 per cent. The interiors divisions, my dad owns. And the plan is that in two years the entire interiors division will come under my control. And I've made it very clear to my dad I don't want any

ambiguity or confusion. No one comes into my business for sure. Apart from that he can do whatever he wants to do."

A man wanders out to the pool. Rakesh introduces his brother-in-law, who has pointed shoes on, a fresh shirt and a lot of gold. He is ready to hang out. His perfume outdoes the evening flowers. Through the window I can see uniformed waiters laying out dinner places for twelve at the long white table. Others have arrived and are drinking inside. It feels like a nightly ritual: I get the impression that a lot of people have the habit of ending their days here.

"In India, the good thing is, our fundamentals are strong. The only thing that will pull us down is the infrastructure and education. If it weren't for the people who run our country, we would actually have children educated and roads built. And the corruption! You know these pollution inspectors? They can hold you to ransom. I've got nineteen manufacturing divisions. Even if every one of them conforms 100 per cent to the environmental regulations – they will still fuck you up the ass. And it's serious. It's really serious. They can seal your company and then you're dead.

"Because I have to supply my customers every *hour*. No interruptions. I hold only three to four hours of inventory. And you know how many cars on an average I supply components for? Just have a guess. A wild guess. Daily. Okay, I'll tell you. Five and a half thousand cars a day. Can you imagine the supply chain, the profit floor, the material floor . . . ? The automotive segment teaches you to work with the highest levels of precision. You can't fuck around with bad components of a car because people can die. You've got to be so accurate. I can't tell my customers I met 99.9 per cent of their requirements. If bad components get to the field and there's a recall, my entire group will be wiped out."

"How did you learn to do all this?" I ask.

"Nearly everything I learned from Suzuki. That company for me is the best company in the world. Undoubtedly. Look at

their systems, their processes, their people. The collaborative approach they have in managing their supply chain. It's not: 'You fucked up, so fuck off.' If you fucked up, if you're eager to learn, if you have that bent of mind where you accept that you've made a mistake but you're open to them, they say: 'We'll teach you and we'll be with you for life.' That's the kind of approach these guys have. That's the Japanese approach."

Rakesh has his eye on the friends arriving inside – some have wandered out to say "Wassup?" His staff come from time to time to consult him about logistics, and after each interruption he resumes his sentence where he left it. I imagine him efficient at work, moving rapidly and intently from task to task.

But he needs to join the party. We get up. The house is like a reality theatre: through the glass is an illuminated stage with characters in all sorts of costumes. At one end, friends recline in deep sofas, their Italian shoes twitching in the air, while at the other, a waiter in a white uniform floats fresh flowers in the marble fountain. Above his head are enormous chandeliers made of bright blue Murano glass.

"I have two lives," says Rakesh, contemplating the view. "I have an automotive business, but I also have a real estate business. During the day I'm in fucking uniform. I have an open-door policy: can you imagine what that means in a 2,600-crore concern? But what you see in front of you is the wealth generated from my real estate. Not from my automotive business. Real estate is something that we've been investing in for a long while. Some inherited wealth, some great investments my dad made over a period of time, which went through the roof. Two lives. I don't mix the two lives at all."

He is proud of his house and wants to show off some highlights before I leave. It is clearly inspired by travels in five-star hotels. There is a massage room and a *post-massage chill-out room*. A beauty parlour. A teppanyaki restaurant.

He walks around quickly, pointing out details: "I knew from the beginning I wanted a water body near my dining table,

which is why we have this fountain." He is obsessed by small imperfections. He talks about the architect, with whom things ended acrimoniously – apparently because the architect presumed to have his own ideas: "Sometimes all you want from someone is to understand what's inside your head and to get it out." He is quick to explain, in case I should underestimate his vision, that what I see around me is not the final version. The ventilation system in the cigar room has still to be installed. They haven't finished the spa.

One of the men sitting around inside jumps up when he sees Rakesh. They shake hands.

"This is my artist," says Rakesh to me. "He troubles me a lot but he's all right."

The 'artist' has come to show Rakesh the proofs of a party invitation he has designed. Rakesh shows it to me: a large, cushiony card covered in silver tracery. "This is for my big party. I do one every year."

"Here?"

"In my house? No way. They would trash the place. The party is at another farmhouse we have across the road. We'll go fucking crazy."

Rakesh is aroused by the talk of parties, he has had a couple of glasses of wine, and as he walks me out, he is thinking about libidinal things. He looks for something on his phone and passes it to me. On the screen is a photograph.

"This is what I looked like when I was in London. Check out the blue contact lenses. Look how much hair I had."

It is a fiercely sensual picture, fifteen years old. When I hand his phone back, he muses wistfully over the screen.

"Now – you know, I'm fucking married, travelling, eating . . . And life is very stressful. There's a lot of pressure. I'm always thinking the worst of myself and my business. You might think we've achieved something but my ambition is far deeper. I can't relax, man – that's the fucking problem. Most of the time I work twelve or thirteen hours a day, six days a week. The only time

I relax is when I have a massage. I go on vacations some weekends but I can't relax, even on the beach."

We come to the front door. If my earlier collision with the glass left any smears, they have since been cleaned away.

"In the end, Rana, the only thing is values. These days, parents don't have any time for their kids so what they do is throw money at them. So the kids don't have any values. They spend loads of cash doing all this rubbish stuff and not getting anywhere. The only thing they know is money. But money doesn't make you a bigger person. It just means that God has been more kind to you.

"Everyone works hard. *Everybody* works hard – you know the guy who rides the bullock cart? – he works hard. So why is it that I'm here and he's there? It's all because of God. So you have to respect that. You're the chosen one. God has been kind to you – if you don't share that wealth, what good is it? I love my parents, I love my family. I'd do anything for them. I'd do anything for Mickey. If he came and said, 'Get out of this house, I want to move in' – I'd do that for him."

Mickey is the person who introduced us, a prominent real-estate tycoon, younger and richer than Rakesh. I ask how they met.

"You know, I'd come back from Japan and in addition to car seating we were also doing auditorium seating, entertainment seating – you know, with the multitextures and all that. He was building his first shopping mall at that time, and I was supplying seats for the cinema, so I went to his office to meet his guys. And as I went down the stairs to leave, he was walking up, and he asked me who I was and for thirty seconds on the stairs there was this amazing chemistry. And I sent him an invitation to my party that year and my asshole security guys forgot to clear his name and he was turned away at the gate. He didn't even say anything. His grace and humility were amazing, man. And the next year I invited him again. And that party was the real cement of our relationship. We got so close that night and it's been the same ever since."

I'm standing in the night outside. Rakesh says, "But the fact is in this bad-guy world you can be *too* nice to people. People take you for granted. I'm nice. I'm not ruthless, frankly I'm not ruthless. That's probably a drawback I have. I should be ruthless."

And he adds, by way of explanation,

"We come to this world naked, and we fucking go back naked."

I walk through the car park, which has filled up with the sports cars of Rakesh's friends. The moon is bright. I get in my car and set off down the drive, the security guards semaphoring. I pass the massive electricity generators that supply the compound. The guard house. Finally, the gate is opened and I pull out into the street. I drive through the desolate high-walled lanes that wind between the farmhouses, reach the roar of the main road, and head back towards the city.

In Delhi, the road is the place from which people derive their image of the *entire city*. It is a segregated city, a city of hierarchies and clannish allegiances, where very few people from any sector of society enjoy the idea of social distinctions being lost – and it has no truly democratic spaces. Delhi's bizarre vocabulary of residential addresses – much of it derived from the time when the city was a British administrative township, with all the attendant social and security paranoia – says much about what people in this city expect from home: they live in *housing societies* and *estates* which are contained in *blocks*, themselves sub-divisions of *sectors*, *enclaves* and *colonies.* In wealthy neighbourhoods, gates and security guards prevent unauthorised movement across the dividing lines. Social life is no different. Delhi is not like Mumbai, whose citizens readily strike up conversations with strangers in bars and restaurants; here, introductions are necessary. People want to know who you are before they will let you in, which is why name- and address-dropping

are so much part of social conversation: people must advertise their connections and allegiances if they are to enjoy a proper social existence. At the top end, social spaces cater to the desire for segregation by allocating price tags, which is why otherwise unremarkable nightclubs can find people queuing up to pay a Rs 20,000 [$400] cover charge.

Not even the snaking Delhi Metro can bring everyone together: though it provides 2.3 million rides a day, it is neglected by both the poorest and richest slices of society. So it is on heaving, honking, smoking traffic arteries such as the one I now drive on – and on which pretty much everyone is forced to move with me – that Delhi residents may have their urban revelation: the entire city, arrayed.

The first thing one notices here, perhaps, is that little allowance is made for walking. Delhi is sometimes compared to Los Angeles because of the highway-like thoroughfares that have grown up over the last fifteen years, which disregard all movement save that of the automobile; and getting around on foot can be fantastically arduous. Middle-class newcomers from other cities sometimes try to walk here, but even before concerned Delhiites can rush to inform them how unseemly this is for people of their station, they discover for themselves that Delhi's sidewalks, where they exist, are a hoax. Setting out on one of these rickety things they have watched it come to an abrupt end; persisting nonetheless with their journey they have found themselves clambering over great piles of rubble, throwing bricks ahead of themselves on which to step through lakes of stagnant water, running madly across eight lanes of a highway – and they have quickly decided to buy themselves a car. This is why Delhi accounts for such a disproportionately large percentage of India's booming car sales – the sales that help to stoke Rakesh's ambitious growth plans. Cramped Mumbai, whose elongation is well served with trains, provides diminishing returns to car buyers; in Delhi, with its broad, radial avenues, nothing works as well as having your own vehicle, which is why the capital, whose cars

could have been numbered with four digits in 1980, now sinks under their jammed-up weight.

For middle-class people, therefore, the spectacle of the city is seen through car windows. If a painter were to paint this middle-class view, as, for instance, so many nineteenth-century painters tried to paint Paris from the perspective of its new, cosmopolitan boulevards, it would not, accordingly, be smooth or intimate. There would be no dwelling, like the Impressionists, on details of costume and gesture, no slow rendition of café light falling on pedestrian faces, no capturing of the almost unnoticeable interactions that happen between strangers in a public place. No, it would be a strobe-lit succession of unrelated glimpses: the covers of *Vogue* and *Autocar* flashing in front of the window as a magazine seller rushes between vehicles stopped at a traffic light, the wind-rushed hair of a woman and her child on the back of a speeding motorbike, the one eye of a stray dog caught in the headlights, the glinting instruments of a wedding band – and the whirl of the dancing procession, and the improbable white of the groom's horse – the lipstick of a cluster of eunuchs pressing their faces to the window, the slump of a human form under a blanket on the highway's central divide, a face in another car momentarily stripe-lit as veering headlights dazzle the rear-view mirror – and a host of impressions of other, unformed characters, animal and human, whose identity it is difficult to discern.

This is my field of vision as I drive. Car lights weave in every direction, blinding high beams all, and in the retinal shadow dart unlit human bodies, almost indistinguishable from the night. Horns blare continually, for the traffic is not a stream that carries you with it, but a jungle through which you hack. People drive as if everyone is against them, and in fact it is true: any space or opportunity they do not seize with all the speed and bulk of their vehicle is immediately usurped by someone else. You can see it here, at a red light, where everyone is looking around to make sure no one else is scheming to take their advantage away.

Some cars out front, of course, simply make a dash across the junction, through the contrary traffic – those who wish to assert their freedom from plebeian constraints like traffic lights. The remaining cars inch forward intently, annexing what ground they can, trying to block their neighbours from leaping ahead of them when the lights change. The pack jostles onwards and gradually bleeds out into the junction.

Waiting at a traffic light is not empty time. On the contrary. It is in this ceasefire that the anxiety of the battlefield suddenly erupts. Drivers are racked with apprehension. They light cigarettes, curse, tap the steering wheel, honk impotently. The wait is intense and unbearable.

Finally, the lights turn to green. And at that point, the engines of the cars out front – rearing, straining, irrepressible – stall.

A furious wail of horns starts up behind them – *the light is green, the promise made us is denied, it is too awful, we always knew the world would turn out to be a swindle . . .* – until the dead engines are cranked into life once more, and the swarm moves off.

A strange kind of performance anxiety.

I once drove with an Israeli psychologist who was very disturbed by this spectacle. "*We* had the holocaust," he said. "But we don't behave like this. We've put that behind us. What I see here is slave behaviour. This is survival mode. Why are they so scared they won't get what they want?"

This is not how people drive in other Indian cities. But Delhi is a place where people generally assume – far more, say, than in Bangalore or Mumbai – that the world is programmed to deny them everything, and that making a proper life will therefore require constant hustle – and manipulation of the rules. Everyone, myself included, uses bribes and connections to get the things they need – a visa, a driving license, a quick resolution of a legal case, a place in a school, a place on a guest list – and if this city seems obsessed by status it is for good reason: power, wealth and networks deliver an immeasurably easier and

better life. People who run schools and hospitals spend much of their time, not running schools and hospitals, but attending to the list of important people and their hangers-on who are haranguing them for preferential, queue-jumping treatment – which throws the systems of those places into a similar disarray as the one here on the roads. But no one wants to be just one of the anonymous mass for whom nothing ever happens. One might think that a place of inequalities as entrenched as Delhi's would breed democratic yearnings, but it is not the case: Delhi's fantasies are feudal. Even those who have rather little social power respect the privileges of those who have a lot – perhaps hoping that one day they will enjoy for themselves their same exemption from law and custom. Look at the advertising all around us, with its incoherent mash of mass-culture and aristocracy: this easily available consumer item will turn you into the person who never has to stop at the barriers that hold everyone else back.

Privilege dominates the roads, too. The scramble for driving opportunity is not equal. The status of people hidden behind tinted car windows may be difficult to discern accurately, but in this new era, which has overwritten previous, more indecipherable, forms of status with the single catch-all of *cost*, advantages accrue, quite simply, to the most expensive cars. Mercedes flash Marutis to let them through the throng, and Marutis obediently move aside. BMW limousines are so well insulated that passengers don't even hear the unflinching horn with which chauffeurs disperse everything in their path. Canary yellow Hummers lumber over the concrete barriers from the heaving jam into the empty bus lane and accelerate illegally past the masses – and traffic police look away, for which cop is going to risk his life challenging the entitlement of rich kids? Yes, the privileges of brand rank are enforced by violence if need be: a Hyundai driver gets out of his car to kick in the doors of a Maruti that kept him dawdling behind, while young men in a Mercedes chase after a Tata driver who dared abuse them out of the window, running

him down and slapping him as if he were an insubordinate kid. It is easy to see why people do not generally drive a less expensive car than they can afford. Investing in the best possible conveyance yields tangible dividends.

One may imagine where all this leaves everyone else. Cars, though ferociously dominant, transport fewer than 20 per cent of road users. The majority travel by auto-rickshaws, buses and motorised scooters. A significant proportion of urban travellers, however, navigate these packed roads on bicycles or on foot. These are overwhelmingly from the lower rungs of the economic ladder, and motor vehicles give them scant consideration; it is they, therefore, who supply the majority of Delhi's impressive number of road deaths. For while vehicles bump into each other all the time, they are rarely travelling at speeds high enough for their passengers to sustain harm. The speeds are sufficient to do a lot of damage, however, to the ones who put their unarmoured flesh in the way of all this steel.

And for countless thousands of Delhi residents, these streets are not simply a passageway but a home, and their flesh is never far from moving vehicles.

At this hour I can already see them settling down into resting places for the night. There are the throngs of refugees from 'development' and 'real estate', the ones who lived relatively stable lives until they were displaced by the new factories and private townships of India's boom. There are the labourers and religious pilgrims who have come to the city to conduct their business and leave again, and the ones so destitute and uprooted that they have not even been able to assemble for themselves the components of a tent. Here they sleep, in the roving glare of headlights, their heads drawn in under their blankets.

The raised central division of this busy road – the width, perhaps, of two adults – might not look like a desirable bed. But the traffic on either side keeps dogs away, and other animal disturbances. It does not of course prevent heat, cold or mosquitoes – and for the sober, the night will bring only half-sleep.

The sleep that comes from never letting your attention flag. The poor can be robbed too, after all. Even the experienced pavement-sleeper can roll into the road. And if not she, then her children, who are so much more mobile when they dream.

Rickshaw drivers sleep with their vehicles. These provide some insulation, but they bring additional problems. The seat of a cycle rickshaw, while softer than a pavement, is only large enough for a torso; drivers must therefore twist their sleep around their vehicles in the most strange and gymnastic of ways. You can see them now, their feet and legs poked through railings or hoisted into ropes hanging from trees.

These itinerant masses store their personal effects in the furniture of the city. At this time of night you can see people climbing up to retrieve sacks of bedding from the roofs where they threw them in the morning. There is hardly a tree crook, hardly a concrete niche that is not stuffed with the clothes and plastic bottles of Delhi's street dwellers. Cloth bags hang from every protrusion on every wall. Tarpaulin and bamboo poles saved from dismantled lean-tos are lashed into the tops of trees, ready for another building.

The fact that the city's outer surfaces function as a giant bedroom, bathroom and closet for the hundreds of thousands who live in it unenclosed, helps to give the roads a run-down air. But these frayed edges – the cartoons etched on the walls by those who sleep against them, the saved-up string on nails, the blankets airing on a fence – are among the more picturesque aspects of this teeming road. For the constructions of those who run this city are just as ragged, and far more lugubrious. The road I drive on now, for instance, has recently been widened: rows of buildings on either side have had their fronts ripped off in the process, and for months this stretch has looked like a war zone. This impression is all the stronger for the fact that life does not stop in the severed rooms, as everyone driving up against them can see. Even in the upper levels, where it would be possible to fall off the floors' hacked edge to certain death, lights are on,

desks stand against walls and clerks cover their ears against the traffic to hear telephone conversations. Calendars on the walls flap in the slipstream of trucks; ceiling fans whisk the exhaust fumes of the street.

Outside, blasted trees stick up like burnt matches from the rubble.

I pass under one of the blistered flyovers across which Delhi's orbital roads soar and dip like a rollercoaster. These scattered megaliths do not feel as if they constitute a system: each of them proclaims different traffic principles, and looks quite unlike the next. Several different construction firms have built them; each has used a different design, a different kind of brick and a different variety of street light, and each has finished things off with its own kind of ornamental flourish. Driving from one to the next is to find the road broadening and narrowing arbitrarily, which creates the crawl-surge rhythm that is so much a part of movement in this city. Two flyovers end in the same place, as if they were not informed about each other, thus feeding fast-moving traffic into a criss-cross swamp of cars from which it takes twenty minutes to emerge.

Like so much of the rest of the city's infrastructure, these gap-toothed flyovers look ancient even when they have only just been built. Delhi's recent multibillion-dollar makeover, completed just in time for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, is already difficult to remember: down the centre of main roads, great sections of the new dividing walls have broken off and fallen into the path of traffic, while the roofs are falling off the rusty Games stadiums, whose car parks lie cracked and empty. The thousands of trees planted to soften the edges of so much new concrete are long since withered, as if they were never intended to outlast the Games themselves. Time in Delhi is macabre: it is a fast-dissolving time that makes bus stops leak and apartment blocks crumble even before they are finished. A time that sinks potholes in month-old roads, built only just well enough to hold together for their inauguration. A time that instantly makes

superfluous the avenues recently slashed through slums because the state-of-the-art sports facilities they led to have been padlocked and left to collapse. To be here is to exist in that kind of time in which everything is old even when it is new, in which everything is always already lost to decay and obsolescence.

Nothing endures: everything is passing away before one's eyes, and it is difficult to preserve the soul from the general tendency. Perhaps one can see why the pristine maintenance of Rakesh's private compound was so arresting. In the Delhi context, its force was almost existential, as if, with every piece of gravel his gardeners swept back into place, Rakesh attempted to immunise himself against the general impermanence.

I turn through the heart of British Delhi, still preserved as the city's administrative centre and therefore largely unaffected by the tearing-down and rebuilding that has taken over the rest of the city. The tree canopy is luxurious overhead and the traffic flows freely. I pass two elephants lumbering steadily along the road. Here and there they pause to pull down branches from the trees, which they chew on meditatively as they trudge home from their labours. Car headlights shine at the level of their knees and only their bandy-legs are illuminated: the great dome of their backs, where the sleepy rider sits, rises above it all, into the darkness.

The sight of these animals always fills me with a rush of love for Delhi. Even in the megapolis, they are still improbably vast – vast enough to be a kind of sink for the city's strife, removing, like a rainforest, the poisons from its air.

Just beyond the elephants lumbers something else: a massive water tanker. Large sections of Delhi, and not only the poor ones, have no piped water and must fill their household tanks, expensively and laboriously, from trucks like these. I have never seen one that is not leaking at a catastrophic rate. It seems to

be part of the cold humour of this city, where water is so precious that the Water Board that controls it pours half of it away on the dusty roads.

Rusty and battered, this particular truck has the regulation deluge escaping from several places on its underside. For added comic effect the operators have also left the cap off the filling hole above, so that a great wave pours out every time it brakes.

It stops now at some traffic lights, and I stop with it.

The traffic lights are shining constant red and flashing amber together. At other times I have seen constant amber with flashing green, red and green together, or flashing amber in all directions. It would be possible to see this expanded traffic light vocabulary as festive, except that it arises from impotence and gloom – from the authorities' inability to stop nocturnal drivers shooting through intersections like this at high speed, whatever the colour of the lights, killing themselves and others. Traditional red lights were too static, too passé perhaps, to arrest the contemporary rush of life, money and drink. So it was decided to introduce something more spirited and fresh. Lights flashing in different colours might just stimulate people – if not into stopping, at least into a moment of hesitation.

In other cases, the waning power of the light symbols is propped up with text annotations: "Do not move on red light. Proceed only on green light."

Piled up on the pavements are the rusty corpses of the last generation of traffic lights.

A man with severed arms begs at the windows of stationary cars; he cannot take the money, obviously, but proffers his trouser pocket to anyone feeling generous. I wonder how a man with no arms eats. I wonder how he unbuttons his trousers.

The intersection is enormous and pummelled by neon light. The roads are divided by raised triangular islands which are covered with sleeping people. A large air-conditioned bus crosses in front of me, full of retired European tourists reading guide books – or sleeping, too.

All around the intersection are large advertising hoardings. One is for a new corporate housing development called Cape Town. It shows computer-generated images of sunny apartments, well-parked BMWs, cute flower beds and rich, happy, light-skinned people laughing around the swimming pool. Ten years ago such a development would have been named after an American locale. Delhi's consumers have become more worldly in that time, however, and they realise that the American suburb is too democratic and open for their tastes. For glamour they turn now to South Africa, Russia or Dubai, where things are more in control.

Another advertisement is for a shopping mall. It shows a man bursting with consumer glee because he has so many different kinds of outfit to try on. The slogan says, "Change Keeps Boring Away." It takes me a moment to realise what these words mean. Having just driven forty minutes through a much-punctured city, I am led immediately to thoughts of drills. Of the enormous perforations that have opened up in Delhi's consciousness during this period of transition. But then I realise that the advertisement is talking, neologistically, about *boredom*. In this churning metropolis of instant millionaires and imperial ambition, where people who fifteen years ago had not seen a microwave now drive Lamborghinis – the biggest threat, apparently, is ennui.

Next to the advertising hoardings is a big garbage heap. Pigs nuzzle among plastic bags and rotting food. I scan the scruffy sign above it, which says, "There Are No Bars To Excrement." Surprised, I look at it again. This time it says, "There Are No Bars To Excellence."

I must be tired.

The lights change. The water tanker heaves, and another tide washes over its back, drenching the road. I turn under another cavernous flyover where lines of washing hang, adults sleep and children play with sticks. I am on the last stretch before home.

Suddenly the cars around me are braking and swerving. In front of me, the traffic parts, and I see, standing in my path, a

young man dressed in rags. I slow down, expecting him to get out of the way. But he stands his ground, stares at me haughtily and holds up his palm so I halt. My car stops a few inches from where he is standing. For a few moments we stare into each other's eyes. He is about sixteen and his hair is wild. Around his neck he wears a great number of tinsel garlands adorned with images of elemental divine power. Kali, Durga and Shiva. There are so many of them that the bundle of tinsel around his neck rises over his ears and covers half his face.

Over the top of these garlands he wears a similar number of corporate swipe cards on woven ribbons: those magnetic cards with digital photographs which so many corporate employees wear around their necks to access their offices. He wears thirty or forty of them, keys to the new global networks.

It is a technique that has long stood people in good stead in this much-pillaged part of the world. Hang on to your old gods, but don't ignore the new.

As I look at him, he grabs one of these magnetic cards and holds it up to me imperiously: "You will go when I say." He stares into my eyes, and his look is blazing and magnificent. We stare at each other for an indefinable moment: he holds my gaze until he is satisfied that I have accepted his authority. Then he wanders away into the racing lines of traffic. I watch him recede, take my foot off the brake, and set off again for home.

One

> It is said of Indian cities that Calcutta, the former British capital, owned the nineteenth century, Bombay, centre of films and corporations, possessed the twentieth, while Delhi, seat of politics, has the twenty-first.

Before 1911, when the British uprooted their administration and moved it to Delhi, the capital of India was Calcutta, in the eastern state of Bengal. Decades of interaction with imperial personnel had created there an anglicised middle class, which supplied a great number of bureaucrats and professionals to the Raj. One of them was my father's father, an accountant who worked in British companies all over northern India.

Until the Partition of 1947, which divided the British territory in the west and the east into the two new states of India and (East and West) Pakistan, my grandfather was chief accountant with Commercial Union Assurance in Lahore, and it is from there that my father's earliest memories float back. They are fond: the family was affluent, the city harmonious. My father remembers affectionately the vibrant mix of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in his school, his gracious Muslim headmaster. But as his tenth year drew on, it became apparent that political machinations would mutilate this tranquil existence. As Partition

approached, the Police Commissioner of Lahore, Allauddin Khan, who was my grandfather's bridge partner, became concerned for the safety of his Hindu friend: he sent his car to take the family to the railway station. He then deputed guards to accompany them on the train as far as Amritsar, on the other side of the imminent cleavage. Allauddin Khan probably saved their lives: in the ensuing violence, the building in which they had lived was burned down and the Hindu landlord and his family murdered.

My father's family returned to Bengal, where the other, eastern, Partition was in progress, and my father found himself on the other side of the game. He remembers the unreal sight of slaughtered Muslims lined up like trophies in the Calcutta streets.

Something seems to have snapped in my grandfather after those upheavals. He became moody and withdrawn. He secured another well-paid position, but walked out of it on a point of principle. Suddenly there was no income for his family of nine children. The electricity was cut off. They could not afford food or candles. My grandfather borrowed from moneylenders to pay his bills; when they sent thugs to reclaim the loans, it was my thirteen-year-old father who had to plead with them in the street, for my grandfather, who wanted to know nothing of all this, was shut up in a room smoking cigarettes and reading English spy novels.

Friends and relatives shunned them. My father got a job selling cooking oil door-to-door, and so kept the entire family from starvation.

He sold, first of all, to people he knew. One day he knocked on the door of an aunt who, seeing how gaunt he was, offered him lunch. From there he took his wares to the house of another aunt, and she too offered him food. Since he did not know when he would be able to eat again, he accepted and sat down to the meal. But he was still in the middle of it when the first aunt came to call and saw him stuffing himself for the second time. Telling the story sixty years later, my father still

shakes with the humiliation of having been caught out in such desperation.

Things turned for the better. My grandfather got another job, as chief accountant of a British tractor company. The job was in Delhi: the whole family moved to the capital and took up residence in a district named Karol Bagh – a former Mughal garden, as the name ('bagh') implies, settled in the early twentieth century by communities evicted from villages levelled for the British city and, still later, and in much greater numbers, by refugees from Partition. But in the 1950s the place still had a leafy feel: my father remembers parks and lazy streets through which he walked to school. "Delhi was beautiful," my father says. "I used to borrow a bike and ride all over the city on those enormous, empty roads."

In an era when the ideal of every middle-class Indian family was a job for life, my grandfather held on to this one for a year. He begrudged his Scottish superior, a Mr McPherson, and decided he would complain about him to the managing director, who worked in Calcutta. Exploiting his position as senior accountant, he arm-twisted the treasurer into giving him money from petty cash to pay for a first-class rail ticket, and departed for Calcutta in search of satisfaction. He was immediately sacked.

My grandfather was an anglophile. His most prominent theory of child-rearing was: "They must speak English." He demanded English at the dinner table and, when away from home, wrote letters in English to his children in an elegant, fussy hand. But after he was uprooted from Lahore, his situation in British companies seems to have rankled in deep and private ways: certainly it drove him to erupt regularly over indignities, real or imagined, to the dismay of all around him. Plunged back into poverty, the family returned to Calcutta. More jobs came and went. An English boss requested my grandfather not to smoke in the office: he understood this as an anti-Indian slight and walked out of his employment.

My grandmother, who came from a wealthy family, was bent

close to insanity by those years of fear and hunger, of social humiliations, of children studying in the stairwell, where the lights were left on for just this purpose by a sympathetic Sikh caretaker. She reminisced endlessly about Lahore, now lost to Pakistan, where life had provided and they had been happy.

It was in this context that my father conceived his plan to redeem the family. Germany was offering cheap passage and guaranteed employment to those who would come there as Gastarbeiter. He decided he would use this as a bridge to studying in England; when he returned, he thought, there would never again be question of unemployment or hunger.

In the weeks before his departure, his anglophile father sat on the balcony calling out proudly to passers-by: "My son is going to England!"

My father embarked in Bombay and spent two of the most carefree weeks of his life sailing across the Arabian Sea, passing through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean and docking, finally, in Genoa. He took a train to Stuttgart, where he worked for a year as an unskilled labourer in a paper factory. In 1962, he arrived in London. He began to study accountancy and to work for British Rail. With his first pay cheque he bought a Parker pen for his father, who wrote to thank him: "I can say with confidence that the pen you sent me is the most famous pen in India. In Calcutta, at least, there is not a man with eyes who has not seen it."

He went to look at a room in the house of a young Jewish couple in east London. The wife had arrived as a refugee from Hitler and was the only member of her family to have escaped the Nazi death camps. He liked them, they liked him. But another bedroom was already rented to a white South African, who was alarmed when he realised my father was looking to move in. He took the landlady aside in consternation: "I can't live with a Coloured man!"

"Then you can leave today," she replied, and evicted him. My father lived in that house for years.

London was supposed to be temporary. My father's home was in Calcutta, and that was where he would return. He missed his beloved Hindustani classical music, which was just then enjoying an amazing efflorescence in Calcutta: much of his teens he had spent listening, ticketless, at the windows of all-night concerts. And he had raised no protest against the engagement that was arranged for him before his departure – an attempt by his family to inoculate him, for the duration of his absence, against the pernicious attentions of Western girls.

But London in the early 1960s gave my father an ecstatic jolt. He had always wanted to be free of constraints, and now he found himself in a freewheeling world of people and experiences. He read about European history. He fell in love with jazz: he went to see Ella and Louis at the Albert Hall. He found himself in a professional system that was gratifying in its simplicity: you worked hard and you got promoted – and before long he could send money home. He was surrounded by other newcomers like him, free, suddenly, of all ties, and ready to live hard. He had girlfriends. He went to see movies and West End shows.

On 12 November 1965, he bought a newspaper in his lunch hour to read about the Rhodesian declaration of independence from the British empire, which had been telegrammed to London on the previous day. Having lived through the paroxysms of one British colony's independence, he was electrified to read of this audacious secession of another. He walked into a restaurant and was seated at the only remaining place, which was opposite a pretty young woman. He remained buried in his newspaper, however, until the waitress mistakenly served his dish to his neighbour and hers to him. Laughing, my father and the woman exchanged plates and began to talk. They arranged to meet again the next day.

The beginning of this relationship says something more extraordinary about my mother than about my father. He had seen something of the world, he was far from home, and he was twenty-seven years old. My mother was eighteen and working

as a clerk in an insurance company. She still lived with her working-class parents in a small town in Essex, where life revolved around church fêtes, neighbourhood gossip and fish for tea on Fridays. She had met precisely one Indian before that day in 1965. There were many around her who were appalled at this new friendship. Her parents were unhappy; friends stopped speaking to her. And yet the romance endured. They went on holiday to Italy. My father sent photographs to show his family in Calcutta what European idylls he was now able to enjoy; he took scissors to them so they would not see the Western girl with whom he travelled.

He still entertained the idea that all this was temporary and he was eventually going back. But as time went by, he found himself drawn in. Before long, he was married, living in Kent, and playing on the village cricket team. Before long he had children and an excellent situation with a multinational corporation. Before long, he was staying.

My father, whose career was a great success, who sent his two children to Oxford, and who was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire in recognition of his services to his adopted country, is in many ways a paragon of immigrant achievement. But this is not the whole story. It does not explain the listlessness he has in retirement, the feeling of never having really arrived. It does not explain the inchoate grief that lingers behind his still-energetic exterior – a grief that even he cannot really articulate, and that flows freely only when he lies in the bath with the door shut and listens to Hindustani classical music. It is the grief of a kind of exile – unimposed, unintentional even, but real all the same. The exile of devoting one's life to a place where people understand nothing of the powerful and shattering experiences that formed him. The exile, simultaneously, of losing all means of return – because to his family members in Calcutta he gradually became an incomprehensible foreigner whose life did not translate into theirs: they became awkward and subdued around him. His parents died long ago. Some of his siblings have

visited his home in Cambridge, but these visits have never quite brought the consummation he desires. The physical evidence of his life – a house, photographs, an accumulation of objects – somehow fails to disclose *life* itself, and even in his own front room there can be incomprehension. Meanwhile, his own trips to Calcutta – "home" as he still says – are even less satisfying, for the environment he grew up in has been completely obliterated in half a century, and he can find nothing of himself. These days, Kolkata, whose name has changed too, sees him perpetually on the brink of rage: that it is not what it should be, that people have moved on, that he cannot tell his siblings who he is, that even in the house where his parents' pictures ceremonially hang, there is no one to understand him.

Before all this, back in 1963, at the very beginning, before my mother, before his professional success, my father was travelling one day on the London Underground. He could see his own reflection in the black window opposite and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw there something else: a vision of his father being loaded, dead, into a hearse in Calcutta. It was as if it were happening inside the train compartment and it was so vivid that he could read the name of the firm of undertakers on the side of the car. When he arrived at his friends' house he told them what he had seen and began to weep so uncontrollably that they could not find it within themselves to tell him the news they had just received by telegram, which only leaked out late that night.

My father had only been away from Calcutta for eighteen months. It is another reason his successes feel so incomplete: the person for whom – in defiance of whom – he pushed himself with such zeal towards achievement never lived to see any part of it.

At the dawn of the present century I was working for a marketing consultancy firm in New York. The job was becoming a burden:

I was increasingly consumed by the novel I was trying to write in the evenings and, moreover, I was in love with a woman who lived on the other side of the world – in Delhi. And so, at the end of 2000, I emulated, contrariwise, my father's journey.

I arrived with one suitcase and a box of notes and articles I had collected for my writing. Everything else I owned I stored with an uncle in New Jersey. I didn't think it would be long before I was back. I didn't know how long it took to write a novel, but it surely couldn't take more than six months. I had no intention of staying in Delhi: I had passed through it a few times during childhood visits to Calcutta, and remembered it as a polluted, charmless sprawl. I had no doubt I could convince my beloved to forsake it for sparkling Manhattan.

But such attitudes quickly fell away when I arrived in Delhi. It would be too simple to say that I fell in love with the city – it is just as true that I fell in hate – but there was certainly an all-consuming plunge. A drawing-in, as if Delhi's attractive power exceeded mere like or dislike – for, in 2000, all that was comfortable and settled in the places I had lived before was here in turbulent preparation, and the city was a vortex of prophecy and possibility. I had fallen, by pure chance, into one of the great churns of the age and, without ever planning to do so, I stayed.

I am still there – here. Well over a decade later, my uncle in New Jersey still lugs my dusty possessions from basement to basement each time he moves house.

At the time I arrived, Delhi had gone through a decade of the changes resulting from the 'liberalisation' of 1991 – that is to say, the reforms which led to the dismantling of the closed and centrally planned economy that had been in place since India's independence, and which opened the country to global flows of products, media and capital.

As far as life in the city was concerned, that decade before

my arrival had been devoted mainly to what you could call changes to its 'software', while its 'hardware' remained relatively untouched. Middle-class houses resounded with new commercial – and foreign – TV programming, and unfamiliar dreams unfurled in their whitewashed rooms, but their original architecture – balconies for the winter and darkened rooms for the summer – remained intact. Shops now stocked the imported jeans previously accessible only to those with contacts abroad, but they were still housed in the old cramped quarters of Connaught Place – the British-era commercial arcade – or in the ramshackle community markets built in the 1960s. The great tumult of destruction and creation that has dominated my acquaintance with Delhi, the furious tearing-down of all that hardware in the pursuit of globalism – "From Walled City to World City" as one leading newspaper sloganned it – still lay in the future.

That tearing-down would remove much of what was settled about Delhi. It removed, certainly, the homes of hundreds of thousands of the poor, in order that shopping malls and apartment complexes could be erected in their place: this enormous transfer of wealth and resources from the city's poorest to its richest citizens turned many of the former into refugees in their own city, and made working-class life in general more edgy and precarious. Many of the businesses run by poorer entrepreneurs were destroyed in the 2000s in the name of aesthetic order – such as the informal tea stalls where you could order a cup of hot, sugary tea for 2 rupees [$0.04], sit on a plastic chair and feel mysteriously insulated from the eddies of people and traffic all around. But the wave of destruction also felled enormous numbers of houses of the affluent who, in their case, were cashing in on the real-estate boom of that decade by knocking down their properties and building blocks of apartments for sale. Built to maximise floor area and therefore sale price, these stern new blocks eschewed the generous terraces and balconies of the former architecture. Life retreated to the air conditioning inside, and so undid the cat's cradle of

inter-balcony conversations that had previously straddled the afternoons.

But in 2000 this was all still to come, and in much of the city, people continued to experience an older kind of time – a languorous breed of time imported from small towns and villages by Partition refugees, which still clung to the environs they had made for themselves all those years ago. The little apartment I found myself occupying that winter was in a neighbourhood originally allocated to such refugees, and looking out I could see them, aged now, wrapped in shawls and sitting out, unmoving, on roofs and balconies. The north Indian winter is cold, and the unheated, stone-floored houses, designed for summer heat, are the same temperature indoors as out; so my neighbours cherished the same winter comforts as their rural forbears: steaming ginger tea in their hands, and the pale afternoon sun on their faces. With their offspring out at work and their grandchildren at school, these venerable neighbours transmitted the serenity of another era to all around them: the men who purchased household glass and paper waste rode their bikes among the houses in unhurried arcs; the cries of the vegetable sellers who wheeled their barrows through the sun-dappled streets seemed patient and placid. Sometimes an old woman would call down to such a man, order some vegetables and agree on a price. She would lower the money down from the roof of her house in a basket on a string; he would take out the money and put in the goods, and slowly, ever so slowly, she would pull the basket up.

That bygone Delhi also shut down early. It has become difficult to remember, because the years after my arrival were occupied with the building of a glittering archipelago of cafés, restaurants, bars and clubs, and now one can scarcely move in the city on weekend evenings for the traffic jams of fervent bar-goers. But none of this existed in 2000, when an older conservatism ruled the city's nights, and when most areas were desolate after the shops shut around 9 p.m. My neighbours, certainly, who believed in the virtues of home and early rising,

had little truck with nights on the town. Profoundly shaped by the terrors and losses of Partition, this generation of Delhi's middle classes was frugal and suspicious of the outside, and spending money in restaurants – and eating food cooked by unknown hands – was anathema to them. It was their Delhi I arrived in, a Delhi which – quite unlike the New York I had just left – made little attempt to seduce or entertain, and which sent you home when the day was done.

Even for the bohemians I now found myself amongst, the evening entertainment was, as it had been for such people for decades, domestic. We did not go out because there was nowhere to go. Instead we gathered in various apartments – small, bare and, in those days, cheap – and, in rooms foggy with cigarette smoke, we sat on cushions on the floor around a motley assemblage of rum and whisky bottles, and we talked.

All conversation is infused with its moment; and it is through those nights of conversation that I realised I had landed in an extraordinary place and time.

The Delhi artists and intellectuals among whom I now found myself spoke at a pitch I have never encountered in another place or, indeed, in the same place since that period. Certainly, they were people of striking brilliance and originality, but the furious energy of their debates came also from the city outside. The old was dying, the new was in preparation, and we were living in the in-between, when nothing was resolved, everything was potential. Everyone was trying to absorb, to imagine, what the city – and their own lives – might become. They lived with empty stomachs, filling themselves on books and conversation – for forms of thought that are deemed formal and remote in stable times become intimate and necessary when all boundaries are lifted away. People need philosophy because they are at a loss for how to understand the upheaval that is themselves. They need more than they already have, more ideas, more words, more language – and they throw themselves into discourse, not caring if they don't sleep.

Some of this energy was exquisitely local. The city was changing in startling ways and there was a sense that life in this place would become marvellous: that it would be liberated from the constraints of the past, and many unknown fruits would sprout in its ground. Another literary newcomer to the city wrote a poem entitled, 'In the Early Days of the Delhi Metro',[1] a title which captured both the epochal feel of those years and also the considerable idealism aroused by the new subway system, whose first line opened shortly after my arrival in the city. Not only did the hi-tech trains and stations seem to inaugurate a new era of high-quality public infrastructure, implemented – *Yes, India can do it too!* – without any of the incompetence or corruption normally associated with such projects, but its effortless glide under the city, bypassing the competitive ruckus of the Delhi roads and sweeping easily through rich and poor areas alike, seemed to herald a new kind of mobility – social and economic too – for this town so enamoured, traditionally, of boundaries and hierarchies.

But the anticipation of those years had a much larger scope than the city itself. It sprang from a universal sense: *What will happen here will change the entire world*.

The people I met were cosmopolitans, and they were delighted to see walls coming down around India. They disdained nationalism and loved the new riches that reached them via the internet. But true to their own scepticism – and to the history of anti-imperial thought in this part of the world – they were also critical of the economic and social bases of Western societies – and the last thing they wanted from this moment of India's opening-up was that a similar society be established here. Much of their intellectual inspiration came from Western capitalism's internal critics: from American free software theorists, from the squatter movement in the Netherlands, from artists in Britain who challenged corporate food and property cultures, from Harvard and Oxford legal scholars who imagined alternative possibilities for the ownership of seeds, images and ideas. These

areas of inquiry could not have been more relevant to post-liberalisation India, where the big question, precisely, was *ownership*. There were so many areas of Indian life in which fundamental resources – certain kinds of land, knowledge and culture, for instance – had always been kept free of ownership, but as India signed up to international trade agreements, things tended towards the privatisation of these previously 'common' goods. Among my Delhi peers, there was a sense that corporate culture, which advertised itself as a recipe for plenty, would herald a new kind of scarcity if it were not fundamentally adapted for this place.

And there was a feeling that through such adaptation it would be possible to imagine new, hybrid forms of capitalism that provide inspiration not just here but everywhere. It was during this period, after all, that New York was struck by the devastation of 9/11 and, as Western societies began to feel the pressure of anxieties about Islam, their multiculturalism – and indeed their sense of superiority – seemed brittle. This multiculturalism might have embraced people from many backgrounds and beliefs, but it also expected them to adopt a deep level of homogeneity: everyone was supposed to abide by a single legal system, for instance, and to put away all practices inconsistent with the state's ethos of efficiency and sobriety. Delhi, where all 15 million people were accustomed to living alongside others whose lives bore absolutely no points of contact with their own, offered a spectacle of life immeasurably more varied and paradoxical than this – and yet it felt fluid and functional. This ability of the Third-World city to embrace utter unintelligibility within its own population, to say not, "Let me understand you so I may live alongside you," but "I will live alongside you without condition, for I will never understand you," seemed not only more profoundly humane but also more promising as a general ethos of globalisation, since it was clear, in these times of global interconnections, that we were all implicated in relationships with people we would never know or understand. Perhaps the Third-World city, long thought of as a place of desolation and despair,

might actually contain implicit forms of knowledge that all places could benefit from.

It was not all talk; for Delhi was erupting, too, with new culture. Even as I sat down to write my first book, realising that Delhi was a far more inspiring place than New York to do so, I was surrounded on every side by people doing similar things. One Delhi writer, Arundhati Roy, who was the first member of this scene to achieve international visibility, had recently won the Booker Prize; and suddenly it seemed that all over this unliterary city young people were writing books and movies. Other twenty- and thirty-somethings were starting publishing houses, magazines and newspapers. Cafés and bars decided they would attract more customers with poetry readings and film screenings.

Most dynamic of all was the nascent art scene, which brought together a motley collection of people attracted to Delhi by the quality of its universities or by the cheapness of its studio space – or simply by the city's whispered promise, so tangible in those days, that it could reveal to you your new self. I remember an experimental show in those early years in an abandoned house: there were pools of water on the floor, and the rigged-up lighting left one groping through the corridors. People were talking in the bathtub. Artworks were drawn on the walls of bathrooms or hidden in kitchen drawers. The show captured something of the city's disintegration in those days, and the new reality, uncanny and wonderful, that would emerge. The show was undeniably cool, and it did not seem outlandish to see Bianca Jagger there, picking her way through those damp rooms in a pristine white suit. People still talk about that evening, when we witnessed something of what was to come – for, within a few years, several of those artists had become darlings of the international art world. Art collectors everywhere wanted to own a piece of India's rise – something that would make tangible the rumours of eastern emergence, the soaring abstractions of the Bombay Stock Exchange – and they bought up steel and marble sculptures

whose massive scale seemed to speak of the epic circumstances from which they sprang. Artists moved into studios like aircraft hangars, they became multinational in their own right – they began to manufacture, like all good twenty-first-century enterprises, in China – and they sold their works for $1 million a time. Their rapid journey from marginal pranksters to wealthy powerhouses could not fail to impress even a society as artistically disinclined as this one, and artists were quickly welcomed into the pantheon of Indian celebrity. But people assumed, because they had become rich, that they had never thought of anything else. I had seen them before, however, when money was not yet on the horizon, when their only thought was how to give form to that great voice whose roar so many of us could hear, here, in the early days of the Delhi Metro.

A decade later, this utopian clamour was no more.

Those astonishing early years already seemed remote. The future had arrived and it was not very impressive. The city had been taken over by more dismal energies, and Delhi once again seemed peripheral and irrelevant. If we had ever thought that this city could teach the rest of the world something about twenty-first-century living, we were disappointed. The land grabs and corruption-as-usual that became so blatant in those later years, the extension of the power of elites at the cost of everyone else, the conversion of all that was slow, intimate and idiosyncratic into the fast, vast and generic – it made it difficult to dream of surprising futures any more. Money ruled this place as it did not even the 'materialistic' West, and the new lifestyle that we saw emerging around us was a spiritless, degraded copy of what Western societies had developed: office blocks, apartment blocks, shopping malls and, all around, the millions who never entered any of them except, perhaps, to sweep the floors.

An upsurge in urban violence, moreover, which displayed itself

most sensationally in a depressingly repetitive series of ghoulish sexual crimes, led to widespread consternation about the kind of society that was taking shape in this rapidly changing metropolis. As thousands took to the streets to demonstrate both their sympathy for the victims and their indignation at the vulnerability that everyone now felt in the streets of their city, Delhi became a place of bewildered introspection. Some had hoped, in these days of India's economic rise, that it would be possible to lay to rest forever those attitudes, dating from colonial times and affecting Indian and foreigner alike, which held that India's was an inferior and atavistic culture; the brutal reports in the city page of Delhi's newspapers gave many of them profound doubts as to the legitimacy of this hope. No longer was the city building a paradise to inspire the world; now it was trying to pull itself back from the brink of hell.

At the end of that decade, I decided to write a book about my adopted city, in part to understand the nature of this transition, which I had lived through alongside so many million others. It felt to me that very wild human energies were at play – those of money, change and ambition, but those also of anxiety, asceticism, and historical trauma – and that the reality of the city could only be discovered by asking residents how they actually lived and felt. Statistics were the favoured language for discussing India's change, for how else could one represent the existence of such a disparate billion? – but the smooth upward graphs of boom-time India expressed nothing at all of the intensity with which every new day landed on the residents of this city. That intensity derived from the deep contortion of daily life, which pulled people between exhilaration and horror, between old value systems and new, between self-realisation and self-annihilation. There was no hieroglyph to sum up the wrench of a globalising society, and indeed the enthusiasm for statistics, and the accompanying neglect of paradox, dream-life and doubt, was a part of the problem. It was too often assumed that the inner life of an apparently prospering population should be as smooth

as its external measures, but the accelerated changes of this emerging-world metropolis were often experienced as a violent and bewildering storm. Even as people made more money, things made less sense.

But the deficiency was not in things, necessarily, so much as in the imagination. It felt as though Delhi had somehow not been imagined yet, and unlike those who lived in much-imagined cities – Paris, New York, Mumbai – we in Delhi had very few codes with which to order the data-chaos around us. The 'city' did not yet exist: it remained for the present a mere force field of raw and raging stimuli – which was one of the reasons it left us all so petulant and exhausted. "Senseless!" cried the local newspapers with each new abomination, so reiterating one of Delhi's centuries-old ideas – that everything is ultimately without meaning. But I wondered if it was possible to turn this history on its head. Though we were caught in the vortex of change, there seemed to be meaning everywhere, and even the horror seemed to have something to say. Individuals, certainly, were ferociously convinced of their own significance, even as they despaired of the rest. I resolved to start with them, with the torrent of Delhi's inner life, and to seek there the rhythm, the history, the mesh, from which a city's lineaments might emerge. It did all mean something, I felt. There *was* a 'city' to be made.

But the book I began to write was only in part a book about Delhi. It was just as much a book about the global system itself. I did not feel that the scenes I witnessed around me were of concern only to this place. Nor did I feel that they were scenes of a 'primitive' part of the system, which was struggling to 'catch up' with the advanced West. They felt, rather, to be hypermodern scenes which were replicated, with some variations, elsewhere on the rockface of contemporary global capitalism. Indeed, the book I began to write felt like a report from the global future: for it seemed to be in those 'emerging' centres like this, which missed out on international capitalism's mid-twentieth-century

– its moment of greatest inclusiveness and hope – that one could best observe the most recent layer of global time. It was no longer in the West, I felt, but in places such as this, that people from all over the world could find their own destiny most clearly writ.

In this sense, I remained true to the universalism of my early years in Delhi. But it was a universalism of a darker kind, and one that had to work much harder to uncover the idealism within.

My father was anxious when I moved to Delhi. He had spent too much of his life escaping this country to watch his son migrate there with equanimity. But as time went on he began to see the possibilities in this unforeseen situation. I became a route back into his past, an emissary between his adult life and his youth. When he and my mother came to stay with me in Delhi, he was more animated than I had seen him in years. His teenage self emerged as he spoke Hindi again – a language he had hardly spoken since his Delhi days – and browsed the music stores for CDs of his beloved Hindustani classical music. In his enthusiasm he asked me to take him to see the house he had lived in during the time his family lived in Delhi in the 1950s.

We set out, he and my mother and I, for Karol Bagh. "15/64 Western Extension Area, Ajmal Khan Road," he chanted momentously in the back of the car. We drove through the wide, fluid streets of the bureaucratic area, turned off in the direction of Karol Bagh. The afternoon was drawing to a close and the streets were full of trucks loading and unloading at Karol Bagh's endless stores. The Punjabi traders who moved here in 1947 had prospered, and now the entire area was bursting at the seams: shops and warehouses extended out onto the streets, apartments had grown upwards and outwards into every