

The Bengal Tiger's Silent Roar

Anil Nijhawan

1

Malvyanagar, New Delhi, 1953

Tarun pulled his Atlas bicycle out from under the tarpaulin, gave the chrome hub dynamo a quick shine with a handkerchief, clipped the grease guards to his trouser legs, and mounted the bicycle. Earlier that morning, his brother had insulted him, called him a station coolie. What girl will want to marry someone who looks like a coolie, he had said. Burning with anger and hurt, he was going to the tailor to order a new shirt and trousers. I will show him who is a station coolie. He whacked the bell with the palm of his rugged hand, making it ring out riotously and began pedalling towards the market.

Pali, his nephew, hollered from the front steps, 'Uncle, are you going past the bus stop? May I have a pillion ride?'

'You can very well walk to the bus stop,' Tarun replied, waving a dismissive hand. 'You have legs.'

In the lane past the bus stop, the cobbler with a grey moustache looked up at him expectantly. A refugee from Lahore. He had set up the shoe mending trade under a

mature banyan tree and was keeping Tarun's ageing Bata shoes in wearable condition. At the scooter repair shop someone was throttling an old Lambretta engine, making it cough repeatedly. It reminded Tarun of old men with chronic bronchitis. At the crossroad, tinkling the bell furiously at the shoppers crossing his path, he felt a sudden drag on his bicycle as if an invisible force had taken control. He stepped up on the pedals, the effort forcing him off the seat. The bike wobbled. Fearing flat tyres or some other failing he applied the brake and whacked the bell again. More bloody expense, he thought. As he was dismounting, a cry resonated in his ear, 'Ha, ha, got you.'

He turned around sharply.

'Salim, you, you had me there for a moment,' Tarun cried, pleased to see his former workmate grinning roguishly and flicking his eyebrows. 'I thought there was something wrong with my bicycle.'

'Bicycle is all right, it is the rider who needs fixing,' Salim said, releasing the hold on the frame and laughing, exposing his paan-stained teeth. The moustache was the same, as was his confident manner. He was wearing a silk shirt fashionably unbuttoned at the chest.

'Come on, let us have something to eat,' Salim said, placing an arm on Tarun's shoulder.

Tarun's joy rapidly turned to anxiety. He would have to pay for the food since he owed Salim a favour for the gift of a portable Pye radio. 'But I – I have to do some urgent shopping,' Tarun said.

'Shopping? To buy vegetables *alu baigan gobi*?' Salim said, 'That's a woman's job. Haven't you got someone at home, a wife?'

Tarun hesitated. Does he think there is something wrong with me? 'Not vegetables, I am going to buy some clothes.'

'What's the urgency about clothes *jaar*? Are you going to a wedding?'

'Wedding? No, no, no,' Tarun said with exaggerated shake of the head, conscious of his own unwedded status. Twenty-eight years old and still a bachelor. What must people think? 'Let us go home, my mother will cook us a good dinner,' he said and instantly wanted to retract the invitation as it came to his mind Salim was not a Hindu. 'You are asking me to cook for a Muslim?' Mother would hiss sternly in Tarun's ears. The memory of the Hindu family in Lyallpur, who lived three doors away, being set upon by a Muslim mob yelling slogans, *Pakistan zindabad, Pakistan zindabad*, was still fresh in her head. She often talked of the terrifying screams of three young children whom she had known from birth, going silent one by one, and of the torching of the house. She never tired of reliving the past when in company of her friends in the neighbourhood, and the neighbours had their own tales of the horror of the partition of 1947.

'Home? Who wants to go home?' shouted Salim, 'We are going to eat out.'

'All right, let us go to Moti Mahal,' Tarun said, feeling guilty at his lapse in hospitality, 'it's the biggest restaurant in Malviyanagar. Their *kulfi falooda* is famous.'

'Oh, good.' Salim said rubbing his hands together.

Tarun pressed his hand to the shirt pocket where he kept the money. There was little money to feel though. It was the end of the month. Why should Salim not pay for the food? He is not short of money. He has a well-paid job as a head electrical technician and a lucrative side business with his father-in-law, a merchant of electrical goods.

‘Are you still with Mohindra Pal?’ Salim asked.

‘Yes, I am. Where else will I go?’ Tarun said impassively with a shake of the shoulders and then recalled the early days at Mohindra Pal & Co. Salim was the senior technician working on complicated installations. Tarun’s duties initially were to carry tools, ladders and be useful. He was grateful to Salim for going out of his way to show him the intricacies of the job. A year later, when Salim had announced he was leaving, Tarun was disappointed. The disappointment had turned to jealousy when Salim said his contract was with a luxurious hotel at double the pay.

‘Is he looking after you?’ Salim said.

Tarun nodded. What else could he say? He was grateful to even have a job. In fact, Tarun was astonished Mohindra Pal had agreed to take him on. The heart leaping like a mad frog, he had promised the boss he would work diligently and learn on the job. That was eighteen months ago. It was his first proper job. Like everyone else, he had taken to waking early, bathing, dressing, and cycling to work to arrive at a predetermined hour.

Tarun was too embarrassed to tell Salim the whole truth, that he had landed this job through his older sister, Savitri’s sagacity. A strange chain of events had occurred in the summer months, leading to a chance encounter with Mohindra Pal. And the businessman offered him a job without even an interview or a meeting.

*

Up at six, Savitri took off for the half-hour brisk walk to the Ganesh temple, to offer a prayer for Tarun. Dear God, please help my brother find a job, anything that will give him purpose in life. All his older brothers are educated and settled with good jobs and families. Tarun is the only one left behind. Why must that be?

She stood under blue, fluorescent tube lights and prayed with bowed head to the life-size marble statue of Lord Ganesh decked with garlands of jasmine and marigolds while the head priest in a flimsy dhoti chanted *shlokas* in Sanskrit. Beside him another priest, naked from waist up, was clanging a brass bell with mechanical dexterity and keeping an eye on the coins that fell on the donation mat. After she had finished praying, she unknotted a corner of her white sari, released a coin from its folds, dropped it on the mat and turned back. Outside, as she was slipping her foot into the sandal, her friend Kanta, also in a white sari, was withdrawing her foot from a green slip-on.

‘Oh Kanta,’ she said, ‘go on, go on, say your prayer. I will wait for you outside.’

Kanta returned five minutes later, and they started the walk back home, matching strides, comfortable in each other’s company.

While they were chatting, a dog crossed their path and then came back to lick Kanta's feet.

'*Yaeeek*, shoo, shoo,' Kanta yelped and pulled her foot away. The animal, a black-and-white mutt, looked up at Kanta with its round eyes, as if hurt by the rejection. Behind them, Savitri heard the temple bell ring out with sudden violence – dong, dong, dong – on the dying note of the priest's last shloka. In the conspicuously loud racket, she heard a thud. It was louder, as if a cymbal crash of an oompah band. Savitri stopped and turned around. What she saw horrified her. A little girl was lying in the middle of the road. An arm cranked under the body, and legs splayed. Four or five yards away was a black Morris Minor, embedded into roadside boulders, its engine still running. The driver was beating his head to the steering wheel, making the car horn bleep with each strike as if in accompaniment to the ding, dong of the temple bell.

Savitri rushed to the scene and picked up the girl, who was howling and beating her arms and legs. She asked people in the rapidly building crowd if they knew the girl. No one came forward. 'We should take her to the hospital,' Savitri said to Kanta.

'Let us take her to Dr Mallick. He is not far,' Kanta suggested.

They extricated themselves from the crowd, which was now threatening to beat up the driver. 'Have you no shame, you son of a donkey, drinking alcohol this time of the morning, when the world is praying to their Gods?'

At the end of the lane, they saw a parked auto-rickshaw and clambered onto it. 'Dr Mallick's surgery, quick, quick,' Savitri yelled at the confused rickshaw driver puffing on a cigarette, 'what are you gaping at, come on move.'

The surgery was already packed. Savitri rushed in with the girl and demanded to see Dr Mallick.

'Madam, the doctor is with a patient. You wait for your turn,' snapped the compounder busily scribbling something on a label attached to a cobalt glass bottle, his white coat stained yellow and orange.

'There has been an accident. This child needs attention instantly. Tell him I am Savitri Sehgal.'

'But you must wait, *na*,' the compounder mumbled irritably, 'they all want to see him first... no patience.'

'Don't you understand, you fool, this is an emergency,' Savitri screamed, making heads turn in the waiting room and on hearing the commotion, Dr Mallick lifted the curtain to his office and put his head out. 'What's the matter?'

'Doctor *sahib*, a car hit this child. You must examine her straight away.'

'*Arre* Sunita, what are you doing here?' doctor exclaimed seeing the pale, frightened face of the child in Savitri's arms.

'You know her?'

'Yes, yes, I know the family well. I have been to their house.'

'Then you must inform them immediately because I don't know who she is or where she lives.'

A month later Savitri was hopping from foot to foot on the sun scorched concrete while hanging washing on the clothesline. A radio in someone's house came on with a deafening blast. She recognised the song from the film *Baazi* – *aaj ki raat piya dil na todo* – and began humming under her breath. Presently, she heard a knock on the door and someone calling, 'Is anyone home?'

She threw the last of the garments on the line and hurried to the front. A stranger, hands joined reverentially, broad-shouldered, with greasy hair neatly combed and a side parting, was standing at the door.

Savitri shrank. Oh no, not another volunteer asking for donations for the Malvyanagar Dussehra festival. It will be the biggest and the best this year, they always say, sister, give generously.

She was about to ask him to go away, but the man spoke first. 'Are you Savitri *behan*?' he asked.

'Yes, I am,' she said, adjusting her sari.

'Savitri Sehgal?'

'Yes, yes.'

'Then I must thank you for saving the girl.'

'*Achha*, you mean little Sunita.'

He bowed his head a little deeper. 'I have had a word with her, forbidden her to run around on the streets alone.'

'How are you connected to Sunita?' Savitri asked.

Humbly, the man replied, 'She is my daughter; my wife's daughter and I hope yours too. Without your prompt action, who knows what would have happened to her? We are most grateful to you.'

She saw the resemblance then. The shape of his nose and cheek bones were like Sunita's. She noticed his immaculately pressed shirt, with no loose threads or stains, and his shoes shining like a trooper's. 'Come inside. It is hot. Would you like a drink of lemonade?'

'No, no, no, thank you. I just came by to let you know Sunita is fine, shaken but no broken bones, thank God. Doctor *sahib* took loving care of her. I went to the police station, had the case against the car owner dropped. He was not to blame; my girl had foolishly dashed into the road without looking. You know what children are like. She was chasing her dog. Foolish girl.'

'A black and white puppy?'

'Yes, she calls him Spotty.'

'Hmm. Does she have any brothers and sisters?'

'A brother and an older sister. She is of marriageable age,' he said.

'How old is she?'

'Sangeeta is twenty-six.' He did not elaborate, did not say if she was working, or sitting idle at home, or in higher education, nor did he say she was a *laadli kuri*, a pampered daughter. Twenty-six, still without a husband, there had to be something wrong with her, Savitri concluded.

'Now I must get back to work, the men are waiting for me.'

‘Where are you from?’ she asked, now keen to learn a little more about the family and the daughter, Sangeeta.

‘My family is from Sargoda, but I was born in Delhi,’ he said and looked impatiently at his watch.

‘What line of work are you in?’ Savitri asked.

‘I am an electrical contractor Savitriji. Our work is with businesses and shops. If I can do anything for you, you must let me know.’

‘There is something you could do,’ she said, ‘my young brother is looking for work. He is not very educated, but strong and hardworking. Could you find him something to do? I will be grateful.’

‘It will be done Savitriji,’ he said without hesitation, ‘ask him to see me. My name is Mohindra Pal.’

That is how Tarun entered the world of the employed, a wage for a day’s work, of give and take, understanding how the wheel of commerce turned on its axis. It was a shock to his system, but he persevered.

*

Moti Mahal was buzzing. Laughter, animated conversations, spoons scraping plates, clatter of tin dishes, a radio tuned to popular music periodically breaking into crude commercials. The smell of cooked food drifts from the kitchen into the main hall. They took a corner table facing each other.

‘I thought you were taking me to some place air-conditioned, like Gaylord,’ Salim said, eyeing the surroundings with disdain.

‘It’s not so bad here,’ Tarun pointed at the ceiling fans above their heads and pushed a plate of cucumber and onions salad towards him, ‘here, try this.’ He gazed at the mirror on the wall behind Salim’s head and watched the customers’ reflections move in and out of the roses and vines engraved along its edges.

Salim dived into the food as soon as it was set on the table, tearing off pieces of roti and scooping up yellow dhal or meat. ‘Wah, what tasty,’ he said, looking up and gesturing with his hand, making a circle with forefinger and thumb, ‘first class. But why aren’t you eating?’

‘*Baas*, I am full now,’ Tarun replied, shaking his head.

‘Eat like a man, have a *paratha*... waiter.’ He raised a dhal-stained finger to catch the waiter’s attention.

‘No, no *paratha*.’ Tarun pulled Salim’s hand back down to the table.

He had been keeping a tally of the bill, making sure it did not exceed the amount of money in his shirt pocket. ‘I am full, *bilkul*,’ he said patting the stomach.

‘Why do you keep looking this way and that way. Is something bothering you?’

Tarun feigned surprise, ‘bothering me? nothing is bothering me.’

‘*Abe saale*, you can talk to Uncle Salim. Didn’t I teach you how to strip a cable and solder, and a hundred other things? Didn’t I?’ Salim said, acting like an older brother, though both were of the same age.

‘Yes, you did.’

‘How many brothers and sisters do you have?’

‘Seven.’

‘Married?’

‘Yes, all of them.’ He waited for the inevitable next question: so why are you not married? How could he explain the tyranny of his family, who considered him unqualified for marriage? As if one must first sit an exam, obtain a certificate, and then face a panel of judges. In his case, the judges were the family members, each with their own prejudices and vested interests.

But Salim surprised him. He glanced slyly to his left and right and did a hand gesture. ‘Doesn’t that thing stand up?’

‘Shh, keep your voice down.’ Tarun blushed. Twenty-eight years old. He had never tried to befriend a girl, never touched anyone in an intimate manner, fearing they would rebuff him. When in the company of young girls, he busied himself with mundane tasks. Even on the street, in public places, he deliberately kept his gaze away from attractive girls, in case they accused him of ogling, ‘you dirty old man, have you no shame?’ Throughout his childhood, he had known only one way to deal with life: to lie low and remain invisible. When he was eighteen, he used to watch his younger sister, Usha, confident and bubbly, flirt with boys who came to the house. He used to wonder why no girl showed similar interest in him. Now aged twenty-eight, he had stopped wondering. He often looked without emotion at the courting couples on park benches or those coming out of cinema halls holding hands. Gone was the hope that he could be one of those lucky ones on the bench leaning into a beautiful female.

‘You want to do it? Eh?’ Salim said suggestively, ‘Come with me, I know girls. They are so beautiful; *bachoo*, you will start drooling when you see them.’

Tarun looked around him and then, picking up a tumbler of lassi, took it to his lips. It was empty. He peered inside the tumbler, puzzled, and then brought it back down to the table, a bit too hard, with a crack. His hand began trembling. He clasped the tumbler as though it would give him support. The other hand searched for something to latch on to. He knew what was coming but could not articulate. The mouth opened and shut. The knees buckled, and he sank to the floor. The chair screeched. He saw a fleeting image of Salim springing up, and people stepping away from him, disgust showing on their faces. A plate crashed to the floor. ‘He is a drunkard, throw him out,’ someone said.

And then nothing.

The words he heard next were: what happened to you? He forced his eyes to focus. Saw Salim’s face. It was peering into his. Too close. And then he realised Salim was on his hands and knees. It came to Tarun that he had not taken the medicine. He slid his hand in his pocket, searching frantically for the small glass bottle.

Salim repeated, ‘What happened to you?’

Tarun nodded. ‘Epilepsy fit. I forgot my medicine, left it at home. How long was I gone?’

‘Too long,’ Salim said, ‘what a frightening sight.’

‘I am all right now,’ Tarun said, ‘feeling better.’

‘You don’t look all right.’

A big man in a white kurta came over, waving his arms as if herding a flock of goats. ‘Take him outside, take him outside, give him fresh air... come, come, come,’ he said.

‘*Abe saale*, you gave me such a shock, I have lost my appetite now. At least you could have warned me beforehand.’

‘How was I to know? I have not had one... in eighteen months... I am telling the truth... believe me.’

They walked to Tarun’s bicycle, and before parting company, Salim advised him to eat butter parathas, chicken, and mutton. ‘It will make you strong, like me.’ He gave his bulging biceps a hefty pat. ‘All this epileptic business will go away, and your penis will become strong and stiff like this.’ This time, he swung his fist like a boxer, demonstrating an uppercut.

Tarun smiled. ‘No chance, my mother is a strict vegetarian. She doesn’t cook meat and will not let me eat either.’

‘So, you don’t have to tell her. You come with me to the Khans in Paharganj. He makes the best mutton biryani in Delhi. *Hanb* let us go there on Sunday. Afterwards, we will go to meet the girls. What do you say?’

Unable to bring himself to say yes, he just nodded and instantly felt a stab of guilt in the chest as if he had already done something immoral and dirty.

‘Good, meet me at Ajmeri Gate.’ Salim slapped Tarun on the shoulder. ‘And give the penis a good spit and polish. Get it ready for action.’

Tarun walked home feeling weak and yet exhilarated for agreeing to meet the girls, a strange kind of sensation, one he had not experienced before. Later, he reflected on the fits he had had over the years. When he was young, his friends used to tease him, ‘a *bhooth*, ghost has possessed Tarun,’ and then run away fearing they too would catch the ‘ghost,’ as if it were contagious. The most embarrassing, yet memorable, was at his younger sister, Usha’s, wedding. It came without a warning. Momentary disorientation, and then he was flat on the floor. His brother described it to him later, ‘You were thrashing about like a landed fish.’

Usha’s wedding was a lavish affair lasting three days. At her insistence, the reception took place in the lobby of the newly opened Manor Hotel. Instead of a brass band from the bazaar she had booked a six-piece orchestra to play dance music. Even at the *ladies’ sangeet*, she had hired musicians with a suitable repertoire to entertain the guests. A cocktail party was organised to welcome the bridegroom and his family. The guests arrived attired in the most elegant chiffon saris, sherwanis and three-piece suits. The air was thick with small talk, laughter, and shouted greetings. Aroma of rose petals and imported whiskey hung in the air. Friends who had been away for months fell upon each other with loud cries. Relatives who met only at weddings or funerals embraced tearfully and exchanged the latest news of distant cousins. One or two Tarun had met before; others were vaguely familiar faces on fading photographs tucked in the family album. Servants in white livery were serving canapés. The tables were laden with exquisite varieties of food. Tarun, in a navy-blue suit borrowed from his brother Krishan, with instructions to keep the platters

topped up, was moving around the tables. Sister-in-law Pushpa, whom he disliked and feared equally, handed him an empty platter and whispered instructions in his ear. Tarun nodded vacantly, making out he was listening while staring at Mrs Verma's rolls of fat bulging around her bra strap. She was Usha's former schoolteacher. 'Don't embarrass us, you fool, now go,' Pushpa hissed. In response, Tarun simply keeled over as if cut down with an axe. He fell heavily on guests' feet, the platter smashing into pieces and began rolling on the ground, jerking his shoulders, feet thrashing wildly. The news travelled to Dr Mallick, who was cracking jokes, surrounded by an all-male cluster of guests, a rose bud in the jacket's buttonhole and a glass of whiskey in hand. He supervised Tarun's removal to a hotel room. This bit Tarun remembered clearly, for he had come around by then. His face washed, a wet napkin on his forehead, the doctor forced medication down his throat.

The next morning, Tarun tried to picture the appalling scene. He could vaguely remember Pushpa whispering in his ear. 'What did I do?' he asked.

'What did you do?' Usha lashed at him, 'I will tell you what you did. You spoiled the cocktail party, made a mess of it, after so much planning had gone into it. What must Prakash's family think of us, that Usha has a brother who is an idiot, a hysteric? They should put you away, lock you up.'

'Yes, lock me up, Usha, lock me up,' Tarun cried and lay face down on the ground with legs tucked under him and began knocking his head against the solid floor.

Seeing Tarun on the floor, Usha began howling. When Suraj, the elder brother from Calcutta, came to investigate, Tarun bawled, '*bharaji*, take me away, lock me up, lock me up.'

'What is going on here? Stop it, stop it, both of you. Tonight, of all nights, we don't need any more hassles.' Suraj pulled Tarun off the floor and yelled at a servant, 'Bring him some icy water, now.'

'And you,' he said to Usha, 'go to your room, not another word.'
Usha hissed at Tarun, 'Don't you dare do that at the wedding. Don't you dare.'