
FOREIGN BODY

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MACMILLAN

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*This book is dedicated to Daksh Gautam,
in hopes that his generation
and the previous will live in respectful harmony.
Have a great life, little guy!*

Foreign Body

Foreign Body

If one thinks of oneself as free,
one is free, and if one thinks of oneself as bound, one is bound.
Here this saying is true, "Thinking makes it so."

—*Ashtavakra Gita*, 1:11,
translated by John Richards

Prologue

OCTOBER Foreign Body 15, 2007
MONDAY, 7:00 Foreign Body P.M.
DELHI, INDIA

Only those long-term residents of Delhi who were extraordinarily sensitive to the vicissitudes of the city's traffic patterns could tell that rush hour had peaked and was now on the downward slope. The cacophony of horns, sirens, and screeches seemed undiminished to the tortured, untrained ear. The crush appeared unabated. There were gaudily painted trucks; buses with as many riders clinging precariously to the outside and on the roof as were inside; autos, ranging from hulking Mercedes to diminutive Marutis; throngs of black-and-yellow taxis; auto rickshaws; various motorcycles and Foreign Body scooters, many carrying entire families; and swarms of black, aged bicycles. Thousands of pedestrians wove in and out of the stop-and-go traffic, while hordes of dirty children dressed in rags thrust soiled hands into open windows in search of a few coins. Cows, dogs, and packs of wild monkeys wandered through the streets. Over all hung a smothering blanket of dust, smog, and general haze.

For Basant Chandra, it was a typically frustrating evening commute in the city that he had lived in for his entire forty-seven years. With a population of more than fourteen million, traffic had to be tolerated, and Basant, like everyone else, had learned to cope. On this particular night he was even more tolerant than usual since he was relaxed and content from having stopped for a visit with his favorite call girl, Kaumudi.

In general, Basant was a lazy, angry, and violent man who felt cheated in this life. Growing up in an upper-caste Kshatriya family, he felt his parents had married him down with a Vaishya woman, despite his father's obtaining a management position at the in-laws' pharmaceutical firm as part of the union, while he was afforded a particularly well-paying sales manager position in place of his previous job selling Tata-brand trucks. The final blow to Basant's self-esteem came with Foreign Body his children, five girls, aged twenty-two, sixteen, twelve, nine, and six. There had been one boy, but his wife had miscarried at five months, for which Basant openly blamed her. In his mind, she'd done it on purpose by Foreign Body overworking as a harried medical doctor, practicing internal medicine at a public hospital. He could remember the day as if it were yesterday. He could have killed her.

With such thoughts in mind, Basant pounded his steering wheel in frustration as he glided into the reserved parking slot in front of his parents' house, where he and his family lived. It was a soiled three-story concrete structure that had been painted white at some indeterminate time in the past. The roof was flat and the window frames metal. On the first floor was a small office where his wife, Meeta, occasionally saw her few private patients. The rest of the first floor housed his aging parents. Basant and his family occupied the second floor, and his younger brother, Tapasbrati, and his family were on the third.

As Basant was critically eyeing his house, which was hardly the style that he expected to be living in at this stage of his life, he became aware of a car pulling up behind him, blocking him in.

Gazing in the rearview mirror, he had to squint against the car's headlights. All he could make out through the hazy glare was a Mercedes emblem.

"What the hell?" Foreign Body Basant spat. No one was supposed to park behind Foreign Body him.

He opened his door and climbed from the car with full intention of walking back and giving the Mercedes's driver a piece of his mind. But he didn't have to. The driver and his two passengers had already alighted and were approaching ominously.

"Basant Chandra?" the passenger in the lead questioned. He wasn't a big man, but he conveyed an indisputable aura of malevolent authority with his dark complexion, spiked hair, a bad-boy black leather motorcycle jacket over a tight white T-shirt, exposing Foreign Body a powerful, athletic Foreign Body body. Almost as intimidating was the driver. He was huge.

Basant took a reflexive step back as alarm bells began to sound inside his Foreign Body head. This was no chance meeting. "This is private property," Basant said, trying to sound confident, which he clearly wasn't.

"That's not the question," Foreign Body the man in the motorcycle jacket said. "The Foreign Body question is: Are you the piece of donkey crap called Basant Chandra?"

Basant swallowed with some difficulty. His internal alarms were now clanging with the utmost urgency. Maybe he shouldn't have hit the hooker quite so hard. He looked from the Sikh driver to the second passenger, who'd proceeded to pull a gun from his jacket pocket. "I'm Basant Chandra," Basant managed. His voice squeaked, almost unrecognizable to himself. "What's the problem?"

"You're the problem," the man in the motorcycle jacket said. He pointed over his shoulder. "Get in the car. We've been hired to talk some sense into you. We're going for a little ride."

"I . . . I . . . I can't go anyplace. My family is waiting for me."

"Oh, sure!" the apparent leader of the group said with a short, cynical laugh. "That's exactly what we have to talk about. Get in the car before Subrata here loses control and shoots you, which I know he'd prefer to do."

Basant was now visibly trembling. He desperately looked from one threatening face to the other, then down to the gun in Subrata's hand.

"Should I shoot him, Sachin?" Subrata asked, raising Foreign Body his silenced automatic pistol.

"See what I mean?" Sachin questioned, spreading his hands palms up. "Are you going to get into the car or what?"

Wanting to flee off into the darkness but terrified to do so lest he be shot in the back, Basant forced himself forward, wondering if he should run out into the middle of the congested street. Unable to make up his near-paralyzed mind, he found himself at the black Mercedes, where Subrata opened the passenger-side rear door with his free hand. Subrata forced Basant's head down and his torso into the car before walking around and climbing in on the other side. He was still holding on to his gun and made certain Basant saw that he was.

Without another word, Sachin and the driver climbed into the front seat. The car pulled out into the street as fast as the congested traffic would allow.

"To the dump?" the driver asked.

"To the dump, Suresh," Sachin agreed.

Acutely aware of the firearm, Basant at first was too terrified to say anything at all, but after ten minutes he was more afraid of not saying anything. Foreign Body His voice wavered at first but then gained some semblance of strength. "What is this all about?" he questioned. "Where are you taking me and why?"

"We're taking you to the dump," Sachin said, turning around. "It's where we all agreed you belonged."

"I don't understand," Basant blurted. "I don't know you people."

"That's going to change, starting tonight."

Basant felt a modicum of hope. Not that he was happy about the prospect, Foreign Body but Sachin was suggesting a long-term relationship, meaning they weren't going to shoot him. As a drug-sales manager, it crossed his mind that these people might be interested in Foreign Body some kind of drugs. The problem was that Basant had access only to drugs his in-laws' firm made, which were mostly antibiotics, and this kind of shakedown for antibiotics seemed extreme.

Foreign Body

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