

BETWEEN THE SPECIES



ABSTRACT

Caste, class, race, and



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1

I saw him first in the spring, lying by the road as we drove through the outskirts of the arid village of Jagatpur in western India. Jagatpur stood like a speed bump between nearby Ahmedabad's urban sprawl and the outer state highway that circumnavigated the city. A few single-storey dwellings, once various shades of ochre and pistachio but now dulled to dun, spilled across the road onto the dry plateau south of the village. The Gujarati plains blanched in the furnace of the pre-monsoon heat as it approached its peak, parching life out of the earth and turning the landscape a depleted shade of beige. The emaciated mass lay motionless in the dirt a few yards from the road, a coat of filthy brown fur stretched taut over ridges of spine and angles of pelvis. As we drove by, I wondered how long the dead dog had been there lying in a heap on the roadside.

The road lay along the route to a college where I'd enrolled



again. I'd spotted a scrawny puppy near the roadside tea stall in Jagatpur and wanted to stop and feed him.

The makeshift kiosk, more a large cupboard than a shop,



legs were bloody, rubbed raw from constant dragging over the rough ground. His spine, ribs, and hipbones jutted out from his skeletal frame. I couldn't believe he was still alive, let alone



As we approached Jagatpur, I scarcely breathed. I started scanning both sides of the road for Crumplestiltskin. What if I couldn't find him? What if he'd disappeared, or, worse yet, already succumbed to his injuries? Slowing down, we passed the little tea stall and crept forward. Ahead on the right, camouflaged in the dirt, lay the familiar brown heap of fur. I gasped. "There, Mukesh! He's there! On the right. Let's pass him and turn around."

We did a U-turn and pulled up close to Crumplestiltskin. As I jumped out, Crumplestiltskin raised his head, saw me, and eyed me eagerly, expecting a good meal. Just like we'd rehearsed, Mukesh left the car idling, hopped out, and went around to open the rear door. My heart still beating like a battle drum, I went straight to the dog, took a deep breath, and with my left hand gently took hold of his scruff. To my immense and immediate relief, Crumplestiltskin looked straight at me with his dark, liquid eyes and offered not a shred of resistance. I exhaled, then scooped up his broken, filthy hind end with my other arm, hurried the few steps to the car, and placed him on the quilt laid out in the back. Mukesh shut the door, we jumped back in, and sped down the road before anyone even noticed we'd been there. Mission accomplished. Spent adrenaline



carried him through to the back garden through the servants' gate, and placed him on a clean blanket in the shade. Lakshmi, our housekeeper, stood cemented on the patio, glaring at the dog with undisguised revulsion.

I went to get some water and a bowl of food but when I returned, Crumplestiltskin had already fallen into a deep sleep, as if the blanket and the garden patch on which it lay were the nurturing arms of a mother pulling her child close and lulling him to blessed, safe, and healing rest. It was as if, somehow, Crumplestiltskin knew he had finally reached safe haven.

2

“Do you want Lakshmi to stay on and work for you?” asked Mr. Desai when we first moved in. Mr. Desai was the owner of the house we'd rented in Kalhaar, an upscale gated community outside Ahmedabad. He was tall and fit, a handsome, a fluent



Mr. Desai had tasked Lakshmi with keeping out would-be intruders and cleaning the house daily, for which he paid her a meager salary. He'd been trying to teach Lakshmi's son, Lala, to look after the garden—to water the flowers and the parts of the lawn that didn't get adequately irrigated by the dodgy automatic sprinklers. The pond also needed daily topping up because it leaked, and the resident turtle was unable to get in and out unless the water was level with the edge. He was aiming to get Lala qualified to join Kalhaar's team of *malis*, or gardeners. "That way," he said, "Lala will learn some skills that will give him a career option." Unsurprisingly for a boy of his age, whatever that was—he was small but had the beginnings of a moustache—Lala did not display much interest in the task.

"You will need servants," said Mr. Desai, "someone to clean, a cook, and a watchman at least?"

I giggled nervously. I was unprepared for the question. The truth was that no, I didn't want servants. I wasn't averse to paying for someone to help with house cleaning now and again, but I didn't want to become a *memsahib* with a retinue of live-in servants. It made me uncomfortable. It struck me as servitude. My mother had been a *memsahib*, and I, a *miss-sahib*, back when my family had lived in India and Pakistan when I was a teenager. I remembered how my mother described the throngs of servants she'd had to supervise on our various overseas postings in the diplomatic corps. "It was like having a houseful of teenagers," she said, recounting what she'd perceived as one of the hardships of diplomatic life.

My intention had been to avoid the colonial quagmire altogether, as if by forgoing servants, I could retain some form of "racial innocence" (Kim 2015, 185) or position outside of



power. That illusion quickly crumbled. By declining Lakshmi's services, I'd be depriving her of a livelihood. By employ-



Mr. Desai about her daily routine, and what her responsibilities should be.

“You have to train her,” said Mr. Desai. “These simple village folk”—by which he meant that subset of the rural poor who came from the low end of India’s socio-economic scale—“are the best to have working for you. They are honest. They know nothing, but they are hard working. The city people are lazy and dishonest, and they will cheat you.” He told us about the previous tenant, a well-to-do foreigner who indulged his



all the more sought-after as a restorative oasis, and rendered it a preferred address for some of Ahmedabad's elite. Kalhaar was not the newest such community, but it struck me as the nicest. The ambiance was so peaceful—nurturing even—when compared to the frenetic atmosphere in the city.

A dreamy, unreal quality permeated the neighbourhood. The gentle hues of the houses—muted peach, soft beige, hushed Jaipur pink—and their broad verandas sat amid oases of green and colour bursts of bougainvillea, gulmohar, and jacaranda. Bursts of jasmine soothed the senses. The many fruit and fow-





“I have no idea how long he’s been this emaciated,” I said. “The people in the village said the accident happened a week before we spoke with them, so he may have been hit about two weeks ago.”

I recounted the details of how I’d found him as Dr. Giri palpated his back, took his temperature, checked his teeth, eyes, and ears, and listened to his lungs and heart with her stethoscope, Piccolo all the while emitting the occasional whine and trying to wriggle off the table. She was skillful and gentle, interacting with Piccolo as if she knew him well. Her assistant, the man who’d ushered us in, came and helped me hold him in place as Dr. Giri examined him. She proceeded to clean each of his hind legs with wet gauze and antiseptic. I winced as she softened and worked away the mud and dried blood. I was shocked to see how much of the skin he’d rubbed raw dragging himself around. The pink flesh finally emerged oozing and bloody in places.

After cleaning his wounds, Dr. Giri prescribed rest and a special feeding plan. I was to wash Piccolo’s hind legs daily with warm water and liquid antiseptic soap. Dr. Giri instructed me to buy children’s cotton socks, insert a drawstring in the top of each, and put them on his hind legs to give the abraded skin a chance to heal. She was obviously familiar with this kind of injury. As for the prognosis, Dr. Giri said we would have to wait and see. She was uncertain as to whether the extended period of starvation had damaged his organs.

“Is this a case in which you would consider euthanasia?” I asked, holding my breath.

“No, no, not at all,” replied Dr. Giri. “This kind of thing happens here. It’s terrible. The dogs suffer so much of trauma. But





incomprehensible to me. He was an entire universe all his own. He mattered. Period.

To name another, at its most basic, is to acknowledge that that 'other' matters, that the being named has significance in their own right, independent of the one doing the naming. In the Genesis creation story, God brings all the animals—every beast of the field and every bird of the air—to Adam one by one “to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living soul, that was its name” (Genesis 2.19 Jubilee Bible). It had always struck me as odd that various commentators interpreted that acr

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“You gorgeous boy,” I said to him, stroking his soft head and ears. How enchanted I was to be sitting in this place, among these creatures, in this oasis carved out of the Gujarati desert. “Snapshots of Eden,” I thought to myself.

I imagined the original Eden as low maintenance, but our mini-Eden demanded active manual work on my part. In my post-Fall paradise perfection was always degenerating. “Piccolo” became “Pickles,” which soon became “Pickles the Incontinent of the Subcontinent.” When he’d peed on the quilt in the back of the vehicle the day I brought him home, I put it down to nerves. After all, he’d never been in a car before. On his second day, on the trip to the vet, he did the same thing. At home, when I picked him up to take him to the bathroom to wash his leg wounds as instructed by Dr. Giri, he peed all over me. Thereafter I learned to carry him facing away from me.

Pickles’ injuries had left him with little in the way of control of his bodily functions. Some years prior, the landlord had glassed in the broad, L-shaped, rear veranda of the house with floor-to-ceiling windows and installed glass doors at each end. The space looked out over the garden and pond. It had a *jungle* but protected feel. I loved it. We set up our living room at one end of the L, and I my desk and work area at the other. The advantage for Pickles (and me) was that there was no carpet in the room. The veranda floor was made of smooth tile. Pickles was able to glide across it easily, pulling himself along with his two front legs. When he had accidents, he left an easily discernible trail I would clean up with paper towels and spray cleaner.

“Sounds like ‘urine a pickle,’” wrote my punster friend when I said I found myself spending a lot of time on my hands and knees cleaning the floor.



The little cotton socks on Pickles' hind legs acted like swabs, which meant I had to wash his legs and change his socks regularly. It also meant I had to wash a pile of smelly socks every-





gauze firmly around each band. They worked perfectly. The dirty sock pile was replaced with a dirty leg band pile.

In the servants' quarters, under the covered patio was a concrete utility area with a faucet and a drain. Each time I changed Pickles' soiled leg bands, I would throw them down near the drain, as I had done previously with his socks. When we first got Pickles, I'd been washing the dirty sock pile myself, once a day. Contrary to the custom in local households, we didn't have Lakshmi doing the laundry or cooking simply because we were used to doing it ourselves. Not having to mime out every instruction also saved considerable depletion of my creative battery and charade skills. After a while I thought I might enlist Lakshmi's help with the washing of Pickles' socks. One day I motioned to her to come over to the faucet and watch me demonstrate.

"*Dekhiye,*" I said, meaning "please look" in Hindi, hoping she would understand. I took one of the dirty socks, rinsed it out under the tap, then soaped and scrubbed it. I rinsed it, wrung out the excess water, and hung it on the adjacent laundry line. I worked my way through the small pile till six clean wet socks hung from the line. I went and got Mukesh and asked him to explain to Lakshmi that I would like her to wash Pickles' socks daily, as I had shown her.

A short exchange ensued in Gujarati between Lakshmi and Mukesh.

"What is she saying?" I asked.

"She will do it," he replied.



I suspected I didn't have the whole story, but that was all they divulged.

When the leg bands took the place of the socks, I again asked Mukesh for help explaining to Lakshmi that she was now to wash the leg bands the same way she'd washed the socks.

As soon as Mukesh conveyed the message, Lakshmi burst into a spirited tirade that sent Mukesh into fits of laughter. His laughter was contagious, and I too started to giggle. "What is she saying?" I asked him.

Between convulsive howls and snorts, he struggled to explain. "She say this dog is having disease. This cloth is having very bad smell."

Lakshmi held Pickles' dirty leg band up for Mukesh to



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made a display of cooing over them when we first brought them home.

Mukesh proceeded to relay my question, to which Lakshmi offered her reply. “Yes, madam,” said Mukesh. “Lakshmi like Button and Penelope. Very nice dogs. She say Pickle not nice. Pickle is disease.”

“Does she know that Button and Penelope are also street dogs?” I asked.

A brief exchange ensued between Mukesh and Lakshmi. Mukesh turned to me. “Lakshmi say Button and Penelope are very nice, not disease.”

I asked Mukesh to explain to Lakshmi that Pickles was not diseased, but that he had been hit by a car. That was how he became paralyzed. His socks and leg bands stunk because he had no control over his—here I made a “pssss” sound and acted out a dog lifting its leg to urinate. “The smell is urine, not infection,” I said.

Mukesh erupted in laughter again, then translated. Lakshmi remained unmoved.

I said to Mukesh, “Explain to Lakshmi that Pickles is like my baby, and this cloth is like his diapers. He is not diseased. He has smelly laundry just like a baby.”

After Mukesh’s explanation, Lakshmi burst into another animated rant, sending Mukesh into a new round of hysterics. What emerged was that Lakshmi’s objection to Pickles was not simply due to his lack of breeding and his smelly laundry. Lakshmi found Pickles repulsive because he was paralyzed.



Disability is stigmatized everywhere. India is no exception. Reports abound of people with disabilities in India experiencing the same kind of treatment as those who endure caste-based discrimination (Harris 2014). The differently abled, like *Dalits*, are frequent victims of sexual violence. And the police are less inclined to investigate cases of sexual assault against disabled women, as is the case with *Dalit*





by three dogs from her village. There the girl eventually gave birth and then returned home, leaving the infant behind. The dogs, however, stayed and protected the newborn from predators throughout the night. In the morning, a man drawn to the

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carts, cows, dogs, and other scavengers who drew their life-blood from the city's veins. I appreciated the vibrant urban rhythms, but living in the midst of it had become overwhelming.

one believes—or rather, what one would like to believe one believes—and what one’s actions show one believes” (Lahiri 2017, 200).

Frequent scenes of stark extremes played out before me. In Ahmedabad’s merciless traffic, at the peak of the searing pre-monsoon heat, a sinewy man in a grimy T-shirt and lungi strained to pull a wooden cart laden with heavy construction equipment. A politician in his white chauffeur-driven Ambassador car pushed in alongside him, horn blasting, forcing the man off the road. Elsewhere in the city, three young men thigh-deep in putrid sewage channels used their bare hands to unclog toxic city drains while a freshly pressed bureaucrat stood off to the side issuing instructions. My dysphoria was compounded by the seeming indifference of many to the oppressive status quo. I didn’t like who I was becoming. I didn’t want to become hardened to misery, but I could feel a bitter edge creeping in. One would have to become hard simply to survive. My response was to try to escape.

Sitting in the secluded back garden in the cool of the morning, watching marauding langurs frolic in the tree branches above while the dogs dozed in the early light and a kingfisher dive-bombed the pond, it felt like I’d stumbled into a sup





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One afternoon Mr. Desai dropped by for a “visit”, which he occasionally did. The dogs mobbed him for a fection as he



“Why have you been moving the sofa downstairs?” he asked. “The servants will not work. They will only be visiting and talking.”

“It’s not being used up there,” I replied, “and Lakshmi and the driver don’t have anywhere to sit or rest while they’re taking a break.”

“They will only take breaks and do nothing else. You have to watch them.”

“Okay, I will,” I lied.

*

Late one night while my husband was away on business, I went down to the kitchen to fill up the bedroom water jug. Fluorescent light from the servants’ patio streamed through the small window above the sink. I knew Lakshmi preferred to sleep outside in the summer to escape the stifling heat of the small maid’s bedroom, which had a fan but no air conditioning. I looked out the kitchen window, which offered only a view of the clothesline, and the outside wall. By stepping on my tiptomf



incident and told him about it. Just as I was acting out for him the ecstatic writhing I'd witnessed, Lakshmi walked in and, upon seeing my improvisation, burst into a hearty, raucous laugh. Whether she knew I was imitating her I couldn't tell.

Shortly thereafter I received a call from an agitated Mr. Desai. "Lakshmi has been having men visiting the house at night," he said, his tone short. "The servants at my friend's house across the road have seen it."

It took me a few moments to connect the dots. Unbeknownst

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