

Some seats are reserved.
Some are earned.
Some you stop needing.

THE THIRD ROW

A MEMOIR



SAURABH KUMAR DEY



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a memoir

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Contents

A Note Before You Begin

Part One — The Third Row

Part Two — Who I Was Before I Became Someone Else

Interlude — On Guilt and the Body

Part Three — The Girl Who Taught Me How to Stay

Part Four — The Dream That Died Six Months Early

Interlude — What the Brain Does With a Deleted Future

Part Five — Flute

Interlude — The Shiva Who Said Nothing

Part Six — The Ghost in the Classroom

Part Seven — The Game Reverse

Part Eight — The Architecture of Wanting

Part Nine — Living Together, and What I Gave Away

Interlude — Karna's Armor

Part Ten — The Slow Disappearance

Part Eleven — The General-Class Ticket

Interlude — Rejection Sensitivity and the Cost of Reaching Out

Part Twelve — The Friend, the Fight, and the Mirror

Part Thirteen — What I Said Back

Part Fourteen — The Return Call

Part Fifteen — My Mother, Again

Interlude — Attachment, and the Language Neither of Us Learned

Part Sixteen — What I Choose Now

Part Seventeen — What I Can't Go Back To

Part Eighteen — The Stranger Who Asked What Time It Was

Part Nineteen — The Voice on the Platform

Afterword — Questions I Never Got Answered

A Note Before You Begin

Everything in this book happened. The names of the two women at the center of it, and one friend of theirs, have been changed — not because I'm ashamed of the truth, but because it isn't only my truth to publish under real names. Everyone else — my mother, my father, Shakir sir, Amit Das sir — appears as themselves, because their part in this story is one I'm proud, or at least unafraid, to put my name next to.

I've written this the way I'd tell it to you across a table, late at night, several drinks past the point where I'd normally edit myself. That means the chronology jumps sometimes. It means I stop mid-story to explain something about the brain, or a myth I grew up half-hearing, when it actually helps make sense of what I couldn't make sense of at the time. It means I don't come out of this looking like the hero. I'm not.

I asked myself, writing this, whether I had the right to publish someone else's worst months alongside my own. I decided the only version I have any right to tell is mine — what I did, what was done to me, what I understood too late. Where I don't know what someone else felt, I've said so, instead of inventing it.

This book is not revenge. If it reads like revenge in places, that's grief wearing revenge's clothes, and I'd ask you to be generous enough to tell the difference the way I eventually had to.

One more thing, because I'd rather say it once, plainly, than bury it: there's a chapter in here about the worst year of my life, when I thought seriously about not staying in it. I'm still here. If any part of that chapter lands close to home for you, please don't carry it alone the way I tried to — talk to someone, a friend, a doctor, anyone. That's the only piece of advice in this entire book I'll give you without hedging.

Part One — The Third Row

I should probably tell you the story doesn't start with a girl.

Everyone assumes it does. I assumed it too, for a while, because the girl part is louder, and pain is loud, and loud things are easier to blame. But if I'm honest with you — and I'm going to try to be, even in the places where honesty makes me look small — this story starts on a plastic chair in the third row at an Independence Day function at BLW, years before either of the women who broke me had a name.

I was sitting where I wasn't supposed to sit. The first two rows were reserved for "officers." I was in the third. A man came and told me to move.

"There aren't even that many officers to fill two whole rows," I said, because I was a child with more mouth than sense.

"Keep sitting," he said. "I'll call the RPF and they'll remove you."

I remember thinking — with the total, humiliating clarity that only a child gets — that the Railway Protection Force sounded, in that moment, less like protection and more like *gundas*. Somebody's hired muscle for a folding chair.

Here's the part I didn't tell anyone for years: I come from an officer family myself. My father's post could have gotten me back into that row in about four seconds. A man on that same organizing committee actually walked over, found out whose son I was, and told the first man to let me sit. Problem solved. Chair reclaimed.

Except it wasn't solved. Because for the rest of that event, something in me was quietly detonating. *Who am I without my father's name attached to me?* And underneath that, a worse question: *who are these officers, exactly?* Not gods. Not *devi devatas*. Public servants. People who, every Independence Day, every Republic Day, stand up and take an oath to

serve with honesty and loyalty — and then spend the rest of the year deciding who's allowed to sit in the first two rows.

We respect the post, not the person. That person exists because of the post they hold — a post they probably got, in this country, by licking someone else's boots, not because they were worthy or capable of it. I know how that sounds. I was a child forming an opinion about institutional India from a folding chair, and I've never fully talked myself out of that opinion since.

Here is the thing nobody tells you about a moment like that: it doesn't stay a memory. It becomes a lens. For years afterward, I couldn't watch anyone defer to a title — a rank, a surname, a designation stitched onto a uniform — without some old, stubborn part of me quietly asking the same question I'd asked at nine or ten years old on that chair. *What did this person actually do to deserve the way you're looking at them right now?* Most of the time, the honest answer was nothing. They inherited the deference the way I'd nearly inherited my seat — not through anything they'd built, but through proximity to something that had already been built for them.

I want you to hold onto that boy on the plastic chair, because he shows up again. In 2023, coming home for Diwali, holding a *confirmed* 2AC window ticket, he'll get told by a ticket examiner — a man who'd just taken twenty-five thousand rupees under the table to hand two genuinely vacant 2AC seats to someone else — “*teri aukat hai 2AC mein travel karne ki?*” Do you even have the status to travel 2AC?

My father, hearing about it, made a call to a Divisional Railway Manager he happened to know through a contact of a contact — the ordinary, unglamorous machinery of Indian influence, *tail-pani*, nothing more dramatic than that. And somehow, by the time that same TTE reached my seat, word had already spread through the train that someone connected to the DRM's office was on board. He treated me, for the rest of that journey, like royalty. When he finally understood who I actually was and tried to apologize, all I said was

something like *come to Banaras, I'll show you whose status is whose* — and he got off at the very next station.

My father isn't a DRM, by the way. He just knows someone who knows a DRM. That's the whole machinery: not power, just proximity to power, laundered through favors and *tail-pani*. And the man who'd told me I didn't have the *ankat* to sit in a seat I'd legitimately paid for left the train the second he learned who I might be connected to. Which means, if you follow that logic all the way through, that I was never actually anyone at all. I was a name attached to a name attached to a favor.

I think about that train ride more than almost anything else in this book, actually, because it's the cleanest demonstration I have of a lesson that took me another decade to apply to my own relationships: people will treat you exactly as well as they believe your position requires them to, and not one inch better, unless something in them chooses generosity on its own terms. The TTE didn't discover I was a good person somewhere on that platform. He discovered a rumor about my father. My worth, in his eyes, never moved. Only his estimate of the consequences did.

You're going to meet this pattern again and again in this book, wearing different clothes: the gap between what someone actually is and what people decide to *treat* them as, based on nothing but a name, a rumor, a ticket class, a title. I built an entire nervous system around noticing that gap. And — this took me a humiliatingly long time to understand — I also built my entire self-worth on the wrong side of it. I spent years trying to prove my worth to people who had already decided what it was.

I was born, for what it's worth, in Varanasi — a city older, people like to say, than time itself, one people come to for one of two reasons: to find Shiva, or to find themselves. I've spent most of this book doing the second one badly, in cities that weren't Varanasi. I didn't know that yet, on the plastic chair. I'm not sure I fully know it now. But the