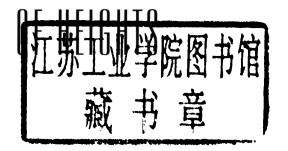
YOU AFRAID HEIGHTS Raj Kamal Jha

Raj Kamal Jha

IF YOU ARE AFRAID





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IF YOU ARE AFRAID OF HEIGHTS

Also by Raj Kamal Jha

THE BLUE BEDSPREAD

To my father Munishwar Jha and my mother Ranjana Jha

I wish to thank:

David Knowles, of Ledig House Writers' Residency in Omi, New York, for his incredible gift: almost eight hundred hours of solitude

My agent, Gillon Aitken, for his faith

My editor at Picador, Rebecca Senior, for her magic blue pencil

Shekhar Gupta, my editor-in-chief in New Delhi, for a rare, dual privilege: letting me float in fiction and remain anchored in fact. At a great newspaper,

The Indian Express

Dr Bal Krishna Mishra and the staff at his hospital for helping me watch and hear

Pratik Kanjilal, for giving the book its name when it was just a chapter old

To Elisabeth Iler, for her New York home and heart And Sujata Bose, my partner. For everything Deep down, I don't believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground and hover in the air. We all have it in us – every man, woman, and child... You must learn to stop being yourself. That's where it begins, and everything else follows from that.

Paul Auster, Mr Vertigo

THE FIRST PROLOGUE

Look at the picture on the cover, there's a child, a girl in a red dress; there's a bird, a crow in a blue white sky. And then there are a few things you cannot see.

One: The child is between eleven and twelve years of age. She's standing on the balcony of a two-room flat in a building that, from the street outside, looks like a crying face. Its windows are the eyes, half-closed by curtains, smudged and wrinkled. Rain, wind and sun of countless years have marked the wall, streaking it in several lines, two of which look like lines of tears, one falling below each window. The mouth is the balcony, curved down under the weight of iron railings, rusted and misshapen. Like the stained teeth of someone very sad. And someone very old.

Two: The balcony, where the child stands, leads into a room behind her. This is where she sleeps on a single bed against the wall. This room – because there are only two rooms in the house – serves as a living room for most of the day. It has chairs, a potted plant, a second-hand table in the centre with a cracked glass top on which are kept some of the child's school books, one opened in the middle.

Three: The child is crying. Tears fill her eyes and

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perhaps that's why she sees the crow as blurred, that's why she can't see me.

Four: I'm sitting on the crow's back, my legs pressed hard against its sides, my body raised so that the bird doesn't feel my weight.

Since morning, I have flown in circles across the sky and over the city, throughout the day, the afternoon and the evening, watching the child's father and mother. I have swooped down several times, in between the tram wires, over the tops of trees, the terraces of buildings, once even below an aircraft descending to land. For a few hours, when it poured this morning, I caught the rain in my eyes, high up, clear and cold, before it mixed with the dust blown up by the shuffle of feet from the streets below. Sometimes, I got off the bird's back to walk or stand still so that I could get a better look at her parents. And sometimes, just to give the poor little bird a break.

Now I'm flying down to meet the child because I have something to show her, I have something to tell: pictures I have taken, words I have scribbled.

What happens when I land, what do the child and I do, we shall come to all of that later – much later, in fact, right at the end when we shall let the child do the talking.

As of now, let's change the blue white morning of the sky to a deep purple evening. Because it's in the dying light of day that our story begins.

The curtains grow dark, the light from the street lamps outside dapples their fabric, making the yellow more yellow, the edges of the balcony sharper, much sharper

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than they appear on the cover. As if they were etched in cement with a thick, black pencil.

In the room behind the child, sits her father.

Father's of medium height, medium age, medium weight, medium nose, medium eyes, everything medium. Even in colour he's medium brown. Like wood left outside in the heat and the rain.

He's just back from work, from the City Building Clearance Office where his job is to sit at the front desk, receive construction plans from those who want to build new houses in this crumbling city.

He files their papers, makes a note in the register every time he gets a plan and then he passes it on to those who have to decide whether any rules have been broken. And, if yes, what the fine should be.

Father is taking his shoes off.

In the next room, Mother is setting up dinner. She has hair like her daughter, dark and straight.

As Father rolls his socks, puts them into his shoes, one by one, he can smell the city on his feet. He bends down to pick the shoes up, to take them to the corner of the room where all the shoes and the slippers lie, in one neat row.

From the next room, he can hear dishes being put on the table, water being poured into glasses, the sound of dinner being served. He walks out of the room to wash up – he can smell the city on his hands as well.

In the bathroom, there's no water in the tap so he scoops a mug from the bucket and rinses his hands, his feet and his mouth making a noise that echoes off the red

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cement wall and the white toilet bowl, both stained, cracked in several places.

He looks into the mirror at his face, wet, turns back, switches off the lights and walks towards the dining table. And in that ten-, eleven-step walk, which is the journey from the bathroom to the dining table, Father thinks he hears the sound of a child crying and he closes his eyes once – for slightly longer than a blink.

At least, that's what it looks like, from the heights where I am.

PART ONE

OF HEIGHTS

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Once upon a time in the city

ONCE UPON A TIME in the city, there lived a woman called Rima and a man named Amir and late one night, they met in an accident, face to face, she picked out the shards of broken glass from his face, they fell in love and just when it seemed they were settling down to live happily ever after, a strange little thing happened one night: Rima woke up hearing a child cry.

She couldn't make out if it was a boy or a girl because it was a wail, rising and falling, loud and soft, sometimes high-pitched, sometimes low, broken here and there by small hiccups from what could only have been a small chest. She got up from the bed, her pillow slipped to the floor, its thud too soft to wake Amir; she drew the drapes aside and looked this way and that, right and left, but saw nothing. Except, of course, the black night, the black street. And a dog.

Brown. She could make out two white patches on its neck where something had chewed at its fur. Its tail was little more than a stump. It must have fallen asleep under a parked taxi right in front of its rear wheels and the driver must have reversed without looking, shearing a bit off the tail.

Such accidents happen every day in this city.

Rima watched the dog lap at the black water in the drain, sniff and sift whatever floated by, sit down, scratch an itch. There was no traffic at that hour so the dog curled up in the middle of the road itself and lowered its head between its paws. By the time it closed its eyes, the child's crying had stopped.

Rima went back to bed, Amir still fast asleep.

When she woke up the next morning, she had forgotten the crying. Only once or twice during the afternoon, when she dropped something small, insignificant, maybe a hairpin, perhaps a rubber band, and then bent down to pick it up, did the crying return. Then she noticed it: the crying returned when Amir was in the room; when he walked away from her, it was as if the crying would fade, get softer and softer with each step he took. So that when he left the room, the crying became a strain of sound from some place far, far away, carried by a wind so light she could hardly feel it. It stayed in her ears for such a fleeting moment that it scarcely registered, neither in thought nor in feeling.

But that night, with Amir next to her in bed, the whole sequence of the previous day repeated itself. The crying began, she found herself walking to the window and looking out. Once again, there was nothing except the wail and the dog, the same dog, but this time running after something imaginary, stopping, turning back, running again before it sat down and went to sleep.

Again the crying stopped, again she returned to bed.

From the second morning, however, Amir stayed at home right through and there was no escaping the crying. She woke up with the sound as if sometime during the

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night, after she had gone back to sleep, the child had crawled into her ear to sit deep inside, curled up, like some stubborn foetus, fully formed but refusing to leave, clutching tight her nerves and her bones, clawing, scraping her eardrum with its fingers, muffling all other sounds in the house.

It's my fault, Rima told herself, it's got nothing to do with Amir being here. This is just like when water enters the ear, when I am in the shower or in the rain, no more, no less. So what do I need to do? I need to give my head a good, hard jerk, maybe hop on one leg, tilt my head, yes I'll look funny, who cares?

But that didn't help.

Forget it, she said. I'll get used to it, sooner rather than later the crying will dribble out into other sounds: Amir pouring water into a glass, the TV from the house upstairs, the boy playing cricket with his maid in the yard below.

That didn't help either.

For six full days, she heard it in her head. And for the next six nights, she woke up to hear the crying from the street outside. On the seventh morning, she thought: let me tell Amir, see what he says.

He didn't say much. Tell me when you hear it, he said. Wake me up, I'll listen too.

So that night, she woke him up even before the crying had begun and they both stood by the window, Amir and Rima, his hand on her right shoulder. He could see and feel the goosebumps on her neck, smell the shampoo in her