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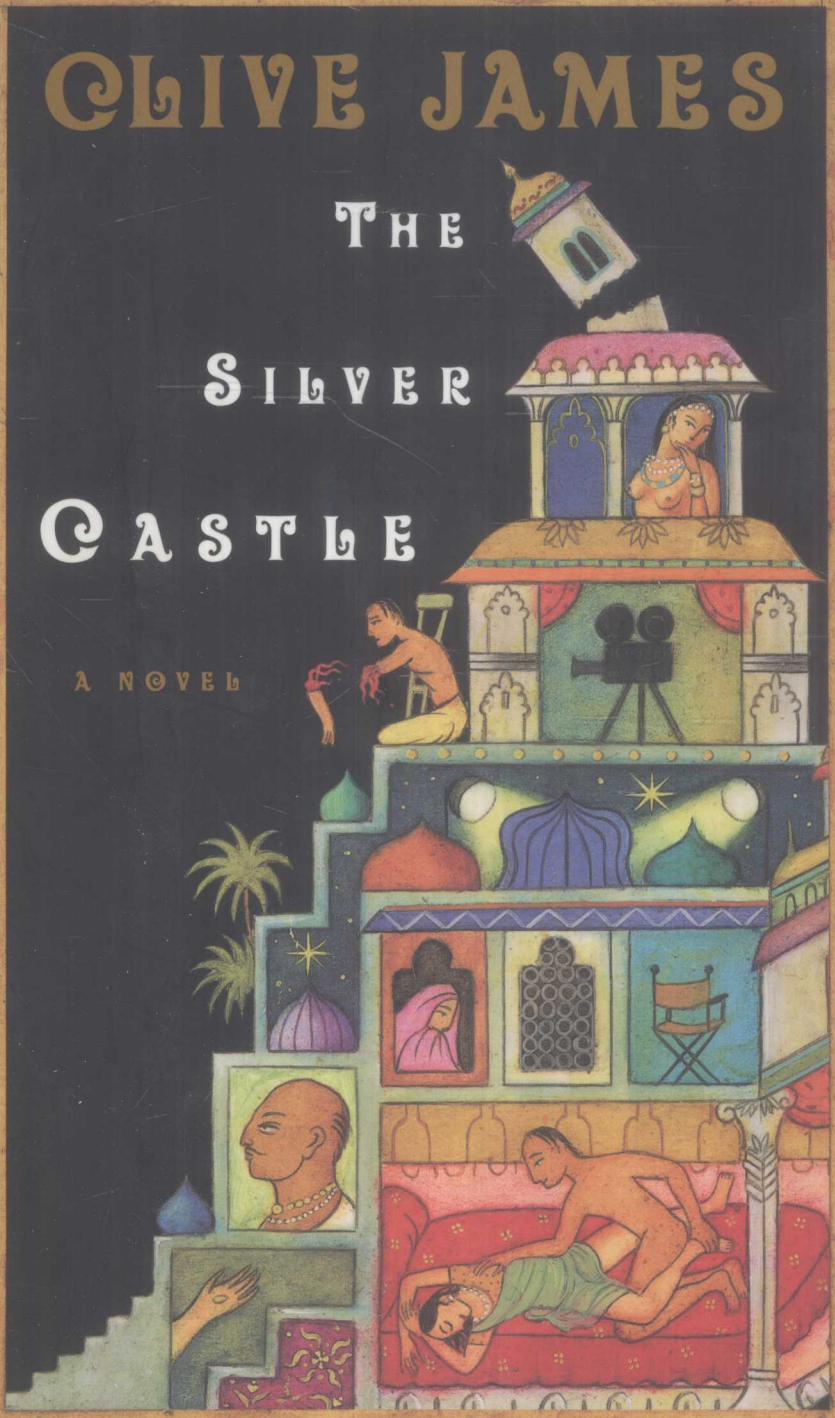
A NOVEL



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*First U.S. Edition*

TO RITA GUERRICCHIO

*con affetto*

*qui tocca anche a noi poveri la nostra parte di richezza*

*You can stand aloof from the sufferings of the world; you are free to do so and it expresses your nature; but perhaps that very aloofness is the one suffering you might have avoided.*

—KAFKA

# 1

THE PAVEMENT where Sanjay was born, and lived out his first difficult years, can only loosely be described as a pavement. Mainly it consists of packed earth, irrigated at intervals by rivulets of sewage. Americans would call it a sidewalk and be more accurate, because at least there would be nothing paved about the word itself. But in India the English language harks back to the Raj, so a stretch of hard dirt like Sanjay's birthplace will always be called a pavement, and give you the idea of something impermeable and slick instead of what it is – friable, porous, simply waiting to be washed away. About an hour and a half by bus out of downtown Bombay on a busy day, a right turn off the main road leading northish through the coastal suburbs takes you through yet more suburbs to an area where there are enough trees and scrub so that you can delude yourself for a few minutes that you have left the city. But leaving Bombay is never that easy. The ragged-edged asphalt two-lane road up through the low hills is heading for Film City, where much of India's enormous movie output for any given year is created in a concentrated version of that uniquely subcontinental business atmosphere combining somnolent chaos and last-minute urgency. For a long stretch, on the left side of the road as you drive up, a low-level shanty town scaled down for crouching people is laid out in a linear manner on the bare earth, a sort of ribbon development for the unfortunate. Nothing has been omitted from the picture of deprivation. There are garbage dumps with women pissing behind them and men pissing on top. Someone's mother-in-law is dying in full view on a spread sack in front of her front door while a couple of listlessly copulating dogs teeter past her

mute scream. A little boy gets kicked in mid-shit by his elder brother. Meanwhile Film City, only a mile up the road, is providing an alternative and more easily contemplated reality. When Sanjay was tiny, the Film City back lot had just started to grow too, but like him it was unmistakably there. They both exuded the energy that makes growth seem inevitable. In India, where life is much chancier than we are used to in the West, the inevitability of growth is quite a thing to exude.

Sanjay, of course, didn't know that Film City even existed, even when he grew old enough to grasp what was going on around him. To start with he grasped nothing much except his mother's breast. There wasn't a lot in that, but luckily there was enough. Other children in Sanjay's row of hovels were given more water than milk. The water wouldn't have been sufficient even if it had been clean, which it never was, just as it was never cool. On the Bombay pavement, clean, cool water takes time and effort to come by. You can see a man selling it from a dented churn mounted on a cart. The sun heats the metal and the metal warms the water. Among the poor people of Bombay, systems gain heat, in a local reversal of the second law of thermodynamics. Sometimes only a wall away from them but many income levels above, air conditioning, with a soft roar and rattle, puts the law back into effect. The rich, the very rich, are cool. We can indulge ourselves, if we wish, in pronouncing it their fault that they breathe sweeter air, but to share that coolness out among all the mouths born to inhale the heat will take a better plan than any philanthropist has yet devised. It is said nowadays that general prosperity will work the trick, but the people who say so are already prosperous themselves, and few among them have ever lived on a Bombay pavement.

In the hovel next up the hill to the one inhabited by Sanjay's family, there was a little boy like Sanjay who didn't even have a mother. His father was a bottle-sorter in a reprocessing shed who had several older relatives living with him, so the baby was short of air as well as nourishment. One of the earliest sounds that Sanjay got used to was the sound of that little boy crying next door. On the

pavements, an expression like 'next door' must be used approximately. Really all the shanties join together. They aren't neat, separate constructions like the little cardboard houses that the Japanese builders' labourers from out of town put together for themselves every evening in the underground walkways of Shinjuku station in Tokyo. Bombay pavement shanties join together in long lines because they are all made of the same scarce materials: rags, bags, the ever-precious kindling and the very occasional, jealously guarded piece of tin or sheet plastic. Detached residences would waste a wall. By the same token, to make shared walls thick would be wasteful too, so they are composed of not much more than an old grain bag lined with a random collection of rags and paper stuck on any old how, usually just by accumulated dirt. It's caked dirt that holds whole houses together and joins them to the houses on either side, and so on until the pavement runs out at the next crossroads.

You can see these improvised sub-cities in almost every part of Bombay, even in the flash areas like Juhu Beach and the Malabar Hills. Except where the Parsees exert their influence, in the policed and barbered territories around the burial ground they call the Towers of Silence, the poverty of Bombay is always closing in on any new area of luxury and threatening to take over. In Rio, most of the shanty towns, the *favelas*, are up on the garbage tips above the city, and the majority of the little houses are made of colour-washed cement, so you will see a baby girl playing in pig-shit but at least she has a solid doorway to go back into when danger threatens, just like your daughter. But in Bombay the rag-and-bone suburbettes are all over the place, right in amongst the city like a parallel universe, and garbage is what they are made of. They have no colour except all the shades of dust and dirt. Dirty and dusty are often the same adjective in Hindi, reflecting the fact that the two substances are variations on a common theme. Just add heat or water to one of them and you'll soon get the other. Add too much of both and you get hot mud. When the monsoon comes the shanty towns in the lower-lying areas are the first to melt away, except for the few inspired constructions incorporating sheets of tin or hard plastic in the roof. In the monsoon it becomes easy to see why the pavement dwellers, though they are an

aristocracy compared to those who sleep on the open streets, are a hopelessly underprivileged sub-class compared to those who live in even the most noxious slum. Slums are not soluble. The shanties are, but in the long stretch of dry hot weather they look better than nothing, although only just.

Look inside one of them and you will usually see somebody sick: a grandmother getting ready to die, a teenage boy coughing like phlegmatic clockwork. When Sanjay made his first journey, about a yard up the slightly sloping pavement to the door of the next hovel, what he saw inside was a young version of himself lying naked and struggling. The baby's wailing and strangling noises were the audio accompaniment to Sanjay's first sentient year. Sanjay's mother told him not to look inside that resonant doorway but Sanjay, having been born with a contrary spirit, always did. He was fascinated by the waving legs. There were old women in there too, but they scarcely moved. When the baby's father cracked under the strain and lost his bottle-sorting job it must have been a clear choice whether to kill himself or the baby. He compromised by going begging, using the baby as bait. He worked the last set of traffic lights on the main road inland, before the turn-off. It was a cherished spot that he sometimes had to fight for. The baby acquired a conspicuous facial injury during one of these fights and its father noticed that his prospects for attracting donations correspondingly improved. It was a short step to improving the prospects further. Mysteriously, the baby lost its left hand. Bound up in a grey rag smelling of petrol, the stump was thrust by the father at the windows of cars waiting at the traffic lights. Cars containing western visitors to Film City were a sure bet. How the baby survived its early medical history is a puzzle best left to science. It didn't survive its later one, but by that time Sanjay was beyond regarding the short trip to the next doorway as an adventure. He had bigger plans.

During the day, Sanjay's father was seldom home to stop him wandering. Sanjay's father had a more or less steady job sorting plastic bags. Getting to the recycling shed, however, meant a long commute by bus that cost most of what he earned, and a newly acquired habit of drinking cost much of the rest. He was a man of

disappointed hopes. He had brought his young wife and family in from the country with some confidence that he would find work washing clothes in one of Bombay's vast open-air laundries which the whole state of Maharashtra has heard about. But jobs at the laundries turned out to be booked up years ahead. He had found himself at the back end of a dispirited mob funnelled between walls, with a tantalising view over one wall of the laundry stretching away into the distance, the thousands of laundry workers swatting cloth against the smooth stone tables with the air of men who knew where their next meal was coming from, even if it came slowly. The whole place was running with water. The water was dirty yet somehow the clothes emerged clean. Again, here is something that makes India marvellous: dirty water can give you clean clothes. In mainland China, by contrast, a thousand million people previously world famous for their ability to do laundry are now, through the miracle wrought by Communism, unable to wash your white shirt without turning it grey, or to press it without crushing the buttons like aspirin in a spoon. In India they know how. Yet Bombay's gigantic open-air laundry system held no place for Sanjay's father. Having no work was a step worse than what he had left behind in his village, where the daily labour of scratching the earth was intolerable but at least tangible, and, if he managed to generate enough sons, might even one day offer rest. Here he was nothing. By the time his luck turned and he got the sorting job he had run through his capital. A room in a slum was out of the question. He could only just afford the shanty. He was at work the day Sanjay was born so he didn't see the dogs eat the afterbirth.

Sanjay's father and mother had left farming behind but not its mentality. There were up-to-date poor people in India who went on having children because they didn't know how not to, but might have stopped if they could have understood the technology. Sanjay's father didn't even have the desire to stop. He still thought of male children as a source of strength. That he did not arrange accidents for his female children he made a point of religious pride. He was a man of conviction. A reasonable number of very young pavement children are rounded up to be inoculated and sometimes even carted off to school, but such a fate had never befallen *his* children. He would not

hear of it. If his wife had an opinion, she was given little respite in which to express it. As a consequence Sanjay was soon no longer the youngest child. When there were a couple younger than him, he was able to extend his voyages without fear of being missed, as long as he was back by nightfall. His father, when he finally got home, could often scarcely walk, but he could still count.

Sanjay's first big trip was across the road. He reached the other side on what would have been recognised as his third birthday, if anyone had known the date. The other side of the road was even more thronged than his own side. After running the gauntlet – toddling the gauntlet in his case – of the speeding buses, trucks, vans, cabs, cars and toot-toot micro-cabs, he emerged in another country. Instead of hovels there were places where people spread things out so that other people could look at them and sometimes buy them. There were all kinds of glittering things spread on mats and rugs. There were hundreds of different kinds of food. Some of it was being cooked right there where you could watch. Sanjay soon learned not to snatch at scraps. A slapped wrist stings. But sometimes he was given a scrap to eat because of his winning looks. Looks shape life and among the poor they help to stave off death. So on the pavement among the stalls Sanjay received the tiny amount of extra energy that made the difference between irreversible damage and the possibility of health. He was at knee height to the thousands of people passing along and he could look the stall-holders in the eye as they squatted. Some of them sat on low stools. One man sat on a painted stool with cards spread out in front of him that he could read, and so tell people what would happen to them in the future. The cards had lavish pictures on the back. The man said they were gods and goddesses. He had a parrot who would turn over the card that the client picked out. The man on the coloured stool was the one who told Sanjay that it would be better to take a shit on the rubbish dump near his home in the morning than to try and find a place to shit among all these stall-holders, because it made some of them angry and they would not feed him scraps. That was the first item in Sanjay's education, if you didn't count his mother's telling him not to piss inside the hovel. Not that she ever really told him: she just hit him when he did, whereas the

man on the coloured stool had a kind voice and appealed to reason. As a consequence, Sanjay learned the lesson after a single telling, because his brain, against all the odds, was potentially as quick as his body was strong and healthy. Circumstances were contriving to undernourish them both, but the conclusion was not foregone. This was unusual, because on the Bombay pavements it almost always is.

# 2

THE FIRST TIME Sanjay ever saw the Silver Castle, he was about seven years old. By then he was used to travelling the whole length of the road on both sides, past all the shanties on one side and all the shops and stalls on the other, as far downhill as the crossroads and as far uphill as where the road was closed. It was closed by a guarded gate through which only those buses, cars, cabs and toot-toot micro-cabs could go that had permission. The people who had permission were all dressed as if they were rich. Some of them, the women who sat in the back seats of the cars, looked like the unimaginably rich goddesses who gleamed in gold and radiant colours on the cards the parrot turned over. All these rich people were going somewhere forbidden. One day Sanjay struck out along the wire fence that separated him from what he was not allowed to see. Eventually he left behind the last vestige of the area where the shops and stalls were, with all their own attendant shanties in an extended hinterland. It didn't extend forever, although it was a long way for his short legs. But eventually it turned into scrub land, just like the scrub land on the other side of the fence. So it was natural that when there was not much for the fence to shut out, it gave up. There was a whole section of it lying rusting in the scrub. Sanjay picked his way over it and headed up through the thick shrubbery. The occasional person was living there – there are few places in Bombay free of inhabitants – but on the whole it was the most unpopulated territory that Sanjay had ever seen. It was so unusual that he forgot to look around and take landmarks so that he could find his way out again. Perhaps he was just too small to think of it. Anyway, he kept going up and around the top of the hill, and then

suddenly he was looking at a stretch of road that he knew must carry the vehicles that were allowed through the barrier. There was a car going along it now, with a rich woman in the back seat. He could tell she was rich because of the gold and green and red shining from her sari, and because she was in a car. It was going somewhere. He looked to see where it was going.

There it was, at the end of the road, at the top of the next slope, rising far above the shrubbery, higher even than the trees. It was the biggest building he had ever seen. It had pointed towers at the corners and was all as brilliant and precious as a pile of crushed soft-drink cans, which up to then had been the most dazzling thing in his experience. Just by looking at this construction he could tell why he wasn't allowed to be there. It made him blink. Even as he blinked he went closer, keeping to the dusty edge of the road, off the hot asphalt. When a bus or a car or a cab or a toot-toot came along, he ran into the scrub, so it was in a zig-zag fashion that he approached the Silver Castle. His course was undeviating nevertheless, like destiny.

When he finally arrived at the wide stretch of bare earth before the castle, men were pouring out of its big front door and heading for the shade of nearby trees so that they could sit down and eat food from cardboard boxes. Sanjay had never seen men dressed like these. Most of them wore silver-studded black jackets, billowing red pants, and turbans with a black cone sticking out of the top. They all carried silver swords. Many of them had ordinary shoes or sandals on their bare feet but the tallest ones had shiny boots that went all the way up to the knee. There was a group of men who were not dressed like this but still looked rich. They were sitting around a table beside a white van and talking very loudly.

"We start again in an hour. An hour means one hour, not two. Ready or not."

"She won't be ready. She only just got here. It takes her two hours to put her face on."

"So we shoot around her."

Sanjay could hear all this but couldn't understand it. He was ready to scoot away if anyone tried to grab him but nobody seemed to care. Emboldened, he walked slowly close to the most magnificent of all the

men with swords. This man, instead of being dressed in black and red, wore a brown fringed soft-looking suit with very high brown boots that looked soft also and had, around their folded tops, fringes of their own. Even though he was sitting down, it was easy to see that he was tall. Elaborately flowing hair made him taller. He was looking at his hair in a mirror. He had more hair on his top lip, which he lifted so that he could look at his teeth. They shone. He shone all over. He was surrounded by other men wearing ordinary clothes, but richly clean and untattered, with proper shoes. One of these attendant men was talking urgently.

"They're saying she won't be ready for two hours, so we have to shoot around her."

"Then they can shoot around me too," said the shining man in brown, patting his hair. "I could be at the beach. I could be in Paris. Who needs it?"

This last phrase was said in a language Sanjay didn't understand, any more than he understood expressions like *shoot around* or *Paris*. He was to hear this language many times in the next hours. It was a special language they spoke here at the castle. The shining man put down his mirror, stretched back, pressed his fingertips gently to his eyes, lowered his hands, looked around and saw Sanjay.

"Who's the kid?"

Sanjay was all set to scuttle off but something in the shining man's tone encouraged a postponement. The shining man wasn't angry. He was like the parrot man. The grand total of people in Sanjay's life who weren't angry with him had increased to two.

"Some poor cockroach from outside the fence," said one of the shining man's rich companions.

"He doesn't look bad for where he's come from," said the shining man. "Bring him over and we'll get some food into him."

The shining man's rich companion walked towards Sanjay, who thought for a few seconds, decided he didn't like the look of the situation, and took off. When it became apparent that he wouldn't be able to outpace his pursuer by running in a straight line, he ran in circles. The shining man and his other companions were laughing and crying out.

"Go, kid, go!"

"Go right!"

"Left, left!"

"You're too fat, Deepak! Try lying down suddenly and maybe he'll run into you!"

Eventually the man dived, flung out a hand, caught Sanjay by the ankle and carried him upside down back to the shining man's throne.

"Take it easy, kid," said the shining man. "I just wanted to give you a bread roll. It's got a slice of cheese in it, see? American style. Ever see that? Take a bite."

Sanjay obeyed. The effect was strange but instantly satisfactory: a real mouthful, all the way down to the stomach.

"Thums Up?"

Sanjay had several times been offered a few mouthfuls of Thums Up by the parrot man but this was the first time he had ever been handed a whole bottle of it to keep. Also this time it was cold, not just cool. It was the coldest thing he had ever tasted. Thums Up is the Coca-Cola of India. Like all the world's countries which have ever been under the sway of the Soviet Union or even just loosely associated with it in an attempt to stave off the cultural influence of the United States, India had felt itself obliged to develop a Coca-Cola substitute. India's is called Thums Up and is one of the world's better local colas. Like all the others – try the Israeli version some day – it can be savoured on the teeth for an hour after it has been drunk, but at least it doesn't taste of petrol. To Sanjay it tasted like a new life. He was swallowing coldness.

"Wow, look at that stuff go down," said one of the rich companions.

"He needs six more bottles to wash himself with," said another.

"The dirt's holding him together," said the shining man. "He reminds me of what my life was like before I got into all this crap. Simple. The life of the senses."

"You're not telling us *you* were ever *poor*," said a special man who had just arrived. You could tell he was special because he had a special thing dangling round his neck.

"If you'd been my first director I would have ended up looking like this pitiful little bastard does now."

"Sure. You would have had only one BMW."

"Let's put him in the film."

"Not a bad idea. He certainly runs faster than you can. Probably acts better too. But he doesn't fit."

The special man walked back towards the castle entrance. The shining man rose from his chair, standing so tall he interfered with the sunlight.

"Dump some water over him and let him stick around. Useful reminder of the great public we're all working for."

The ordeal by water would remain in Sanjay's mind as one of the most intense of all the intense experiences that made up his initiation into the magic of the Silver Castle. Some of them were thrilling, some of them were shocking, but this one was devastating. Luckily they didn't try to get his clothes off. They just inundated him where he was. The sun soon dried him off, but the shameful memory remained of fingers being stuck in his ears and men showing the palms of their hands to each other after they had scraped at his arms and legs. He was on the point of heading home right there, but his trembling legs wouldn't carry him. That was lucky, because everything that happened next was wonderful.

He was taken inside the castle, which was even more dazzling inside than out. In actuality it was made of planks, roughly-dressed joists, plaster of Paris and frosty silver paint, and the film had to be finished before the monsoon came to strip the terraces and battlements bare of their glory and turn the patchy grass of the courtyard to uninterrupted mud. But to Sanjay it looked like the place where the creation of the Earth must have been planned, the fortress of the gods. There were armies manoeuvring inside it, marshalled by the special man, who would squint through his special thing and had a younger man to shout for him. The special man would say something softly and then the man who did the shouting for him would say it loudly. Then everybody made complicated movements on the grass and up in the terraces. Occasionally the shining man rose from his canvas chair and joined in. Sanjay was given a job. When