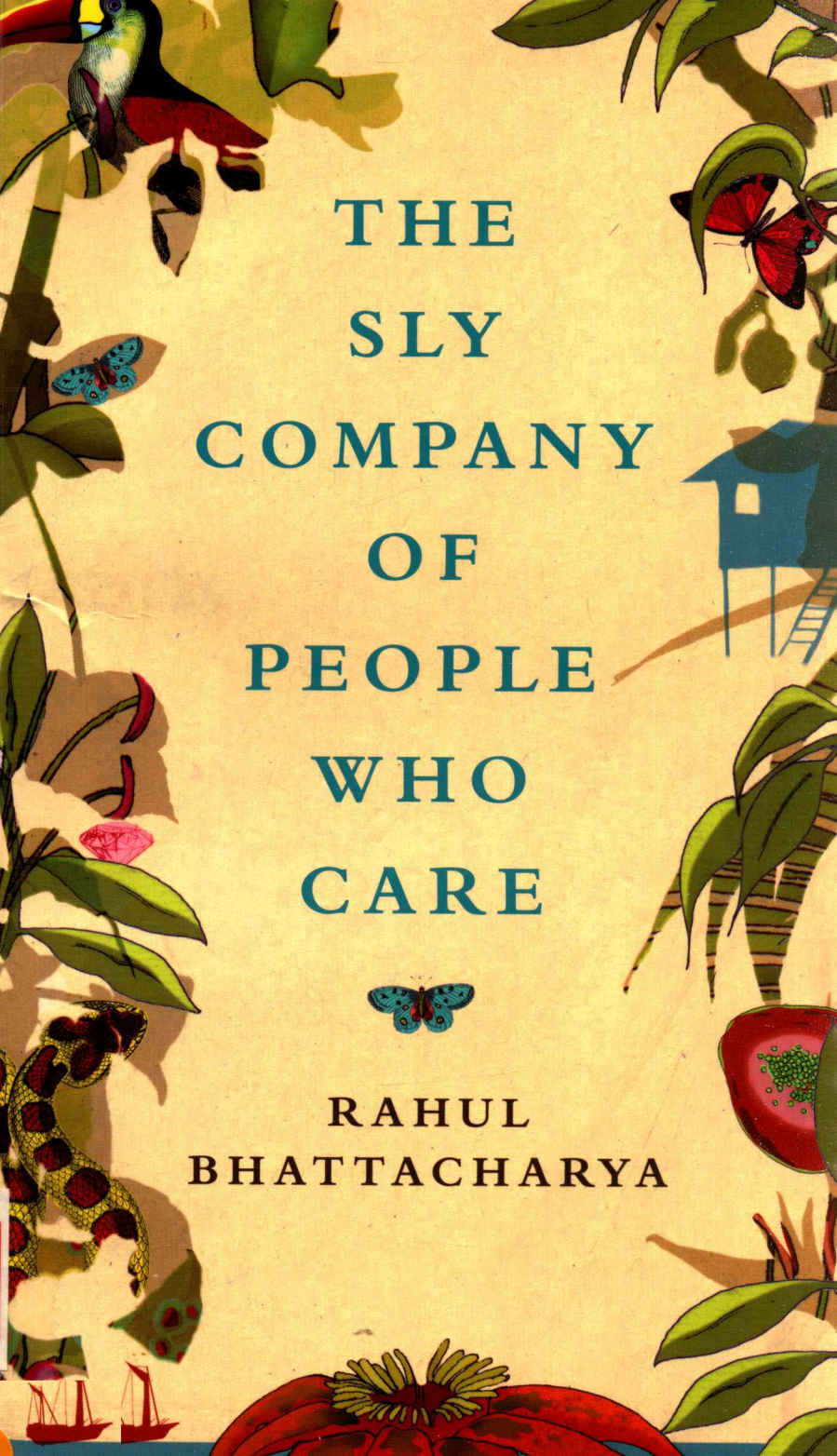
THE
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The Sly Company of People Who Care

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PICADOR

First published 2011 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-53473-4

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by InoSoft Systems
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

THE SLY COMPANY OF PEOPLE WHO CARE

Born in Bombay in 1979, Rahul Bhattacharya is the author of the cricket tour book *Pundits from Pakistan*, fourth in the *Wisden Cricketer*'s list of Best Cricket books of all time. It won the Crossword Award for most popular book, 2005, and was shortlisted for the Cricket Society Book of the Year award. He lives in Delhi.

By the same author

Pundits from Pakistan: On Tour with India 2003–04

All this was Dutch. Then, like so much else, it was English.

—James Salter, *Light Years*

A NOTE

The term Indian in Guyana and this book refers to East Indians. They are the descendants of the coolies, indentured labourers from India. The last census shows them as 43.5 per cent of the population, comfortably higher than the Africans (30.2 per cent), Mixed Race (16.7), Portuguese (0.20), Chinese (0.19) and Whites (0.06). The indigenous people (9.2 per cent) are called Amerindians. Indians from India are referred to as Indian nationals – condemned to squareness by the nomenclature itself. Keep in mind that the Guyanese are also West Indians.

Like Sam Selvon said, 'Christopher Columbus must be killing himself with laugh.'

PART ONE

I

LIFE, as we know, is a living, shrinking affair, and somewhere down the line I became taken with the idea that man and his world should be renewed on a daily basis. Those days I liked thinking in absolutes – life, man, the world – but people like to be specific about things. Hence, my actions were a little difficult to explain. To be a slow ramblin' stranger! It made perfect sense to me.

I still had to make friends, and my first one was Mr Bhombal, a waterworks technician. Mr Bhombal was, like me, an Indian national. Bhombal was his first name, yet I took to calling him Mr Bhombal. He just had that vibration. He wore polyester trousers. His steel watch faced up palm side. To read the time he would raise his forearm to his eyeline.

Ordinarily I would deflect the question of why I was in Guyana: 'Nice girls, eh' or 'The people here are all leaving' – wholly correct – 'so somebody had to come'. But as Mr Bhombal was so sincere in his effort to play elder brother, I told him the truth. I told him I came here once and afterwards had dreams. The low sky, red earth and brown water made me feel humble and ecstatic. The drenched wooden houses on stilts wrenched my soul. I told him I'd be here for a year.

Mr Bhombal had a way of conveying that one was on the precipice of a dreadful mistake; however, not to worry, with practical thinking one could make something of the situation. He had gloomy eyes, a fat, melancholy face, framed precisely by drooping eyebrows and defeated lips. He was not bald or even balding, but his hair was extravagantly spaced. He would consider the facts sociologically (was his word), then logistically (at this stage he asked detailed questions and closed his eyes as the replies came). My needless arrival here, he contended, could be swiftly rectified by application to another country: each time he called up a different one. Ultimately, after much deliberation, he would conclude – indeed, it was Mr Bhombal's conclusion for any issue – that the secret of the resolution lay in discerning 'how much goodness there is in the good, how much badness in the bad'. His facility to believe this was a fresh insight each time amounted to genius. I would insult Mr Bhombal and he would take it well, in fact with glee. He felt he had provoked thought.

Such triumphs were fleeting. Soon Mr Bhombal would return to his cocooned misery. 'Up-down,' he said wearily of his days, from the engineering office below to the shared living quarters above. He made the journey in green gumboots – longboots they were called in Guyana. When he did venture out, it was before dark, to the seawall or to the young Sindhi assistants of the variety stores on Regent Street who deflated him with their sad ambitions of owning shops here. Being an Indian-national sort of Indian national, Mr Bhombal struggled in this kind of place. He was scandalised easily. He was aghast when I told him that many reggae songs were a bhajan for an Ethiopian king. The Africans were one thing, but what of the East Indians? At least Trinidad had malls and cinemas. 'Is this life?' he despaired, donned in longboots hours after he had traversed the single flight of stairs. 'Is this country?'

Guyana had the feel of an accidental place. Partly it was the epic indolence. Partly it was the ethnic composition. In the slang of the street there were chinee, putagee, buck, coolie, blackman,

and the combinations emanating from these, a separate and larger lexicon. On the ramble in such a land you could encounter a story every day.

Take the one recounted to me at the bar in the cricket club by the lawyer. The case was of a lady he'd once badgered so hard in the witness box that she fainted. A year after the event she knocked on his door. 'Thick Indian girl, country manners, powder on chest.' He was not good with faces, but he remembered her on account of the fainting. She wanted to retain him. She had been accused of killing her own baby. Everybody suspected that the child was by a black man. Certainly her behaviour was odd. She would shave the child's head every week, so nobody got to see its hair. And when the child died she didn't report it, she buried it. She claimed he choked on his vomit. They proved the presence of vomit. He won her the case. But he had no doubt whatever she killed the baby. No, why the arse should it bother him? It was not his to decide guilt and innocence. He was a professional. Anybody could kill their baby.

The lawyer was putagee – of Portuguese extraction. The Portuguese had come to Guyana as indentured labourers even before the Indians and the Chinese. They were light-skinned and independent-minded. They rose up the ranks, and now, small in number and of high position, they could look at race as something they were not a part of.

I walked plenty in the early days. There were no shadows in Georgetown. A young town, poetic and wasted, its exquisite woodenness going to rot or concreted over, it was cleaved and connected by trenches which fumed, blossomed and stank. There were no tall buildings. Under the high equatorial sun, shade trees, some so large and spreading as the saman, rarely crept beyond their own peripheries. When 'sun hot', as them boys said, it had no place to hide.

One day, idling in town – Sunday, quiet – I sat to rest on Carmichael, one of the streets that spoke out from the big church,

when a man with a rice sack over his shoulder approached me. 'Gimme a lil t'ing nuh, soldier,' he said.

His hair was browned with dirt, a face like shattered dreams, idealistic and corroded equally. He made one want to say, 'No man, don't worry, it's not you, it's the world.' He had come out of jail, done time for murder. He was a porknocker. He went into the interior and hunted for diamond. One night, sleeping with his kiddy at his crotch, he found his own pardner trying to get into it. He always slept with a cutlass under his head. He grabbed it and chopped the man's face nine times, till the man dead.

I bought him a juice and gave him the fare to his home in the Cuyuni, three rivers west. In return he handed me a hideous plastic pebble. He had made it by melting toothbrushes in the big prison on the Mazaruni.

'You could keep that,' he said, as I studied the grotesque glory of the object.

'Thanks.'

He offered his fist for a bump. 'Baby's the name,' he said and slid away.

In less than a fortnight after my arrival, Mr Bhombal was gone. He told me only hours before. A matrimonial match had been found for him in Bhubaneshwar. The matter needed to be settled at once. I saw him off at his house. He departed with hasty clumping movements, leaving behind nothing, only the prints of his green longboots on the wooden stairs.

It was a lovely raining day, the kind of Georgetown January day that would singe me forever. Clothes flew on the line against a palm. Wooden houses cried on corners. A frangipani dripped over a crook paling. A goat bleated through thick slanting drops. The trenches were aglimmer darkly. Guyana was elemental, water and earth, mud and fruit, race and crime, innocent and full of scoundrels.

2

THE house was a peculiar creation, neither one thing nor the other, in half measures concrete and wood, of an old style and new. One could discern the reputed Guyanese elegance in the slenderness of the banisters, the decayed fretwork under the roof, and it had been built in the Guyanese way, upon high stilts. You could tell at one time, before the bottom was walled up, before the back extended and part of the yard shedded – you could tell it had been a house of proportion. But now it was a mass, the thin man inside the fat man forever obscured.

By these disfigurations, Action Jackson, the gold-wearing, gum-chewing husband of my landlady, could juice rent from six tenements. It was an act of ambition that drew both respect and resentment. 'You see how the gold around he neck get poundish? I know the man when he was just a limer.'

The house was hidden behind Latchman's Hardware ('We there in hard time and soft'). You entered through a long passageway made by the shop and a wall of rusted tin. That corridor tapered into a makeshift entrance where Rabindranauth Latchman and Action Jackson had been waging a cold war over a small patch of land,

leading to sudden and always temporary captures of territory with barrels or scraps of tin. Beyond these battles was the staircase.

In the tropical way the house was built for ventilation: walls of wood which stopped short of the ceiling, doors whose top halves could be latched open for breeze, louvred windows which let in air but not rain.

The place was in considerable disrepair. The wooden floor had rotted in parts. The stays on the windows had rusted to amorphousness and to attempt a change in angle was to shatter a slat of glass. Elsewhere cobwebs joined broken glass doors to shelves littered with sad pellets of lizard droppings. The toilet bowl, once a baby pink but now its own singular shade, had deep stains in the porcelain imparting the water at the bottom a yellow-brown colouration so that it always looked freshly soiled. There was a crack in the porcelain too, just below the seat, so one always tried to not sit too hard, taxing for a reader and idler. These features subsidised the rent.

I was one of two flats on the upper storey; there were three below, another in the yard, holding a total of anywhere between eight and fourteen tenants. These included Hassa the dead-eyed minibus driver; a pair of busty Indian-Chinese cashiers who people called Curry-Chowmein and who shared my floor; Kwesi the youthman who did electrical odd jobs and often came upstairs to make pining phone calls that contained the words 'I got true feelin for you baby, I ain't lie'; his mother, a hard-working churchwoman who worried for Kwesi and passed around magnificent trails of black pudding on Sundays; and a secret couple whose secret fights had everybody's attention in quiet times.

The first door as you entered the gate was enlivened by the graffiti, 'Let them talk, talk don't bother me'. But in fact it was its occupant, Lancelot Banarsee, who people called a talkman or a gyaffman.

'Indiaman,' Uncle Lance had said to me on the first day. 'Nobody could imitate like Guyanese, you know . . .'

For a moment I suspected he was making a stinging criticism.

'. . . Tha'is why Guyanese could succeed anywhere. We go New York, Canada, Flarida, we could become jus like them. But they can't become like we! I know you mussee hear all kind of t'ing about here. But we's good people, eh. Good people. I ah tell you the problem. Too much politricks. Poli*tricks*, you hear. Ha! G'lang bai, but you must come down fuh gyaff.'

As Uncle Lance was always on the bench by the staircase, this was unavoidable.

'So, how's India?' he would ask. I was still not versed in gyaffin – the key was to make a joke, preferably obscene, denounce something strongly, share a rumour or at the very least discuss somebody's plight – so I would earnestly reply, 'What do you mean, Uncle Lance? Like politically, economically?'

'Economically. Growth, bai, is ten per cent they be aimin for.'

'That's right—'

'How about Bombay? Flimstars! They callin it Mombay now.'

'Yes.'

'How about Delhi? Is a rape there every one minute, rass. Rape capital of the world.'

It was true that Uncle Lance could make talk out of anything. He was armed with nuff nuff conspiracy theories, many of them involving Americans. Like he knew that Hurricane Katrina was put out to disperse Haitian immigrants. To express his true contempt he would go Latin American. Seeing the red swarms of mosquito bites on my forearms he might remark, 'Gringo would be proud to go back so. They could go back and say: watch, we been South America. Blasted fools.'

Uncle Lance knew everybody in the neighbourhood. He had a thin frame and thin limbs that curved like flower stalks into child-bearing hips. He wore boxers and a vest which clung steadfast to his little dhal-belly. It was the vest, and the way he breathed in the neighbourhood, which made one feel that he should have had a top flat: Guyana was full of men in vests who leaned casually in

their balconies and watched street-life below. It seemed an injustice that Uncle Lance hadn't that vantage.

Though I myself didn't have much of a view of the street because of the hardware shop, there were sceneries to the side, across the tin partition, where a bruck-up house thrived with many beings. It had fowl-cock and chicken who called each other at shameless hours of the night, two dogs, a dozen or more pups and a wire cage twittering with birds. Children ran about the place with tremendous hollering energy. They got hard licks and thereafter bawled with terrible passion, which, in the rare instances when the mammy felt in the mood, was followed by such prolonged soothing and cooing it brought to mind Nabokov's words that there is nothing so atrociously cruel as an adored child.

Kitty was the name of the ward. Kitty! Its soft ts fluttered like eyelashes. For a long time I didn't know why it was called so. Afterwards a learned man told me it was named for the daughter of the Dutch planter, Mr Bourda. By then I had come to associate it with the sexual innuendo of the soca Kitty Cat. Kitty had that kind of mood. Boys stood on corners, under the crisscrossing wires, sooring every girl who passed. The sound of a soor, a puckered kiss. 'How you mean, bro!' they said when asked if it caused trouble. 'They get vex if you *don't* show em. Is only the ugly ones who make style.'

Till not very long ago Kitty was its own village. It still retained some of its pastoral disposition. Several people minded animals. Goat, chicken, bird; and in the news was the story of the Kitty cowherd who had been battered to death at dawn after grazing his cows in the national park where Georgetown bourgeoisie took their constitutionals. There was among Kitty's residents an old village pride. Even those who despised Forbes Burnham, the late dictator, cited with satisfaction that he had sprung from Kitty. They were proud of its size and scope. 'It have everything in Kitty,' Uncle Lance said. 'It have Hindu chu'ch, Muslim chu'ch, chu'ch of Christ. We got embassy, orphanage, vulcanisin, pawnshop, cookshop, rumshop,