

## The Link

Anil barreled his new 1964 sedan through one Bombay pothole after another before braking hard at a funeral procession. In the heat outside his open window, a garlanded corpse, being shouldered by family to the crematory, gave Anil a desiccated grin, as though to agree that Anil had done the right thing by returning from Geneva. To family, to the residence he shared with his older brother Sohil and sister-in-law Vimala, to India. Finally, he was home.

This swelling peak of optimism, naturally, marked the exact moment he heard a thundercrack of metal striking metal with force. He'd been back long enough to feel these related, as if Bombay was showing him who was boss. The Amby's engine shivered and crunched to a halt with a burnt-oil puff of black smoke. The Amby had thrown a rod.

He had no real idea where he was. He'd spent most of the past year sequestered at the lab, the work on his plutonium lurching toward success that was now agonizingly close. Anil scanned the narrow, sweltering street of mold-pocked buildings for a familiar sign or shop, but found nothing. It was hard to believe he'd passed his first thirteen years in the town.

A crowd gathered, mostly men, mostly beggars. Or if not beggars, at least men without homes or jobs or all the things he had. This aspect of Bombay he did not care for. He'd never known how to handle people. Anil wanted to get out of his Amby and figure out in his own time what was wrong. But as soon as he lifted the bonnet he would have every man jack of them shouting advice, offering him all manner of everything, each hoping to strike it lucky with a proposition that exactly matched a need.

Anil opened the door. The men were jovial, most about Anil's age, and not so intimidating once he was standing amongst them. He ventured a friendly headshake. He

realized he liked being with them. You could do worse than have a crowd of good-looking young Indian men jostling around you, wanting to be your best friend.

Anil pushed round to the bonnet, which someone had already propped open. A passing bus pulled a wind of hot exhaust. Anil squeezed through the men, enjoying the warm breath, the feel of their lightly clothed bodies against his, but not at all enjoying the sight of a hole in his crankcase—a big hole, just the shape of an undivided Kashmir—which he could see all too clearly, because the oil had drained out to a spreading black lake.

"I can fix, saab. I can fix," a man said, so confidently that Anil almost believed him, but fixing the car would take more than any of these men could provide. A new crankcase would be just the start. He'd have to get it to Sohil's repair shop. His poor Amby.

"All I need is a tow." Anil would never extricate himself from this crowd now.

A shiny-headed man produced an iron-link chain from nowhere, a heavy, rusted, improbable thing. He was looping it to the sturdy front bumper. Anil had negotiated nothing with him, but already this enterprising purveyor of chain, this chainwalla with round face and mustache was attaching himself to both Anil and his car.

"How much?" It had been so long since Anil had bargained properly. Sohil would doubtless tell him he was mucking everything up.

The chain was now snorkeling through the crowd of men. Amounts of rupees were bandied about, rejected and complained over as the chainwalla assembled a crew from the crowd, who seemed quite eager for their two rupees apiece, that much at least was set, to tow the car to...

"Where shall we tow, saab?"

Anil gave them his home address. He'd ask one of Sohil's drivers for the repair shop's location once they arrived. The men tugged the heavy chain taut, five to a side, avoiding the oil slick as the chainwalla barked out commands.

They strained. The Amby did not budge. The chain pullers counted—ek, do, teen—and threw their bodies into it. Still nothing. It should be rolling easily. Was the brake on? Was the car in gear? Surely they must've checked.

"Put it in neutral," Anil yelled.

The men kept straining. Pulling. Anil wiped sweat from his brow. The car was inching forward, but only because they were dragging it down the street, its way greased by its own shed oil.

He looked inside. The brake was off but the car was in first, where it had been when it threw the rod. "I'm telling you, it's still in gear."

No one was listening.

He opened the door and sat down to release the clutch. The chainwalla yelled at him, as though Anil thought himself a raja to be carried on a litter. Did no one in this country ever truly listen? He was trying to make their work easier.

Before he could hit the clutch, Anil heard a loud, crisp snap. Then silence. He got out of the car. A man lay on the ground. The group circled, shielding him. Anil pushed through, expecting to see the man hurt, maybe an arm broken, a calf sliced open, but the backlash when the chain broke must have cracked it like a whip, the broken length of chain flying with the force of ten straining men, taking an angry smack at a fellow so slight he could hardly have added much strength to the pull.

The man wasn't moving; his eyes were open, unseeing. Anil wasn't sure what he was looking at. He blinked. What was wrong with the fellow?

"The bloody car was in gear," Anil yelled. The snapped chain lay at his feet, its broken link corroded halfway through, a typical disaster-in-waiting he should have inspected beforehand. He looked again at the man, a very dark fellow, darker even than Anil, very short, and very still. And now Anil saw it: a white line in the gore of red and bloody black hair. Anil crouched. The back of the man's skull was gone.

Anil felt lightheaded, woozy. Everyone was still. He put a hand on the greasy pavement to steady himself, heedless of the street's odor of vegetal rot. But there was hardly any blood. Was the fellow truly dead? The poor fellow. What to do?

The chainwalla came to himself, and began issuing orders. It seemed to be what he did best, perhaps all he did.

A sheet was fetched. A new chain was fetched, a better chain. Was that it, then? Was life to go on as normal?

"We will tow your car," the chainwalla said. "But you will have to pay money to the widow. A thousand rupees."

So the man was indeed dead. The chainwalla was so matter of fact it pained Anil. Did none of them see the gray matter, spilled on the street? Were none shocked that a brain, the captain that kept one alive, the agent that provided the entire wherewithal for Anil's scientific accomplishments, could be so quickly and irretrievably stilled?

The man—a body now—was laid on the dirty white sheet and wrapped for transport. Anil supposed that was how things were done here. Someone would take the body somewhere. Anil wished he had his brother to guide him.

A ropy-armed member of the chain-pulling crew grabbed Anil's arm. His hair smelled of coconut. "Do not give this oily thug an anna. He does not even know Ninad. Ninad is *my* friend."

The chainwalla began beating this supposed friend. "Get out of here, you no-good sisterfucker."

The friend backed up, but only a few feet. "Ninad and I were just there, looking for work." The man pointed with his chin toward a gulmohar tree growing in the footpath, aflame with red blossoms.

Anil believed the friend. The chainwalla was too much a talker, too little a listener. At Anil's Sussex boarding school the man would have been lead bully of a sporting team, probably named Philip, with a bifurcated surname like Atwater-Chumsworthy, but definitely not worthy of being a chum. That was all the guidance Anil needed. The sum seemed about right—it was likely more than the dead man would have earned in a year, and Anil only had it on his person because Sohil had asked him to withdraw the monthly housekeeping budget from the bank.

Over the chainwalla's sputtering objections, Anil counted out a thousand rupees from his wallet with trembling fingers and handed it to the friend. The friend thanked him profusely, weeping, talking of a pregnant wife, now widow, and retreated, bowing, with another man, hammocking the body down the street.

Anil turned to the chainwalla. He crossed his arms to hide his shaking, to pretend this was ordinary. "Now, you. Will you tow my car or not?" Anil did not believe the others were as unruffled as they appeared, but still, he wanted to get as far away from the scene as he could.

The chainwalla grumbled, but gathered his crew, ten again with the addition of three new fellows, strong enough to tow, strong enough to kill. Anil ran his hands and eyes over the length of the shiny new chain. It looked entirely serviceable, but what if he missed something? He was more comfortable with nuclear orbits and mean free radii, not the crude world of shear moduli and tensile strength. He knew he'd be up that night, pondering the quality of the first chain's steel, its alloy, the uncorroded diameter of link, and whether the extra five or six percent his body weight had added to the load could have made the crucial difference.

The crew threaded the new chain through the bumper. Anil heard the chainwalla calling him a fool and worse under his breath, but Anil was certain that he had done the right thing. He worried rather that he hadn't given the widow enough. He still had another two hundred in his wallet. Why hadn't he given the man that? There would be cremation expenses, pujas to be said, camphor and honeyed dhupa to be burnt. But Anil's connection to the widow had vanished with the ropy-armed man and the body.

His Amby was towed to Sarasvati Nivas, the family home, where Sohil soon came thudding down the front steps, big and bearded, his evening kurta and pajama billowing. Sohil had his men take the Amby to the garage for repair.

When the men and car were entirely gone, Anil recounted the story for Sohil and Vimala, sparing them the description of the man's injury. As he told them of the death, of the tow, of the dispute between the mustachioed chainwalla and the ropy-armed friend, Anil

clenched his eyes against the memory of the man's peaceful, untouched face, rolling back and forth, back and forth, as the white sheet was twisted top and bottom, enclosing the man in a final swaddle.

"Dear brother," Sohil said, placing his hand on Anil's arm, "the widow will never see a single rupee of that."

"If there even is a widow," Vimala added. "It's always the same few stories. If she isn't pregnant, then her breasts have run dry and she needs a rupee for powdered milk." Vimala pulled the free end of her sari, tightening it across her chest. "With utmost respect, dear Anil, you've been taken in."

Anil tried to convince them that he had avoided just that possibility, that the chainwalla had been the lying schemer, and that the widow was real. The friend's tears and anger had been heartfelt. Could anyone make up such sincerity so quickly?

The two just looked at him. He could see it in their loving eyes: he was newly returned, no longer of Bombay. But just as they would never believe that the thousand rupees would go to the widow, Anil would never believe that they would not.