

Ruffled Feathers

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It was one of the finest buildings in South Mumbai. Not a fly could enter unnoticed. It had been constructed on slum land, but today bore an elite address. The affluent and the successful aspired to stay here. And stay they did, after paying a fortune for their apartments. There were twenty stories in all, and three levels of parking, and three elevators for the owners, and a separate elevator for the domestic help.

The security in the building was watertight. Five sturdy guards, in uniforms, patrolled the entrance. Twenty-four hours a day a vigil was maintained. Not that the neighborhood was dangerous, but every precaution had to be taken. That's why the maintenance charges were high: fifty thousand rupees per month. But no one minded, no one complained. And there was CCTV, too, eagle-eyed scanners that snapped up every movement.

The male servants were frisked and checked before they entered and before they left the premises. The maids got away with a bit of flirting; they knew how to soften the men in uniforms. But the chauffeurs were checked morning and evening, and this would annoy them, for they had their pride, these men of spotless appearance.

There were strict rules. Every visitor would have to enter his name and address into a logbook and whilst leaving would have to sign out. This would annoy the visitors, but rules were rules, and the security could not be compromised.

It was surprising then that a pigeon got into the shaft. This was the

long vertical shaft that ran along the bathrooms, carrying the plumbing pipes, all the way from the first floor to the twentieth. It was a wonder how the bird got in, considering that the shaft was covered with a special bird mesh. It could be inferred that the pigeon was looking for a safe place to lay her eggs and, in her quest for childbearing privacy, had torn through the mesh.

The bird was noisy. It bleated without pause, its cooing growing louder with every passing minute. Sometimes, as though seized by some terrible impulse, it would flap its wings and fly up, beating its wings so furiously that feathers from its body would dislodge and float into the bathrooms.

Fed up with the noise, the women of the building decided to take their complaint to the property manager, Major Anirudh Sood, who had his office on the ground floor. The major was a broad-chested man with a jowly face, small, alert eyes, and a faint ironic smile. He ordered tea for the ladies, who had begun to talk among themselves. They spoke for about ten minutes, discussing servants, chauffeurs, and noise levels from the adjoining chawls, before realizing they were there for an important matter.

Kamal Suchanti was the first to speak. She was a glum-faced woman, seventy years of age, residing alone on the third floor. She said that the bird had added to her constipation problem. As it is, unloading at her age was such a problem. And just when she would get the urge the damn bird would start its song of oppression—hootoo, hootoo, it would go, and she would freeze up. Then the bird would rise to a higher level and, going hootoo, hootoo, would excrete onto her bathroom window. It seemed to be mocking her, this bird.

The other women offered some suggestions. Had she tried bananas, papaya, plums, or black grapes, all time-trusted remedies in the battle against constipation? Then someone asked: Had she tried throwing water at the bird before she began her business?

"Not just water," said Major Sood quickly. "Piping hot water! To shock, to stun!"

"Of course not!" said Kamal Suchanti, horrified. "That would be cruel. Horrendously cruel."

"Maybe we can fumigate the shaft?" said Mrs. Vyas helpfully. "That should help get rid of the bird."

"No," said Mrs. Bansal. "That pigeon is pregnant, and we don't want to harm her babies. That would be like the Bhopal Gas tragedy. We don't want that on our conscience."

"No, surely not!" said Mrs. Venkatraman. "Whatever we do, we shouldn't endanger the bird or its eggs. After all, we are civilized people."

"What about tempting the bird with some seeds?" said Mrs. Thakore. "We could place some seeds on the ledge of a toilet window, and when it comes to eat those, we could try and trap it,"

"No, no," said Mrs. Kashyap. "Once the bird knows there is food available, it is never going to go. It will simply stay put."

"Which reminds me," said Mrs. Adenwalla, stiffly. "I must bring it to your attention, Mr. Sood, that someone continues to feed the crows every morning. They throw bread and chapattis on the ledge below my apartment, and the crows flock there and make a terrible nuisance. Caw, caw, they go, for over an hour. Which disturbs my meditation. May I request you to send a circular to all the flat-owners requesting

them to stop this at once? And, if that doesn't work, perhaps you could focus a CCTV upward, to catch the culprit."

"There is nothing wrong in feeding crows, Mrs. Adenwalla. In case you didn't know, crows are nothing but your ancestors reborn, and when you feed them, they shower you with blessings," said Mrs. Doshi. Short and stout, Sheetal Doshi had a grim face that belied her thirty years of age. She sucked in her lips and glared at Mrs. Adenwalla through round glasses.

But Mrs. Adenwalla was not be intimidated by a woman twenty years her junior. Coldly she said, "I can assure you, Mrs. Doshi, that if my ancestors are reborn they are certainly not going to be crows. They are going to be civilized, cultured human beings in London or Paris. In fact, I find it insulting that you'd think my elders to be scavengers. I will have you know, that we, Parsees, have excellent tastes in food."

"Oh, we know all about your tastes in food, Mrs. Adenwalla; don't remind us! You eat the brains and the liver and the kidneys of goats, and their private parts, too. Why, just the other day, the whole lift was stinking when you returned from the bazaar. I could tell it was some awful flesh you had brought back. So don't talk to me about your fine tastes. We know all about that!"

"Well, if you know that much, Mrs. Doshi, perhaps you would also like to tell us who it is who is feeding the crows. Who is following this uncivilized practice, day after day?" Mrs. Adenwalla's eyes glinted. The room bristled with tension.

"Ladies, ladies!" said Major Sood, stretching out his hands in a calming gesture. He felt like a man who had been invaded on his turf, drawn into a battle not his own. Yet he smiled.

"Please stay out of this, Major," said Mrs. Adenwalla angrily. "I think Mrs. Doshi and I have something to settle, and it might as well be here and now!"

"Well, first, let me tell you, Mrs. Adenwalla, that you have no business bringing all your foul-smelling meats into the lift. Most of us here are religious people. We go to the temple; we do puja daily; we don't even allow our servants to eat non-veg food. And then you just walk into the lift with your stinking meats and pollute it. That is not proper. You should think of our feelings, too."

Mrs. Adenwalla crossed her legs elegantly. At fifty-two, she had the body of a gymnast. Sitting erect, hands over her knees, she spoke coolly. "I don't believe it, Mrs. Doshi. You are acting as though being non-vegetarian is some sort of a crime. You are trying to make me feel guilty, make me feel small. Well, you are not going to succeed. Let me tell you what it is like to bite into tender, flavored meat. It makes your palate sing, your senses soar. You eat not just to fill your stomach, but to celebrate life, to feast on it. Something that nature has intended for you. But you can't imagine that, can you? How can you? You are so closed to the idea that you don't even know what you are missing. And another thing: Please stop saying 'lift.' The correct word is 'elevator.' If you must use the English language, use it correctly."

Mrs. Doshi flushed red. With a sudden jerk, she moved her chair closer to her opponent. Then, through clenched teeth, she spoke. She said, "Well, what do you think non-vegetarianism is, if not a crime? Let me ask you one thing, Mrs. Adenwalla, just one thing, huh? And you try and answer me. You think you are very clever, no, with all your fancy airs and your ideas about the English language, then you answer

me one thing from common sense. My guruji told me this, and now I am asking you, and if you answer me, I will acknowledge you in front of all these ladies. Yes, I will! If human beings are meant to eat flesh, then why we don't have claws and fangs like all those flesh-eating animals? Why are we made so differently? Come on! Answer me! I am waiting."

"I don't see why I have to justify myself to you, Mrs. Doshi," said Mrs. Adenwalla. "As far as I am concerned, non-vegetarianism is a matter of individual choice, and you had better learn to respect that. We live in a cosmopolitan society and, if you have a problem with that, then buzz off, move, I say! Go somewhere where you can be with your own kind."

"Hah, you are trying to change the topic because you can't answer my question. How can you? You don't even know what you are stuffing into your body, what you are serving your family. If you really loved your family, would you give them dead offerings? Tell me, would you?" Mrs. Doshi turned and looked around at the other women, her face thick with victory.

"Ladies, ladies, please! We have strayed from the main subject. We need to decide the fate of the pigeon." Major Sood was polite, but his smile had disappeared.

"Well, what are you here for, Mr. Sood, if you can't solve this problem? Our duty was to bring it to your attention. Now you decide how you want to solve it. All we know is: it has to go! The bird has to be removed gently, without hurting it. I am told a pigeon's breath is bad for the health. It can lead to asthma and lung infection. And we have so many children in the building, and old people, too. So you

must act promptly. Wouldn't you agree, ladies? Major Sood is the best man for the job. We should leave it to him."

This was Minoti, Minoti the painter, who was known for her exquisite depictions of old Mumbai. It was a beautiful day, full of warm natural light, and Minoti was eager to return to her canvases.

The other women agreed. Yes, the major was the right man for the job.

Major Sood shot Minoti a grateful look. He had a busy day ahead and liked to maintain a brisk schedule. He rose to his feet and assured the women that the pigeon would be removed. Within twenty-four hours it would be evicted. They had his word on that.

Alone in his office, the major thought what a close shave it had been. It could have turned nasty, like the last time. Mrs. Doshi and Mrs. Adenwalla were old foes, their animosity having begun over a parking spot. Not their fault, really. In Mumbai, parking space was always in short supply. In the building, for instance, each flat-owner was entitled to two parking spots on the raised podium. But how was that to suffice when almost every person in a family owned a car? The space along the driveway was an open parking lot—anyone could park there, as long as you got in first. Yet, there was always a scramble for the spots, and sometimes arguments, which invariably got sorted out.

But one night, things had gotten out of control. Sheetal Doshi's husband, Chetan, had steered his BMW into the place where Soli Adenwalla usually parked his Jaguar. Now, you don't do that to a man like Soli, a big man, a successful man, with an ego as big as his belly. Not for nothing was Soli paying the security guards an additional ten

thousand rupees a month. For that price, they were supposed to keep an eye on his car and discourage other flat-owners from occupying his spot. But that night Soli was out, and Chetan Doshi had rolled in from Pune, having driven three hours non-stop to get home in time for an India-Pakistan cricket match. Chetan was tired, and though he had two reserved spots on the podium above, he thought: why not make use of the open parking?

The security guards had protested. This was Soli Sahib's parking. He always parked there.

Where, where was it written? Chetan Doshi had demanded. And before his gaze the security guards had withdrawn.

Two hours later, Soli cruised in, from a Parsi wedding, where he had knocked back four large single malts and gorged on chicken farcha, patra fish, salli par eedoo, and a spicy pulao dal that reminded him of the one his grandmother would make. Craving the luxury of his four-poster bed, he was aghast to find his parking spot occupied. Calling the security guards, he let fly at them, and all they could do was listen, stupefied. "What could we do, sahib?" they said glumly. "We tried explaining, but Doshi Sahib just would not listen."

That sent Soli into a rage. He ordered them to call Chetan Doshi and tell him to remove his car that minute before he, Soli, did something drastic. And Silla Adenwalla, standing beside her husband, in her fineries, pleaded, "Soli, please, calm down, my darling. You know what Dr. Balaporia said about your blood pressure. You don't want to take chances. You have to take care. You don't want to ruin your health, do you, my sweet potato?"

The guards called up Chetan Doshi, who was equally furious at being asked to abandon an exciting match. Slipping out of his shorts,

into his trousers, he swore that he would teach that arrogant baw a lesson; he would take him down a peg or two. And listening to him was his wife, Sheetal, who decided to accompany her husband, just in case things got out of hand.

Face to face, the two men had argued, had stood their ground, and, when that failed, they traded insults, then blows. When the security guards had tried to intervene, they had been ordered to stay away. And soon the wives had joined in, screaming at each other.

Just then a cop van had passed by. It had stopped, and three cops had stepped out and questioned the men—why the hell were they brawling like hooligans and why were their clothes torn, their faces bloodied? The cops had asked them to accompany them to the station. And, naturally, the wives went too, angry and shrill with accusations.

Complaints were registered. Criminal complaints. On the basis of these, cases were filed in the Bombay High Court. If one of the complainants alleged threat to life and property (meaning car), the other said he had been subjected to a communal slur; he had been insulted to the point where he had suffered a loss of self-esteem.

Each complainant offered the security guards a bribe to testify in his favor. The guards reported this to Major Sood, who thought it prudent to transfer them out and bring in a new lot.

The matter came up for hearing in the Bombay High Court. Justice Nyay Sundaram clubbed all the cases filed by the complainants and brought them to a single hearing. The court didn't have time for petty matters, he said, matters that sprang from the ego.

Hearing both sides, the honorable judge delivered his judgment. The fault lay not with either party but with the civic authorities

who blindly allowed builders to build skyscrapers without taking into account the number of cars. He fined the two complainants five thousand rupees each for wasting the court's time and suggested that they collectively file a public interest litigation asking the civic authorities to give a complete report on how they planned to provide parking space for the new development projects sanctioned by them.

The case made headlines and brought Soli Adenwalla and Chetan Doshi into the limelight. Overnight, they became known, and were now seen as people who had brought to light an important civic issue. The two had to also work together on the public interest litigation. And, while doing so, they buried their hostility, discovering, in the bargain, a common love for cricket. But somehow their wives could not forget that the two men had traded blows, inflicted insults and injuries, and been whisked away, in the dead of night, to the police station, like common criminals. The women were too proud to forget that night.

And that's how matters had come to a boil this morning, thought Major Sood. The argument was simply an offshoot of the main issue. But that was their problem, he thought. He had work to be done, important work. He had better get started.

First, he had to get an estimate for installing a sewage water treatment plant in the building. The plant would recycle and treat wastewater and utilize it for flushing, gardening, and washing cars. It was his idea, the plant, and would result in huge savings on water bills. He was sure that would impress the flat-owners. Show them the foresight he could bring to his job.

Then he had to visit the municipality and request them to level the access road to the building, which was full of potholes. For that, he

should remember to take some money from the bank. Because those jokers at the municipality wouldn't budge without a bribe.

While at the municipality, he also had to complain about the stray dogs who kept up their barking all night. Recently, they had attacked Mrs. Sippy's pug, and Mrs. Sippy had simply refused to pay the monthly maintenance charges until the strays were removed.

He also had to get the water tanks cleaned, the main gate painted, and the chandeliers in the lobby polished. And, besides all that, there was that matter of the damn bird.

At the municipality, he had to wait for two hours, outside the chief engineer's office. Seated on a hard wooden bench, he could see the chief engineer—a small, wiry man with a foxy face—through the swiveling half-doors.

In passing, a peon suggested to him that he stand up. If the chief engineer saw him standing, his ego would be appeased. The peon paused, lingered, and the major sighed and reached for his wallet.

Standing, the major wondered if he missed army life, if, in some way, he still hankered for the thrills of action. For him, it was never about the glory, but the need to be of service to his country. Even as a teenager he had wept over the patriotic songs and felt something stir in his throat and chest during the singing of the national anthem. A twitch in his hip reminded him why he had left the army and, as though to get away from the memory, he began pacing.

Operation Lone Star, it was called, and it was a clandestine operation. An operation that saw him venture into enemy lines, take risks that would have been considered a breach of treaties and peace pacts. The

mission was nowhere to be found in any army records. Not as much as a word. They had been told that even their families would not know their location and, should something happen, their bodies would be declared missing in action.

There were five of them on the strike force: Pushpinder Sinha, Banwari Lal, Vivek Mathur, and Rajindra Singh Khosla. He, of course, was the senior-most, the man in charge, and together they were known as Sher-e-Parbat, Lions of the Mountain, because it was their job to move out after dark and comb the mountains for hidden bunkers and snipers and render them inactive.

It was almost midnight when they had come upon the house on the mountain, a solitary hut that looked deserted.

And then he had seen a flash and knew that it was occupied. They were being watched, yes! Targeted? Perhaps.

And he knew, too, that his men were exhausted. They had been on the move for days, walking across treacherous ledges, along mountain walls ripped by shells and mortar. Their feet and fingers were stiff, like logs. Their boots and weapons felt like a burden. They were low on sleep, low on rations, and their breathing was slow and heavy.

So he had decided to check out the hut himself. Ordering his men to cover him, he had begun his climb, his one hand over a torch, his other holding a rifle.

Twice he had seen the flash, and knew he had to get there quickly. But the hut was higher than what it had seemed from below. At five thousand meters, the eyes and the mind could play tricks. That much he knew about the mountains.

Glad for the bulletproof jacket he wore and for the sheltering dark, he had inched his way up, expecting any moment to catch a burst

of gunfire. They lived with that feeling always: the tacit presence of death. Like knowing they could be consumed anytime by these jagged white peaks, where nothing in nature survived.

Then, luckily, he had found a path that led to the house, and he had brought out his pickaxe and lurched forward, man against nature, and nature allowing itself to be conquered, slowly, grudgingly.

Working his way up, he couldn't breathe freely. His breath came in spurts, short and hard, and he was sure that the enemy could hear him wheezing.

Finally he was there, outside the hut, at the side entrance. He did not care if someone were to shoot him now. He was that tired, that numb. Besides, he could not see his men and knew not what awaited him on the other side.

Mustering all his strength, he kicked at the door, and the first thing he saw were the white of eyes, startled, and a rifle point clumsily at him.

Then he felt a searing pain in his thigh, the ground wobble under him, and he, falling, had emptied out his rifle.

When he was sure that it was all over, he had swung his torch around and was seized by a terrible panic. What had he done? What, indeed? The figure before him was that of a boy no more than seven or eight years in age, slumped dead against the wall of the hut.

He crawled across the room, wondering how the boy had come to be there. What was he doing at that height? Was he an Indian or a Pakistani? Or the son of a terrorist?

Under the torchlight, he had gazed at that face and realized it was not a face he would ever forget. A sweet, angelic face, with long, feathery eyelashes.

Removing his gloves, he touched the boy's forehead with his palm. It was still warm, and the hair so soft and moist.

He felt his thigh swell and his groin and hip throb mercilessly. But he knew that if he was to ever feel any paternal instinct, any pangs of fatherhood, it was in these moments only.

He had shouted to his men that it was all over, and even as the peaks carried his voice back to him, he knew that it was, indeed, all over. He had done his bit for the country, but it was life that had tripped him. He would have to live with that face now—and a bad leg to remind him.

Heavyhearted and numb with pain, he had lifted the boy's body and carried it outside. And even whilst he struggled with the weight something fell to the ground. Something, he felt, that did not deserve his attention.

He had buried the boy, but did not have the heart to cover the face. Who was he to cover anything so beautiful, so pure? He left that to the mountains and to the Gods above.

And then he had said a silent prayer and asked the mountains to forgive him. But the mountains were, as usual, unresponsive.

And then he remembered the fallen object and went back for it.

The light from his torch fell onto a mountain-runner's badge. A badge worn by the brave men who carried news in this part of the world, who treaded the narrow paths and the slippery slopes to deliver letters and parcels. The boy was using the badge to signal someone, to tell him that he was alive and well.

It made him sick to think of what he had delivered to the boy, instead. His leg felt heavy now, heavy and unmovable, but not as heavy as his heart.

On the way down, his leg had given way twice, and then he had fainted, and when he had woken up, days later, it was in a military hospital, at the foot of the mountains.

There he had been told it was all over. His career, that is. He would never know about the fate of his men and was instructed to forget about the mission. To simply erase it from his mind.

As though it was that easy. But, then, he was a bachelor, and was used to silence. So getting back to civilian life was something he took in his stride. Besides, the army compensated him well. He was given a one-bedroom apartment in Colaba, a membership to the U.S. club, and a card that entitled him to subsidized rations and free train travel across the country.

He had got the first job he had applied for. It was with an international property management company where the pay scales were world-class. And the first building to which he was assigned was a prestigious one, one of the best in South Mumbai. So, in a sense, life had worked out well for him. It had made him a bed as comfortable as he could expect at his age. And, here, no one considered him handicapped. With a little bit of pride and effort, he got around. He made himself useful, valuable.

And now the chief engineer called him in. He had two of his assistants with him. They noticed his limp, but said nothing. Just pointed to a rickety chair.

The room smelled of a freshly consumed lunch. Pickles. Onions. Papads. It reminded the major of what had been enjoyed while he was waiting, standing, pacing.

He explained why he was there. If the access road could be repaired and leveled?

They laughed and said that was for their bosses to decide, their big bosses.

Looking at their impassive faces, Major Sood was tempted to throw a chair at them. It would be so easy, he thought, to topple the desk and crush them. Instead, he bit back his anger and said, "Sahib, is there anyway you can do some basic repairs? All our flat-owners have expensive cars. And they have important guests visiting. It doesn't look good for a premium building to have this kind of an access road." He brought out an envelope from his pocket and placed it on the desk.

Without touching it, the chief engineer said, "Tell me, sir, what would be the total value of all the cars in your building?" Then without pause he added, "I hope your gift is in proportion to that. You see, our own tank is very large. It has a very big capacity." And then they had started laughing, and the major was forced to laugh, too. And in that laughter they had all seemed united. At least for a while.

No sooner had he returned then there was a call from Mrs. Sippy. She said her maid had refused to take the pug for a walk; she was petrified of the strays. So could Major Sood come and walk the pug? He could arm himself with a stick and teach the strays a lesson.

And Major Sood had felt a swamping anger in his heart. What sort of job was this that denied him his rank and his twenty years of military service? And what had the country come to that it chose to expose a man of his stature to petty bribes and tawdry humor?

At 5:30 that evening a circular went out to all the flat-owners. It said: "You are hereby requested to cooperate in the matter of the

pigeon eviction. The pigeon is a bird known to cause breathing problems and lung infections. Hence, please don't take this lightly. Please switch on your exhaust fan in the toilet at 9:00 P.M. sharp. With all fans on, this will force the bird to seek refuge at the bottom of the shaft, from where it will be removed by the housekeeping boys. I have personally instructed the boys, who will work as per my instructions. All we need is your cooperation and support. So help us help you."—By Order of the Property Manager, Major Anirudh Sood, Sher-e-Parbat. He hoped that someone would ask him what that last bit meant. Not that he would reveal much. Perhaps give just a hint of who he had been. A special man on a special duty.

A security guard went from apartment to apartment, handing out the circular. In most places, the circular was collected by a domestic helper, the lady of the house either having gone out or engrossed before the television set.

Minoti collected hers, only to wipe her paint-stained fingers on it and crush it into a ball. This was a distraction in the face of some serious art waiting to be created.

Kamal Suchanti, heavy in the stomach and compelled to forsake her lunch, peered at it sullenly and said, "How, how will this help? If nothing else, more feathers, more nuisance!"

Sheetal Doshi took it absent-mindedly, at the door, while in conversation with her neighbor. "Tell me, Mrs. Venkatraman," she said. "Tell me one thing, huh. About these non-vegetarians! Why do they call other animals wild animals when they themselves eat defenseless animals? Animals who can't protect themselves, who can't fight back! Is that normal, you tell me?"

And Mrs. Venkatraman replied, "You are so right, Mrs. Doshi. You were right this morning, too. But I could not say that openly. You know how that Mrs. Adenwalla is. A real fighter-cock! She would have argued, fought, and made us all feel small. My husband always says, 'A human being is what he eats. You eat satvic food and you will be calm and pleasant, but eat spicy food and you will generate heat and anger.'"

Sheetal Doshi's voice turned soft. She said, "Why, that is exactly what my guruji says. Only, he explains it so beautifully. Why don't you and Mr. Venkatraman come one day to one of Guruji's discourses? You will enjoy, I tell you. It will change your lives."

Mrs. Venkatraman stiffened. She said coldly, "Why, thank you, Mrs. Doshi, but we don't need our lives changed. We are very happy the way we are. Simple living and high thinking; that is what we practice. And never to harm others or to speak ill of them. Even if they are different from us. Now, if you will excuse me, I will go and start preparing dinner. Mr. Venkatraman likes to eat early."

And so the two neighbors went to their respective duties and, of course, they forgot to switch on their exhaust fans. As did many others in the building.

The next morning, all the young housekeeping boys were called to the property manager's office. There they stood, listening to a lecture.

"The pigeon, by and large, is a dirty bird, a noisy bird," said Major Sood, standing at his desk, standing upright, his hands behind his back. "But, in times of war, it has its uses. During World War 1, for instance, it was a pigeon, Cher Ami, who, despite being shot in the eye and breast, continued its flight and delivered a message that saved the lives of a hundred-and-ninety-four British soldiers. And, again, during

World War II, it was a pigeon who saved the lives of a thousand British soldiers. It flew twenty miles in twenty minutes to warn the soldiers that the town they occupied was going to be bombed. But that was in war, mind you, and those were special pigeons.”

From a giant cage on his desk, a disfeathered pigeon let out its first coo of the day, cocking its neck upward, then sideways, to reveal a curious orange-rimmed eye. Later, it would be given finely chopped almonds and pistachios and the thick battle-grazed finger of Major Sood would enter its cage and rub its head and neck gently. And that evening it would be removed to the one-bedroom apartment of Major Sood, where it would be positioned on a balcony facing the sea, the balcony on which Major Sood enjoyed his three rum-and-Cokes of the day while listening to old Hindi songs from the Sixties and Seventies, his fingers drumming away on his white wicker armchair. And once he was finished with his drinks, and the ocean before him had turned dark and foaming, dark and noisy, the major would rise, stand before the cage, and whisper softly, “Mother, little Mother, are you ready? Will you be ready soon?” □