

Soaring of the Wingless

A Journey to Paradise, through Hell

A Novel

by **Vikas Kochhar**

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To my family, who continues to believe in my utterly fictitious abilities.

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Book I
The Legacy

Chapter 1

The Fence

As it descended, the sun relented. It slipped behind the hills and caressed the scorched earth with its honey-colored fingers. Shadows grew bold and began to mingle together, rejoicing in the day's decline.

A wind sprang up from the east and, like a country woman plucking wild flowers, started gathering small, hot eddies swirling in the underbrush. An, old wooden fence stood rotting in the middle of a clearing in a jungle of the Himalayan foothills. The fence's planks rattled in rheumatic protest as the wind gathered strength. Young, wild grass hemmed the fence in on all sides—the lush, long blades of grass began to mock the fence's creaking rigidity by singing and dancing to the wind's rhapsody.

Suddenly a figure, perhaps of a boy or of a man, came running out of the darkness that had begun to thicken around the edges of the clearing. It rushed toward the fence, and just when a heads-on collision between flesh and wood appeared inevitable, the figure got airborne with a leap. As it hung midair for a fraction of a second, the sinking sun became its gigantic halo. Its bare feet struck the upper plank of the fence, and the figure tumbled into the rustling grass below.

Many moments passed before the person rose painfully to his feet. The unkempt hair on his head waved in the wind. Also waved a long and thick mustache on his upper lip. He raised a hand to his head and touched a maturing bruise with a groan. On its way down, his hand brushed against his mouth and one end of his luxuriant mustache came free. It dangled from his face for a moment and then floated off to the ground like a bloated feather. He stooped to pick it up and put it in his pocket.

His face, though haggard and contorted with a pain deeper and older than that of the new bump on his head, was that of a boy. He had generous, cubic proportions, with his width nearly equaling his height. But the wind fell for a moment, and his shape transformed. His oversized clothes, which the wind had been lifting and filling out, now hung loose on his gaunt body.

A stream cut through the clearing in which the boy stood. There was dense jungle on three sides and the hills in the west. The retiring sun looked upon the murmuring brook with a genial eye and made it a body of molten gold.

Behind the boy was the remnant of the ancient fence—so ancient that there was no indication as to what it might have once fenced in. He turned and stepped around it. There was a stagger in his gait; he moved like an old man.

‘Well,’ he said to a crude face he had etched on the fence with a stone, ‘if I sit on you, I become a fence-sitter, don't I? And if I try to jump over you, you entangle my toes and make me fall.’

But then, as though he could see a scowl on the fence's face, he assumed a conciliatory tone. 'Come on,' he said, 'be a sport! No need to get angry. Do you think I couldn't jump clear over you because you are so high and mighty? No, sir! It is only because,' he fell silent, pressed his stomach with a hand, and spoke slowly, 'only because I have not eaten anything in two days.'

The fence responded in no way. The boy raised his head and looked at the setting sun, and his eyes seemed to be setting too: there was a watery longing in them. He gazed at the wisps of clouds gliding in air till he saw a formation of parrots passing overhead, flying homeward—the color in their plumage forming a mobile rainbow in the skies. He leaned on the fence and looked longingly at the parrots till they flew out of sight into the forest.

He continued to look at the emptiness left behind. His eyes were remarkable—most remarkable in the fact that nothing specific could be remarked about them. Light brown eyes. They were large, or, perhaps, they appeared so because his face was thin. Shades came and went in his eyes, one after the other: shades of fear, despair, agony, and yearning. Patches of darkness with streaks of light, as when black clouds flit past a new moon.

His eyes were still turned upward when he saw a straggling parrot. The bird flew tilted to one side and tottered in the sky. That is just like me, the boy thought. The bird beat its wings with increased agitation, as if making a last, concerted effort to catch up with its flock. Its strength failed visibly. It careened toward the ground and landed a few feet ahead of the boy.

'You wait here,' said the boy to the fence, 'I'll talk to the poor Mithoo.'

He crept cautiously toward the parrot. The bird, with its beak buried in its breast and its wings slightly quivering, lay panting in the grass. It raised its head and hopped forward as the boy came nearer.

'Stop a second,' the boy cooed. 'Don't be afraid of *me*. We're so-, so...*similar*.' But the bird had its own notion of their similarities. The two presented a strange sight: the parrot staggered ahead and the boy hobbled behind.

'You are wounded, and I am hurt,' said the boy. 'You are alone, and so am I.' He looked back with a guilty glance at the fence. 'I mean, I am not alone, but *he* doesn't talk much.'

Time had ushered the day out and handed the charge over to the night now. A large milky moon rose and stood sentinel among a spattering of stars in the eastern quarters of the sky. The stream sighed as it lost its golden hue and became silvery. Stars, as if not too sure of their timing, pulsated with uncertainty, coming forward and drawing back. The grass kept up its merry song and dance, determined to tease the jittery fence as long as it could.

The boy stopped walking and looked with a drawn face at the deepening darkness of the jungle. The mob of shadows pressed on the clearing from all the sides. The bird also stopped. The boy sank down to the brush and sat cross-legged. 'Frightened of *me*!' he chuckled at the absurdity of the idea.

A hunting caracal called in the distance and sent the parrot's wings working in a frenzy of impotence. 'Do you know cats eat birds?' he asked the parrot. For the first time, the parrot tilted its head to a side and fixed a gleaming eye upon the boy, as though to say, 'I know that, thank you!'

'Oh, but dogs bite viciously,' said the boy, displaying a wound on his palm and a long, seamed scar on one of his calves. They still hurt, the wound and the scar.

'I am Smast,' he spoke again. 'Formerly, Smast the Rat. Presently, presently—,' his voice hushed and his gaze darted to the edges of visibility, 'Smast the Murderer.'

The parrot remained unimpressed by this revelation and dug its beak into the feathers on its chest. The cat called out again; the parrot began fluttering and hopping in a pathetic attempt to take flight. 'The cat smells your blood,' Smast said, detecting a wound in the parrot's side. 'But don't be scared, I'll protect you from the cat. And maybe, just maybe, you can save me from this loneliness later.'

The caracal growled somewhere close now. A bush some yards away rustled, parted, and the squat head of a large cat peered out. Its fangs gleamed white in the moonlight. The cold yellow flame of its eyes moved from the bird to Smast and the beast stood still in its predatory crouch. The parrot edged and dragged itself closer to Smast.

The boy pried a clod of earth loose from the soil and threw it at the animal, missing his aim by a few feet. The caracal stared at him defiantly; it stretched its jaws, arched its back, and hissed. Smast's heartbeat quickened in fear—for a moment it appeared entirely possible to him that the wild cat could make *him* the main meal of its dinner after enjoying the bird as an appetizer. He groped for a more solid missile to throw at the cat. Finding nothing, he rose to his knees and flailed his arms violently at it. After another insolent glare, the caracal wheeled and vanished into the darkness of the jungle.

Smast settled back in the grass and looked into the depthless, stony eye of the parrot. He brought out the mustache from his pocket and clapped it on to his face. 'We may be stuck here together for some time, so let me be plain with you,' he said. 'I don't think there's any similarity between us after all. You're beautiful, I am ugly. Nobody calls you a crow, everyone has always called me a rat. You are a bird, I am a jailbird. You deserted your mother; I was dragged away from mine. In short, I am so bad they were going to hang me by the neck.'

He fell silent and began to touch the bruise on his head again. His fingers crept into his hairline and hovered over the edges of an ugly, jagged wound. "Let's go sleep," he said and, extending his hand, gently picked up the parrot.

Smast rose and walked back in the direction of the fence. There, underneath the lowest plank, he had dug himself a small cavity. He lay down in it, placed the bird by his side, and closed his eyes.

'I wish you would tell me your story one day,' he said to the fence, opening his eyes again. 'Or that I would be able to tell you...mine. But it's not a pretty bedtime story.'

The stars now shone with a greater surety. They winked down on him, very knowingly, as though saying, '*We* saw it all; we know it all.'

Chapter 2

The Unimportance of Things

The gnarled face of the fence exhibited no desire to listen to Smast's story. It remained expressionless in the moonlight, and an aging joint in the fence's frame creaked occasionally in the wind.

'You laugh!' said Smast. 'If only you knew some of it—like who really killed that evil dog, Bheekhhu, in the prison—you'd be begging me to tell you the entire thing. But guess what? I am not going to tell you *any* part of it now. Stand here and keep wondering.'

Smast closed his eyes again; a gust rattled the loose planks so violently that the fence appeared in danger of toppling over the boy. 'Oh, waiting for me just to shut my eyes, to crush me? Even you, who haven't ever gone anywhere, would go out of your way to do it, wouldn't you? And why not, why should you be any different from the rest of the world?' He crossed his arms on his chest. 'Okay, I will just not sleep then.'

But in a little while, he fell into a second-rate slumber. Even sleep came to him like a bad coin thrown at a blind beggar. There was hunger in him and there was no bed under him. No walls around, no roof above.

He was afraid. Afraid of the darkness, scared of the jungle, frightened by the sounds of the night, and terrified by the silence that those sounds did not ever breach.

And there was his mind with its tendency to drag him back to the beginnings of his time and throw him in a swamp of nightmares as soon as he would close his eyes. The wind hummed through the sleeping forest canopy in tune with the song of the stream. Pearls of dew began to form in the grass and became millions of miniature moons shining on the ground. The parrot, its wings spread out like a ropewalker's pole, inched away from Smast's arms and hopped toward a bush near the water. At some point, Smast fell asleep and nightmares pounced upon him.

He was born in the year nineteen hundred and twenty-three, in a town a few hundred miles away from the foothills of the great Himalayas. For some reason that Smast could not comprehend until years afterwards, the world had taken extreme offense at his coming into existence.

These had been the elements of that existence: a home that would remain dark even at noontime on sunny days, and drip on rainy nights. It was always either intolerably hot or freezing, depending upon the month of the year. It had changed from the time of his earliest memory to the time he was dragged out of it by a posse of constables corrupt to the soles of their boots. It had not changed for the better. Nothing had ever changed for the better.

The amount of food his mother could earn for him decreased year after year. He had yearned for milk ever since he was a baby. Other children his age were all stronger than him;

none of them came from a household that did not own even a single cow. Pintu attributed Smast's thinness and foolishness to his having no cattle.

Pintu was an obese boy with a disproportionately small head and an uncanny talent for summoning big crocodile-tears at will. He still sucked his thumb at the age of fourteen, and even his own mother thought that his brain-matter could have fitted inside an insect's head with room to spare. But that did not matter. Smast's mother thought that *his* brain-matter could have filled Birbal's cranium without diminishing that great man's reputation one whit. Smast was exceptionally bright. That did not matter either.

What mattered was that Pintu was well fed, drank milk twice a day, went to the best school in town, was always dressed warmly for the winters, and lived in the grandest and biggest house of the town. His father had dozens of head of cattle and owned the rice fields where Smast's mother went to work. These were the things that mattered. The important things.

Pintu's ownership over Smast's time and will was implicit in these things. He had even coined the epithet by which all the others called him: Smast the Rat. And they called, by a mere co-incidence, Pintu's little sister *Cat*. Cat was very catlike in her eyes, in the chubby roundness of her face, and in her particular aversion to rats.

'Hey, Rat!' Pintu would command Smast, 'bring that football over here. Don't touch it with your *foot*, pick it up. What's it to *you* if it's all muddy?'

The people who are important also determine what is unimportant, and their notions become universal. The fact that Smast and Pintu's fathers were brothers was deemed insignificant. Smast had chanced to hear somewhere once that the plantations on which his mother worked as a bonded laborer were her own lands. He went home and asked her if that was true.

'It is true, but it is not important,' she answered. 'You might hear of such other things, Smast. Tomorrow somebody may tell you that Darshan—, you know Darshan?'

'Yes,' Smast answered, 'the fat man who sits in the shed and stuffs his mouth with both the hands, and whose voice sounds like a girl's half the time.'

Nina smiled. 'His voice sounds like that of a girl *all* the time when he shouts. And he shouts at the peasants all the time. If I stop for a minute to rest, he yells at me. And yet, tomorrow somebody may tell you that he is actually my servant. There was a time he would bow to me whenever I saw him. That was when your father was alive. But what does it matter now? We have more important things to think of, like how to keep living till tomorrow.'

'You mean, Ma,' Smast spoke with wonder, 'that the cows that Pintu and Cat get all their milk from, are my cows, too?'

'Yes, they are,' she said.

'But if they are ours, what do we get from them, Ma?'

'We are given a part of the cows' dung, my child. Just think, whatever would we do without it, since we are forbidden to gather and burn wood?'

‘Why are we forbidden to burn wood?’

‘Wood is privately owned, Smast, and it’s very valuable. Because Pintu’s parents use either oil or wood as their fuel, they don’t have much use for their cows’ dung. So old Mohan, their servant, secretly brings some of it here for us.’

‘Privately owned, valuable, important,’ he mused, trying to understand the big things. ‘Milk, wood, food, clothes, toys, a house where the roof doesn’t leak in the rains—all these are such valuable things. Pintu has them all. Why don’t I have any of them? Not one of them. He says only he matters and I don’t count. I don’t count, Ma?’

She did not say anything. She tipped her head back and blinked rapidly. Then she clasped her boy in her arms, embracing him with a force of desperation that squeezed their breaths out of both of them. He felt large drops falling on the back of his neck. And though she spoke after many moments, her voice still quivered.

‘There is nothing and nobody on earth who matters more than you do, my child. I continue to be, because you are. You count and *only* you count. Where is the power in me to go on and on as I do, every day, in this scorching heat, in those soaking rains? It comes from you, from your importance: you are too important, my darling.’

Smast concluded from this that one could be unimportant and too important at the same time. His mother kept him pressed to her heart for a long time. The heavy drops at Smast’s nape trickled down his back in little, tickling streams.

Chapter 3

The Luxury of Dreaming

Pintu was brilliant at torture. This brilliance, paradoxically, stemmed from his stupidity. He once led a group of children to a featureless playground. There were no trees, grass, walls or hedges in that field. Just a vast, dusty, dull plain.

Pintu crooked his finger and shook it in the way of a summons. With a thudding heart and downcast eyes, Smast stepped forward from the rear of the crowd.

‘Suggest a game we could play here this evening, Rat. Fast! Come up with something by the time I count to three.’ His thumb shot to his mouth and two long, protruding teeth worked into the dirt lodged behind his yellow nail for a moment. ‘One! Two! Three!’ He spat out at the end of that moment and then looked at Smast with a mix of righteous anger, contemptuous pity, and native superiority. ‘How could anybody be *this* slow and dull?’ he demanded to know from his cronies.

‘Everybody!’ he cried, ‘I know what we shall play—the best game of them all: hide-and-seek. My version of it. Turn your backs and count to thirty. Rat will hide first, and we’ll *all* look for him together. And you,’ he said, turning to Smast, ‘you’ll give piggyback rides to everyone who seeks you out. No cheating, everybody! Turn your backs and close your eyes.’

Pintu and his cronies spent that evening enjoying their rides; their ‘pony’ fell down at the end of it, lay alone on the cold ground for an hour, and went home limping and crying in the dark.

The roots of Smast’s awakening, and of the strange and dangerous course his life soon took, lay in an evening about a year later.

Dusk fell like a grey shroud slowly gravitating to earth. Smast was not afraid of darkness when it had no limits—with no edges to it, there were no fears in it. His mother was never home till long after sundown, and out of necessity, he never lighted a lamp before she was back from work. Whenever he could steal past the grounds where Pintu and his friends played, he went to the municipal pond’s banks. It was not easy to get there unseen.

He went there because it was a wasteland, because it was not *privately owned*. The pond had gone stagnant and the stench from its mossy waters, along with the stink of the garbage heaps lining its banks, kept the important children away.

Smast was very fond of the place and didn’t mind its foulness and its flies. It was infested with rats—fat, heavy, lethargic rats, which resembled Pintu more than they did Smast. But they still afforded Smast a sense of fellow-feeling.

On this particular evening, Smast crawled in a drained canal for an hour to reach the pond undetected. Half a moon was out and shining. Smast began his evening by playing

with his shadow. He liked the control he had over it, but more than that, he savored its attachment, its devotion to him: it was the one companion he had on equal terms.

He started his play with high jumping: leaping over an imaginary barrier and landing onto a mound of soil. He liked high-jumping and he also liked soil. He could make shapes out of it.

He took a handful off the mound, went to the pond, and mixed some water in it. He sat crossed-legged on the ground and went to work. A little structure took shape under his hands. It was not a crude hut. It was a house, with straight walls rising symmetrically from inside a low compound wall. He built it with such care, attention, detail, and tenderness that his eyes moistened when he completed it. It was not a plaything for him. It was a Dream. A dream he could touch.

He dreamed of his mother living in such a house. He touched the small room on the terrace where he would sleep. A foot blurred past his arm and Smast's dream vanished. It shattered and flew about in small lumps of soil. Some of the fragments of his dream fell on his face and got into his eyes. Only a shed he had built at the back remained standing.

'Clean my boot, Rat, it has got all dirty. But wait a second,' said Pintu, and kicked the shed out of existence.

'Okay, clean the boot now. What funny things had you made, Rat? And when did you come here? We were looking for you today. Would have had such fun with you and the little pup Ramu stole from Kama Singh's farm. I threw the puppy in the well to see how long it could dog-pedal, but—hey, don't you see the mud sticking to the sole? So, what had you made out of this sticky soil?'

'I just made a house.'

'What was that at the back of your stupid house?'

'That was a shed for the cows.'

'Cows! Why did you make them, the house and the shed?'

'I want to live in a house like that, Pintu. I want Ma to live in a house like that. Its roof doesn't leak and we can keep some cows in the shed.'

'You know what, Rat? It sounds just like my house. It even *looked* like my house. So you want to live in my house, huh? You want that? Tell me!'

'No, not in your house. In our house—Ma's house and mine.'

'You mean my house is your mama's and yours! Isn't that what you mean?' Pintu yelled.

Smast had not meant that at all at first, but he knew that the easiest way, with the least damage, out of Pintu's paws was to avoid disagreeing with him as much as possible.

'Gone dumb, Rat? Speak out and admit that is what you meant!'

'Yes, I meant exactly that. It is my house you live in!' Smast said. Defiant words, uttered meekly.

Two slaps slammed into his face and a fist rammed into his stomach. When he bent over with pain, Cat, who stood a little backward, came up and scratched his face with her long and dirty nails, which her mother had not clipped for weeks.

‘So, let’s get it all straight for the record. (Cat, you be the witness.) Rat here says that the house we live in is not our house. He claims we are living in *his* house. He also means that everything else, the very clothes we are wearing, is also his. We always knew this-, this *revolt* was coming from you ungrateful pigs. Let me tell Papa and then see what happens,’ said Pintu. He twisted Smast’s shirt in his hand and unburdened it of the weight of its two remaining buttons.

‘And I will tell Mama,’ Cat joined in. ‘Mama always says, “don’t touch dirty things, Catty.” I will tell her that Rat was saying nasty things, so I touched *him*.’

Smast was outright terrified now. He knew that whatever would *happen* when Pintu told his parents this pack of lies would be done not to him, but to his mother.

‘No, please Pintu,’ Smast begged. ‘Don’t say anything to your father. Your house is your house. I don’t want to live in your house. I just want to live in my hut till the day I die. I’ll clean your boots everyday and you can even tie me behind your pony and drag me in the sand, but please say nothing to your father.’

‘Oh! You don’t *want* to live in my house now! You suddenly have airs and think it’s not good enough for you? Tell me!’

‘No, your house is very good, too good for me. We can not live in it because it is too good for me. I was just dreaming when I made that house.’

‘Dreaming? You hear, Catty? He was dreaming! Ha ha ha!’ Pintu laughed with a sound that could induce a hyena to throw up its last meal. Cat began giggling when he started and stopped when he stopped.

Smast came home with terror lodged in his chest as palpably as a bullet. He trembled at the possibility of things that could happen to his mother at the hands of that terrible man, Pintu’s father.

Pintu and Cat had taken Smast back to their garden and asked him to make more houses of soil while they went home and had their milk. He molded shapes that were not as neat and precise as the house he had built in the wasteland. Ugly huts sprang up in crooked rows under his hand. About ten were finished when Pintu returned.

Though Pintu had attended school from the usual early age, he was a bad specimen of the improvements engendered by education. He counted the huts twice, differently both times.

‘So, were you dreaming when you made *these* nine houses? Just a minute—one, two, three...yes, ten houses. Were you dreaming then?’

Smast hesitated, but Pintu saved him the trouble of responding.

‘*Dreaming!* Here go your dreams, ha ha ha!’ He kicked the ten structures flat in twenty seconds and went home.

When Smast came home, he asked his mother, 'To dream is a bad thing, Ma?'

'Of course not, Smast. Why do you ask?'

'Pintu said he dreams of becoming the richest man of India. He said he always has a hundred bags full of money in his dreams, and I only get what he throws at me just as he throws bones to his dogs.'

His mother laughed her different laugh. It was different because he could never make out whether it was a chuckle or a sob. Smast would later call it, 'laughing the sorrow.'

'They talk of money and power all the time at Pintu's home,' she said. 'His having this sort of a dream is very natural. The rich think, worry, and dream more about money than the poor do.'

'He says it is foolish of me to dream of living in a big house, where we can sleep in dry beds and keep cows of our own and have bags full of money.'

She laughed her sorrow again. 'No, my little prince, it's not foolish of you to dream of these things, not foolish at all.'