
Transmission

Hari Kunzru

Chapter 1

Around him Connaught Place seethed with life. Office workers, foreign backpackers, messengers and lurching ladies all elbowed past the beggars, dodging traffic and running in and out of Palika Bazaar like contestants in a demented game. For a moment Arjun Mehta, consumed by hesitation, was the only stationary figure in the crowd. He was visible from a distance, a skinny flagpole of a boy, hunching himself up to lose a few conspicuous inches before making his entrance. The face fluttering on top wore an expression of mild confusion, partly obscured by metal-framed glasses whose lenses were blurred with fingerprints. Attempting to assert its authority over his top lip was a downy moustache. As he fiddled with his collar, it twitched nervously, a small mammal startled in a clearing.

Finally, feeling himself as small as he would ever get, he clutched his folder of diplomas to his chest, stated his business to the chowkidar, and was waved up the steps into the air-conditioned cool of the office lobby.

Marble under his feet. The traffic noise suddenly muffled.

Behind the front desk sat a receptionist. Above her a row of clocks, relic of the optimistic 1960s, displayed the time in key world cities. New Delhi seemed to be only two hours ahead of New York, and one behind Tokyo. Automatically Arjun found himself calculating the shrinkage in the world implied by this error, but, lacking even a best estimate for certain of the variables, his thoughts trailed away. For a moment or two the image hung around ominously in his brain - the globe contracting like a deflating beach ball.

It was punctured by a cleaner pushing a mop over his toes. He frowned at the man, who stared unapologetically back as he continued his progress across the lobby. At the desk the receptionist directed him to a bank of elevators. Stepping out at the eighth floor, he walked up and down a corridor searching, with rising panic, for Office Suite E. Just as he was beginning to think he had been given an incorrect address, he came to a door with a hand-written sign taped over the nameplate: INTERVIEWS HERE. He knocked, received no reply, knocked again, then shuffled about for a while wondering what to do. The shuffling did not seem to help, so he kneeled down and polished his smudged shoes with his handkerchief.

'Excuse me please?'

He looked up at a prim young woman in a peach-coloured salwar-kameez.

'Yes?'

'Would you mind moving out of the way?'

'Sorry.'

She brushed past him and unceremoniously pulled the door open to reveal a waiting room filled with nervous young people, sitting on orange plastic chairs with the peculiar self-isolating stiffness interview candidates share with criminal defendants and people in STD-clinic reception areas. The woman swept in and announced herself to a clerk, who checked her name on a list and assigned her a number. Consumed by his own inadequacy, Arjun followed.

The candidates squirmed. They coughed and played with their hands. They pretended to flick through magazines and made elaborate attempts to avoid eye contact with one another. All the seats were occupied, so Arjun picked a spot near a window and stood there, shifting his weight from foot to foot and trying to reboot himself in positive mode. Listen, Mehta. You don't know how many positions Databodies has open. Perhaps there are several. The Americans have a skills shortage. They want as many programmers as they can get. But such a number of applicants? There were at least fifty people in the room.

The air-conditioning system grumbled, failing to counter the heat gain from the mass of sweating job-hungry flesh. Candidates fanned themselves with filled-out forms. Chairs squeaked under moist buttocks. There were three interview rooms in simultaneous operation; and, as people were called in and others arrived, the scene around Arjun changed like a time-lapse photograph of some uncertain natural process, neither generation nor decay. Whenever a seat became free he willed someone else to take it, the illogical hope growing inside his chest that by staying very still and quiet he could preserve himself, would not have to pass through any of the three frosted-glass doors.

'Mehta A. K.?'

He stared hard out of the window.

'Mehta A. K.?'

It was no use. The woman with the list was speaking to him. Weakly he put up his hand and allowed her to show him into an office, where she indicated a seat in front of a pine-veneer desk. On the far side, legs ostentatiously crossed, lounged a man who appeared to be less a human being than a communications medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages. From his gelled hair to his lightly burnished penny loafers, every particular of his appearance carried a set of aspirational associations, some explicit (the branding on his tennis shirt, his belt buckle, the side arms of the UV sun goggles perched on his head), some implicit (the heft of his Swiss watch, the Swissness of that watch) and some no more than hints, wafts of mediated yearning written in the scent of his unisex scruffing lotion, the warp and weft of his khaki slacks.

Arjun tugged at his collar.

'Sunny Srinivasan,' said the channel, leaning over the desk and shaking hands, 'So how are you today?'

Sunny Srinivasan's features were regular and well defined. He had the polite yet aggressive air of a man who enjoys competitive racket sports. When he spoke, his words rang out with decisiveness and verve, his dragged vowels and rolling consonants returning the listener to the source of all his other signs of affluence: Amrika. Residence of the Non-Resident Indian.

'Arjun Mehta,' said Arjun, immediately kicking himself for forgetting the transatlantic mode of address. 'I mean, nice day. I'm having a nice day.'

Sunny Srinivasan opened his mouth, unhooding a smile like a dentally powered searchlight. 'I'm glad to hear that, Arjun. Everyone should have a nice day - every day.'

Arjun nodded gravely, shrinking a little further in his chair. The careers counsellor at NOIT had more than once told him he lacked positivity. Sunny Srinivasan, by contrast, exuded the stuff. Here was a fellow who had patently experienced an unbroken progression of nice days, stretching back into the mists of what had probably been a very nice childhood. As Sunny reached out his hand to relieve him of his documents, Arjun marvelled at his skin. Every section of the man not covered with luxury cotton casual wear seemed to glow with ostentatious life, as if some kind of optical membrane had been inserted under the epidermis. He glanced down at his own arms and hands, ordinary and unremarkable. They looked like the 'before' illustration in a cosmetics advertisement.

As Arjun considered skincare, Sunny flicked through his certificates, holding one or two up to the light. 'So,' he concluded, 'it all looks most excellent. What I need to know from you now is how much you're bullshitting.'

'Bull -? What do you mean?'

'Well, Arjun K. Mehta, educated to B.Sc. standard at North Okhla Institute of Technology, on paper your qualifications look good. Not great, but good. The question is, are they real?'

'Entirely. One hundred per cent.'

'Glad to hear it. Half the losers out there in the waiting room bought their diplomas in the bazaar. Another quarter have completed some two-bit nightschool computer course and faked it up to look like a college education. But you, Arjun, you're telling me you're the real deal. Right?'

'Absolutely. Real deal. Thumbs up. As I said on my application, I can provide references. I am skilled in all major areas - networking, database -'

'Let me stop you there.' Sunny held up his smooth, lipid-nourished hands. 'You don't need to wow me with all that. I'll tell you a secret, Arjun: I don't know the difference

between SQL and HTML. And I don't care. To me it's all letters. What I care about is butts, good properly qualified desi butts sitting on good American office chairs, earning good consultancy dollars for Databodies and for me. Understand?'

Absolutely,' murmured Arjun. Sunny Srinivasan was appearing more impressive by the minute.

Sunny leaned back on his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. 'So what I'm going to do is this,' he announced, as if the thought were the product of long rumination. 'I'm going to take your application, get you checked out by my people, and, if you're telling the truth, I'm going to send you to America and start making you rich.'

Arjun could not believe it. 'Just like that?'

'Just like that, Arjun. When you're a Databodies IT consultant, things happen. Your life starts moving forward. You start to become who you always dreamed of becoming. That's our mission, Arjun. To help people become their dreams. That's what we stand for.'

And you can guarantee me a job in America?'

'Boy, good programmers like you are gold dust over there. Everyone knows American college students are only interested in cannabis and skateboarding, right? You leave it with me. If you're telling the truth, you're going to be raking in the dollars just as soon as we can get you on a flight.'

Arjun could barely contain his gratitude. He reached across the desk and clasped Srinivasan's hand. 'Thank you, sir! Thank you! Have a nice day!'

'No, thank you, Arjun. Good to have you aboard.'