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The Temple-Goers

Written by Aatish Taseer

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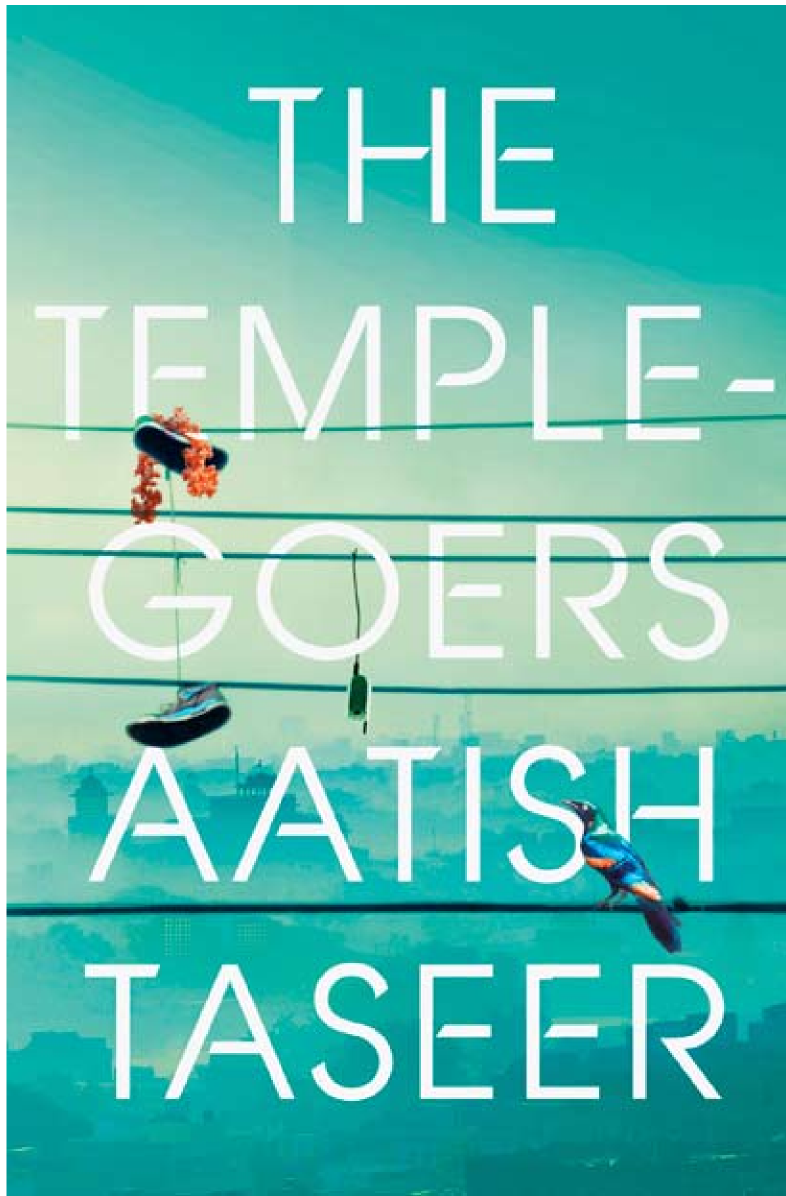

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The Temple-Goers
by
Aatish Taseer

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Prologue

It was just after dinner and on one of the news channels the murder was re-enacted. There was a clap of studio thunder on one side of the split screen, a flash of strobe lightning, the glint of a knife. A hooded figure, his clean-shaven face partly in shadow, pursues a fat girl through a keekar forest. Suspenseful music, punctuated by the crashing of cymbals, plays in the background. The darkened figure catches up with the girl; her eyes widen, her wet lips part in a scream. He plunges a knife into her body at various points. In the next scene, he cuts up her body with a kitchen knife, putting great handfuls of flesh into black bin bags, four in total. Then tying them together, he sets them afloat on a hyacinth-choked canal in whose dark water the red lights of a power station are reflected. On the other side of the split screen a passport-size picture of the girl flashes above the caption '1982–2008'. She's laughing, her milky, rounded teeth exposed. She seems so unsinkable. I could almost hear her saying, 'I'm twenty-six, running twenty-seven.'

I sat in my stepfather's study in Alibaug. It was a high, tree house-like room with ceiling-to-floor windows. Outside, the garden was still, the night punctured at even intervals by white path lights. Beyond the shadows cast by tall, fleshy plants was the sea. It came almost to the garden wall at night and its roar carried up to the room. I turned off the television and the various lamps in the room and made my way down a flight of modern wooden steps with no banister.

Downstairs, a sea breeze carrying cold currents made its way on to the tiled veranda. The Bombay winter. A deceptively mild wind for two weeks in the year, bringing clear skies and disease. The city was sometimes visible beyond the short stretch of water

and its outline made Alibaug's mainland villages, with their pale yellow houses and red-tiled roofs, blackening in the sea air, seem like the island.

I sat down in a planters chair and called Sanyogita. There had been trouble between us in the past few days, but I thought the worst was over. Two days before she'd asked me not to call so much, then the following night she'd written, 'I am blessed to have you in my life but I need to fulfil the rest of it. You've been doing that for yourself for some time and you are an inspiration for having done it. I'm off to Mars now.' I had focused on her saying she was blessed to have me in her life and on the Mars reference, suggesting higher spirits. She only ever referred to interplanetary travel when she was in a good mood. But hearing her voice now, I realized I had misread her state of mind. She was in a taxi on her way somewhere, and frantic.

'It's not working, baby; it's not working.'

'Sanyogita, you can't end a two-year relationship on the telephone. And not in a cab.' It was an old technique: undercutting her good emotion with cold reason. She became quiet.

'I'll come,' I added.

I took her silence to mean consent, but she said, with uncharacteristic firmness, 'I won't call you for a while now. I'll need my time.'

I became agitated. 'Sanyogita, this is no way to end this. I'll come on the first flight tomorrow.'

She said something to the taxi driver. The interruption, though momentary, gave me my first intimation of life without her. Her voice returned, its timbre unstable, now strong, now sobbing faintly. Not so long ago, it would have irritated me. But wounded for the last time on my behalf, it felt like one more thing I had taken for granted.

'I'm going to hang up now,' she said abruptly.

'Sanyogita, listen . . .' I whispered, aware of a tremor in my own voice.

For a moment I held her attention.

'Why are you doing this?'

It was a foolish thing to say. Her reasons must have flooded back. She seemed to recall a formulation she had meant to use. 'My feelings have changed. I can't compete with the other intimacies in your life.'

When we hung up, my first thought was to cheat the panic that grew in me. It was not late; the night was bright; it would feel very long if I couldn't sleep. Like a man holding his breath, I went up to my room, got straight into bed and tried to sleep.

My mistake was to wonder what the date was. It was an unplanned admission of finality. No sooner had I plotted that point than my mind was prised open to other dates. Two years to the month nearly. A meeting in London. A year spent there, a happy year of work and study, of little-known restaurants, cinemas and bright international friends. Sanyogita was haunted by the happiness of that year. Then the year in Delhi, beginning in those hot months of flowers. The year when Aakash moved like a planet over our lives.

My sheets were warm, crushed; my bed was an alluvial mess.

I went downstairs. The lights of the Balinese fantasy house pierced me from every direction. They each had their barbs: the sharpness of the halogen spot; the sickly glare of the fluorescent path light; smoked glass and lizards on the wall. I poured myself a large whisky, lit a cigarette and sank into a planters chair on the veranda. But I was not a smoker and soon the fraudulence of the gesture defeated me. Then the phone calls began, to friends and family; repeated, abortive attempts at sleep; the hotness of the sheets; the impotence of air-conditioning; the sexual arousal of fear and panic; an orgasm before the glare of a computer at three a.m.

My last memory was of an orange moon, heavy and low, seeming not so much to sink as to slip over the water, fragment and float away.

*

I left the next morning. The road curled out from the coast to the jetty. We went past houses with open verandas and fairy lights; the foliage was bright and dense and encroaching.

At the jetty the sea was unseasonably rough. A row of pale clouds kept a purple, sepulchral sky in place. A ferry had trouble mooring. Its low white body crept up to the jetty's cement steps and was thrown back. Each time a chasm of greenish-brown water opened up. Women in pink and mauve saris wrapped twice about themselves shrieked. One man grabbed on to the ferry's second-storey railings, but then couldn't lift himself up and was nearly crushed against the jetty steps. At length he was rescued and the men watching laughed. Then again the wooden ferry and the barnacled jetty tried closing over the stretch of rough water. A column of nervous passengers crossed hurriedly. The jetty's cement pillars, showing exposed iron in places, cast gloomy shadows over the water racing between their legs.

On the ferry, Sanyogita's words sang in my head: 'I can't compete with the other intimacies in your life.' Their finality made what had felt like day-to-day life at the time now seem part of a chain of events. And many of the things I knew now, a feeling of waste, the destructiveness of the past few months, I hadn't known earlier. It was as if life had carried me along, anaesthetized up to a point, then channelled me out.

On the boat – the slowest there was – men in baggy trousers and polyester shirts clung to the railings, reading about the murder. Their soft, damp newspapers thrashed about in the wind, but they read on, in Marathi, in Hindi and English, stopping occasionally to consider the latest smudged images. And it was only now, with the perspective endings bring, that I could look beyond my particularity and see that I had been close to a story that had riveted a country.

The sea changed from green to brown; oily, rainbow patterns ran over its surface. Red-bottomed, rusting freighters, some with Russian and Arab names, came into view. Then tall white buildings and the pale red domes of the Taj Hotel. Bombay's

mud-coloured water sloshed around us, bringing up plastic bottles and rose petals. We rocked in the brown water for a few minutes more, then gingerly disembarked. I was on the three p.m. flight to Delhi.

Part One

I

I had come to Delhi eleven months before to revise a novel. After college in America, I had lived for a couple of years in England, working as a reporter on an American news magazine. There I met an American journalist who read the novel I'd written in college and sent it along to an agent in New York. The agent wrote back a few days later, saying, 'Finished your novel this weekend and was mightily impressed. You are a wonderful writer – hyper-observant and able to convey real emotion . . . I was totally involved with the narrator's experience and the prose alone kept me riveted. Alas, the plot didn't develop enough and sort of veered off course for me when I least expected it . . . But a voice like yours comes along rarely and I would love to work with you on this, or any other book you are working on. It is worth fixing!' She also sent a separate editorial letter with a detailed list of suggested changes. I don't know if I really believed in the book; what I did know was that I wanted to leave Britain and return to India.

My mother had argued hard to make my stepfather pay for college in America, and more for her sake than his, I didn't want to return empty-handed. The agent was the ideal cover. My family in India didn't know much about the workings of publishing, but they knew about advances; everyone knew about advances. And just flashing the edge of this golden ticket before the eyes of my mother, who in any case wanted me back, was enough. A wider circle of friends and family was persuaded that my time abroad had not been misspent. I, in the meantime, signed a contract with the agent and told her I was leaving my job. This alarmed her. 'Go with your heart,' she wrote. 'Just remember there are no guarantees on advances (from passes, not interested to six-figure advances . . . everything is game), so take that out

of the equation.' I did; and in less time than I thought possible, I found myself on one of the new Jet Airways flights from London to Delhi.

The reading lights in the cabin were icy white. In the darkness, they refreshed a childhood memory of playing with torches under blankets. The spotlit whiteness; the knobbed, dark blue headrest that could be adjusted into a gorge for the base of the neck; the personal screens in economy; and the staff – young, polite college graduates – drifting by in blue and yellow, offering red wine as if they'd stolen it from their parents' bar; these were the thrills of India's first private international airline.

I ordered some wine and watched a new film. It was about four college friends who lead an idle life, drinking beer, skateboarding, riding fast bikes in an old Delhi ruin called the 'classroom'. They are discovered by Sue, a young English girl trying to make a documentary about a group of Indian freedom fighters executed in the last days of the Raj by her grandfather, a British army officer. The grandfather had left behind a journal in which he had written of the courage the men showed and his own disenchantment with the colonial enterprise. The empire over, his granddaughter, six decades later, wants to use the group of young friends as actors in her documentary. But they resist her. And it turns out that their idle life and Western ways are more like a fear of life, a disillusionment with modern India. In a stolen, romantic moment, one of the boys says to Sue in Hinglish, 'It's been five years since I left university, but I'm here only. I just want to stay in university. On campus people know me; I have status. People say DJ will make something of himself. But out in the world, better DJs than me have been ground down in that crowd of millions.' Another says, 'What freedom, Sue? Have you seen the state of this country? No one believes this bullshit.' But Sue prevails; the documentary is made; the young men begin to rediscover their history. They travel around India; they shoot the documentary; they run through fields, tearing off their T-shirts; sepia sequences of the documentary, with them playing the historical parts, are spliced into the film.

It must have been the altitude, the wine, or maybe just homesickness, but I suddenly found that I was crying. A kind of frightened euphoria at seeing India like this seized me. I muttered indistinct words to myself, tears ran down my face, my jaw hardened.

I reopened the screen and finished the film. It ended in carnage and nihilism. Just as the group of friends rediscover their country, a fighter-pilot friend of theirs dies when his MiG crashes. They watch it live on TVDelhi at a tea stall. The Minister of Defence, instead of taking responsibility for having bought bad parts, blames the pilot for the crash. This is too much for the group, so recently restored to idealism. They decide to assassinate the minister. One crime of passion and patriotism excites others and the film ends in further assassinations, patricides and the takeover of a radio station. In the closing scenes, commandos besiege the station where the friends are holed up, explaining their bloody deeds to the nation and welcoming callers. One by one – and on air – each of them is killed off; they bleed, laugh and sing as they die. Sue, in a taxi, listens to the broadcast.

I put away the screen and tried to sleep.

When I next opened my eyes, two flight attendants were walking past. They spoke in the dawn whispers that precede waking up the cabin for landing. Through a half-oval window, past dark sleeping figures, a thin fire burned precisely along the edge of a colourless sky. One of the attendants was a young woman with brown lipstick and hair held firmly in place by a wide clip. Her colleague was a tall man with darkening circles round his soft, attentive eyes. They were courteous, ambitious and bilingual. How different they were from the Indian Airlines ogres of my childhood. Those women with their boiled sweets and matronly tread, the stench of stove and state woven into their clothes, weary at serving men other than their husbands . . . were they the mothers of these bright, beautiful children?

Peering out of the white light at the two attendants, I attracted their attention.

'Sir, may I serve you with anything?' the man with dark, soft eyes asked.

The woman attendant smiled benignly, like a politician's wife.

The cabin lights came on.

'Lime water, please.'

'Sir, right away.'

The attendants went off.

I was flicking through the last of the channels when, a few seats down from me, I noticed a large woman with black, dimpled arms transfixed by what she saw on her screen. Thin clouds raced across the video display, then a patchwork of fields in changing shades of green appeared, dotted with cement roofs, swimming pools and corrugated-iron sheds. Pale quarries with green water and coppery edges came into view. The wandering eye of the camera caught slum roofs, a blue and pink polythene waste dump and brownish, algal rivers choked with hyacinth. A red earth road ran like a vein through the land. The widening bulge of train tracks, the yellow and black of taxis and, at last, the striped walls of Delhi airport.

The camera pulled the land closer and I saw what I loved most about Delhi: its trees. They managed a surprising unity, declaring themselves the first line to touch the city's white sky. Not so white today. As the land came close, I could see a dust storm rage, blurring the camera's vision. It stole through the trees like a spirit, ready to pounce on the city below.

Delhi vanished, the camera swung down and the runway's bumpy, oil-stained surface came into view. The large dark woman, watching peacefully until now, let out a cry.

At home, in my mother's study, Chamunda sat behind a silver tea set in a green chiffon sari. When she saw me, she extended a sharp, jewelled hand and clutched me to her breast; I tried to reach to touch her feet. 'Welcome home, baba, welcome home,' she said to the tune of may-you-have-a-long-life.

Then pulling away as if overcome with emotion, she poured

me a piped column of tea. In her other hand she held the silver strainer's handle. One wrist had green bangles on it, the other a Cartier watch and two inches of red religious threads, tight and damp from a shower.

'You're wearing so many,' I said, amazed at the thickness of the red threads.

She glanced at them as she finished pouring the tea. 'Politics, baba, all from politics.'

'Oh, of course. Congratulations. How long has it been now?'

'Nearly four years. Elections next year, baba. I want you to come and help me. Your mother will come too. It'll be hectic, but we'll have some fun. They're early in the year, so the weather will be lovely.'

Chamunda was my mother's best friend, and my girlfriend Sanyogita's aunt. She had been married into a small princely state, but her husband had deserted her just months after their marriage. She had joined politics as a young bride, defeated her husband in his own constituency and risen steadily. She was a member of the legislative assembly in the 1980s, an MP in the 1990s, a junior minister in 2000. Then four years ago, she had gone back to the state as its chief ministerial candidate and won. It had made her the Chief Minister of Jhaatkebaal, a small breakaway state on the border of Delhi, important for its twin satellite cities, Sectorpur and Phasenagar. I had no idea what she was doing in my mother's flat.

'Chamunda massi, Ma is in Bombay, right?'

'Yes, in Bombay. She asked me to be here to welcome you home.'

This was doubtful. Chamunda was busy and selfish; I couldn't imagine her welcoming Sanyogita home, let alone me. And besides, I'd spoken to my mother on the way into town and she'd said nothing about Chamunda. I noticed that the edges of her hair were wet.

'Can you imagine,' she said, handing me a cup of tea, 'me in politics? Who would've thought it?'

'Is it difficult, being a woman and everything?'

'Yes, very,' she replied, pleased to be asked. 'But there are advantages.'

'Such as?'

'I like to take advantage of, exploit one might even say' – she smiled, showing little teeth and mischief – 'the very things that make it difficult to be a woman in politics. So for instance, I always dress the part. I always wear beautiful saris, never any ethnic crap. I always wear make-up and jewellery. I make a point to look like the Maharani of Ayatlochanapur. And if I'm talking to some bureaucrats or opposition leaders, or even treacherous elements in my own party, and my pallu accidentally falls . . .' She pushed the green chiffon end of her sari off her shoulder to demonstrate what she meant. Her cleavage showed soft and brown, dimpled in places. 'Then I may let it stay fallen for a few moments till I've finished my point and sweep it up when I'm done.' In one motion, she swung it back over her shoulder and the breasts were once again half-concealed behind a papery chiffon screen. 'And inevitably the response in these cases to what I've been saying is . . .' She paused, altering her accent to a strong Indian one and moving her head from side to side. '"Yes, yes, madam," or an emphatic "No, no, madam, of course not."' Chamunda chuckled wickedly, her pert comic-book lips arched. 'Or, I'll lean forward and let the pallu drop, very slightly.' She did; her breasts collected warmly, and though they remained hidden, the cleavage became long and dark. A gold chain with a Kali pendant dangled hypnotically in front of the tunnel.

Then suddenly, she was in a rush.

'Baba, I can't stay long. You might have heard, I'm having a small rebellion in my state. Bloody Jats. I have to go back and deal with it.'

'Jats?'

'It's a sub-caste. They want reservations in government jobs and schools. I tell you, the Congress Party has let a monster out of the bag with this reservations business. Women, dalits,

scheduled castes, Muslims, now Jats . . . Soon the Brahmins and Kshattriyas will be saying, what about us? Then we can go ahead and carve up the country and no one will have to do a day's work again.

'I can't lose the election even before you and Sanyogita have come to stay with me. But enough about politics, tell me about your book.'

'No, nothing, massi. There's just interest in a revised version. Now I have to actually fix it.'

She smiled placidly.

'And your relationship with Sanyogita, all good there?'

'Yes, very good.'

'She's moved back too, you know.'

'I know.'

'Does she know what she wants to do?'

'She wants to write too.'

Chamunda looked serious. 'It's a racket, this writing business. You're writing a book, my friend Jamuni is writing a book, now Sanyogita wants to write a book . . .'

'What's Jamuni writing about? She hasn't written anything in years.'

'I don't really know. She wants to do a funny book, a rehash of her earlier book, but about Indian ostentation.'

'And Sanyogita?'

'She doesn't know yet.'

Chamunda bit at a cuticle.

'What's the matter?'

'No, nothing. Nothing.'

'Come on, Chamunda, tell me.'

'It's just that these girls, you know, these privileged girls, like I once was, I suppose, and like Sanyogita is – they feel that because these are modern times, the world owes them a job, a career. Your mother and I, we never thought this way. If our husbands hadn't both been such rotters, we would have been quite happy to settle down and produce a brood of children.

We worked because we had to work. You want to learn something about women in India? Learn this: India is a country where women work right from the top to the bottom, but they work because they have to work. And it's the best kind of work. Always be suspicious of these rich and middle-class girls who go off to college in the West and come back feeling that the world owes them a living just because they're modern women. I say this about my niece too and I'm saying it because you're a smart boy, you understand these things; I want you one day to marry her, but don't put up with too much of this silliness.'

'Come on, massi, she can't stay home and make me lunch and dinner.'

'Tch,' she spat with irritation. 'Is that what I'm saying? Do I look like a woman who would say something so stupid? No. All I'm saying is that you're setting out to be a writer, you've worked hard at being a journalist, you've secured a book deal –'

'An agent.'

'Whatever. All I'm saying is I don't like the sound of my darling niece Sanyogita, who is basically just following you back, also wanting to write.'

There was a knock on the door. Shakti, my mother's servant, came in with a cordless phone. She took it from him. 'Yes, yes, Raunak Singh. Yes. Tell them I'll be there very soon.' She punched the lime-green button and looked absently at me, as if for a moment forgetting where she was.

'Right, baba. I'm off. Come and see me soon with your mother, or with Sanyogita. Welcome back.' With this she was gone, leaving a trail of tuberose perfume behind her.

I wandered about my mother's flat for under an hour. Its familiarity, its inevitability, far from comforting me, oppressed me, seeming to force our old association. It made my few foreign possessions – a red Old Spice deodorant stick, an electric toothbrush, a Lush soap – appear out of place, as though I'd brought

unwelcome friends to dinner. ‘It *is* my mother. This flat is my mother,’ I said, almost aloud. ‘I’ll have to scrape her off the walls if I’m to live here.’ And so, just hours after I arrived, I escaped the flat for Sanyogita’s.