

ELEPHANTS
WITH
HEADLIGHTS
BEM LE HUNTE





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*To the women of the world — the eternal flame of the sacred feminine,
To the transformational hopes of our mothers, and to my mother, who
inspired in me the love of literature.*

PROLOGUE: A CALL FROM THE FUTURE

NONE OF IT would have ever happened if Siddharth hadn't received that call from the future. It came disguised as the usual ringtone from his smart phone — a time machine pulsing with numbers and people and deals and connections yet to be made. It was his business colleague who had bought the house in Golf Links from their family and helped him finance his outsourcing company — a motor trade mogul with a pot belly like Ganesh and an appetite for disruption like the Vedic messenger Narad.

'You heard of this driverless car, yah? We're going to see about getting it out to India, Siddharth, and we could be the first — just imagine.'

Imagination was something that Siddharth had in fountains — especially when the pragmatics were handled by underlings. All they had to do was to go to Goa, where the science fiction stories he'd dreamed about as a kid were waiting, along with some people from Google who had come out from Silicon Valley to paint a picture of an India catapulted into an unrecognisable new era.

This new India was a place where the entire history and forecast of the Earth existed in the same time capsule simultaneously — from the ancient world to a future still waiting to be articulated. And what fun it would be to open that time capsule when the story was told!

‘Want to come as part of the investment team?’

Siddharth was known as a shrewd futurist — someone with demonic insight in his capacity as an angel investor. A businessman who could both move and shake and, even more importantly, ‘smooth the way’ for the momentous changes ahead — a fearless oiler of wheels for the juggernauts of business pushing their way into his country. The pandits (the new ones, that is — not the priestly kind) claimed it was the Asian Century, and Siddharth had no problem at all being a part of the success. Maybe one day when the future called he would no longer be able to answer because he no longer inhabited it, but for now he was part of the invincible subcontinent that was answering the call.

But driverless cars?

In India?

What kind of algorithm or sensor would account for the cow that decided to give birth in front of the Toyota three cars ahead in the traffic jam on the MG Road? Or the cartwheeling, kajalled child beggars by the side of the road? Or the elephants that returned home down the side streets after attending one of those grand Delhi weddings? Why, they’d only fairly recently passed a law that these elephants would have to wear headlights at night — would they equip the prehistoric beasts with sensors next?

‘So, you coming to Goa?’

‘Why not?’

Siddharth was not one to regret decisions. He never regretted a business deal that failed, never regretted leaving behind his girlfriend in England when he returned from his studies, and never regretted marrying his wife, although there may have been more than the odd occasion for regret. He did, however, regret his decision to ask his son Neel to come with him to Goa as a reward for finishing his High School Matriculation — and yes, he regretted encouraging him to ‘have a bit of fun on the beaches’ before planning a university education overseas. For if Neel hadn’t seen Mae dancing through the fire that night, he could have kept him at home — and he would never have met the Australian girl who had caused all the trouble in the first place, bringing together two continents that hadn’t been joined since the beginning of time.



Neel was sitting on a mat, looking at the slow waves lap the shore through a tall fire on a Goan beach — the waves probably slow because he had smoked a lot of *bhang*. He saw Mae first as an apparition dancing in the flames of the fire, which hovered over the inky sea: she was like a goddess who could survive any torture or affliction (how wrong he was about that), and he kept on staring at the goddess in her dress of flames and dancing hands that reached up to the bonfire’s golden tips. She came into his life like the miracle of fire on water — the sea in the distance — as she danced towards him to sit down on the beach mat opposite his.

They began a conversation, if you could call it that, even though he barely understood her, perhaps because of the *bhang* or perhaps because her accent seemed somehow less than English, a slur of

syllables and unrecognisable cadences. Still, the words weren't as important as the kind of electricity that wakes you up in a dream, hard and ready for your evolutionary purpose.

She sat closer to him, a hallucination: a talking goddess, trying to speak the human language. He mumbled something about being there as a prize for having finished school.

'I've just finished school, too,' she said. 'But Carrie and I decided we wanted to do schoolies in India.'

'Schoolies?'

Neel only found out later about the strange traditions of her distant land, where the beaches of her hometown filled up with vomiting teenagers, on account of the fact that they had just finished their Grade Twelve matriculation exams.

'And we wanted to get away from the toolies.'

He found out, too, about the toolies — the guys who 'cracked onto' the girl schoolies who were too inebriated to object. It was as if he was being introduced to a new tongue — this language of 'schoolies' and 'toolies', together with a world where ladies could go alone to a beach and be groped by unknown men. Not even in the festive rampage of *holi* would such allowances be made in his world. Why, he and his friends always had to work so hard to get a girl to even look at them, yet here was this foreign goddess who had arrived, absolutely without any propitiation, as if his stare alone (together with some *bhang*) had the magnetic force required to summon her.

'Your parents don't mind you travelling together, just two ladies?' he'd asked. The word 'lady' sat well with her. Yes, she could be one of those, she thought. She was far enough from home for it not to sound embarrassing.

'My parents wanted me to go overseas and get some life experience. You know, do a gap year,' she replied.

Through his *bhang*-filled thoughts he tried to imagine such brave parents who would want to send their daughters off to dance on beaches in front of a thousand eyes — to accept the gap in their lives as a natural chasm and wave goodbye to their daughters' virginities. Yet no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't quite picture them. His smoky imagination tried to summon an English gentleman in a pinstriped suit, but the man didn't look like this Australian girl's father. Then he tried to imagine his parents meeting hers and felt sick. No, their parents had to be absent — the centrifugal force of authority had to be circumvented. The two young ones had to be re-imagined like two colonies granted their independence, unattached now from their colonial umbilicus, free to explore each other's continents directly.

And what should they do with such freedom?

Neel held Mae's hand and without words he pulled her down onto a mat, which was only large enough for one person and so required the good patchouli-scented lady to lie down on top of him so that he could protect her hair from the sand. (And this was the pleasure enjoyed by toolies? What gods they were.) For a few minutes he enjoyed the spoils of those toolies, but when he tried to find some words in her language he could only articulate these.

'Do you like India?'

He said this as he ran his hand under a *kalamkari* dress of crimped cotton that Mae had purchased only that day from the local bazaar.

'I like you,' she replied.

He was Rahu now, a creature planet — the rascal god who stole the sun and ruled at his birth, according to their family astrologer.

It took him a few seconds only to feel the skin of her legs — to reach up and find that she was wearing no underpants beneath that *kalamkari* dress.

All that was required was that first brush of his hand against the warm, trimmed, thoroughly modern triangle. A finger slipping into a damp cave that led to another country. One very long seaside kiss and he knew he would do better overseas than in the country of his birth, as is the same for all those with Rahu exalted in their charts. His fate was sealed. But his overseas education would have to take place in Australia now, not at an English university like Oxford or Cambridge, or at a last resort Babson College in the United States, as his father had once hoped, because the new world he was entering had new rules. And women, it seemed, were in command of it.

THE DANCE CLASS

ARUNJI, THE FAMILY astrologer, had once told Savitri that they were entering the age of the goddess rising — and that being named after a goddess would serve her well. ‘You have powers that you will discover,’ he’d told her once. But on that particular day when Dadi told her to call Arunji, there was no such encouraging prediction.

‘Do one thing — make sure you *do not* go to your dance rehearsal today.’

The prosaic nature of this advice stalled her. It held none of the profound or prophetic wisdom of seers long gone, nor the visionary poetry of those uttering wisdom from the depths of consciousness. Savitri held the phone away from her face and whispered to her grandmother, withered by her multiple sclerosis, who was clutching her arm in panic. ‘Dadi — don’t worry, it’s nothing serious.’

‘Do you hear me?’ Arunji’s voice continued. ‘Under no circumstances are you to go to your dance rehearsal!’

‘Okay, okay, Arunji, I will be certain not to go ...’ She felt a mixture of disappointment and rebellion. All of the family and

a few friends were rehearsing for a Bollywood dance they were going to perform for her brother's wedding reception. 'You're just talking about today, yah? I can go next week?'

'Just today.'

Odd.

Savitri was inclined to ignore the request, just as she'd ignored other predictions Arunji had made. Like the time he told her that she'd get married before her brother. What nonsense! His wedding was less than a month away — as if she was going to pick someone off the street and marry him to beat her brother to the finish line. She was tempted to go to the rehearsal anyway — what the hell.

Dadi amplified the family astrologer's concerns. 'But how can you go, darling *beti*? Remember what happened to Papa when he went to the golf course against Arunji's advice.'

Oh, that incident! It had been replayed on the ancient cassette of family mythology for as long as she could remember. Arunji had told her father that he had to avoid the golf course and he'd blindly ignored the prophecy. The fact that he'd been knocked out cold by a golf ball hitting him between the eyes was all the evidence required to confirm Arunji's sibylline divinatory powers.

'Please, *beti*. Arunji is our family. He has our best interests at heart.'

Dadi had known Arunji since he was a little boy who accompanied his father to wash Dadi's clothes, squatting on the courtyard floor by a square brick sink and cleaning saris and kurta pyjamas and petticoats and tablecloths under many steaming suns. But as Arunji was to later find out, destiny can pivot in a day. Almost forty years earlier, Dadi was walking past this small *dhabi* as he squatted next to his father, vigorously slapping clothes and swaying to the

rhythmic sound of cotton pounding brick. The sun was full glare on white walls and his prospects in life were fully illuminated.

‘Why aren’t you at school?’ she asked.

Dadi didn’t need to wait for the answer. Here was a tiny boy — far smaller than her own son but the same age, and his only life choices were between squeezing out cotton or letting it drip.

‘But who will help my papa?’

Doubtless, the clothes needed ironing after they’d been washed, and of course Gandhi had announced that caste was a sin against humanity and God — and of course she knew the answer to her next question, too.

‘What job do you think you’ll have if you don’t go to school?’

She was interfering with this sin against God and humanity — she knew full well she was meddling with something that was embedded in the circuitry of culture. She knew she was about to handle live electrical wires in an attempt to reroute the forces that be, but what choice did she have? She was a Gandhian and a housewife — the only action she could take towards equality would have to occur within her household.

‘Why don’t we send little Arun to school?’ she asked her husband that night all those years ago. It was a contest against fate and history combined with culture. The fact that the *dholi*’s father’s father’s father had also been a *dholi* didn’t even need mentioning. ‘He is a naturally intelligent and hardworking boy.’

She was seeing to a rebirth of a kind now — the mother in her knew this much.

‘Just let’s see if he does well until tenth grade.’

This cosmic intervention was nothing short of electrifying. The fact that Arunji went on to become a professor of mathematics at

Delhi University was astounding, but it was hardly surprising that he should also become interested in the mathematics of destiny, given the cosmic numbers that had devised this plan to redeem his future all those years ago.

Dadi remained fearful after Arunji's latest advice. Not for herself, but for her granddaughter — going off to a dance rehearsal where the dancing Shiva himself could be present, tapping his toes on skulls and laying the world to waste. Her body was tortured with multiple sclerosis and there was nothing she could do physically to stop Savitri except use a little cunning — which she still had command of, thankfully.



Savitri had hesitated at first to go to the dance class — fighting her inherited sense of rebellion, her refusal to do the bidding of men, as fostered over generations of strong-headed women who resisted permission-seeking and sought to lead. Yet Arunji's prediction had made her feel as if she was holding on to both ends of a rope in a tug-of-war competition, as she called the 'spare' driver to pull up in front of the farmhouse. Together, she and the driver headed down the MG Road, with Savitri in the back listening to the dance track on her headphones, oblivious to her grandmother's concerns now that they were travelling away from home. Only when the driver pulled over to the side of the road and opened the bonnet did she think to pull out her earbuds and ask what the hell was going on.

'So sorry, madam. *Garhi toot gayee.*'

Oh shit!

He told her that they would be taking a detour to see ‘Sahib’ in Chattarpur Farms.

‘No way — you’ve got to be kidding! Fuck, fuck, fuck!’

The ‘Sahib’ they were going to see was Uncle Hari, her father’s best friend from his university days in England. It’s a ploy. This much was clear to Savitri. Whenever her parents decided to ‘drop round’ to Hari and Susheila’s it was always with the intention of marrying her off to their son.

Mohan would have been the most convenient and suitable match of all time. But what a disaster their last ‘encounter’ had been! She’d been skilfully avoiding Mohan ever since the night he’d given her too much whisky, disguised in Coca-Cola. The night she’d put her feet in his lap and her head down on a cushion, and she’d felt a crunch. She’d lifted his cushion and found his porno magazine, with the horrible sight of a defiled goddess on the front cover — a toy, not a woman, with parted plastic legs. Being a literary scholar, she’d tried to remind herself that even in celebrations of Durga Puja, when nine days of the goddess were celebrated, women of faith were depicted collecting earth from the *haveli* of a prostitute. So why not collect the ‘earth’ from this depiction?

She started to read the text out loud to Mohan.

‘Give it to me, yah. I didn’t buy it. This guy left it here.’

‘So you didn’t even look at it?’ Savitri asked.

‘No.’

He stretched down next to her, as if trying to read the magazine for the first time.

‘Yah, that position would be so uncomfortable in real life,’ Mohan said, his hand reaching slowly up to one of her breasts as the other reached for the page, to turn it. He was leaning over her.

The whisky must have been to blame, because she let him — this man of the world with his libido under a cushion. She let him do what he wanted ...

And now we are going to Mohan's house! It was a detour to hell. The car pulled off the main road and traversed the lush roads to luxury homes in Chattarpur Farms. Savitri found her spine straightening. Authority has a posture. This much she knew from her work at Kamala Nehru College. She could take on the world if she had a straight back. When the car pulled up she strode confidently up to Hari's house to knock on the door. Nobody was there. Brilliant! She waited for a maidservant to appear. 'Mohan Sahib is here,' she told them, 'I'll just call him.' Oh Shit! Served with a capital S.

'Don't disturb him. We only want to borrow some tools from your driver.'

But disturbed he was — the male *purusha* energy of the universe was awakened. Mohan arrived down the stairs looking dishevelled. He'd been unemployed since his return from Babson College, mostly because he'd been turning down jobs with the same frequency that Savitri had been turning down the boys who were introduced to her with a view to marriage. He walked over to her, his singlet covering muscles that had clearly been developed in the family gym, pulling on his longish hair, his thin legs and tight pants tucked into oversized Doc Martens. They hugged, amicably enough.

'You been well?' Mohan asked. 'Still teaching, yah?'

'Yes. And what are you going to do with your life, Mohan?'

'I'm going to take a look at your car,' he answered, striding past her.

Savitri was taken off guard. She watched him as he took a look underneath, back down, tummy and chest up, nothing but boots

and skinny legs emerging elegantly from under the dark metal. She said nothing, but watched as he stooped over the open bonnet, pulling at meaningless, mindless cords as if he knew what he was doing. Was he the only Indian male in her circle who knew more about mechanics than banking?

‘Where’d you learn about cars?’ she asked.

‘In the US. We took road trips all over. I taught myself.’

‘Mmm.’

‘You know there’s nothing wrong with your car,’ he said after a while. ‘It works just fine. Maybe it was just an excuse for you to come and visit me?’

‘Are you joking?’

‘Come on, yah — we should go for a drink together some time.’

‘You know I don’t drink ...’ She realised the irony, given the whisky he’d plied her with last time.

Mohan seemed apologetic. Respectful, even. Different from before. But Savitri got back into her car and instructed the driver to continue on to the dance class.

‘Come back any time,’ Mohan called after her.

When they arrived back at the MG Road they were held up by a major collision ahead. People lay bleeding by the side of the road, and crowds were using any tools they had to prise open cars. Their driver jumped out to inspect the action. Savitri stayed in the car and tried to look away as she saw a vision of a soul trying to escape its body, possibly a male body, but too covered with blood for her to be sure.

There were enough people around that person. Nothing she could do.

‘Take me home,’ Savitri instructed when the driver returned to the car, calmly, even though every cell of her body was shocked at the happenstance. She felt her entire body steeped in awakened gratitude: even for Mohan, for her grandmother, the driver. She knew nothing. There was so much to learn. Hamlet came to her mind: *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*



Siddharth was just about ready to go for his monthly facial and manicure when his driver announced that his wife, Tota, had just rung and he had to go for lessons with the dance master instead. He looked at the perfect face of his Patek Philippe watch — something he usually did with pleasure, because it was the one piece of jewellery that a man could wear. Yet even the miraculous Patek couldn’t squeeze the hours up close enough to fit in his trip to Venus Beauty Parlour (the men’s floor, of course) as well as a dance class with the choreographer hired for his son’s wedding. Where was he going to find the time to make an appearance at the office to make sure the good-for-nothings were working?

Even though Siddharth’s wife had her own driver, Tota commanded Siddharth’s driver as if she owned the world — which of course she did. ‘Memsahib told me to take you straight to dance class,’ he announced, and in their familiar silent submission to all things female, driver and master made their way towards a room at the Taj Hotel, where a dozen or more family members were set to rehearse a dance routine that in Siddharth’s mind was promising to turn the wedding into a circus.

‘What a *tamasha* there would have been if my father were forced to dance for our wedding,’ Siddharth announced crossly as he reached for a copy of the *Hindustan Times* and went straight to the ‘Delhi Times’ section to see if he knew anyone on page three. If the future had to belong to his son’s generation, they’d be better off preparing with their brains, not their *bhangra*.

‘Yes, sahib, what a *tamasha* there would have been if they’d forced your father to dance at your wedding,’ the driver lamented, repeating, as always, exactly what his master said with a ‘sir’ for emphasis and implicit agreement. Siddharth always took great comfort in his reflection as given to him by his driver: the one and only person in the entirety of India who never had an opinion on anything of importance — or any opinion at all, for that matter.

The driver turned off the cricket, knowing that sahib liked to read the paper in silence, and turned on the air filter of the Mercedes as the engine began to puff smoke over the perfectly trimmed lawn. There was so much pollution you couldn’t get from the farmhouse to central Delhi anymore without the air filter. It was the artificial lung that made this city liveable, the only way of cutting out the air that one had to breathe in between the farm, the office, the club and proper homes.

Siddharth’s hesitation to dance was more complex than a mere case of lead feet. It was the heaviness in his heart that slowed him down, and turned what would have been a proper, traditional, Punjabi *shaadi* into a ‘wedding’. His son, Neel, was marrying that Australian girl he’d met in Goa.

Mae.

When his son had told him about the ‘girlfriend’ on the phone, Siddharth said, ‘Why did they name her after a calendar month?’

It was his way of pretending that the news was of no significance, and like the month of May she would pass. But somehow the name stuck: it spelled trouble, disruption, distraction and disloyalty, right from its first utterance.

‘We named you after a god,’ Siddharth said, to accentuate the chasm between the girlfriend and his son.

‘Yes, and why the hell?’ Neel replied. It was Neelkanth in full, a name for the blue-necked Lord Shiva that completely lost its sacred colour in translation.

At the airport, both parents, both drivers and Buddhi Ayah, Savitri and Neel’s ayah, who had looked after them ever since they dribbled breastmilk, were waiting for his flight to arrive at Indira Gandhi International Airport, inside the terminal where it was air-conditioned. And in that same cool air, that girl, Mae, appeared next to Neel, pushing their shared luggage. She was wearing a dress down to the ground like Tota used to wear when she was back in college, and she had the kind of blonde hair that made foreigners look anaemic.

‘You must be June,’ Tota spurted out quickly.

‘Wrong month,’ Neel replied, hugging his mother, and began to make introductions that seemed strangely formal.

Tota gave her an outsider’s hug — a brief and distracted formal embrace that was a simple recognition of existence, nothing more.

Siddharth noticed that it was Buddhi Ayah, frail and wizened, with two missing teeth, and soft, loose skin under the layers of her white sari, who took Mae’s hand, kissed it, stroked her face, teased out her blonde hair, muttered something in her native Bihari and then burst into tears of joy. Mae gave her boyfriend’s elderly nanny a patchouli-scented hug and allowed herself to cry.

'I've heard so much about you,' she told Buddhi Ayah, who kept murmuring meaningful vowels and consonants, and touching her hair again, examining it like she might have examined the bright yellow tresses of the Barbie dolls that Savitri used to play with as a child.

As soon as they arrived back at the farmhouse, Neel announced privately to Siddharth and Tota that he intended to marry Mae.

'What are you saying?' his mother asked. 'You hardly know the girl!'

'Err, Mummy, we live together,' Neel replied, 'so I know her a lot better than you knew Papa before you got married.'

'Is she pregnant?' Tota asked, direct as a bullet.

'Mae wants an Indian wedding, so no, she's not pregnant,' Neel responded emphatically, as if to ward off the premature assassination of his heirs. Then he added with a hint of cruelty, 'And we have every intention of returning to Australia to settle after the wedding.'

'What for does she want an Indian wedding, then?'

'You'll get to know her,' Neel added. 'You'll see. She's not what you expect from a *firangi*.'



It was true that Mae had a passion for all things Indian, which was why Siddharth now found himself on his way to a dance rehearsal for their wedding — she had more passion for Indian dance than he ever could. Siddharth was far more comfortable pulling out his credit card to pay the wedding organisers than he was putting on his dancing shoes, but for now the dance was his 'duty', and if there

was something that Siddharth had absorbed since he was a child, it was his obligation to ‘do the needful’ in the delivery of duty.

The car pulled up at a detour due to a horrific incident on the road, which triggered Siddharth’s heart to go into one of its familiar involuntary spasms. But nothing to worry about. He turned on his GPS and navigated along an alternative road until they pulled up smoothly in front of the pillared lobby of the Taj — a grand entrance of the whitest marble with every square inch defying the Delhi dust. The doorman opened the passenger door for Siddharth to get out. He asked the concierge for the hall where the dance practice had been organised and was promptly shown to a room where some loud filmy music was playing.

Tota glared at Siddharth as he entered, and Neel and his cousins started complaining that this was no time to arrive, halfway through the class.

The ‘master’ was a young boy, lithe and, most importantly, accommodating. After Tota whispered something in his ear the dance master said, ‘Madam, no problem, we will be giving him a separate dance to perform so we won’t have to be starting from the very *bigning*. Sir, you can come here and please start making this step like this like this like this.’

Rolling his eyes, Siddharth joined the others at the front of the line. It was clear that the joke was on him. He was the klutzy-footed father of the groom and somehow that meant that he was the perfect foil and centrepiece.

The master showed him some awkward moves, which Siddharth mimicked, making them more awkward still. His was a different routine, but he couldn’t see what the others were doing because they were all behind him, and tittering — probably at him rather than each other.

'Now, I want you to be putting your foot out and turning it like this like this. Backwards, left side, right side' ... Siddharth's foot twisted from left to right, taking off in any direction, like a deserter, while the rest of him jiggled from side to side, his body inside his jacket almost as still as a mannequin.

Siddharth couldn't see the gyrations of the small family group behind him, but he could hear their giggles and the way their feet tapped to the rhythm of the song, intoxicated by the dreadful beat.

'Perfect,' the master shouted out. 'There's only one problem, sir. You are forgetting to smile!'

Siddharth squinted and let one corner of his mouth rise to the occasion, reproducing the exact smile of Amitabh Bachchan in an early performance as *Don* — an arch gangster's undecipherable, undecided smile.

'Yes, we are all happy now,' the master concluded. 'We will make everyone dance with us for the *shaadi*. Everyone will be happy!'