Age of Vice

A Novel

Deepti Kapoor

ALSO BY DEEPTI KAPOOR

A Bad Character

AGE OF VICE

कलियुग

DEEPTI KAPOOR

RIVERHEAD BOOKS · NEW YORK · 2023

RIVERHEAD BOOKS
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kapoor, Deepti, author.
Title: Age of vice / Deepti Kapoor.
Description: New York : Riverhead Books, 2023.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022028294 (print) | LCCN 2022028295 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593328798 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593328811 (ebook)
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.
Classification: LCC PR9499.4.K3763 A72 2023 (print) | LCC PR9499.4.K3763 (ebook) | DDC 823/.92—dc23/eng/20220616
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022028294
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022028295

Cover design: Gregg Kulick
Map by Malik Sajad

BOOK DESIGN BY LUCIA BERNARD, ADAPTED FOR EBOOK BY MAGGIE HUNT

pid_prh_6.0_142201953_c0_r0

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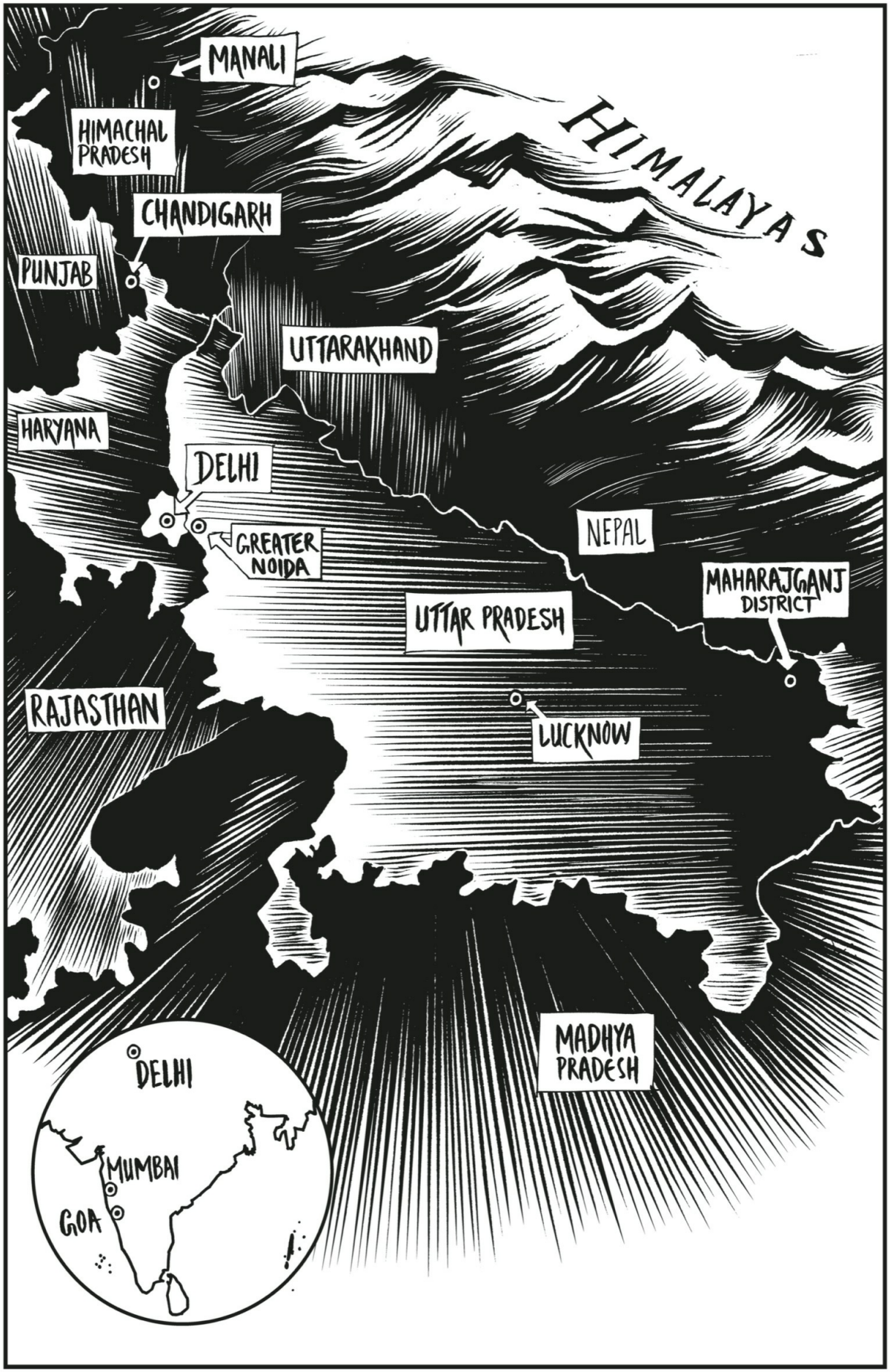
For *naga sadhus*, the *kumbha mela* disaster of 1954 was just another round of violence during an event predicated on violence among men whose profession was violence. If it was different, it was only because ordinary householders had gotten in the way.

—WILLIAM R. PINCH, *WARRIOR ASCETICS AND INDIAN EMPIRES*

And in consequence of the shortness of their lives they will not be able to acquire much knowledge. And in consequence of the littleness of their knowledge, they will have no wisdom. And for this, covetousness and avarice will overwhelm them all.

—THE *MAHABHARATA*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MUMBAI
GOA

ONE

NEW DELHI, 2004

Five pavement-dwellers lie dead at the side of Delhi's Inner Ring Road.

It sounds like the start of a sick joke.

If it is, no one told them.

They die where they slept.

Almost.

Their bodies have been dragged ten meters by the speeding Mercedes that jumped the curb and cut them down.

It's February. Three a.m. Six degrees.

Fifteen million souls curl up in sleep.

A pale fog of sulfur lines the streets.

And one of the dead, Ragini, was eighteen years old. She was five months pregnant at the time. Her husband, Rajesh, twenty-three, was sleeping by her side. Both belly-up, tucked in with heavy shawls at the crown and feet, looking like corpses anyway save the telltale signs, the rucksack beneath the head, the sandals lined up neatly beside the arms.

A cruel twist of fate: this couple arrived in Delhi only yesterday. Taking refuge with Krishna, Iyaad, and Chotu, three migrant laborers from the same district in Uttar Pradesh. Each day these men woke before dawn to trek to the labor mandi at Company Bagh, trying to grab whatever daily wage they could find—dhaba cook, wedding waiter, construction laborer—sending money back to their village, paying for a sister's shaadi, a brother's schooling, a father's nightly medicine. Living day to day, hour to hour, the working poor, struggling to survive. Returning to sleep in this barren spot after dark, beside the Ring Road, close to Nigambodh Ghat. Close to the demolished slums of the Yamuna Pushta that had been their home.

But the newspapers don't dwell on these three men. Their names vanish at dawn with the stars.

A police van with four cops inside arrives at the crash site. They climb out and see the dead bodies, and the wailing, angry crowd that now surrounds the car. There's someone still inside! A young man, sitting bolt upright, arms braced at the wheel, eyes shut tightly. Is he dead? Did he die like that? The cops push the rabble aside and peer in. "Is he sleeping?" one cop says to his colleagues. These words cause the driver to turn his head and, like some monster, open his eyes. The cop looks back and almost jumps in fright. There's something grotesque about the driver's smooth, handsome face. His eyes are leering and wild, but other than that, there's not a hair out of place. The cops pull open the door, wave their lathis thunderously, order him out. There's an empty bottle of Black Label at his feet. He's a lean man, gym honed, wearing a gray gabardine safari suit, hair parted millimeter fine, impeccably oiled. Beneath the reek of whisky there's another scent: Davidoff Cool Water, not that these cops know.

What they know is this: he's not a rich man, not a rich man at all, rather a facsimile, a man dressed in the imitation of wealth: in its service. The clothes, the well-groomed features, the car, they cannot hide the essential poverty of his birth; its smell is stronger than any liquor or cologne.

Yes, he's a servant, a chauffeur, a driver, a "boy."

A well-fed and housebroken version of what lies dead on the road.

And this is not his Mercedes.

Which means he can be hurt.

He sobs in oblivion as the cops drag him out. Bent double, he vomits on his own loafers. One cop hits him with his lathi, hauls him up. Another searches his body, finds his wallet, finds an empty shoulder holster, finds a matchbook from a hotel called the Palace Grande, finds a money clip holding twenty thousand rupees.

Whose car is this?

Where did the money come from?

Who did you steal it from?

Thought you'd go for a joyride?

Whose liquor is it?

Chutiya, where's the gun?

Fucker, who do you work for?

In his wallet there's an election card, a driver's license, three hundred rupees. His cards say he is Ajay. His father's name is Hari. He was born January 1, 1982.

And the Mercedes? It is registered to one Gautam Rathore.

The cops confer: the name sounds familiar. And the address—Aurangzeb Road—speaks for itself. Only the rich and the powerful live there.

"Chutiya," an officer barks, holding up the car's papers. "Is this your boss?"

But this young man called Ajay is too drunk to speak.

"Asshole, did you take his car?"

One of the cops walks to the side and looks down at the dead. The girl's eyes are open, skin already blue in the cold. She is bleeding from the space between her legs, where life has been.

In the station Ajay is stripped and left naked in a cold and windowless room. He's so drunk he passes out. The constables return to throw icy water over him and he wakes with a scream. He is seated, and they press his shoulders against the wall, pull his legs apart. A female constable stands on his thighs until his circulation goes and he roars in pain and passes out once more.

By the next day the case has gained traction. The media is appalled. At first it's about the pregnant girl. News channels mourn her. But she was neither photogenic nor full of promise. So the focus shifts to the killer. A source confirms the car is a Mercedes registered to Gautam Rathore, and this is news—he's a fixture of the Delhi social scene, a polo player, a

raconteur, and a prince, genuine royalty, the first and only son of a member of Parliament, Maharaja Prasad Singh Rathore. Was Gautam Rathore driving? That's the question on everyone's lips. But no, no, his alibi is watertight. He was holidaying away from Delhi last night. He was at a fort palace hotel near Jaipur. His current location is unknown. But he has released a statement expressing his horror, sending his condolences to the deceased and their kin. The driver, his statement reveals, only recently began working for him. He seems to have taken the Mercedes without Gautam's knowledge. Taken whisky and the Mercedes and gone for an illicit spin.

A statement from the police confirms as much: Ajay, employee of Gautam Rathore, stole a bottle of whisky from Rathore's home while his employer was away, took the Mercedes for a joyride, lost control.

This story becomes fact.

It settles in the papers.

And the FIR is registered.

Ajay, son of Hari, is booked under Section 304A of the Indian Penal Code. Death due to negligence. Maximum sentence: two years.

He is sent to the crowded courthouse and presented to the district magistrate, the magistrate takes two minutes to send him to judicial custody with no consideration of bail. He is driven with the other prisoners on a bus to Tihar Jail. They are lined up for processing; they sit in sullen rows on wooden benches in the reception hall, surrounded by placards with rules hammered into the damp, pockmarked plaster of the walls. When his turn arrives, he's taken into a cramped office where a clerk and a prison doctor with their typewriter and stethoscope await. His possessions are laid out once more: wallet, money clip containing twenty thousand rupees, the book of matches bearing the name Palace Grande, the empty shoulder holster. The money is counted.

The clerk takes his pencil and begins to fill out the form.

"Name?"

The prisoner stares at them.

"Name?"

"Ajay," he says, barely audible.

"Father's name?"

"Hari."

"Age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Occupation?"

"Driver."

"Speak up."

"Driver."

"Who is your employer?"

The clerk looks over his glasses.

"What is the name of your employer?"

"Gautam Rathore."

Ten thousand rupees are taken from his money, the rest is handed back to him.

"Put it in your sock," the clerk says.

He is processed and sent to Jail No. 1, led through the courtyard to the barracks, taken along the dank corridor to a wide cell where nine other inmates live crowded and packed. Clothes hang from the cell bars like in a market stall, and the floor inside is covered with tattered mattresses, blankets, buckets, bundles, sacks. A small squatting latrine in the corner. Though there's no room left, the warden orders a small space to be cleared out for him on the cold floor next to the latrine. But no mattress can be spared. Ajay lays the blanket he's been given on the stone floor. He sits with his back to the wall, staring vacantly ahead. A few of his cellmates come and tell him their names, but he says nothing, acknowledges nothing. He curls into a ball and sleeps.

When he comes to, he sees a man standing over him. Old and missing teeth, with frantic eyes. More than sixty years on earth, he is saying. More than sixty years. He's an autorickshaw driver from Bihar, or at least he was on the outside. He's been here awaiting trial for six years. He's

innocent. It's one of the first things he says. "I'm innocent. I'm supposed to be a drug peddler. But I'm innocent. I was caught in the wrong place. A peddler was in my rickshaw, but he ran and the cops took me." He goes on to ask what Ajay is charged with, how much money he has hidden away with him. Ajay ignores him, turns in the opposite direction. "Suit yourself," the old man cheerfully says, "but you should know, I can get things done around here. For one hundred rupees I can get you another blanket, for one hundred rupees I can get you a better meal." "Let him be," hollers another cellmate, a plump, dark boy from Aligarh, who is picking his teeth with a piece of neem. "Don't you know who he is, he's the Mercedes Killer." The old man shuffles off. "I'm Arvind," the fat boy says. "They say I killed my wife, but I'm innocent."

Out into the courtyard, break time. Hundreds of inmates piling out of their cells to congregate. Men size him up. He's something of a celebrity. They've all heard about the Mercedes Killer. They want a closer look, judge for themselves his innocence or guilt, see how tough he is, how scared, decide where he could belong. It only takes a minute to recognize he's one of the innocent, a scapegoat for a wealthy boss. Men try to prize this truth from him. What was he promised to take the fall? Something sweet? Money, when he gets out? Or will his sons and daughters be sent through school? Or did it come from the other side? Was his family threatened? Was his life in danger? Or was he just loyal?

Representatives from the gangs that run the jail approach him in the yard, in the dining hall, in the corridors, canvass his support, present their pitch. The Chawanni gang, the Sissodia gang, the Beedi gang, the Haddi gang, the Atte gang. The dreaded Bawania gang. The Acharya gang, the Guptas. As an innocent man, as a man unaccustomed to the criminal life, he will need protection. He will soon become a target for extortion if he does not pick a gang; without a gang's support, a man will rape him soon enough, a warden will have him transferred to a cell, alone with another cellmate, he will be his sport, no one will come when he screams. And they'll take whatever money he has. They offer this as sage and neutral advice, as if they were not the threat. He is pulled this way and that. What

money do you have? Join our gang. Join our gang and you'll have security. You'll have a mobile phone, pornography, chicken. You'll be exempt from the "freshers party" coming your way. Join our gang and you can fuck, you can rape. Our gang is the strongest. You should join us before it's too late. He ignores each pitch. By the time he returns to his cell, his blanket has been taken away.

He prefers to be alone and in pain anyway. The horror of the dead follows him inside, he mourns them as he breathes. He refuses all the gangs, snubs the emissaries and their overtures. So on the second day, outside the pharmacy, alone, just after he's been called to visit the doctor, three men from another cell converge on him. They stick out their tongues and remove the razor blades they keep in their mouths; they set upon him, slashing at his face and chest and the forearms he raises to protect himself. He takes the cuts in penance, making no expression of pain. Then his patience finally snaps, breaks like a trapdoor. He shatters his first attacker's nose with the heel of his palm, takes the second man's arm at the elbow and snaps it at the joint. The third he sweeps down to the floor. He snatches one of their razors and takes it to this man's tongue, slicing it down the middle, squeezing the squealing prisoner's jaw open with his grip.

He's found standing over them, splattered in blood, the prisoners howling in pain as he's locked in solitary in a daze. They beat him, tell him he'll be there for a very long time. Once the door shuts, he goes wild, snarling and slapping and kicking the walls. Screaming without language. Incomprehensible words. He cannot control his world.

He imagines the end. Everything he is and all he's done. But no. The next morning, the door is opened, new guards enter. They tell him to come with them. He'll shower first. He's shivering naked and raw. When they approach, he curls his fists, back to the wall, to fight. They laugh and throw him fresh clothes.

He's taken to the warden's office. A pleasing spread: freshly cut fruit, paratha, lassi. A vision of paradise. The warden asks him to sit. "Have a cigarette. Help yourself. There's been a mistake. I wasn't told," he says. "If I'd been told, this would never have happened. Really, no one knew, not even your friends. But things will be different. You'll be taken to your friends here now. You'll be free, within reason. And this unfortunate business with those other men, this will be forgotten. They could be punished. Only, you punished them yourself, didn't you!? Quite a show. Oh, and this money, it's yours. You should have said something. You should have made it clear. You should have let us know. Why didn't you let us know?"

Ajay stares at the food, at the cigarette pack.

"Know what?"

The warden smiles.

"That you're a Wadia man."

MAHARAJGANJ, EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH, 1991

AJAY

(Thirteen Years Earlier)

1.

What you have to remember is that Ajay was just a boy. Eight years old and malnourished. Barely literate. Watchful inside the sockets of his eyes.

His family was poor. Wracked by poverty. Living hand to mouth in a hut patched with dried grass and plastic sheets on raised ground above the floodplain, by the ears of sarkanda beyond the shadow edge of the village. Father and mother manual scavengers both, scraping shit from the villagers' dry latrines with slate and hand, bearing wicker baskets on heads, to be dumped on farther ground. Pissing and shitting in the fields before dawn. Pissing after dark. Growing meager leafy vegetables in the filthy runoff. Drinking water from the brackish distant well so as not to pollute the common source. Knowing their limits. So as not to invite death upon themselves.

Ajay's mother, Rupa, is pregnant again.

His elder sister, Hema, tends to their goat.

This is Eastern Uttar Pradesh. Nineteen ninety-one.

The foothills of Nepal rise in the north.

The moon is visible long after dawn.

Before Ajay took a breath he was already mourned.

2.

It’s nineteen ninety-one and the district is in dire need. The upper-caste landlords and their cronies thrive. The boy treks each day to the government school, an aging, unloved shell; a false hope of concrete without doors; wooden windows shuttered, splintered, and full of holes; rooms too small for the many children, snot nosed, hair combed, hair oiled, scrappy uniforms kept clean, fighting a threadbare tide. The teacher is missing, often drunk, often runaway, often collecting his government salary at home. Ajay is poor, less than poor, shunted to the back with the other Valmikis, with the Pasis and Koris, shunned, ignored. At lunch they are made to wait apart, on rocky ground, while the caste children sit cross-legged in rows on the smooth platform taking their meals on banana leaves. When their meals are over, it is the outcastes’ turn, their portion meager, watered down. After lunch Ajay is put to work. He sweeps the floor, removes dried shit from the corners, sweeps lizard shit from the ledge. One day a dead dog lies beside the boundary wall, bloated and rotten and snakebit. He is made to tie string around its hind leg, drag it away.

In the afternoon heat he returns several kilometers home to help Hema with the goat. Past the Hanuman temple, past the boys playing cricket. He keeps a safe distance. Three years ago he made the error of picking up a stray ball, throwing it back with all his might. The ball was shunned like a leper, and Ajay was chased through the fields. He escaped across the sewage ditch. They told him: Touch the ball again, we’ll hack off your arms and legs, set fire to them, throw you in the well.

It’s nineteen ninety-one and his father has gotten into some kind of trouble. Their goat has broken free from its tether and entered a villager’s field to eat the spinach there. Ajay and Hema retrieve it, but the owner of the field comes to know. He arrives late afternoon with the village headman, Kuldeep Singh. Kuldeep Singh brings with him a handful of eager goons. In their presence the landowner demands an explanation

where none will suffice, while Ajay's father, all sinew and bone, begs forgiveness when none will come. It's the goat they deal with first. In clairvoyance, it spits and snorts and rears and brandishes its horns, so the goons shy away. It takes Kuldeep Singh to push them aside, to bring his brutish club down swiftly on its head. The skull cracks, the goat teeters on the void, legs folding—it looks, for a moment, like a newborn trying to walk. Kuldeep Singh places his knee on its head and slits its throat with his blade. Exalted by the hot blood, the goons move in on Ajay's father. They drag him to the ground, hold him down by his shoulders and knees, and take turns beating the soles of his feet with bamboo sticks, graduating in their zeal to his ankles, his shins, his knees, his groin. They deliver heavy blows to his groin, his chest, his arms. His wife and daughter cry out, wail, beg them to stop. Ajay turns to run, but he's held fast by Kuldeep Singh as he goes. Those heavy hands grip his shoulders. The breath of tobacco and liquor is a sour perfume for his nose. Ajay turns away, directs his eyes at the pinkish sky, but Kuldeep Singh twists his head so he must watch.

His father falls into a fever, bones purpling into dusk. In the morning, in despair, his mother turns to the local moneylender, Rajdeep Singh, begging enough to take her husband for treatment to the government hospital twenty kilometers away. Rajdeep Singh grants her two hundred rupees at 40 percent interest after a humiliating negotiation.

When Rupa reaches the hospital, the doctors refuse to admit her husband unless they are paid up front in full. They take 150 rupees, then leave him in a ward unattended. He slips from this world by midnight. She drags his body back herself, strapped to a wooden sled in the dark, reaching home after dawn. Denied access to the village's burning ground, they cremate him themselves with collected oil and cheap wood on a pyre near their home. There's not enough wood to finish the job. The stench is unbearable. They dig a shallow grave beside the woods and bury his charred remains there.

Next day, Rajdeep Singh's men come round to remind Ajay's mother what is owed. The goons surround Ajay's sister, pass lewd comments, suggest what she might do. Ajay watches hidden and mute among the stalks of the neighboring field. There's a cockroach in the cracked earth beneath his feet. He covers his ears to block the cries and stamps the