I KICK AND I FLY

RUCHIRA GUPTA

SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-82509-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, April 2023

Book design by Christopher Stengel

CHAPTER ONE

Forbesganj, Bihar, India

My stomach growls as I walk through the wrought-iron gates into school.

Today is Monday. I'm always hungriest after the weekend at home.

The main gate of the school opens off a tarred road lined with tall eucalyptus trees. I breathe in their tangy, sour smell. The faded pink of our L-shaped, two-story school building greets me with a brief, reassuring familiarity.

The low wall is very gray now, though at some point I'd like to think that it too had been pink. It wraps around the entire compound, marking our patch as separate from the green rice fields that surround us on three sides.

I feel the other kids' eyes on me as I cross the courtyard. Maybe because their clothes are washed and starched every day and mine

aren't. Maybe they can hear my stomach's hungry growl. Maybe they know that food is why I really come to school.

Last night, Mai found some potato peels and boiled them with a little salt. She forages the garbage near the railway tracks for leftovers because Baba takes her earnings to gamble.

I think of him, big and tall, despite his limp. He twirls his flowing black mustache as he walks around with a swagger in his lungi sarong, red plastic sunglasses, and a bandanna tied around his neck. Looking at him, you wouldn't think that our family is starving.

But, in our lane, when everyone is cold, dirty, and hungry, we are hungrier, dirtier, and colder than everyone else.

I breathe deeply and remind myself that I can feel confident, because today, I look more like the other children. I'm not barefoot. I have on a pair of white canvas shoes that I found near the railway tracks. I stare down at the bindis I've stuck over the torn parts, where I've painted little flower petals of blue and black around them with eyeliner pencils.

Still, the nerves find their way to my chest. Whenever I get anxious about class, about the other kids, I think of the breeze over the green rice fields and the white birds that nest there.

I arrive at the two buildings at the end of the courtyard. The hostel for orphaned and vulnerable girls is on one side and the school building on the other. All the rooms of the L-shaped school building open onto a long wraparound veranda. The doors are never shut, even in the monsoon season, and there is always a breeze, even when there is no electricity to power the ceiling fans.

Parrots, sparrows, crows, and even squirrels all nest in the old

mango, semal cotton, and guava trees here. And in a corner of the courtyard, just near the swings, is a mud stretch where the hostel girls exercise in white pants and jackets every day. I watch them practice their high kicks as I walk to class.

The kids point and whisper at me as I walk into the school building, but I don't stop or look at anyone. I keep walking down the long corridor and into class. I prefer the days that they don't notice me. It's better than the alternative. The heady smell of steaming rice wafts in from the school kitchen and my eyes blur from the hunger.

"Pretty shoes," says Manish as I walk in. I blush with pleasure and sit next to him.

Perhaps he's back to being my friend again like the old days. Before Rosy went away.

It's been a while since I let myself think of her. Her long black hair, just like mine. Her dimpled round cheeks and upturned eyes. Our teacher always mixed us up, even though I'm much darker than her and am always dressed in the same black salwar kameez, patched up in many places. I wonder if Manish misses his sister as much as I miss my best friend.

I don't know how or when Manish became the most popular kid in school. Maybe because he's a good student, or because he's strong and powerfully built. The girls clamor for his attention and the boys cling to him as if his confidence might rub off on them. Or maybe because his father is a police officer, the famous Suraj Sharma, and Manish comes to school in the police van. In the monsoon season, he gives the school principal a lift too.

I place my schoolbooks on the desk and turn to him with a smile. He

points at my painted shoes. "They don't really hide your dirty feet. You can still see that they're old and torn."

Everyone bursts out laughing.

Math class begins. Our teacher, Sunil Sir, sits on a big chair behind a wooden desk. He's neatly dressed, as usual. His large bony body conceals his gentle and patient nature. I take my stubby pencil and dirty notebook out of my worn cloth satchel and begin to listen.

I'm so hungry I can't hear a word. If anyone bothered to check, they would see just how completely lost I really am. I copy the problem set on the board and then write borderline nonsense. Or maybe it does make sense, and I just can't tell. I can't stop thinking about the rice and daal boiling in the kitchen.

My stomach performs a big, famished rumble as soon as the bell rings.

Manish hears. "Don't worry, Heera, it's lunchtime now," he says mockingly. And again, everyone starts laughing. Of course they know food is why I come to school.

I focus my eyes away from my classmates and toward the trees outside. One day I'll get used to the hunger and hopelessness like Mai.

Manish gets up from the wooden bench we share and walks to one near the door. He sits down like royalty with his feet up on a desk in front of him and his back resting on a table behind him. A few of the boys gather around him. He says something and they all laugh. I know they're up to something, but I have to get past them to get to the mess hall.

When I make my way through the narrow aisle between the tables, my gaze is fixed toward the door. I'm almost there when I trip over something—a foot perhaps—and the ground falls out from under me.

My arms shoot out to break my fall, but I'm too late. I'm flat on my face. A spot of blood leaks from my nose as I get up off the floor.

Without wiping it, I run from the laughter. My toes push apart the already-torn canvas of my shoes.

I take my mat and spread it on the floor of the mess hall. As I cross my legs to sit, I sneak a look at my toes peeping out of the torn shoes. Are my feet really dirty? I look more closely. They're cracked and coated with filth. I thought my brown skin hid the dirt, but it doesn't really work that way, I suppose. I curl my toes into my shoes and tuck my feet under me.

And then the food arrives. Whole spices, cauliflower, and chunks of potatoes almost melt into the roasted moong daal that has been boiled with rice and arhar daal. The khichdi glistens with the spoonful of ghee topping it. I can think of nothing else as I swallow great, big, hungry mouthfuls. We are almost done eating by the time they bring around the boiled eggs. One perfect, gleaming oval hits my steel plate and rolls around. Eggs are only served twice a week, and they have always been my favorite food. I can practically taste the egg's rich, heavy, buttery flavor.

I keep my eye on it as I finish the rest of my food. I know it won't disappear, but I don't dare to look away. The kids around me don't seem to notice when I slip the egg into my bag.

What if I were to leave now and bring Mai the egg for lunch? My full stomach is a heavy burden to bear. But as I quietly file out, Manish suddenly appears at my elbow with two other boys who I don't know as well.

"Oh, hello, Heera," Manish says with a smirk. "What's in the bag?"

I hold on to my bag tightly.

"What do you do when you aren't at school?" asks one of the boys with him before I can respond.

"I bet I know what she does when she isn't here," says another boy. He walks forward and stands beside Manish. They don't live far from our lane lined with small brothel rooms behind the huts. They know.

"Why does she come to school, anyway? We know what she'll end up doing. You don't need to read and write to do that," the first boy says, as if I'm not even here.

"Yeah, like that cousin of hers, Mira. Bet she spends all day *reading*," taunts the other boy.

Their laughter echoes through my brain. My cheeks are on fire and my heart begins to race. Shame creeps onto my skin, heating my face from the inside.

And then Manish grabs my bag, and I know immediately what he's going to do. I try to snatch it back, but he's already reached inside. His smile is an awful thing across his face.

"Heera laid an egg! Heera laid an egg!" he sings as he pulls out the egg and holds it above his head.

I run after him as he strides down the corridor. It's as though I'm back in front of my family's tiny hut just a few days ago, chasing down the pig that stole my little sister Chotu's only good shirt. That didn't end well, and neither will this.

I don't even know my next move; I act on impulse and kick Manish hard in his butt. And as he tumbles to the floor, I reach out and yank the egg out of his hand.

Miraculously, it is intact. I put it into my pocket, and before he can get up, I let my fist fly, hitting him straight in the face. I watch, as though in slow motion. Blood flies out of his mouth. I lean down and pick up a tooth off the ground, and he looks at me with horror as he reaches up to his face. The shouts around me grow louder, crying for punishment. The crowd wants retribution for Manish and his broken tooth.

I return the tooth but keep the egg.

The principal is not in his office after Manish has finished dragging me through the hallways. As we wait outside, he continues to taunt me. "You're not gonna get away with this. I will make sure you never come to school again. You Nats are all thieves and prostitutes. You'll never change."

It's nothing I haven't heard before. But I can't seem to quell the anger stirring inside me before my reflexes kick in and I spit at his feet.

The principal comes around the corner at that very moment. "What is going on?" he asks angrily, waving his walking stick.

"Manish tripped me and pulled my bag, sir," I stammer.

Manish shows him the broken tooth.

The principal looks at me furiously, his bald head glimmering. "As it is, the other parents object to admitting children like you to this school."

I hang my head, staring at the floor just in time to see a mouse scuttling by.

"Please come to my office," the principal says. He doesn't say a word to Manish.

Manish returns to class as I walk into the principal's chamber.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, my head still down as I slowly enter.

"I'm afraid I can't keep you in school any longer. Your father can come and take all your certificates. But you will have to find admission in some other school," the principal says in a firm voice as I stand in front of his desk.

"Please, sir . . ." I attempt to explain what happened, but he pulls out a file and begins to make notes as if I'm not there.

"No explanations necessary. There's no room for discussion under the circumstances. Just leave," the principal repeats in a voice that brooks no ifs, ands, or buts.

I wait silently for a few moments, hoping he will give me an opening. But after an agonizing minute of standing there, invisible, I walk out, tormented by the principal's words.

I begin to shake uncontrollably.

My arms and legs feel too heavy to walk home. I don't want to face Mai's tears and Baba's fists. But it's too late for that. Much too late. Baba will tell her he was right: We Nat tribes are not meant for school. Mai will lose face to Baba after all her sacrifices to make sure I could attend.

What will I eat?

I walk past the empty schoolyard, my feet pinching in my hand-me-down shoes. The other children are all still in class, including Salman, my model older brother—always so calm and studious. He's able to crack a joke to defuse a fight. But me? I fight too easily. I lose my temper in a minute.

I reach the referral hospital. I can see our dirt lane, smell the rotten

food dumped by the food carts as I cross the railway tracks. My stomach growls automatically while my senses revolt. My insides know that the smell means food.

I leave the pigs to it this time. Tomorrow, when the hunger rises like a serpent in my stomach, biting my insides, when even the swallowing of my saliva won't still the cramps, I will come back.

My eyes sting and I realize the tears have already come.

I straighten my shoulders and walk to our makeshift plastic home propped against one solid wall. My future is a hazy, unknowable thing, full of menacing shadows. My actions could very well seal the fate for my younger sisters, Chotu and Sania, as well.

Perhaps Chotu might fulfill my mother's dreams. She is a plucky five-year-old. Her thin, spiny body conceals a determined spirit. Perhaps my brother, Salman, will calm Baba down. He'll crack a joke, and everyone will forget that they have to share their portion of food with me. Perhaps Baba will be happy that he was right. Perhaps he will leave for the liquor shop without beating me or yelling at Mai.

Perhaps Mira Di has sent some milk over for Sania, the baby.

Perhaps I will be able to sell my canvas shoes to the garbage recycling uncle at the head of our lane.

Perhaps I will accustom myself to the constant hunger like Mai. Now that I am old enough—fourteen going on fifteen.

Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps . . .

But perhaps, now that I am not in school, it will be easier for Baba to sell me. I can quell the pangs of hunger, but I cannot quell the fear of what awaits me if Baba and Ravi Lala push aside Mai's wishes.