

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

[This chapter is dedicated to Librium, a drug manufactured by Valeant]

To make a long story short, and to include just enough biographical detail so as to make the rest of the book and its viewpoint somewhat understandable: I was born in a South Indian city eight thousand miles away from New York. Like most male babies whatever their color, I was born with a penis, though it didn't occur to me at the time that this tiny appendage, which most men and women find to be a pretty neat accessory capable of performing some cool tricks, might be a huge stumbling block for a future brown writer in America. And like around thirty million other Indians, I grew up Christian—a Catholic, like half of that number—in a town that was a congestion of churches, convents, monasteries, seminaries, and Christian schools, and, like my many Hindu classmates at the same Christian schools, never thought it strange, and never even dreamt that it would be held against me nearly thirty-five years later by some senior editors in the New York publishing world.

Though not abjectly poor as a child, I was sometimes hungry and felt deprived of food and affection, as a result of which I would often end up confusing the two for many years thereafter. And I was sometimes denied meals and went hungry as punishment for lapses of memory such as losing a pencil (one of my many early lessons in understanding injustice, a sense of which is no doubt a powerful force in this book and in much of my other writing). Perhaps because the powerful adults around me all wore crucifixes around their necks and said the rosary a lot, I was for many years devoutly attached to Christianity, and influenced by Italian saints named Dominic Savio and Don Bosco (no relation of Don Corleone, I believe, but certainly a Don with a respectable Indian and darkie following). What Christianity and these heaven-gazing saints taught me was that while milk biscuits might taste delicious when you're hungry, in the eternal sweepstakes, money and material riches mattered very little, that the crucial values in life were the intangible ones, including a stubborn insistence on speaking

loudly and fearlessly what one believed to be the truth, regardless of consequences, not excluding death—a prejudice that persisted with me long after I ceased to be a fervent Christian. Only one of my parents had passed high school and my access to books and to serious readers of literature was greatly limited. Until I was twenty, I had not met a single real author (I do not include, in my definition of author, a few college teachers who exploited their position by churning out barely literate textbooks or study “guides.”).

In retrospect, I know that these experiences, and my relative sense of deprivation, insecurity, anxiety, and injustice, were irreplaceably crucial in making me what I am and infusing my writing with some of its passion and its stubborn compassion for the less-fortunate—a prejudice which, if nothing else, is at least my own. All I wish to note here is that in some of these respects, I differ from almost any of the Oxbridge or prep-school-educated, cosmopolitan, upper-middle-class Indian writers who form a large percentage of the Indian writers in English patronized by the mainstream Western literary establishment, which pretty much dictates the literary fashions of India and the livelihoods of those of its writers for whom English has become a de facto mother tongue. Nor did I quickly join the select inner circles of the cognoscenti, almost exclusively residing in three major cities, as some of the others did, but remained a naïve small town boy for very long. In these circumstances, how I even got to be a writer, how I even dared to dream of becoming one, never ceases to amaze me: in India's rigid class system, especially at the time I was growing up in the Sixties and Seventies, this wasn't supposed to happen.

In any case, I did not plan for it to happen in India, because I had no hope that it could, in such a rigidly class-conscious country, where most of the celebrated writers in English come from one of five colleges (two of these being Oxford and Cambridge, the other three being two Xaviers and a Stephens)—this in a country with tens of thousands of colleges. My dream had an American setting. For, during the twenty years in which my American Dream was planted, blossomed, and possessed me, and during which I thrilled to the idea of an

unlimited and free republic of beautiful words, I never thought for one moment that my relatively humble background would be an obstacle when I reached America, let alone the existence of the humble appendage between my legs. The legends about the log-cabin president, the stories of Mark Twain and of Dale Carnegie and other members of the Penised Class—all of these told me that if there was one country in the world where a poor boy who was bright could make it, it was America the Beautiful.

And thanks to this American dream, I was the one that got away. Well, almost.

THE SCOTT MEREDITH LITERARY AGENCY

(This chapter is dedicated to Valium, manufactured by Roche, and given special mention in
Appendix III)

If there are thirty things about myself that I hate—and there are possibly more—then Number Twenty-three is my discomfort with the law, a discomfort that makes me sweat or become self-conscious when a cop or a customs officer gives me the once-over or the twice-over (even though, nearly a hundred percent of the time, I have done nothing to be afraid of—don't snort or smoke or booze or brawl or spit or pee on the pavement, and dreaming of making whoopee with the woman in front of me is not, as far as I know, a felony). So when, in May 1981, I graduated from my Master's Degree program in Literature and Journalism at American University in Washington D.C.—my stepping stone to the Great American Writing Dream, along with a course in Book Editing, taught by Little, Brown senior editor at Harvard University's summer school, with the help of Strunk & White and *Words into Type*—I decided, unlike many other more adventurous foreign students on student visas, to get myself job training the *legal* way. I applied for a six-month "practical training" visa and headed off to the Big Apple to make my fortune as a wordsmith.

The great wave of South Asian immigration had barely begun, and the New York journalistic world of 1981 was still a milk-white person's world. At the various "editorial" employment agencies and newspapers and magazines that I called, I was given the brush-off by the secretaries who, when told that I had a M.A. in Literature from American University, with a Distinction, brusquely disposed of me by asking me to take typing tests. So what if I couldn't type sixty words per minute on an unfamiliar keyboard without mistakes? Could

James Joyce? Did the young Ben Bradlee?¹ I had been admitted to American University solely because of my 98 percentile GRE English score, before they had even seen me, and then been given a scholarship solely for my first semester's academic performance; were these employers rejecting me solely on the basis of my appearance, which admittedly didn't compare with Young Bradlee's? I felt miserable, until one day, responding to an enticing advertisement offering the chance to do tons of pure writing, I was given the courtesy of being asked to take a test that was not primarily a typing test, but a *writing* test—though I would have to pound out my writing on a not-too-familiar IBM Selectric. I was told to write a letter containing a literary evaluation of a fictional client who had submitted an article.

Apparently I performed well enough in the test, or so I was told later by the vice president of the agency, Ted Coles [not his real name], who not only knew the Little, Brown editor who had taught me at Harvard, but said he was impressed by my “flow”—or what I frankly thought of as my linguistic bullshitting art, which I had developed in response to the needs of answering essay-type university examination questions in India. I danced up and down in my Flushing apartment for weeks after, so thrilled was I to get the job—which involved reading novels and *writing* about them for hours and hours—in a distinguished literary agency, located in that nerve-center of world publishing, Third Avenue in the Fifties, right next door to Random House and Knopf! Not writing boring business letters or dense economic reports, but simply letting go, merrily slinging the bull, slinging the *joie de vivre* and the *weltanschauung*, giddily opening all my valves and letting my pistons pound like a race-car driver in a Ferrari on a lonely Texas highway after having spent ten years in an underground prison cell. I was grateful. So low had my self-confidence dived thanks to my recent experiences that I knew it was the only job in America I could ever get. And I needed, for the sake of my fragile manhood, to have a job, to have a weekly pay check, whatever its

¹ The legendary Ben Bradlee, executive editor of *The Washington Post*, had sailed into the writing profession when his interviewing editor asked him, “Have you written anything?” “No,” Bradlee had replied. “Well, nobody’s perfect,” said the editor, and gave him the job.

size.

Or perhaps I simply needed an excuse to wear a tie, for you had to wear a tie at the office. It didn't matter if you wore the same frayed tie every day of your life, it didn't matter if you had holes in your underwear—it didn't matter if you wore *no* underwear—but *you had to wear a tie!* The tie was their crafty stratagem to help camouflage our extremely low pay from our own eyes: in my case, two hundred dollars a week, or one hundred sixty after taxes (yeah, I had become that holy American icon: a taxpayer, and a tie-wearing taxpayer to boot!). The tie made me feel important as I rode the elevator each day at precisely 8:55 a.m. with other important tie-wearing people, alighting at an important twelfth floor office to breathe in the air of importance exhaled by *real* agents who occupied their own offices, with real windows, in the hallowed, carpeted corridor that led to the Boss's hallowed office, probably guarded at its portals by Cerberus.

Passing through this consecrated corridor, I and my “reading specialist” colleagues parted company with the real agents midway and took a sly left turn into the cubbyhole office six of us shared. We knew our place. We were the “fee agents.” We handled the “fee clients.” The brain-dead sucker section.

At least we had *jobs*, unlike the troublemakers out there. Unlike Them.

This was how it worked.

The agency bought mailing lists of the literary chapter of that megatribe called Suckers Americanus²—fellows who had sent out in the mail for some writing manual or magazine or “free” offer, chaps who had, in a moment of weakness, betrayed to the Omnipresent Mail Order Industry an interest in scribbling, or in unburdening their souls, their lives, their fantasies, their craziness onto hundreds of sheets of white, and sometimes cream-colored, paper. Their own Great American Writing Dream. Every week the agency zeroed in

² And please, before you think I am being scornful of or condescending to others—rather than, as I actually am, describing and mimicking a mindset that seems to take over people who work in publishing and literary agencies—I am the world's biggest sucker, an Eternal Sucker Universalis, and not just in my weakness for mail order offers, as this book itself will reveal. And I demand protection and kindness towards our tribe.

on a few hundred Designated Suckers and mailed them a flyer reproducing some old news clipping about what a great and innovative tiger of a literary agent Mr. Scott Meredith was: the founder of the literary auction and the agent to famous authors and politicians, although he had scornfully turned down Richard Nixon (no doubt a cause of Nixon's relatively early death). Apparently, the ever-hungry Scott was now voracious for new clients. However, he would naturally have to charge these untested tyros a fee for reading their masterpieces and reporting on them until their marketability and immortal genius had been established beyond doubt.