

Tuesday , August 20 , 2013

## EXCERPT

Debut novelist Subhashini Dinesh on My Iron Wings, her 'loving ode to calcutta'



On a bandh day, police vans and ambulances were the only traffic on the city roads. It was time for long hangouts and family bonding.

But journalists had no choice. Pickup cars with their redoubtable PRESS stickers of immunity offered us door-to-door service. I was on the morning shift that ended at four and was on my way home in the office car with six of my colleagues. Only the stodgy Ambassadors had the capacity of packing in that many people. Jhontu-*da*, the transport incharge, always overestimated a car's capacity and crammed as many of us as possible into it. The driver barely managed to sit behind the wheel, as two others squeezed into the passenger seat beside him. The old-fashioned car had hand gears, so a little more floor space was available for those in the front to rest their feet.

"*Ore Baba*, this car does not have a floor gear. Imagine then... the gentleman might use mine by mistake," exclaimed the man sitting next to the driver. We burst into a big laugh. They all got off one by one, except Pradeep and I. We were on our way to Pradeep's house when the car was stopped by a political procession and a sea of belligerent protesters surrounded us. The protesters were aggressive. Many of them carried arms chanting provocative slogans like a war cry. I froze and then quickly rolled up the window glasses. Pradeep squeezed my hand in an attempt to calm me. Suddenly, the hostile protesters began thumping on the driver's door.

"*Sala... Ch\*\*\*\*\*giri hochche? Kothai? Where?*"

The driver was too shocked to answer. But Pradeep took control and said we were journalists returning home from work. "You can see PRESS and the newspaper name on the windshield."

They burst out laughing, making me shudder. "*Ga\*\*\*!* Whom are you trying to fool?" asked one of them, widening his blood-shot eyes.

*Is he drunk?*

"Where is your fu\*\*\*\*g sticker?" shouted another man, his tight netted vest revealed his toned hairy chest.

"*Ki? Girlphrand?*"

"*Dekhooon dada... Please understand,*" began Pradeep in chaste Bangla.

"What? Taking your girlfriend out for a drive? But there will be no *phuchka wallah* today at Vivekananda Park," another one with a broken front tooth said, amid lusty jeers.

"No, dada. Our office has forgotten to put a new sticker," Pradeep, ever so calm, answered without a

quiver in his voice.

The man with the broken tooth laughed out loud. I turned to my left and saw a few of them pawing at my glass window and passing comments, which I could not hear. I spotted a glass bulb with some colourless liquid clutched in one of their hands. Acid bomb!

My hands, still under Pradeep's grasp, turned ice cold. Beads of sweat dotted my forehead as my eyes kept going back to the bulb though I tried to look away.

I slowly moved closer to Pradeep. Even in the midst of this crisis, I was conscious of our closeness. I felt like a teenager.

Then, Pradeep put his arm around me and whispered in my ear, "ID." My fingers trembled as I fumbled for my ID inside my jute bag, crammed with unwanted papers and receipts. Finally, I remembered I had kept it in the inner zipped pocket of the bag. My index finger and thumb still trembled as they tried to unzip the pocket; a few drops of sweat fell over my palm as I did so. I finally fished it out and gave it to Pradeep. He flashed them at the gang leader with characteristic flamboyance. One look at our IDs and he ordered his storm-troopers to make way for our car. It was like the parting of the Red Sea for us.

*Excerpted from My Iron Wings [Palimpsest, Rs 599]*