

“A Bend In The Track” (novel excerpt)
by Aditya Desai

The meeting had been short, a lot shorter than Ashok had assumed it would be. He sat in a plush leather chair, his jittering hands clasped together under the glass table, as if he could have hid them. It struck him that the office, and conference room, was mostly empty, clean and pristine. Large foot-to-ceiling windows looked down over downtown Washington. The capital’s infamous traffic slugged down K Street, anonymous civil suits working extended lunch hours to transfer reports from one government office to another. He tried to keep his attention on his interlocutors, rather than the miniature taxis and buses, but as the minutes passed on, it was getting tiresome.

The table was bare, save for a disc-shaped telephone speaker and the file folder Ashok had brought with him, containing his work particulars. They’d flipped through it, the resumes, the degrees, the certificates, the letters, all in seconds, almost as a polite gesture, and pushed it aside. Again, the efficiency of such an exalted job struck him with curiosity.

For such a high-powered job, with responsibilities and guidelines, where he would have his own desk with a nameplate, where he would wear a suit and attend development meetings, Brian and Chris had only mimicked the routine from the day before, a sort of tag-team question and answer where it felt they were only talking to each other, and not to him.

Why had he come down? He hadn’t told anyone about the meeting. When he emerged from the trailer, they crew had assumed, as he had, that it was his effective termination. He told them it wasn’t, just a heavy reprimand about his disobedience. Strike one of the customary three, in American terms. He went on to tell them that in India, as a child in school, any infractions were met with the sharp end of a ruler, on the butt cheeks or even worse, between the knuckles. And then the issue was forgotten almost immediately. It was almost disturbing to Ashok how easily his exotic Eastern-ness distracted his coworkers for more distressing matters.

“Now, how are you with administration?” Brian asked.

“Administration?”

“You know,” Chris said. “Making sure the project grows and develops properly. Knowing how to handle people, tell them what to do, then fix it when they fuck-up.”

“Kind of like looking after a bunch of children,” Brian said. “Wouldn’t you say, Chris?”

“Yeah, sure, why not? What experience do you have there, Ash?”

Ashok remained silent for a moment. Then he spoke. “In...raising children?”

They laughed.

“No, no. Administration.”

Ashok sighed, and gave them an answer. He talked about the light fixtures that fell through, the track work that fell behind, the workers that arrived late and was cut loose. He told each of these as a functionary, machine like process he executed as easily as chewing and swallowing food. The problem was reported and he came on-site to see it through. The curious efficiency Brian and Chris and their office projected to him.

“Okay, sounds good.” Brian said. He took the file and tamped it down, then handed it back. “We’ll be in touch.”

“You have any questions,” Chris said, “Let us know.”

“I do have one now,” Ashok said.

“Oh. Okay, shoot.”

“How much faith do you have in this project succeeding?”

“Faith?”

“Yes, faith. Hope? Confidence?”

“Bottomless,” said Chris, teeth beaming.

“Immeasurable,” said Brian. “With what we saw at the site and what you’ve told us Ash, we feel so strong about it.”

Ashok shook their hands and took the elevator down to the parking garage. As he hunted down his car, lost in the stacks of concrete pillars and ramps, he considered what he didn’t mention to them. That how in reality, those days where something went awry, which was most days of the week, involved only he and Chuck or Reggie, standing at the edge of the site with cups of stale coffee, watching a maintenance man languidly try tool after tool under one worked and the light, track, or whichever started operating again. And invariably, it would break once more and they would return. This was the job, no more, no less.

He found his car and drove out to the pay toll. The attendant rattled off the fee, twenty-five dollars.

“That much?” Ashok said, aghast.

“It’s normal around here,” he said, shrugging. “You didn’t get it validated?”

“Validated?”

“Some of the offices will validate your ticket, so you don’t have to pay.”

Ashok sighed. He could have asked, if he’d known about such things. He could go back now and see, but then how would that look? As he pulled out the last bits of cash from his wallet, he suddenly realized how much he needed this job to come through.

The bed was cold beside him when Ashok got up that morning. His wife had already risen. Downstairs, he could hear the pressure cooker making it’s searing whistle noise, and the faint smell of turmeric popping in oil. He looked at the clock, saw that it was ten minutes past the time he’d intended on waking, and pulled the covers closer over his body, luxuriating in a sensation he hadn’t experienced in many years. After a few more minutes, he got up and went into the shower. With the warm water running over his back, he thought of the many mornings when he would walk through the front door, the chilly dew hitting his face as he walked to the car and started it, then let it warm as he went back inside for a quick cup of tea. Upstairs he would hear his wife wake their son, and he would be gone before she’d properly gotten him out of bed.

When he came out of the bathroom, he saw his suit laid out on the bed. It was as if some heavenly being had whisked it’s way through the house, rearranging things bit by bit as if to send him through a time portal and live a life that had left him so long ago.

He dressed as quick as he could, but as he struggled to put on the tie, a task that had always frustrated him so much, his wife walked in, as if on command, and clawed at the twisted knot that chocked him. Without a word, she undid the entire thing, and refastened the loop. She always knew

somehow, despite never having worn one herself, the right ratio of thin end to thick, the exact taut to wrap around. Silently, he watched her in the mirror, the back of her head staring back at his face. He saw wrinkles he hadn't known before across his temples and forehead, and made himself believe that one the other side of that greying scalp, his wife was still as young and fair as the day they'd circled the we

Only once the tie tightened against his neck did she speak.

"When will you be back home?"

"Well, it goes late into the night, I think."

"I will wait for you," she said.

"Don't worry yourself," he said, looking still at the scalp in the mirror

"Who said anything about worrying? It's nothing for me to wait a few hours to eat. Look at me, I don't need too much food anyway."

She still held onto the tie, fiddling with the knot, as if it was a work of art still incomplete.

"The tie is good," he said.

"It needs to be perfect."

He dared to look down at her. It was not the vision he expected; there were no tears, no somber trembles in her lip. She looks only at his neckline, discerningly, meticulously. It was here he realized, in these simple adornments, that her life lay. It was in the right amount of spice in the dinner, the creaseless shirts stacked in the closet, the ice-temperate attitude when he walked through the door, despite what kind of day he had had.

"If tonight goes well," Ashok said. "We will be set for the rest of our lives."

"Don't talk like a big shot. Just do your job."

"That's all I've been doing, all of these years. Can't you see where it's gotten us?"

"We are still alive aren't we? Isn't that good enough?" Her hands shrunk away from him. He looked back in the mirror, at the head that dipped slightly, and the at his own face, questioning whether this was the image that would lead the city to new prosperous heights. The face that looked back at him was worried, unsure, and perhaps not even fully understanding of what was ahead. The body before it, shrunk before him.

He felt her warmth collapse against his chest. He put an arm around her, perfunctorily, and waited as the sobs ensued. They had not come for a long time. They had built up, and now they flowed like levees undone. He closed his arm tighter, and as he did she clutched his back. A wail muffled against his body, and he felt it absorb into him. It was a shared pain, he knew. Not because they felt it at the same time, but because just as one managed to break the surface, the other would succumb to its depth.

His put his other arm around her and closed his eyes, so as not to see her heaving back in the mirror. It made his stomach wither to see her in pain. When it happened, and it had not for some time, he never knew how to react. For him, the pain was cast out into a dark pit that he'd refilled with dirt and left unmarked. He knew only how to shrug it away and move on. But she reveled in it, accentuating the hurt and soreness, like some inverted massage.

When she was finished, he let go. She folded the rest of the clothes she had sitting on the bed, and told him tea was waiting on the kitchen table. “Get it now before it cools off.”

“It looks like *most* of these stations need a lot of work,” Steve, his co-project leader, said.

Ashok nodded, of course they do, he thought. They’ve needed work for years, but who’s going to do it? You? They don’t pay us enough to.

Ashok saw himself as just a middleman, a ferryman whose job it was to make sure the digging, soldering, and ratcheting of the ground workers was satisfying and complete enough to meet the requirements of the higher ups. The bare-minimum requirements. He lamented the attitude, but resigned to it all the same. It was the *laissez-faire* system he had encountered all his life in India, from the railway stations to the government offices to the schools. Do just enough to pass the work onto the next guy, and then it’s his problem.

It worked the other way, too, when new plans and schematics, of investor demands and city codes came down. He would glance at the memos, or nod and shake his head passively as his bosses stated his new responsibilities, then digested it until there was one easy simple command he could pass onto the man doing the grunt work. It was simpler this way for every body he thought, most of all for them, those migrants who came, without papers or a formal border crossing, without even a working vocabulary of English; a passage totally unlike his. They made small change, and for that they deserved small orders.

That had all been halted now that the project was in full swing. He and Steve had spent the entire week combing the existing system for flaws, to see what can be improved on to a “platinum standard.” That was the phrase Brian had used. “No cutting corners, Ash. Nuh-uh, that’s not what we do here. This is a platinum standard.” His almost perfectly-angled face arched back into a grin as he said this, his brow, nose, and lips all pointing in one forward direction at Ashok.

It didn’t take long before an empty sheet of lined paper on Steve’s clipboard became a full notebook, dog-eared and marked with the post-its to classify station or tracking; if the problem was electrical, mechanical, architectural, or decorative; if it was a special job that needed outside contracting; what its estimated budget was, workers needed, hours, tools, and machines.

By the end of the first day, when he returned to the office, Steve threw himself down on the chair and huffed, “Jesus fucking Christ, Ash. You really stirred up some shit.”

Ashok wasn’t too happy to spend his days with Steve, either. To start, the man smoked too much, and Steve insisted they use his car, since the company paid for his gas, and Ash relented. But it was a small, cramped sports car, the budget model that looked fetching but had the same C-class guts as Ash’s own station wagon. The entire cabin had an air that stung of cigarette butts. Ashok had to hold back from gagging the whole day. Steve’s second problem was that he swore too much. Not so much that it exceeded the other men on the site, but Steve had a more respectable position in the organization, one that gave him a suit and a briefcase. Ashok felt this required some decorum of the tongue. The day was filled with colorful phrases of all sorts, but Steve seemed to have a penchant for the saying “cocksucker” as a coverall word: he yelled it was other drivers who cut him off on the highway; he spat it at each new repair added to the list; and sometimes after he’d told Ash a story of administration politics, he’d laugh and gasp “cocksucker” through his bursts. “Seriously Ash, you don’t know what crocodiles these guys can be. Cocksuckers.” But the third, and what both knew was

the biggest core problem, was that Steve just plain didn't like Ashok, his promotion, or that Ashok had added so much hardship to his worklife.

Steve rubbed his temples again and took a deep breath. "How's about a drink, Ash? You drink?"

"Sure," he said. He did drink, in that he had no beliefs or rules against it. But the last time he'd sipped any booze, whisky he thought it had been, was years ago, from when it didn't feel so embarrassing, so treacherous to his wife and his own dignity.

And it was whiskey indeed that Steve took out of his desk drawer. "Come on," he said. They walked down the hall where in a small breakroom, there were two vending machines, one for snacks and one for drinks, and a water cooler. The trailer never had so much as a water cooler, Ashok thought, remembering the hot summer days when Reggie and Chuck mused at whether it was legal for the company to stick them in a box without hydration. Steve took two cone cups and handed one to Ashok. He poured whiskey in both, then filled his to the top with cold water.

"Straight for you?"

"Straight is best," he replied. "No point in drinking if you don't keep it pure."

"Okay, then,"

Ashok thought he saw an eye roll. Steve raised his glass. "To the shit you started. May I hopefully see a good night's rest again in the near future." They drank. The liquor, so long absent from Ashok's throat, prickled and sent him coughing. This might as well have been his virgin sip. It burned down all the way to his stomach. He coughed and heaved, and coughed again.

"Pure, huh?" Steve said. He was chuckling to himself, too loudly for an empty office. Ashok looked up to respond, some witty remark to explain why this whisky, against all the others he of course knew so well, disagreed with him. But the coughs continued, and no words formed. Steve chuckled again. He put the cone cup to his mouth to take another sip, and mumbled "cocksucker," sipping down the last bits.

Night work was on full swing on the outer edges of the track, where the line pierced through the city lines back into the county, knitting east and west together. On the side of the highway, towering floodlights marked out the diggers like actors on stage. Ashok thought back to the days when this was his life, when he would leave the house after a full dinner and almost fall asleep on the drive over. His wife's food was so heavy and filled that ghee that nuzzled his brain, and he would have trouble getting up from his car and lowering into the pits under the evening sky, like some kind of grave robber. There was a peace to it he always liked. There were fewer horns, and if he was lucky, it would be in the summer months when the air was cool and sobering.

This night however, as early autumn set in, the middle of the night dipped the temperatures so far that the floodlights caught all of the fog emitting from the worker's mouths. Though Ashok had been in this situation many times as well, he'd never enjoyed it, and now as the supervisor he felt burdened to make a case to Steve that perhaps they didn't need to work in the cold so often.

"Cold is better," Steve had replied. "They work faster and harder just to keep warm."

Work was going around the clock now. Soon several more sites would open up, both in the city and the burbs. The aim was to finish it quick and in one full swing, before no one, not the

protestors, the politicians, the developers, the businesses pacts, nor the unions, could make a big enough fuss to complicate it. When the last track line had been built in Baltimore, the stops had been erected one by one, and the bosses in the office would mark each one with a gold star on the map, like the trail on a pirate's treasure map. The trains started running before the entire thing was done, in order to get revenue flowing in at first chance, but that necessitated building temporary tracking to allow car switching at the end of the line. This new extension was made with even more haste and ill-planning than the earlier phases, and went into the property of the University campus that sued the MVA, and because no one could afford the tarnish of paving through school buildings (though it had only been into a faculty parking lot), all agreed next time it there would be no butchering, no mess of blood and meat scraps. Instead, one, clean, swoop. Like an ax, like a guillotine.

Ashok had read up on all of this in archived newspapers he found in the office's library. Someone had gone through the trouble of clipping every story, editorial, and cartoon about the MVA's projects going back to the 1960s. News reporting was so much better in those days, he thought. Forward and clear. He had no trouble following any of the writing. All with the proper grammar he'd learned in school, borrowed from the British who knew it best, and free of colorful phrases that fell limp before his eyes. In it, he read of an organization long beleaguered with power plays and cronyism.

There was the story of how an accountant in the state comptroller had embezzled hundred of thousands from the surplus earning in license plate registration fees after the arrival of several factories on the harbor brought a bevy of workers. It didn't need but a few omitted marks on the balance sheets to roll over dollars into his pocket, all back before computers seemed to rule bank accounts. Then there was the story about a wave of muggers who would corner passengers on the late night routes, when there was no one else on the bus save for the driver, the predator, and prey. This led to a decline or ridership for nearly two years, with assurances that undercover police will ride the bus all day. Ashok found an editorial stapled to the back that highly doubted the department even had the extra personnel to mount such a sting.

There were tales of potholes that were crying indicators of the state's failure to put public safety first, Signs that came detached and fell onto the highways, traffic lights that fell out of synchronicity and had cars running into each other. All of these stemmed to the same culprits: men who wanted money and were willing to cut corners to get it. Incompetent people put in charge because their dad knew a guy. The kind of dirty acts he only expected in halls of government or in global finance companies. But somehow, the allure of the roads, the power over the movement of person from place to place, had a certain attraction for the desperate and cutthroat.

Ashok would tell his wife about these scandals every morning over tea, like stories at a campfire.

"Most of these men were just crooks," he'd said. "A man would think being greedy and lousy is a job requirement to have my job. I don't like it. It makes me feel like I've put on someone else's skin like a costume, oily and disgusting. Maybe I am like that. Maybe I've always been, and I just never realized it."

"You can only be what you know about yourself," she'd replied, pouring tea to her saucer. "You can't be anything more."

"I know I'm not that kind of person."

Without missing a sip, she asked: "Could you become one?"

Ashok pondered this, watching the crane lower a great stone pipe into the ditch. Sure, he had access to so many ways to screwing over the other men and getting away rich. His contract

stipulated a large expense account that he'd barely touched. Brian and Chris, the men from DC, had insisted to the administrators he have one. When he said he didn't know what to do with it, Chris had told him, "To grease any wheels, you know? Buy lunches for reporters, pay for taxis to go from site to site without burning your own car. You know, just act more like us."

Ashok's most favorite part about covering the night shift though, was the simple fact that less was demanded of the supervisor. Even with the floodlights, it was hard to get the best perception in the deep holes and around the crevices of large cinder pieces. It was easy to get away with a lot of heartless and noncommittal calls on the site. He would never judge with haste or without being more than one hundred percent complete, but instead he took comfort in not having to do it all. He would smile and tell the head man, Jorge, to do what he could and leave the rest for the morning guys. It was another of those unwritten rules that he'd embraced, for a change one he didn't completely disagree with.

Jorge clamored out of the ditch, wiping sweat from his brow. Ashok liked Jorge, who'd been with the MVA for a decade longer and didn't mind taking all of the dangerous jobs, which usually were in the night shift. He'd long thought the man should have also had a spot in the trailer office with him. But Dave had explained once why.

"He's too necessary on the night crew. Most of the boys who have families and home lives don't want to be on the night crew, so the Mexicans always snatch those hours up, 'cause they know they get time-and-a-half, and since they're all paid under the table they're less of a liability. You know how crazy the night shift can get. Can't see anything, a car could clip you on the road, the guy behind the crane might forget to look before swinging one-eighty. But then they need someone to translate and make sure everything's going smoothly. You know how the office boys are. They don't care who's carrying the shovel as long as they can trust the guy telling 'em where to dig."

The remark reminded Ashok of his favorite film, *The Good The Bad and the Ugly*, and the end scene where Clint Eastwood pointed his pistol at sniveling Eli Wallach and posed the same thought: "In this world, there's two kinds of people. Those with loaded guns, and those who dig. You dig."

The Mexicans did the digging at night, and the rest during the day. Ashok had also done the digging. Any man who knew the job could dig, and while there weren't any guns waved around on this job, Ashok wondered what everyone else did have.

She dusted the home for the third time that day, going over and over from the table in the living room to the china hutch behind the dining table that they never used, up the bannister that climbed alongside the steps and across the few picture frames that she'd put up again the other week. Over the years, she had found different excuses to take each down one by one. They would start benign. She would calmly announce to Ashok as he was reading the paper or having his tea, "I don't like my complexion in this," or "Look how the paper is fading," and take it off the wall with him barely looking up. Later she stopped saying anything aloud at all, instead silently reasoning to herself, *Why is this birthday cake important? Do we even go to this beach anymore? Do we still talk to these people?*

In this way, with the pace that the Earth shifts continents or builds mountains under the sea, she slowly erased any lasting visages of him from their sight. At the time, she saw moving on as inseparable from putting away. It seems eliminating record was as good as eliminating existence, or vice versa.

But, in the same way those frames had disappeared into a shelf in the closet, behind a box of saris that had torn or faded, they reappeared one by one. When Ashok was away, late into the midday when the house was still quiet and her head was dulled from a cup of warm whole milk, she felt

capable to take another photo out and hang it up, both aware and unaware that her body was doing this. She would adjust it a bit this way and that, and then before her eyes could focus too deeply on his face again, she would go to the bed and fall into her afternoon nap, knowing when she awoke she could pretend it had all happened in a dream, like magic, and perhaps she hadn't done the such an act of skullduggery.

In the late evenings and early mornings, she would see Ashok pause, if only for half a second, peer into the wall, and then keep on with whatever he was doing – down the stairs to the table for breakfast, or after dinner from the table up to sleep. For him too, she thought, he hoped perhaps a lack of sleep had made him delusional.

But for Ashok, when he did see them, it was a surprise of realizing he had forgotten them entirely. He would stare and discern everything about the photo save for his face – whether the sky was night or day, whether the background was buildings or pasture, whether the clothing was for warm or cold weather. Like he a puzzle, he would reconstruct each memory from the clues in frame, letting it return to the forefront of his head after so many years of banishment.

By the time Ashok noticed the walls around the house suddenly going bare, he had made his own approaches. He had his own photos, raw, radiated rolls of film stock that he'd accumulated from an overactive camera finger. He'd always been so terrible at taking them to the CVS to developed, the small pang in the back of his mind telling him that if it were done, suddenly that image was real for all to see, and would always take precedent over the favorable, desired snap he had in his head.

It didn't end there. Little toys had gone into a box that he carefully covered all around with duct tape and put in a storage park somewhere off of Northern Parkway, far enough out of his way he knew he would never just go idly. Stacks of notebooks from school, handwriting that was started blocky and lumbering, turned wavy and elegant, and somehow deteriorated back to crude scrapes. These he flipped through passively, one day sitting alone on the floor of his closet, if he was reading the sports page, then tore the hardtack covers off and sent each ruled page through the paper shredder he'd borrowed from the office. These things, his wife watched him do.

What he'd done without her stead, on his way home from work one day, perhaps the only thing he knew she wouldn't bring herself to do. He'd gotten off the highway and taken the back roads up north of the county out towards Pennsylvania, and then, coming out to a small brook that he'd passed many years ago on cold mornings for a job out in the Aberdeen Proving Grounds, he stopped the car and got out. The sun was high; it was August. A dry spell in the past week had made the air scratch his in throat with every breath.

At the bank of the stream, he took out of one pocket, a pair of scissors, and a cigarette lighter. Out of the other, a handful of more photos, but rather than Ashok's own candid these were official documents of existence – a green card, a passport, a social security ID, a library card. Each had a profile photo, stamped, glued, laminated next to his name, and his date of birth.

He took a knee in the dirt, and ripped some of the dead grass out and into a pile. With quick, efficient snips the documents went into two, three, many more pieces, mixed into the grass like decayed salad. He lit the pile, and waited. It burned faster than he expected it to, so he sat a bit longer, and when he started coughing in the acrid heat, he got up, kicked the ashes into the running water, and walked back to the car.

The next morning, he bashfully approached Bill and handed back the cigarette lighter.

“I was wonderin’ where that went,” Bill said. “Where’d you find it?”

“I didn’t, I took it for the day.”

“You could’ve just asked, Ash.” A smile formed at Bill’s face. “Did you take up smoking? Finally?”

When Ashok didn’t answer, he handed the lighter back. “You can keep it. I got another one anyway.”

When Ashok didn’t take the lighter, he pulled out his pack of Kools, took two in his mouth, lit them, and handed one over. Ashok took the cigarette. The smoke was rough, charred, as he expected smoke to be, and took another puff, if only to stop himself from letting anything else out of his mouth.