

Johnny Gone Down: Prologue

‘Stop staring,’ said the woman through clenched teeth.

The little boy, presumably her son, looked away reluctantly. He fixed his attention outside the window as the train sped through the vast, arid plains of central India.

My son would look like him perhaps, I thought suddenly. If he were alive, that is. In the part of the world where he was growing up, infant mortality is as common as UFO sightings in America. The son I abandoned without seeing his face, feeling his breath, or touching his fingers – yet another life I had destroyed in my Faustian journey. It didn’t hurt to think about it any more. Nothing hurt. I felt nothing, I thought nothing; just the moment now, the journey here. I would be crushed under the weight of my regrets if I allowed myself the luxury.

The boy, angelic face streaked with soot, soon began to tire of looking outside and started stealing glances at me once again.

‘His left arm is missing,’ he burst out finally. ‘He is an amputee, Mama, isn’t he? *Amputated.*’ The boy, seven, maybe eight years old, had clearly learnt a new word and was beside himself with joy to see a live example in front of him.

His mother, a tall, young, big-boned lady with a firm, determined jaw and hard cheekbones, pounced on him, slapping him across his face.

‘It’s all right. Please,’ I said. ‘He’s right. I don’t have a left arm.’ I took out my stump from my coat to show him.

It seemed strange to speak in Hindi after so many years. I had been gone far too long. I was back now, and it wasn’t a triumphant return by any means, but this was home.

Everything had changed, yet nothing had changed.

‘I’m really sorry,’ said the mother as the boy escaped her grasp, staring at me in frank admiration.

‘Not at all. He is very observant,’ I said, managing to smile at the boy.

His face lit up. He now had the licence to stare openly at me, and his eyes darted from my stump to the punctured holes in my right wrist where they’d forced in the tubes.

‘Are you going to Delhi?’ asked the mother, still frowning at her boy.

I nodded.

‘You live there?’

‘I used to,’ I replied. ‘A while ago.’

‘You live in Bombay now?’ she asked.

I smiled. If I had missed anything in the twenty years I’d been gone, it was this uniquely Indian gift for immediate familiarity, the unabashed probing followed by a quick judgement on another’s choices. In another life, I’d probably have warmed up to the interrogation. Now, every question unleashed an avalanche of memories – none of them pleasant.

‘No,’ I said shortly. ‘I am coming from overseas.’

A sophisticated but defeated looking middle-aged man, the fourth occupant of our second-class Bombay–Delhi train compartment, buried in his newspaper all this while, perked up suddenly. He put down his newspaper, adjusted his thick spectacles and stared at me, his thick lips and dark moustache quivering, perhaps in anticipation of a debate which would ease the monotony of the twenty-four-hour journey in the hot Indian summer.

‘What’s the use of going abroad nowadays?’ he said. ‘Everything is in India.’

He picked up his newspaper again and pointed to the picture of a short, dark man on the front page. ‘Look, Rahman is going to compose music on Broadway. Is he any less than Elton John? Is Shah Rukh Khan any less than Brad Pitt? All of Hollywood is coming to Bollywood now. India is going to be the next superpower. Why go anywhere else?’

I nodded noncommittally. None of these names sounded familiar. I had just risen from the dead. In the world I came from, there were no movies, no music, no life. Only time and darkness, boundless and pervasive, enough to last several lifetimes and then some more.

‘How long were you abroad? Where were you?’ the man asked; tall, erect body with just the beginnings of a paunch shifting as he spoke.

‘Twenty-five years,’ I said, wishing he would keep quiet. ‘I’ve been in different places.’

‘Twenty-five years!’ he exclaimed. ‘If I were to guess, you must be my age, forty or forty-five years old. That means you’ve been away since you were, what, fifteen or twenty.’

Unconsciously, he appraised me from top to bottom, glancing disdainfully at my worn-out shoes, frayed coat, unshaven face, amputated arm and long, matted hair streaked with grey.

‘What did you get from it?’ he asked.

Suddenly, I wanted to be alone in the darkness of my thoughts. I knew he didn't mean to offend; he was just a bored, curious man, intending to provoke, discuss, argue – it helped kill the time. But I had nothing to say, no desire for this conversation, or any other conversation for that matter.

'Arre,' said the woman, breaking in before I got the chance to mutter a response, 'not everything is about getting and giving, gaining and losing, victory and defeat. Imagine living twenty years in different countries! How much experience he has had; how many lives he has lived! Compared to him, we are like frogs in the well, jumping about in our tiny worlds without ever seeing the light outside.'

'The deer wandered restlessly from forest to forest, searching for the divine fragrance, not knowing that the musk rested in his own belly,' the man said smugly. 'The only light that needs to shine is the one in your own mind.'

'You are a strange one,' said the woman condescendingly. 'Not all who wander are lost. Besides, he must come back home to India almost every year. That's what my sister in the US does. She spends more time with my parents than I do, though I live in India.' She turned to me. 'Don't you?'

I shook my head.

'How often do you come back?' she asked.

'Never,' I said quietly.

'You didn't come to India even once in twenty-five years?' she said incredulously.

I shook my head again. 'I didn't get a chance.'

The man looked at her triumphantly.

'So what? He must have liked it there,' she said defensively. She pointed to another picture in the forgotten newspaper. 'Look at this woman. Would she ever want to come back? She is the CEO of the biggest company in the world. Like me, she is an MBA, but unlike me, she was smart enough to leave India. Women can't get anywhere in this country, but look at her.'

I looked at the picture out of curiosity – and recognized her at once. She hadn't changed much: the hard, determined look in her bright eyes; the angular face; the short hair that was so unfashionable back then – but she hadn't cared.

‘I march to my own drummer,’ she used to say, and we would laugh because she played the drums in the college band, the only woman amidst the stoned grunge rockers.

Even her lovemaking was deliberate and measured and afterwards, when I would collapse on top of her, exhausted, she would methodically explain the latest positions she had read about in *The Joy of Sex* that she wanted to try next time. I had never seen her or spoken to her since that day in 1975 when we graduated. I never thought about how my life might have turned out if we had still been together. There had been too many wrong turns and missed opportunities for me to contemplate just one alternate universe.

‘Why are you smiling?’ asked the man, startling me a little.

‘Nothing,’ I replied, abashed by the sudden, clear memory.

‘She isn’t bad looking,’ he conceded.

‘She is the CEO of the biggest company in the world; *Fortune*’s most powerful woman; the first woman to break the American glass ceiling – being an Indian, that too – and all you can talk about is how she looks. No wonder you are in a second-class compartment while she travels in her corporate jet,’ said the woman in disgust.

The young boy, delighted that someone else was getting a lashing from his mother for a change, smiled conspiratorially at me.

‘And what about you, madam?’ the man said with a smirk. ‘You say you are an MBA like her. Why aren’t you travelling in your Gulfstream then? Some people are just lucky.’

‘She was in my class at MIT. She deserves all her success,’ I muttered, coming to the woman’s rescue.

There was a sudden silence as they both looked at me with expressions of absolute contempt (him) and pity (her). It was so ridiculous a statement coming from an obviously broke, middle-aged loser, that it didn’t even merit an acknowledgement or expression of disbelief. I bore them no ill-will; it sounded absurd even to me.

‘Well,’ said the man after a while. ‘I guess I should go back to my newspaper.’

My unintended comment had spoilt his moment by sweeping the discussion into the ludicrous. What was the fun in engaging in a debate with a lunatic?

The man opened his newspaper, hemming and hawing from time to time. The woman leaned back in her seat, only, this time she held her child closer. I had proven to be as unreliable as I

looked. She watched me from the corner of her eye, keeping another eye on the red emergency chain above, ready to pull it if I acted suspicious.

To make them feel comfortable, I got up and made my way towards the door. No one in the crowded passage gave me a second glance as I shuffled past. This was a second-class train compartment in India; every face hid a thousand tragedies, and it took more to surprise a person than an armless man with a large, ugly scar on his face. I opened the door and sat quietly on the steps, wondering whether this was – and secretly hoping it was – the last journey of my life. I was tired. I had been running far too long, though I had nothing to show for it. The train swept past the landscape, dry, hot wind blowing against my face. Dhaulagiri, Ratnagiri, Chopan, Chunar, Aurangabad: names from another lifetime when the past wasn't as desolate and the future still held hope. Twilight gave way to dusk and finally, the welcome blackness of night arrived as I continued to stare into the invisible landscape, devoid of thought, wondering only sparingly how I had ended up here on my fortieth birthday. It wasn't meant to be this way, I thought briefly as I closed my eyes, although I knew sleep was an impossible luxury. I had been an insomniac for years, unable to get rid of the images of a happier past with its unfinished stories, lost chances and wrong turns. I had everything, I thought, and I threw it all away.



‘Oh my God! Are you crazy?’

Inadvertently, my hand reached for the Glock concealed in my coat pocket. It took me a second to recognize her as the woman from the compartment. I relaxed and took my hand out of my pocket.

She didn't seem to notice the movement.

‘You will die here,’ she said. ‘This is summer in India, not California. Such a strong, hot Loo and you are sitting on the steps wearing this heavy overcoat. Shut the door and come inside!’

I stood up and pushed the door close.

She stared at me. ‘How did you get up? You didn't even touch the floor with your hand. What are you? A kung fu master?’

Flashes from the past. Ten years in Rio de Janeiro, trained to fight like a dog – or a drug lord – by the best fighters in the business.

‘I’ve had to learn,’ I said.

‘Ufff... Can’t you close the door properly? I’m getting scalded. Aren’t you human?’ Another flash. Minnesota, homeless, sleeping under a bridge, shivering in my thin shirt and torn pants as the Arctic wind cut me in shreds. The body adapts, I had learnt.

‘You adapt,’ I told her.

She stared at me for a while. ‘I like you,’ she said finally. ‘I’m sorry I reacted that way inside. Did you really go to school with Lavanya Varma at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston?’

MIT. Placid, innocent, the lull before the angry storms that hadn’t stopped raging since.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I replied.

She looked curiously at me. ‘How did you lose your arm?’

Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The most dismal time of my life. Not because I hadn’t seen worse after, but because I was young then. I was twenty-two. I was invincible. I wasn’t supposed to get hurt. Once again, I felt that hollow, empty feeling in the pit of my stomach when I recalled the gangrene that ate up my hand.

‘You ask too many questions,’ I told her.

She laughed, the open, honest laughter of someone who has never known loss.

‘What to do? I am the cliché of a bored housewife.’ She smiled petulantly, no longer compelled to play the model parent now that her kid was tucked in for the night. ‘I let go my job after Raja was born. My husband travels all the time, but he still doesn’t make any money.’

Strangers on a train, I thought. She was desperate to reveal herself to any willing ear and drop every mask, secure in the knowledge that there would never be a next time.

She waited with an expectant look on her face, as if wishing me to ask questions, to probe, or even to justify myself.

I didn’t say a word. Don’t ask, don’t judge, just accept – the first lesson I had learnt in the monastery. Eight years wasted; no monk could have walked farther away from the Buddha’s path than I had.

‘Sometimes I feel caged by my circumstances,’ she continued.

I shuddered as I recalled the small, dark cage where I had counted seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years, chained to the wall.

‘It’s getting late,’ I said.

She looked disappointed as I began to shuffle away from the train door.

‘Stay for a while. What’s early? What’s late? Do you have any work tomorrow in Delhi?’ She looked at me, half contemptuous, half teasing. *What work could someone like you have that can’t wait?*

‘Tomorrow is important,’ I said with a mirthless smile as I limped my way back to the compartment. ‘A matter of life and death.’



Another sleepless night staring into the darkness. I felt the train rumble beneath me, its motion elegant and rhythmic, a mockery of my own irregular journey. I had been running for twenty-five years, yet I was behind where I started. I closed my eyes and waited.

‘Are you asleep?’

She was back in the compartment. A tall woman, the top of her head almost reached the upper berth where I lay, and her hair brushed lightly against my face. A sweet fragrance filled the air. A familiar fragrance, a whiff of patchouli and sandalwood.

Lara.

Her memory struck me with a crushing, almost physical force. A dull pain seemed to pass from my scrotum to the inside of my stomach.

‘You are awake,’ the woman whispered.

She bent down, possibly to check if her son was still asleep. Seemingly reassured, she looked up at me again.

‘You aren’t sleeping. Do you want to talk for a bit?’ she asked.

I wished for her sake that loneliness would be the most serious problem she ever faced in her life.

‘It’s late,’ I repeated.

‘Not that late,’ she answered.

‘It’s 2:20 a.m. Isn’t that late for you?’

She checked her watch quickly and looked at me, a surprised expression in her narrowed eyes. ‘2:21,’ she said. ‘How did you know the time? You don’t wear a watch, you don’t have a cellphone, you... you don’t even have a bag.’

I didn’t say anything. I had counted every second in the years spent in captivity; old habits die hard.

‘You don’t even have a bag,’ she repeated slowly. ‘How can anyone travel from Delhi to Bombay without a bag?’

‘Look,’ I said. ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but I really need to sleep.’

I turned on my side and stared unblinking into the darkness. Forgive me, I said silently to her, but every word you say seems to bury me in an avalanche of regret – and after all these years, I have lost the will to claw my way out again.



The train arrived on time at the New Delhi railway station the next day, and I searched for the handler among the hundreds of bewildered travellers, deformed beggars and smiling urchins. I had no idea what he looked like but I spotted him at once. He looked as I had expected him to look: short, squat, inconspicuous, of indeterminate ethnicity – as likely to be South American as Indian. He blended into the crowd easily; his eyes, intent and sharp, took in everything like a chameleon ready to pounce on his prey. He was trained by the best, and I knew that beneath his bulky, baggy shirt lay hard, taut muscles trained in advanced hand-to-hand combat and sharp shooting. He spotted me simultaneously and raised his left eyebrow. I responded to his gesture and walked up to him.

‘Good journey,’ he said, more an assertion than a question.

In our world, any journey you came back from alive was a good journey. Expertly, he guided me through the crowds. A cut here, a turn there and we were out of the station and into the waiting car. The car, nondescript from the outside, was fitted with all the equipment an operative needs to perform successfully. He rolled up the dividing screen between the driver and us, made

a quick phone call in an unknown language from the phone affixed to the door, punched a few keys into his custom palm pilot, and we were on our way.

‘You’ve played before?’ he asked, his voice raspy, guttural and laboured.

I looked at his neck closely and spotted the wound. The bullet had probably punctured his lungs.

I shook my head.

‘It’s just like in the movies, except there is no need for drama,’ he said. ‘Don’t put on a performance. Just take the gun when it’s your turn, pull the trigger and pass it back.’

I nodded.

‘No drama,’ he repeated. ‘They’ve paid to see blood, they get blood. Nothing more, nothing less. This isn’t a circus.’

‘Okay,’ I said, glancing out the window to see roads and highways, large, cold buildings, faceless cars and the absence of shantytowns under the bridges. Twenty-five years, I reminded myself, things change.

‘Delhi has changed,’ I said.

He didn’t reply. Small talk wasn’t a part of his job description.

‘Two million rupees,’ he said after a while.

‘What?’

‘The stakes,’ he said. ‘You take half a million, those who bet on you double their money; we take the remaining.’

‘If I win, that is. If I lose, I get nothing except a bullet through my head.’

He shrugged. Life is tough, get over it.

They would pick up the money either way, I thought, though I suspected that the game was organized less for money and more for the entertainment of important clients – a morbid modern-day joust.

‘The Donos says you are the first man he has met who is genuinely unafraid to die,’ said the handler. ‘Two million rupees isn’t a joke in India. Do you know why the stakes are so high?’

I didn’t know, nor did I care.

‘Indians seem almost as afraid to die as Americans and Europeans. Elsewhere in south-east Asia – Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, even Hong Kong – it’s easy to organize. Here, we can’t

find two people we can trust to play the game till the end. Every time, one or both of them chickens out after the first shot, or they shiver so much that they can't even hold the revolver straight, or else they cry like babies. It's embarrassing. Why are Indians so afraid to die?' he asked rhetorically.

'Family ties, perhaps,' I said disinterestedly.

I didn't know. I didn't care. I had no ties in India or, for that matter, anywhere else. I was better dead than alive, and would have done the honour myself except for my irrational belief that suicide was morally wrong, a direct violation of the laws that the Buddha had taught me. Or maybe I was just a yellow hypocrite. I neither knew nor trusted myself any more.

'This time is going to be different, I know,' he said, studying me closely. 'Your eyes are steady.'

I didn't say anything. Blowing your brains out for money was cowardice, not courage.

'The other man is also a great find. He is dying of cancer but looks as healthy as an ox. It wouldn't work if he looked as if he were about to die.'

I didn't want to think about my opponent. It was best that he remained nameless and faceless.

'How's business?' I asked instead.

The thick muscles in his neck tightened. 'There are a lot of gang wars, especially with the big cartels from Colombia and Russia stepping in to get a piece of the action. I lost two men this month. You ran Marco's operations in India?'

I shook my head. 'I was with him in Brazil.'

'How did you get there? I heard you went to MIT or Harvard or somewhere. You don't meet too many of them in our line of work,' he said, his blank eyes showing a slight flicker of interest.

'Long story,' I said dismissively.

He shrugged. Whatever, your hell.

The car stopped in front of a furniture showroom on a busy street.

'Here?' I asked. It seemed an unlikely location for this diabolical duel. But where was I expecting him to take me anyway? India Gate or the Rashtrapati Bhavan, perhaps?

I followed him quietly as he scanned the road with a practised eye and made his way through the smoked glass doors to enter the main floor, which was filled with sparkling new cane furniture. The merchants in the showroom stood to attention. He ignored them and walked to the

back of the shop. We went down a flight of stairs into a dark, stale basement where a small door opened into a surprisingly large, bare room with a wooden table in the centre and a chair on either side.

A man sat on one of the chairs, staring blankly at the light bulb above him, one of the two bulbs that lit the room.

‘This is Dayaram, your opponent,’ said the handler.

He looked about sixty, six foot plus, solidly built, with just a touch of grey in his thick black hair. The handler was right. God knows I had seen more dying men than anyone should see in a lifetime, and he didn’t look like one. A little pale perhaps, but he might soon be blowing a hole through his temple, something that could make even the best of men lose colour. Dayaram got up from his chair and greeted me warmly.

‘Nikhil,’ I said, shaking his hand.

Or Jet. Or Monk Namche. Or Coke Buddha. Or Nick. Different aliases for each phase of my life. Take your pick, none had worked.

‘I was worried they wouldn’t be able to find an opponent,’ Daya said in chaste Hindi. ‘Thank you for doing this, sahib.’

I smiled slightly. He was thanking a man he was about to kill, or would be killed by in a few minutes. I liked him at once.

‘You have your choice of revolvers, but you both have to use the same one of course,’ said the handler, impatient to begin. ‘Should I toss a coin to choose who picks? We need to hurry before the audience starts coming in.’

An array of revolvers lay on the table – .17 Remington, .416 Barrett, .25 WSSM, .35 Remington, .357 Magnum, .30 Carbine. It had been a while but I recognized all of them, I realized with some measure of pride.

‘No need,’ I said. ‘He can pick.’

Dayaram looked bewildered at the range of options, just as I had been the first time Marco asked me to pick.

‘Just pick the one that feels most comfortable in your hand. All of them are equally effective,’ I said gently. ‘Aiming right is more important.’

The handler seemed to like the advice. He picked up the Smith.

‘You need to point here,’ he said, placing the gun against his temple. ‘Just move the barrel around a bit, like this, until you feel the slight bump, then press the trigger. Don’t point anywhere else on the head. It will be slow and painful for you – and for us. Too much blood, too messy, and you know of course that going to a hospital isn’t an option.’

To his credit, Dayaram seemed unfazed at the prospect of ending up in bits of bone and blood in a few minutes. He picked up the revolvers one by one, fingering each one gingerly, and finally chose the .35 Remington.

‘Good choice,’ I said approvingly. ‘Let me unload the cartridges so you can practise.’

I took the pistol, unfastened the lock, removed the cartridges, and gave it back to him.

The handler looked at me appreciatively. I was quick despite my arm. We had obviously been trained in the same school.

‘Can you help him out a bit?’ the handler said. ‘I need to check on a few other things. People should be arriving any moment now.’

He walked towards the door.



By the time Daya found the bump on the temple, he was sweating profusely, his hands clammy and unable to get a firm grip on the barrel. He looked down at himself in disgust.

‘Don’t worry,’ I told him. ‘You aren’t scared. It’s the heat in the room.’

He looked at me gratefully.

‘They said you are from a big college like IIT, sahib,’ Daya said, once he had practised a few times with a firmer grip. ‘Is that true?’

I winced. My absent arm began to hurt again, the same throbbing, phantom pain that had plagued me for years now.

‘MIT,’ I replied shortly. ‘It’s outside India. I was there a long time ago, but it doesn’t matter now.’

‘I am honoured to do this with you, sahib.’

‘Likewise,’ I said.

‘But I am no IIT graduate. I’m just a naukhar in a big man’s house. Now that I am dying, who is going to take care of my family? This money will be like a lottery for us if I win. If I lose, nothing lost, I’m dying anyway.’ His face darkened. ‘They assured me that they will give the money immediately if I win – can I trust them?’

I thought of Marco in the Jocinha favela of Rio de Janeiro, who had almost given up his life for me; good money thrown after bad.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You can trust them with your life.’



The audience, all of them men, began to stream in and the small, airless room turned stuffier and sweatier. They eyed Daya and me curiously as they gathered around the table, sweat glistening on their temples, starched shirts darkened from being in an unsavoury part of town, their faces flushed, either from the stifling Delhi summer or with barely contained excitement.

That could have been me, I thought suddenly as I looked at the smartly-dressed, wealthy looking men. A few different turns and I could have been strolling in here on my way to a Bernard Shaw adaptation or a Beethoven rendition. But the old, naive me probably wouldn’t have believed that such a game could take place in Delhi – or anywhere outside Hollywood. Now, nothing surprised me. I had seen the best of human nature and the worst of it. I believed in the evil of man as much as I trusted in the good.

A dark, well-dressed young man bumped against my chair. I looked up at him. Reflexively, he raised his right foot and rubbed it against his left pant sleeve. Polishing his shoes, I thought. What would he tell his young wife when he got back home? *Honey, I forgot the onions because I bet fifty thousand rupees on someone blowing his brains out.* What kind of emptiness made these men come here? How could you be so insulated from death that you had to seek it out? Our eyes met. I saw the gleam in his eyes and averted mine so he wouldn’t see the pity in them.



The handler walked up to the table once the fifty-odd men in the audience had huddled around us.

‘Thank you for being here,’ he mumbled, looking uncomfortable at having to speak.

The room fell silent as the suits moved closer, breathing down hard on our necks, a few spare drops of sweat splashing onto the table.

‘Move back, please,’ said the handler authoritatively.

This was the kind of direction he was used to giving. The men complied immediately and shuffled back a few steps.

‘As you know, we have been trying to arrange this for a while,’ the handler continued. ‘Finally, I present before you two fearless men.’

A smattering of applause broke out and seemed to unnerve the handler. The rest of his words came out in a jumbled heap. ‘The rules are simple. The revolver has six rounds, but only one bullet. The other five are blanks. One shoots at himself, passes the gun to the other who shoots at himself, and so on, until one of them falls. Someone could die on the first shot or on the last shot. But one of them *will* die tonight. Those who bet on the winner will have their money doubled. I will rotate the barrel after every turn. Any questions?’

There seemed to be none.

‘Let’s begin the game. I will rotate the revolver to choose who goes first,’ he said, obviously relieved at being done with the talking. He placed the revolver on the table.

‘Do you want to call or spin?’ he asked Dayaram.

Dayaram’s hands began to tremble as he mumbled something. The reality had finally sunk in, I thought, he was probably thinking of the family he would never see again.

The handler looked disgusted. ‘Are you going to call or spin?’ he repeated impatiently.

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘We don’t need the toss. I’ll go first.’

A hush fell upon the room.

‘Are you okay with that?’ the handler asked Dayaram.

He nodded and looked at me gratefully. ‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered.

I shook my head dismissively. ‘It doesn’t matter. You will be fine.’

Every eye followed me hungrily as I picked up the revolver. I positioned the gun against my temple. They say your entire life flashes before your eyes when you are about to die. But no such thing happened to me, perhaps because I was no stranger to death, perhaps because my entire life had been a series of mistakes that I didn’t care to recall in my last moments alive. As I

placed the pistol to my temple and cocked the barrel, all I thought of was that beautiful garden where I had sat twenty-five years ago. When I placed my finger on the trigger, I swear I heard Sam laughing. And what was that sudden sweet fragrance? April cherry blossoms in Boston. The dark, cheerless room suddenly seemed to fill with sunlight and hope.