



**The Satanic
Verses**
**Salman
Rushdie**

'A masterpiece' *Sunday Times*

VINTAGE

THE SATANIC VERSES

by Salman Rushdie

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For Marianne

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Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is . . . without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.

Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil*

I

The Angel Gibreel

1

"To be born again," sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, "first you have to die. Hoji! Hoji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Taka-thun! How to ever smile again, if first you won't cry? How to win the darling's love, mister, without a sigh? Baba, if you want to get born again . . ." Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky.

"I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you," and thusly and so beneath a moon of alabaster until a loud cry crossed the night, "To the devil with your tunes," the words hanging crystalline in the iced white night, "in the movies you only mimed to playback singers, so spare me these infernal noises now."

Gibreel, the tuneless soloist, had been cavorting in moonlight as he sang his impromptu gazal, swimming in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching

himself into a ball, spreadeagling himself against the almostinfinity of the almost-dawn, adopting heraldic postures, rampant, couchant, pitting levity against gravity. Now he rolled happily towards the sardonic voice. "Ohé, Salad baba, it's you, too good. What-ho, old Chumch." At which the other, a fastidious shadow falling headfirst in a grey suit with all the jacket buttons done up, arms by his sides, taking for granted the improbability of the bowler hat on his head, pulled a nickname-hater's face. "Hey, Spoono," Gibreel yelled, eliciting a second inverted wince, "Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won't know what hit them. Meteor or lightning or vengeance of God. Out of thin air, baby. _Dharrraamm!_ Wham, na? What an entrance, yaar. I swear: splat."

Out of thin air: a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time . . . the jumbo jet _Bostan_, Flight AI-420, blew apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked blinked nodded in the night. While at Himalayan height a brief and premature sun burst into the powdery January air, a blip vanished from radar screens, and the thin air was full of bodies, descending from the Everest of the catastrophe to the milky paleness of the sea.

Who am I?

Who else is there?

The aircraft cracked in half, a seed-pod giving up its spores, an egg yielding its mystery. Two actors, prancing Gibreel and buttony, pursed Mr. Saladin Chamcha, fell like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar. Above, behind, below them in the void there hung reclining seats, stereophonic headsets, drinks trolleys, motion discomfort receptacles, disembarkation cards, duty-free video games, braided caps, paper cups, blankets, oxygen masks. Also -- for there had been more than a few migrants aboard, yes, quite a quantity of wives who had been grilled by reasonable, doing-their-job officials about the length of and distinguishing moles upon their husbands' genitalia, a sufficiency of children upon whose legitimacy the British Government had cast its everreasonable doubts -- mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mothertongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished

futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, _land_, _belonging_, _home_. Knocked a little silly by the blast, Gibreel and Saladin plummeted like bundles dropped by some carelessly open-beaked stork, and because Chamcha was going down head first, in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal, he commenced to feel a low irritation at the other's refusal to fall in plain fashion. Saladin nosedived while Farishta embraced air, hugging it with his arms and legs, a flailing, overwrought actor without techniques of restraint. Below, cloud-covered, awaiting their entrance, the slow congealed currents of the English Sleeve, the appointed zone of their watery reincarnation.

"O, my shoes are Japanese," Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation, "These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that." The clouds were bubbling up towards them, and perhaps it was on account of that great mystification of cumulus and cumulonimbus, the mighty rolling thunderheads standing like hammers in the dawn, or perhaps it was the singing (the one busy performing, the other booing the performance), or their blast--delirium that spared them full foreknowledge of the imminent . . . but for whatever reason, the two men, Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began.

Mutation?

Yessir, but not random. Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic, -- because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible -- wayupthere, at any rate, changes took place in delirious actors that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr. Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.

What characteristics which? Slow down; you think Creation happens in a rush? So then, neither does revelation . . . take a look at the pair of them. Notice anything unusual? Just two brown men, falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun, is that it?

That's not it. Listen:

Mr. Saladin Chamcha, appalled by the noises emanating from Gibreel Farishta's mouth, fought back with verses of his own. What Farishta heard wafting across the improbable night sky was an old song, too, lyrics by Mr. James Thomson, seventeenthundred to seventeen-fortyeight. ". . . at Heaven's command," Chamcha carolled through lips turned jingoistically redwhiteblue by the cold, "arooooose from out the aaaazure main." Farishta, horrified, sang louder and louder of Japanese shoes, Russian hats, inviolately subcontinental hearts, but could not still Saladin's wild recital: "And guardian aaaaangels sung the strain."

Let's face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let's face this, too: they did.

Downdown they hurtled, and the winter cold frosting their eyelashes and threatening to freeze their hearts was on the point of waking them from their delirious daydream, they were about to become aware of the miracle of the singing, the rain of limbs and babies of which they were a part, and the terror of the destiny rushing at them from below, when they hit, were drenched and instantly iced by, the degree-zero boiling of the clouds.

They were in what appeared to be a long, vertical tunnel. Chamcha, prim, rigid, and still upside-down, saw Gibreel Farishta in his purple bush-shirt come swimming towards him across that cloud-walled funnel, and would have shouted, "Keep away, get away from me," except that something prevented him, the beginning of a little fluttery screamy thing in his intestines, so instead of uttering words of rejection he opened his arms and Farishta swam into them until they were embracing head-to-tail, and the force of their collision sent them tumbling end over end, performing their geminate cartwheels all the way down and along the hole that went to Wonderland; while pushing their way out of the white came a succession of cloudforms, ceaselessly metamorphosing, gods into bulls, women into spiders, men into wolves. Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon them, gigantic flowers with human breasts dangling from fleshy stalks, winged cats, centaurs, and Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head

nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long, patrician neck.

This person had, however, no time for such "high falutions"; was, indeed, incapable of faluting at all; having just seen, emerging from the swirl of cloud, the figure of a glamorous woman of a certain age, wearing a brocade sari in green and gold, with a diamond in her nose and lacquer defending her high-coiled hair against the pressure of the wind at these altitudes, as she sat, equably, upon a flying carpet. "Rekha Merchant," Gibreel greeted her. "You couldn't find your way to heaven or what?" Insensitive words to speak to a dead woman! But his concussed, plummeting condition may be offered in mitigation

. . . Chamcha, clutching his legs, made an uncomprehending query: "What the hell?"

"You don't see her?" Gibreel shouted. "You don't see her goddamn Bokhara rug?"

No, no, Gibbo, her voice whispered in his ears, don't expect him to confirm. I am strictly for your eyes only, maybe you are going crazy, what do you think, you namaqool, you piece of pig excrement, my love. With death comes honesty, my beloved, so I can call you by your true names.

Cloudy Rekha murmured sour nothings, but Gibreel cried again to Chamcha: "Spoon? You see her or you don't?"

Saladin Chamcha saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing. Gibreel faced her alone. "You shouldn't have done it," he admonished her. "No, sir. A sin. A suchmuch thing."

O, you can lecture me now, she laughed. You are the one with the high moral tone, that's a good one. It was you who left me, her voice reminded his ear, seeming to nibble at the lobe. It was you, O moon of my delight, who hid behind a cloud. And I in darkness, blinded, lost, for love.

He became afraid. "What do you want? No, don't tell, just go."

When you were sick I could not see you, in case of scandal, you knew I could not, that I stayed away for your sake, but afterwards you punished, you used it as your excuse to leave, your cloud to hide behind. That, and also her, the icewoman. Bastard. Now that I am dead I have forgotten how to forgive. I curse you, my Gibreel, may your life be hell. Hell, because that's where you sent me, damn you, where you came from, devil, where

you're going, sucker, enjoy the bloody dip. Rekha's curse; and after that, verses in a language he did not understand, all harshnesses and sibillances, in which he thought he made out, but maybe not, the repeated name _Al-Lat_.

He clutched at Chamcha; they burst through the bottom of the clouds.

Speed, the sensation of speed, returned, whistling its fearful note. The roof of cloud fled upwards, the water-floor zoomed closer, their eyes opened. A scream, that same scream that had fluttered in his guts when Gibreel swam across the sky, burst from Chamcha's lips; a shaft of sunlight pierced his open mouth and set it free. But they had fallen through the transformations of the clouds, Chamcha and Farishta, and there was a fluidity, an indistinctness, at the edges of them, and as the sunlight hit Chamcha it released more than noise:

"Fly," Chamcha shrieked at Gibreel. "Start flying, now." And added, without knowing its source, the second command: "And sing."

How does newness come into the world? How is it born?

Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?

How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?

Is birth always a fall?

Do angels have wings? Can men fly?

When Mr. Saladin Chamcha fell out of the clouds over the English Channel he felt his heart being gripped by a force so implacable that he understood it was impossible for him to die. Afterwards, when his feet were once more firmly planted on the ground, he would begin to doubt this, to ascribe the implausibilities of his transit to the scrambling of his perceptions by the blast, and to attribute his survival, his and Gibreel's, to blind, dumb luck. But at the time he had no doubt; what had taken him over was the will to live, unadulterated, irresistible, pure, and the first thing it did was to inform him that it wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that, and he found himself surrendering to it, yes, go on, as if he were a bystander in his own mind, in his own body, because it began in the very centre of his body and spread outwards, turning his blood to iron, changing

his flesh to steel, except that it also felt like a fist that enveloped him from outside, holding him in a way that was both unbearably tight and intolerably gentle; until finally it had conquered him totally and could work his mouth, his fingers, whatever it chose, and once it was sure of its dominion it spread outward from his body and grabbed Gibreel Farishta by the balls.

"Fly," it commanded Gibreel. "Sing."

Chamcha held on to Gibreel while the other began, slowly at first and then with increasing rapidity and force, to flap his arms. Harder and harder he flapped, and as he flapped a song burst out of him, and like the song of the spectre of Rekha Merchant it was sung in a language he did not know to a tune he had never heard. Gibreel never repudiated the miracle; unlike Chamcha, who tried to reason it out of existence, he never stopped saying that the gazal had been celestial, that without the song the flapping would have been for nothing, and without the flapping it was a sure thing that they would have hit the waves like rocks or what and simply burst into pieces on making contact with the taut drum of the sea. Whereas instead they began to slow down. The more emphatically Gibreel flapped and sang, sang and flapped, the more pronounced the deceleration, until finally the two of them were floating down to the Channel like scraps of paper in a breeze.

They were the only survivors of the wreck, the only ones who fell from _Bostan_ and lived. They were found washed up on a beach. The more voluble of the two, the one in the purple shirt, swore in his wild ramblings that they had walked upon the water, that the waves had borne them gently in to shore; but the other, to whose head a soggy bowler hat clung as if by magic, denied this. "God, we were lucky," he said. "How lucky can you get?"

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and -potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type -- angelic, satanic -- was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?

These were the first words Gibreel Farishta said when he awoke on the snowbound English beach with the improbability of a starfish by his ear: "Born again, Spoono, you and me. Happy birthday, mister; happy birthday to you."

Whereupon Saladin Chamcha coughed, spluttered, opened his eyes, and, as befitted a new-born babe, burst into foolish tears.

2

Reincarnation was always a big topic with Gibreel, for fifteen years the biggest star in the history of the Indian movies, even before he "miraculously" defeated the Phantom Bug that everyone had begun to believe would terminate his contracts. So maybe someone should have been able to forecast, only nobody did, that when he was up and about again he would sotospeak succeed where the germs had failed and walk out of his old life forever within a week of his fortieth birthday, vanishing, poof!, like a trick, into thin air.

The first people to notice his absence were the four members of his filmstudio wheelchair-team. Long before his illness he had formed the habit of being transported from set to set on the great D. W. Rama lot by this group of speedy, trusted athletes, because a man who makes up to eleven movies "sy-multaneous" needs to conserve his energies. Guided by a complex coding system of slashes, circles and dots which Gibreel remembered from his childhood among the fabled lunch-runners of Bombay (of which more later), the chair-men zoomed him from role to role, delivering him as punctually and unerringly as once his father had delivered lunch. And after each take Gibreel would skip back into the chair and be navigated at high speed towards the next set, to be recostumed, made up and handed his lines. "A career in the Bombay talkies," he told his loyal crew, "is more like a wheelchair race with onetwo pit stops along the route." After the illness, the Ghostly Germ, the Mystery Malaise, the Bug, he had returned to work, easing himself in, only seven pictures at a time . . . and then, justlikethat, he wasn't there. The wheelchair stood empty among the silenced sound-stages; his absence revealed the tawdry shamming of the sets. Wheelchairmen, one to four, made excuses for the missing star when movie executives descended upon them in wrath: Ji, he must be sick, he has always been famous for his punctual, no, why to criticize, maharaj, great artists must from time to time be permitted their temperament, na, and for