

DIVYANK JAIN



Out of the Ring

16 Pages Publisher

DIVYANK JAIN IS A 26 YEARS OLD WRITER BASED IN UDAIPUR, INDIA.

ALTHOUGH HE IS A COMMERCE TEACHER, HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN PASSIONATE ABOUT LITERATURE AND WRITING.

HIS WORK APPEARED IN ANTHOLOGIES AND MAGAZINES SUCH AS NOTIONS OF LIVING, NOTIONS OF HEALING, CHARIOTS OF REBELLION, RADIATE LIT. JOURNAL, LIGHTSTREAM MAGAZINE, TOGETHER MAGAZINE, ACTIVE MUSE, STAR GAZETTE MAGAZINE, FIREFLY REVIEW, YAWP JOURNAL, ARC JOURNAL, RHODORA MAGAZINE, FLARE JOURNAL.

CURRENTLY HE IS WORKING ON HIS DEBUT NOVELLA.

Out of the Ring is first printed in december 2022 as a gift for Kermesse contributors and patreons.

16 Pages Publisher

December 2022

Jack turned the handle of the unlocked door of his rented house twice in order to open it. He pushed it in, the bell over his head clanked. Cheryl came out. Jack saw her walking out of the kitchen toward him even though he was walking in with his eyes glued to the floor.

Outside, it was almost dark and cool, but the floor inside was shining from the evening wiping, the dim light was reflecting in it, and inside it was warmer. The TV was going on in his bedroom, playing some old, melodious songs from the 80s. Once Jack too liked listening to them while driving alone or sometimes with his wife. He could recall all of those carefree days of his life in a matter of a second. Cheryl came closer; he handed over his gym bag and half-filled water bottle to her and, while he bent low to untie his ankle-high sports shoes, he sensed her eyes glaring at his trembling hands. As he stood upright, he put them into his pockets.

"How was it?" Cheryl asked.

"Yeah!" Jack put on the slippers, still staring down, he said, "It wasn't bad."

His face was all cut up by the recent fights he had been through. The left side of his jaw was puffed up, and a brown bandage from his left cheekbone to the edge of his eye had covered the dull, purple skin.

Jack embraced his wife, as though performing a mundane everyday ritual. He always considered himself too tall to give Cheryl a perfect hug. She kissed him on his chest and held her hands around his hips for a while. After they had parted, she took his hands in hers for a closer examination, and asked,

"Oh god. Are there more injuries, darling?"

"Not much," Jack replied, looking away.

Hands tucked still in the pockets, Jack walked in with heavy steps, and his wife followed. The gym bag was hanging from

her shoulder and the water bottle was moving back and forth with her hand. She walked smoothly to the slow rhythm of the 80's music and put them on the table. Jack stretched his back sideways a little, as if he was entering the ring again, before he sat down and settled on the couch; his eyes closed, his head back on the couch. Cheryl stood in front of him, observing.

"Jack? How was the fight really?" She sat down close beside him.

"He wasn't quick."

"Thank God! I prayed for that, you know. Did you win, Jack?"

"Of course."

"Oh, my sweetness!" She rubbed her delicate palm on his tough shoulder. "I already knew it. God always listens to me. I hope you too are praying after winning each game."

"Then pray, so that they pay for each game I win."

"Don't think about it. You are going to win this tournament, dear. I know."

Jack said nothing and kept his eyes closed and face up to the ceiling. He spread out his legs, his body seemed in the pursuit of comfort though his left foot tapping on the floor. As if he was pretending to be tired and sleepy but one could see his restless eyes moving under the darkened eyelids.

"Should I make you a coffee?" she asked, rubbing on his shoulder.

"No."

"Really, Jack?"

"Sure."

"But you love coffee at this time, don't you? and you said it's good for the muscle-ache."

"I am fine."

"But you said, things must happen at the right time..."

"Please, Cheryl." Jack grabbed her hand off his shoulder and put it down on the couch. "I don't really feel like having a coffee right now. And please turn that TV off. I hate these bloody, old songs."

Cheryl waited for a moment, then went inside to switch off the TV. It got quiet, then Jack heard the wind-chimes tinkling gently outside, and beyond, the leaves made a faint noise. Cheryl shuffled to the kitchen to check on something and came back, rubbed her hands on the apron. She found her tired husband sitting there in the same slack position.

"Jack?" she asked.

"What?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" She was somewhat curious and perplexed all together.

"I'll change later. It's fine." He talked to her with his eyes closed. Cheryl said, "If you are hungry, we can have dinner. It's ready. We also got a cake too. I made it myself. Don't ask me what day is today." She said, laughing.

As Jack opened his eyes, Cheryl moved her gaze away from his aching face to the clay pot hanging outside of the window. In that pot used to be a little Basil plant, but it withered away last winter and couldn't revive. Then her eyes came back to him with a forcefully wide smile. One could guess she wanted to say something. Jack didn't ask her anything, instead, he looked down at his toes, and said, "Dinner! Okay, let's have it." Although he had started to say that I'm done with having damn dinner every night, but in the fear of making her more uncomfortable, he changed it in his mind before speaking.

He stood up, trudged to the dining room, and sat down on the chair, his elbows on the table, and his left foot began to tap again on the floor under the table. He was looking at the pattern of tablecloth as if a sailor caught in a storm was reading a map ruined by the sea.

Cheryl prepared the table, not turning the lights on, instead, she lit three candles, and while serving, was trying to peep into Jack's eyes as if wanting to hear something kind from him. She had brown eyes - appealing, all-day wearing eyeshadows and eyeliners that hid the fat around her eyes to some extent, and made them look calm and young - Jack had adored them but today they were scaring him to death.

Cheryl sat down near him. They started eating. She loved to eat while it was hot, but Jack started very slow. While eating the breast of the roasted chicken garnished with cooked peas, mashed potatoes and caramelised onions, strangely it was confusing for Jack to distinguish between a fork and a knife as though he was a boy of no more than five. At last, he picked up the spoon.

"It's still hot." Jack let the spoon rest beside the soup bowl and stared down at the knife while he rotated it on the table, then he started again on the chicken. He was confused about what to eat and more about whether he really needed to eat or not. They had been devouring canned food for almost two weeks but the greasy taste of the homemade chicken made no visible difference on his face. Soon there was a film on the top of the soup and, before it started to congeal completely, he began to guzzle it down in a haste. He finished with many red beads on the table-cloth between him and his bowl. Cheryl looked at his trembling hand while he drank the water. He put the glass down and found his wife's eyes studying him. They really scared him.

"What was the matter, Jack?" finally she asked.

"Sorry for messing it all up."

"Forget about this, Jack," Cheryl said. "You always talk when we eat. We talk about things. You tell me the weird stories from the gym. And mostly you talk about the food. You have always asked me to cook french style chicken. Jack, it is your favourite cuisine, and you- what's wrong with you Jack? Tell me please."

All the while she was speaking to him, Jack maintained a tough, blank, defensive look on his face. She looked down, stirred the spoon in her bowl, then said. "It scares me, Jack. You know how much I love you."

"I know it all right, and you should not take it otherwise."

"I can't help it."

"Darling! I am just not feeling well."

"You said you are fine."

"I am fine, but- " Jack shook his head and dropped it down into his cupped palms. "-I am so sorry." He stood up. "I am going out for a walk."

"Jack?" she called out, "I thought, we should drink a little red wine, at least today. And there's cake too. I forgot it. You know what day it is today?"

Not until then, Jack noticed the foil-wrapped bottle placed on the table and two glasses shining with the candle light. She continued, "Jack, It's been too long we haven't drank anything together. But, today is a different day. Could we please..." the words came out from her mouth with the hint of hesitation on both the corners of her lips. She swallowed down.

"You are kind, but I don't think I need wine," said Jack. "A little walk will be enough, I think."

He stood up and left the table. Putting on his jacket and his shoes, he came over to her and kissed her hair. Thank God! He didn't look at her face. "Take care of yourself, darling," Cheryl said, looking at his back as he walked out.

Jack, as he stepped out of the apartment, despised the damn bell over his head. Like every other antique piece that had stuffed the walls and the corners of every room in his house, it was also the choice of his wife. Cheryl loved ancient-looking things and they bought many fine copies of the originals. Jack had considered them only boring, though he had always found himself getting bored around the new things too. Old or new, he was bored all the time. He strode through the street and there, after the first left, he stopped. He took out a cigarette and lit it up and walked leisurely, puffing the smoke. He was pulling it in hard as if after this, he was to quit smoking. There was a cloud of smoke hanging over his shoulder, moving along, visible under the road lights. Every car that went by had to honk twice or thrice on his back and then they, leaning out of the window, swore at him. Jack kept strolling through the pee-stinking streets until he reached Michael's.

There, Jack sat at the only empty table by the window, thinking about the old man he had just found sitting on the bench right outside the bar. I've seen him somewhere before. He put his head down on his folded arms on the table and didn't even care to raise it for a single time, even when the waitress came to take the order. Though, he had a glance around when she came back and poured him a beer, smiling at him. Everybody knew who Jack was in his locality and they distributed a thousand pamphlets of the fight with his and his opponent's photographs printed on them, and there was also a hoarding about it at the main road, outside the street.

At the far end of the hall, there sat Adam with his three peers, all cheering and laughing. One could see Adam's busted, red face from there. Jack had knocked him out today in the ring but he didn't look defeated anymore. They saw Jack. "Look! the winner had joined the losers," raising the glass, declared Adam. "Let's celebrate in the name of our next world

champion, and me, the champion of all the losers," he said with a sarcastic tone. Everyone around him laughed. Unconcerned, Jack continued drinking. Adam, a short but bulky local bully, stood up and swaggered to him, his three friends followed, rolling up their sleeves, preparing themselves for something terrible. Adam put down his fat ass on the front chair, looking across at Jack.

"You must be celebrating here," Adam said, looking into his eyes.

"None of your business."

"We only want to pay tribute to the victor."

"Go away, Adam. Please!"

"Please? A victorious way to approach your opponent!" Adam laughed, turning his bald head toward his ugly friends.

"Not here, Adam."

"Here or there, it doesn't matter. You think you are better because you beat me in the ring?" Putting both hands on the table, Adam glared deep into his eyes, "Show me here if you are."

The ebony waitress with a tray in her hands watched them from a good distance. The other two male waiters peeped out from over her shoulders, anticipating something expensive. All of them in the hall exchanged glances, but Jack kept his eagle eyes locked with Adam's, and he stood up. Adam stood up too, rolled the sleeves of his dull, wine-stinking shirt. Jack looked past him and then at the waitress. She seemed startled by her wild thoughts. A drop of sweat rolled down from his back of neck. He looked around, studied all at once, and he backstepped.

"I am not in the mood for any row here today," he said. "Meet

me tomorrow evening in the ring, if you want to." He took his bottle off the table and went over to the bar to pay the bill. He didn't look at Adam until he was out.

Jack heard them all laughing inside and naming him, also the waitress was giggling. But, the tall, old man sitting on an outer bench simpered at him mockingly. That hurt Jack the most. The church bells were clanging while he lumbered through the street with a bottle of beer swinging in his hand, stopping and pouring it in his mouth after every few steps. Soon the bottle was emptied and he smashed it on the iron pole with a signboard suggesting a U-turn. "Fuck this city!" Jack cursed as he entered his apartment. "And this damn bell too."

The TV was on. Cheryl was watching a decent family show that could raise a little laughter every once in a while when you are too stressed or eager to laugh. As soon as Jack came into the room, she turned the TV off and inspected him from head to toe as he walked round the bed and sat down on it, still sweating and was light-headed now.

"Are you drunk?" she asked.

"No." Jack laid himself down.

"Did you fight with someone outside?"

"I am not supposed to fight out of the ring."

"Jack, listen! I want to ask you something."

"Yes, please."

"Are you worried about something? The rent, pay-cheques or something like that? Are you worried about money?"

Jack said nothing.

The wife continued, "dear, listen! Everything's gonna be al-

right. Do not worry about money and all. God has his grand finale and we will all be saved then. Don't worry about anything. We are still young and we have enough time for everything."

"Sure."

"You are not listening, darling."

"I am thinking about something else."

"Then tell it to me."

"You ought not to listen to such things, Cheryl."

"Tell me if you truly love me."

"Okay," Jack said.

Cheryl dragged herself close, put her hand on his thigh, then rubbed it gently.

"You know Peter?" Jack began, "the young boy whom I used to train lately?"

"I don't think I -"

"Anyway, he killed himself last night."

"What?"

"Yeah! They said, last night he slit open his wrist with a blade and his whole body was soaked in blood when they found him."

"Jesus Christ!" She couldn't speak for a while, then she checked her husband's eyes. "How old was he?"

"Seven years younger than me. I used to teach him in my lei-

sures."

"Jesus! Why did he do such a grave thing to himself? He must have a father or a mother or a sister or at least someone who loved him. He broke the law of God. It's not good. God will never forgive him. No one in his kingdom should commit such a hateful crime. It's unforgivable. Didn't he know? How can someone even think about killing oneself?"

"It's not that easy, Cheryl."

"It is! Life is an easy thing. God made it easy for us."

Jack sighed in disappointment. They didn't speak for a couple of minutes and their heads hung low. Meanwhile, It was the silence that came in through the curtains, crawled onto the bed and climbed up their shoulders and spoke to them in a very cruel manner. Cheryl took a deep breath.

"Anyway!" she said, staring down at Jack's hand placed on the bed. "We should pray for him." Then, she closed her eyes and opened them after a minute. "It wasn't your fault, Jack."

"I envied him all the time."

"Why?"

"He was quick and ambitious. I thought he'd join the league faster than his peers."

"We don't really know what God has decided for us. No one knows! God works very mysteriously. You must stop thinking about such things. It wasn't your fault."

"I envied him, that's troubling me."

"Have faith in god. Ask for his forgiveness if that is bothering you at least he deserves this. He must be a good kid too."

"I was jealous of him," Jack repeated, they hardly came out of his mouth, his throat was caught by something.

"Oh, my good husband. My lovely dearest one. You got a heart of gold. I am glad that you are my husband. But, please do not think about that, please."

After a pause, Jack suggested, "we must sleep now, it's late."

It wasn't a good suggestion.

"Did you take the pill?" Cheryl asked.

"I don't feel like taking anything. I am okay."

She slid herself down slowly in between his arms. "Jack, are you sure?"

"Yes, Cheryl."

She fisted on his nightshirt. Her one hand rubbed his back. "Can I do something else for you that can soothe you?"

"No, Cheryl, not today."

The wife fell asleep only after a few minutes, though Jack couldn't sleep for two hours. He was staring at the hands of the clock in front of him. He began counting the seconds to forget about everything but he noticed it was working quite opposite; it was the count he was forgetting after every four or five minutes, and he had to begin all over again. He thought about the time he had spent in the ring, counting; he thought about the time when he was young and he trained himself laboriously, counting; he thought about the month in which he quarrelled every day with his wife, counting. Then, the days when Cheryl went through the first few weeks of pregnancy. All the while, he was counting. Jack once had been ambitious and courageous exactly like Peter. No, Peter is quicker than me, he thought. He was agile enough and fearless in the ring but now he was afraid of forgetting the count. His chest swelling up. As soon as a

young, red face sweating madly with upturned lips floated ahead of his eyes in the dark, no longer could he see the clock and he forgot the count again. He sat up and rubbed his eyes with his palms.

Turning on the lamp-light, he stared at Cheryl's face, who was sleeping under his stretched out shadow, snoring a bit. Her mouth was open, her clean hands with rounded fingers were on her breasts. He looked down at his own hands which were rough, full of cuts and cracks. He touched his chest, felt the heart beating through the layer of the nightshirt. Before getting up, he took heavy breath-ins twice as if bracing himself up for a fight and went to the kitchen, drank some water. He felt cold in his lungs. His hand was shaking while drinking, he noticed.

In the hallway, he stretched his legs from the hips, saw his reflection in the window glass. The wind was banging the bell and the branches were snapping outside, and the twinkling of wind-chimes created music, an unpleasant music. Jack went closer, there was a shadow moving outside. Apparently, a tall, old man with a lean, strong physique was strolling in front of his house in such weather. Jack couldn't see his face precisely but he knew by heart that he was the same old man he saw outside the bar. He drew the curtains shut.

Immediately, he went to the bathroom panting as if he had just finished a fight, washed his face in the sink, looked at himself in the mirror and then closed his eyes and looked again; a fleshless bony structure full of scars. There, as he recalled Peter again, he saw the glimpse of his own shaking hand. He thought of pills! In the chest, there was a container - 'A Pill Every Night Before Sleeping' was written on the sticker attached. Jack took out six pills, bright red against the pinkish white of his palm, he clenched them hard in his fist. He could hear his wife snoring in the bedroom. He saw his face in the mirror again. He hated it. He put all the pills back into the container except one. It was hard.

He swallowed it down with water. Coming out, in the living room, he looked at the calendar gifted by his gym on the occa-

sion of new year which was hanging behind the door. He ran his finger through the bygone dates of the month, and he stopped. Today was the last day of this tedious month. The last day of fucking November! He repeated it to himself. The last day of...? Jack ran back to his room. Nervous, he stopped in the doorway and pushed the gate slowly.

"Cheryl!?" He was startled when he found his wife sitting in the bed. Her long locks of hair scattered all over her shoulders.

"Where have you been?" Her eyes were sleepy.

"Just went to drink water, nothing else."

"Show me your pockets."

"I am not doing that, again, believe me. I won't." He stepped forward and pulled his pockets out to prove himself.

"Oh, Jack... I trust you," she spoke in a low tone. "You won't believe what I have seen. It was the worst nightmare of my life."

"What did you see?"

"It's gone, Jack." She pulled him closer and hugged him tightly. Her lips pressed against his stomach. "Stay close to me."

It was warm and when they lay down in bed in each other's arms, Jack said, "Sorry Cheryl. I am truly sorry."

"For what?" she asked.

"You know what it is. How could I forget it? I am so stupid."

"Oh, Jack. Let's not talk about it, it's gone."

"Yeah, it's gone."

JACK TURNED THE HANDLE OF THE UNLOCKED DOOR OF HIS RENTED HOUSE TWICE IN ORDER TO OPEN IT. HE PUSHED IT IN, THE BELL OVER HIS HEAD CLANKED. CHERYL CAME OUT. JACK SAW HER WALKING OUT OF THE KITCHEN TOWARD HIM EVEN THOUGH HE WAS WALKING IN WITH HIS EYES GLUED TO THE FLOOR.

DIVYANK JAIN WRITE A PSYCHOLOGICAL FICTION REVOLVING AROUND A BOXER'S LIFE OUTSIDE OF THE RING.