

GODS OF WILLOW

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GODS OF WILLOW

A Coming of Age Innings

a novel



AMRISH KUMAR


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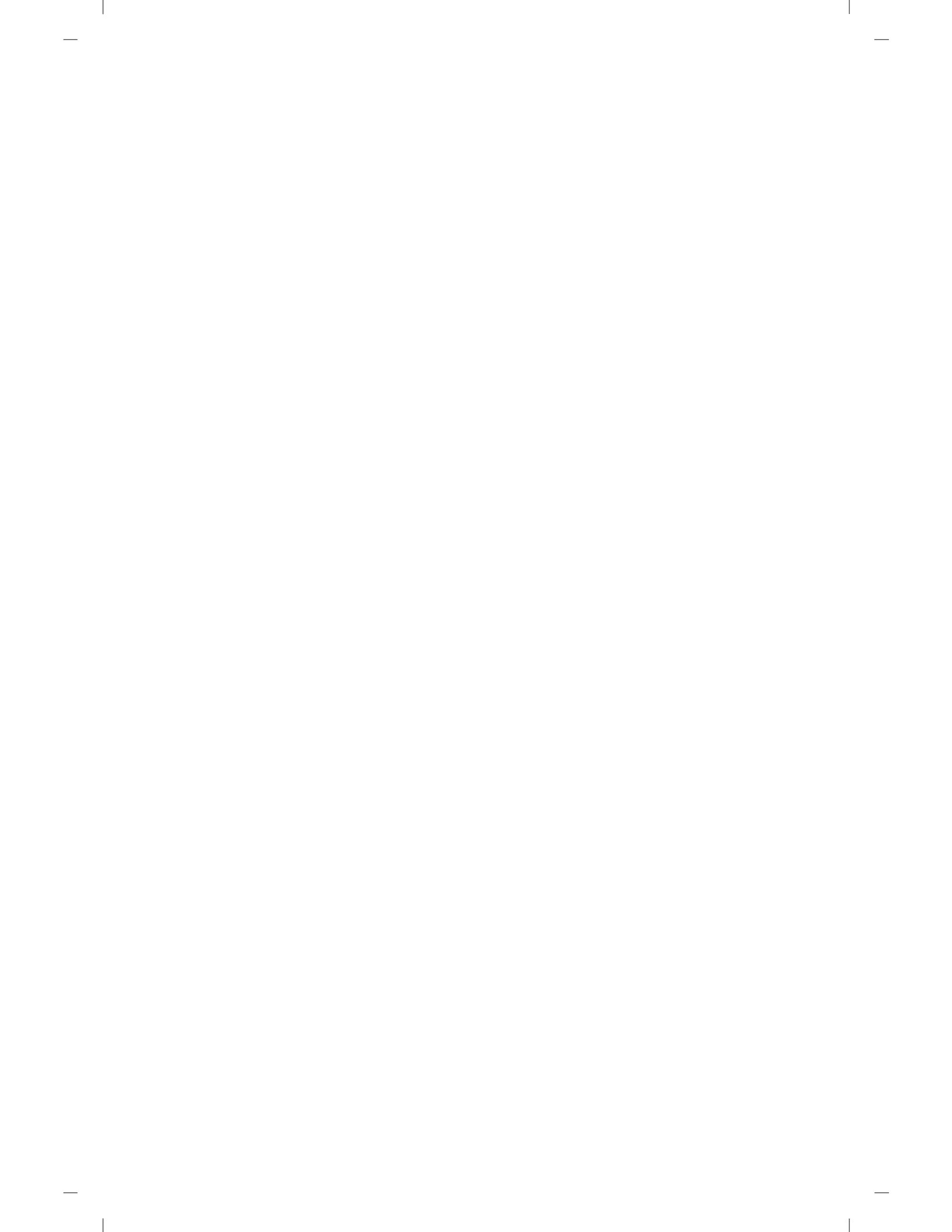


*To the women in my life, who assured me that they knew better.
Mother, aunts, cousins and friends. They encouraged me to
keep writing and helped regularly check my own instincts
(or foolishness as they put it).*

*To the men in my life, who assured me that I didn't know what
I was doing. Father, brothers, lads and uncles. They encouraged
me by finding amusement in all my life's trivialities and endeavours.*

Come to think of it, it's amazing this thing got written.





BOOK I



CHAPTER ONE

9 March 1998

He woke to the piercing urgency of an alarm clock. The clattering instrument was loud at any time of day, but early mornings' velvety consciousness made its trill almost unbearable.

Making matters worse, his bed had formed the perfect alchemy of comfort. Pillow pushed against the headboard just right, coverings curled around contours and the mattress deliciously cocooned his weight.

A clumsy arm flew out from under the blanket, flailing at the offending object. He questioned the need for torturing himself at this ungodly hour.

A quick calculation ensued – what if he didn't get out of bed?

But in the end, it was hopeless. Just like every other morning, the fog cleared, and he remembered the cause. The reason he would always sling his legs over the side and sit upright.

He hated this moment of inevitability. His obsession with it all.

Obsession is a clumsy, judgmental word. If you are obsessed with something, there is a flaw in your personality; you are hankering to fill a void. You should be counselled, you should look

towards meditation, you should do yoga, you should be speaking to your aunty who smoked pot as a twenty-something-year-old. But bravo for acknowledging and accepting your deep flaws. Well done for owning your own limitations and reaching out for acceptance. Friends, people who know your friends, family, extended family and really anyone who knows you exist, now knows that you are flawed. You can be judged with a certification. You and your obsession! Honestly.

For twenty-one-year-old Kabir Menon, cricket isn't merely an obsession. It serves a specific purpose. It is a tool, which helps with mundane cerebral functions required to manage his day. When he lays down to sleep, he imagines playing a match where he is bowling outswingers. First one past the bat, second one... left alone, third one an in-cutter, rapped on the pads, LBW – thanks very much... he's asleep.

Cricket helps him measure the passage of time and hangs smears of memory to his life. He knows he had his tooth pulled out when he was twelve, which resulted in a swollen mouth during the 1992 series played in Australia. To his great joy, he was allowed to sleep in the TV room as the matches started at 4 a.m. in India. He remembers Srikanth pulled Ambrose for a six over square leg while he was in and out of a novocaine-induced fever.

Cricket has formed a crust in some critical neural pathways of his brain. Associations and physical ticks often have something to do with the sport. If you see him walking along, pondering the day, he will most likely be playing a shadow cover drive.

How did this predicament come to pass? It probably has something to do with a little boy's neurological development. What the rhyme did not mention, was that along with snails and tails, little boys are made of an innate desire to belong to a tribe. To immortalize stories told of physicality and competition. This tribalism finds fertile pasture in an adolescent brain. Patterns and colours start forming – the angles created by leg spin, for instance;

the bushy black caterpillar on Javed Miandad's upper lip, the neat hand-stitched seam on a new cricket ball, the rotund shape of Boon or Ranatunga whose generous stomachs looked better-suited to rest a plate of your fried snacks, than on a professional sports arena and so on. These tenacious impressions then hang on to the subconscious like a stubborn tick and you find Kabir, a decade later, doodling the shape of Viv Richards' bat logo whilst in a lecture on Keynesian demand stimulus.

So, early this morning, having dragged himself out of bed, Kabir walked through the neighbourhood bazaar on the way to cricket practice. It was pleasantly cool at this time of day. The freshness of spring had not yet been wrapped in the heat of summer's thronging reverb. Slanted sunlight glinted on the old, black cobbled-stone street. Rhythms of the market were beginning to play themselves out the way they had for hundreds of years. *Doodhwalas* on creaky cycles were off for their morning deliveries. Some stores were being opened; others were being swept. Newspaper bundles had just been delivered to the street-side magazine kiosk and Mian Qadir was waiting for his copy to be cut loose from the plastic tawny thread holding the bulk together.

Mian Qadir never looked less than stately. His slim face, manicured grey beard, tailored kurta and waistcoat were a permanent fixture in this lane.

'Mianji, how clean and starched you look,' Kabir teased with the confidence of an indulged ward. After all, he had known Mian Qadir all his life and took great glee that after a growth spurt at fourteen, he was now four inches taller than this man. Mian remained elegant in aspect and looked over Kabir's cricket whites and university team cap. Even though in principle his clothes were clean and to his size, Kabir managed a disheveled visage. His kit hung off his shoulders as if his body was yet undecided on the shape it must become.

'With great grace and foresight, the Almighty has given me the sense and ability not to offend others with my appearance.'

Mian Qadir's mellifluous voice came from great depths and spoke in honeyed timeless Urdu. It sounded as though there was a cave in his throat where additional chambers could be called upon for use. Passionate about his qawwali, he sported the stained mouth of paan-chewing maestros of this art. His occupation was the proprietorship of Sunshine Bakery and the adjoining Biryani Plaza restaurant – both long-standing institutions, passed on through generations. Where one began early with sugared breads and small glasses of chai, the other would open its simple padlocked façade just before lunch and go on till well after midnight.

Striding into the bakery, Kabir helped himself to a fresh batch of fluffy yellow cake with embedded bits of raisins. Mianji feigned irritation and pulled the boy away from the counter.

'Listen here boy, I know you are not altogether useless, so why is it that your father is despairing of you? Why won't you start studying for the IAS or law like he suggests? You know that the time has come to start thinking about what happens after college.'

'How am I to do all of this, Mianji? I have cricket practice and college exams. Besides, who does IAS anymore? Who wants a government job now? I don't want to spend the rest of my life wearing a safari suit and sucking up to babus.'

Qadir raised his hand to stop the rambling teen. 'Little man, speak to your father. It's only fair to him that he knows you have no intentions of all this.'

'How can I? He won't understand, Mianji. To him it's either the IAS or law – these are the only choices. Now, just because he did not get to go to college and sit the exams doesn't mean that I need to...'

The wheels of Kabir's mind seemed to be turning.

'Can't you speak to him on my behalf?' Kabir was grasping at straws now for any relief from his father's scrutiny. It had become so severe that hearing the latch of his father's door would make him anxious. His sole motivation then became how to get out of the room without being noticed. It all seemed quite hopeless.

‘You’re right in a way, boy. There are other opportunities in the world for you, which we did not have. But if you think that you won’t need to suck up to safari suits, you have a bigger shock coming. Anyway, I will speak to him for you, but you will need to show some purpose in life.’

As with all such conversations, Kabir’s mind was beginning to wander. Noticing his waning attention, Mian Qadir cut his losses and diverted his care to the slovenly pace at which his sales staff was attending to a new customer.

The bazaar was waking. Commercialized graphic design avariciously covered every corner of masonry. Advertisements peddling Pepsi, Liril soap and ICICI Bank dominated. In between the garish posters were hints of a more ancient place. Carefully constructed doorways with Islamic arch detailing, remnants of carved wooden balustrades, all mixed in with modern plasterwork and tawdrily painted blocks. Small cubbyhole stores of locksmiths, dentists and knife sharpeners had made way for mobile phone vendors, video rentals and internet cafés. However, the old faithfuls like Sunshine Bakery and Agarwal General Store still anchored the street.

Today was day four of the India vs Australia test match and the Australians were ahead. Naturally, Kabir could not dwell on IAS exams at a time like this. Deep within him a flutter of hope remained – Sachin Tendulkar hadn’t come in to bat yet. The tension was making him jittery. It could all be over in a flash if they got him out. That would really ruin his week.

He grew up a Hindu in a community, which was equal parts Muslim, some Christians, and a smattering of Jains and Jews. As a child Kabir was made to bow his head to a small shrine in his home and he now did it as a matter of habit before an important match or exam. The shrine had a small multi-limbed deity surrounded by playing card-sized pictures of gods and goddesses. Each had a specific function, each heroic in posture and larger than life in colour and intent.

But Indian cricket was Kabir's true religion and it seemed destined to provide more pain than joy. Its prophets led their flock up a mountain but never seemed to glimpse any semblance of a promised land. For the rest of his life, he was fated to yearn for the triumph of the team. Its successes were euphoric and cruelly sporadic; its failures were constant and soul sapping.

Kabir sauntered absent-mindedly towards the bus stand to catch the number 13 to college. Hearing his name called out, he swung around. It was Montu – a boy from the neighbourhood, who graduated from the same college two years ago. Kabir groaned as he watched Montu trotting to catch up. It was not that he didn't like Montu, but there was something about him that Kabir just didn't like. Perhaps it was Montu's whiff of condescension at being just a little older.

Montu had recently acquired an articleship at a local chartered accountant's practice. This added to the worldly way in which he now carried himself. He had been given a small square plastic box of business cards with his name printed in a clunky bold type. Mahinder Jain, Junior Officer at Radhashyam Gulshan Chartered Accountants. This was the closest to godliness Montu had ever felt.

Kabir quickened his pace to get away from this forced companionship. Montu managed to catch up to him anyway.

Montu handed one of his business cards to Kabir and ensured he zipped it up safely in the inner pocket of his kit bag.

'No chance today. Day 4 on the Chennai pitch, Shane Warne bowling, we won't even get a lead of 150. Australia will win the match today itself.'

Kabir knew he was being goaded, but it still irritated him. He fought off the urge to respond but the seeds of doubt had already been planted. He struggled to keep his cool and his expression barely disguised his inner monologue.

Knowing the track record of the Indian team, it was a precarious position to be in. But in amongst those doubts was the resurging