

PENGUIN BOOKS

# RUN, REBEL

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***For  
Joe  
and  
all the women and girls who dare to rebel.***

PENGUIN BOOKS

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RUN

REBEL

*Manjeet Mann*



PENGUIN BOOKS



# PROLOGUE

A wound.  
Triggered  
by a beating.

It grew.  
Thriving  
on neglect.

It swelled.  
Flourishing  
on her spine.

When ripe,  
a clotted  
blister.

It.  
Crippled.  
Her.

Weighing down  
on her  
too-small

frame  
for her  
adolescent age.

My. Mother.  
Sat  
hunchback,

working.

Silent.

Ignored and ignoring  
pins of  
prickly pain pulsing.

*What's wrong with your daughter?*  
a neighbour asked.

*She's not  
sitting or standing upright?  
It's been weeks.*

My grandmother  
looked at  
my mother

as if she were  
observing her  
for the first time.

My grandmother

fell  
to  
the  
floor.

*Crumpled like a sheet  
falling from  
a washing line,  
my mother tells me.*

Slumped  
on the back  
of a motorbike,

my mother travelled  
along dusty dirt tracks,  
through several Indian villages

to the nearest hospital.  
The poison  
drained.

The rotten flesh  
carved,  
    gouged,  
        burrowed  
            out.

My mother  
concealed her  
anger.

Her mother  
showed no  
remorse.

The wound –  
now  
a scar.

The size  
of a fist.

A crater  
buried between  
shoulder blades.

*It is the curse of being a girl,  
my mother tells me.*

*You are the property of your  
parents, husband, brothers.  
You endure,  
never question it.*

I question it.

# ONE RESTLESS

## ANATOMY OF A REVOLUTION STAGE 1

People feel restless.  
Held down by  
restrictions,  
forced to  
accept  
less.

Preparing to fight,  
accepting all  
they will  
lose.



# BOUND

**B**uilt-in fear  
of our families,  
the community,  
we are **O**bserved  
thro**u**gh the gaze of others.  
Socialized into tracking each other.  
Friends, neighbours, family.

*Is she where she should be?  
Should she be out this late?  
Who is that she's walking with?*

Watching.  
Mo**n**itoring

and **d**ying to get out.

# I AM 1

Bewakoof.  
The Punjabi word for  
stupid.

I.  
Am.  
Stupid.

Nikame.  
The Punjabi word for  
useless.

I.  
Am.  
Useless.

My name is  
Amber Rai.

Amber.  
The stone of  
courage.

The soul  
of a  
tiger.

Rai,  
from the Sanskrit *raja*.  
A title of honour.

A leader.  
A king.  
A chief.

But  
at home

I am  
stupid  
and  
I am  
useless.

# BURDEN

No one wanted my mother.  
No one wanted her mother,  
and no one wanted her mother.

It goes on and on  
now and  
way back then.

No one wanted Ruby.  
No one wanted me.

My sister Ruby and I  
have heard  
the stories.

The sadness that  
cloaked  
our births.

The prayers  
and temple visits,  
wishing,

wishing  
we would come out  
as boys.

So we are born  
in all our  
feminine form

and reminded  
of our  
burden

every day.

We are obedient.  
We are small.  
We are quiet.

To prove  
we are  
not

a burden.

We are still reminded  
that we are a  
burden.

It eats away at you.

# CONFUSED

If girls are never wanted,  
how do you expect  
to get

your  
precious  
little  
boy?

# MY VOICE

No matter how small or quiet I am expected to be,  
I find my voice on the running track. It's where I'm truly alive.

Words boomerang from trainer to tarmac. Creating  
ripples in every corner of my body until all

knock-downs, run-ins, face-offs and scraps  
have been      twisted      wrung      exhausted

up

up

and released      up  
into the clouds and sky above.

# DREAMS

So simple. To run.  
A professional athlete.  
It's a stupid dream.

Ruby's dreams were crushed.  
She was overpowered, tamed.  
She chose not to fight.

Mum must have had dreams.  
She's never spoken of them.  
Must be too painful.

Dad sleep-talks his dreams.  
They keep us awake at night.  
Dreams trapped in nightmares.



# PREDICTION

Home  
is not  
where my  
heart is.

Freedom  
usually comes  
at a  
price.

I am restless,  
my feet  
need to fly.

It's only  
a matter  
of time.

Correction.

I *fear*  
it's only  
a matter

of

time.

# FIRST DAY BACK

I leave for school earlier than usual.  
Meeting with Tara and David at our secret place.

My stomach doing flips holding in – excitement.  
Not seeing them over the summer makes holidays – unbearable.

Correction.

Not seeing David over the summer makes holidays  
HELL ON EARTH.

I turn out of my estate, take in the tree-lined street that surrounds me  
and leave the looming high-rises behind.

# THE ESTATE

Palm Wood Estate  
is one of the roughest  
and biggest estates  
in the country.

Streets in the sky dreams  
turned to  
sinkhole nightmares.

# THE GRASS IS GREENER

I stride past  
the bookies,  
the chippy,  
the newsagent's.

Get to our secret place – quicker.  
See Tara and David – sooner.

Turn on to streets that  
enjoy sky and  
green spaces.  
Breathe air that

suggests it's cleaner,  
pass houses that promise  
better futures and  
shops that

promise healthier  
hearts and minds,  
as the eyes of the  
high-rises

fade

into

the

distance.

# OUR SECRET PLACE

St Martin's Church  
dominates the skyline.  
A thing of beauty  
in a place that  
has been 'voted'

Britain's

worst town.  
Unhealthiest town.  
Grimmest town.  
And – the latest –  
most deprived town.

An unfair review  
of a town that's  
split in two.  
St Martin's stands  
at the divide

between council tenants  
and homeowners.  
Between the unemployed  
and the employed.

A divided town  
where prosperity  
and poverty  
are neighbours.  
A postcode lottery  
cementing futures.

At St Martin's  
none of that matters.  
It's neutral, it's beautiful,  
it's safe.

# A ROOM WITH A VIEW

If I stand on the toilet in our house and look out of the bathroom window,  
I can see it.

Ruby and I would rush to tiptoe-peek out of the window when the church bells rang on a Sunday morning.

In religious studies we were told the spiritual weight of a church bell could drive away 'evil spirits' and storms.

Hypnotized by the melodic chimes, we stood transfixed.  
Our toes numbing on the cold plastic rim as

we prayed the bells would drive away the tempest that engulfed our own home.

# SECRET CORNERS

St Martin's has many hidden places  
concealed by oversized gravestones.

I head towards our secluded corner, screened in  
on *three* sides and camouflaged by a giant oak.

I can hear their voices. I poke my head round.  
Tara squeals and jumps up and down.

***AmberAmberAmber!***

She grabs me and gives me  
the biggest squeeze ever.

***I've missed your beautiful face!***

Tara is the only person who calls me beautiful.  
I try and believe it.

David holds out his arms.

**Sister from another mister,  
come here!**

He gives me an almighty hug, which makes my  
heart do a little flip.

**Bro-ther f-rom a-n-oth-er mo-th-er!**

I can barely get the words out, David's embrace is so tight.  
He smells of strawberry chewing gum and Lynx.

I take a moment to try and breathe him in  
and sink into his shoulder.

Being with these two grounds me  
like the giant oak that shields us.

I feel rooted and protected as he  
stands in front of me, his hands still on my arms,

grinning, chewing and smelling great.  
He looks different. Slightly more tanned,

streaks of blond in his dark hair.  
His eyes wider, his lashes longer.

He looks way hotter than I remember him six weeks ago.  
Waaaaaay hotter. I didn't think that was even possible.

**Hot,**  
I say.

Not in my head but out **loud.**

*What?*

Tara, staring at me, staring at David  
for                      way                      too                      long.

**Hmmm?**  
**Nothing.**  
**I'm just hot.**  
**Are you hot?**  
*I'm really hot.*