

Road to Redemption

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NOVELLA: ROAD TO REDEMPTION

ABSTRACT

Lurching from day-today in the months before South Africa becomes a republic, booze-befuddled Indian private investigator Rohit Biswas does not ponder how he can secure his daughter's future after he became a widower and lost his job as police detective when he killed a man who fatally stabbed his wife.

Salvation appears when a rich client hires the PI to find evidence proving his son did not rape and murder a white socialite. Fighting against seeming impossible odds in colonial-apartheid Durban and a sanctions-busting conspiracy, Biswas secures his client's acquittal. In the process he defies karma and redeems himself.

The phone's strident ring alarms me.

'Biswas?' I grunt my name. The onus is on the caller, *ne*, also my brain's not at work today. The gentleman at the other end speaks slowly, like a *gora*. I shut my trap, listen. He hangs up after 'bout half a minute. Rajshekhar Ramlall, Esquire, or whatever, is coming to *my* office! Wouldn't say why. Need I start worrying?

I get my battered steel cabinet open, fish out the office bottle secreted in the gap between files L and N, pour a stiff shot of Mainstay cane spirit powered up with a hint of Schweppes bitter lemon, sink the putt in one. I needed that lubrication ... cure or Dutch courage?

Through my office window that I don't remember ever being washed, Monday afternoon the second of January 1961 looks as if all colours had been leached from the landscape, and me. My head still throbs from New Year's Day boozing. I spy with bloodshot peepers the pregnant dark clouds crying their eyes out and down below people scurrying like rats. *Ha*, in these blinding sheets of rain even the ducks've waddled off for deep cover. Thank god, it's not so wet in my first floor office at Valbro Chambers, in piss-smelling lead-Grey Street, Durban, or as the Zulus know it, eThekwin, in what Europeans call the pariah state, South Africa, arsehole of the world. I've got a coupla small, galvanised iron buckets placed to catch the bigger drips; the mingy-sized ones disappear into the dust of the mouldy carpet, raising a stink. As the government demands, and my finances allow, I find myself on the wrong side of town where the sun often refuses to appear alone. Such is life for us towel-headed, napkin-wearing camel jockeys, as we're described by whiteys who have no time to rem'ber our names or that we're human. If words could hurt I'd have been in a permanent coma at King Edward VIII or McCord Zulu Hospital.

I'm pulling on the *chillum*, blowing out *ganja* smoke from Durban Poison, good weed that drives the mosquitoes buzzing. I try to clap 'em dead but fail, seeing there's no blood on my palms. In this city on the Indian Ocean, "founded" (as though it had been lost) by Sir Benjamin D'Urban in 1820, the air even during a downpour is the temperature of blood. Never gets bone cold, not even in "winter", but you can get mop-wet by a squall.

The smell of fried onions, fish, *sev* 'n nuts, *moorkoo*, *vada*, *puri-patha*, *samosa*, and god knows what other vegetable 'n flour-based snacks prepared down below, has drifted upstairs, inviting the spirits of ancestors to drool as they watch me wrinkle my nose.

My mind, airy as a candy-floss cloud, has drifted, fathoming whether this gumshoe would survive to “celebrate” forty next year, *in shaa Allah*. A drip falls on my shiny Jarmans resting on the “antique” mahogany desk I bought at the sheriff’s auction. Must be a flood on the floor above. I have non-rent paying sub-tenants: fleas, ’roaches, and I suspect a coupla or three rats, who’ve gone on a day’s outing. Swimming. Now ’n again, I finger shoot my roommates; I don’t murder vermin and god’s creatures: They have more rights to life than me, a bogged-in-the-mud has-been operating from this shabby joint ’cause nobody ever pulled me aboard the gravy train. That’s life; can’t blame someone else from where I sit.

I cast my eyes on the rusted mirror on the opposite wall. Ma never told me why but my brown, handsome yet sad-looking face with straight nose propped up by a Stalin moustache seems like I always smell something bad but can’t put a finger on the shit. I wear my black Borsalino felt hat at an angle, with a small multicoloured peacock feather, the *topi* six feet two inches from ground level, as measured by Suresh, my connection at Rajcoomar’s Funeral Undertakers. Talk ’bout measuring up for the last ride. Below the headgear is a lined forehead and caterpillar eyebrows framing deep-set peepers. This make-up comes partly from having too much *dharoo* too often. I drink to forget, I can’t rem’ber what, but mostly my eight years of blissful marriage. Some clients have called me an Americano *charou*, not to my face, for they know my fists move three seconds faster’n my brain, talk more’n my mouth. Here, with midlife crisis, I smile thinking that once I was an aspiring, but failed, light welterweight coached by my father’s brother-in-law, working out at Benny Singh’s gym in Kismet Arcade. So what if I’m a copycat? I care not, for amongst the people who matter I’m the real thing. *Ja*, I know *aja* Ashok Biswas came to Port Natal in 1874 as a slave, what the *Angreji* called an indentured labourer or human donkey, but I was born out of a seed planted on South African soil. I may be called many names but I’m a patriot, not an immigrant.

At times I have to repeat something, ’cause I rasp, my vocal chords being rusty. *Ganja* opens, widens, and deepens the mind, drawing on it is a nasty habit but one that helps me think clearly on worldly matters. The government doesn’t agree, yet. In between puffs, I take a swig. Self-medication. A few works better’n one – for me. Those snobs, Johnny Walker and Jack Daniels, don’t want to be seen hanging about here, so I’m with Mainstay, who’s not fussy ’bout the company it keeps.

I’m minding nobody’s business for right now and for some three months hitherto (nice word, *ne*? I learned it from my lawyer friend, Sham Singh), I’ve been trying to compose a piece of fiction to tell my landlord ’bout the rent. Coolie bastard, ten times worse’n a Jew. Money is

God. Shakespeare in pyjamas with skullcap and a forever-mournful face, old man Fakir. If he gives me any shit I'll have to tune him up.

Killing time in solitude knowing doing nothing is a dangerous occupation, I'm munching a quarter mutton bunny with carrot salad, mango pickle, and vinegar chillies from Victory Lounge, sunk by cane, spirit for lost souls – drink to take the edge off – when I (think) I hear a knock. I see a shadow on the other side of the front door with its frosted glass advertising, *Rohit Biswas – Licensed Private Detective: Discrete Investigations*. Debt collector or enforcer? *Hai bhagwan*, please send a fee-paying client – it's so long since I sniffed the sweet smell of cash. I grunt, as I often do. It must be Rajshekhar Ramlall.

An Indian gentleman, dressed as a funeral undertaker, enters, trailing smoke like a crop duster. I see sadness etched in the aged face. I make a mental (ha!) note of the browned, Roman-numerated wall clock, a gift from my long-cremated father's mother who used to, unnecessarily, say, "Time is money." Three bells and I'm not sure all's well.

I push the old backrest-less Globe chair toward my visitor. The client plumps down on it, sighs, the wind let out of his flat belly. He removes his hat, pulls on his hooked pipe. The client waves away the *dagga* smoke, genteel, but the *ou* doesn't refuse a slug of *dharoo*. Hindu politeness and humility suggests I enquire 'bout my visitor's health before getting down to brass tacks. After that we make small talk, which I encourage as I charge by the nearest or furthest quarter hour, whatever, adding some fat for insurance and rainy days like this.

'Do you mind?'

'*Nahi, bhaia*, you carry on. Smells nice, that Dunhill tobacco.' I call him "brother" 'though we're from different planets. Mr Rajshekhar Ramlall made big, big money at Greyville and Clairwood racecourses, bought a house and a lorry. Now he owns a mansion with a helluva big fishpond with all-colour fishes, six bedrooms with each one having its own toilet 'n bathroom, a sitting room quarter the size of a soccer field, three garages for shiny-new cars: Kapil's Mercedes 300SL hardtop, the *ballie's* hearse-like Rolls Royce Silver Cloud, and a soft-top Studebaker Silver Hawk. I saw these and all when I gate-crashed a wedding *joll*, but it is also my job to know, you know. *Bapu* does sand-dredging, from four spots in the Umgeni River, now has fourteen trucks, most of them brand new, and other businesses I don't know of. He's a *mota*, but as far as I know not involved in any illegal stuff. Drinks whisky instead of Durban Corporation water from the time a bottle of Scotch for us hustlers would last a year or more, sitting proudly in a mahogany, mirror-backed display

cabinet with radio and 78 vinyl record turntable using a needle at the end of an arm to extract sounds from Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi.

In my many years as detective and PI, I honestly can't remember I ever saw anyone with so much of grief, pain, fear, whatever, wrapped up in one face. 'How can I help you, *babuji*?'

The handsome man rubs his close-cropped grey-black hair, talks like a *gora*. He forces a smile, 'Call me Raj.' *I could see he must've been or still is a prince among us paupers.* 'My youngest son has been arrested for the rape and murder of a white woman.'

My mouth must've fallen open like that of a landed catfish from that electric shock, but I can't show it. *An Indian did such things? Jesus! He'll be double-damned.* While we may be from different mothers, we're brothers after all. I walk 'round my desk and embrace the hurting man. He holds tight, like a lover. 'I'm so sorry, *bhairam*, to see you find yourself under torture. I can't imagine. Such a blow to your *izzat* ...'

'Family name and dignity is one thing, Mr Biswas ...'

'Call me Rohit, uncle ...'

'... what's worse is I have let Anil down.'

I return to my seat, make my face look like I just heard my granny died. 'I suppose no matter how hard you try, you can never protect your children from all the evils in this cruel world, in this period ... *kalyug*.'

'Yes; Kali's Age of Destruction. We can see that we're experiencing it ...'

'Tell me 'bout your son. What happened? Everything, in confidence, *bhairam*.'

Mr Ramlall's tired brown eyes are searching my face slowly and calmly, maybe looking for a sign of hope. I can't oblige. 'I'll give you the family background later. Let's discuss the immediate problem: Anil was found fast asleep in his car with scratches on his face and chest and some blood on his clothes, at three this morning.'

'Where?'

'At La Mercy Beach. His car door was open, all the lights on ...'

'Was he asleep or passed out?'

'Passed out, I guess, but the police have given me no details.'

'Where's he now?'

'At Central Police Station. They're not releasing him on bail.'

'*Ha ji*. The *goras* think they're gods.' I'm using some little Hindi I know to show what you call empathy or sympathy, whatever, for a distressed father. Can't blame the *topi* for the sins of his children. 'Where's the body?'

‘At Gale Street or King Edward Hospital mortuary, I should think.’

‘Hmm. And who was killed?’

‘The police are not saying.’

‘You have some contacts with the SAP, *ne bhai*?’

The man nods, holds a commanding hand for silence, with the other puts the pipe to his mouth and draws; maybe to gather his thoughts. ‘Retired Police Commissioner James True-May phoned me. But at this stage he couldn’t say much. You know the gentleman?’

‘Yes, *bhairam*, I worked under his son, Fred, the present Deputy Commissioner. Good *goras*.’ We sit silent for a minute, him looking off into the distance as if remembering his childhood, me checking the ceiling for rain leaks. I clear my throat. ‘I’m not a betting man, *babu*, but with rape and murder of a *gori*, the odds will be mighty heavy against your son.’

‘Don’t I know it?’ The visitor removes his pipe and jabs the stem at me accusingly. ‘That’s why I want you to investigate. Get the missing evidence, ones the police didn’t bother looking for, or will deliberately ignore. You know we’re fighting the mighty colonial-apartheid legal machinery, eh?’

I nod, show my yellowing teeth in a wince, thinking how swift “justice” can be in a case of white versus brown.

Ramlall takes the pipe out of his clenched teeth. ‘The cops will work fast, get Anil convicted, sentenced, and hanged, without looking far or digging too deep. Remember Moosa’s case?’

How could I ever forget? Moosa’s was the first take away joint on Battery Beach. This was the country’s best little stretch of coastline and was reserved for the Indian race group, naturally, being on the shores of the Indian Ocean. It wasn’t ours for long, but that’s another story. *Chacha* Moosa was always there when we got to the *samudar*, his caravan chimney belching smoke of flame-grilled mutton sausages, sardines, deep fried mince or potato *samosas*, I&J fish fingers, and other vegetable-based Indian delights we call bites. I don’t know how that Muslim uncle managed in such a small place to make things so tasty spit falls out of your mouth.

One morning, after making no money caddying at the *goras*’ Durban Country Club, I walk to Fitzsimon’s Snake Park, my belly complaining so loudly. Eleven o’ clock and Super Snacks caravan had its shutters down. No sign of life, no smell of cooking. I shout, ‘*Chacha, chachaji*,’ there’s no answer. I sit down with my rumbling stomach hoping the *ballie* comes soon. I must’ve fallen asleep because now someone is kicking my legs. I squint at the sun and

can make out the umdoni-purple face of Bushknife Bobby, the man whose bark is worse than his bite, a feller who makes lots of threats of violence, then disappears quietly, tail and bush-knife between his skinny legs.

‘You heard, Roy?’

‘No, Uncle Bobby, what?’ I stand up, staring at this terror of our village.

‘Ismail Moosa was arrested last night.’

‘Arrested? What’s that?’

‘Locked up by the police, *guchoo*.’

‘For what?’

‘Don’t know, Roy Boy. Rumour is a six year old white girl was found there in the *amatingula* bushes, covered in sand. She been raped.’

I’m puzzled. ‘What’s “raped”?’

‘You’ll learn soon enough.’

‘*Chacha* can rape?’

‘We’ll know when the police bring him to court.’

Baba, who had worked for the Natal Government Railways Police said that at the Somtseu Road Magistrates Court *chacha* was crying when he said: “I didn’t do nothing. I went five o’ clock morning to Beachwood to catch some shad, bream, slingers, anything to make fish and chips. I cast my two lines. There was a little bit wind, no bite, for ’bout one hour. I just went to the bushes to pee. Then I notice some toes sticking out of the sand. I began digging with my hands, saw it was a little white girl, some blood between her legs. I tore off the dress and saw someone had damaged ... raped her. She was already dead, had sand in her mouth and nose. Such a beautiful child, looking just like my Zohra ...”

Baba told us that a *gora* examined the body at what he called the mortuary, said the child was dead maybe ten, twelve hours before *chacha* went to Beachwood. Did he kill the little girl before and hide the body in the sand under the *amatingula* plants and the high trees with long roots going into the black water of the pond you cross before going on the beach?

Everybody in the district was quietly saying that old man Moosa will hang, but baba said wait and see because that ace detective James True-May will get the truth out. He arrested a white man who after one week gave the full story, he done it, was sorry. Sorry for what? Sorry won’t bring the child back to life. Lucky, *chacha* was allowed to carry on his business in the caravan, but now he forgot how to smile. People looked at him like he was a *jaanmari*, until ’bout six months later, during *mohurram* celebrations, he was found by his

missus hanging from the rafter in his house near the Soofie Saheb Mosque in Riverside. Sad. At least the story made me think that I will one day become a detective looking hard to find what white people call truth and justice.

‘Rohit?’

‘*Bhai?*’

He holds his head sideways, like a watchful Indian mynah. ‘Thought I lost you for a moment.’ Ramlall takes a packet from his pocket, puts tobacco into his pipe and tamps it with a thumb. He lights it, drawing with pouting lips like a mud-sucking mullet.

I watch him, not responding, trying sharp to process all he’d just said. ‘I was just thinking. Looking at where we are in this country with the white man holding all the aces and trump cards there’s no guarantee that if I take the case the pieces of evidence I find would save Anil’s life ...’

‘Meaning?’

‘Get me right on this. The cops and the prosecutor will not be really interested in evidence that may go to show your son *didn’t* commit the crimes ...’

The prospective client raises both his eyebrows and a finger. ‘I’m going to pay you handsomely to find such evidence or proof, and I’ll make sure the police place everything before the court.’

I stare, reading the kind of regret and sorrow on the man’s face that would melt a heart of stone. ‘I have to point out this, Mr Ramlall, what if I find proof that shows Anil factly did those things he’s accused of?’

‘Need I remind you that you’ll be working for me, the defence?’

‘Sure, boss, but according to the law, whatever information is found by one party must be shared with the other.’

‘Rohit, the *goras* write the law and mostly, but not always, live by it. We darkies die by it. They write the rules of the game but are also players and referees. It’s weighted against us non-Europeans. But here we’re not playing chess. Anil’s not the trophy, certainly not for the prosecution. He needs a chance in life. You can give him that; I didn’t. You know the cops will do a hatchet job, look so far, get a victim, and the white judge will hang him. We can’t let that happen.’ Tears leaks onto Ramlall’s face.

I guess the more someone has to lose ... a son, family name, a business, the harder he’ll fight to keep it. ‘I’ll do my best, but what I’m saying is that my investigations could also unearth evidence that may point to his guilt.’

‘You surely are a poker, *thunny* player, huh; how and when to show your hand, if ever you have to? This case can set you up for life.’

Or end it. But money is always important, especially if you grow up without it. Time to stop thinking and acting small.

‘Mr Ramlall, it’s one hell of a job; big; high Profile. Could I have some time to think ’bout it?’

The man’s eyebrows come down almost to the top of his nose. ‘Time is a luxury we cannot afford. You’re the first detective I’ve approached. If you don’t want the case, I’ll find someone else.’

‘Boss, this is one hell of an assignment. Let me sleep on it, at least, please?’

The client points the pipe stem at me, showing a half-smile. ‘Fair enough. Shall we say ten o’ clock tomorrow, at my office?’

I nod. The sky is now like a grey tarpaulin, darkening my poorly-lit office. The gloom is punctuated by the blinding strobe of lightning, freezing us two white-faced parents, the flash a few million time more powerful than that of the Metz I use on my Nikon, or what a *gora* uses to photograph dead bodies. *Hare Ram!*

Dhana seth Rajshekhar Ramlall gets up, shakes my hand. ‘Good. I’ll see you soon. You don’t have much time. Bye.’

Wait a minute; hold the phone! Eight years of odd jobs, bits ’n piece work to put *roti* and wine on the table and out of the blue: rape ’n murder? Stone the crows; what’s going on? Doubt creeps along the edges of my mind. I widen my eyes, open my feeble brain; talk to me. If you can have dreams you can also have nightmares. But what the hell – a boozier-loser can’t afford principles, must remember that I’m my own salvation. With these thoughts buzzing in my throbbing head, I close the door, walk back, open my desk drawer and switch off the tape recorder.

Looking at the multicoloured beach ball containing my late wife's breath placed in an empty flower pot atop the filing cabinet makes me wonder if Asha's death was *karma*, her time was up. So what was the *kaffir* pickpocket who stabbed her, an agent of God? I shut my eyes tight for a second, seeing I'm still in a dark place with my shadow. Her smiling face makes me cautious: It's not only myself I have to think of but also my eight-year old daughter. What would Aarthi do if I dig myself into a black hole I can't get out of? I've really got to stop feeling sorry for myself, making as if Asha only just left me. I must see her death as if it happened a hundred years ago, her name, meaning hope, and her soul somehow solidified and preserved in the middle of a clear yellow rock that was once liquid.

While I cannot fathom Raj Ramlall's motive for hiring me, I know I need the money ... desperately. There's nothing wrong in him choosing anyone he wants, so why am I suspicious? He'll pay top dollar, not bargain for a fifty per cent discount like other cheapskate clients. Some of them are 'roaches, coming out at night 'cause I'd nail them. They make up all kinds of sad stories, until I grab 'em by the balls and squeeze – easy way to open wallets. But still...

I stare at nothing, trying to see meaning in the rain through the dirty window pane. Was that a *thufan* blew through here, a spirit and when I'm stone cold sober I'd realise it was a dream? I pour four fingers of my chronic medication, down the remedy in two hits. It helps not to be anxious. Brain defogged and tongue lubricated, I pick up the phone.

'How're you, my long lost love?' A minute's fruitless flirting to brighten up a woman's eight hour working day. Malthi giggles like the Durban Indian Girls' High School pupil she was two decades ago, makes a witty remark. Pity she can't see my smile.

'Is your good-for-little husband there?'

The attorney's receptionist-cum-boss replies in the affirmative.

'Digging his nose or snoring?'

A loud 'n clear laugh.

'No. Don't wake him. Just make sure he doesn't slither out through the crack under your office door, like a black mamba. I'm coming there to tune him. Please put the kettle on, *bahenji*.'

She asks if I'm coming for high tea.

I grunt. '*Didi*, you know I'm allergic to tea, pee, and all. Organise some Irish coffee.'

Behind the desk I see Sham the office hermit's hair is, as usual, Brylcreemed and parted with German precision, without *sindhoor* like Malthi's is. The red power is put in the bride's hair parting as a symbol of unity, oneness, and devotion; removed by the deceased husband's forefinger as an act freeing his wife from bondage or whatever they call it. Sham has a thick walrus moustache that sometimes anchors or harbours a grain of rice or *dhall*. He sits hands clasped over his ample beer 'n biryani belly, looked down upon by a peach-pit complexioned but kind face. The attorney heaves himself out of his large swivel chair and greets me with his trademark two-sided hug. There's that smell. I grin – it's the serial-farter releasing pressure from yesterday's spiced 'n greased mutton curry.

Malthi comes in bearing a tray with two glasses, ice, and a bottle of Black and White. We trained her well. She pours a double each, adds a little water and then plumps two ice cubes. We watch and grin at her ritual. Whisky, then tango and foxtrot, only I don't have a dancing partner anymore.

'Thank you, sister, now how 'bout some bites, eh?'

Malthi gives her blushing smile. 'Don't push you luck, brother.' Sham's Moir's jelly stomach quivers. The waitress leaves, shutting the office door.

'Well, *bhairam*, I wanted your advice about my latest case. You can start the clock running, billed to Rajshekhar Ramlall.'

The attorney's eyebrows rise above his fish eyes, fingers fluttering on the belly. 'This could be interesting. I'm all ears.'

'Well, the *topi* just left my office. His youngest son's been arrested for rape and murder ...'

'*Hare Ram!* Anil? The attorney says in a voice sounding like a choking dog's bark.

'*Ha, ji.* The *ballie* is a *dost* of the former Police Commissioner. He told Raj 'bout it but could not give him much detail.'

Sham gives me his lazy eye, shakes his head; gulps some whisky. 'This could be a hanging matter.'

'*Ja*, that's why I'm panicking.'

'Why, Rohit?'

'Jesus, man. The first *charou* to be brought up on such charges. Ramlall's a *mota*, he could have hired the best *goras*, so why me?'

Sham opens his trap. I see the strings of spit hooking up the purplish upper and lower lips. 'I'll respond with an anecdote.'

‘Antidote?’

‘Maybe, just for you. A man comes in saying he’s in big trouble and needs a white lawyer. I ask why a *gora*. The bloke says because the white man knows the law, and I respond, but the Indian attorney knows the judge. Okay, okay, won’t work in this case.’

I frown and laugh at the same time – some people have said I’m multi-talented. ‘Go on.’

‘I ask: Why not you?’

‘Are all you lawyers the same, answer a question with a question?’

Sham shows horse chompers. ‘It’s our job to ask questions and to argue. We play with words; they’re our sword and shield. Law is a game: we don’t create anything, like bricklayers, carpenters, and vegetable gardeners do. But, tell me, Rohit, why shouldn’t he hire you?’

‘That’s what I’m telling myself. I’ve never done a rape ’n murder case. This is high profile, man.’

‘He who talks to himself often listens to a fool.’

‘Come again, *bhairam*?’

‘Anyway, I agree, but what you’ve been doing is not by choice. It’s what the system allows or permits a third class citizen, sorry, immigrant, to do. We can’t complain that Indians are too law-abiding, can we?’ Sham finishes his drink; I gulp mine, he refills.

‘I understand all that, *bhaia*; I didn’t become a private detective by choice either. I’m just wondering if there isn’t a hidden agenda here.’

‘I can’t guess what you mean by that; you’re a man who looks at a gift horse in the mouth, so can be your own worst enemy.’

‘I accept I’m down at the crowded bottom and have lots of room to improve.’

Sham nods, serious-like. ‘Acknowledging it is one thing; doing something is another. I’m no politician and wouldn’t know if the powers that be have an interest in this particular case. But it may well be that this ... Anil Ramlall could be used as an example, a scapegoat, by the English to put us coolies in place.’

‘Umh. Do you know Raj Ramlall?’

‘Not well. I have done some work for him from time to time. He appears to be a straight shooter; I haven’t heard anything shady about him. Rohit, I don’t know why you are looking for ghosts or black mambas where there aren’t any.’

‘What you saying, Sham?’

‘It’s like you have a death wish, man. You can’t stay stuck in the past, like black clay sitting at the bottom of the Umgeni River. You’ve got to shake loose, rise to the top, like cream – if not for your own sake, then for Arthi’s.

Food for thought. I rub my face; blink my eyes to focus. ‘It’s one hell of a case, Sham.’

The attorney nods, taps my hand. ‘If anyone can do it, you can. Don’t consider the past eight years; look back on your career as a detective with the SAP. You got the foundation, the experience, the intelligence, the instincts, and doggedness. Get up and dust yourself. This is a challenge that you can meet if you put your mind to it.’

‘What if I fail; and that *laaitie* hangs?’ I sigh. I guess my face must look like I just heard of the passing of a dear one.

‘Rohit, can I speak plainly?’

‘Please.’

‘You asked for advice, I’ll give it to you free, *mahala*, so don’t get cross, okay?’

‘Sure, *bhairam*.’

‘While we have been put in our place by the *Angreji* and the Afrikaners, we must not blame them for all our ills. If we have no ambition, if we stand still, we stay in the past. Look, our forefathers took a decision to come to Africa, okay they believed the lies the agents in Calcutta and Madras told them; were in the dark about what to find here. They took a chance out of desperation, thinking nothing could be worse than starving and dying in a dusty village. You, my friend, must not be suffocated or smothered by your past.’ Sham pauses and sweeps me with a hard level look with his rheumy eyes. He swallows some Black and White, belches. I see a calm Buddha before me. ‘You seem to have two difficulties: Firstly, sad to say, many of our Indians have this and it keeps the *gora* smiling, is an inferiority complex. The second is: we tend to be negative and pessimistic ...’

‘Shama, you said you’ll speak plain English.’

The attorney grins. ‘Come, another shot to cut the phlegm.’ He pours, we shoot a third down. He bridges his fingertips over his stomach. ‘Get rid of these attitudes and negative outlook to life. Suffering is part of the human condition but don’t make a virtue of it. Stop being stuck in the mud or hovering over shit like a green-arsed fly. Get rid of the shackles and move on. You need to weigh up the pros and cons of this appointment. Remember the scale used by Ramses and Moses in *The Ten Commandments*?’

‘Ja, I saw the movie at the Raj.’

Sham nods. 'Now cast your mind back. How Ramses was loading the one side of the scale with all the allegations against Moses, until the Jew put a brick in and tipped the scales? You've got to get a balance; like fishmongers, greengrocers, and clever people, pause to weigh up things. But first, remember at the start of any case, at this stage what Raj Ramlall has told you, may be just the tip of the iceberg. We don't or can't know what lies beneath. Only when a case is finished you'll learn what all or most of its ramifications are, not up front. So, you have to take some things on faith. There's nothing impossible about such a case; it's every bit possible. Follow me?' Sham's voice has a slight liquor edge now.

'Needless to say, I get your drift.'

'In this case the rewards for success can far outweigh the consequences of failure. You can't be sitting and moping about the past or be neutral. Get out of the inferiority complex that bogs us down. Nobody can give you a guarantee of success or failure. The risk is the fulcrum in the seesaw. You have to take your chances.' Sham pauses. I see a little foam or spittle on his thick lips, being not so used to talking too much. The attorney may look pear-shaped and dumb, but can be sharp when occasion demands it. I value his counsel.

Sham wipes his mouth with a handkerchief, sips his drink, and continues. 'After a short chat with your client you seem to have jumped to the end of the story. Don't do that; start at the beginning. Think positive. Failure, if it comes, will not be through your lack of trying, I'm sure. If the paw-paw hits the fan, you don't die; just open your umbrella. Worst case scenario? Life, if you can call it that, goes on as before, in this miserable dump. Prepare for the worst and it may never happen – preparation inhibits spontaneity.'

I frown. 'That sounds like Shakespeare.'

The man licks his lips and grins. 'No, Sham Singh. But what about success? What if, through your investigations, this guy is cleared of the charges? It's a Godsend opportunity. You'll make a name for yourself; leave your skid marks on Grey Street. Fame brings jobs and cash. Money is always useful. This could set you ... and Arthi up for life. What I wouldn't give for a secure financial future.' Sham swallows his drink, sucks through his teeth as he pours another, his piss-coloured eyes on me, scolding. 'You're unique, Rohit, you know that?'

'What?'

'Show me another Indian private detective in this country, on the African continent, even. You'll be famous, man.'

I smile and then remind myself not to get sloshed; have some serious thinking to do. 'To be honest, Sham *bhai*, I'm scared.'

Sham gives his donkey laugh, gets up, waddles around the desk and gives me a bear hug. He stands, hand on my shoulder, smiling. 'I know; I would be too. But let's be honest, Rohit. I'm not talking of you but generally of us Indians in the working class. When you are on the lowest rung of the ladder, you can't go further down. At that point one has nothing to lose. See that ladder as your roadmap, leading to the trap door that Raj Ramlall is holding open, to many opportunities. As they say, if you don't spend some money on a lottery ticket, you will never hit the jackpot. Take a chance, man.'

I look up to the older man. He squeezes my shoulder and goes back to his swivel chair.

'Should I take the case, Sham?'

He smiles. 'I told you we lawyers don't answer questions. The sooner you learn it the better, *beta*: some loads you carry on your own. It's for you to decide. Always look after number one – if you don't no one else will. Rohit, you've got nothing to lose but your pension, right? I'm giving it straight to you. What I can say is this: If I were you, I'd grab this appointment with both hands and thank Ganesha for bringing the opportunity to your door. C'mon, a stiff shot to the case and its success.' The Attorney-at-Law raises his glass, inclines his head.

I drink, but my mind's not with me.

'Sham I think it may help me decide if I tell Fred True-May about the job and get his advice too.'

'The Deputy-Police Commissioner? *Ja*, if you still need convincing.'

I pick up Sham's phone.

'I'm lucky I caught the chief. He said he'll see me at the Yacht Mole for five minutes in half-an-hour. I better get on my bicycle.'

The attorney takes my hand in both his pudgy ones. Man with a good heart. Malthi blows a kiss; I grab it and place it on my heart. Sham shows his horse teeth, as he habitually does on my entrance and departure, at least.

Steeping out of Damjee Building onto Victoria Street I see the *bari* Dinesh Rajput, descendent of warriors, now cafe owner. I have a *puri-patha* and masala tea, thinking as I chew on the snack made from *amadumbi* leaf and *dhall*, the itchiness it causes diluted by a squeeze of lemon. Rape and murder ... I have to try damn hard to save the *balatkari* and *jaanmari* ... alleged; mustn't think like some whiteys who believe the only good coolie is one in chains, or dead.

We stand next to the concrete bench marked “Whites Only – Slegs Blankes” under anonymous black umbrellas at the Yacht Mole, watching the rain-washed sailboats, toys of the *larnie goras*, bobbing on the water the colour of the top cop’s eyes.

‘If you don’t mind me putting it bluntly, Rohit, that was a dumb question.’

‘Why, chief?’

‘When I go to a barber, have a haircut and shave, I pay him, right?’

I frown, not knowing what his reference to a *mahapathir* means. ‘Ja.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause he’s done his job?’

‘Right! So, you’re a private detective and a client asks you to investigate a case why wouldn’t you take it on, as any person would a job he’s trained to do?’

‘But, Fred, what if I fail?’

‘Did this ... Rajshekhar Ramlall ask for a guarantee that you’ll save his son’s life?’

I look into the eyes of my former boss, gulp. ‘No.’

‘Did he say he won’t pay you if you fail?’

‘No.’

‘So your question, “Should I take the job”, shouldn’t arise. It’s meaningless.’

‘But it’ll be so hard ...’

‘You’re a pessimist; look for excuses up front. I really don’t know what’s become of you since you left the force. If I were you, even if the prosecution has a watertight case, I’d carry on. You get paid to do your job, not to sit in judgment.’

Fred True-May puts a hand on my shoulder and looks at me like a father would a child who’s just done some mischief, although the Deputy Police Commissioner is only fourteen years older’n me. ‘Rohit Biswas, you can be your worst enemy. Climb out of your shit hole and get on with life, at least for your daughter’s sake.’

I am sobered by those few words, second time I hear it in less than two hours, yet I am still in two minds. ‘I don’t know, chief ...’

‘Tell you what. I’ll get dad to meet and talk with you, tonight.’

I wanted one more confirmation before I really decide to take or chuck the case ’n walk ’way, if something worries me too much.

I sit in the red-curtained Golden Peacock Restaurant in Rajab Arcade linking Victoria and Queen streets, checking ex Police Commissioner James True-May tuck into his butter chicken with gusto. The *topi*, bald as an egg, has a helluva appetite for a man his age; must be

in his seventies, but you can't tell with these *goras*, even with the brown liver spots on their reddish face and fingers.

'You don't have to worry about Raj; he's a pukkah gentleman. For some reason he didn't get on with Anil, I believe since his son's childhood. I think the old man's trying to make up now for his failure as a father.'

My mutton biryani is heaped like river sand at one of Ramlall's stockpiles. I dig in. 'He's going to pay good money ...'

'You need that, Biswas.'

'Right, chief, but ...'

'But what?'

'Anil's life is on the line. To right his screw-ups, the old man might want me to do something to make sure his son doesn't hang.'

The *bari gora* points the drumstick held between greasy thumb and forefinger. 'Okay. Raj is one of the richest Indians in Durban right now. He's powerful, got all the right connections, and he's damn smart, hasn't broken any laws. Too sharp for that.'

'So, him appointing me must be above board?'

The diner licks his fingers, stares at me. 'Most probably. But you never know with these rich folk. What do they really want; how far will they go to protect their interests? The stakes may be higher here than you think, Biswas.'

'So, I should call it off?'

'Don't be chicken.' The man laughs, so does his belly; I grin like a goat. 'No, you need the money, that's why I recommended you. Just make sure your mind's clear at all times and watch your back. Don't fuck up; do nothing you'll regret someday.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'But, my boy, don't get in over your head. Fred may or may not have told you that your great grandma was my *ayah*. Dad said she looked after me better than her own kids. For her and your daughter's sake, don't let this case cost you your life.'

'Sir?'

The burly former cop's fat Cuban cigar glows red like a car's cigarette lighter as he sucks in. 'Times are changing. We're saying fuck you to the Brits, my people. But I was born here, in Port Natal; this is my country, and it's growing up, abandoning its nanny in Whitehall ...'

'I'm sorry, I don't follow.'

‘Don’t be sorry; be good.’ True-May points the cock-like cigar accusingly. ‘Look, the fucking Dutchmen want to piss on the British Empire and its belief that the natives should be given their freedom. What will those shits do with it? Want to live under *kaffir* rule? Not me. The National Party may be right in gearing up to fight them and their master, the Soviet Union. Biswas, in the war ... against the total onslaught by the communists, there will be many casualties. Don’t be one.’

I walk back in the dark to the office and get there at eight, then drive home deep in thought. I had forgotten to tell ma I’d be late. The house is church-quiet. I open the door to Arthi’s room, switch on the light. She’s fast asleep. I stand there, looking at her, a replica of Asha. I swallow. Can I give her a happy childhood, a life? What if I die before I can set things up? A child never asks to be born, so we parents have a duty of care. What kind of father am I? How can I do right? I kiss Arthi on her forehead, close the door gently and go to the pantry for a nightcap. Only one shot – head must be clear for tomorrow.

Ma makes hot egg-tomato chutney for *aji*, herself and me and a fried egg followed by jam-*roti* for Arthi. My daughter sits on a Globe chair with me at the wooden kitchen table, scolding me for coming so late last night. As we have our enamel cup of tea with Gold Cross condensed milk and two teaspoonful of Hulett's sugar, I apologise, saying I was busy working. She frowns, and again I'm reminded of Asha. I drop Arthi at school and drive to the office.

I phone Ramlall but he's not in. An Indian woman trying to sound like a *gori* says he left a message that he had to go to Pietermaritzburg on an urgent business matter and he would see me at four.

I sit at my desk writing notes. First, a list of people I can talk to and find out more about Anil: the man himself, but unlikely at this stage; his father and brother; the manager at the Lotus Hotel; Joe at the spice shop – he imports masala and god-knows-what from India and was a member of the Crimson League, maybe still is; Liam Flanagan, manager of the Himalaya Hotel, known to have underworld contacts and knowledgeable about the liquor and entertainment industry; Pumpy Naidoo, proprietor of Goodwill Lounge; and Chota Essop, head of the Crimson League. That's enough for a start to my intelligence gathering operation. I'll add to the list after speaking with my client.

I walk on the pavement down the left side of Grey Street in the shade of tarpaulin awnings protecting shop windows from the low afternoon sun's rays; then turn left into Queen Street and into the courtyard of Goodhope Centre. I wonder if there's a twin building, somewhere in this world, called "Badhope"? A young man is trying to mop out the shit of mynahs, crows, ravens, the harbingers of bad luck, even death, and on the paving – an impossible task. At least the feller has a paying job.

A prune-coloured Indian relic sits on a stool in black pants with a yellow band running along the sides, red coat with frayed gold braids, and a police-like hat. He fumbles a salute and I finger shoot him. What a life, spending the day pressing a button to keep lift doors open, wishing people good morning and good afternoon, as if God told him it'll be a *lekker* day, sometimes tipping a hat to a larnie-looking *ou* or auntie, and using only two words of English: "Going up!" At least the guy who tears up your cinema tickets gets to see a movie – over and over again. I go to the top floor of the building. There's a bloke in a black suit behind a desk in front of a wall with a world map proclaiming "Ramlall Enterprises".

How original. The man bows, opens the door and palms up directs me in. A beautiful young thing, also decked in death's colour, looks up from her desk, displaying a good advert for Colgate toothpaste.

'Mr Biswas, Mr Ramlall is expecting you. Follow me.' My eyes follow, I gulp.

The *larnie* takes my right hand in both of his. 'Glad you could make it.'

I didn't know a *charou* can have a corner, all-glass office like this with seasoned mahogany woodwork dark like treacle, matching thick carpets and curtains. This resembles a maharaja's palace; must be the *larniest* office in the Casbah. He'd be parking in the poshest joint in West or Smith street weren't it for the *Group Areas Act*, designed to keep non-whites in their allotted places. There's a view of the Yacht Mole, the Harbour Haven, the Bluff, and all. A guy can get some serious work done in a plush joint like this.

'Rohit, we'll sit in the outer office here. But before we start, do you mind if I show you something?'

'Please.'

Raj puts a hand on my shoulder and takes me to a room next to his office. He unlocks the door and takes off his shoes. I do likewise, and enter a room full of pictures and sculptures of deities, fresh marigold-garlanded browned pictures of long-dead parents and wife. A lump comes to my throat. The enterprise man sits on the floor Indian style; I do the same. He starts chanting and says a prayer starting with *Om namo Shivaya* and ending *Om shanti, shanti, shanti*. Asking for peace. He dips his forefinger in *sindhoor* and places an orange dot in the third-eye position on my forehead. He does the same on his. We get up and have a piece of sweetmeat each.

'Pardon my ignorance, *bhairam*, but what was that for?'

The *larnie* grins. 'I prayed for you – to have the strength, courage and wisdom to see this case through. I also prayed that the *parmatma* spares Anil's life. I'm assuming you'll take the case?'

'Shall we discuss it, *babuji*, or you don't have time?'

Again Ramlall takes my hands in his. 'I told you, Rohit, this is top priority. I will drop everything if you need me, any time. See, my assistant has done herself proud.' I check a bottle of Glenfiddich twelve year old single malt, two crystal glass, ice in a stainless steel bucket and water in what Soobri calls a *carafe*. There's some fresh Indian snacks – chili bites, *puri-patha*, *vada*, chicken pieces, meat balls, and bread rolls. Like me, Raj must know that a man can't do deep thinking without lubrication. He pours a large in each glass, looks at me.

'Water okay?'

‘Fine, *bhaia*.’

‘Cheers.’ We clink glasses and sit. The scotch is as smooth as Ramlall’s Rolls Royce piston heads.

‘Now, Rohit, fire away.’

‘Oh?’

‘Your questions. I will be open with you; the saying is that one can lie to parents and priests, but not to lawyers ... and detectives.’

I grin; swallow the excellent alcohol. Raj tops us up.

‘Why did you hire me?’

The *larnie* frowns. ‘Why not?’

I smile. ‘You’re talking like a lawyer – answering a question with a question. To be honest, *bhairam*, you know the saying; if you want a proper job done, get a white man. There’s plenty *gora* private detectives you could have gone to.’

‘Too true. I’m not boasting but I can hire the best that money can buy. But our Indian brothers need the breaks; we have to look after each other. Another reason, Rohit, is that money is important but it is not a god in our culture, as it may be for the *Angreji*. I know you will do your best. I will not put my son’s life into the hands of people to whom it is just a job knowing they’ll get paid, win or lose.’ The *topi* sighs, sips his whisky, growls deep in his throat, fishes out his Dunhill pipe and packet of tobacco, and tamps it into the bowl. He puffs it alight, and then slumps back in his seat. He takes the briar from his clenched teeth, points with the stem, and says, ‘Go on.’

‘What’s different about me?’

‘Firstly, you come highly recommended by former Police Commissioner James True-May, and secondly, only an Indian can understand our culture, psyche ...’

‘I don’t know about what you call psyche, and all.’

‘What I mean is we Hindus have our culture, norms, and standards that is ingrained in all of us. This would be helpful in understanding Anil. The English don’t know us, don’t care. You could be the difference between life and death. Also, attorney Sham Singh confirmed you’re the man for the job.’

I put my hand into my coat left pocket to take out my *chillum*, but think better of it ... don’t want to fumigate the office even if it’s air conditioned. ‘Okay, Mr Ramlall, I’ll take the case on. As you can see, I need the money ...’

‘I’ll pay you handsomely, not a cut price Indian rate, for my son’s life hangs by a slender thread. You hold that lifeline in your hands.’

I nod, take a swallow to calm my pulsing nerves. 'I'll need a lot of help from you; I don't have the power and pull necessary to get the right answers quickly enough.'

'Of course. I understand fully; as I said, anything you want, anytime.'

'*Bhairam*, if the police allow me I will talk with Anil at the right time. At this stage I have to draw up a plan of action. I've got to retrace his movements. But first I need to know all about your son; everything; especially what he or you may not wish to tell his lawyer.'

The client removes his pipe, blows smoke. 'Why?'

'So our advocate will be able to understand Anil's character and prepare the best possible defence. He must not be surprised during trial. If you tell me everything, I will only disclose what I think is relevant to the defence team, the rest is to help my investigations. What Anil tells his lawyers is privileged.'

Raj pours another round. I have some *puri-patha*. It's delicious, not greasy.

'Okay. Do you need any assistance from my side, Rohit?'

'To do a job right you've got to do it yourself; trust no one. But I may come to you now and then because getting information can cost.'

'Of course. There's no financial limit, but as you know, time is of the essence.'

'*Ha, ji*. I'll get Sham Singh to help, if that's okay with you, *bhairam*.'

Raj jerks the pipe out of his mouth. 'Fine. You can be sure he'll bill me for every minute you spend with him, adding some fat for cushion.'

'We'll need a barrister, *ne*? I don't think Sham can manage alone, not in the Supreme Court.'

'Hmm. That I'll discuss with James. We don't have any Indian barristers, so it may have to be a *gora*. 'I'm glad you've decided to take the case. When he recommended you, I thought back to Tika Singh's bend and remembered my father was on the same boat, the *SS Enmore*, as Ashok Biswas, your *pardada*. So my choosing you has some logic and charity, maybe a kind of nepotism. You don't mind me asking a few questions?'

'In my line, like the lawyering business, I usually ask not answer questions. But since you're paying, ask as many as you want and take as long as you need.' I grin; take a good sip of the *mahala* Scotch.

The man nods. 'I heard you are a fighter, for justice?'

I relate my history and circumstances, which may only have gone to confirm what he already knew from his quick check of my background. Maybe the *larnie* is testing my honesty? I was playing with my third drink and thinking of the fourth. This fancy stuff does not have a mule kick like Mainstay. *Bapuji* opens a leather briefcase and pushes a ten by

eight picture in front of me. I look at a black 'n white photo that must be more'n twenty years old but can see, still, she was a beauty. I frown. 'Is there something wrong with her eyes?'

Ramlall grins. 'Uma had green eyes.'

'*Hare Ram!* Your wife's a *gori*?'

My client shakes his head. 'No, she was not white, born in Srinagar.'

'Ah, Kashmir, where the world's beautifulest women come from?'

'Yes, she was a beauty. Love marriage, in London, just after she qualified as a doctor – gave me three sons and a daughter. She died of a heart attack when Anil was seven. Rohit, I know losing your wife must've been a traumatic experience, but you have to move on. I did after I lost my *biwi*. It was not easy. I think I was hypnotized by her. Was yours an arranged or a love marriage?'

If a *charou* can blush, I must've. 'Love, *bhaia*, at first sight, as it says in the books.'

'Ah, you believe in Shakespeare, huh?'

'*Ha*, the Bard of Avon must've been a *slum ou, ne bhai*?'

'Meaning?'

'Sheikh Pir, like Badshah Pir – Muslim. That *gora* must've copied one Arabian Knights story. Ours was just like that Romeo and Juliet – ended in tragedy.' Raj Ramlall comes and hugs me, pours me a shot. My tears fall into the whisky. I toast the client. 'So, we're two of a kind.'

'Come again?'

'Widows.'

The client shakes his head, blows sweet-smelling Dunhill smoke. 'Widowers.'

'Hmm.' I sip, savouring the Glenfiddich and thanking the Scotsmen making the stuff in the cold and damp. 'But I'm married to my shadow, *bhaia*, now my bodyguards gone.'

'Eh?'

'Smith & Wesson.'

'Tell me, Rohit, have you ever shot anyone? No, you don't have to answer that.'

I blink my eyes. I can't be caught out in a lie. 'I'll be honest with you as I hope you will, with me. I never needed a gun, knife; any weapon. Indian police were not given firearms; just a baton and handcuffs – which you couldn't use on a *gora* or *gori*.'

'Oh?'

'We coolies were not allowed to arrest a white man or woman in the early days. Nowadays you get arms when promoted to detective rank.'

‘Oh yes. But you were disarmed when you killed that African chap that had stabbed your wife? How?’

‘I shot that *madhur chodh* with my partner’s gun. First life I ever took and will regret that act for as long as I live.’

‘Stop dwelling on open wounds. James told me what happened. Don’t feel sorry for yourself, you handed out justice.’

‘Who but God can judge? Killing a man isn’t any easy thing to live with, even if you don’t know the person. He comes to see me when I close my eyes. Sometimes my nightmare begins all over again when I wake in the morning.’ There’s a moment’s silence as the air-conditioners hum.

Ramlall coughs. ‘It’s the things you don’t see coming that you have to watch out for. Now, my man, you don’t need Smith and Wesson, you can afford the protection of Johnny Walker and Jack Daniels.’

I nod, confirming I caught that joke. ‘You were saying about Anil ...’

‘Yes. He was too attached to his mother. After Uma died, he was never the same again.’

‘I’m so sorry, *bhairam*.’

Bapuji shrugs. ‘It was God’s will. I don’t know how to put it but Anil was never close to me, no matter how much I tried.’

‘I’m not a psychologist or psychiatrist, but I know that where a boy child is attracted or attached to his mother, he sees the father as an opponent.’

‘Hmm. Oedipus complex.’

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind. Anil completed primary School at St Anthony’s, close to my fruit and vegetable shop in Epsom Road.’

‘*Ha*, I know – the first Indian store in the *gora* town. Did you know any of Anil’s friends?’

‘No. He didn’t talk to me about school life. As a child, he seemed to have built a wall between us. That gulf became wider, as I said, after Uma’s death. He maintained, hardened that shield.’

‘But *bhairam* you could have made a plan?’

Mr Ramlall nods. ‘He’d go into a tantrum whenever I touched him; close his ears when I spoke to him. I hired an Indian maid, a pretty young thing. He seemed happy in her company. I left it at that.’

I could see tears in the *topi's* eyes. I feel bad, thinking about Arthi, who had lost a mother she had never known. It's not easy to see into a child's mind. 'What happened when Anil got his Primary School Certificate?'

'After eight years schooling, I sent him to the Westminster School in London.'

'So by putting him in a boarding school you cut him off completely?'

'Hmm. Maybe it was a mistake. But we couldn't cope when his nanny got married and went to live in Clairwood. The child became impossible. I visited him once a month in London – it didn't achieve anything. I wanted to give him the best education. At age seventeen, he got admitted to Trinity College ...'

'Dublin?'

'Yes.'

'Studying to become a doctor?'

'Uh huh, but he got kicked out after eighteen months.'

'Oh?'

'Well you know what teenagers are. I was told Anil had some wild friends – drinking, smoking *ganja*, partying ... a girl, cute boarder, got pregnant. She, a Catholic, refused to have an abortion. Everyone said it was Anil's child, but there was no proof. Truth lies in the facts, as you know. We didn't get to the bottom of things. I paid, got him out.'

I sip my Glenfiddich. 'So he never got no degree or diploma, and all?'

'No, but I could see that Anil was sharp, had a business brain. After the scandal ... no, incident, he didn't want to return to South Africa. He got himself admitted to University College, London, studying for a B.Com. Took him four years, during which time I hardly saw or heard from him, then he came home.'

'When?'

'Beginning of last year.'

'Did you know any of his friends in London or Dublin?'

'No, Rohit. Why do you ask?'

'Well, Anil was there at an interesting time, when so much pressure was being put on this country by Britain and the US, maybe also by the United Nations. I had dreamed of studying law in England, after Matric, and fighting the apartheid regime.'

Ramlall nods, with a faraway look. 'It's a tragedy so many of our bright children couldn't go to high school even, having to earn a living, like you.'

I take a sip of the free Scotch. 'What I'm trying to find out, *babuji*, is whether Anil became political-like, speaking out against our *goras*, making powerful enemies.'

Raj frowns; pulls on his pipe, removes it. 'Interesting point. Perhaps it's something you ought to investigate.'

'I'll talk to George Sewpershad and Pumpy Naidoo; see if they got any contacts in London.'

'Try Prema Naidoo and his sister, Ramnie ... also Issie Dinat.'

'Right. Anything happened to Anil when he got back?'

My client shakes his head. 'Not really. We still don't get on as well as I had hoped. Since he wanted to be left alone and showed promise as an entrepreneur, I bought him the Lotus Hotel, with two white partners.'

I grin. 'Got around the *Group Areas Act*, eh larnie?'

'Yes. Also because my son refused to stay in my house, didn't want me in his life. Now that he's in such a jam, I'm hoping he'll let me be a father.'

'But, *bhaia* money can't buy you love.'

'Don't I know that? But money can buy the best defence team, isn't that so? Now tell me, what's your plan?'

'Well, you can't solve a problem until you can measure it, the dimensions and depth.'

'That's true. How?'

'Snooping, leg work, paper work, questions. A lot depends on what the prosecution's case is, and we won't know until much later, if we ever get full disclosure...'

'I know doubt keeps the intellect happy and the mind free, but it won't be good enough. In South Africa a non-white has to prove he's not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. That's your job, Rohit.'

'Do you have a picture of Anil?'

Ramlall rummages in his packet. 'Here, you can keep this.'

I scrutinise the black 'n white ten by eight portrait, see Uma's son had inherited his beautiful and delicate features from her; maybe some from President John Kennedy and his lovely wife Jackie.

'When was this picture taken?'

'A year ago – on the day of Anil's return to South Africa.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-nine.'

Looks ten years younger. Anil won't be singing Jailhouse Rock; he wouldn't survive any prison stretch.

‘*Ja*. I’ve got to put in use one of the old saying I learned: It’s not what you look at but what you see. If you’ve ever fished you’d know the poor bait pays the ultimate price. It’s not going to happen to Anil. We’ll be up against the odds, but I’m going to search for truth and justice.’ I’m sounding like a priest-politician.

‘While the lawyers will say the truth lies in the facts, at my age, Rohit, I’m prepared to take a few issues on faith.’

‘*Ja*, a man’s destiny is in his hands, not written upfront by the gods.’

My client grins. ‘That’s the spirit. I’m with you.’ We clink glasses. ‘To freedom!’

Next day I meet Kapil Ramlall, eldest son, at his office in Poorbandar Building in Grey Street. This man could pass for white – skin the colour of weak white tea, blue eyes, and not an ounce of fat. He admits that he is partial to white women, invites some to his parties, imports porn, and sex toys. He confesses that Anil was once found gawking when he was making love and may have also, accidentally, seen some of his porn movies, but never in his life would believe his brother capable of doing the things he has been arrested for.

Raj takes me to his son’s flat in Queen Street. This search is fruitless so we drive in the Jag to the Lotus Hotel at the intersection of Prince Edward Street and Soldiers’ Way. He leaves me here.

I introduce myself to the manager, a middle-aged gentleman, Prakash Batohi, tell him of the charges that Anil may be facing. The man falls back in his seat, mouth hanging open like a landed rock-cod. He agrees to answer all my questions. Anil sold liquor wholesale; he may have dealt in drugs, but Batohi can’t tell me more; he drove a black Mercedes SL190 hardtop; didn’t bring any women to the hotel himself; most of the clientele were Indians; some women would dine in the Rajmahal Restaurant, but they were accompanied by their husbands or boyfriends. The manager doesn’t know of any women friends of his boss, who never made use of any of the hotel’s rooms. He didn’t know of anyone with a grudge against Anil. The office is tastefully furnished, with paintings on two walls, but not a single photograph. I go through some one hundred and twenty files in a steel filing cabinet but find nothing to shed light on Anil or any illegal business. On looking through a telephone account I note certain frequently-called numbers. The manager says these are private calls made by Anil Ramlall and not by the receptionist, who can tell me nothing of value about her boss.

I decide I’m gonna be on the beat, seeking information. I lock my office, not that there’s anything worth stealing anyway, ’cept maybe two bottles of Mainstay and my *ganja* pipe. I

walk west along Victoria Street, tipping my hat. Joe's Corner Shop is, as you may have guessed, at a corner, not of streets but of stalls or cubicles in the Indian Market. Joharilall is, as usual, squinting from the smoke of a hand-rolled cigarette, *bidi*, the ash falling into the enamel bowl adding flavour to the mix masala. His trademark grin greets me before his voice.

'Bis, you old dog you. Lock up any criminals lately?'

'That's why I'm here, Joe.'

The spice man's smile disappears. He extends his wrists held together. 'Herewa, clip on the cuffs.' I grin; clap Masala Man on the back. The cigarette drops. He stomps it. 'Have a *dop* ... pipe?'

'Naw, man, too early. Johar, I need info ...'

The man frowns. 'You know I'll share information with my brother like I share a plate of food or a bottle of vodka or a *chillum*, right?'

'That's true, *bhairam*. Tell me any juicy stuff about Raj Ramlall and his son, Anil.'

'Boss, poor feller like me mix spices. I don't hobnob with top shelf people or go 'round talking 'bout them. It's like crossing West Street wearing a blindfold.'

I laugh. This ageing *ganjaredi* always has the sense of the dramatic, even when he's low. 'In strictest confidence, Joe boy, I swear on my *aji*'s grave.'

'Bis, we cremated your granny and scattered her ashes in Blue Lagoon, rem'ber?

After your phone call, I put out some feelers, like. There's no firm evidence, PI, but rumours and speculation. While eldest brother Kapil imports goods mostly from India via Singapore and Hong Kong, it 'pears Anil went further, bringing in generic drugs and medicines, pornographic material, booze, and what not. I hear he's behind the supply of our best Poison – dunno where he gets that. His hotel and a coupla houses, at La Mercy and Isipingo Beach, are brothels for rich *goras*. He may be owning other properties registered to white people. He's not married, but could get any white woman he wanted, just like that,' Johar clicks his fingers.

'Looks like he got the last one. Not a good CV for someone up for rape and murder. What about the father, old, rich and handsome?'

Joharilall puts the spice-mixing bowl on the counter, lights a cigarette, draws on it like a Hoover vacuum cleaner. He squints. 'From what I hear, the *ballie* is on the level. Was cut up when his second son, Amrit, died, *dronk*, smashed his red MG into a stationary tree. This *ou* was my drinking partner. Makes you think, huh?'

'What?'

‘Drink can kill a man in more ways than one,’ says Joe, frowning. ‘You know, Raj’s father came as an indentured labourer with Bodasing?’

‘*Ha*, my *pardada* was on the same boat.’

‘He or your *aja* or *pitaji* didn’t tell you about the Ramlall family living by you all there at Tika Singh’s Bend?’

‘Naw. Though they lived as neighbours there, somehow we didn’t mix. Maybe because of caste. Then we lived close, us in Myhill Road and Ramlall in Mysore Road, but we were worlds apart.’

Joe shows his tobacco-stained teeth. ‘Money can divide people, *ne*?’

Early evening in Himalaya Hotel’s Kilimanjaro Bar I gulp the Mainstay and Schweppes bitter lemon, put the glass down with a bang. Soobri comes running to refill. I drink my seven cents *dhall* with fish gravy using a teaspoon. Nice, this. I turn my bum around on the swivel stool; look for clues through the thick cigarette haze. Juggler and Gus are as usual playing darts. I have no time for such shit, or hitting a small white ball with a long wood or iron into nine holes.

Curly-haired Deva comes in, black eyes casing the joint. He shows me purple gums; I give a half-smile. He goes from one drinker to another, Chinaman’s *fah-fee* runner. I don’t take chances or numbers – not with my luck. The radio volume is turned up; the hard of hearing punters hope to hear their horse’s name, most return to their drinks. Next race, maybe.

Langadha shuffles in, eyes darting, lips smacking, hustling for a *dop*, from three feet away the smell of rotten cabbage almost knocks me off my barstool. I nod to Soobri who pours a Smirnoff for the cripple.

‘Thanks, Roy *bhai*,’ he says like a child looking up to Santa Claus or Santa Ana.

‘No problem, Shiva.’ We clink glasses. ‘I’m going to pee. Don’t sniff or sip or spit in my drink. Don’t touch it, Okay?’

‘Right, *mam*.’

I stand in front of the urinal and grin, remembering when the hotel was opened and Laloo Bridgmohan, a bit *dronk*, took me by the hand and led me to the toilet. I got worried – this feller is twice my size. He, in a fancier suit than me, tells me to stand facing the wall to which was fixed a stainless steel or aluminium sheet, below a Falkirk cast iron cistern. He opens his fly and takes out his *nuni* – I don’t see it, do the same. He tells me to wee-wee and I oblige the *larnie* of Citimetal. Next thing, there’s a loud bang – gunshot? I jump, wetting my

pants, water flows over the sheet-metal. Laloo laughed till tears came in his big eyes. My first encounter with an automatic flusher. Progress? I walk back to the bar, give my drink to the cripple for I don't know what could have gone inside or whose lips touched the outside. I look at the hustler, feel pity.

'You hungry, Shiva?'

Shivakrishnan Perumal, a beggar named after two gods, swallows; his hair-covered Adam's apple bobbing. 'Always, boss.'

'Soobri, organise a *carou* mutton curry 'n rice for Shiva. Hope you're not fasting, *tata*?'

'All the time, but once in while a *lekker* mutton'll get my mouth juices working again. You not eating, *mam*?'

'Naw, I'm on a liquid diet.' I look down on the man sweating above his grey-black beard and moustache, his urine-coloured teeth reflecting happiness experienced ages ago, in his forty or sixty-year life. The waiter tells me the food's on the table. My guest and me take a seat, the hungry guy licking his lips. Shiva eats like Govind's dog who gets a starter once a day, if he's lucky. Why keep a dog if you can't afford dog food?

'In exchange for the chow I'm gonna tell you my story ...'

'Hey man, I've heard your story, forwards, backwards, sideways, so many times that if I gave you a meal every time I hear that shit, you'll be fat like Buddha.'

'Who's that?'

I look around and notice Soobri motioning with his head. I go behind the bar counter through a door into the kitchen. The manager, dressed like a lawyer in his black double-breasted pinstripe suit, comes forward, hand stretched out. I shake it.

'I made some calls after your call. You're right, Bis. Anil is in the booze, mandrax, and dagga business. His pills come from Bombay, through Salisbury, then by road to Joburg. He's got a girlfriend, married white woman whose husband is a big shot. You ought to investigate this woman, Elizabeth Russell. Something's not right about her. That's all I've got at the moment. You didn't get this from me, okay?'

'You're right something's not right about her.'

'What?'

'She's been raped and murdered ...'

Liam Flanagan's mouth hangs open like a landed catfish.

'... It's a case I'm on. Irish, thanks. That's a great help. See you 'round.'

‘Not if I see you first,’ he forces a grin. I give the friendly *gora* a light punch on the shoulder and get back into the bar, with some satisfaction; at least a blurred picture is emerging.

I ponder the question that Raj Ramlall asked, about my background and how I became a private investigator.

A reason for my wanting to be involved in crime detection or justice was that I read detective and crime stories when young. My father worked for the South African Board Mills in Umgeni. The company collected newspapers, books, magazines, and all, from white homes and dumped them for recycling. Baba, a machinery greaser, would go through the rubbish, pick out and clean comics and books. We had no such things in our house; all we read was yesterday's tea, curry 'n *dhall*-stained *Daily News* or the *Natal Mercury* on the blue Panelyte kitchen table. Now 'n then Hari *kaka* bought the weekly *Leader* and sometimes the *Graphic*. These were boring, 'cause Indians didn't do the kind of things that made interesting reading. *Aji* won't allow anybody to read the *Post* saying it was full of rubbish, even to someone who's illiterate.

'Though I read anything that started off being interesting, from about age nine I enjoyed novels by James Hadley Chase and Erle Stanley Gardner. Crimes, criminals and cops. Some of Chase's books were banned but Cassim *bhai* who owned and ran Avalon Tea Room next to the cinema could smuggle them into the country. I'd pay a two-shilling deposit and wait and wait. I'd save some money and also bluff *kaka* that I needed a crown sometimes for a school excursion or whatever came to mind quickly. *Didi* used to buy the comic that came free inside *Personality* magazine once in two weeks for tuppence. So, I became a fan of Perry Mason, Inspector Carr, Inspector West, and of the weekly serial, *Consider Your Verdict*. I thought maybe I should be a Mason kind of feller, but two problems prevented me from making my "dream" come true: My family couldn't afford sending me to university; secondly they said a lawyer can't stay out of trouble with the government in this country. A Matric pass could get me a job with the South African Police, for all they needed was a PSC. So, why not become a crime fighter, a much simpler version of Superman or Batman?

*

One summer afternoon Hari *kaka* returned from work at Wheeler's Sand Company where he was a dragline operator and said let's go catch something for supper. *Kaka*, baba, and me

walked down the steep slippery slope to the river now in full flood. Carefully we enter the water, the colour of strong tea with not enough Gold Cross condensed milk. *Kaka* and baba hold the two ends of the six feet by two hessian sack we use as a net. They put it into the water about five feet out and drag it toward the bank. I stand on my left foot and with the other trample the reeds and stir the still water. I'd scoop the prawns, shrimps, crabs, and small fishes into a pillow case; then we'd walk upriver and repeat the exercise. It wasn't long before we made a big catch.

The net is lifted above the water and I put my hand in to take out the stuff. I stop; look at the thing like I'm seeing *Shaitan*. I don't know whether baba was having an asthma attack or a stroke; *kaka's* eyes were big 'n white as boiled eggs. I swallow, seeing this whitish bald head – no nose, tongue, skin, nothing. I put a thumb and middle finger through the dark holes where the poor feller's eyes would've been and put the thing in the pillow case.

Kaka says, 'What, you mad, Rohit? Give me the bag!' He twists the top end of the pillow case and ties it; swings it above his head and throws the bag a distance downstream. It lands on the near bank. I make a note of the spot.

Next day I ducked school and walked the seven miles to Briardene Police Station and told the Indian man in blue uniform behind the counter about our catch.

The *karia* raises his caterpillar eyebrows, then seeing me looking worried, smiles. 'So you brought this pillowcase of prawns, shrimps, crabs, and all to sell, or did these creatures commit a crime?' He gives a donkey laugh, spit flying through his purple lips. It's not funny.

I put the pillow case on the counter and pull out the head. The man who was the colour of ripe umdoni went grey like ashes, just like that. He's breathing heavily, and takes hold of the counter with both hands, looking at me like I was a ghost. After a minute he lifts a flap on the counter and asks me to come into the room they call the charge office. He turns his head and shouts, 'Sarge!'

The *gora* named Sarge, wearing black pants, white long sleeve shirt and black tie, comes into this room, stretching out his hand. I shake it. The Indian policeman whispers to him for a minute, pointing to the skull on the counter. The handsome man smiles.

'Moodley, put the skull in a paper bag. Send it to the lab, now.' He turns to me. 'Master Rohit Biswas, pleased to meet you. I'm Detective Sergeant Fred True-May. Let's go into my office, shall we?'

I sit at a big wooden desk opposite the detective who looks at me like I come from 'nother planet.

‘Thirsty?’ I swallow, nod. ‘Sipho, two cold Co-ee, please.’

The African policeman puts two sweating bottles with gas coming out of the neck on the desk. Sergeant nods. I swallow, almost choking, then slow down, ready to be questioned. I shouldn’t have come here. Now I know I’m in trouble. The man opens a book, ready to start writing. He asked my name, age, school, mother’s and father’s names, and all. Now I know I made problems for myself, having a criminal record or something. But the *gora* smiles and says, ‘Go on.’

‘...maybe the man – I’m guessing it’s a man – got chopped by *rawans*? Man without a face, used to be one time someone’s father, brother or uncle ...’

‘Hey, boy.’

I jerk.

‘You think the man, or woman, went into the water, and got taken by a crocodile?’

‘No crocodiles ... or sharks in Sea Cow Lake, Sergeant.’

The policeman raises his eyebrows. ‘Just testing. What about being strangled by an eel?’

I shake my head, smile. ‘We get eels here, sometimes, but the biggest we caught will not have been strong enough to choke a man. You know, Sir, I’m the only one in the district to eat eel, small ones, and barbel. Nobody else will. They’re tasty.’

‘You’re a man of exquisite taste, especially for an Indian.’

‘Hmm. When I’m like dying from being so hungry, I pinch the head of a shrimp, pull off the shell, and eat it. No running stomach, nothing.’

‘Quite the river-food gourmet, aren’t you?’ Sarge smiles.

‘Sir?’

‘Another cool drink, Master Biswas?’

I nod. ‘If you got it, uncle.’ I never talked so much one time in my ten year’s life. Thirsty work.

The *gora* shouts, ‘Moodley!’ The Indian cop comes in, stands. ‘Two Cokes. Also get some chili bites, our witness must now be hungry.’ I eat like Bonzo, my neighbour’s dog, who gets fed only bones after all the mutton or chicken meat have been scraped off.

‘Tell me, Rohit, why you don’t think the skull came from that cemetery across the river, in Springfield?’

‘Well, Sergeant, the graveyard is directly opposite the place where the skull was found. If it came from there, dug out by the flood, the body would have been washed ’way and found further down the river.’

The man forehead gets creased. ‘Sounds reasonable. Now what’s your hypothesis ... theory?’

‘Huh?’

‘What do you think ... guess, really happened?’

‘I’m believing the body came from up-river. I’d heard a story of a swami who had disappeared from his cave at Haunch, below Clermont. Rumour was that he was putting young married ladies in a trance and then taking their clothes out, and all. I overheard *aji* telling our neighbour that Bishum, the bus driver, had given his wife a hiding because she had gone like *pagal* with all the mumbo-jumbo Swami Parmananda had put into her pretty head. Munilall was known to be short tempered and to take a lot of *dharoo*. Swamiji head was shaved bald, just like the skull. Maybe his body or only the head got stuck here.’

‘Rohit, how did you get to know about Swami Parmananda?’

‘I don’t think he was a pukkah pandit ...’

‘Just a quack...’

‘Eh?’

‘Go on; how did you learn of this man?’

‘Well, baba and me sometimes walked a long way upriver from Mana Maharaj’s house, but many times the prawns and crabs were small, and not enough. It was too far to go to get decent sized stuff. I told baba that we should catch a bus to Behari’s Store, in the far west part of Newlands, and start catching the big, see-through prawns from Haunch, work downwards and when we had enough, then catch a bus home. We sold some of our catch, the rest we eat like kings and shit out like riverside battlers. Haunch was what *kaka* called a treasure trove. The far bank here was a reddish-yellow cliff with some caves where monkeys and baboons lived. The Swami who came from India stayed there, I don’t know why. His job was to help people with trouble through prayers. Most men-folk said he was a fake or a snake; I dunno what that all means. Some ladies thought he was the Indian Jesus. I think Swamiji believed he was a saint who could walk on water. Nobody can do that in the Umgeni River. Trouble started when married ladies went to his cave, alone, to tell Swami of their problems and suffering, and all. Next thing we hear the guru’s gone missing – was never found.’

‘You don’t think he went back to Mysore?’

‘Naw. All of his stuff was still left in the cave. He would have told everybody if he was returning to India.’

The *gora*'s forehead gets creased again. 'So you think he got killed by an irate husband?'

'Irate?'

'A man who got angry with his wife and killed the Swami?'

I smile. 'You're the detective. You have to find the truth.'

The Sergeant had stopped writing. 'Is that the whole story, Rohit?'

'I think so, uncle.'

The Sergeant puts on his check coat and comes around the desk holding a ten-shilling note in front of my puzzled face.

'Sir, is this what you call a bribe?'

He laughs. 'No, a reward; an incentive ... for you to carry on.'

Mr Fred True-May drives me home in his new Morris Minor. Neighbours surround the vehicle, swallowing, Adam's apples bobbing like motor car pistons. The detective gets out of the car and shakes my hand, saying he will be "in touch". He puts a hand on Hari *kaka*'s shoulder and whispers for a minute or two. Then I know I'm in trouble but after the Sergeant drives away, I see my uncle smiling at me.

'You know that policeman, Rohit?'

'Sergeant?'

'*Ha*. His father is a big-shot in the police. The two True-May *goras* saved Ismail Moosa from being hanged.'

My body turns cold remembering that case. I smile, knowing that there are some good white people in Durban, and I'm thinking I should become a detective and maybe save lives too.

I forgot about the Swami until about six months later I see the Morris Minor at my house. Sergeant calls me with his finger. We shake hands. He gives me a pound note.

'This is for doing my job. You solved the case. Our tests showed that the skull was indeed of Swami Parmananda. Bishum Munilall confessed to his murder, and throwing his body into the Umgeni. You were right all along – you should become a detective, after you've finished Matric.'

Kaka showed me the *Leader*. There was a picture of me shaking hands with Detective Chief Inspector James True-May and his son, Sergeant. On Monday, at assembly, principal Nair with hair in nose and ears, gave me an envelope and told the school of my part in

solving a murder mystery. All clapped. No mystery in the envelope – it was another pound note. If a detective is also a money collector, I want to be one.

After finishing Matric at Sastri College and not wanting to be teacher and not being able to afford going to varsity to study medicine, I caught a bus to town and walked to Central Police Station. The *gora*, they called him Fred, remembered me and we toasted with cold but sweaty Co-ee iron brew. Can't be a detective just like that, I found out. The man gave me a job as a constable; at least I got a uniform to wear, at no cost. Fred's *ballie*, James True-May, is the *larnie*. He tells me I have to go for police training at Wentworth, in the bushy township past Clairwood and the Bluff; came back as a cop, started at the bottom, but at last and at least I was earning some money to give ma for food. Luckily, the two True-Mays kept their sea-blue eyes on me and I got quickly promoted to this 'n that, and finally to Detective Sergeant. *Ja*, I solved some big cases. I could afford to get married, so I did, and fathered a child. Now I'm proud of me. And then one day there's a knock on my door. Old man James has come to notify me my beloved wife has been murdered. He puts his large arms around me. Something in my chest is breaking; there's an instant ache. That's why I use alcohol as an anaesthetic, for my chronic pain.

*

I blink my eyes – no time for daydreaming, back to my twenty-four hour nightmare, Anil Ramlall. Will the lessons and cop tricks I learned from the True-Mays help me catch the real killer? Or confirm that Anil done the deeds? In South Africa the long arm of the white man's law moves at scary speed. The arrest, trial, and execution can happen in fast motion. We don't let a killer have accommodation, food and clothing at taxpayer's expense for too long. I've got to move, pronto. But it's too soon – the police will have little on their files; even less to share. I can't wait or follow someone else's lead, have to begin digging now.

I called Deputy Police Commissioner Fred True-May and, as expected, he tells me there is nothing to say, not even the identity of the deceased until she was identified by her next of kin. I scan the newspapers, starting with the obituaries as I habitually do: *The Natal Mercury*, *The Daily News*, even *The Post* that specialises in crime and other sordid kind of stuff, had nothing. Why not? Is this story being deliberately kept under wraps? Why? Won't a smart cop tip off the press for a small consideration? Wouldn't there be a little article saying an unidentified white woman was yesterday found raped and murdered in her home at X.

Police are investigating; or some shit like that? No dice; I've got to make my own treasure-seeking map.

I sit in my office, looking at the marked telephone numbers of private calls made by Anil on the account I got at the Lotus Hotel. I dial one that has been frequently called.

'Russell residence.' An African woman's voice, tuning like an educated *gori*.

'May I speak with Mr Russell, please?'

'He is not available. Call his office, Sir,' the maid answers bluntly, like she's a nightclub bouncer.

'Well, madam, can I speak with Mrs Russell?'

'No, she ... is not here. What's your business with the *baas* or madam?'

'Ah, yes. A young Indian gentleman paid me, Famed Florist, to deliver a bunch of roses. Just gave this phone number, no name, nothing ...'

'I don't know why anybody who knows madam will send her flowers ... roses?'

'*Ja*. Why's that?'

'Mavis.'

'Ah, sis Mavis. You think I've made a mistake or what?'

'It's just that the gardener, Prem, has so many flowers, and a big section of roses.'

'But sister, this young man has paid me and I don't know him. So I better get my driver to deliver the flowers. What's the address?' I make a note. 'I hope madam will be there to receive the lovely roses ...'

'She'll never be here.'

'Why?'

I hear sobbing. 'Ask the police.' She hangs up.

Jackpot!

I go to the locked gate and shout: "Hello!" and wait like the market gardeners must have, in the hope of selling some fresh vegetables, fruit, or flowers. I see a side door open and a hefty Zulu woman in a blue one-piece skirt and top with matching *doek* waddles toward me, stopping breathless. I put on my cop accent and flash my fake badge.

'I'm Detective-Constable Kissoon from Durban North Police Station. You have a man named Prem working here?'

'Yes. What is the problem?'

'I can't tell you – it's a police matter. Send him out, please; it's private business; I'll have to talk to him alone.'

On either side of the gate the maid and me stood in different worlds just now. How the English has divided even us darkies, for easier rule. We Indians living in our villages, working as servants for the white households or as office labourers, tea boys, drivers, messengers, and what not. But we couldn't get a job with the Durban Corporation, driving their rubbish and shit-bucket trucks; were not permitted to become carpenters, plumbers and electricians. The coloureds could do all this. Job reservation. So we had a four-level system here, us above the baseline Africans. Seems like a different kind of caste system. *Ja*, the *munts* carted shit buckets and washed them at the Springfield depot and across the road, they levelled the refuse and covered it with a thin layer of soil. They dug up roads, seemingly happy as they sang their Zulu work chants, their picks rising and falling in unison, handled expertly between spit-lubricated palms. While we use our Indian-owned buses, Africans are allocated the last six rear seats in red-coloured white buses reserved for Africans, "green mambas" were for use by Non Europeans but they didn't travel to Indian Group Areas. So we didn't mix with other races, really, especially not with Africans. But I used to enjoy the black 'n white movies shown on a white bed sheet at the compound for African male railway workers on Friday evenings. They'd drink *tshwala*, a beer made of sorghum, drunk out of a used gallon paint tin passed around. Slowly these guys get *dronk* and halfway through the movie the talking is so loud you can't hear the actors. Sometimes stick fights would break out, as in Mahageni, a village one mile from us where men working as hard labourers for the Durban Corporation and the South African Railways and Harbours would start drinking on a Saturday afternoon. They usually never harmed us kids but I rem'ber the time when these guys would chase each other. Is this a repeat of the 1949 Potato Riots between Indians and Zulu's all over again? Two half-naked men ran toward our house. We locked all doors. Each had a spear in one hand and a knobkerrie in the other. From the window ten feet away we saw the battle and heard the thwack of wood on flesh. At age seven I saw, wide-eyed, a man killed, stabbed by a spear in the heart, bleeding like red water running from a hosepipe. These people are animals, and we treated them as such, when I think how William, our gardener and kitchen boy, who taught me swimming, catching crabs, and other useful things, lived, like so many of his kind, in dark cellars or storerooms shared with bats, rats, and cockroaches. Even today, these black men can only drink the Durban Corporation-supplied *tshwala* in municipal owned beer halls; they're not allowed in our Indian bars behind white hotels. Thank god.

The gate opens; a dark wrinkled face pokes out, looking left and right before stepping into the cul-de-sac.

‘No need to worry, uncle. I’m investigating for the defence in a rape ’n murder case.’ That got the old gardener’s goat; his sunken eyes come alive. ‘I want to just ask a few questions.’ We sit in my car under the shade of a rubber tree. I pop a bottle of Castle, hand it to my companion. He gulps, Adam’s apple bobbing. ‘Remember, Prem *kaka*, you’re not in trouble. Anything you tell me will be our secret, *ne*?’ The man nods, eyes scanning for another beer. I give him one and toast with mine. ‘First, tell me about your Madam.’

Prem, the mournful licks his purple lips, says that madam’s body drives him to migraines, wet dreams and a shaking of his shrivelled cock. Maybe this is the highlight of the poor guy’s life. I suppress a laugh, let him off the leash. ‘G’wan.’

‘Not right talking ’bout dead people.’

‘Who?’

‘Madam. She was ... raped and murdered. You from the police, don’t you know?’

Jackpot! ‘Okay, *kaka*, I understand we must respect the dead. But we owe it to her to find who did these terrible things to her, then took her life. It’ll help me if I know everything ’bout your madam.’

‘Right, *beta*. But one time, Saturday morning I came here. Know what I saw?’

‘No, but wait. What is your *gora*’s name?’

‘George Russell; he’s a *mota*. Big man in town.’

‘His wife’s name?’

‘Liz ... Lizzie. The *topis* and grannies called her Elizabeth.’

I’ve got the basics; need to work in and around it, but have to humour this topi now.

‘Okay, *kakaji*, you were going to tell me what you saw, one time?’

‘Guess?’

‘I’m not good at guessing, uncle.’ I read a kind of schoolboy enthusiasm in the old timer’s umdoni-coloured face. He may have never had such an interested audience. I let the Castle loosen his tongue.

‘Give up? Okay, okay, I tell you. She was sitting there, by the pool under the umbrella ... naked, *nunge*. She sees me with my big, big eyes and tongue hanging out and says, “You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Prem”. She never even covered her *buur*, with so lot... white hair; never felt shy ’bout it.’

‘And your tongue was hanging out, eh *kaka*?’

'I tell you, not only tongue, Roy, but my *danda* was waking up, after being dead so long time ...'

'*Ja*, you believe in reincarnation, that the dead will arise, but not your old wrinkled *dunda*, surely? Resurrection?'

'Don't know nothing 'bout reseraction, but hey, sonny boy, Madam Lizzie can wake the dead, with a body and a smile like that. But she done more rude, rude things.'

'What?'

'That one night ... lotta rain. I stayed 'way here. Mr Russell was overseas. She was *jolling*, with one Indian feller. *Sies*, man,' the relic shakes his head.

'What she was doing?'

'*Chi chi* ... Not nice, like that.'

'You dirty dog, you ...'

'Not dirty dog, sly fox they call me.' The gardener sips the beer like a man of the world and grins toothlessly.

'And you wet yourself, Prem?'

'Too old, boy. I got so mad, jealous, that my missus was doing such a dirty thing ... that I wanted to rush in there and hit the *madhur chodh* with my *lathi* ...'

'I see. So, *kaka* you were jealous, eh? Didn't want any non-white *madhur chodhoing* your madam?'

'Hey, boy, don't use so rude, rude words. You have to respect white peoples.'

'Yes, but you were jealous, someone touching your missus, let alone she sucking a coolie's cock.'

'*Ha*, I was jealous, but also wanted to look after *baas* George's property. Sometimes my brain gets so mixed up I want to grab her, suck her *choochi* ...'

'*Hayibo* Prem, Liz has turned your brains into butter. She can have you eating out of her puss anytime she wants.'

'She's a *shaitan* ... was, that *kasbin* ... Madam Smells so nice; she's so soft and lovely. I shiver to think what it'll be like to have such a thing in my bed. But it's only a dream, *beta* ... I can never taste a white lady's *buur*, not in this life.'

'Dream on, old man.'

'You watch out, Roy, my boy. Once she grabs your balls, you can't get out. You might be thinking you in heaven, one time, but you going to see after that it was hell ... hell.' The old man's Adam's apple bobs in his turkey throat. I pop off the top and pass the bottle to my informer. He drinks glug, glug and sighs.

‘Thanks for the advice, Prem *kaka*. But tell me. Have you seen an Indian chap with a black Mercedes 190SL, a small ... you know, sports car, visiting madam anytime?’

‘*Ha*. Few times, when *Russell baas* is overseas. That’s the bloke I’m talking about, handsome feller, maybe twenty-five, thirty-five years old.’

‘Do you know the man’s name, anything about him?’

‘Naw, nothing.’

‘When did you see him here last?’

‘New Year’s Eve.’

‘Saturday?’

‘*Ha, ji*.’

‘What time did he leave?’

‘Don’t know. I knocked off work five o’ clock. The party people in fancy cars only started to come then.’

‘*Kaka*, did you work the next day?’

‘Naw; don’t work Sundays.’

‘Did you recognise ...’

‘Huh?’

‘Did you know ... make out, anybody else at the party, before you left?’

‘That time there was only *goras* and *goris*. That kind people I don’t know.’

‘Prem uncle, tell me. These people, they only celebrated with alcohol?’

‘What you mean, *beta*?’

‘Did you see anyone taking drugs?’

The old man shakes his head. ‘Don’t know nothing ’bout drugs, bugs, and all. But some of the people smoke *ganja*.’

‘Gwan. Did you see that?’

‘Naw, but I know. I found some *zolls* in the garden shed. She got some dagga plants, telling me its marigolds that don’t bear flowers.’ A toothless grin. ‘I wasn’t born yesterday.’

‘No, you were born a long time ago, saw much of hard life, I know.’

Mavis would be a dead end, warned not to speak to anyone about the crimes, as would Elizabeth Russell, in a fridge at Gale Street or King Edward VIII mortuary. I’ve got to chat with Fred True-May, maybe also to his *topi*. Raj has to help because *goras* won’t talk to me, but I’ve got to know who were at that party and when they left.

I sit in the car, thinking. Did Anil leave from here after a party? Did he stay the night? Did Liz Russell have anything to do with his departure? What happened here? I can

understand sexy Liz arousing an old goat but what if she drove Anil or someone else crazy with lust to such an extent that the man killed her? How did Anil end up *konked* out at La Mercy Beach? So many questions; nobody to interrogate. I must make a plan, sharp.

I let my informer out with a bottle of beer and thanks. He couldn't tell me anything about his *baas*, George Russell, absent from the *joll*. That raised my antenna. Did he know Anil and the missus were lovers? '*Kaka?*' The *topi* turns, pokes his head through my car window.

'*Kya, beta?*'

I take out Anil's photo, show it to the gardener. 'Is this the man who *chodhoed* your madam?'

The ghoulish man's deep-set eyes enlarge to focus. '*Ha, ji. That's the madhur.*'

It's early evening; I sit on a bollard at Ocean Terminal sweating in Durban's air that's as warm as my blood. I hear the *Hind Mahasagar*, the Indian Ocean, lapping against the piers while the Dukes Combo plays *Hava nagila*: India meeting Israel in South Africa. Dee Sharma's saxophone turns me into a dreamer. My eyes scan the water, peering to see if the subcontinent appears like a mirage out of the darkness.

Here we are, fourth and fifth generation, hand in hand, a father-daughter story-telling ritual, at Battery Beach or Albert Park, or the Yacht Mole, always looking at the calming sea, me the *kisa* man, often using baba's black notebook as a crutch. Arthi is frowning up at me.

'*Papaji*, why you smiling?'

'Oh, *beti*, sitting here, just about where *pardada*, my great grandfather, landed eighty-seven years ago, makes me think of the past.'

'Tell me his story.'

'My girl, it's a long, boring one that will not interest a little girl like you.'

'I like to learn about history, especially where we came from.'

'Okay, my love. Now, if you want a *kahani* told like it's a real experience, then I will have to be an actor and play the role of my *pardada*, Ashok Biswas. I'm going to make it up from what he and my *aja*, grandfather, told me, and what baba translated from Hindi into English in his big black notebook he called his *Ramayana*.'

'Make it interesting, right?'

'Uh huh. I'll try. Remember, out of respect, we don't use the names of our elders but I'm going to do so for the story's sake.'

We settle down on a bench near the edge of the jetty, water in front and behind us. I hold my only possession of value.

'Here goes. First, an introduction: I was eleven when Ashok died aged 73. I remember his white turban with matching handlebar moustache and beard, telling tales with a crooked smile and the occasional draw on the *hookah*.' I clear my throat; open the home-made *kisa* or *kahani* book.

*

The rain is drumming like a tabla on the corrugated iron roof and walls. I don't see, but feel a drop on my face. Lying on the wooden floor, I can't move because there's someone sleeping next to me, left and right. I hear a sound that can frighten anyone; I can't describe it. Somebody is shaking me, shouting, "Ashok, get up! Everybody, get out! Now!" We go out in the dark, stand in the rain. We see the Umgeni River flowing so fast ten, twelve feet away. So near. Hare Ram, a flood. Somebody shouts, "What's the time?" Must be a well-to-do man with a watch answers, "Three o' clock."

Straight away I called my two sons, Jivan and his smaller brother, Junghi, to go and help Gangan and Mariemuthoo Padavattan who have a boat. I'll never forget that Sunday, 28 October 1917, when we saved 175 people but lost Jivan, taken by the floodwater. I told Junghi he must write the story down, starting with life and death in Tika Singh's Bend.

Arthi shakes me. 'But that story doesn't start in India.'

I smile. 'No, I was being clever, starting in 1917 when *pardada* was 57. It's strange how my *pitaji*, who suffered two drowning where both bodies were never found, formed the Durban Indian Surf Life Saving Club sixteen years later with a cousin and neighbour Balkumar Singh. Strength of character, I suppose.'

'Okay, *pitaji*, let's go to India.'

*

The main thing I remember is the thirst, I can swallow nothing. The throat burns, stomach makes noises, nose itches from the bad, bad smell like one madman mixed salt, sweat, and piss. We hardly see or hear anything, but half-naked dirty men and non-stop creaking. I feel in my guts the never-ending rolling, making me look like someone who drank too much home-made dharoo or pulled long and hard on the chillum. I have been lying down, day and night, night and day, for weeks, so weak, sick, want to throw up, but my stomach's got nothing to blow out. I notice something on the moving wooden floor, reach out, praying for any one of the 3 500 devtas to turn it into food or sweetmeat, and close my fingers around it. Ha, light as air. A boot stomps on my hand. "Ma!" It hurts.

"Stealing, huh?"

I can't speak. It's like God got angry just now and struck me dumb. Water, like the jal from the Ganga River, falls from my red eyes. I shake my head up and down.

"Look at me, coolie," an angry dog barks.

I lift my head; see a giant white man in a funny hat, black coat with big silver buttons all the way on one side, coming down to his knees, from where thick socks go down to the side of black shoes tied with string. The jahajis wear only their dirty dhotis...

‘What’s “jahaji” and “dhoti”, *papaji*?’ My daughter tugs me back to the present.

‘*Jahaji* is a sailor, who wears a white cloth, called a *dhoti*, from his waist down, instead of trousers. It is what made the white sahibs laugh and call them towel-heads, napkin-wearing camel jockeys.’

‘I don’t understand.’

I grin. ‘You will, one day. Anyway, back to Ashok’s story.’

*

The gora shows his yellow teeth in between black and white hairs under his nose, in his ears, and on his fat cheeks, looking like our monkey God, Hanuman.

“How old are you, boy?”

I don’t know what the man is saying because I never learned English, so I keep quiet.

“You travelling alone, feller?”

I suck my lips, wondering what the malik of the ship means. The gora grabs my hand and pulls me up.

“Come with me.”

I walk behind him, like my dog, Hira, who I used to pull with a string tied to his neck. Is the man going to throw me in the sea, where aja said the almighty, Atma’s, creatures came from and where all must return, one day? Is it today for me? Tears come as my eyes roll, looking everywhere. The gora opens the door lock with a big key, pulls me inside. Hai, this is like Maharaja Jai Singh’s palace, which baba showed me once in Jaipur, only smaller. The man they call “captain” pushes me onto a chair. I sit, frightened, the gora so near, his eyes the colour of the sea ... Shaitan’s. The captain bites his thin red lips, pours something from a dark green bottle into a round glass that looks like a lotus flower with a stem. It’s red. Khoon? Is captain a Kali devotee who’ll drink my blood and then throw me in the kala pani, black water, what the lascars, the fifty Indian men who run the jahaj, call the Indian Ocean? I am thinking I’ll never see the place where they said the gold shines on the sides of roads and from brinjal plants, the Promised Land for Indian coolies, the British colony of Natal, on the bottom tip of Africa.

‘Papa?’

‘Yes, *beti*?’

‘Is this a fairy tale?’

I laugh, widen my eyes. ‘The story may sound like it, but it’s true. That’s how we came to be here.’

‘Okay.’

*

My brother, Jhora, five years older than me, also heard about the stories of gold but he didn’t know if they were fairy tales. Baba said they must stop thinking about nonsense and work harder on his small sugar cane plantation, knowing full well that we’ll never get enough pay from Babu Dulelsing to whom pitaji sold his crop. One day, father, me, and Jhora went to Babu. We sucked sweet, hot tea from the saucer as we listened to him saying there’s no future in the village of Goshukigurh, not even in the District of Agra. His son, Bodasing, was going with his blessings to find a job on a sugar plantation in Natal. Even if that place is a jungle with lions and elephants, and all, it may be better than staying and starving in India. Father told if we wanted to go, he won’t stop us. Jewellery shop-owner, Cohen sahib, who made money within paan-spitting distance of the Taj Mahal, had said, “Go, boys, get stinking rich. Use your brains. Be sharp.” I remember the old goat’s face; believed that Jew. When Jhora got a letter saying the Indian army could not take him, we caught a train from Agra. The agent in Madras shook his head while laughing with his black eyes. ‘Ha ji, there’s plenty gold; lot money. You can get rich without working hard; become owner of business, have slaves, like the Angreji sahibs.

We were frightened to be on a jahaj on so deep water because not one of us can swim. The jahajis had such a small place, if you turn you go on top of another man. Sometimes, when the wind is strong and the ship shakes like it’s going to break, then all pray we don’t go down, down to the bottom. Times like this the aunties don’t clean the rice and dhal and the people find sand and other rubbish mixed in with the dry fish or potatoes. Then the ship smells bad after most people vomited, shitted even. When water to drink is not enough we suffer extra. If not the pagal samudar...

‘What’s that, *papaji*?’

‘The mad ocean ... sea.’

If not that, then the rotten food might kill us. Jhora bhai looked at me and shook his head, feeling bad because he can't do anything to make his fourteen-year old brother better. One night the strong wind sounds like someone is running a catgut bow over the sarangi, sounding like a baby crying. I close my eyes tight. Then somebody is shaking me. I awake and see it is one of the sirdars. The big man puts a hand round my shoulder and speaks in Hindi.

"You are Ashok Biswas?"

"Ji, ha."

"I'm so sorry, beta, your brother, Jhora, is no more."

"What you saying, sirdarji?"

"He went on deck to pee – got washed away by big wave."

I looked at the man, my eyes and mouth wide open. Then I scream. Nobody hears.

"He's in kala pani?" Sirdarji shakes his turbaned head. "Did anyone say a prayer, do the last rites?"

"Beta, the goras don't care about all that. Only the captain worries, because he don't get paid for lost cargo. We have left our traditions, customs, castes, and all that with the Port Officer in Madras. You can see here Brahmin, Kshatriya, like me, are thrown in one bit pot with chamars, pig eaters and shoe makers. The sahibs know no caste; they just want donkeys ..."

"You are saying we were tricked, when they said we can make lot money in Port Natal?"

Sirdarji's teeth shine white between his beard and moustache. "Is it not better ... is nothing not better than starving in your village? You work hard and don't sit on your brain, who knows, you could become a maharaja, ne?"

I lift and drop my shoulders.

"You must be strong, beta." He pats my head and goes. I could see tears in that big warrior's eyes.

"You want a drink, boy?" Masterji asks. I am so thirsty and hungry ... but I can't drink blood, I want ... need water. "Go on, it's good wine ... Cabernet Sauvignon, made from grapes. I'm sorry you lost your brother overboard."

He pours into the funny-looking glass. "Drink up. See, it won't kill you." He sips, makes 'aah'. I am dying of thirst, will even drink piss. I swallow a little, cough. It's sour like lemon or lime. The gora slaps his thigh, his body shaking like he got a trance. He sees my eyes, must be white like boiled eggs, from just looking at the plate of roasted meat. I never

eaten ghos before, my teeth make noise. I open my right hand. The brown thing falls on the table.

“Ah. You see that?” The gora points, his finger thick like a cucumber, “It’s a wine bottle stopper, made from cork ...”

This man is rude, because I heard that the word is English for nuni.

“... cork, made from the bark of a tree, most probably from Spain.”

I thought about that strange country, Spain, where trees bark like dogs and they make cocks from trees? Clever, the people who live there. Captain takes the thing and drops it in a jug of water. Ha! It floats, like Jagesur’s fishing boat. I’ve seen such a lot of dead men, looking already like ghosts, skin and bones, bulging yellow eyes, sewed into bags and thrown into the sea, like rubbish, sinking as a big stone would. Gone! Not floating about. No prayers for Atma to take care of them and save their souls. I think if I’m not dumped in the sea and if by the grace of Saraswati I land in the place I’m supposed to go to, I can use this cock as a floater, catch some fish for supper. The bari man eats like a baby, spit falling from his mouth. With his left hand ... chi ... he gives me a piece.

Captain moves both hands, like a fowl’s wings, makes a sound, “puk puk, puk puk.” I laugh. “It’s chicken, won’t poison you.”

I grab what the sahib called a drumstick and eat like Hira when he has had nothing for a week. It tastes different, not like the sour porridge, dhall or kedgerree, roti and tomato chutney we have in Goshukigurh. I blink; move my head up and down.

“Know where you are, boy?”

I’m eating so fast I can’t talk or think of anything else. I lift and drop my shoulders.

Captain opens a long, rolled-up paper that has pictures on it. He knocks on one place with a thick finger. “Know where that is, hmm?”

“Nahi.”

“Port Natal. The Enmore will land there in about eight days, around the end of August in the year of our Lord, 1874; Him and Davy Jones willing, of course.” He claps his hands, laughs like a donkey.

Ha ji! That’s the place Babu Dulelsing and Mr Cohen said we will be going, to make a fortune, whatever that is, maybe meaning money, get rich like the Maharaja of Jaipur.

“Good to see you smiling, lad. We set out with 342 coolies; I’ll be mightily pleased if no more are lost overboard before we drop anchor.” He hits me on my back. Something goes straight down to my stomach. I cough.

The chicken, so tasty, is finished. I suck my fingers, look up and see a big sunk on the cupboard that has lots of drawers. It's the work of God, so many colours, sparkling like stars on a clear night above Jaipur. It shines in the mirror, like sequins on the saris of dancing women in the Maharaja's palace. The lovely shell must have been home once, to one of the Atma's sea creatures. It's the size of a small pumpkin, purple, light brown, and orange. On one side it looks like the toothless mouth of a granny with wrinkled lips after she had been drinking too much vinegar when nobody was looking. Yet, so nice-looking ... it is not that kind of sunk the pandit blows on to call Ganesha, Hanuman, Vishnu, Shiva, Saraswathi, or whoever to come have the offering at the katha and jhunda prayers. The white man sees what I am looking at.

"You like that? It called a seashell, a conch. Beautiful, isn't it? I picked it up at Goa, fourteen years ago; maybe about the time you were born."

Captain drinks the sour, blood-like juice made from grapes. He pours more in my glass. Does wine make someone see beauty, colours more clearly, I wonder? Captain gets up, brings the conch back. "Here, look at it. A work of art, eh?"

Ji, ha. Bhagwan's handiwork, the conch, once a living creature, like us. I look at the thing, eyes wide. Captain turns his head a little and puts it to his ear.

"You can hear the sound of the sea, in here. Go on, try it."

I rub my hands on my dirty dhoti; put the sunk to my ear. It's true. I hear the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, whatever, the sounds of ma and baba, brothers Eshwar, Rajesh, Jhora, sister Radha ... This may have been made by Lord Krishna, to call the young girls or to talk to them while they sleep. Why, I'm in dreamland myself.

"... you can come here anytime you want and listen to the seas. It's yours. If I weren't contracted to deliver you to Mr Rick Hansen of Natal Estates I'd keep you as my cabin boy, you beautiful, stinking creature. Now, it's time for your bath."

I blink. Captain is taking off his coat and trousers, making eyes at me. Only my mother, and some friends, had seen me without clothes when we bath in the Jamuna River. But the gora's a good man. He took and fed me, gave me this beautiful sunk and that thing he calls a cock – for fishing. The white man is not like us poor Indians – he gives his things away; we have nothing to give. He's three times bigger than me, his body red, covered all over with hair. He takes my hand, pulls me into a small room where on the floor is a bath with water, carries and puts me in there, like I'm a baby. He washes, wipes me, as ma used to do. Last thing I remember is his hair-full face and blue eyes.

I wake up screaming, wondering if I had a bad dream or that someone on the ship was killing me. The tears flow. I see nothing in the dark but hear the ship creaking and someone making noises like a pig. It must be Shaitan. I see the cock and the sunk ... can I blow it? Will my family and friends so far away in Bharat, my devtas, hear and come fast to save my body and soul? Or is it only the waiting ghosts of the dead in the whispering sea who'll fly to this devil jahaj to take me away?

I land at Port Natal and being without a father couldn't get work. But I found treasure on the jahaj, a shy girl named Shanti, only child of Arjun and Tara Misra. Her pitaji looks like he could eat me for supper but the mother tells this Bengal tiger about how my bigger brother, Jhora, got washed 'way and that I now have nobody; am akele. Shanti cries and how I wish I could wipe away her tears. I sit with the Misra family breakfast and supper time. The daughter, two years younger than me, talks of life in the dusty but sometimes flooded village of Suraj in Haldia, about twenty-five miles from Calcutta. Good memory for a twelve-year old. She tells me how her father lost their small farm because he owed the moneylenders so much after getting her older sister, Indra, married. Maji smiles a lot, maybe because being a Brahmin lady she could see the future will definitely be better than the past? But will people return to their old customs and traditions, castes and religion, when they live in Port Natal? Will it be the same as Goshukigurh, only different?

Shanti and her family are taken by Mr Rick Hansen to Ottawa Estates, a sugar cane plantation. Arjun kaka said I could stay with them but the gora says no. I am crying – will they put me in jail? What I did? Then a tall man in a turban puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Tumare naam kya he, beta?”

“Ashok.”

“Baap, jati ki naam?”

“Biswas, hum iehir he, sirdarji.”

The man smiles. “Ha! Samajtha isko matlab?”

“Nahi.”

“Sach. Angreji boltha tumare naam ko matlab hain ‘truth aur belief.’” The tall man smiles, talks in Hindi to the Englishman, who looks at me and shakes his head up and down. Sirdarji tells me that the Angreji said I can stay with him, work on Mr Roger Puntan's sugar plantation in Springfield. “Teak hain?”

I shake my head sideways. “Ji, hain.” Sirdar Tika Singh will be what is called my adopted father.

Me and my new family worked hard on the sugar cane field on the bank of the Umgeni River, and on Sundays in our garden we planted carrots, pumpkins, mealies, green beans, and also umdoni and jack fruit trees. We caught shrimps by net and fish by rods and sold in the market. Sirdarji was a good man and one night, about five years afterward when he was in a good mood and laughing too much, I think from the ganja, I told him about Shanti. The old man said nothing, but on Saturday, Maji made hot water and I had a good bath and put on new clothes. We crossed the river by boat and walked to Temple Station where we caught a train to Ottawa. Then we walked to the village on the narrow rail track between tall sugar cane.

They were happy to see me. Shanti looked lovelier than when she was on the ship – must be 'bout seventeen years old now. Sirdarji and Arjun kaka talked into the night by the fire, drinking something I don't know. They laughed at jokes I could not understand or hear; my eyes only on the girl. What to do?

“Ashok!”

“Baba?”

We are walking to Ottawa to catch the train back to Temple Station the next day. “Arjun Misra said he will be happy if you marry his daughter.”

“Sirdarji, I'm only nineteen years old.”

“Ji hain. Not a baby. You must make babies ... boys, who must work hard, like you, beta.” Baba looks at me with raised eyebrows.

The Tika Singh clan became my family. Sitting on a stone at the place we landed after I finished my five-year indenture contract, I thought should I go back to Goshukigurh or anywhere else in India. No, I would be like the crores of half-starved villagers destined to die from want, for back in Bharat poverty is guaranteed, life is not. Yes, rather stay here; take my chances. I made this decision when I saw a cork floating for a long time on the calm water, like a lone marigold from a dead man's wreath. I will not be alone, as long as Shanti lives, by my side.

I see the floater going in and out, the line becoming tight. Ha! Something is biting. Fish for supper, for me, listening to the ocean and faraway people and places, the conch whose whispers cut like a knife through the darkest night and bring some comfort to a lost soul, a lone cork, bobbing on a vast and restless sea, no gold in sight.

Babu Tika Singh paid for the wedding, took no dowry, nothing. I am happy to have Shanti with me, working with other ladies and girls looking after the men at Tika Singh's Bend. But I'm sad because I could not do what my adopted father wanted. My first son died

after about six months; then Jivan and Junghi came, but after the last child was born dead, a pandit said Shanti will not bear any more children. She never was the same smiling mother after our older son drowned.

I don't know if I am cursed or what, but Junghi's son, Jairam, only had one son, Rohit. I know Puja wanted more children but nothing happened. Jairam took her to doctors, malis, nothing. At last I said Junghi must see the maulvi at Alpine Road Mosque. We listened as Moulana Siddiqui talked while we sipped tea. After lots of chanting and all that we didn't understand, he said we can go. We smiled after Moulana told us that Puja will get in a family way in about six months time and if a boy child is born, we must sacrifice a goat in the name of Saint Badsha Pir. Nothing happened; Rohit didn't get a brother or sister. I looked at my great grandson with tears in my eyes because there was nothing I could do. I know it won't be long before I have to go to the Atma, leaving Rohit alone.

*

I sit silent, head leaning forward as if I'm looking for the ancestors to emerge out of the gloom as new immigrants. Not possible – coolies are not welcome, even as third class citizens. *Pardada* Ashok Biswas could've been a writer if he was not destined to be a cane-cutter.

I look beside me; Arthi is asleep. So much for my storytelling ability: a cure for insomnia. Dee's saxophone is soothing. I must have a drink and go back to the dance floor. Wish Asha was here as my partner, rather than looking down with my forefathers upon a grown man weeping. Someone is impersonating Roy Orbison, singing *Only the Lonely*. But I haven't sent in a request, nor am I lonely as I look at the little sleeping beauty beside me.

What's past is past. I've got to forget my dreams and pay attention to stopping Anil's nightmare. Am I up to that kind of magic? Somebody had said that god gave everybody a brain, only some people don't use it. Sleuthing, working by deduction and logic may not be enough. Ganesha, give me strength and your blessing.

Tuesday, fasting day – no meat, fish, or fowl; the *pandits* never said nothing about firewater. It's only the third day of the year. Are newspaper reporters suffering *babelaas*? I've looked at all the papers – *The Natal Mercury*, *The Daily News*, *Sunday Tribune*, *The Post*, Pietermaritzburg's *The Natal Witness*, nothing. Surely the story would have leaked out by now? There are reporters and cameramen outside the court. Have they smelt something fishy? Just as I'm about to enter the courtroom, a mynah squawks past, depositing shit on my shoulder. Is it an omen?

I look at my yellowed Roamer and then up at the big clock with Roman numerals above the high wooden chair. Both read 10.00. I sit next to Rajshekhar Ramlall in the Durban Magistrates Court when Anil makes his first appearance, forty-eight hours after being formally charged. I never saw the accused before; try as hard as I could, even after tuning my *dost*, Police Deputy-Commissioner Fred True-May, I was not granted access to my client. First time I see the light-skinned handsome man looking sharp in a navy blue suit and matching tie. Even from afar I notice the dark rings 'round his eyes and guess that a jail cell is not what he'll get used to, the young *mota*, being so tender 'n delicate looking.

The white magistrate in black robes enters; bows and sits on the throne. He takes his hammer ... gavel and bangs three times. The murmur stops. Church-like silence. The *gora* clears his throat and introduces himself as Michael Dexter, nods to the court orderly. What a ritual! The charges are read out – rape and murder of a Caucasian woman, Elizabeth Russell, aged 37. Raj had told Sham Singh, attorney, standing next to the accused, that he's prepared to pay whatever bail the magistrate sets. The prosecutor, who had introduced himself to the court as Adam Naismith, dressed in a black suit, white shirt, striped tie and matching handkerchief, talks like he's on stage under a spotlight.

I widen my eyes. This would be the front line man to ensure, at least from the start, that justice would be carried out, not "seen" to be done; that the morals, values, interests, dignity, respect, standards, culture, tradition, and other shit so dear to the whites are protected, preserved, and promoted. As coolie immigrants we have no rights to such fanciful things, or none that the colonial fathers in London would bother to enforce anyway.

Having been born on South African soil, experienced thirty-nine years of survival, and absorbing the stories of struggle and hardship told by *pardada*, *aja*, and *baba*, I can understand the sentiments of most white folk of Durban. Just seeing the prosecutor showing

off makes me think he has the appearance of the kind of man suited to represent the anti-Indian resentment developed over a century. I get the sense that this Englishman will smile when the magistrate finds Anil guilty and sentence him to hang by the neck until dead. He'd go home, pour himself a Scotch, eat roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, burp, and later snore. An achievement for himself and for all *goras*. He will be remembered in the British Commonwealth, the world, even, for feeding the gallows, getting rid of what sahibs and their families call vermin.

Rape and murder of a white by a coolie – unheard of. An immediate and permanent stop must be put to such barbaric deeds before others do the same. Such crimes are an affront to the white community and a threat to its safety, particularly of innocent women and children. Larger issues, such as flouting of the *Immorality Act*, illegal importation and distribution of liquor and drugs that undermine society's morals and pose a serious threat, are also at play, we're seeing maybe only the tip of some iceberg, as Sham told me earlier.

I look up in time to hear the magistrate say loud and clear that due to the gravity of the charges, bail is denied. Anil will be remanded in custody while police complete their investigations. A dozen white reporters rush off to be the first in print with the juicy story. There's going to be a coolie hanging soon. Fame for Anil, the first step to the noose. Lynch mob mentality, something that reminds me of the American south, Negroes strung up from trees by the Klu Klux Klan. Raj, with tears in his tired eyes, protests, to no avail. Like me, I don't think he can understand how Anil could rape and murder any woman. I am also puzzled by the bizarreness, a word I learned in the movie, *From Here to Eternity*, at the Raj Cinema. This is the first time I hear of an Indian committing such crimes. At this stage the police docket will just have the charge, or allegations, with no evidence, witness list, exhibits, and all.

Sham tells me he thinks the case will be referred to the Supreme Court; if so, the defence will need a barrister. He suggests that Raj talk to retired Police Commissioner James True-May since he's a friend of Durban's former top cop. Mr Ramlall said he had already done so and tells us that he recommends a Thomas Taylor, a fellow *Angreji*, saying he's Queen's Counsel, I suppose meaning he advises Queen Elizabeth in Buckingham Palace ... must be good, then, especially since Raj trusts the *topi*, shares a bottle of whisky at times, so I'm told by my client. Good.

That's how it's in Durban: the white man at the top; we the jam in the middle of two slices of brown bread, the *rawan* at the bottom of the shit sandwich. We're used by the *goras* when it suits them and in turn use the *kaffirs* like slaves. No mixing or drinking *tshwala* with

these stinkers. We coolies are brought up by our extended families as creatures inferior to the Englishman, *baas*, not to question or back answer them. So we end up with narrow minds and short sight. Trained like dogs. We reinforce the *Angreji* and the Dutchmen's view of us as third class immigrants. We blame not ourselves but others.

Sham 'n me drive back to our offices in the Casbah and then together in my jalopy to the barrister's office on the Esplanade. A grey-haired lady in a black suit and blue 'n white striped blouse stretches her hand pointing to the fat leather sofas over the thick green carpet. On the walls I see the faces of serious, browned old men with handlebar moustaches, and round glasses, overdressed in tie, waistcoat, and coat, with a gold chain coming out of a pocket. They seem to look at Sham 'n me like we're from another planet. We sit with a hiss like air going out of a car tyre.

'Tea or coffee, gentlemen?'

'No, don't worry madam,' Sham says automatically, in the tone of a house boy.

'It's no bother, I assure you.' She shows teeth browned by tobacco or whisky, or both.

I give my crooked smile. 'We'll have two teas, white, with two sugars, thank you, Mrs Harvey.' The attorney looks like he's going to kill me. Sham has a ... misguided notion that excessive humility and politeness can endear you to these English rogues.

Luckily, two *goris* are typing like they in a competition that I think nobody can hear my stomach making so much noise. I look at my yellowed Roamer watch – nearly one hour sitting with roaming eyes listening to that irritating tic-tic of typewriter keys – when the aunty tells us to follow her.

'Messrs Sham Singh and Rohit Biswas.'

First time I'm called "missus". The *gora* with white hair, creased face and Hitler moustache stands up behind the mahogany or oak desk the size of a full billiard table at Himalaya Hotel. We stretch and shake hands. A triangular board on the desk reads "Thomas Taylor QC". I'd have thought an educated *ballie* would remember his own name by now.

Sham thanks Taylor man for meeting with us and begins telling him about Anil's case. The *topi* raises a hand like he's stopping traffic in Smith Street. 'Tell me, Mr Singh, who is this gentleman?'

'Rohit Biswas ...'

'Yes, yes, I got the name first time, but what is his role in this matter?'

'He has been engaged by Mr Rajshekhar Ramlall to assist the defence. Rohit's a private investigator.'

The man widens his mouth. 'A unique individual, no doubt. I've never heard of an Indian PI.' I check the smile fading fast as the QC looks at Sham. 'Mr Singh, you know full well of attorney-client privilege. I will not have a third person party to our conversations.'

'But Sir ...' Sham protests like I think an American slave would have.

'Sir, you don't really know *me*. Let's not start off on the wrong foot. Rajshekhar Ramlall may be paying our fees, but our client is his son. Only you will have access to the accused, and where necessary so will I. You will report *only* to me. I don't want any other person or party involved. Do I make myself perfectly clear?' The QC looks like my angry high school Latin teacher, Narsimulu, as he looks down on the poor attorney.

'Yes, Mr Taylor, crystal.' Sham nods at me. I leave the office; sit in my Morris Minor, head touching the roof. This day, with a smile on my face, I could've strangled that old white goat.

I'm nervous sitting doing nothing 'cept tap my fingers on the steering wheel. Still treated like dirt ... I think of the movie, *Mother India*, and the struggle of the beautiful actress, Nargis, to bring up two sons and a cripple husband, must be in fifties rural India. Naw, we're not *that* badly off. I hum; then sing,

Duniya me ham ae hai to jina padega ga

Jivan hai agar zahar to pina hi padega ...

Hai, this song about being born to struggle is too sad. I recall another song from the movie, the one about the colourful harvest festival, *holi*:

Holi aayi re kanhaai, holi aayi re

Holi aayi re kanhaai

Rag chhalake sunaa de zara baasari...

We still celebrate in our villages, with a dozen different coloured dry powders or mixed in water, playing flutes and drumming on the *dholak* with a stick, calling upon the gods to come down and celebrate with us. At such religious festivals we forget our sorrows and burdens, at least for the day.

Is Sham pinned down by long speeches by that shit, Taylor? Elvis whispers in my ear; I sing: *It's now or never*. This may be true. The case can make or break me. I've got to get off my arse and move; nobody can really help. But then I don't have to share the spoils of success. *Only the Lonely*. I don't know why but I'm now thinking of Alfred Hitchcock's

movie, *Psycho*. I don't have details of Mrs Russell's rape and murder but can't put my mind off the killing in this film. After 'bout half an hour during which I have sung these songs in my out-of-tune voice, and refined my current chutney favourite, *Aya he Republic ke zamana*, Sham opens the car door and sits in the passenger seat.

'So, that *madhur chodh* will take the case?'

The lawyer grins, rubs his chin. 'Of course, Rohit. He's a pukka Englishman who thinks his fart doesn't stink, but will do the job for its money and prestige. The Ramlalls will pay, in more ways than one.'

'I'm worried by your tone, *bhaia*. You don't like him too? Why can't we get someone else?'

'Singhwa shakes his groomed head. 'These *Angreji* are all the same. At least he's recommended by True-May senior– that's something. Another unknown pig may be worse.'

'You could be right – never know where you are with these *gardoos* – green mambas in the green grass. Slimy.'

Sham laughs, so does the jelly belly on his thighs. 'Let's move, Rohit.'

'Where to, boss?'

'To the West End, get drunk.'

'Drink without the provocation of thirst, as you lawyers would say? Good idea, only if you're paying. That reminds me. You know where the profession "barrister" comes from?'

A grin. 'No, but I'm sure you're dying to tell me.'

'Those *madhurs* come from the bar, bar-barrister, where they practise for so many years eating and drinking and to hell with the consequences – the law will take its course anyway. It's just a job. If a feller hangs, it's what he deserves. They'll repair to the bar and have many toasts – without jam.'

Sham does a belly-laugh. 'You're right.'

'There's no Indian barristers?'

'Not that I know of. Wait; there's Royeppen. He qualified at Cambridge or Oxford but, no, he didn't register as a barrister in the Union. Anyway, Rohit, if there were any, they've either gone underground or into exile, after Sharpeville and the State of Emergency.'

I nod. Who can forget, 69 protestors killed by the government on 21 March 1960?

'How many Indian attorneys we got, Sham?'

My big-bellied *dost* frowns, bites his purple lower lip. 'As far as I know, countrywide, about twenty. Won't help, though.'

'Why?'

‘Well, Rohit, appearing in the Supreme Court is, like, reserved.’

‘Pity Gandhi’s not around. He’d have given the *goras* hell, eh?’

My passenger frowns as he looks at me. ‘Gandhi was a *Guji*, didn’t care about indentured folk, only business people who could pay his fees. I’m worried, Rohit.’

‘Bout what?’

‘First, Anil can remember nothing from about six in the evening of the killing. I’m not sure his amnesia ...’

‘Amnesia?’

‘... loss of memory ... is genuine, or he’s hiding something. Secondly, with a cold hearted Englishman, I’m not convinced Taylor’s heart is in the case – he could be influenced or persuaded by the current anti-Indian sentiment. The *bahen chodh* will do it just for the money.’

‘Like a male *kasbin*?’

Sham gives a long laugh, ending in a snort. ‘*Ja*.’

I grin. ‘Thinking of bitches, what’s the difference between a prostitute and an attorney?’

‘You tell me, Roy Boy.’

‘An attorney will screw you long after you’re dead ’n buried.’

Sham frowns, then the belly starts jumping. I pull up outside the West End Hotel Indian Bar; cut out the lawnmower engine; put a “Doctor – On Call” sign inside the windscreen; and walk through the door thirsting for my first drink of the day. We deserve it, after Taylor.

Sham phones to say that Anil is scheduled to make his second appearance at the Magistrates Court on Monday, 13 February. I must have everything tic-tac, a week or two before that – say just over a month from now. I look at the list of preliminary questions I need answers to:

1. Who were at the New Years Eve Party?
2. Who saw Anil at the party?
3. What went on at that party – drinks, drugs, sex?
4. Prem said that he had seen Anil at Liz’s house before – did they have a sexual relationship, for how long?
5. Did anyone see Anil and Liz together before, during or after the party; caught them in the act of having sex?
6. What kind of people, really, were Anil, Liz, and George Russell?

7. Did George know if his wife and Anil were having an affair, and if so, what was his attitude?
8. Why didn't George and Liz have children?
9. What was the couple's financial position like?
10. Did anyone have a motive for killing Liz?
11. Did Anil ever contemplate marriage?
12. List of neighbours, friends, and relatives of all three
13. Did neighbours see anything out of place?
14. Whose fingerprints can be matched?
15. What becomes of fingerprints found at the crime scene but not on the police database?
16. Other questions

I know that the list will grow and that I must get answers, pronto, so I can begin ticking off and getting educated. It's going to be a slog, especially for a *charou* getting answers from stuck-up whites. First stop is Fred.

I sit on a plush sofa looking across the heavy mahogany coffee table holding up a crystal decanter of whisky and two almost full glasses of my favourite medication, at my *dost* of twenty-nine years, Deputy Commissioner Fred True-May's office. We do the glass clinking ritual as another plain-clothes *gora* comes in and leaves a file on the table. He looks a couple years younger than the fifty-three year old *larnie*. The cop nods to me. I stand up.

'Rohit, this is Detective Sergeant Owen Broad, in charge of the Russell investigations.'

We shake hands.

'Join us for a drink, Broad?'

'No, thank you, Sir.'

'Okay, you have made copies of everything for Mr Biswas ... left nothing out?'

The man smiles. 'It's all there.' He leaves.

'Rohit, you can take the file away. Call me if there's anything else you need, but remember I'm not directly involved in this matter, so don't ask for nitty-gritty details, okay? Cheers!' We sink our putts.

'Thanks chief. Anything not in the file you can tell me about?' I ask in hope rather than expectation.

‘It’s early days, man, but Broad and his boys say we’ll have an open-and-shut case.’

‘So I’m wasting my time?’

‘I didn’t say that, Mr PI.’

‘Then what do you mean, Fred?’

‘A so-called open-and-shut case should not stop you from doing your job. Ramlall has plenty of money to waste. You should not advise him to stop spending. Chow while the food is hot, Biswas *bhai*.’

It’s raining cats and dogs outside. I pour my refreshment and sit at my desk, going through the copy of the file and making notes.

A call was made to the Durban North Police Station at 8.11 on Monday the 2nd of January when the maid, Mavis Ndlovu, discovered the body of her employer, Mrs Elizabeth Russell, 37, Caucasian female, spouse of George Russell. After taking down details, Durban North called police headquarters. I read the transcript of the deceased’s phone call:

There’s someone in my house! Anil, is that you? Anil? God, he’s got a knife ... he’s going to kill me!

The line goes dead. I pause to catch my breath. This is damning stuff. Strangely, the time of the call was not recorded. Could have helped establish approximate time of death. Police bungling or a deliberate act or the cop who took the call was a rookie?

A team headed by DS Broad was despatched immediately. The property was cordoned off and the team made a search inside and outside the house. The medical examiner’s preliminary note states that the deceased was found dead on his arrival, with seven stab wounds, it being not clear then which of these caused the fatal injury. There were signs of a struggle and sexual intercourse. There were no indications of a break in. The maid, gardener, and Mr Russell were not at the New Years Eve party where it was assumed that the deceased was raped and killed. At this stage it is not known who attended the party. No murder weapon was found in the house or on the one-acre ground. Witness statements had not yet been made as none had been identified. Fingerprints were taken and are being currently matched with those on file. The husband has been notified and will be returning from London. He will not have access to the property until investigations have been completed. Only one arrest has been made, that of Mr Anil Ramlall, a single Indian male aged 29 found with bloodied clothes at 3am in a car at La Mercy Beach, and may be charged with rape and murder. Police are continuing with investigations.

There, in a monkey-nut shell. Much ado 'bout nothing, as Shakespeare may have pronounced. As Fred said, it's still early. But I don't have all that much time. Leg, tongue, ear, nose, and paperwork; plodding police stuff I thought I had already graduated from. I can't delegate 'cause I have no one. I'd better get on my bicycle.

Monday, 13th February at nine, before Anil makes his second appearance before the magistrate, I visit the Vishnu Temple in Somtseu Road, not far from Court. I take a round brass plate, of the obligatory five kinds of fruit – apple, banana, orange, grapefruit, and guava, with sweetmeats – *jalebi*, *gulab jamun*, and *ladoo*, flavoured with free cockroach shit from Bhagat's Vegetarian Cafe. I kneel before Ganesha, Saraswati, Durga, Hanuman, and God knows what other deities, pray for Anil and his father, beside *pandit* Lalitha Maharaj, hairy as a gorilla, his stomach oozing over his *dhoti*, bald head *ghee*-sheened. *Panditji* gets up with a grunt, places his right hand on my head and mumbles. Greek to me. He picks up the *thari*, lights camphor on it and asks me to turn the offering in a circular, clockwise motion seven times while he blows on a conch and rings a little bell to call the deities to come and partake of the *prasad*. The business with God is finished; hope He finds a way to rescue the accused from *Shaitan*. The *pandit* works his toothless mouth under the handlebar moustache and holds out his right hand, like a *bheekmanga*. I put a pound note in the beggar's greasy palm. He stares at the money as if it were a caterpillar, looks up at me with snake eyes. I put another pound note there, clasp my palms before my face and walk out. I've experienced daylight robbery here before, like when I did prayers for my then out-of-the box Morris Minor.

I shake hands with Deputy Commissioner True-May and the DS on the steps of the Court. Fred tells me, private-like, the man in charge is in mid-forties, graduating from University of Natal, efficient, conscientious, but also ambitious, hence a formidable opponent. So is prosecutor, Adam Naismith, who asks Broad how long the police are likely to take to complete their investigations. I couldn't hear what the *gora* said. The magistrate nods, bangs his wooden hammer and announces that due to the offence being a capital one, he is remitting the case to the Supreme Court in Durban where the hearing will be some six weeks hence, at a date to be confirmed. There's a hullabaloo during which Anil is escorted down to his cell. I've got 'bout a month to perform a miracle; make something out of nothing, which is what I have at the moment.

Indian time in Durban moves slowly, like the beachfront rickshaws. I've already got a thick file on the case but with mostly plodding police work information, from what I learned as a plain clothes detective. I told people that on a cop's salary I couldn't shop at Mr Carnaby's on Grey Street. I'm thinking, but my brain's in neutral, until the ringing phone makes me touchdown. Sham says he's got news.

I put a coin in Himath Sooklall's Gold Cross Condensed Milk cup. The man, whose legs were removed in a suicidal attempt to stop a sugar cane-carrying train near Kenville Station, now sits on a frayed piece of cardboard, back supported by a road sign at the intersection of Grey and Victoria streets. He displays red gums while snoring, blowing the dusty fuzz in his nostrils back and forth, a sign his lungs are still working. I tip my Borsalino, cross the road and walk up to the first floor of Damjee's Building. The receptionist, graceful in a purple Kanjipuram sari and matching *choli* blouse showing a bit of whitish flesh 'round the midriff, looks up, smiling.

'Good afternoon, Mr Biswas.'

'I know it's afternoon; don't know if it's good.'

Malhi shows even teeth. 'How are you today?'

'Sweet like a lemon, as always.' Mrs Singh blushes like a virgin water carrier walking back to her village in the middle of dusty nowhere in rural India. 'When you going to leave your ugly husband? I'm an available bachelor.'

'I know, but eternally in love with Asha, no? So not on the market.'

'You got the measure of me, girly. Shama's expecting me instead of a baby.' She rolls her brown eyes and waves me in. Attorney Singh is smiling behind his desk, having heard the front office banter.

'I'm sorry, Rohit, bad news first. You can't talk to Anil.'

'I may have lost my virginity and dignity, but not my voice.'

'Seriously. Taylor is correct; only he as counsel and me as attorney can converse with the accused. Raj can visit his son but whether Anil talks to him is another matter.'

'Ja, I heard those two are like oil and water. Can the *gora* ... converse with the client?'

'Not without me being present or without my permission.'

'That's OK, then.'

'Oh?'

‘I don’t like the idea of that *madhur chodh* talking with the *laaitie* alone ...’

‘Anil’s not a youngster; he’s twenty-nine.’

‘Hmm. Looks younger ’n that. ‘What about the police?’

‘What about them?’

‘Can they interrogate the suspect when you’re not around?’

‘You were a cop. You should know; technically, no. For whatever it’s worth, we’re British subjects under the jurisdiction of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, but these *goras* can do almost as they please.’

‘Like get away with murder?’ Sham winces. ‘But *larnie*, this kind of setup leaves me out in Durban’s cold.’

‘Don’t I know it, Rohit? I promise I’ll brief you on everything, in confidence, without giving you any physical evidence.’

‘It’s not the same as being right there; it’s like living on different planets.’

‘I know, it’s shit, but that’s the law.’

‘What the Dickens said the law is an ass.’ Sham chuckles. We sip our teas, a concoction of Five Roses leaves, water, two teaspoons of Hulett’s brown sugar and Nestle condensed milk. Give me Mainstay with Schweppes bitter lemon anytime, well, say, after two in the afternoon. ‘Sham, why we don’t tune Raj; get him to hire another barrister?’

‘That won’t help as the new counsel will apply the same rules regarding attorney-client privilege.’

‘Tsk tsk tsk. For me to get evidence-based proof of Anil’s innocence I’ll have to look somewhere else, not just the police docket. That’ll be difficult, man.’

‘I agree; I’ll help, but don’t envy you. It’s a tough job. Taylor and I are visiting Anil tomorrow. I’ll call you as soon as I get back.’

At noon Sham phones me, suggests we discuss matters over lunch. We two sit among empty tables covered in white linen upstairs at Delhi Restaurant, opposite one of our watering holes, the West End Hotel.

‘Anil is adamant ...’

‘Adam who?’

Sham grins. ‘He is positive Mrs Russell was alive when he left the house Sunday at about 3:30 in the afternoon; admits they had sex a few times during the night and late the next morning; the woman was bitchy, possessive, and in a wild mood; they quarrelled on Sunday afternoon when Anil said he had to go; he admits that Liz scratched his face and chest, which

bled. He seemed surprised to learn that she was raped and murdered ...’

‘He may be innocent or might have worked in Hollywood.’

‘Could be, Rohit. It’s unclear at this stage whether the wounds were ante-mortem or post-mortem, or both.’

‘You seen the body ... at the post-mortem?’

The attorney shakes his head. ‘The bastards wouldn’t allow me in the mortuary, to see a naked white woman cut up, even after her being frozen like a Rainbow Chicken.’

‘*Bahen chodhs!* Then how ...?’

‘Taylor told me, describing the details like a robot.’

‘He’s one cold fish, looking like a barbel, that *gardoo*.’

‘Arsehole, too right. Rohit, he’s sure to make a meal of this. You know what?’

‘No, tell me.’

‘Sahib told me that I needn’t meet with the client. He will do so and fill me in later.’

‘*What?*’

‘Really. I reminded him, politely of course, that I am the instructing attorney and that I could persuade Mr Rajshekhar Ramlall to allow me to find another barrister. That shook your friend somewhat.’

‘Right on, *bhairam*. But what pissed *you* off?’

‘Every time I got to something important, Taylor interrupted me or changed the subject. After a while I got really suspicious. We’ve got to watch this white green mamba, Rohit. I smell some shit.’

‘*Ja*, my antenna told me there’s something fishy about that *Angreji*, but we’ll have to go with him. Who knows, he may be able to save Anil after all.’

‘Oh, he’ll love that, believe me, Rohit, and the newspapers will make him a real hero.’

‘They’ll get ... show ... all the stuff?’

‘What stuff?’

‘The gory details of the post mortem, and all?’

‘Sure, sensationalism sells newspapers – in Durban, South Africa, worldwide.’

My eyes pop. ‘*Hare Ram!* Nobody can stop the shit?’

‘No.’

‘What about the prosecution? They’ll not want to show all the cards they hold, surely?’

Sham smiles, shakes his head and then looks like he’s gonna cry any minute. ‘There’s

no surprises in a case like this. The public has a right to know, and the prosecution will dish out the free mutton biryani, *dhall*, *raita*, and *suji* – double helpings.’

I swallow. ‘Then Anil’s as good as dead?’

‘Uh huh, so are we. My toughest case. We need a miracle; a couple of gods to work on this. You know any?’ Sham’s not joking. I shake my head, speechless.

‘Then only you have the point one per cent chance to save Anil.’

‘How, *bhairam*?’

‘Find the missing pieces to this *madhur* of a puzzle; fill in the gaps. Anil may not be much help. Even if his memory loss is faked, he knows what he’s up against and may shut up like a clam, or make up lies.’

I gulp the cane-bitter lemon concoction. ‘I think you right. Sham you checked Anil’s clothes?’

‘*Ja*. Why?’

‘Was there much blood?’

‘My God! No, just a bit on his shirt, from the scratches on his face and chest, most probably.’

‘*Ha ji*. Not enough from seven stab wounds, some may have spurted out blood ... like a hosepipe.’

Sham’s mouth hangs open, the *dharoo* glass two inches from it.

‘I’ve gotta find someone who saw Anil leave Liz’s house on Sunday.’

‘Why, Rohit?’

‘To check if his clothes and hands had a lot of blood on them. If not, he could have changed ... or is being framed, *bhaia*.’

‘And if they were bloody, then most likely he butchered the victim?’

‘Looks like that. Maybe he wasn’t so *dronk* as he made out, went somewhere and cleaned himself up, planted some blood on his shirt.’

‘You’re a tough one Rohit, not giving your client the benefit of the doubt.’

‘I can’t do that, the evidence might. I’ve gotta find out what happened at the party and on the next day. Also we need to know Anil’s movements from the time he left Liz’s house to when he was found by the cops Monday morning.’

‘Damn ...’

‘What?’

‘Mr PI, you know in a case like this the cops and the prosecution may not disclose vital information to us?’

‘To make sure they win the case at all costs, put the coolies, especially the rich Indian businessmen, in their place, eh *bhairam*?’

‘Right on. We have to get Raj Ramlall to use whatever money and influence he’s got. May still not be enough.’

‘Wait, Sham. Tell me what Anil looks like, from close up.’

‘Not like a rapist or a knife-wielding killer ...’

‘Oh, my dear attorney brother, what do that kind *ous* look like?’

Sham smiles. ‘This guy is light-skinned, handsome, looks younger than twenty-nine – perhaps he uses make-up. He is polite and patient; speaks slowly and deliberately.’

‘Like his *ballie*; comes from money rather than breeding.’

‘He looks ... what’s the word ... delicate.’

‘You know what happens to delicacies in the *tronk*, *ne*?’

Sham closes his eyes. ‘I shudder to think.’

I get up. ‘We gotta get to work, Sham,’ the clock is on countdown against Anil, but I’ve worked out some hypo ...’

‘Hypotheses?’

‘*Ha, bhaia*, I have to test them and discard useless ones. There’s a bogeyman in this case.’

‘Oh? Who?’ Sham raises both caterpillar eyebrows.

‘George Russell. Always look for what’s out of place, not quite fitting in, at a crime scene.’

‘But he wasn’t around when his missus bought a cemetery plot.’

‘Exactly! And who’s to benefit, financially, from Liz’s death, eh?’

‘Better take out your magnifying glass, Rohit.’

Feeling tired, run down, depressed really, with my limited progress on the case, I lock the office at half-past four and drive slowly on Umgeni Road, cross the river on Queen's Bridge, halfway up which the 1917 floodwaters reached, and get onto Sea Cow Lake Road. On a whim or thirst-quenching quest, I turn left into Roadhouse Hotel, opposite the start of Riverside Road. The bar is almost full of people who talk small. I see a man I know sitting drinking alone at a corner table.

'Bhimsan? Howzit?' The man gets up clasps my palm in both of his.

'Rohit! Good to see you. Sit.'

We chat. He beckons the waiter.

'Give Mr Biswas what he wants.' The waiter in black shoes, trousers and sleeveless waistcoat over a white shirt, inclines his head.

'Rohit *bhai*. Double Mainstay and Schweppes bitter lemon with two ice cubes. Coming up, right?'

'As a pukkah *Angreji* would say, "Precisely".'

'Another shot for you, uncle?'

'*Yebo*, but I'll switch to what Rohit is having. Maybe there's something in it that's beneficial.' The waiter bows, departs carrying his grin.

'Bhim, I'm surprised to find you in a pub.'

'Caught out at second slip, eh? I was passing by and thought I'd get away from the wife and kids for a short while.'

I give my half smile. 'I thought it was because you can't drink at home under the nose of the sari-blouse government.'

Bhimsan Hurbans gives a laugh so loud it turns drunken heads. He slaps my shoulder. 'That too.'

The steward sets the drinks on the table. 'You gentlemen want to eat something?'

'Shit, it's only five o' clock, too early for me. I'll stick with my liquid diet.'

'I'm hungry; besides if I don't chow something I'll get too on, and my *biwi* will hit me with her rolling pin.' says my old *dost*.

I laugh in pity for a married man. 'What's on the menu, Raju?'

The waiter again puts on his dental display. '*Your* specials, Rohit: sheep-head curry, trotters, tripe, Zulu fowl, curried and fried line fish.'

‘The sheep-head is hot?’ Bhimsan asks.

‘*Ja, carou*, loaded with red gunpowder, you know, *bhaia*.’

‘You can’t make it mild or medium, for my *jigri dost*?’

‘For you, *larnie*, we’ll do anything. I’ll just have to rinse it under the tap.’

‘Rajugopal, you know that’ll take out all the *sawad*. You don’t have *bhindie*, *karela*, *tharoi*, *methi*, and all?’

Bhimsan and Raju laugh.

‘I don’t think any of our regulars are vegetarians. For those who are fasting, we have beans bunny or can quickly rustle up cabbage, green beans, potatoes and stuff.’

‘*Sawadless* shit,’ I gulp my drink, motion for another round.

‘I’m going to be reckless, I’ll have tripe; I don’t get it at home,’ Bhimsan says licking back his drool.

I slap the table. ‘Fried shad with *roti*, Raju’

Done with dinner, we burp. Bhimsan leaves before his curfew; I have one for the road. I feel good; buy some *puri-patha* and sweet meats for Arthi.

I had not driven a thousand yards and was opposite Natal Steam Laundry when I see someone run from the side into the middle of the road, holding up his hand. I nearly hit the bastard, a uniformed cop. I pull up to one side; in spite of the hiss of steam from the laundry I hear the crunch of black gravel. I know I’m in shit. I wind down my window.

The reddish *gora* folds his hands on the window sill. ‘Licence and registration papers.’

‘I don’t have it.’

‘You own this car?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Can you prove it? How do I know it’s not stolen?’

‘Take my word for it?’

‘Your words worth fuck all, coolie.’

‘I have the licence and registration documents in my office.’

‘Office, eh? You a businessman?’

‘That’s right.’ I feel in my pocket, find a ten pound note and fold it over the turning indicator column. The cop beckons to his friend sitting in the police car.

‘See that, Marsh, a ten pound note draped over the indicator lever. Looks like a bribe to me.’

‘It sure does, partner.’

‘So, we split it evenly, what can we do with five quid? This guy thinks we’re cheapskates.’

‘Sorry, officers, you’ve got it all wrong. I took out the cash to save time paying for petrol at the garage over there.’

‘Does it look like we were born yesterday? You came out of the Roadhouse Hotel, correct?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘What did you have there? Schweppes bitter lemon ...?’

‘*Ja*, Officer Cole, Sir, chased with a half-dozen double Mainstays,’ the other cop mimics an Indian.

Seems like a set up; cops wanting a bribe.

‘Get out of the car.’

‘But officer ...’

‘Now!’

I am handcuffed, made to sit in the passenger seat. Officer Cole picks up the ten pound note with a handkerchief – evidence on a bribery charge, I suppose.

‘Marsh, follow me to King Edward.’ We drive.

‘Officer Cole, why are we going to the hospital? There’s nothing wrong with me.’

‘Maybe nothing, except your drunkenness. The District Surgeon will test your blood for alcohol.’

‘He can’t draw blood without my permission. It’s against my rights.’

The officer laughs, slaps his left thigh. ‘Rights? You serious? You’re the remnants of indentured slaves, immigrants, not citizens. You have fuck-all rights.’

I shut up to make sure I don’t provoke the *madhur*, look out the window, see we’re not headed for Congella via Alpine Road, but turning into the police station at the Somtseu Road Magistrates Court. I am pulled out of my car, a baton pushed under my chin. We walk to the charge office. Cole whispers to the desk sergeant, who smiles, comes out with a bunch of keys. Why haven’t I been booked for drunk-driving, bribery, and whatever these *gora* cops can cook up? We walk down one floor, the sergeant smartly opens a cell gate, pushes me in, locks it and the two officers walk away.

The light’s not good. There’s somebody sitting on the bed in the far corner of that small cell. My eyes widen. ‘Anil Ramlall?’

‘Yes?’

I introduce myself and quickly fill the accused in on details. Chota Essop must’ve organised my arrest. I finish off my piece. ‘*Bhaia*, I’m not here to judge you; that’s up to god if you believe in him. I know you and your father had ... have differences. That happens, but now he wants to do his duty which maybe he thinks up to now he hasn’t ...’

‘Did he ask you to come here as a priest, to get confession?’

‘No, sorry ’bout that. I’ve got to know your father over the past month or so. I can feel his pain. I lost my wife after eight years marriage, when she was seven months pregnant.’

‘She died at premature childbirth?’

‘No, stabbed by a *rawan* pickpocket.’

‘I’m so sorry for your loss. And the baby?’

‘She survived. Arthi is now eight. But listen, *beta*, I don’t have much time. Now, I’m not boasting and forgive me for being so blunt, but I may be the only man who could save you from the gallows.’

‘You have no faith, trust in barrister Taylor?’

I shake my head. ‘No. Truth speaking, he could be the happiest guy to see you hang. For these arseholes it’s just a job.’

‘I’m inclined to agree with you, Ravi.’

‘Rohit ... Biswas.’

The accused smiles, showing perfect teeth. ‘At least you have the right name for the job. Dad said “Biswas” means belief and honesty.’

I laugh. ‘A label can’t save you, but if you have trust in me and speak honestly, I may be able to find evidence to get you off. But at the moment I wouldn’t bet on me.’

‘That ... what you’d call *madhur chodh* Taylor said I mustn’t converse with you.’

‘We’re not “conversing”; we’re two awaiting-trial prisoners making small cell-chat.’

Anil chuckles. ‘Clever. Okay, Biswas, I’ll put my worthless life in your hands. Ask your questions. There’s no guarantee I’ll answer in the absence of counsel.’

‘It’s your funeral.’ I get up.

‘Hang on. I was just joking. Sorry, gallows humour. Sit, please.’

Anil spent New Year’s Eve and most of the next day at Liz’s house, so he says. He doesn’t know how many guests were at the party because he hid in Liz’s bedroom most of the time. When he bumped into anyone he pretended to be a colleague as he didn’t want the *goras* to know that he and Mrs Russell were lovers. No, he was never in love with the woman but she

may have been with him. Liz had a heavy sexual appetite, a bit kinky, whatever that means. After the last guests had left, at about two on Sunday morning, he and Liz made passionate love, slept, got up, and carried on. He was beginning to get irritated with the woman more because of their heavy drinking his *dunda* went to sleep. She taunted him, made out like he's not a real man. He didn't care; wasn't in the mood and not interested in the woman, told her so. Liz got really mad, especially when he couldn't give her an orgasm. They fought. She scratched his chest and back, bit his lip. While she was trying to choke him, Anil bit her breast. She let go. He dressed and left; she lay on the bed, naked, cursing and crying.

'What time you left on Sunday?'

'Three-thirty in the afternoon.'

'Who opened the driveway gate?'

'I did. It was not locked.'

'Anybody see you leave?'

'Liz. She was standing naked on the balcony, screaming at me to come back in.'

'Did you go back into the house?'

'No.'

'You didn't lock the gate?'

'No, there was no lock on it.'

'Did you see anyone walk or drive in?'

'No. I didn't want the crazy bitch to get into her car and follow me. Sorry, Biswas, I shouldn't speak of the dead like that. I drove off, through the open gate, with a heavy hangover – couldn't even think straight.'

'Where ...' the lights go out. Damn. I go to the security gate, rattle the bars. In the dim passage light I see a uniformed cop with a bunch of keys.

'Sergeant Govender?'

'Biswas, you old dog, you. Still in trouble?'

'Stuck in the shit, as always.'

Govender laughs quietly, and then whispers. 'My *larnie* said when the lights hit out I must take you and Ramlall to the interrogation room.' He unlocks and opens the gate. 'Don't be long and don't be loud; my job's on the line.' We go into a small, brightly lit room. 'I'm going to lock the door. I'll pass here every ten minutes and let you out when you're finished. But make sharp, sharp, eh?'

'Sarge, can we have tea with milk, two sugars, please?'

‘I think my bladder’s full; enough to make two cups of piss.’ The chompers are prominent in Govender’s dark face. He points a finger at me and leaves. I continue the interrogation or interview as some would call a mild grilling.

‘How did you get an invitation to the party?’

‘Liz phoned me.’

‘There were no written invitations, cards, or whatever?’

‘Not that I know of.’

‘You didn’t know or recognise anyone you saw?’

‘No. Biswas, I wasn’t at the party to socialise with any of Liz’s whitey connections. I don’t know who her friends, relatives or neighbours are.’

‘But some guests saw you?’

‘I’m not sure. If they did, it would have been for just a second or so, maybe. I wasn’t introduced to anyone and didn’t really talk to anybody.’

‘Okay. Do you know anyone who may have had a grudge against Mrs Russell, wanted to harm her?’

‘She was beautiful, sexy, an outgoing kind of person, an extrovert, charming, made friends easily. Lost many, soon enough.’

‘How so?’

‘Liz was a jealous, possessive type. She may well have upset some men ... and women friends. I don’t know.’

‘Was she *jolling* around ... I mean did she have other lovers?’

‘Look, we were just secret fuckers; we didn’t socialise; met in dark places; didn’t want to get caught by the likes of the cop in the boot ... Basie Smit. I don’t know her friends ... or enemies.’

‘What ’bout her husband?’

‘George? What about him?’

‘Do you think he knows whether or not she was sleeping around?’

‘That you’ll have to ask him.’

‘He won’t answer me, or at least will be economical with the truth.’

‘Talking about economics, Biswas, you may want to investigate his business. In a way he’s my rival, competitor, big in import-export, but I think his empire is sinking. You know Sheriff Khan?’

‘Not personally, but I know he’s a *mota* from Joburg.’

‘Yes. I think George works with him sometimes. You know their *modus operandi*?’

‘I don’t know this *modus* thing.’

Anil gives a tired half-smile. ‘How they operate. Over the past twelve years George’s warehouses have been hit a few times. I think he pays protection money to the Crimson League. Those boys are being pissed off because George is threatening to stop payment, saying the League is useless. He’s clever, over-insures his goods. Rumour is that he shares profits with Khan.’

‘I did much fraud-type investigative work for insurance companies and have some contacts in the League. I’ll follow that up. But Anil, you may have opened an interesting possibility there.’

‘What?’

‘Motive – greed, business survival through reducing competition. But there’s a problem with the MO.’

‘*Modus operandi*?’

I shake my head, smile. ‘To go with motive, you need means and opportunity, to make up the MOM. George was in London or thereabouts when Liz was killed. No opportunity. The murder weapon was not found to show means, the instrument of death ... and rape. Damn it!’

‘Don’t go so fast, Biswas. Hold up! If husband George arranged a hit, by someone else, while he’s conveniently “absent”, you have opportunity and means. Killing by remote control, using a hit-man.’

I raise my thumb. ‘As Charles Dickens may have said, “By Jove!” and Sherlock Holmes could have remarked, “The plot thickens!” You’ll make a great detective. We can be partners.’

The condemned man smiles. ‘Solve this case first so I’ll live to consider your proposition.’

‘Great! Now, for your alibi. You left at three-thirty. Where did you go?’

‘To the Island Hotel. I had a business meeting there, at four-thirty. Liz and I drank a lot during the party and the next day, and we also had some LSD, so I was not really in my full senses when I was at the Island. I couldn’t eat anything. Had a couple of whiskies as a cure. Didn’t work. I sat on the patio for about an hour with Morga Naidoo, drinking in only the air. That didn’t help either.’

‘What time you left Isipingo Beach?’

‘Not sure. I think about six-thirty. The guys there can confirm.’

‘*Ja*. Where were you headed?’

‘Home ... my house at La Mercy Beach. By now I was hungry and turned off to the Beach Road for Muthusamy’s.’

‘The Seabelle, for a seafood chow?’

‘Correct. But I never made it.’

‘Oh?’

‘I must’ve blacked out on Beach Road before the restaurant.’

‘Can you remember what time?’

‘No, Biswas, I was feeling dizzy, weak. I couldn’t read the dashboard, I was so fucked. So, if I drove straight from Isipingo Beach to La Mercy it would normally take about an hour to eighty minutes.’

‘Okay, but come to think of it, the time you conked out may be what people say is of academic interest.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The time of Liz’s death is crucial. I know the pathologists cannot pinpoint it as close as half an hour, but here may be a problem for you if they estimate she was killed, say between two o’ clock and six that evening.’

‘Please explain, Biswas.’

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, *larnie*. The prosecution will pull out all stops to get you convicted. So they could say Liz was killed while you were in her house. Alternatively, they could try to discredit your alibi witnesses at the Island Hotel by saying you were still in the house after you say you left. You may be rich but you’re not an Englishman and never will be. We’ll always be treated like immigrants, not citizens, even if we’re born here on South African soil. No matter your class, caste, and your status in the community, to the *Angreji*, we’re coolies, labourers, nothing more. Lose one; he can be replaced, just like that.’ I snap my fingers to underline my anger.

‘I understand your feeling, learning from dad that your great grandfather came practically as a slave at age fourteen on the same ship as his father. I also see what you’re getting at. What’s your hypothesis, Rohit?’

‘I’ll have to answer that question with a question. As you correctly said, I am not your priest or confessor. So you don’t have to answer this question.’

‘Go ahead. I’ll try to be honest.’

‘When you left Liz’s house, she was alive?’

‘Alive and ranting, naked on the balcony, as I said.’

‘Then it boils down to time of death. Can the medical examiner or forensic pathologist estimate it reasonably accurately or can he be induced to put a time to suit the prosecution?’

‘Jesus, Rohit, now you’re scaring me.’

‘I’m shitting in my pants myself. English fair play you may get in good old England, here on darkest Africa they play their own game and are the referees or umpires too.’

‘I may be the victim here – it’s your battle, Rohit, and it seems against impossible odds.’

‘*Ja*, a David versus Goliath tussle. Timing is the thing.’

‘You mean when to hit the giant?’

I smile. ‘No. If the post-mortem shows Liz was killed say before five-thirty, your loss of memory after leaving the deceased’s house is irrelevant.’

‘So it seems my final walk will be to the gallows?’

‘Not if I can stop it.’

‘How?’

‘Look at it from another angle. As you said, remote control ... killing by agency. Time is tight. But one last question. Do you know anybody at the party or who may have wanted to harm you, have a grudge or something?’

‘No. Those people don’t know me and most likely didn’t know Liz and I were screwing.’

‘Anybody else – a dumped lover, a business rival?’

Anil is silent for a minute. He frowns. ‘Now that you mention it, Rohit, George Russell was a business rival, but as I said he was sinking and may now be onto something else. He may have known of our affair, but I don’t think that would have worried him too much.’

‘What would have, then, Anil?’

‘Business. I heard rumours that something big was coming up.’

‘Rumours from where?’

‘London. I knew some activists there when I was a student in Dublin. Some of these guys formed the Boycott Movement in ’59 which a year later became the Anti-Apartheid Movement. I still have some contacts with these guys ... Kader Asmal, Tennyson Makiwane, Vella Pillay, Rosalynde Ainslie, the secretary and Abdul Minty. Start there. Go to my office and ask my manager, Prakash for their details, if the cops haven’t taken all my stuff away. They were agitating for economic sanctions against South Africa.’

‘So?’

‘Don’t you see? If there were sanctions, prices of goods would go up.’

‘Sorry, Anil, I still don’t get it.’

‘You may want to check really why George has been visiting London so often recently. With the boycott campaign against South African goods gearing up into sanctions, there will be millions to be made. I heard that a number of locals are preparing to climb into sanctions-busting.’

‘What, exporting apples, pears, and crayfish tails to the UK through some other countries?’

Anil smiles. ‘No. With the Union becoming a republic, South Africa may be kicked out of the Commonwealth. The Brits are the apartheid regime’s biggest supplier of arms, ammunition, military technology, and oil. If sanctions bite, a major black market will open. Think about it.’

‘I most certainly will, Anil Anything else?’

‘Yes, it may be of interest to you to know that Taylor also has business interests in London, has shares in some big companies and is on the board of some of them and one or two banks. Sanction-busting can be lucrative, so much so that a few murders would be a small price to pay, in the national interest.’

‘National interest?’

‘The apartheid regime is making a big song and dance about the so-called total communist onslaught. The *boere* have gone paranoid after Sharpeville, thinking the ANC can influence other African countries to join in a struggle to get rid of the Nats. To contain the Red threat, Britain, the US, and Europe will supply South Africa with what it needs, clandestinely. Guys like Russell and Taylor, I suspect, are smiling. Safe, rich pickings.’

‘Hang on. It may not be safe if we’re talking millions of pounds. Could you, or Mrs Russell, or both, have been seen as a threat to such plans?’

‘I don’t know about Liz. She was mixed up with the South African Communist Party. She was a political activist, anti-government. But I don’t think she would know about sanctions-busting. Come to think of it ...’

‘Yes?’

‘When I said I think I’m being framed, Taylor had a good laugh. When I mentioned Russell, he told me to stay on track, be focused. This happened a few times and I think Singh clocked or sensed this. To my mind Taylor does not want Russell to be dragged into this. So, I’m suspicious of him.’

I smile. 'Me too, that's why I got *dronk* and arrested, to get around the cul-de-sac that the *madhur chodh* built.'

'Biswas the hit Man!' Anil laughs; good to see he has a sense of humour – don't know how long it'll last.

I'm surprised to see Malthi, usually clad in a colourful sari and matching *choli* blouse, now sporting a funeral undertaker's suit, whitish legs encased in black stockings. At forty she still looks lovely even in that sombre attire; and having not an ounce of stomach fat would no doubt look sexy in her birthday suit. 'What the hell?'

She puts a *mehindi*-painted forefinger to her luscious lips, opens Sham's door. 'May I present Rohit Biswas, esquire?'

'I don't want packaged faeces for a present, M'Lady.'

'Pardon, Sire, this is not a democracy; you have to deal with any client, even lowlifes and scum of the earth.' She curtsies, leaves, shutting the door.

'Very well. Take a seat, by all means.'

'I'm not here to rearrange your furniture, Sir.'

'Will you take tea?'

'I'd sooner drink the damned stuff, if you don't have a cure handy.'

'Afraid not, old boy.'

'You look like shit, Sham.'

'Splendid! You look worse.'

'Don't I know it? I had been arrested for drunk-driving and attempting to bribe a pink pig.'

'So I heard on the Casbah grapevine. Driving under the influence of liquor – was a matter of time, eh, Mr PI?'

'This incident was pre-planned *karma*.'

'I'm not surprised. You need an attorney?'

'Know of a good one?'

Sham laughs, holds up his hand. 'How was your incarceration, Rohit?'

'Short and bittersweet.'

'Any progress?'

'I must rub your ample stomach with eucalyptus and camphor oil to see if a genie comes out. We're in deep shit. But before I forget, what's a "knobhead"?'

'You.' Deadpan.

'Eh?'

‘That’s what Taylor called you. It’s the business end of the *nuni*, what I think Americans call “dickhead”.’

‘Then I know where to shove it to stop that *bahen chodh* talking shit.’ Sham laughs and I’m sure behind that old desk his jellified stomach joins in.

‘You screwed Taylor good and proper, Roy Boy. But tell nobody; it’s privileged, eh?’ The attorney laughs, talks, and cries at the same time. I don’t know how some *charous* can do so many things simultaneously. He wipes his tears with a handkerchief. ‘Hmm. Maybe both of us will be worser after that English bulldog has mauled us. ‘We’ll see. Raj is going to send Sunder to call us when he’s parked downstairs.’

‘We’re going with him to the *gardoo*’s office? What for?’

Sham puts a banana finger to his lips. ‘Shh. It’s privileged. Even a learned *ou* like me doesn’t know.’ There is a knock on the door. Malthi pokes her lovely head in.

‘Mr Ramlall’s driver is here.’

Raj Ramlall leads the way up the stairs to the defence barrister’s office. The rich *topi* is fit. We are shown in immediately; sit at a table that has tea, coffee, and biscuits. Taylor is playing aunty, smiling as he acts like a servant to three coolies.

I must thank you, Mr Ramlall, for entrusting your son’s defence to me. I know this is a different kind of struggle from what you had known ...’

‘Meaning?’

‘Well, I learned that your grandfather disembarked at Port Natal on 1 September 1874 and did five years indenture with Mr Rick Hansen at Ottawa Estates, renewed what we call the *girmitt* for another five years, then bought some land there and farmed. Remarkable story. You’re a better man than I am – I inherited some wealth from my family; didn’t have to slave for it.’

Raj smiles, bites into a biscuit. I break mine in two, dip it into the tea. I see Taylor looking like he’s gonna kill me. I must take the lead from Ramlall; don’t understand what makes these pukkah Englishmen blow hot and cold.

‘Now Mr Ramlall, we have to get down to the business of your son’s case. If I say so myself, I do not think you could find a better barrister in the country.’

‘I know, Mr Taylor; you come highly recommended, and not cheap.’

‘Quite so, but can you put a price on a man’s head? I run a tight ship; everyone must play his role, what?’

‘What are you saying, Sir?’

‘The defence team must be small and extremely efficient. No place and time for laggards.’ The *madhur chodh* looks at me as he says this, sips his tea like a *moffie*.

‘Please explain.’

‘I excuse Mr Biswas from this conversation and the team.’

Raj frowns, puts down his cup. ‘Why?’

‘At the risk of sounding indelicate, Mr Ramlall, I think he is surplus to requirements.’

‘Sir, you are paid to think of ways to save my son’s life by putting up the best defence possible, not to tell me how I should conduct *my* business. Mr Biswas works for me; he is part of the defence team with attorney Sham Singh. This discussion is not privileged. Let me remind you that I am paying for your services, *Sir*.’

‘And remunerating me well, I might add, for what I could do.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Saving your son’s life.’

‘For that you will be rewarded handsomely. But I’m also paying Rohit to help make sure Anil is not wrongly convicted.’

‘Very well, but blame me not if Mr Biswas inadvertently helps the prosecution’s case.’

I think Raj put that arrogant *gora* in his place but knowing bulldogs, what you call the psyche of our colonial masters, I did not fool myself that the story will end there.

Maybe to butter up Raj nicely, Taylor invites the three of us to dinner at his house in Hillcrest. We relax and watch the scenery as Sunder drives the Merc like it’s a boat, gliding. The mansion is on what looks like five acres surrounded by a well-trimmed bougainvillea hedge, with stables, pool, tennis court, and other *larnie* stuff. My research showed that Taylor moves around in a chauffeur-driven Bentley; is a member of Durban Country Club, and the Yacht Club on the Esplanade; has a yacht; chows often at the British Middle East Indian Sporting and Dining Club or Queens Tavern on Stamfordhill Road, and Harbour Haven at the Yacht Mole, with posh people, sometimes his wife’s around to make sure he doesn’t get too fresh after a coupla Gordon’s London dry gin and tonic or some such sissy drinks. The *gardoo* got his law degree at Oxford University; then took dinners at Grays Inn. This must be a pub serving *larnie* suppers for lawyers who had too much money and not much idea how to spend it. He was a Bencher at this Inn that’s something like seven hundred years old. I guess they must be turning out really good barristers there. Taylor was appointed Queens Counsel after ten years. Talk about connection! I learned that being a QC is a big

deal, allowing the *ou* to wear a silk gown, not like the cheapskates. What about the wig, then? I checked that he did civil cases, for big companies and banks, making tons of pounds.

After what Raj says was a sumptuous Indian meal he wants to congratulate the chef. Taylor tells the servant, Ravi, in black pants, white shirt, red sleeveless cardigan with matching turban and Rajastani handlebar moustache, to call Suminthra. Raj gets up, clasps his palms, bows, and thanks her for the best meal he's had for many a year. Suminthra, somewhere in her fifties, clad in a sari and full-length blouse, is shy but realises this is a genuine compliment. Taylor is a good host, he invites us to repair to his drawing room for brandies and cigars, what? The walls are full of books and browned portraits of long dead male relations. The beige carpet must be six inches thick, matching the fat sofas. This is an Englishman's castle. Jolly good show!

'I'm dreadfully sorry my wife, Vera, could not join us for dinner and drinks. She has an excruciating migraine after a few hours in Pietermaritzburg, you know.'

I'm not listening to the *topi's* bullshit, just walking 'round admiring the decor, and all. Ravi pours brandies into big bubble glasses, hands them out, bowing like we're maharajas, or members of Elizabeth the Eleventh's family.

'Here's to success, what, Anil's freedom!'

'To freedom,' us three brownies chorus. Is Taylor making friends with us? Ravi brings a mahogany box of giant cigars. I take a thick one, rub it under my nose. Wish somebody had a camera. We blow smoke, like *larnies*, I cough. Nobody told me you don't pull on a Cuban like a *ganja* pipe. Ravi refills the bubbles. He bumps into Taylor, spilling some brandy on the sahib's pants' crotch. The barrister turns red, calling the waiter a damned fool. I excuse myself; follow Ravi outside where he's gone to cool off. I give him my business card and ask him to meet me on his day off.

When I get back to the drawing room, Raj tells the host we had better leave as it is late. He thanks the Lord of the Manor for his hospitality, adding that he hopes Mrs Taylor would get over her headache.

We discuss the barrister and his insults. I tell Raj and Sham that I've asked Ravi to meet me so I can check out what the lawyer's character is really like. From what I've seen of Taylor, I fear for Anil's life. The *gora* may be saying under his moustache that the only good Indian is a coolie or a dead one. This means I have to work extra hard to come up with evidence that a blind person will be able to see that the accused did not rape and kill Liz.

I meet with Ravi Angamuthu at Victory Lounge and order a South Indian style fish curry, the one flavoured with red gunpowder.

‘So you stay at the house?’

‘*Ja*, in the outbuilding, with Vishnu, the chauffeur, the housekeeper, Anila, Sumintra the chef, and Ganesh, the gardener.’

‘No African servants?’

Ravi laughs. ‘We’ve got a dozen, but they’re not allowed in the house. The *larnie* says a *kaffir*’s place is in the bush, on trees.’

I nod, not smiling, take the dish from Taylor’s manservant and add some curry to my plate of rice. ‘How does he treat you guys?’

‘You know the old saying?’

I smile. ‘There are so many, *thumbi*, which one?’

‘If you know and keep in your place, you’re okay. He’s the boss. If he says suck my arse, we’ll do it with a smile. The *madhur* is so full of himself, talks like he’s got a hot potato in his mouth ...’

‘His property must be worth a fortune. I don’t see how a lawyer can have so much wealth.’

‘Oh, he’s got many businesses. I think the law office is just where he sits.’

‘A kind of front?’

‘Eh?’

‘From where he controls his other interests. You think he does anything illegal?’

‘I dunno. He makes plenty money; pays us well, compared to what the *charous* in Hillcrest, Kloof, Hilton, and other places earn.’

‘What about his personality?’

‘Don’t know about his personality, and all. I’m just a servant; don’t eat and drink with him at the clubs ...’

‘Because you’re not allowed in?’

‘*Ja*, but also because we are like trash to him. I’ve worked nine years for the *gardoo*. Thinks his fart doesn’t stink. His wife doesn’t take any bullshit from him. I think the *ballie* is a little scared of her.’

‘How old is the *topi*?’

‘Fifty-five; madam is fifty, but looks thirty-five. She’s a good woman, doesn’t lose her temper with us, polite, a real lady.’

Ha ji. My character study confirms the *madhur* is a colonialist-racist and I'd be happy to rub his wrinkled pink face in Durban's clay for *mahala*. But I mustn't get distracted. The *ou* may be some kind of sinister mastermind out to make millions and not be bothered by coolies. He'd be happy to see me lying in the mud, face down. I've got to dig deeper. 'Tell me, Ravi *bhai*, does your boss have a mistress?'

The man chokes on his mouthful of curry 'n rice. 'Don't know; Vishnu drives him around, maybe you should ask him.'

'I will. But you are in the house what, six days a week?'

'Right, *larnie*.'

'You must've heard things?'

'Not about a mistress. But this one bloke, George Russell, he comes in quite often ...'

My ears prick up. 'And?'

'His wife ... Liz or something, sometimes came with them. They didn't seem to hit it off. She doesn't like hanging about; wants to go back home soon after they get here.'

'So?'

'Well, one night, when Mr Russell was here in the drawing room, I heard them talking about her ... Liz.'

'And?'

'From what I could hear, Mr Russell's business was in trouble and he needed money. Mr Taylor said something like Elizabeth is loaded, isn't she? And Russell says, so what? Then the *larnie* asks him who inherits if she dies and Russell says him, unless she changes her will; or something like that. I went 'way after that; didn't want the *larnie* finding me listening and firing me.'

I thank Ravi; ask him not to tell anyone about our lunch, a meal worth its weight in gold. Taylor for dessert.

*

Saturday night: The sound of music, singing and laughter reaches me and my daughter before we drop anchor at Garib's house. I park the Morris and walk carefully with Arthi, a gift shirt in a box under my left arm and the other holding an umbrella. It's a slippery clay slope, but I manage. The *joll* is in full swing under the grease-stained tarpaulin, most likely stolen from South African Railways and Harbours, held up by wattle poles and a bamboo frame. A chap is poking from under the bulges to push away the water. Damn fool; it won't help any.

Eshwar Garib and his wife Dropathi greet us warmly; maybe thankful for the cash contribution I made to the poor family for their son's wedding. Arthi is taken from me to be amused by other girls her age. Himanth Garib, the groom, is sitting on a stool, in shorts and vest, being plastered with turmeric paste. Tonight is *hurdee*, a ritual taking place also at the bride's home. The father-in-law to be places his hand on my shoulder; leads me to a room where the usual suspects sit, stand or list, drinking beer, cheap cane, *dhall*, and what not.

'Double Mainstay with bitter lemon, right, *larnie*?'

'You got that right all by yourself, Ramesh!' Laughter, clinking glasses. 'Cheers.'

'Roy, you need to wake the *joll* up, man. Munessar with his *nagarra* is going to put us to sleep.'

'With Sureshi?'

'Who called me? PI? *Kya bath?*' A tall, beautiful man in a red, sequined sari and *choli* blouse walks in smiling, accompanied by *ghungaroo*, bands of little bells around his or her wrists, ankles and waist. I smile, give him a hug. There's laughter. Someone says, 'Sureshi is ready for marriage. She can stand it like a man.'

The dancer flutters his *kohl*-black eyelids. 'I can give it like a man. Rameshwa, pour me a shot, on the double.' The drinking and bantering continues. Angath the rat, who was not in the queue when god was dishing out brains, gets a slap for touching Sureshi's false tits.

'Roy my boy, you got your *baja*?'

'*Ja*, in my car, Sureshi. Why?'

'You've got to liven up the *tamasha*, *bhaia*. As that *chootya* said, that old goat Munessar will put us all to sleep.'

Someone remarks, 'I don't mind sleeping with you, my dear *natchanya*. I want a fuck. I'll leave my mother's house for you.'

The dancer points his chin at me. I get the hint. 'You must show respect, Gopi.'

'What, for a dancing bitch?' the man sniggers.

'Why do you have to spice up your speech with Fs and Bs? They don't make things clearer.'

'What's it to you, big man?'

'You swear in my presence and I'll beat the snot out of you and then wash your filthy mouth out in a toilet bowl.' Sureshi squeals with delight; the rat slinks away.

'*Ha*, Gopi, big mouth, small *danda*. You're harmless.' There's much laughter; Sureshi punctuates it with a stomp of his feet, sending the *ghungaroo* at her ankles jangling.

‘Kisten, here’s my keys. Get my harmonium from the boot. Don’t let it get wet, huh?’
We have a few quick shots, and all go out to sing and dance.

I look in on Arthi, tell her to come out and watch me play music. I sit on a folding wooden chair, my music box imported from India by Bhoola & Sons on a chair in front of me. I snap my knuckles, rub my fingers then with left hand fan the bellows behind the instrument; tap the black and white piano-like keys. I clear my throat, aaahhh, three times, a ritual performed even by singers, like me, who have little talent. I nod to old Munessar, the man renowned for making the big cowhide drum rumble, the *dholak*, *tabla*, *majeera* players and the clappers who can do it rhythmically, even when *dronk*. I’m ready to go; start with what we call a chutney number:

Aya ho Republic ka zamana babuji zara chor ke kana, babu chor ke kana.
Aya ho Republic ka zamana babuji zara chor ke kana, babu chor ke kana.
Cane piya brandy piya ginger ale tho mangana, ginger ale tho mangana
Usme le la lingana babuji zara samal ke rehana, samal ke rehana,
Ayah ho Republic ka zamana...
Ata nahi, chawal nahi, daria tho mangana, daria tho mangana
Usme phalli chutney dalana, he babu zara sawad tho dekana, sawad tho dekana
Ayah ho Republic ka zamana...

The music takes over; I gulp a shot, while waiting to resume singing, about the coming age of the republic, in the dark years of the *kalyug*, where we have to steal food to stay alive; drink to forget our grief, eat a mixture of home-made preparations. I caution that we have to be careful in the Republic; behave ourselves. We have no flour and rice so must make do with mealie rice and ground monkey-nut chutney, delicious if your taste buds have been deadened by cheap liquor. Can things get worse in a republic, a thing we *charous* know nothing of?

The *dhumdham* is hot, the rain cold. After a while I sit at a trestle with others having supper. Sham joins me and soon all his right hand fingers are messed with beans curry, vegetable pickle, carrot salad, and *puri*. We finish with a burp, wash hands and find a secluded corner under the canopy to talk business.

‘Anything further on the case?’

I shake my head; drink my brinjal-flavoured *dhall* from an enamel cup.

‘You know I said we need a miracle; talk to some of the deities?’

‘The *devtas* won’t listen to me.’

‘Well, Rohit, I’ve got another idea. Now, don’t laugh ...’

‘What?’

‘You’ve got to talk with Maharajin.’

‘What? You gone *pagal*? What can an *ojardi* do? Now she’s even blind.’

‘It may seem crazy but you’ve got nothing to lose, man. It won’t hurt anybody – see the seer. You want a reference for the old lady, talk to my *ballie*. He can tell you of things she’s done.’

‘I don’t know, Sham.’

‘I know. We’re going nowhere with all the obstacles that Taylor has put before you. Talk to the psychic; do it on the quiet. Know where she lives?’

‘Still in Candella Road, right?’

‘*Ja*. You’ll need something from Anil, or Liz or the crime scene ...’

‘Borrow evidence?’

‘Uh huh. She uses something connected to the crime, to get visions, to kick-start the discovery process.’

I’m deep in thought as Sham ’n me have an after-dinner Mainstay.

‘Rohit, you didn’t get around to telling me about the jailhouse interview.’

I give Sham the gist of what Anil told me. ‘What you think?’

The attorney burps, licks his lips. ‘Two points: One, his story about the time he spent at the deceased’s house and later being arrested doesn’t advance or support any theory. Two, the thing about George Russell and Taylor getting involved in multi-million pound clandestine sanction-busting is intriguing. Ambitious people doing that kind of thing may stop at nothing.’

‘*Ja*, that’s an angle I want to follow, but not with the help of any seer, peer, and all; just detective work. Taylor seems to be rolling in dough; can’t be from lawyering work alone, eh?’

Sham frowns. ‘Yes, many who study law do not practice as their training equips them to earn well in business. Okay, what’s your next move?’

‘I may have to follow the trail from the other end, Dublin and London.’

‘Can I come with you, carry your bags?’

I smile. ‘Gotta travel light, *bhairam*. Lots of legwork, little time. But I’m worried that it could end in nothing.’

‘What do you mean, Rohit?’

‘I think you picked it up. Anil was convincing ... only in parts.’

‘What’s your first, close up impression of him?’

‘He told me Liz and him were secret lovers, but there’s something odd about the relationship ... and him.’

‘Meaning?’

‘I have a hype ... hypo ...’

‘Hypothesis?’

‘*Ha*. This *ou*’s too polite, delicate, whatever, to have stabbed a lover seven times ...’

‘Don’t be too sure of that, Mr PI; a guy provoked or taunted can suffer temporary insanity and in that moment can do just about anything and not remember it later.’

‘*Ha*, I know anybody is capable of murder. It’s not that.’

‘Then what?’

‘I’m beginning to have my doubts about Anil, so I’ll have to develop my theory, dig deeper, see what I come up with.’

‘So, what’s the next move?’

‘Sham, I think the starting point would be the post mortem findings. At this stage I may be seeing only the tip of the iceberg.’

‘Yes. There could be more sinister plots underfoot. Watch your back, Rohit.’

While waiting for the post mortem report, I get to get into my old cop routine, pound the beat, and knock on doors. Will people open up when they know I'm a private investigator or set their German shepherds on me? Should I use a white person's name, and say I did so to gain entry? No, it'll immediately put them on alert and they'd refuse to talk with me. I have the copy of my police badge and identity, so no problem.

I start on the block bounded by Roehampton Way, Kinclaven Drive, Gleneagles Drive, and Kathleen Place, at nine o' clock, after the *baas* would have left for the office. Number 124 on Roehampton, the upper side, is opposite the deceased's house. Mrs Manning speaks to me through the front gate, saying she heard the party on New Year's Eve but did not notice anything the next day, except for a black Mercedes sports car parked outside the garage. She had left at about eleven with her family to visit her parents in Kloof, returning at about eight in the evening. Our discussion brings out her neighbour who invites me in for tea and biscuits. I suppose *larnie* housewives too can get bored and like to talk even if it's with a *charou* gumshoe. Although Mrs Thurston seems friendly and smiles, she may have been nervous, insisting on seeing my identification. Then she relaxes a bit.

'So, did you work with the Police Commissioner?'

'His son was my boss, Ma'am.'

'But you left to work for yourself, to make more money?'

I give my crooked smile. 'No, I was fired.'

'Goodness gracious me! I'm sorry. What happened ... or you'd rather not talk about it?'

I shake my head. 'It's no secret.' I tell her my story; it brings a tear to her sea-blue eyes. More tea? Yes.

'Well, Mr Biswas, my husband, God bless his soul, was killed by a black man six years ago at Virginia Airport. So I'm a widow, and understand your situation. Now, before I forget. It may be nothing, but on Sunday, the first, it was raining and I stayed indoors, slept till late. There was a black Mercedes 190SL sports, hardtop, outside Liz's garage. Later, it was gone.'

'You are very observant, Mrs Thurston.'

'Not sharp enough to get the registration number, though.'

‘Never mind. You didn’t see the vehicle leave?’

‘No, but I saw another one drive off.’

A break, at last? ‘Tell me what you saw, please.’

‘Well, I was in my bedroom reading, looked up at the clock and saw it was 4 pm. I got up to make tea and scones, looked out and just saw a black American-type car ... lots of chrome, drive off.’

‘From where?’

‘Opposite Elizabeth’s driveway.’

‘Did the car come up the driveway and out the gate?’

‘No, Mr Biswas, just as I saw it, the car sped off. I didn’t see it on the Russell property.’

‘Did you see anyone get on or off?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t get the make of the car?’

‘No sorry, I saw it only momentarily.’

‘Would you recognise the car if I showed you some photographs?’

‘Sorry, Mr PI, but no.’

‘Did you notice anything odd around Mr Russell’s house that Sunday?’

Mrs Thurston shakes her head. ‘No ... wait. The gate was open. Nobody in the area does that, although we don’t usually lock them; there’s no riff-raff around here.’

‘Was it open all of Sunday?’

‘It was still open when I looked out at around four in the afternoon.’

‘I see. Did you attend Liz’s New Year’s Eve party?’

The woman smiles. ‘We’re not exactly friends. Besides, we had our own party. My son and daughter were here from Joburg and we had some friends. More tea, Mr Biswas?’

I draw a blank with all the other neighbours on the block. Some didn’t even open the front gate, secluded, scared in their own little world. A day gone, but at least I have a lead: a big black chromed American car. If the gate was left open anyone could have slipped in and done the deeds. Could the killer have stayed overnight and left the next day? Was he picked up by an accomplice? I’ve got to talk to Chota Essop; he or someone in the Crimson League may know the car. Long shot. I’m going to disclose my information to Fred True-May, get his advice. But first, I must go to the deceased’s house.

‘I came about half-past seven, saw the gate open, and was worried.’

‘Why worried, Mavis?’

‘Because we never leave it open. *Baas*, madam and me have keys. We lock the gate when nobody’s at home.’

‘The gardener?’

‘He, Prem, comes at eight o’ clock. He doesn’t have a key.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘I closed the gate and then began cleaning up. After about half an hour I went upstairs ...’

The maid breaks into a sob; I take her hands in mine, say words of sympathy and comfort. After Mavis had calmed down, I continue. ‘You washed everything in the kitchen, dining room, lounge, and all?’

‘Not everything. I mopped the floors then got all of the plates, glasses, knives, forks, spoons from everywhere and left it in the kitchen. I made coffee for madam because this is another one Monday when she won’t go to work.’

‘What you mean, Mavis?’

‘Well, Sir, you know the missus sometimes drinks too much. She gets *babelaas* and don’t go to university.’

‘So madam has a hangover often?’

‘Eh?’

‘Mrs Russell, she gets a *babelaas* one, twice a month?’

‘*Yebo*. She teaches at Natal University, sometimes comes home drunk, drunk.’

I smile. Maybe Liz ’n me will meet at Boozer’s Heaven? ‘Okay. Now think carefully, close your eyes. Besides Mrs Russell’s body, what else was there in her bedroom?’

‘Her clothes ... nightgown and panties, one bath towel with blood on it, empty bottle of whisky on the floor, one half-full bottle and two glasses on the dressing table, all the stuff she uses on her face ...’

‘Mavis, did you wash the drinking glasses?’

The maid gives a gap-toothed smile. ‘*Hayibo*, no Sir. I know when somebody is killed, you mustn’t touch nothing.’

I clap soundlessly, shake her hand. ‘Hey, you’re sharp, sister. Well done. Now the phone on the bedside table. It was not off the hook?’

‘No sir, it was okay.’

‘You used it to call the police?’

Another smile. ‘I used the phone in the kitchen.’

The gardener still appeared in a state of paralysis or *rigor mortis* from the loss of a woman who gave him sleepless nights and migraines, a reason to get out of bed every morning. Prem had left on Saturday afternoon; doesn’t work on Sundays, and came in after Mavis on Monday. He could provide no clues. I walk back to the lounge where I have a glass of water. I hear someone come in the front door.

‘Whose car is that, Mavis?’

‘Sorry, Sir, it is Mr Biswas. He’s in the lounge.’

A tall *gora* somewhere in his fifties comes in, taking off his suit coat. I get up.

‘Mr Biswas, who are you?’

I explain. The *ou* is going reddish. ‘Would you mind answering some questions, Sir?’

‘I wouldn’t mind if my legal advisor says it’s okay.’

The gentleman picks up the phone, calls the cops. I leave, head back to the office, busy writing up my interviews. The phone jangles. It’s the *madhur chodh*; wants to see me in his office ... immediately.

I am shown in straight away; no tea and biscuits.

‘Mr Biswas, I thought I had made myself perfectly clear?’ Purple veins in the red-faced man stand out. Taylor seems like he’s about to explode.

‘About what?’

‘Don’t play the idiot you are. Did I or did I not tell you not to talk to people with whom communications are privileged?’

‘Anil, yes.’

‘Don’t you know that engagement ... communication with the deceased’s husband is privileged?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Well, for your edification, Mr PI, communication between a man and his spouse is privileged.’

I’m no lawyer but that sounds like bullshit. ‘So, Mr Taylor?’

The man’s handsome moustache twitches. ‘You cannot talk to Mr Russell about his wife. The man is in mourning and entitled to grieve in peace in private. Understand?’

‘Perfectly, Sir.’

‘Good. Attorney Singh and I are the only ones legally entitled and authorised by statutory law to communicate with the accused and the deceased’s spouse. They have rights protected by law. Do you understand, Mr Biswas?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well. Now I know you have been commissioned by Mr Ramlall to investigate the case; perfectly legitimate and I know you are only doing your job. So am I.’ *The madhur is smiling now.* ‘If you took the trouble to inform me, beforehand, that you want to interview certain persons, I may allow it, subject, of course, to my or Mr Singh, or both of us, being present, if necessary. You appreciated that?’

‘Fully, Mr Taylor.’

‘Good. I’m sorry; we always seem to get off on the wrong foot. Can I make it up to you by offering you a drink, Mr Biswas?’

‘No, thank you sir; I don’t drink when I’m working,’ I say straight-faced.

I go through the photocopied pages of the deceased’s telephone book that DI Broad had given me and call all the numbers. It’s odd but none of them attended the New Year’s Eve party. White liars! Except for one, Professor in the Sociology Department, David Levi. He invited me to his office, at Howard College, where I wanted to study law but couldn’t afford to. I needed to earn an income after Matric. I ended up studying through the University of South Africa, passed Private Law I and Criminal law – two courses in two years, at this rate I’d be dead before I graduate.

I knock on Room 202 and hear someone say, ‘Enter!’ Behind an antique desk sits an ancient white man, motioning me to a chair. No I won’t have tea, am becoming allergic to caffeine, I think.

‘Liz and I had a professional relationship. She’s about twenty to twenty-five years younger than me so we move in different circles. That was her first party I attended.’

‘What time did you leave, Prof?’

‘About twelve-thirty. I felt out of place with strangers and all that political talk which is of no interest to me.’

‘Now we didn’t find a guest list, so I’m trying to piece together who were at the party. Did you know anyone?’

‘Apart from the deceased, not a one. There were about a dozen of us, mostly white; some looked Jewish, like me, two Africans, and an Indian ...’

‘Hang on. Can you describe the Indian?’

‘Short, big bellied, mid-forties to mid-fifties, moustachioed. Seemed to like the sound of his voice, as did the young black chap. I think some of the guests were commies.’

‘Sorry; say again?’

‘The younger black man asked me if I belonged to the party.’

‘What party?’

‘That’s what I asked the gentleman. He gave me a dirty look and walked away.’

‘Why do you think it was members of the South African Communist Party?’

‘Oh, Elizabeth was into politics of protest, overthrow of the apartheid regime, and all that, an organiser on this campus. I didn’t recognise any of these people at the party.’

‘Did you come across a light-skinned Indian, handsome, late twenties?’

‘No; just a minute. I bumped into a coloured man coming out of the toilet. I later saw him in the kitchen, his head in the refrigerator.’

‘Why do you rem’ber him from a dozen people, Prof?’

‘Well, it’s just that he didn’t fit in ... looked ... and dressed like a wrestler or night club bouncer. To put it crudely, he seemed like a rat that had scurried out for a bite of cheese. I didn’t notice him mixing with the other guests. He was that sort of person that I’m sure Elizabeth would not have invited to a party.’

‘Hmm. Uninvited guest?’

‘I don’t think he’s the sort of person who’d gate crash a party, more like one keeping a watchful eye on things.’

‘You don’t remember the name of this coloured guy?’

‘No, we were not introduced; I put out my hand, he didn’t shake it.’

‘Prof, this is important: Would you be able to identify that man if you saw him again?’

‘Not with my memory, I only had a glimpse ... a momentary glance. But I remember him because of his clothing.’

‘Can you describe it?’

‘He was all black – shirt, tie, coat, pants, and shoes. You would not see him in the dark.’

‘So, he was not dressed appropriately for a New Years Eve party?’

‘That’s why he stuck out. Big chap, tall, muscular...’

‘Prof, do me a favour. Close your eyes and tell me what you see about this bloke.’

‘Ah, Mr Biswas, hypnosis, eh? Hang on ...’

‘What?’

‘He must have drunk something cold because he grimaced.’

‘Eh?’

‘The cold must have hit a nerve in his teeth. He winced, eyes shut, mouth open. I saw something glinting in his mouth, under the bright kitchen light.’

‘What?’

‘Perhaps gold-capped teeth?’

‘All?’

‘No; just the upper incisors, I think. I only got a second’s glimpse.’

‘Thank you, Professor Levi; that’s most helpful. I’ve always felt the need to know as much about a victim as possible and that includes her past.’

‘It must be gratifying to have a job which you can use to justify what in others might be seen as intrusive curiosity.’

‘You have a valid point, but you know murder is the end of life but the beginning of an investigation. Yes, it may be intrusive. The clues to a killing may lie in the clues to a victim’s and the perpetrator’s life.’

‘But an investigation may constitute a violation of privacy which the victim could no longer protect.’

‘True, Sir, but what is privacy to a dead person? If we respect such an ideal, justice may be compromised. I don’t have the time or the brains to enter into an intellectual debate. Is there anything else that may help me?’

‘Well, Mr Biswas, come to think of it, maybe. Although we did not socialise, I could sense Elizabeth was a troubled woman. I didn’t understand her lifestyle, given she was a wealthy woman, inheriting a fortune from her late parents. She went on a year-long sabbatical to an ashram in Haridwar, India, came back changed, from a radical communist-cum-bohemian type to a calm, peaceful woman, wanting to do something for the poor. She did mention to me that she’d was going to leave the bulk of her fortune to the Child Welfare Society.’

‘Do you know if she changed her will?’

‘No, you’ll have to talk to her attorney.’

I leave academia pleased that my visit gave me more fruit for thought.

‘You’re not worried about getting arrested for drunk driving again?’ The diner grins.

I smile, finger shoot Sham who’s busy with his mutton chops chutney, a grain of rice on his greasy lips. I’m having sheep tripe with broad beans and *roti* at the Etna Restaurant in

Himalaya Hotel and in between mouthfuls briefing the attorney. I wash down the hot curry with a double of my chronic medication, put down the glass. The waiter materialises from nowhere, Magic Mari.

‘How’s the chow, boss?’

‘Splendid, dear boy, absolutely delicious!’

The man with black pants, white shirt, black sleeveless cardigan and black bow tie, hair parted in the middle frowns. ‘Looks like you had enough booze, Rohit.’

‘My dear chap, the gentleman has only just started, you know?’ Sham speaks like he’s got a hot potato in his mouth.

‘Maitre’d, we’re trying to be pukkah brown English gentlemen, perfecting the language, what? Would you be so awfully kind and get us refills, my good man?’

The man gives a smart salute. ‘Certainly, Sir! Two double Mainstays with Schweppes bitter lemon coming up, on the double, Sir!’

‘There’s a good chap, Marimuthoo Narainsamy, esquire. I say I say I say, Mr Singh?’

‘Pray, do say.’

‘I’m afraid we’re up the proverbial creek without a paddle.’

‘You’re known to be a resourceful old chap, Biswas sahib. I’m certain you will come up with said paddle smartly.’

‘If I do, sire, the first thing I shall do is beat up the *madhur chodh*.’

‘More a *bahen chodh*.’

‘What the devil do you mean, Mr Attorney?’

‘You know the English can marry their cousins ...’

‘Well put, my learned friend. But I talk not in jest. This *gardoo* is making my job difficult. It’s like he wants the prosecution to win.’

‘Ah! Your tormentor could do with a thorough thrashing, I agree.’ Sham and his belly laugh so much he almost chokes on his chop. ‘But dear Sir, what can we do?’

‘I don’t presume to know, old chap, but it may be profitable to have a word with our benefactor, eh?’

‘Only one word?’

‘Goodness gracious, no. The poor father must be in agony; we need to brief him and also get his advice and assistance, my dear attorney.’

‘Tally ho! Let’s go meet the maharaja.’

The *topi* said his driver will pick up Sham and me and leave us home after dinner at his house. Wow, this Ramlall mahal is something – so big, all on one floor. We follow our

philosophy: never eat on an empty stomach – so we start with a fancy single malt whisky that eldest son Kapil has brought from Scotland by the caseload. Wish I could pocket a bottle or three. I give my story, ending with a theory or hypothesis, or both.

‘The key to the puzzle, *larnie*, could be a coloured bloke with two gold-capped upper incisors and possibly a big black American-type car with lots of chrome.’

Raj bites his lower lip. ‘I can help checking up on cars; I have contacts in the transport business, but this Dracula I don’t know.’

‘There can’t be many killer clowns like that in Africa. I’m gonna talk with Chota Essop.’

Raj frowns. ‘The *mota* of the Crimson League? You know him?’

‘*Ja, babu*, from my cop days. He may know this bushie. Find him and we may find the car. But boss, we need your help.’

‘What can I do?’

‘Well, let me put it this way. Most likely Anil will be sunk by circumstantial evidence. I mean so far there doesn’t seem to be any eye witnesses, right, Sham?’

The attorney sips his Scotch. ‘Correct, but we never know what surprises the prosecution can spring up. They’re supposed to disclose all material evidence to the defence and vice versa. They could well hold back crucial information, maybe even manufacture something.’

‘Are you serious, Sham, that these English and Dutchmen would not hesitate to go outside the law to get a conviction?’ a frowning Ramlall asks.

‘Take it from me, *larnie*, the cops and the prosecution work in cahoots. There’s so much jealousy, what’s the word ... resentment ... of successful Indian businessmen, putting them down is a fun game. They don’t care about us battlers; we’re not a threat. But they envy, hate people like you, behind your back.’

Raj smiles. ‘Too true, Rohit, my father would have testified to that also. But what are you telling me, man?’

‘Chief, you may have to call in some markers. Fred is not directly involved in this investigation. Detective Sergeant David Owen is an educated cop but an ambitious one. He’s not going to share anything with us, except what’s on the police file and what the Deputy Commissioner orders him to show me. Our barrister won’t sweat or lose sleep over this case. We need eyes and ears at the cop shop.’

‘I’ll talk to James and Fred, but they have to be careful and not antagonise the investigators and the prosecution.’

‘Thanks. It’s a pity we weren’t allowed to have a private pathologist at the post-mortem.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the state’s guy could be persuaded to write a report favourable to the prosecution, even withhold vital findings and evidence. Money may not be able to buy love but can purchase many other things. Everybody has a price.’

‘My God! I don’t know Dr Meyer, but a doctor working at a public hospital can’t be well off. I suppose he can be paid to be co-operative. But Rohit, why mention the pathologist?’

The housekeeper, Nundoo, appears like magic and tops us up. ‘Well, *babuji*, we know factly that Anil and Liz spent much of Sunday together, boozing, sexing, and all. I ask you this: What if there was a guy there who shouldn’t be, hiding, waiting for the right time ...?’

Raj takes the unlit pipe from his mouth. ‘For what?’

‘I’ll get to that, as Taylor would say, “presently”.’ That brings some laughs to a sombre group. ‘I told you about this Dracula character, right?’

‘Go on,’ Ramlall waves his hand to put the match out. Sham looks at me with his fish eyes that then focus on Raj, holding his Dunhill pipe in front of his mouth that is open like a cave.

‘Okay, this *bruin ou* may be a dead ringer, a stereotype, and I don’t want him to condemn him because of his race, clothing, and appearance – looking like a crook or enforcer, but I have to follow any lead.’

‘Well Rohit, I told you to do your best. You’re going beyond the call of duty, trying everything. I appreciate that.’

‘I said I’d do my damndest, old boy, whichever way I can, right?’ Mr Ramlall smiles. ‘Now, the autopsy thing. What if this coloured chap, or any guest for that matter, hid in the house, stayed the night and much of the day? He would have had something to eat and drink – left fingerprints. If he left sex with Liz he could have left some evidence – like fibre from his pants or pubic hair ...’

Sham raises his hand. ‘Good point, Rohit, but the police database would have fingerprints only of a small number of people who have been charged with a crime. Maybe this coloured bloke has not yet been brought before the courts.’

‘You’re right Sham, it’s a long shot. What it means is that the cops have to find fingerprints, fibre or hair, whatever, and then arrest this guy, and match the evidence. Anil is sunk if we don’t catch this suspect.’

Raj nods. 'We must work together with whoever we can enlist. But let's go to supper.'

'Hang on, chief, there's one more thing.' I tell him about Anil's theory of sanctions-busting and the possible collusion of Russell and Taylor. Ramlall appears dumbfounded.

'Rohit, follow that up. Go where the leads take you. Money is no problem. I have contacts in London that may be able to shed light on the arms industry, and so on. But be careful, son, people involved in that kind of business are ruthless. Now I'm hungry; let's go eat.'

It's a feast, with Kapil and his wife Simitha and Raj's youngest daughter, Shamini joining us, while frog-faced Amrit and his beautiful mother in photo frames encircled with fresh marigold garland watch us. We don't talk business. Except for Sham, nobody seems to have an appetite, even for the colourful dessert. As in the case of Taylor's dinner, we repair to the drawing room for cognac and cigars. Kapil joins us, giving Sham 'n me a bottle each of the *larnie* single malt Scotch.

'Take Anil's name when you have this, right?'

I pat his shoulder, smile. 'Not to worry, we'll have a few ... lots of shots at the Lotus Hotel with your *bru* in celebration of freedom.'

'Rohit, George Russell may be in trouble with the Crimson League. Check that angle.'

'Hey *bhaia*, thanks for that dope. I'll talk to Chota *bhai*.' Kapil leaves with a smile. Shamini and Simitha come kiss the *topi* on the cheek and depart. Beautiful people.

I shoot some of the cognac and draw lightly on the cigar. You learn from your mistakes.

'Well, Rohit, what else before we call it a night?'

'I think, *babuji*, it may help if Sham gives us some idea what to expect at the trial.'

The attorney clears his throat, sips some cognac. 'Okay, this may sound like a lecture but I think you need to understand the legal situation, especially if Taylor tries to pull a fast one. Since before Union twenty-five to thirty percent of criminal trials were heard by juries ...'

'Gora juries?'

'Yes, Rohit, but the percentage has since 1948 been steadily decreasing as it was felt by the apartheid government that juries are unfair to most criminals, who happen to be Africans. This is because juries are composed of lay people, or peers, and not persons educated in law. So, most non-whites were against being tried by racist "average" whites.'

The Minister of Justice in 1954 decreed that an accused will be tried without a jury unless they specifically chose otherwise.’ Sham tastes the cognac.

‘Can anyone influence the selection of a jury?’

‘No, Mr Ramlall. Since the Nationalist Party came into power, the *boers* control what happens. It’s political – they put their own people in. So a non-white has less chance with a biased, prejudiced white jury.’

‘Can we not buy off some of these jurors?’

‘Difficult, if not impossible.’

‘So Anil’s stuck with a white judge?’

‘*Ja*, there’s no real choice but he may be better off with a bench trial. I’ve written a quote from the Minister of Justice, Petrus C Pelser. He said, “There is an old saying ... that if a person is not guilty then he must not elect to be tried by jury, but that if he is guilty he should.”

I’m puzzled. ‘What that means, Sham?’

‘A jury does not know or understand the law. They judge by who puts up a better show; they use emotion rather than hard facts and law.’

‘But an all-white jury will not be sympathetic to an Indian, especially where the victim is a defenceless white woman.’

‘Exactly, Rohit, Anil’s better off under a judge.’

‘Any idea who’s going to be involved?’

Sham nods. ‘Yes, Mr Ramlall, I’ve made some enquiries. The judge will be Sir Bernard Laughton, MC; DSO ...’

‘What, a Master of Ceremonies?’

Sham laughs. ‘No, he was a war hero, awarded the Military Cross and a Distinguished Service Order ...’

‘He’s a lawyer, though?’

‘Yes, Rohit, and a much respected judge. He’ll be fair; not a racist ...’

‘There’s no such thing.’

‘Maybe so, Mr Ramlall, but we have no say in the choice of adjudicator.’

‘Who’s prosecuting?’

‘Philip Cook QC; CBE. Like Thomas Taylor, he’s Queen’s Counsel, meaning very experienced, and a Count of the Order of the British Empire, awarded for his achievements in human rights and law reform in the British colonies. In 1937 he went to India where he married Puja Arora, a beautiful solicitor from Simla, in Himachal Pradesh. They settled in

Delhi where Cook was Crown Prosecutor. They returned to London in 1947 where he continued with the CPS until awarded the CBE and sent to Salisbury, Rhodesia, where he undertook reform of the criminal law system. The political situation and human rights abuses in that country made him leave after three years for the sun, surf and fishing in Durban. He continued with human rights and law reform while serving as senior prosecutor for the Crown. Puja is a lecturer at Natal University's Howard College campus. They live nearby on Ridge Road.'

'Wow, Sham, this *ou* is formidable. Unlike Taylor who specialised in civil cases this Cook is an expert in criminal law?'

'Right, Rohit, spent most of his time with the Crown Prosecution Service.'

'Then even if the fellow you two call *madhur chodh* and *bahen chodh*, Taylor, does his best ... for the fortune I'm paying him, he may fall short.'

'Mr Ramlall, from my research barrister Cook comes across as a fair man. An advantage is that he spent ten years in India and understands the plight of the underdog.'

'Maybe I should go and *tune* his wife, Puja?'

Laughter. 'No, Rohit, not at all. You must not be seen attempting to influence the prosecution or the judge. But we have another problem ...'

'Don't we have enough already, Sham *bhai*?'

'*Ja*, but Cook is too experienced and now too old to get deep into the case. He has a local junior counsel, Laitie Lambie.'

Raj pulls the pipe out of his mouth. 'So?'

'For starters, she's a woman sympathetic to Liz and what happened to her. Secondly, she may have studied with the deceased and could well have known her ...'

'Shouldn't she then recuse herself, if that's the right term?'

'She will be able to easily say that won't influence the case or her presentation of it. But there's a bigger challenge. She's all for women's equality or liberation, as was Liz.'

'What shit is that?'

'Communist Party Manifesto and all that. Women are equal to men. She'll go all out to nail Anil, showing him as a sexual predator, no consideration of women's status, all that nonsense. She'll move heaven and earth to prove Anil's guilt. Taylor may sit back and smile.'

Ramlall taps his pipe empty on an ash tray. 'You know Kennedy is making a big thing about the Soviet and Cuban ambitions against democracy. The arms industry is going to grow exponentially to counter that threat, real or not. There will be powerful political and business interests at stake. I don't know how Anil could be involved in trying to smash the sanctions-

busting plan or to supply arms to the freedom movements. These are dangerous activities. You've got to get to the bottom of this mystery alongside the rape and murder. The odds are loaded against you, Rohit, and my son, especially so with this prosecutor woman seeking revenge.'

I walk alongside Raj Ramlall, behind barrister Thomas Taylor and attorney Sham Singh, down Masonic Grove and into the hubbub, scanning the environment, seeing and hearing the mood of the good citizens, mostly white and brown. There's a long queue of would-be spectators, although security men tell the excited *ous* the courtroom's already full. The newspaper reporters with their photographers are here in full force. This is meat 'n wine for them, for months to come. The foyer is abuzz, every chair and sofa in the waiting room taken. I shiver, not from cold, but being in a place where the game of life or death is contested, fought by gladiators with old *goras* as umpires or referees, playing God. Taylor and Sham walk to the table allocated to the defence team and put on their robes, then shake hands with the prosecutors, all of them having being introduced to the judge in chambers the previous day, so I was told by Anil's attorney.

This is not the first time I make an appearance at the Supreme Court in Durban as I have been a prosecution witness before, but usually the only darkies allowed in are cleaners, tea boys, criminals, and one or two Indian attorneys. It's both an intimidating and a magnificent courtroom, with its oak panelled and moulded dais and furniture. The place sounds like the African beer hall adjoining the Indian Market in Victoria Street, with the volume turned down a little. I worry as I sit among people who have no idea of my stake in the outcome of the proceedings. I failed to get any information from the prosecutor at the Magistrates Court, Adam Naismith. I tried to hustle Detective Sergeant Broad, to no avail. Fred does not know much as he is not directly involved in Anil's case or can't pass on information other than what's on the police docket, and that isn't much. Polite and humble Sham has not got anything from the prosecution or even out of our defence barrister.

A hush makes me turn around. I see Anil's head, then shoulders emerging as he walks up the narrow stairs from his basement cell into the courtroom. He's handcuffed, his feet manacled, the chains rattling as he makes his way with difficulty to the dock, guided by a uniformed policeman with a steering hand on his shoulder. The rapist-murderer ... alleged ... does not look like a criminal, dressed in a plain, single-breasted steel-grey suit, white shirt and matching tie, bought by me from Ideals at the corner of Grey and Queen Streets. The smile intended for the defence team fails to materialise and Anil nods to Taylor and Singh before he

sits down. I see him look up at the raised and imposing judge's bench, and swallow. His body seems to shudder from an unseen chill, unusual for hot 'n humid Durban. Maybe the cornered rat look comes from seeing this scary place, so many white faces with cold, hate-filled eyes staring at him as if he was an alien released from the underground cell, here for a show. I check Anil licking his lips as he looks at his potential saviour, me, half-smiling up at him. He turns to face the prosecution, his brown eyes narrow, the gaze scanning the courtroom, an arena of unequal struggle. No other familiar faces. Oh yes, Mr Ramlall at the back, waving at him. Anil nods, looking bewildered-like.

'Silence in court!' I jump up and stand, like the other spectators. The white judge, looking like he didn't get it last night, enters, bows slightly; then sits, eyes roaming his domain. The crowd eases down on to the benches and chairs. So quickly that noisy room becomes silent. The judge sits on a platform, behind a wood panelled counter, his high, carved chair like a king's throne, in front of a moulded archway. With curly white hair, hooked nose and black robe, Judge Sir Bernard Laughton, MC; DSO, resembles a vulture, an omen. I fear for Anil – the odds are against him.

'Are all parties ready?' queries the judge after banging his gavel three times to demand silence, perhaps to show who's boss.

A white auntie, looking sexy even if dressed like one of the *ous* from Rajcoomar's Funeral Undertakers, stands up and clears her throat of phlegm. 'Your Honour, I'm Laitie Lambie, leading the prosecution for barrister Philip Cook, the District Attorney. And my colleague here is Retha Reyneke. The prosecution is ready,' says the enemy in a sing song.

The judge nods, looking down at the defence duo.

The *madhur chodh* bows. 'I am Thomas Taylor, M'Lord, and this is my colleague, Sham Singh. The defence is ready,' booms Anil's representative.

'Opening statements?'

'If it pleases Your Honour, I wish to make a statement.'

'Go ahead, Miss Lambie,' the judge remarks, already seeming bored.

'The accused is charged with the crimes of rape and murder. On the first of January this year he, Anil Ramlall, raped and killed one Elizabeth Russell, a thirty-seven-year old in the prime of her life and career, an Associate Professor at Natal University's Howard College campus. The accused was not content with raping the deceased, but proceeded to stab her no less than seven times ...'

Why is this woman acting like a she-dog in heat, as if she's got a personal grudge against our handsome client?

'Objection!'

'You can't object to an opening statement ...'

'Objection sustained: Will counsel approach the bench?'

Taylor and Sham step alongside Cook and the frowning woman, who doesn't look so cocky now. 'Yes, Your Honour?'

The judge looks angry. He puts a hand over the mike and speaks to the prosecutor. We can't hear but I think His Lordship is jacking her up. She bows and the four lawyers return to their seats. I ask Sham in a whisper what happened. He confirms what I guessed; saying that if the auntie wants to make speeches she must get on a soap box in Hyde Park. I didn't understand that bit. I almost clap – this is a good sign, a judge who's not taking sides.

'Orderly, will you remove the accused's handcuff and manacles?' The judge raises his bristling Mopani-worm eyebrows at Anil; then nods to Miss Lambie.

At least the topi seems like a decent bloke.

'The prosecution will show that the accused had the opportunity and means of committing the crimes. Whilst his motive at this stage is unclear, the state contends that it is unimportant. The accused was present at the scene of the crime at all material times, the only person, apart from the deceased, in the vicinity. Evidence will be led to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that he did commit the crimes in question, with intent. Therefore what we have here is rape and premeditated murder. Thank you, Your Honour.'

My first murder trial with a fellow Indian in the dock – we're making history here.

'Mr Taylor?'

'Thank you, M'Lord. At this juncture I wish to emphasise one point only: The accused appears to have been tried by the public and the press already. This is most unfair. Need I remind the media and the people of Durban, in fact countrywide, that in our law an accused is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond any reasonable doubt. I therefore appeal for fairness, in the interests of justice. Thank you, M'Lord.'

Good show, sahib!

It had been agreed that Taylor would not make the kind of opening statement that may alert the prosecution of any shortcomings in their case, like the apparent lack of motive, the absence of the murder weapon, and the fact that there were no eyewitnesses to the rape or murder. This was the defence's "secret" armoury, whether it would be of any effect in a colonial-apartheid court remains to be seen.

‘Will the prosecution call its first witness?’

Miss Lambie stands up, speaks loud ’n clear. ‘I call Detective Sergeant Owen Broad.’ The tanned man takes the stand, looking smart in his brown suit and tie, appearing, as you’d call it, appropriately sober, solemn, and sombre.

‘Do you swear that the evidence you are about to give before this Court is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?’

‘I do, so help me God.’

‘You are Detective Sergeant Owen Broad, attached to the Criminal Investigation Department and stationed in Durban?’

We’d had been told by Taylor that the detective will spend a day or two being examined and cross-examined, so it may be boring for me. I watch but my mind is working overtime trying to see how I can investigate thoroughly to find evidence showing Anil didn’t commit the crimes.

The witness, speaking slowly and clearly, said he was the first person to arrive and secured the crime scene. I wake up. ‘A team of specialist investigators began taking photographs, measurements, dusting for fingerprints, making sketches, all that is required in such cases. Then Dr Meyer examined the body *in-situ* and finally said it could be removed.’

‘Did you find what could have been the murder weapon?’

‘No, madam.’

‘Did you find the alleged perpetrator on site?’

‘No, we arrested him later.’

‘Please explain, Detective Sergeant.’

‘The deceased had been raped, strangled and stabbed seven times ...’

‘Yes, yes, the pathologist will testify.’

Ja, that’s what I’m interested in, not how cops do or don’t do their jobs. The questioning goes on and on, boring. If I miss something I can get the court’s transcripts.

‘Anyway, there was nobody at the deceased’s house. The body was taken to the mortuary for a post-mortem ... I was told earlier by the desk sergeant that an Indian man had been arrested about three the same morning with his face and chest scratched and blood on his shirt and vest. That fitted in with the profile of a potential perpetrator.’

‘What tied him to the crimes in question?’

‘His fingerprints, several, were found on objects in the deceased’s house.’

‘Thank you Detective Sergeant, that is all.’

I wake up; scared people will hear my stomach mumbling. Thank god, Judge Laughton must also be hungry for he says the Court will go into a one-hour lunch recess.

After a sober meal, we're back in the arena.

The judge looks over his horn-rimmed glasses, raising his caterpillar eyebrows. 'Cross?'

Taylor gets up from the bench we're sitting on, puts a hand on Sham's shoulder, and raises his eyebrows as he looks at me. I mouth "good luck" not because the *gardoo's* suddenly became my friend but for Anil's sake. I am out of my depth here, have to sit, shut up, listen and learn the law, maybe something about justice, if I'm lucky. The defence counsel stops in front of the hefty, red-faced witness.

Taylor bows to the judge. 'I shall be brief, M'Lord.'

'Take all the time you want, Mr Taylor,' the judge says drily.

Sarcastic Englishman, giving his bru his own medicine.

'What is the size of the Russell property?'

'One acre.'

And the buildings?'

'According to the plans we obtained from the Durban City Engineer's Department, the main dwelling is one thousand three hundred and seventy square feet; the three bedroom cottage used by Mr Russell as a home office is four hundred and thirty square feet; and there is a double garage attached to which is a servants quarter of two bedrooms, a lounge, kitchenette, and ablutions.'

'Rather a large property for a couple?'

'That's not for me to say, sir.'

'Quite so. Did you find anything on the premises relating to the crimes?'

'No.'

'Anything belonging to the accused?'

'No.'

'Thank you.'

The judge peers down from on high. 'Miss Lambie, your next witness?'

'I call Mr Anthony Jones.'

This chap is a technician, a fingerprint expert. The aunty asks a number of routine-like questions; then sits down. Taylor gets up. These two are like lifts going up and down.

'Did you find only the accused's fingerprints in the deceased's house?'

‘No, sir, I found several.’

‘And used them to eliminate other suspects?’

‘We matched them against our database ...’

‘A small database, I gather?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you found many fingerprints ... of persons unknown to the police?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know when the accused’s fingerprints were made?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Well then, is it not conceivable that he was not present at the time the deceased was killed, could have left them, say, a week, a month earlier, if he had been to the house before?’

‘It is possible, since rumour has it that the accused and the deceased were clandestine lovers.’

There is a murmur. Even Taylor seems surprised.

‘Thank you, Mr Jones, nothing further.’

‘Witness may step down.’ The judge bangs his gavel three times. ‘Court will reconvene at ten am tomorrow.’

My bum is aching from sitting on that hard bench so long. I check Anil looking up at the judge, then at his defence team, perhaps asking, what was all that about? He seems confused, bewildered. The proceedings had carried on as if he were not present, as if he did not matter, was there for the amusement of all these people here for free entertainment. Was this the start of the unknown journey to death, the dark road to the hangman’s noose? Was this the beginning of the end? Have we done enough to prove his innocence or cast doubt on his guilt? I shake my head; I don’t think so. The policeman puts on the handcuffs and manacle, guides Anil down the stairs to his basement cell.

Taylor leaves in a hurry, maybe to wet his whistle at the Durban Club. Freedom or death? It matters not to our defence counsel – he’ll get paid, highly, being in a win-win situation. I guess it always is, with *Angreji* people like him.

We wanted to go to the Kohinoor Restaurant but I remind Raj that it’s a slum joint and therefore unlicensed. We end up at the Delhi, order whisky for three.

‘Well, gentlemen, what do you think of the day’s proceedings,’ asks a tired-looking Raj Ramlall. Sham shrugs his heavy shoulders.

‘At least Taylor highlighted the size of the property. A rapist-killer could have hidden anywhere and pounced when the time was right. There’s no real security in *larnie* areas like Durban North; a *rawan* would not wander about there, so far from the jungle reservation. The cops will pick him up, *dompas* or not, just to get some boxing practice.’

‘Rohit, how do you prove there was somebody else around at the time of the killing?’

‘I’m going to suggest to Fred he gets the whole property sealed off for another search. George can stay in a hotel with his servants.’

‘Hmm, it’s good to double check,’ Sham says after a gulp and eye exercise.

‘I thought the prosecutor, after she got shut up by the judge, did not ask enough questions about the victim and the crime scene,’ says Mr Ramlall, waving an arm to put out his match.

‘Well, sir, that’s because the crime scene investigators and the lab chaps will fill us in.’

‘I hope so, Sham.’

‘*Ha, bhairam*, you can rest assured that Lamb Chop will leave no stone unturned to avenge the rape and death of a fellow woman.’ Laughter breaks the tense and dense atmosphere.

It’s another summer’s day in Durban; the oven air is sweat-making and stink-producing, sure to bring down rain. Ten bells and we’re inside the courtroom where most white ladies are wearing big hats and already cooling their made-up, smooth faces with dainty fans. The men, mostly in suits, pants and jackets, are already mopping brows and pale faces. The ceiling fans rotating lazily, as if sapped of their strength by the heat, are not coping. I’m also wet under my new black single-breasted pinstripe suit, cotton shirt and striped tie from Mr Carnaby in Grey Street. Dawood Bobat gave me a fifty per cent discount, or so he says, a man who’s not one for the books.

The third witness has just been sworn in. Lambkin rises with a smile to examine him. I take out my notepad in case there’s some evidence that needs further investigation.

‘State your name and occupation, for the record, please.’

‘I am Doctor Steven Meyer, District Surgeon and Forensic Pathologist at King Edward VIII Hospital.’

The main man, I think, who can sink Anil or rescue him.

‘You performed a post mortem on the deceased?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you also examined the accused shortly after his arrest?’

‘Yes, on Monday, the second of January, 1961.’

‘Did you examine the body of the deceased at the scene of the murder?’

‘I can’t say for sure it was the scene of the murder, but I did a superficial examination of the corpse where it was found, yes.’

Why “superficial” and not a thorough one?

‘What were your findings at the crime scene?’

‘I surmised that the victim had died from asphyxia ...’

‘Could you explain in lay-person’s terms, please, doctor?’

For me too, I’m not versed in medicine.

‘Death had been caused by manual strangulation. The victim had been choked. This was confirmed by the presence of blood and fluid in the nostrils and mouth, and from the displacement of her tongue. There were also finger marks on her throat. The deceased had been stabbed in seven places after her death with a long knife or dagger, serrated along one edge.’

‘You are sure all the wounds, save for the strangulation, were made post mortem?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were there any signs of a struggle, doctor?’

‘Yes. The deceased had long nails, two of which in her left hand had broken off. There were traces of blood and skin under some of her nails and hair under the nail of the middle finger of her right hand.’

‘What does that indicate?’

‘I presume she scratched her assailant’s face, possibly the chest or part of his body that has hair.’

‘Any other indicators, any evidence of sexual assault?’

‘It was difficult to determine this from an examination at the scene of the crime. However my post mortem examination ...’

‘We shall come to that presently. Is there anything further you would like to add from your *in situ* examination?’

‘The minimal amount of bleeding from the stab wounds indicates that the victim was dead when these injuries were inflicted.’

There is a collective gasp from the audience. I’m also shocked, hearing this for the first time.

‘Thank you, doctor. Now the findings of your post mortem examination, in lay-persons’ language please.’

‘Briefly, death was confirmed to have been caused by manual strangulation; that is, choking, the deceased’s hyoid bone was broken. The stab wounds were deep and large and from their shape, consistent with a weapon similar to that made by a dagger, sharp on the lower end and serrated along the upper. The deceased had a deep bite mark on her left breast. A model was made of the accused’s teeth which confirmed that he had made that bite.’

There is a moment’s silence. ‘Go on, doctor.’

‘As I said, sexual penetration had occurred. There were seminal stains inside the deceased’s thighs. Two strands of hair were found near her vagina.’

‘Could those not have been the deceased’s own hair?’

‘Not likely ... the deceased, unusually, had blonde pubic hair ...’

‘Just a minute, doctor. Why do you say “unusually”?’

The witness clears his throat. ‘Usually a blonde person’s pubic hair is much darker than that on the head, arms, legs and body, because of lack of sunlight. Often, the colour of the eyebrows gives an indication of the person’s pubic hair colour.’

Ah! I’ve learned something.

‘Thank you, doctor,’ Miss Lambie rearranges some papers on her table. ‘So here, unusually, the deceased had blonde pubic hair and the two hairs you found in the proximity of her bloodied vagina were not hers?’

‘Correct; both hairs were black and straight.’

‘Who could they have come from?’

Dr Meyer smiles. ‘Hair cannot be used to identify a person, an individual. This type of forensic testimony is not fact but opinion. The deceased could have had sex with one or more Caucasian or Mongoloid persons.’

That’s comforting. What if hair is deliberately planted to incriminate someone?

‘The two strands of hair came from one or two persons?’

‘Both came from the same person.’

‘Thank you, doctor. Now tell us about your examination of the accused.’

‘It was a routine examination. The accused’s blood and urine were tested, and his body and clothing examined.’

‘What were your findings?’

‘The accused’s blood had a high alcohol content – far in excess of the limit that would enable a person to drive a motor vehicle or operate heavy machinery safely.’ Dr Meyer takes

a sip of water. ‘Seminal stains were found on the accused’s penis and on the inside of his thighs, as well as on his briefs – his underpants. His face had been scratched, and there were scratch marks on his chest as well, and his lower lip was bitten.’

‘What did analysis of the blood samples reveal?’

‘Blood taken from under the deceased’s finger nails were of the group “AB Positive”, the same as the accused’s. Blood stains on the accused’s clothing were of the same group.’

There is a gasp from the crowd. Anil looks at his shiny black shoes. I’m not as surprised as the audience because he had admitted this to me.

‘Am I correct in my assumption or guess, really, that the deceased scratched the accused, who bled?’

‘Yes.’

‘Could you tell whether sexual intercourse occurred once or more?’

The doctor grins. ‘You would need eyewitness testimony to answer that question. Now, this is opinion: The amount, spread and state of preservation of the semen suggests several incidents of coitus, over many hours.’

Could it have been with other party guests? How does this ou prove the semen came only from Anil?

‘Thank you. Anything further?’

‘The last sexual encounter was post mortem.’

Jesus! Sex with a corpse? What kind of sicko would do that?

I see one of sexy Lamb’s eyebrow rise. ‘Just to be absolutely clear: You are saying the accused had sex after the deceased was already dead?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I am saying sexual intercourse took place after the deceased was dead. I can’t tell for certain it was with or initiated by the accused.’

There is a hubbub, someone screams. The judge bangs his hammer.

‘Did you ascertain the time of death, doctor?’

‘Due to several factors, like the rainy weather, resulting in unusually low summer temperature for Durban and that the deceased was naked, the sliding door to her bedroom open, my estimate cannot be said to be accurate. It’s nothing better than a guesstimate. I would say she died sometime between the hours of 1 pm and 6 pm on Sunday, the 1st of January 1961.’

‘A five-hour window? Not very helpful, is it doctor?’

The man shrugs. 'Best I can do, madam prosecutor.'

'Thank you, that is all.'

'Defence?'

Taylor stands up and draws his gown together with one hand, the other holding a sheet of notes. He clears his throat. 'Thank you, M'Lord.' 'Doctor I must complement and thank you for the clear way you presented your technical evidence, even I understood it.' There is subdued laughter. 'Now then, sir, I don't want to get into too much detail but wish to clear up some points which may seem trivial to you but not to me as a layman. So, please bear with me. In your examination of the deceased *in situ*, the post mortem as well as the examination of the accused, were you assisted by someone?'

'No.'

'You did everything yourself, alone?'

'Yes, but the police, Detective Sergeant Broad, was present.'

'I see. Is it not usual, in a case like this, to wait until a legal representative of the accused can be present at the examination or arrange for some medical person to be there, to observe for the defence?'

'Yes, but the deceased's husband was in the UK and unavailable. I assume that the defence did not have a private pathologist or that the police did not tell them of their rights. I'm not sure of the circumstances.'

'What I am asking, doctor, to your knowledge, wouldn't it have helped the defence if they had, say, an independent pathologist to make his or her own findings?'

'Yes, of course, under normal circumstances.'

'The circumstances here were abnormal, then?'

'What I'm saying is that it may be unlikely that the police would allow a non-white present at the autopsy.'

How can any dead person feel ashamed being seen naked?

'Because the victim is a white woman and the alleged perpetrator Indian?'

'Well ... yes.'

'So you do a quick, a routine-type examination?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you, doctor. Now tell me. Did sexual intercourse with the deceased take place immediately before her death?'

'Yes.'

‘How could you tell?’

‘What do you mean, Mr Taylor?’

‘For example, could it not have occurred say an hour, five hours before her death, or perhaps even *post mortem*?’

‘It could have happened anytime before her death, and as I said even after.’

‘Oh?’

‘She had secreted fluid from earlier copulation – a dead person doesn’t, so the last intercourse left only the semen of the perpetrator.’

‘Did you find alcohol present in the deceased’s blood?’

‘I said so earlier ...’

‘I’m talking of the deceased’s blood, not the accused’s.’

‘Yes, there was alcohol in her blood.’

‘How much?’

‘About 0.15 mg – a high level, enough for a person’s movements to become un-co-ordinated, with impairment of vision, slurred speech, loss of memory, and other effects.’

‘Any indication that she had taken drugs?’

‘Yes, she tested positive for Secobarbital, a barbiturate, and LSD, as did the accused.’

‘Thank you, doctor. Now then, the blood found under her finger nails – it belonged to the “AB Positive” group?’

‘Yes.’

‘A somewhat rare group, not more than ten per cent of the world’s population belong to this group?’

‘That’s correct.’

‘Can you, doctor, with certainty say that that blood belonged to the accused?’

‘The accused’s face and chest were scratched...’

‘That is not my question. I repeat, could the accused not have been scratched by, say a girlfriend earlier on?’

‘That is possible.’

‘I repeat my question, then. Can you positively say that the blood found under the deceased’s finger nails *definitely* came from the accused?’

‘No, I can’t.’

That’s one for Anil.

‘Thank you, doctor. Now, your evidence ... testimony suggests the deceased was killed where she was found, does it not?’

‘It does, but ...’

‘But?’

‘Stabbings ante mortem would have resulted in a large amount of bleeding, with blood *in situ* and on the person who undertook such acts.’

‘So the amount of blood where the body was found was insufficient, not consistent with your theory?’

‘It fits in with the hypothesis that the deceased was stabbed post-mortem.’

‘And, Dr Meyer, how does the blood theory fit in with the accused, the clothing, the car he was found in?’

‘It doesn’t.’

‘Meaning?’

The accused only had blood on his shirt and vest, not elsewhere on his body, hair, shoes, or in the car. It was blood of his group, most probably his own.’

‘Now, you did say that you performed the post-mortem yourself?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So you did not have the benefit of a forensic pathologist?’

‘I am a qualified forensic pathologist myself.’

‘I see. So the vaginal smears were analysed in your laboratory?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where you able to ascertain whether the seminal fluid found on the deceased and on the accused’s person came from the accused and deceased and vice versa?’

‘No.’

‘Oh?’ defence counsel raises an eyebrow. ‘So, there is the possibility that the deceased could have been raped, or could have had consensual sexual intercourse with anybody?’

‘There is that possibility, yes.’

This seems to fit in with my hypothesis – someone else supplied the sperm found.

Taylor pauses, shuffles his papers, takes a sip of water and sighs, the pause designed to let this suggestion register with the judge, I guess. ‘There is that possibility. Interesting turn of phrase. Dr Meyer, could you determine with *certainty*, whether the accused himself had sex with the deceased?’

‘Well, I found semen ... seminal stains on his penis ...’

‘That is not my question. Can you positively say the deceased ejaculated?’

‘No.’

There is a murmur. The judge raises his gavel, silence ensues.

I'm beginning to admire our barrister, to my utter astonishment, as an Englishman would say.

Defence counsel resumes. 'Ahem. Now doctor, you did mention that you found some skin and hair under the deceased's fingernails, did you not?'

'Yes.'

'Could you say, with *certainty*, that these came from the accused?'

'Not with certainty, no. But lab tests show they did come from him.'

'I won't dispute that, doctor. Now then, to confirm, the two strands of hair found in the deceased's vaginal area: They were from the same person? In other words, are they the same type?'

'Yes.'

'Thank you, doctor. Now, did you find any fibres from the accused's clothing on the deceased?'

'I did find some fibres, yes. They did not match the accused's clothing, except for one – that belonging to his underpants.'

'What type of underpants?'

'Did you positively confirm that the fibre came from the accused's underwear and no one else's?'

'No.'

'Is it not true, doctor, that this is one of the most popular brands in the country?'

'I guess so.'

Could be anybody's. I also use Jockeys.

'Okay. Now, determination of time of death ... I appreciate the difficulty you had in ascertaining this. What system did you use?'

'The conventional method.'

'Meaning *rigor mortis*, that is, stiffening of the body?'

'Yes, due to the presence of substances, mainly lactic acid, in the muscles.'

'Now doctor, the post mortem examination was conducted comparatively quickly after death, I mean within twenty-four hour hours. You had the advantage then of being able to take the rectal and liver temperatures to determine the rate of cooling of the body and the time elapsed since death. Did you do so?'

‘Yes, this assisted in determining the time of death, but as I said before, there were certain climatic conditions that affect determination. Furthermore, the body cools off very rapidly in the first three hours, then tapers off, levelling when it reaches close to room temperature. Then there are other influencing factors such as whether the body was indoors or not, weight and age of the victim, the type of clothing worn, the weather, and so forth.’

‘Thank you, doctor, for your enlightening exposition. Now, coming back to the estimation of time of death, you did say death occurred sometime between 1 pm and 6 pm on the first of January?’

‘That’s right.’

‘A five hour window within which just about anybody could have perpetrated the crimes?’

‘Yes, but as I stated earlier, one cannot pin the time down more accurately ...’

‘Precisely doctor. Did you empty the deceased’s stomach to aid in determining time of death?’

‘Yes, she had little in her stomach, whatever there was had been processed. She had last eaten long before she was killed.’

‘I understand, doctor, thank you. Did you examine for any bruising around or inside the throat, in the soft tissues to confirm that death was by throttling?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nothing further, M’Lord.’ Taylor shakes his head; then sits down, looking what you call exasperated.

‘Re-examination, Miss Lambie?’ queries the judge, looking at the beautiful prosecutor from above his glasses.

‘Yes, Your Honour. Doctor, you are positive that the skin and hair under the deceased’s finger nails were that of a person with blood group AB Positive, a somewhat rare group?’

‘Yes.’

‘You testified about post mortem intercourse.’

‘Yes?’

‘Were there any other signs of deviant sexual behaviour?’

‘Yes. I also found semen in the mouth, throat, and anus. There were cuts and bleeding in and around the anus.’

There is a collective intake of breath.

I can't believe the delicate Anil could do such atrocious acts, but then I remember saying anybody is capable of murder.

'So, doctor, you are saying the deceased was subjected to sexual intercourse before and after her death, through all three orifices?'

'That's correct.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes. The bedroom was reeking of urine. It would appear the perpetrator urinated over the deceased's body as she lay on the bed.'

I look around and notice the feeling of disgust on most faces. Chi!

'Why didn't you tell the court all of this before?'

'Madam Prosecutor, I answer questions asked, I don't volunteer information.'

'Thank you, that is all.' Lamb Chop sits, having forgotten her sexy smile.

'Mr Taylor?' asks the judge peering over his half glasses.

'Nothing further, M'Lord.'

'The witness may step down.'

'Well, *larnie*, I think it went well for us today.'

'How so, Rohit?'

'The seeds of doubt have been sown by Taylor.' I laugh.

'Share the joke, won't you?'

'Sorry *larnie*, Taylor sewing I found funny.' Mr Ramlall and Sham laugh.

'You'd be the first to admit in this country that doubt is not enough.'

'You're right, Mr Ramlall. A non-white has to virtually prove his innocence – not the state to prove his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.'

'I'm hoping you come up with something.'

'If Anil's memory returns it may help. Sham, are we not going to call a psychologist or psychiatrist to testify?'

'No, Taylor says such testimony will not help Anil. I agree – it may sink him.'

'You don't mean Anil could admit something to them under ...'

'No, but they would say Anil could have killed her in a drunken stupor or under the influence of drugs and not remember afterwards. And such memory is not likely to return. But he remembers the only thing that counts – the woman was alive when he left her house.'

Raj looks at me with glazed eyes. 'Rohit, you are Anil's only hope.'

I skip the trial, knowing Taylor will get the truth out of the witnesses I found – David Levi. I put in some work at my office and have arranged to meet with Chota Essop at Goodwill Lounge for dinner. I'm rattled when the phone rings. Sham asks me to come to court immediately. I run.

'Cross examine, Miss Lambie?' asks a clearly tired Justice Laughton.

'No questions. May we approach the bench, Your Honour?'

'Come!' Miss Lambie, Mr Cook, Taylor, and Sham stand before the judge. This time he doesn't put a hand over the microphone.

'Your Honour, we concede that the case for the state has been closed but subsequently a witness has come forward that can give some valuable evidence which may assist the Court in arriving at a verdict. I beg the Court's indulgence in allowing the prosecution to put this witness on the stand.'

'In my chambers.' I follow the lawyers into the judges red-carpeted and red-sofa room, walls full of books, mahogany or teak or oak desk and green leather covered seats on high-backed chairs. 'Drinks, anyone?'

Taylor notices me, makes eyes, shooing me off.

'Just a minute, Mr Taylor. Who are you sir?'

'I'm Rohit Biswas, a private investigator for the defence.'

'And what is your interest here?'

'To help with seeing justice done.'

'Excellent answer. Please stay.' The judge gives me a brown-toothed smile. Sounds like an okay *ou*. 'Cookie, old chap, come have some Brooke Bond tea, which you must've got so used to during your ten-year stint in India, eh?'

'Thanks, Bernard, I may get nostalgic on tea, although I could do with a Scotch and soda.' The prosecutor comes to me; does he know? 'You have Indian ancestry, no doubt, Mr Biswas?'

'My great grandfather arrived as an indentured labourer in 1874.'

'Ah, so you have deep roots in Durban ...'

The judge clears his throat. 'Now, to business. You know the rules, Philip. I'm tempted to not allow this witness to take the stand because his or her testimony could prejudice the accused. How do you feel about this, Tom?'

'To tell you the truth, I am not at all happy with the state springing a surprise witness on us. We could accede, if you give the defence a wide latitude in cross-examination and if

you are prepared to reject this witness's testimony if you feel it may unfairly prejudice the accused.'

'Fair enough. Lady and gentlemen on the basis of what Mr Taylor has just said, I will allow this witness, and no more. However, it is now twenty minutes to four and it has been a long day. I am adjourning to tomorrow.'

'Your Honour, this witness will not be in the stand long ...'

'How can you be certain, Miss Lambie? Can you read Mr Taylor's mind? Will he keep it short? Maybe not. Move along, please.'

We shuffle back to the courtroom, take our seats.

The judge bangs his gavel thrice. 'Court is adjourned till ten am tomorrow.' Justice Laughton gathers his gown around him and leaves with a flourish. The court sounds like an African beer hall. Although my hidden tape recorder is on, I am a serial note taker as if my life or Anil's, depended on my scribbling.

Raj has invited us all to his house for dinner. This time our barrister joins us. The drinks are most welcome. Taylor looks tired, but is smiling.

'Another surprise witness, but it backfired because of Judge Laughton.'

'Do you know who it is?' asks Sham.

'It's a surprise – haven't a clue. Cheers.'

'What do you think about post-mortem sex?' I look at Taylor.

'Not for me; or you Biswas.' All laugh; then quieten down as Raj enters the room.

'The pathologist cannot be absolutely certain of course, given the state of medical science in this country. However, the limited amount of blood *in situ* lends credibility to Meyer's views.' Taylor on a soap box.

Raj motions with his eyes. I join him on the patio. 'Rohit, I invited this *madhur chodh* out of courtesy. Although I think he's done well so far, I don't trust the *Angreji*.'

'Right, *larnie*, neither do I.'

'Time is short and so far I don't think the defence has done much to exonerate Anil. When are you seeing Chota Essop?'

'Tomorrow night, at Goodwill Lounge.'

'Ah, give Pumpy Naidoo my regards. Maybe he could help identifying this coloured chap and may also know about George Russell's business.'

'Ja, I'm gonna ask both of them. I've got to get things sewn up before the trial ends. If I get the evidence, we could swing it. I think the Judge is a fair man.'

‘Hmm. Look Rohit, I don’t want us getting pally with Taylor. So not too much booze and loose talk. Let’s have supper and then you all should leave. I’m worried about tomorrow.’

‘Oh?’

‘I don’t like surprises.’

Our quartet with the *madhur chodh* as lead and we three brownies as chorus ducks under our tilted black umbrellas from the sleeting rain blowing over the harbour. We settle in our seats for the *S v Ramlall* show. Judge Laughton enters the courtroom hurriedly, precisely at ten. His eyes wander the packed room before he bangs the gavel once, twice, thrice. He's got everybody's attention, all right.

'Lady and gentlemen, please join me in my chamber.'

The judge is not smiling, does not offer Brooke Bond tea, and all. I wonder what happened between him and his missus last night. 'Mr Cook, I presume your witness is still a "surprise" to the defence?'

'Afraid so, M'Lord.'

'Who is he or she?'

'Reginald Simpson, the deceased's attorney.'

'And what is his business here?'

'He was given a cine 8 movie recording by the deceased some five years ago ...'

'Go on.'

'This movie shows the accused having sex with a woman who was later found dead.'

'I fail to see its relevance to this case.'

'Your Honour, the accused was having some kind of S&M ...'

'You've lost me, Miss Lambie.'

'Sorry, Your Honour, sadomasochism, erotic sex with a prostitute. The accused was strangling the woman with her stockings. She died and the accused carried her body away wrapped in a carpet. He ...'

'Just a minute, Miss Lambie. Which accused are you referring to?' Judge Laughton asks, frowning.

'The accused in this trial, Mr Anil Ramlall.'

'Come now. You are talking as though relating facts. What is the connection of that incident with the present case?'

'Your Honour, it goes to show the accused's character or pattern of behaviour...'

'Hold it right there, madam.' The judge turns to the DA. 'Philip, *you* know better. I can't allow something that happened five years ago to be introduced in my court.'

'M'Lord, double jeopardy does not apply in South Africa.'

‘That may be so, anyway, I care not for Americanisms. I can take notice of the facts of that previous case, when and where appropriate, but what you really want is a trial within a trial, not so, Miss Lambie, Mr Cook?’

‘Yes sir,’ the duo says in chorus. Old man Taylor looks just as puzzled as Sham ’n me.

Judge Sir Bernard Laughton drums on his desk with liver-spotted fingers. ‘Hmm, quite a quandary. Was the case resolved?’

‘No, Your Honour, the killer was never found.’

‘Now the coin finally drops. Interesting, Miss Lambie, you want me to try the accused for that crime, two for the price of one? I don’t think so. The charge sheet against Mr Ramlall is fairly explicit; I don’t want it complicated with unproven “facts” or conjectures, or insinuations; call them what you will. But in order to expedite current proceedings and in fairness to the accused having the right to a speedy trial, I ask you, madam, can you get the senior investigating officer, the state pathologist, and anybody relevant to that case for an in-camera discussion at nine tomorrow?’

‘Certainly, Your Honour.’

The judge presses a red button on his desk, drums his fingers. A *bari*-sized white policeman in uniform enters. ‘Bailiff, will you clear the court and announce that the trial will not proceed today and tomorrow?’

‘Yes, Sir.’ The guy salutes to the judge who’s not looking.

‘M’Lord?’

‘Yes, Mr Taylor?’

‘This suspense is killing me. Could we not bring the so-called surprise witness in now?’

The judge smiles. ‘Restrain yourself, man. You can have a go at him day after tomorrow. Dismissed.’ He waves us all away.

*

I feel like Taylor, stressed. I have the whole bloody day ahead. I can’t bring my 7.30 pm appointment with Chota Essop forward – you don’t dictate to a *mota*. It’s too early to booze. Go over my notes, look for something, anything, I may have missed? I’m not in the mood for paperwork; need a break to get me back on the trail for compelling favourable evidence. But where? I refuse a lift, walk under my umbrella, too engrossed to notice the goings on in the wet, piss, shit, and rubbish being washed away into the storm water drains, to land on the beaches, smells stick around to flavour the Casbah. Back in my lonely office I pull on *ganja*

so I can relax. If it wasn't raining, I'd take Arthi to the beach, do some fishing while she plays on the sand, have tin-fish sandwiches, cool drinks, and ice cream. It would have been wonderful if Asha were there too. I look at the beach ball and sigh. I'll pick up my baby from school at twelve and we'd stay home playing games. *Ha!* That's it, Arthi as stress reliever.

We drive along Riverside Road to Blue Lagoon, sit in the Morris on the jetty watching waves breaking on the rocks, wetting some diehard or desperate fishermen. Our storytelling ritual, but I'm not in the mood for talking. We have some snacks sold by barefooted and rain-soaked vendors. I could do with a drink but dare not indulge in front of the small petticoat government. We stroll hand in hand under the umbrella, she throwing nuts to the waterproof gulls and the brown mynahs. We walk on the wet sand and into ankle deep foam. It's not cold; Durban knows no winter. We drive to Battery Beach; *Chacha's* caravan is no more and neither is he. I drive to the back of the Edward Hotel and *tune* the chef, Amit Parmesar, for some chow that an eight-year old can eat. We dine in the car for not even the long-serving *bhandari* can organise a table for us brownies at that posh joint. Stupid, isn't it? Indian businessmen, *bunias* or *Gujis* and slum *ous*, are rightfully concerned with the colour of money, not of skin ... My, how time flies. I drive home, happy yet also concerned as to how I could get Anil out of the hole he'd dug himself into.

Arthi is asleep. Four o' clock and I'm in a holiday mood, preparing for tomorrow's "surprise". I run a bath, pour myself a Johnny Walker Black, having graduated from Mainstay. I remember the days when some twenty of us lived in this house with the two-room outbuilding attached to which was a miniature kitchen, its plastered walls and asbestos roof blackened by the smoke of the Falkirk cast iron coal stove. We used to bath once a week, water warmed in five gallon drums on a *choola*, two straightened truck steel springs lying parallel over two Coronation clay bricks. Sometimes *aji* would boil some leaves in the water which turned brown. She said it takes away the aches and pains. I have no proof of that. Evidence is the thing. I sip the Scotch, genteel-like. In summer, wet with sweat, we'd shower under a hosepipe tied to the umdoni tree. William, our garden boy, would join us to get rid of his terrible smell that sticks with you five minutes after he's gone past. Durban's heat gets the worst stinks out of anybody.

The family has scattered, gone to Avoca, Springfield, Clare Estate, Malvern, Mayville, Merebank, Ottawa, Verulam, Tongaat, Stanger, and god knows where. I miss the noisy, extended family, happy to have each other as a shield against poverty and starvation

that goes with it. This house at 188 Myhill Road was the first brick under tile in the district, built by contractor IB Singh and baba paid with a Durban Corporation loan. I inherited it as a sole male heir, or whatever the lawyers call it. This is the first non-white house of a working class family with a pantry where we stored sacks of flour, mealie rice, mealie meal, pea *dhall*, sugar, and five-gallon tins of oil and *ghee*. No sweets and biscuits those days, no meat and fish, except those bought fresh and cooked the same day. The house stands on a three-foot high face brick foundation wall with pillars inside, supporting the creaky tongue and groove meranti wood floors. William lived in the dark cellar, alone with cockroaches, bats, rats, and other unknown relatives and neighbours.

I sit on the open verandah which has almost three hundred and sixty degree views, of the Blue Lagoon, Springfield, Clare Estate, Newlands, Parlock, and the lake where hunter John Ross killed hippopotamuses or is that hippopotami, for fun. The lake still floods two or three times in summer but now is inhabited by another species – mosquitos. From here we used to watch the Naicker's Store, Beharie's Store, and Peter Road buses in the distance and walk smartly to the bus stop so we don't have to wait long for transport. From this vantage point we could watch friend, foe or neighbour approach and prepare accordingly. I go to the pantry and pour myself four fingers doctored with a little ice water. Goodbye Schweppes and Canada Dry. I could do with a mango pickle bite. *Aji* used to make this and stored it in a glazed earthenware jar in the seven foot by three prayer room, out of the clutches of daughters-in-law, especially when they had their periods. I grin, thinking of my granny, boss since *pardada* died in 1933 and *malikin* of this house, built in 1950. I sit on the veranda, doing what I'm accustomed to, a tall drink and a long, quiet pipe, taking leave from thinking, as the darkness spreads like a stain with me an island, marooned *charou* with mosquitos making merry. I had stayed sober the whole day, must be a record to note in my black book. I have a fitful sleep because my nightmares come when I'm awake, roused by the panicky squawks of the hadedah backed up by ugly Indian mynahs.

The sound of the saxophone reaches me before I get to Goodwill Lounge. I like Dee Sharma and Dukes Combo, rock 'n roll or pop, whatever, Elvis, Jim Reeves, Roy Orbison, *nagarra*, *qawali*, chutney, whatever, but never had the taste for jazz or jive. Fat old Pumpy, hair slicked with Brylcreem, parted in the middle, like Sham. Why doesn't he put *sindhoor* in the path, to show he's married? The entrepreneur and his fatter *bru* have sharp noses and tongues for business, bringing in some top overseas jazz and blues artists for local whites to enjoy. They can afford to pay the Lounge's top food 'n drink prices. Some *charous* are copying the

goras, driving fancy cars, dressing posh, drinking expensive champagne, wine, and piss like that.

A hustler finds a gap for me to park. I tell him if my car's still there, unharmed when I get back, he gets a shilling I know he'll spend on a nip of vodka. I hear the place is packed, as they say, to the rafters, the overflow loitering outside. Jesus, how am I going to have a conversation in this *macheni*, noisy as the Zulu beer hall?

The doorman or bouncer salutes me. Pumpy waddles gracefully, dressed like a funeral undertaker, a cigar in his mouth, smoke in his eyes, both arms outstretched like a plump penguin, or is it a pelican?

'Rohit, you still alive?'

'*Ja, larnie*, but I may have used up eight lives.'

Pumpy removes his cigar and laughs, his belly joins in. 'Good to see you, *bhairam*. How's the little one?'

I smile; the big guy is so what you call affable, a family man. 'She's fine; I spent a half-day with her.'

'Good, good. Remember, without family a man is like a ship with a dead engine, drifting on the restless sea. Family is an anchor.'

'I must write that down in my little black notebook; Pumpy's words of wisdom.' The stomach vibrates. He slaps me on the back; I almost fall headlong. The proprietor used to be an amateur wrestler, now gone to fat on his own extravagant cuisine, expensive wine, and cigars. 'Come, Chota *bhai* got in five minutes ago, must've already worked up a thirst.'

I walk in Pumpy's wake. The dance floor is packed; the band on a six inch high dais is going full tilt, saxophone, drums, guitar, maracas, and the devil knows what else they use to make a racket.

Pumpy opens a heavy-looking door. The room is luxurious, thick, all-red carpet, sofas and curtains, a small dark mahogany or teak or whatever bar to one side with six matching barstools, and a five-seater wooden table. He closes the door – instant silence. A shortish man with a Hitler moustache, black pin-striped double-breasted suit, striped tie and matching pocket handkerchief gets up, arms outstretched.

'Biswas, you old dog you. Still alive?'

'That's the second time in five minutes I've been asked the same question, *larnie*. Pumpy, can't you guys put on an original act?' The host's belly rolls; Chota cackles. I give him a bear hug; lift him an inch above the carpet. He's packing.

'Well, I'm not surprised you're still alive.'

‘How so, Chota *bhai*?’

The gang-leader raises his bushy salt ’n pepper eyebrows. ‘You, Mr PI, should know, only the good die young; we three are going to be around a long time.’ More laughter.

‘You two may be okay; me, I’m doomed.’ I make my granny-just-died face.

‘How so, Bis?’

‘You *motas* can afford to buy a ticket to heaven or bribe your way through; me I’m too poor.’ Laughter, and a slap on my back from Chota Essop; it doesn’t make me rush headlong, like Pumpy’s did.

‘Biswas, how’s your *bacha*, what’s her age?’

‘Eight years old, boss.’

‘Ah, what a joy, a miniature Asha, no?’

Tears well up. ‘*Ha ji*, Chota *bhai*.’

‘You know how fast children grow, man, like they live on Windmill Fertilizer. Next thing they’re married and gone. You know you gonna have another problem in a decade?’

‘How so, *larnie*?’

‘*Uloo ka patta*. Don’t you know a seed blossoms into a flower and gets plucked by a suitor? You gotta save for a dowry, man.’ Laughter, backslapping.

‘Chota *bhai*, Rohit, enough talking. Let’s get down to some serious drinking ...’

‘Not for Biswas.’

‘What you mean, *bhaia*?’ Pumpy is squinting above his cigar as he opens what looks like old, expensive whisky.

‘He could get arrested for drunk-driving!’ Chota Essop slaps his thigh. I grin, knowing he arranged my dramatic arrest. The gang leader whispers in the restaurateur’s ear; the big man’s stomach goes bouncing.

‘Chota *bhai*, straight, right?’

‘Straight, *yebo*, *baba*; is there any other way? I don’t trust this Durban Corporation water; it could be a plot by the *goras* to kill us with dysentery, cholera, whatever, to stop us *charous* breeding like rabbits. Fill her up.’

Dop is *haram* for a slum *ou*, but who’s going to remind Chota Essop? It could be life-threatening.

‘Gentlemen I have some seafood specials prepared: grilled langoustine and crayfish; crab curry; masala fried and curried shad; and anything else you fancy I can organise chop-chop. You want to eat now or later?’

‘Later,’ Chota ’n me chorus.

We sit on the sofa, the head of the Crimson League taps my knee. ‘*Acha bhaia*, talk.’

I describe the suspect, a big coloured guy with twisted hair and two upper gold-capped incisors, perhaps driving a black American car with lots of chrome. Pumpy and Chota exchange knowing glances, then chorus: ‘Shaun Daniels!’

Chota puts an arm around my shoulder. ‘It’s a pity I was away overseas on business and couldn’t meet you earlier or we would have wrapped this shit up chop-chop. This *madhur* is Sheriff Khan’s hit-man; dangerous fellow. Sheriff is muscling in on our business, running the show from Joburg through Fordsburg. It’s hurting us. Now’s our chance to get our own back. But Bis, don’t go gunning for this bushie; leave that to me. His balls are mine, to make kebab.’

‘But Chota *bhai*, dead men tell no tales.’

‘I know; a *slum ou* like me should not touch a pig, but the *bahen chodh* will squeal like a *suar* before Allah the Merciful takes his black soul. Let’s eat. You got *halal* fish, Pumpy?’

‘You guys know the husband of the woman who was murdered ... George Russell?’ Chota and Pumpy again exchange knowing glances.

The League man gulps his drink. ‘That’s the fucker in cahoots with Khan. Smart *ou*; we’ve got no proof that will put him behind bars; he’s the mastermind, like. If things get worse, we may have to plant him six feet underground, *gora* or not.’

‘What’s he up to?’

‘Tell our detective, Pumpy.’

‘Well, Georgie boy is in the import-export business – wine, beer, liquor, tobacco, foodstuff, carpets, toiletries, perfume, maybe even women. He can get anything; over-insures his goods and then unfortunately his warehouses get broken into. Get’s paid double.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Sheriff Khan’s men with cops on the payroll “confiscate” the goods and store the stuff in another warehouse. The merchandise is sold; the insurance companies do not recover the stolen goods and pay up.’

‘Clever; but that kind of scam will only last so long as the cops are part of the deal.’

‘Right, Rohit. George and Sheriff are getting heat from us and the Police Commissioner. But you know what’s getting Georgie boy really fucked?’

‘No?’

‘*Madhur chodh*’s a gambler, deep in debt. He’s desperate now.’

‘Chota *bhai*, how come the League hasn’t been able to nail this *gardoo*?’

‘Well, he wasn’t in the protection racket, so we didn’t bother. But now he’s showing our customers our protection is worthless.’

‘Also, he’s got protection, man,’ puts in Pumpy, squinting over his Cuban.

‘From the police?’

‘No.’ Pumpy puts his forefinger to his temple. ‘Lawyers. His attorney is Reginald Simpson; backup is that fart, barrister Thomas Taylor, a *larnie*, who may have shares in Russell’s businesses. Reggie’s the front office guy, spokesman.’

I put up my hands. ‘Gentlemen, hang on. I’ve gotta tell you something but first, Pumpy, let’s wet our throats again with your expensive Scotch. Now, this Reginald Simpson is appearing before the judge tomorrow. He’s been given a home movie of Anil Ramlall having sex and killing a white woman.’

Mouths hang open. ‘Russell’s wife?’

‘No, a prostitute – five years ago. The police never solved that case.’

Pumpy replenishes our drinks. ‘Now they want to pin that on Ramlall’s son?’

‘Maybe.’

The owner of Goodwill Lounge removes his *nuni*-like cigar. ‘Fuck, Rohit, I think Georgie boy is trying to kill three birds with one stone – Chota *bhai* and Anil plus the businesses protected by the League.’

‘*Ja*, but maybe four birds ...’

‘What?’

‘Who’d benefit from Liz Russell’s death? She was loaded, I hear. If Georgio is not involved in her death, he may benefit from her will; pay his debts.’

‘You’ve got to check her will. How?’

‘Pumpy, I think Reginald Simpson may have that but he’ll never show it to me.’

Chota Essop coughs in genteel fashion. ‘I could arrange for his office to be burgled one stormy night.’

‘I didn’t hear that, *bhairam*.’

‘*Ja*, you’re hard of hearing – too much *ganja* smoke in your ears.’

I raise my glass, sip the mellow stuff. ‘It’ll be nice to know; knowledge is power. Now another theory or hypothesis, gentlemen ...’

‘See, Chota *bhai*, two years of law studies seem to have gone to the PI’s head. I remember George Sewpershad telling Rohit, “Education, like justice, is both a shield and a sword. It equips you to deal with life’s problems using your brain,” or something like that.’

‘I thank you and brother George for your wise counsel. *Ja*, Chota *bhai*, I’m studying law, moving at snail’s pace, so I’ll have to continue from the grave if I’m to qualify.’

‘*Uloo ka patta* – no grave, we’ll roast you and throw your ashes down the toilet. Pumpy, cigars please.’

‘Right. What I’m saying is George was conveniently absent, in London, when his wife got bumped off.’

‘So he’s got a government-endorsed alibi – exit and entry stamps in his passport?’

‘Correct, Pumpy, but what if he got his wife killed by agency?’

‘Secret agent? Anil? No, they’re business rivals, not pals.’

‘No, I mean killed by a hit-man who pins it on Anil. Oh, by the way, he also told me that Russell and barrister Taylor may be business partners, coming up soon with some lucrative deals to supply our government with whatever they need if boycotts and sanctions bite.’

Pumpy frowns. ‘Run that by us, in English.’

‘The boycott movement aimed at stopping apartheid started in London in ’59. Since this year it became the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It’s growing, and may, in time, persuade the United Nations to apply sanctions against South Africa. So, even now, it may be lucrative to be pally with the National Party and supply it with whatever they need but cannot get legitimately. Big bucks to be made and those two have a head start.’

Pumpy and Chota nod, letting this sink in while they consider how they could benefit, working under the radar.

Chota speaks, ‘Rohit, what I can’t understand is why these two rogue Englishmen would want to get Anil hanged?’

‘I think during his stay in London he might have unearthed something that could put their ... venture under risk. It may become double jeopardy if Anil talked to his Communist friends. I’ve contacted the AAM people, Abdul Minty will be in touch with me. I’m hoping to unearth a plot or motive that may show Russell cooked up his wife’s murder and framed Anil. I’m going to London and Dublin as soon as I get a passport. I have a few leads to follow up that end.’

Chota clears his throat. ‘Sharp work, Rohit. Give my regards to Abdul – good bloke. Speak to Kader Asmal; he’s left dust for the London School of Economics.’

Pumpy clears his throat. ‘I can understand those dacoits wanting to put Anil away, but why Russell’s wife?’

‘Well, her inheritance, for one thing. Now she and Anil were lovers and she may know what he has against her husband. Silence both ... or she may have been a tool to get rid of Anil. Although, they could have used simpler means.’

‘*Madhur chodh* may have been jealous knowing his wife is being screwed by a coolie,’ Chota moves his upper lip sending his moustache dancing.

‘*Ja*. Now coming back to the agency thing, what if Russell paid someone to bump off his missus while he was away?’

‘Shaun Davids,’ Chota and Pumpy chorus.

‘Right. But we need proof – it may save Anil’s life.’

‘Biswas, payment for a hit would have been in cash, won’t reflect in that dacoit’s bank account, if the bushie has one. We’ve got to check if bad boy Shaun made any investments recently. I’ll get my boys onto that, sharp.’ Chota raises his glass for a refill.

‘*Yebo*. Simpson and the cops involved in that murder investigation five years ago will appear before Judge Laughton tomorrow. I’ll tell you, in confidence, what happened. I appreciate your help, the chow, booze, and cigars. Hey, Pumpy, I hope this place is not bugged?’

‘We may have bugs and cockroaches, but I’ll make sure they don’t spill the beans.’

Chota *bhai* has to have the last word. ‘Or don’t sing or squeal or rat on us.’

I leave the quiet sanctity of Pumpy’s office into the noisy band-dance floor, walk outside and catch my breath. There’s a commotion on the pavement on the other side of the street. I walk across to check. I hear a car start up. I see the headlights of a big black vehicle, what looks like a ’48 Chevy Fleetline, come on, the driver revving the engine as if readying for a race. Must be a rich *bunya laaitie* borrowing his *ballie*’s car as the old man snores, having to get up around six to open his shop. I walk fast but stop when I hear the roar of the motor, close. I stand stock still in the middle of Victoria Street, my eyes hypnotised by the headlights. When the monster is almost on top of me I hurl myself. The wing mirror hits my lower back. I lie in the gutter looking at the car speeding away in the direction of Soldiers Way, its lights off. I couldn’t read the number plate, nothing. If I got injured or killed, the City Police would have called it a hit ’n run. It’s no accident, but attempted murder. Who am I making angry or uncomfortable?

I'm early for the conference, sit on a fire hydrant, coat in hand, thinking what will transpire. Sex, strangling, and dumping of the body of a white woman by an Indian man; could it get any worse for Anil? Hang on, "alleged offences"; the case was not solved or closed but may be five years later; now. But you can only hang a guy once. If the accused had even a small chance of getting away with Liz's alleged rape and murder, I think any loopholes in the prosecution's case will be covered now, with this newfound shit. What kind of man is Anil?

'Good morning, Mr Biswas.'

'*Namaste*, Mr Cook. It's morning, alright, but whether it'll be good for the accused, I'm not sure.'

The District Attorney smiles. 'That's up to the defence force. You're a widower, aren't you sir?'

'My name's Rohit. I lost my wife eight years ago ...'

'So I heard from Sir Bernard. Tragic, but that's life, eh? Never know when your allotted time's up. You must visit us soon; taste and comment on Puja's cooking, what?'

'That's very kind of you sir.'

'Not at all; here's my card, give me a call, perhaps after this ghastly business is over. Shall we go in?'

I see the throne on the platform is empty, not the dozen chairs in a semicircle in front of it. Cook and me join the group. Nobody seems to have any papers or pens in their hands. Sir Bernard Laughton enters, drawing his black gown around him. He raises a hand to someone and I hear the front door being locked, the courtroom is empty. The judge nods to the people in the semicircle; reminds me of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, not that I've been to any.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming at such short notice. I have in front of me the completed and signed attendance register with your designations so I will not require you to introduce yourselves as we, speaking for myself, will not remember the names.'

There's subdued laughter. 'I will call out your name and you can sit or stand where you are and answer. This is an information gathering process and not part of court proceedings. Are we clear on that? No recordings or notes should be taken. What is said and heard here is off the record and confidential. Agreed?'

‘Yes, Your Honour,’ the twelve-person chorus responds.

‘I assume every person here has an interest in either the present case of *S v Ramlall* or in the matter of five years previously; if not, you should leave immediately.’ Nobody moves. ‘Very well, then. I call upon Deputy Police Commissioner True-May.’

My ex-boss stands up, looking different but handsome in a white shirt, grey suit, and matching tie.

‘Let’s be informal here to save a little time, perhaps. Deputy Commissioner, you then as Detective Chief Inspector supervised the investigation into the alleged rape and murder of a young white woman some five years ago. Just the gist of your findings, please, the state pathologist and others will fill in the details.’

Fred clears his throat. ‘Your Honour. On the morning of 17th August 1956, I responded to a call from a uniformed officer reporting the finding of a body at Albert Park. I was immediately assigned the case. I reached the crime scene at eight; found the body of a naked white woman wrapped in a red carpet. She appeared to have been dead a few hours. I called the crime scene squad. The deceased was identified by her husband as Candice Strydom, a twenty-three year old from Germiston, two weeks after her photograph appeared in the press. She worked as a hostess at Smugglers Inn. Nobody was arrested or charged with her death.’

Well, Fred didn’t say Anil did it, that’s a comfort.

‘Thank you, Deputy Commissioner, for that succinct exposition. Now I call on Dr Steven Meyer.’ I hardly recognise the guy in his black suit rather than white dustcoat.

‘You were then, as you are now, a forensic pathologist who examined the deceased, Mrs Candice Strydom, *in situ* and at the mortuary?’

‘Yes, Your Honour.’

‘Please tell us briefly of your findings.’

‘The crime did not occur where the body was found. I estimated time of death to be from four to six hours earlier, that is between 2 am and 4 am on the same morning. Although a net stocking was around her neck, strangulation or garroting, in this case most probably auto erotic asphyxiation, was not the cause of death. Insufficient pressure was applied by the ligature indicated by absence of marks on the neck and throat, and her hyoid bone was intact. The deceased reached climax ... had an orgasm ... simultaneously with a death spasm from an overdose of a barbiturate, Secobarbital, the effects of which were heightened by high level of alcohol in her blood and that exacerbated the situation as well as her adrenalin rush.’

I'm a bit lost here. "Auto erotic asphyxiation" – what has a car to do with the woman's death? She tried to choke herself after being so high on drink 'n drugs?

'Could a person force someone to take such an overdose of drugs?'

'Not likely, Your Honour. If the deceased had taken the amount of the drug found in her blood in one swallow, she would have died within thirty minutes. The alcohol and the sodium salt of Secobarbital or Seconal had been ingested over a period estimated to be about four or five hours.'

'Such drugs are readily available in this country?'

'No, Your Honour, most probably brought in from abroad by wealthy travellers.'

Judge Laughton frown, nods. 'She died definitely from such overdose, self-administered, and not as a result of choking, strangling, garrotting or smothering?'

'Definitely from alcohol and drug overdose.'

So, Anil can't be blamed for that. The woman was an adult prostitute, plying her trade while her husband sailed on the small ship, Jolanda, between Durban and Port Louis, Mauritius. Who knows where and when she got drunk and drugged? Must be an experienced "entertainer" who wanted something different, for a bigger tip, to have an orgasm while gasping for breath during self-strangulation. Jesus what sick things some whites get up to behind closed doors to get high?

'Was she raped?'

'I found signs of much sexual activity which appeared to be consensual and not forced as there were no signs of bruising in and around her vagina, anus, mouth and breasts.'

'Thank you, doctor. The two testimonies have cleared up the facts that Mrs Swanepoel died under her own hand and secondly that no person was arrested as being responsible for that death.'

That's a relief.

The judge takes a sip of water ... or is it vodka? 'Now I call upon Mr Reginald Simpson. Please tell us why you are here.'

'Thank you, Your Honour. I am attorney for the deceased and her surviving spouse. On 22 August 1956 Mrs Russell called at my office and gave me a sealed package with strict instructions, verbal and in writing, that it must be opened only in the event that it has been determined that she, that is, Mrs Russell herself, had died from unnatural causes ...'

'Just a minute, Mr Simpson. When did you open the package?'

'A week ago.'

'Why did you wait so long?'

‘Your Honour I was on a month’s vacation – the first in six years ...’

‘But sir, on learning of your client’s death could you not have instructed someone in your office to open the package and take any action as may be appropriate?’

‘Well, no, Your Honour.’

‘And why not?’

‘Well, I guessed it may contain sensitive material.’

‘You guessed or did you *know*? Did you open the package and see its contents earlier, against your client’s instructions?’

‘Your Honour, I refuse to answer that question ...’

‘Mr Simpson, you are an officer of the court in South Africa, not in the US – you cannot plead the Fifth Amendment. You are not under oath but I caution you to answer truthfully. Did you see the contents of that package?’

‘Yes. It’s an 8 millimetre movie recording.’

‘Why disclose it now?’

‘I was told to wait for an opportune time.’

‘By who?’

‘I’d rather not tell.’

‘Mr Simpson, my patience is wearing thin.’ Judge Laughton’s face has turned purple.

‘Mr Russell.’

‘So he knew of the package and its contents?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘A day after Mrs Russell left it with me. I phoned him and he came in the next day.’

‘Didn’t the deceased make it clear that the package was private and confidential?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why breach that trust, Mr Simpson?’

‘I act for both Mr and Mrs Russell and for their estates. Mr Russell instructed me to keep him fully informed; his wife didn’t.’

‘Did Mr Russell, on learning of the contents of the package take any action?’

‘No, Your Honour.’

‘Did he give you any instructions on the matter?’

‘He said, “Guard this with your life, old boy; this is a trump card, could be our ticket to easy street,” or something to that effect.’

Hare Ram! This could be the killer punch.

‘Has Mr Russell communicated with you recently about that package?’

‘Yes. He said, “Don’t go to the police. Wait till the prosecution has built up a case; reveal it at the right time in case the cops botch the investigations. So here I am.”’

‘Thank you, Mr Simpson. Deputy Commissioner?’

My ex-boss jumps up, stands ramrod straight. ‘Yes, Your Honour?’

‘I hope you noted the proceedings and will watch the show with interest; then take whatever action you deem fit?’

‘Rest assured, Your Honour.’

‘Thank you, sir. Now ladies and gentlemen, we shall take a fifteen-minute recess while preparations are made for a showing of the movie. Need I remind you that these proceedings are confidential?’

I call a little Indian runner. ‘You know the Victoria Street taxi rank?’

The boy shakes his head left to right in rhythmical fashion – a sign he understands. Why doesn’t he just say so? ‘You know the owner of Rajput’s Cafe, the fat fellow who cooks outside?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ask him to tell Chota *bhai* that I will meet him there, ’bout five or six o’ clock. It’s urgent. Got that?’

‘Got it!’ The boy gives a thumbs-up.

‘Before I give you this shilling, who gave you that message?’

‘Rohit Biswas, the private detective.’

‘Ha, you got it, *chalo*.’

People are smoking outside the Supreme Court. It’s too early for a *zoll* or a *dop*. Taylor looks like he got a running stomach. Sham comes with a bottle of Co-ee iron brew. ‘Why’s that *madhur chodh* looking like he caught his gardener *chodhoing* his wife?’

Sham and his belly laugh. ‘I heard him telling Cookie that they should stop the judge showing the movie.’

‘What did the DA say?’

‘He said, “You can try. Once old Bernard has made a decision, only a tsunami can stop him.”’

‘What’s a “tsunami”, a Japanese samurai warrior, or something like that?’

‘I don’t know. I think he’s mad because the prosecution doesn’t seem to care.’

‘This movie may be part of a conspiracy to make sure Anil is convicted so George can inherit from his wife’s will. Chota told me that attorney is in cahoots, a protector of Russell and Sheriff Khan’s Durban operations. If Georgie Boy is not involved in his wife’s death he can inherit from her, right Sham?’

‘Yes, but all you have, Rohit, is conjecture, guesswork. We will need concrete proof.’

The film is grainy and the colour not bright but you know what the game is – dirty. You see a beautiful white woman with yellow-like hair enter wearing a long red dress, gloves going up to the blouse sleeves ending at the elbow, black fishnet stockings, a long black coat like society Englishmen use and the type of hat Paul Kruger and Winston Churchill wore. She wobbles around, using a rain umbrella to balance, the drink in her other hand spilling. She kicks her legs this way ’n that, more drink falls on the red carpet. She throws away her hat, takes off her coat, chucks that away too. Strip tease! We see Anil come into the room. He looks bored, sips a drink, like he’s seen better shows than this before. The woman is now naked, grabs Anil and starts taking his clothes off. Then he’s wearing only a FL, but his *nuni* is limp. He pours Black Horse into his and the bitch’s glass, spilling some of the stuff because his hand is shaky. She drips the *dop* on her tits, grabs Anil’s head; runs her tongue over his face. She plays with her tits, sucks Anil’s breasts, caresses his balls, takes the condom off; sucks the dead *nuni*. She’s getting carried away. Young Anil has been sitting on the sofa watching the show as if he bored and cross because he didn’t get value for money. The woman takes the umbrella puts the tip in her vagina, pushes in and out. *Is she pagal?* Candice sits next to Anil, playing with his breasts, caressing his face, licking his stomach. She stands, does a wobbly dance, grabs her stocking; wraps it around her neck. She lies on the sofa, legs stretched out, holding the stocking tight around her neck. *Is she trying to hang herself?* She takes out her tongue, runs it sideways. Anil sits, hand on mouth, eyes blinking. There’s no sound or you would have heard the sofa complaining. The woman’s action stops suddenly, she’s now twitching. Anil moves his arse on the sofa, goes close to her, looks down at her face. She is quiet, still. He puts his hand on her face, forehead. He pulls on his brief and pants, goes back to the woman, places two fingers by the side of her neck, opens her eyelids. He sits on the sofa, head in hands. We see him putting his clothes on, going out the door. The screen goes blank.

‘Mr Simpson, is that the end?’

‘No, Your Honour; the reel is still running. It will come on shortly.’

We wait. Interval with no popcorn, peanuts, toffee apples or ice cream. Live action porn with two young buckaroos, whatever, and then one of the actors dies; real stuff. Humans are worse than animals, performing like that; doing dirty things ... for money. It's hard being a father, especially of a girl, you have to be security guard twenty-four hours.

Anil comes back into the room, fully clothed, carrying a large rug. He seems steadier now; sobered up sharp. He places the carpet on the floor, carries the woman from the sofa, puts her down gently, closes her eyes, and rolls the body in the rug. You see nothing of the corpse for the length of the carpet is greater than her height. He opens the door, comes back and with a bit of effort lifts the package onto his shoulder and walks out of the room. The screen goes blank.

'That's the end, Your Honour.' The lights come on.

The judge stands in front of the blank screen. 'That concludes the proceedings for today; court reconvenes at ten tomorrow morning. Any questions?'

'Your Honour, will you admit the movie recording as an exhibit?' It's Lamb Chop.

'Most certainly not. It has no probative value to the current case.'

'But it goes to show character, Your Honour.'

'Whose character, Miss Lambie, and how?'

'The accused's, his propensity for sex, rape ...'

'Who was raped? Who was the dominant partner?'

'But, Your Honour, the public has a right to know ...'

'Know what? That movie has the potential to incense the public and heighten racial animosity. I will not give the people a free porn show in my court. Philip, what's your view?'

'Sir Bernard, while the exhibit does allow one to draw conclusions based on similarities with the present case, that the accused may have a propensity for statutorily-prohibited sex, it is not factual, meaning it does not prove that the accused killed that woman as the state pathologist testified.'

'I agree. It proves nothing in the present case. Showing it to the public may be immoral if sensationalised by the press. A public viewing is not in the interests of the community or of justice. The present case must be judged on its own merits based on evidence. Whether a crime has been committed and what actions are to be taken after Mr Simpson's exposition and the movie, is up to the police. Thank you; that is all.'

I'm no movie expert but when the show stopped after the woman collapsed, Anil came in looking different; sobered up. There must have been an interval 'cause I know he couldn't have sobered up that sharp. I didn't see him getting an erection, entering the prostitute or

coming. He must've been too drunk and drugged to get it up, or unless he has a problem with the nuni? Did Anil realise what was going on? My suspicions of the accused are beginning to get confirmed. I must follow up the Dublin story of Anil fathering the child there. Can't tell Rajshekhar Ramlall any of this. Hang up; hold the phone. Candice Swanepoel was killed ... or died on 17th August 1956 and Simpson got the package from Mrs Russell five days later. Were Anil and Liz "secret" lovers for five years, maybe more? I find that hard to believe. This seems like a set-up, but why would Liz want to protect herself and in the process harm her lover? I smell something fishy.

It is three o' clock. I call Mr Ramlall; then walk to Goodhope Centre. We hug; watch the harbour then take our drinks and sit on a sofa. Raj seems to have aged in the last fortnight, but I may have good news for a *topi* who's become a friend – joined through sorrow. I remind him that the hearings were confidential but summarise the proceedings and tell him that the "surprise" witness is not one that we expected to send Anil to the gallows.

'Please explain to a man who's losing his mind.'

'Well, *bhairam*, what we guessed was that Anil may have committed a similar crime before and if this was shown, it would seal his fate.'

'But?'

'It did not prove that Anil killed that prostitute five years ago; it did not show that he forced drugs and drinks down her throat. No crime there except for contravening the *Immorality Act*, not reporting a death, and attempting to conceal a body. I don't think Deputy Commissioner True-May is going to lose any sleep over that. Anyway, evidence from one trial that was not concluded, I mean someone was not charged; cannot be used in another case unless the judge allows it. Here he clearly said he wouldn't.'

'So what's the good news?'

'First we must toast this.' I get a half smile and another double. 'Cheers. Russell saw the tape a week after his wife left it with her attorney. He told that chap, Reginald Simpson, not to disclose it to anyone, not even the cops, until the right time. I'm thinking he wanted to use it as blackmail ...'

'Against who?'

'Well, say, his wife, if she had not died and maybe wanted to divorce him or cut him off her will. Secondly, against Anil, in case he got acquitted. Remember, Russell's business is sinking, but he'll give that line up for more lucrative sanctions-busting oil and arms; use his inheritance as seed capital.'

‘Intriguing, the stuff you come up with.’

‘You ain’t seen nothing yet, as the Americans would say.’

‘Come on; I’m bribing you with expensive whisky.’

‘I know I can have it and still shut up. Jokes aside, *larnie*, the big thing is both Chota Essop and Pumpy Naidoo identified the suspect, from the description I got from a guy, Levi, who was at the party, as a coloured chap named Shaun Daniels from Joburg.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘One of Sheriff Khan’s hit-men.’

‘Sheriff is operating in Durban?’

‘*Ja*, we suspect in cahoots with George Russell. Pumpy sends his regards, though. We’ve worked a plan to smoke out this *bruin ou*.’

‘How?’

‘The less you know the better. Now the trial may finish tomorrow but I doubt the judgment will be given immediately. We may have a week to wrap things up.’

‘What your next move?’

‘Well, Raj, I’m wondering why they sprang this surprise so early.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have looked at the witness’ affidavits. There’s good and bad news.’

‘Go on, PI.’

‘Firstly, the one African feller and the Indian chap say nothing more than they were at the party but didn’t see Anil. There were some Communist Party guys ... and women there, up to mischief. Two white men and two women also confirm they were there but didn’t see anything amiss. They admit being too drunk; don’t say they were stoned on imported drugs. What’s bad is two witnesses ...’

Raj leans forward. ‘What?’

‘The young Zulu, Jabulani Mkhize, says he wandered around the house, no doubt looking for what he could pocket, went upstairs and saw Anil and Liz arm in arm, sleeping naked in her bedroom.’

Raj shakes his head.

‘Sleeping together can mean nothing. The other witness is who can sink Anil. This chap, Pyotr Kowalski, aged twenty-seven, said he went upstairs to use the toilet; hears two voices, peeped and saw Anil and Liz busy making love. They were so engrossed in each other that this guy watched for a while and then left.’

‘This is bad ...’

‘*Ja*. But the fact ... I’m not sure it’s fact, is that he’s the only one who caught Anil and Mrs Russell red-handed.’

‘So?’

‘Did he really see the action or was he paid by someone to come to court and tell lies? We need the Deputy Commissioner to investigate this chap’s bank account, if he has one – he’s a student at Natal University – came here from Hungary in ’56.’

‘You’ll follow that up with Fred?’

‘Yes, *bhairam*. Now, I’m maybe naturally suspicious, but two witnesses don’t appear on the police list – they are on mine.’

‘Explain please, Rohit.’

‘I met an old guy who worked with Mrs Russell: Professor David Levi. He told me that Liz had gone to find herself or something at an ashram in India, came back and wanted to leave her fortune, on her death, to the Durban Child Welfare Society.’

‘To put George in place. He must have been really mad if he knew.’

‘I suspect that *chor* lawyer, Simpson, must’ve tipped him off.’

‘My word, Rohit, that’s something!’

‘What worries me is how come the cops didn’t find these guys and interrogate them? Is there a police conspiracy at work here?’

‘What are you going to do? This may, just may, go to show that Anil was set up.’

‘I’m going to see Fred – Jesus!’

‘What, Rohit?’

‘I hope *he*’s not part of the conspiracy.’

Ramlall’s mouth hangs open.

‘Where you can come in, *larnie*, is to persuade the Deputy Police Commissioner to get his top and trusted men to be on alert. It may be an opportunity for True-May to get rid of some riff-raff and keep his promise to clear the city of scum. It may help to have a word in his father’s ear.’

‘Come to think of it, Rohit, I know James a long time, but now you mentioned suppression of evidence, I’m beginning to think how he could afford such a luxurious lifestyle as a pensioner. Could *he* be on someone’s payroll?’

‘My god, Raj *babu*, now you’re scaring me.’

‘I’m worried that with such big guns at play, a small fry like Anil’s got no hope.’

‘Don’t say that; we’ve got to work as a team. Can you use your contacts to investigate the financial affairs of James and Fred?’

‘Oh boy; that’s going to be near impossible.’

‘We have to perform miracles, if we’re to save your son’s life.’

‘Seems that way. But it may take some time.’

‘Time is something that money can’t buy.’

‘I’m not sure of that,’ Ramlall winks. ‘Let’s have a shot to boost our brains.’

‘Now you’re talking my language, boss. What is essential is either evidence, proof that someone else did it, then it’s up to the police to show that, pronto, or the suspect confesses. The second option is preferable, as the lawyers will say.’

‘Oh, by the way, I got your passport today.’

‘Good; I’ve gotta move fast, but I can’t miss the action here; especially the two witnesses that need to come before Judge Laughton.’

‘I’ll also talk to Fred about that, after you have. But at this stage, with your conspiracy theory, we have to proceed with caution. I’ll brief Singh and ask him to hold the fort in your absence.’

‘I’ve got an idea, *larnie*.’ I gulp the single malt scotch.

‘What’s that?’

‘Can you buy time?’

‘How?’

‘Persuade Fred that the police investigations are not completed – that the case be adjourned, say for a week, till I finish my foreign enquiries?’

‘I can try but make no promises.’

‘I’m meeting with Chota at the Victoria Street taxi rank. I’m going to ask him to keep an eye on Russell and Daniels, and to put things in motion. Be on standby.’

I sit window-down in the passenger seat of Chota *bhai*’s black ’n white ’57 Hudson Hornet V8 four door sedan with white-walled tyres, thick leather seats, air conditioning, steering wheel smooth white with a matching turning knob on it, they say made of ivory, poor elephants sacrificed for a gangster to show off. I’d trade three or four of my ’56 Morris Minors, if I had them, for one of this. A two-toned auto, what? We’re *chowing* spinach and potato-based *bhajia* straight from Rajput’s giant *kadhai*, the thick cast iron pot and hot *ghee* making up the right flavour from gas flame, eight feet from where we watch the street. I give Chota *bhai* a confidential briefing on today’s proceedings; he slaps his thigh.

‘You old dog you, Biswas, deserve a *dop*, we’re gonna nail the *madhurs*, chop-chop now.’ He hoots; a *laaitie* comes up to his window. He talks in Urdu, similar to Hindi, so I understand. The little feller comes back with a brown paper packet, returns the money. Chota

lives by the charity of the people in the Casbah. *Bhai* takes a swig, grunts and passes the package to me. I copy.

‘Shaun Davids is from Coronationville in Joburg. Here in Durbs he’s changed from a rat to a cockroach or owl ...’

‘Eh?’

‘Comes out only at night. Difficult to tail. We’ll have to bait the bushy *madhur*. I got word he’s buying a house in the *larnie* part of Wentworth, with sea views. How you like that, PI?’

‘Must cost a big packet, *bhairam*.’

‘Fuckin’ right. Twenty thousand quid. Cash.’

‘You know the seller?’

‘Fuckin’ right, again.’

‘Chota *bhai*, can you get an affidavit from him, written in Indian ink, not blood?’

‘Biswas, you wasting your time as a detective, man, you should be in a circus.’

‘Boswell and Wilkie employ Indians to bath the elephants and lions, clean up their shit, not to perform as clowns. Besides, I’m not *so* funny. Seriously, *larnie*, I need evidence, made without duress.’

‘What’s that, Durex Gossamer shit?’

I laugh ‘cause I can’t help it. ‘I’m not talking of French leather. What I mean when a guy makes a statement or affidavit that can be used as evidence in a court of law; he mustn’t do it with a gun to his head ...’

‘A knife’s okay then?’ Chota slaps his thigh; laughs like Garib’s donkey. ‘I get the movie. He must write that shit without any threat. I can do that; I’m a nice guy when you get to really know me, right?’

‘You’re Father Christmas, Romeo, Shakespeare, whatever you want to be ...’

‘Not only an affidavit; I can get that *ou*’s wife from him, that *moffie*. You want?’

‘An affidavit, yes.’

‘You got it, free and *mahala*. What else you need?’

‘Shaun Daniels.’

‘Not the same as affidavit, man. You saying I must smoke him out of his rat hole?’

‘Time is short, Chota *bhai*, but also remember, dead men tell no tales.’

‘You want him to sing like a *koyal* in the jungle, a canary or Mohammed Rafi? That *bruin ou* is tough, won’t squeal in a hurry, but I can arranged a private concert.’

‘How, Chota *bhai*?’

The man raises his caterpillar eyebrows. Has he seen some danger in the street? No, he relaxes. ‘Gotta give it some thought. What if the cops ... and our boys put out word that Anil’s got some evidence in his office that incriminates someone else?’

‘And Shaun goes looking for it ... breaks in? He won’t know what it is and may not be interested, seeing that Anil may be as good as ready for the rope.’

‘You’re right, Bis; it may not work and time is short. What if rumour has it that Anil got a big consignment just after he got arrested but that his security is now lax – worth hitting, and we’ll be there, waiting?’

‘It may work if Daniels is part of the raiding party.’

‘*Ja*, he’s the muscle, will head up the gang of rogues. Sheriff doesn’t get involved in this kind of shit directly – he works by remote control.’ Chota is thinking, narrowed eyes, head on the steering wheel.

‘What you’ll do if you grab Shaun?’

‘Make him sing a *qawali*, *ghazal*, or whatever a bushman sings, telling his story.’

‘Then he must put a signature showing it’s his own composition.’

Chota tips his hat back; smiles. ‘I see where you’re going with this, Biswas. The confession must be in writing, checked and signed, not made under duress. Got all that.’ The head of the Crimson League shoots his forehead with an index finger.

‘*Ja*, also he’ll need fingers to hold a pen.’

Chota *bhai* gives a donkey laugh, takes a swig; passes the brown paper packet. ‘He’ll keep his fingers, *nuni* and balls until we make *halal* and *braai* his equipment. I’ll even get an attorney to represent him, free of charge; all legit, so at the trial he won’t be able to what the lawyers call recant or withdraw or deny he made a confession. Stop worrying; it’s under control, my detective brother.’

‘What will really help, Chota *bhai*, if the confession is such that he admits the rape and murder. That will exonerate Anil.’

‘I don’t know nothing ’bout exonerate, bexonerate shit. What I know, *bhairam*, is that when a person’s life is at stake, he’ll be sensible or I can persuade him to be.’ Chota slaps his thigh. The gang-leader takes a swig, passes the bottle. ‘You know, Bis ...’

‘No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.’

‘Fuck off. I think that bushie with an Irish name is scared; smells a rat or some shit.’

‘What you mean?’

‘Look, in Joburg, this guy was walking tall, like, not scared even of the *gora* detectives ...’

‘Because they were bought off by Sheriff Khan?’

‘*Ja, ja*, but still. Here, he’s like a new bride or a woman in mourning. Something’s wrong. We’re wasting time talking shit here and eating greasy *bhajia* that’s going to give me running stomach.’

‘Chota *bhai*, I’m going to London and Dublin – will be away ’bout five, six days. Think you’ll have that bushy packaged for a Diwali present while I’m away?’

‘You go have your *joll*, I’ll do the graft.’

‘Keep Sham Singh posted, right?’

‘Okay, Mr international PI.’ Chota slaps his thigh, hoots. The *laaitie* is back; the head of the Crimson League whispers in the boy’s ear. We have a swig each; finish the snack that sat so long between us on the front bench seat. ‘How’s your daughter?’

‘She’s fine.’

‘Behaving good, not like her father?’

‘She’s a good girl; *aji* and ma say so.’

‘Hmm. I never had a daughter; don’t have the recipe to make one. Can I exchange two useless sons for Arthi?’

‘Not even in your dreams.’

‘Can’t blame a *topi* for trying. Okay, I’m going to set an ambush, maybe tonight, because you said time is tight, right?’

‘*Yebo, baba*. Can I be part of the team?’ The boy returns, gives Chota a greasy brown paper packet.

‘No, that’s my part of the business. You look after yourself. Here, take this; it’s for my granddaughter.’ I give the little man a hug and get out of the car. The packet contains seven sweetmeats in different colours.

I grin and begin walking. I hear a bang. Diwali firecrackers? There’s another shot. I dive to the ground. Chota starts his car, revs it and makes a u-turn, tyres screaming, headed up Victoria Street. On the pavement, I twist around; see someone caught in the headlights, running. Chota is gaining on him. The shooter turns right, runs down Cross Street. Chota *bhai* turns after him. I get up; see the sweetmeats lying in the gutter. Food for ants. Have to make it up to Arthi somehow. Chota pulls up, rolls down the car window.

‘I lost the *madhur chodh*. Rohit, it’s obvious, right?’

‘What, Chota *bhai*?’

‘Someone wants you dead.’

Chota is right. Two attempts on my life. The sweetmeats make me think. What's sweeter, more precious to me than life itself? Arthi. What if these *madhurs* use her to get to me? A parent can never be everywhere, a twenty-four hour security guard. She can be picked up at home, at school, anywhere.

Against her protests and tears, I got her packed up and drive to my sister, Radha's house in Eshowe. I had to tell her a little 'bout the case and warned her not to let her niece out of sight, until I returned, I didn't know when. It was good to see the family, which I have neglected so long. Would've been better if it were under happier circumstances.

Driving home in late afternoon on North Coast Road, instead of turning right unto Sea Cow Lake Road opposite Roadhouse Hotel, on a hunch I turned left into Riverside Road and stopped at a house near the Soofie Saheb Mosque. I guessed Mr Neeranjana Rajcoomar, proprietor of Rajcoomar's Funeral Undertakers, would be home. From his looks I guessed that the gentleman would be giving his firm some unpaid business soon, turning into smoke and bones. I told the *ballie* I'm on a mission to save Anil Ramlall's life and could he tell me anything about his mother's death.

'I don't mind other people's business; not like you detectives.'

'It's our job, *dada*.'

'I won't want talk about the dead. They must, as the Christians say, rest in peace.'

'Of course, baba, but they will want us to help their loved ones who are still living on this sinful earth, *ne*?'

The *topi* frowns; then opens up, maybe because in retirement what is there but to gossip, sit and wait for death?

'Raj Ramlall phoned me about five in the morning, after a terrible night of thunderstorms. Said his wife passed away and could I collect the body. It was lying on his bedroom floor, already wrapped in a *caphan*...'

'Shroud?'

'*Ha, ji*. He told me we don't need to wash the body – he done it himself.'

'So, baba, her body was not kept at your place at all?'

'Oh yes, for about four-five hours, to give time for all his family to come, see the face.'

‘I’m sorry but I have to ask you this. Did you look at the body?’

A hint of a smile crosses the ghoulish face. ‘What can I say, *beta*? Mrs Ramlall was a beautiful lady; me a young man. I moved the ... shroud and looked.’

‘Anything suspicious?’

‘Eh?’

‘You saw anything not looking right?’

‘*Ha*. I saw a mark, like she been poked here.’ He points to the place his heart would be.

‘Anything else seemed out of place?’

‘With the body, no. But when I drove the hearse to the mahal I saw Mr Ramlall burning something in a forty-four gallon drum.’

‘Why’s that odd?’

‘A man with so many servants will be burning rubbish himself?’

There’s a thought.

‘You must’ve seen the death certificate?’

‘*Ji, ha*, we funeral undertakers register dead people with the government.’

‘Who signed it?’

‘Doctor Jivan Bunsee.’

‘Where can I find him?’

The old man points a finger at the ceiling. *Is he living in the attic?*

‘You can’t talk to Jivan because I cremated him three years after Uma Ramlall. He burnt fast.’

‘Oh?’

‘Lot of *dharoo* in his body – liver and kidneys pickled in whisky.’

Although I’ve been high many times, and maybe because us *charous* are more like ostriches than eagles, this is the first time I’m flying, in a plane. I sit, alone, in the last row. Never left the country before, not even been to Cape Town – went to East London and to Port Elizabeth, fishing and camping but mostly boozing when the fish wouldn’t take the sardine bait. Been to Joburg a few times – at least an eight-hour car drive – to watch the white Durban City Soccer Club play Highlands Park, Rangers or Germiston Callies. Also watched Natal playing cricket. Apart from sport, including watching and training for boxing under my father’s sister’s husband, Kid Mansingh, there was not much entertainment in Durban, apart from cinema, playing thunny and fishing, river, surf, and sometimes deep sea, but I don’t have the patience

to become good enough at it to catch my supper. The other thing I spend some time on is drinking 'n eating, finding it tastier when someone else is paying. Didn't much care for horse racing – you can't trust animals to ensure you win; a mug's game. Used to go to Curries Fountain when Orlando Pirates or Moroka Swallows visited, until I got a beer bottle falling out of the sky and landing on my head, drawing blood.

Thinking of *khoon*, I have to find out how Uma Ramlall died when her youngest child was seven years old. I get a shiver because I'm nervous or scared of being in the air? I ask the lovely *gori* with a sexy cap and lid lips if I can get a double whisky to calm the nerves. She tells me so nicely, that drinks are not served on domestic flights and we'd be landing in Johannesburg soon, that I forget 'bout the nerves and thirst. Maybe I can refuel before I take off on a twelve hour flight to London? Don't want to get on board *dopped* up; Sham said you get free *dharoo* on international flights. *Ja*, Raj Ramlall's paying so it's not really free. After a coupla shots before and after some roast lamb supper I must've dozed off because it's daylight and we're coming down to land. *Hare bhagwan!*

I say a silent prayer as soon as my feet touch the ground. Two *charous* and an African feller wave at me like they're washing the airport windows. I never met any Communists before but soon, in the big black taxi, Kader Asmal, Abdul Minty, and Tennyson Makiwane act like they're my long lost brothers from different mothers. I listen as I look out, in the strange world that is London. We get off outside William Temple House, 25 Trebovir Road in Earl's Court. We walk up to the second floor. Kader opens a bottle. I frown – this is *haram* for him and Abdul.

'Medicine to avoid catching cold, right?' the eyes bulge out of the skinny face.

I forget jet lag, and all, smile. We foursome toast; vodka charged with tap water, 'cept for Abdul – straight coke.

'Now, Rohit, you don't have much time – Joe briefed me on the case ...'

'Joe, of Joe's Corner Spice Shop?'

All three laugh, Kader's moustache jumping. 'Joe the spice man; that's too hot for us, eh? Joe Slovo, of the SACP!'

I must be looking sheepish. 'Never had the pleasure, and all that.'

'Look, we know what you're after. Start at Dublin. I've made arrangements with the Dean at Trinity College for someone to take you to meet Megan O'Leary.'

'Who's she?'

'The girl ... purportedly impregnated by Anil Ramlall.'

‘We’ve already started investigating the anti-boycott guys, Russell and Taylor. Nothing yet but let’s see what we can come up with. We’ve moving from boycotts to an organisation we call the Anti-Apartheid Movement,’ says Abdul Minty.

I see Makiwane frowning. ‘Rohit, my brother, we may come up against a brick wall.’

‘I don’t follow ... Tennyson.’

‘You know Britain is South Africa’s biggest arms supplier as it is, and is likely to continue even after you become a republic. There are some powerful people involved, politicians and big businessmen, and the Special Branch is not likely to hand out flyers. But I have some contacts through the ANC. We’ll see what we can do, but getting concrete evidence that will stand up in a court of law will not be easy.’

Kader raises his full glass. ‘But never fear, Rohit *bhai*, you won’t go home empty handed.’

The guy from the university said he’ll wait in the car. I knock on the door of a never-ending block of two-story houses, looking little better’n Magazine Barracks. I can hear a child crying. The door is opened a little and a white face peers.

‘Yes?’

‘Mrs O’Leary?’

‘It’s Ambrose, now. Mr Biswas? I’ve been expecting you. Come in.’

I go into a dark sitting room, dark, with a snot-nosed child coloured-like crying on a sofa. She has a broad African nose and curly hair, but looks cute as a doll.

‘Sorry, I’m hanging out the washing. Let’s go outside.’

I sit on the steps overlooking a handkerchief-sized backyard of uncut grass. The woman lights a cigarette and hands it to me. I shake my head; she draws on it cheeks hollowed. She must’ve been beautiful a few years ago and I don’t blame Anil for falling for her. But having a child must’ve taken a toll; a white bicycle tyre showed when she raised her arms to hang up the clothes.

‘I’m so sorry to hear that Anil is being tried for rape and murder. I would never have believed it.’

‘Why do you say that, Mrs Ambrose?’

‘Call me Megan. Well, Anil was a gentle and caring person; generous too. We knew each other for about two years and in that time I never saw him lose his temper or hurt anyone.’

‘Your child – is it his?’

She laughs, head thrown back, tobacco-stained teeth showing. 'Good heavens no. That's Clarissa, from my husband, Rodney Ambrose, from Trinidad.'

'Didn't you have a child, was made pregnant by Anil?'

'No. I'm so ashamed of what I did then, but I was coerced by Rodney.'

'Can you explain?'

She leaves the washing and sits on the steps beside me. 'Rodney knew Anil and I were a couple, as it were. He was broke and came with a ploy when I got pregnant; suggesting I say Anil was responsible ... because he's got money.'

'Did he fall for it?'

'The fool did; perhaps because of his nature, and we liked each others' company.'

'But you spent two years together. Nothing ... came of that?'

She grins, taps my knee. 'Two people sleeping together may be just enjoying each other's company, right? We never had sex.'

'Because of your Catholic upbringing?'

'No, silly, because Anil was not interested.'

'Forgive me, Megan, but I find that really hard to believe. If I lay beside you on and off for two years, I'd have made two babies with a beautiful young woman like you.'

She cackles. 'That's 'cause you're a real man, dearie.'

I got a sworn affidavit from Megan to atone for her scam. I decide not to make any disclosures about Anil in London – you never know how effectively the South African Communist Party's grapevine operates. We sit near a fire in the pub called the "Cavern" close to the apartment. We have South African *Oudemeester* brandy. Tennyson is the speaker.

'Rohit, from the contacts that the AAM has, we've learned that George Russell has been in London seventeen times in the last two years; Thomas Taylor a dozen times. They don't travel together, but they have been seen meeting with some big financiers and other hot-shot businessmen. They're up to something but we can't pin anything on them ... yet. They're sharp, cautious.'

'My contact at the Special Branch admitted ... sorry, hinted that they are under surveillance,' says Abdul, sipping his coke like it's vintage wine.

'Yes, but knowing those rogues they may have a stake in the loot, so unlikely to give anything up. However, we've got a number of comrades here ... like Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Vella Pillay ... who have powerful friends in the British political system who are opposed to the apartheid regime, especially after Sharpeville.' Kader takes a sip, looks sad.

‘That’s right, Rohit,’ Tennyson adds, ‘you can rest assured we’re going to work hard to expose these guys who’ll supply arms to kill our brothers and sisters ...’

‘Talking about killing. Here’s some news that may come as a shock,’ Kader adds, taking a sip from a bubble glass.

‘I may be shockproof, brothers.’

‘Ahem. Before Anil left for South Africa, he was living with an Englishman in Chelsea.’

‘Uh huh?’

‘This guy, Bernard Morrison, a known homosexual, was found hanging in his apartment.’

‘*Hare Ram!* Was foul play suspected?’

‘Scotland Yard investigated, but at the inquest Morrison’s death was ruled a suicide. Anil left London two days after the funeral.’

I get a phone call from Sham. He tells me that Mrs Thurston and Levi testified. The part about the coloured guest at the deceased’s party stirred things up, but may be nullified by the testimony of Pyotr Kowalski who was adamant the he saw Anil and Liz engrossed in lovemaking. Cookie said that circumstances and logical inferences drawn from them can point to guilt. All that topped up by the Hungarian witness’s testimony can send Anil to the gallows. But surely, his evidence needs to be corroborated? What if he’s lying ... for some reason? Was he really at the party? I ask my attorney friend to follow up on this bloke’s background, especially if he’s hit the jackpot recently. Sham said not to worry as the court is in recess today and tomorrow as Judge Laughton sprained his ankle which is in plaster cast and him propped up on crutches. Accidents can buy you time.

Abdul gave me a tour of Trafalgar Square, the Tower of London, Houses of Parliament, and Hyde Park. Then it was time to return home. The trio saw me off at the airport.

‘Well, Rohit *bhai*, I hope you achieved something during this short trip. Don’t worry about the sanctions-busting shenanigans. It may take some time, but we’ll nail the *madhurs*. We’ll be in touch through our channels.’

Makiwane has the last word. ‘Brother Biswas, these are dangerous times for darkies in South Africa, with apartheid capitalists warring against freedom fighters. Don’t be caught in the crossfire. Watch your back.’

I'm dreaming of the long dead who'd been stuffed in the Tower of London by the cruel and callous English; not like William Wallace who got, what they call, drawn and quartered and cut up into curry-sized pieces. Yuk, what bloodthirsty whiteys. The nightmare ends with the phone ringing. The alarm clock shows 2.30 am. Has one of my connections died or rushed to King Edward Hospital because of a heart attack or multiple organ failure?

It's Andre Booysen, Sergeant Owen's right-hand man, saying I must get my black arse on my car seat and move, sharp. Arrogant *Boer*, not a racist, though.

There's a few cars, four or five SAP vehicles and two ambulances, all with headlights on, red and blue lights flashing, at the corner of Pine Street and Soldiers Way. I must've missed some action. I try to find someone I know. I see Detective Sergeant David Owen standing at the back of an open ambulance.

'DS, what's happened?'

'Hi, Rohit. We surprised some seven or eight guys about to break into Anil Ramlall's warehouse. There was a shootout. One of our chap's been killed, two of the crooks, one's seriously injured ...'

'Dracula, Shaun Daniels, I hope?'

'Yes, the Deputy Commissioner briefed me about him. We're taking the guy to King Edward Hospital;

'He'll be under armed guard?'

'Of course. We have a search warrant for his house. Detective Inspector Booysen with a uniform is going with Daniels. You know Andre?'

'Uh huh; he's a competent *ou*. You'll ask him to get a statement or confession from Daniels as soon as he can?'

'He'll hold the coloured's hand and keep his big ear close to the bloke's ugly mouth.' The strained face comes up with a half-smile. 'Biswas, you go home. The trial continues at ten, right?'

'*Ja.*'

'I'll get Booysen to keep you posted, in case the bushie talks ... or croaks.'

As arranged, I meet Raj and Sham outside the court house and brief them of my trip to London and Dublin, concluding with recounting our early morning movie-like drama; and that Shaun Daniels is unconscious, in a critical condition at King Edward Hospital. No point in going to the hospital. I may visit later, hoping I get something out. I'll go back to the office, catch up on paperwork.

'Hello, Mr Biswas,' I turn around, see the DA waving. I stop.

'Good morning, Mr Cook,'

'Are you dreadfully busy?'

'Not dreadfully, no.'

The barrister laughs. 'I was wondering if I could trouble you for a short tour of the Indian CBD?'

'The Casbah? Sure.'

'Perhaps have some *chai, teak he?*'

'*Bilkul.*' I remember the man spent ten years in India up to independence in '47. We walk west on Smith Street and turn right onto Grey Street, then right again into Pine street. We go into some of the *Guji darjee* shops showing hand-made suits a week after they appear in Oxford, Bond, Carnaby streets and Saville Row in London, so I've been told.

The weather's an abortion. We take off coats and ties, leave our shirts on. 'Here at the corner of Pine Street, Grey Street and Commercial Road is where Red Square was. Many anti-apartheid rallies were held here by leaders like Dr Monty Naicker, president of the Natal Indian Congress, Dr AB Xuma, leader of the African National Congress, Dr Yusuf Dadoo, of the Transvaal Indian Congress, Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Dr Kesavaloo Goonum, Helen Joseph, and many others. The first organised joint Indo-African opposition to apartheid rally, the '52 Defiance Campaign, started here. It was based on the "Doctors Pact" signed in '47.'

'Fascinating. We're standing at the place where history against colonialism and apartheid took root. Were you involved in politics, Mr Biswas?'

'Call me Rohit. No, Mr Cook, I was a copper, eking out a living. We could get fired for taking part in rallies or meetings. The white cops kept open eyes on us darkies.'

We turn left into Albert Street and then left again and go down Commercial Road, then right, back into Grey Street. We go into the closeted Ajmeri Arcade, shops on both sides, and stand on Cathedral Road, admiring anti-apartheid activist, Reverend Denis Hurley's, Emmanuel Cathedral. We don't go in but head back.

The smell of spices and cooking assail us. 'Mr Cook ...'

‘Philip.’

I smile. ‘This is Manjra’s Cafe. The old man is one of Durban’s top chefs, specialising in catering for weddings. He doesn’t charge a fee; you pay what you can afford. We won’t go in here; it’s too early.’

We walk down the narrow and crowded Madressa Arcade where you can buy just about anything – incense sticks, spices, shoes, sari, dress, suit material, cotton, wool, lace, ribbons, clothes pegs, hangers, rice, sugar beans, broad beans, double beans, *gadhra*, *dhall*, tin buckets and bathtubs, clothing irons, Primus stoves, paraffin lamps, toys, second-hand playing cards, vinyl records, whatever. The place is noisy with people outshouting each other to draw you into their tiny shops or to the wares outside.

‘This is like India, only cleaner.’

‘Ja, the Durban Corporation is very strict – you’ve got to be licensed and follow the by-laws, or you get evicted.’

We turn into Queen Street and visit the Top Market which is where the fishmongers and *muti* sellers hang out, side by side. We don’t go on the bridge over the railway line to the Squatters Market. I tell the DA we can do it some other time. We walk back to the intersection of Queen and Grey streets and enter the Juma Masjid, the largest mosque in the southern hemisphere. We take off our shoes and go in, sit on the carpet. The place is empty, yet I whisper, perhaps in awe.

‘A thirty-year old half-naked *fakir* named Sheikh Ahmed was among the first indentured Indians who came on the *Truro* in 1860. He hung about here, literally a beggar, performing miracles and healing the physically, mentally, and spiritually sick, so the brainwashed said.’

‘You’re talking of the chap who later was named Badshah Pir, the king of guides?’

‘Ja. He was buried in the Brook Street mosque where later Soofie Saheb built a shrine which still stands. The Grey Street Mosque was started as a small brick structure in 1881.’

‘You are a Hindu, Rohit?’

‘Born a Hindu but not really practising my religion – used to be too busy chasing crooks.’ Cook smiles, we put on our shoes and walk north up Grey Street and go upstairs into what used to be called Peter’s Lounge, now Delhi Restaurant.

‘I thought you may want to have a bite since it’s one o’clock.’

‘My, how time flies when you are having fun. Thanks for the tour – it was most interesting. At least let me treat you to lunch.’

‘I won’t say no to a free chow.’

A waiter appears. ‘*Howsit*, Kisten. This is barrister Philip Cook, the District Attorney.’

The steward bows, ‘Welcome, Sir.’

‘Now, we want the freshest stuff, or you could get arrested. You have any line fish?’

‘*Ja, larnie*. We have bream, dorado, and shad – came in this morning.’

‘Fresh, fresh?’

‘Anything fresher is still swimming, boss.’

Cookie smiles.

‘What you think, Philip, shad or coolie fish, masala fried or curried, with *roti*?’

‘Sounds great, but why is it called coolie fish?’

‘The fish has to be fresh. White people don’t take chances, so they won’t eat shad.

The Indians usually are fisherman, catch their own stuff or sell it in the fish market we just been to.’

‘Okay, we’ll go with that.’

‘Kisten, please call the *bhandari*.’

A big bellied guy wearing an apron and a chef’s hat materialises at the table.

‘*Namaste*, sahib, Rohit *bhai*. What can I do for you?’ The pumpkin-faced man smiles.

‘Mohan *bhaia*, we’re having shad – masala fried and curried. Philip, you want hot, medium or mild?’

‘If possible, made with whole spices. I can tolerate medium, after ten years in Delhi. *Bhandari bhai*, can you make a *lassi*, with salt and lemon?’

The man nods. ‘Sure. Rohit, the usual?’

‘No; it’s too early for a shot. Tell Kisten I’ll have a Bombay crush, chief.’

The waiter sets some starters down on the table – *sev* and nuts, *morkoo*, *vada*, and *puri-patha*. This brings a smile to the prosecutor’s grey eyes. ‘Thanks, Kisten.’ Cookie is good at rem’bering names. The man departs, returns with our drinks. Service on the double.

‘There’s quite a number of cafes and restaurants in this vicinity.’

‘*Ji ha*, Philip. There’s Victory Lounge on the next street and across that is Rajput’s Cafe. Patels, Bhagats, Casillas and Cha Cha’s are vegetarian joints, owned by Gujeratis. The cuisine in the West End and Himalaya hotels and Goodwill Lounge is good.’

‘We hardly go out to Indian restaurants. Puja likes home cooking – gets her spices imported from Bombay by Haribhai’s. You and your daughter must join us for dinner, sometime soon?’

‘Sure, chief, I’d like that.’ I smile, so does this *gora*. I have to be good to him because I’m going to ask him a big favour. I don’t know how or when, I’m scared he’ll say no, but Anil’s life could be in this man’s hand. ‘In the fifties, the Victoria and Grey street area used to be known as “Little Chicago” on account of the taxi wars. Moosa Ismail and later his second son, Lighty, terrorised this area as well as Overport. They dressed like Al Capone: dark, striped, double-breasted suits, matching shirt, pocket handkerchief, American hats, glossy shoes, cigarette or cigar. Their opponents were the Crimson League headed up now by Chota Essop, and the Dutchenes.’

‘Fascinating.’

We nibble on the bites, sip our drinks. *It’s now or never*. ‘Philip, I have to ask you something ...’

‘Sure, go ahead.’

‘I know we can’t discuss the case but I feel there’s something I have to tell you, even though you are the opposition.’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, it’s an issue me and our attorney think Mr Taylor won’t consider at all. This is in strict confidence, off the record, right?’

‘Okay.’

I tell the DA about Shaun Daniels, now in hospital. ‘Well, if the trial is concluded now and the judge gives his verdict before this bloke confesses, Anil could hang ...’

‘Wait a minute, Rohit; don’t be too quick to judge the English. Judge Laughton is a fair man, I know him well. He will consider all evidence, carefully and objectively, I assure you.’

‘But think of the racial animosity, the anti-Indian feeling; the white community’s ... sentiments, will put a lot of pressure on him to impose the mandatory death penalty, if Anil is found guilty.’

‘You may be right. It’s true, as Miss Lambie said, that a suspect could be convicted on circumstantial evidence, beyond reasonable doubt, if logical conclusions can be inferred from it.’

‘Please explain to a layman.’

‘The pieces of circumstantial evidence must link together, causally, to give a plausible and logical explanation of what may have happened.’

‘So, we have to find evidence creating reasonable doubt, but in South Africa, for a non-white, that may not be enough.’

‘What do you mean, Rohit?’

‘You see, sahib, the only person who can save an innocent guy’s neck is the real killer.’

‘Daniels? What if he doesn’t confess?’

‘Then the police must investigate him – fast – before the trial ends or Judge Laughton gives his verdict.’ There’s a minute’s silence for Anil.

Cook raises his eyebrow looks into my worried eyes. ‘As I see it, Rohit, the only way out, before our closing statements, is for the Deputy Police Commissioner to testify that there is a new lead in the case, they need some time to conclude their investigations and present new evidence.’

‘That will help.’

‘But it’s up to the defence to raise that.’

‘Mr Taylor won’t. I’m speaking bluntly, in confidence, but the defence counsel may have business interests with the deceased’s husband and Anil is one of their rivals.’

‘Rohit, you’re a detective, you may be able to persuade Mr Taylor ...’

‘No way, Philip. He thinks I’m shit; all Indians are coolies, human donkeys.’

The DA smiles as our meals are placed on the table with a Kisten flourish. We tuck in.

‘I’ve known Tom for many years. Yes, he has a superiority complex, even among his peers. I do believe he won’t break into a sweat defending his client. After all, he will be paid win or lose. I know he doesn’t earn his keep from criminal defence.’

I raise my glass of Bombay crush.

Cook sips his *lassi*, deep in thought, licks his ultra-thin lips. ‘What are you going to do, Rohit?’

‘Firstly, wait for Daniels to recover and confess.’

What if he doesn’t ... recover or confess. Why should he talk?’

‘I’m praying, for the first time, to our 3 500 gods or deities, whatever, to loosen his tongue and open his brain, sahib.’

The prosecutor gives a half-smile. ‘You’re on a hope and a prayer. Tell me, is the accused’s father a friend of the former Police Commissioner?’

‘Yes.’

‘I shouldn’t be telling you this but it may help if Mr Ramlall were to persuade him to convince his son to drop everything and conduct investigations into this Shaun Daniels.’

‘What can you do for the defence, Philip?’

‘I also get paid win, or lose. I cannot talk to Judge Laughton without Tom and the attorneys being present. I’ll call the Deputy Police Commissioner as a final witness and then play it by ear.’

‘Thanks, *bhairam*.’

‘Did your trip to Dublin and London give you any insights, leads?’

‘*Ha, ji*. I got some evidence that may help Anil. I also got confirmation, not proof, mind you, that Russell and Taylor are under observation by Britain’s Special Branch. The commies could get nothing concrete but told me they’ll keep me posted.’

I thank the DA and walk to my office, phone Andre Booysen. The DI tells me Shaun Daniels is still unconscious. I shoot a double Johnny, followed by a pipe-full of *ganja* while I catch up with some paperwork. I can’t do such routine shit without a stimulant, what? I’m readying to go home at five-thirty when the phone rings. It’s Philip Cook.

‘Some good news, Rohit, in confidence. I went to see Fred True-May; he’s agreed to appear as a witness. I decided not to tell Tom yet. I’m going to spring a surprise that may please him, maybe not Lambie. But it could work if my assumption, based on what you’ve told me, is correct.’

‘What’s your assumption?’

‘That Thomas Taylor will go along with anything that will convict the accused while not bringing Russell under the limelight.’

‘Good! Can you tell me ...’

‘No, Rohit. You’ll have a front seat in a live courtroom drama tomorrow. Hold your horses.’

I have another slug to celebrate and then get busy, in the mood now. The phone rings.

‘Yes?’

‘Rohit Biswas, I won’t tell you my name, but I have vital information I can’t discuss on the phone.’

I don’t want to fall into a trap, remembering Tennison Makiwane’s warning in London. ‘Give me a hint of who you are or hang up.’

‘I work in a white coat in a place where the smell is of disinfectant and death.’

I grin. ‘Got you. Can we meet at half past six?’

‘Yes, where?’

‘Somewhere obscure. What about the Durban Drive in?’

‘Okay, see you.’ The guy hangs up. Jesus. I’ve got an adrenalin rush. Wonder what Eshwar Maharaj from the lab at King Edward Hospital has? I have a large one to iron my wrinkled nerves.

I sit between the fir trees on Brickhill Road watching the giant drive-in screen across in a fenced lot designed to keep non-whites out. A black and white soundless movie had just started when there’s a tap on my passenger window. I open the door. A young Indian in a brown suit and tie gets in and sits in the dark. We shake hands.

‘Eshwar, good to see you. How’s Roshni?’

‘She’s good, sends her regards.’

‘Oh?’

Mr Maharaj, who I know completed his BSc in Chemistry and something at Salisbury Island, the Indian ethnic university and who I thought would end up mixing paint at Buffalo or Plascon Evans, laughs. ‘She’s a nurse at King Edward. Took a couple of days off to attend Ramlall’s trial ...’

‘So?’

‘Well, Rohit *bhaia*, I had given her a full briefing on the post-mortem.’

‘Did you attend?’

I see Eshwar’s teeth in the dark. ‘No, we’re not allowed, but we get white people’s bits of flesh and blood and shit to put under the microscope. Here’s the clincher. My boss didn’t give an accurate or true account of his examination of the deceased, according to Roshni.’

‘Give me the highlights, *beta*.’

‘Just one thing. He testified there were two straight black hairs, right?’

‘Correct.’ I pull out my bottle and offer Eshwar a shot.

‘I don’t touch the stuff.’

‘Don’t touch it; swallow the *muti*.’ He gives me a playful punch.

‘You carry on; more for you. Anyway, there was one twisted hair found that Meyer forgot or decided not to mention.’

‘Twisted as in ...’

‘African or coloured.’

‘That’s a clincher, but it’s worthless unless there’s concrete evidence.’

‘Here it is. Read the final post-mortem report and rejoice. Remember, you didn’t get it from me.’

‘I don’t even know you.’

I motor home on a high, but for how long? To save Anil, now it’s not only Daniels but also forensic pathologist Dr Steven Meyer who must talk. How?

I sit and tell a short childhood story then have a Bombay duck in tomato chutney with lime pickle and rice pushed down by a Johnnie, while Arthi has lamb chops with mashed potato and peas. Yuck. I tuck her in and then myself, with a nightcap. Sleep will not come; I stare at the ceiling, on an adrenalin high. Tomorrow's D-Day. I run my fingers over Asha's face in the black 'n white photo on my bedside table. Is my angel smiling on me, bringing me luck, or what?

I remember Police Commissioner James True-May, bald as a fowl's egg, had tears in his eyes as he came to embrace me on hearing of Asha's passing. Words were unnecessary as we held each other like a pair of brown 'n white male lovers. I refused to take a month's leave – there was work to be done, like catching the bastard that took life away from me. The PC, promoted from Detective Chief Inspector, took me off the case, made me hand in my Smith & Wesson .38 which I had never used. I only had it for one and a half years since I got promoted. Before that Indian police were not given guns, couldn't even arrest whites under English rule. Though we were British subjects, whatever that means, our forefathers who came under contract, what they called *girmit*, and us still were classed as immigrants and not citizens. Slaves. That's life, *kismet* or *karma*, but it is the laws of the colonials that put us in our place and keep us down.

When the PC asked me to hand in my badge, the only jewellery I wore apart from my father's Roamer watch he got for twenty-five years service in Natal Government Railways, I felt a bit naked. Call it good detective work, forward planning or *karma*, but sometime before that I asked Dinesh Narandas to make me an exact copy without putting it in the books. Murali Govinden from Universal Printing Works did the same with my identification document. You gotta look after your property, not knowing when a *rawan* will break into your house and cart away even worthless stuff.

Would this shit have happened if I had more brains than balls? Better to have loved and lost than just lost but those eight years of wedded bliss is the cause of my pain – had I not met Asha I would not be in his hell hole. But then I would never have tasted or understood happiness. You only fall in love like this once in your lifetime. What can't be cured must be endured. Alcohol is the anaesthetic that allows you to bear life's pain. I got a bottle of Mainstay for company, night after night, it was better than moping with Detective Anand

Perumal, my partner. Drink took 'n left me alone in a dark place, the gloom spreading like a stain from a bleeding wound. Forgiving myself is something I can't do, I'm not a priest. I try to close my mind with the *ganja*, but it's like smoke 'n mirrors. I realise in my scrambled mind I can't outrun my shadow. My baby searches my red eyes, looking for her mother who'd left me in this gloom alone. How ironic – I name my daughter Arthi, meaning “light”, but I don't see it. I feel I'm standing in my own grave with its dark bottom.

*

It was my day off, compassionate leave; I had nothing to do but get pissed on cane spirit and mind-fogged with *ganja*, but it was still early. What to do? Anand told me he got a tip off from informer, Billy Boy, bloke with a Hitler moustache and a lazy eye. We are on a stakeout in my partner's coffin-shaped beige Peugeot 404. We see the suspect approaching. Anand tells me to wait in the car – he'll handle the *madhur chodh*. They're talking. I can't sit like a passenger. I get out of the car; keep a wary eye on the killer.

‘... we know it was you. We have witnesses.’

‘Don't talk shit. There was no witness ...’

‘Oh, so you admit stabbing Mrs Biswas, this man's wife?’

The African feller widens his bloodshot eyes. ‘*Yebo*, but you coolies can do fuck all about it. You're lucky I didn't rape the bitch in the arse.’

I see red. I'm going mad, like my heart, blood vessels, will explode now, now. Anand walks forward, eyes on the *coon*, taking out a pair of handcuffs from his belt. ‘I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Asha Biswas ...’

The killer reaches into his pocket, pulls out a flick knife, and lunges forward, slicing Anand's left arm. He goes down. The *rawan* feints, makes like he's going to come for me, we're like sparring, then he turns 'round and runs. I act fast, grab the gun out of my partner's holster and shoot twice. The man stumbles, falls on his face. I kick the *kaffir* just to make sure he's dead, pulse – nothing. Anand winces, takes the gun from my hand; wipes it with a handkerchief.

‘What you doing?’

He closes his eyes tight, must've been feeling pain. ‘Since it's my weapon, I shot the suspect, so my prints will be on it. Get out of here – now! You're on leave; you were not here, saw nothing. Understand?’

I understood. I had taken a life; no matter that the creature was what Kinmont from the City Engineer's Department would call sewage treatment pond scum. I had no right to be

executioner. In a split second I had become a killer, defied the *parmatma* and the laws of Manu. I know I'll be haunted forever and pay for my sins someday, for sure.

I attended the inquest into the murder, what *The Natal Mercury*, *The Daily News*, and *The Post* were calling an execution because the suspect was shot in the back. James and his son looked at Anand Perumal like they were smelling something bad but they seemed like they did not believe him. Later, we had a meeting in the Commissioner's office. My partner has three children; no way am I going to let him cover up for my sins. I admitted that it was me who shot the running suspect. I shared my sorrow with Mainstay, began self-medicating often. Commissioner True-May said he regrets it but I must leave the Force before I disgrace it and myself. He took my badge. The department carried me financially as a passenger for two years. The boss organised a payout and financed my office, setting me up as a private investigator/detective. He said I'd better sober up before I lose my child. *Aji* rolled her deep-set eyes and finger-pointing reminded me I had a dual role as mother and father to my beautiful baby girl, a miniature replica of Asha; stop feeling sorry for myself and get on with life. It's *dharma* and *karma*. I'll never forget her, or Anand or the Commissioner, nor will I ever forget that I also was a killer. I didn't get my weapon back, never needed a gun nor could use one if I had. Lessons of life.

Even if the beach ball on top of my filing cabinet deflates and Asha's breath leaves to disappear into the polluted atmosphere, she will still be with me – forever. Such is love. While hope may be the last emotion to leave us, love can linger forever, in spirit, a partner that can help me in times of pain and dread, casting my dark shadow aside. Asha was not like the average Indian schoolgirl – whereas most had skinny, hairy legs and arms, one or two with a hint of a moustache, she was hairless with legs what a white feller would call stout, not like Guinness, but thick 'n strong. My girl.

Asha was in the family way, ready for the big moment, two months to go. Yet she still looked lovely, not sweaty, pimply, and short tempered like the few women I knew in that condition. I told her not to go into town alone, the Indian Affairs Department in Stanger Street being so far from the Beatrice Street bus stop. She smiled, gave me a kiss and said she'll be okay, needed the exercise. She didn't say her last goodbye because I was chasing crooks; she didn't even see or hold our newborn daughter. Snatched; taken, just like that. Life can be cruel.

I don't need a photograph to remind me what she looked like. Asha, a top student at Durban Indian Girls' High School, wanted to be a lawyer; I encouraged her while admiring

her beauty and character. She had just finished her Bachelor of Laws degree at Howard College when we got married secretly at the Magistrates Court. No, she was not pregnant or anything; it's just that her father, I think, didn't like me, maybe because he was Brahmin caste, me *iehir* – not high, not low but medium, what *goras* would call 'mediocre'. Not good enough for high castes and you don't want to associate with those below you – peanut butter between the two slices of brown bread, your prospects and status in life determined at birth. Doomed from the start. Asha's mother was no problem, though. We told her and she spoke to her husband. I don't know what magic happened, but Mr Vivek Sharma said we ought to be married in Aryan style, quick, before Asha got pregnant, and all. We had a small Hindu ceremony because I refused to let my father-in-law pay for a big *tamasha*. Ah, only eight years together, but Asha's with me still, and always will be. But now, sober, I look at Arthi and I have to hold back my tears – for she is the image of her mother. *Ram, Ram*, you have taken one doll and given me another. *Shukriah*. I'm grateful, I have a living memory now of Asha. I must shape up lest I lose this gift of God, as ma and *aji* so often remind me.

Ma came from a poor family of sugar cane fieldworkers. They had a small plot of fertile land in Ottawa Estate where *nana*, the coal miner turned cane-cutter, planted green beans, double beans, brinjals, pumpkins, squashes, mealies, *karela* and *bhindee*, what *goras* call bitter gourd and okra, and what not. I don't know how baba got the nickname Bhindee – maybe it's because he must've been a slimy character? Pumpkins, blue and yellow, were used to hold down the smoke-blackened kitchen's corrugated iron roof. Tradition was once the eldest son got married, the daughter-in-law or *bahuji* becomes the mother-in-law's slave. So ma, getting married by arrangement at age fourteen, did not get much chance of learning to cook, taking a chance, sometimes with peas 'n potatoes, mashed pumpkin with sugar and red chillies, or fried *karela*, maybe *bhindee*. She could not get (expensive) meat dishes right, but also was tired when it came time to cook supper, often the only meal, for the extended family. My *kaki* from a farming family in La Mercy was a first-class cook. She taught ma and Asha, showing them the secret blends of whole spices, *garam* masala, ginger 'n garlic mixtures ... the smell of these concoctions makes your mouth water, never mind the aroma when she stands by Asha as she cooks with a half-smile. *Aji* made inputs and comments, ma learned by observation, I did too. Ma couldn't take a chance and practice because you can't throw away any food if the "experiment" failed. Apart from the veggies which even my poor mother could not get just right, Asha made tasty ...delicious mutton or chicken roast and curried tripe, sheep's head 'n trotters, liver, kidneys, and what not. She didn't cook chicken head and feet –

ma did that, with her trademark see-through gravy. Sometimes Asha's mother would visit, commenting on her daughter's cooking, turning a dish that was to my simple mind but choosy tongue and stomach, into something finger-licking tasty. With her sweet talk, big blue eyes, smile, and all, Asha was able to make me 'n her father "friends". It's not respectful to smoke or drink in front of your elders, but one night Mr Sharma brought a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label and mother'n law two crystal glasses, expensive looking, but I was feeling awkward until she said, 'It's okay, *beta*. You and Pa are celebrating your first wedding anniversary.' I swallowed nothing, feeling so shame for not remembering. Asha came and gave me a hug, so did my *saas*, the mother'n law, and *pitaji*, grinning. *Aji's* eagle nose must've got the smell; she came in grinning with a glass. Mr Sharma clasps his palms and bows, smiles as he pours granny a double. Straight. She holds the glass up, as if looking for ants, flies, 'roaches or whatever, gulps, and says in Hindi, 'Happy anniversary. May Rohit and Asha have many more anniversaries and babies every year. The others clap, *aji* has a sip. 'This is better than Oudemeester brandy, *na*, Rohit?' I toast my indestructible granny, ma, a teetotaller, gives a gap-toothed grin.

I was a shy feller, didn't know how to chaff Asha, from Spencer Road, Clare Estate, in her white Durban Indian Girls' High School uniform, always looking like a glass of milk. Her grandfather, of the Brahmin caste, was a full-time priest, her father a school principal. I felt unworthy, my family battlers and half as educated. When I said something I thought was funny as we boarded Dehal's bus at the Lorne Street bus rank she frowned, then smiled. I nearly died: she didn't insult me! Encouraged, I sat next to her, tongue-tied, my mind blank.

'You live in Sea Cow Lake, not so?' A low, sexy voice.

I stuttered, stammered, 'Yes.'

'Then you're in the wrong bus.'

'If you don't mind, I'll sit here with you, get off in Umgeni and catch another bus.'

'Seems such a waste.'

'I don't think so.' I wanted to touch her hand but I think I must've just got paralysed.

I'd come home sweaty; take a shower 'n a shot, then help Asha with the cooking. I don't know where she got the energy, but always wanted to cook a fresh meal every night. She'd said the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Well, she needn't have worried – she'd stolen my heart, soul, and all, beautiful *gori*. I'd reply that I can't eat on an empty stomach –

gotta drink first. Asha would pour me a *dop*. Ma and *aji* would frown – because Indians ducked and drank in the pubs, not at home – but got used to it and close to their young *bahuji*.

I wanted to be near Asha, as much as I can and my job allows. I'd become a gourmet, comment on the food – she liked my honesty, said it improved her dishes. I'd cry of happiness over the chopped onions.

*

The courtroom sounds like the Zulu beer hall in Victoria Street as we wait for action. Judge Laughton, right foot and ankle in plaster, comes walking on crutches. We stand; he sits and waves us down.

‘Any more witnesses?’

‘No, Your Honour, the prosecution rests,’ puts in Lamb Chop with her usual smile.

‘You are sure you rest, Miss Lambie?’ asks Justice Laughton dryly. ‘Defence?’

‘We have no witnesses, M’Lord.’

‘Very well then, do you want to make closing statements now, or require some time preparing them?’

‘The defence will make its summation now.’

‘Go ahead, Mr Taylor,’ the judge looks down at the defence table.

I’m all ears.

‘If it pleases the Court. I will be brief. Firstly, the prosecution is supposed to prove the guilt of the accused beyond any reasonable doubt. It has patently failed to do so.’ Taylor counts on his fingers. ‘Secondly, there are certain aspects of this case which give great cause for concern, such as the speed with which the investigation was undertaken that didn’t give the defence adequate preparation time; thirdly, the post-mortem being done in the absence of representation from the defence or in the presence of an independent forensic pathologist; fourthly: absence of means – the instrument of death has not been found; fifthly: the five-hour guesstimate of the time of death opened doors for anyone off the street to come in, rape and murder the deceased, in other words, anyone could have had an opportunity; and finally, the state has failed to provide a motive for the senseless crime. However, the state in its haste, has, I believe, jeopardised their case in that they have been able to provide only circumstantial evidence and not a shred of direct evidence implicating the accused or tying him to the crime, that is, there is no causal nexus between the accused and the crimes he is charged with. There are too many contradictions, uncertainties, and loose ends. All of these

combine to create serious doubt. Since the weakness of the state's case is patently obvious, I will not elaborate, save to say the investigation concluded the accused's guilt up front; then neglected to search for evidence that may have eliminated the uncertainties. In the process, potentially incriminating evidence may not have been found and produced.'

Well, Taylor seems to be earning his keep, if I grasped what he just said.

'M'Lord, I refer the court to *R v Ndlovu* 1945 AD 369 where the Appellate Division held that "in all criminal cases it is for the Crown to establish the guilt of the accused, not for the accused to establish his innocence". Under the circumstances I charge that the state has not proved its case. M'Lord, I therefore move that the court acquit the accused of all charges.'

I didn't understand much of our gardoo's mumbo-jumbo but I'm not hopeful the case will be dismissed. Taylor made no mention of the possibility of Daniels being the rapist-killer. He didn't sow enough doubt. But I'm not worried for I produced all the notes from my Dublin-London investigations and gave Fred and Sham a quick verbal report. The Deputy Commissioner promised to follow up.

The judge clears his throat. 'Motion denied. Miss Lambie, Mr Cook?'

'Thank you, Your Honour,' the auntie gets up looking sexy even in a suit white people use for attending funerals. 'The law exists to protect and promote the interests of the community; it is not created to advise individuals how to behave. The folk of Durban, indeed, the whole country, as would all Christian-thinking persons, are rightly outraged by the brutality of this rape and killing. The state has shown that the accused is inclined to quick temper, and has particular, illegal and sadomasochistic sexual preferences. The fact that he was caught is due to his intoxicated state. The defence has chosen not to plead that the accused did not have *mens rea* for I believe they accept that he had, as indicated by the deliberateness of the accused's acts. It was shown in *R v Pethla* 1956 (4) SA 605 (AD) that intoxication does not constitute an exception and in *R v Botha* 1959 (1) SA 547 (O) that amnesia is not an exception either. The accused has admitted in a statement, Exhibit D, that he was at the deceased's house from five pm on 31st December 1960 to about 3.30 pm on the 1st of January 1961 and spent most of the morning lovemaking, which ended in a fight. The accused therefore had means opportunity and motive. He wanted to end the affair with the deceased and he did just that – permanently, after raping her.'

Maybe I'm stupid, but I don't get Lambie's logic. If Anil and Liz were lovers, how can there be rape? Did he, at some stage, in the lovemaking, or in the last sexual encounter,

injure the deceased? The auntie doesn't know what I do about the accused. I hide my grin with my hand.

‘Now, Your Honour, as regards circumstantial evidence, learned counsel for the defence knows that in many cases direct evidence is not available and that more often than not recourse is to be had to circumstantial evidence. The sufficiency of such evidence in a criminal trial is governed by strict rules of logic formulated in *R v Blom* 1939 AD 188, and, for civil trials, confirmed in *Govan v Skidmore* 1952 1 SA 732 (N).’

All this “circumstantial evidence” thing is going over my head. While there is no eyewitness to the actual murder, Mr Kowalski’s sworn testimony to the sexual assault, which really was consensual intercourse, points to the accused being the only person who had the opportunity to commit the crimes he is charged with.

‘Consequently, the prosecution argues that the state has discharged its onus of proving the guilt of the accused beyond reasonable doubt, and he should be found guilty of both rape and murder. Furthermore, due to the heinous nature of the crimes, the accused should be removed permanently from society so that he cannot in future repeat such acts. Therefore, in the interests of justice, the state requests that the mandatory death penalty, as prescribed under section 330(1) of the *Criminal Procedure Act*, No 56 of 1955, be imposed on the accused. Thank you, Your Honour.’

The Deputy Police Commissioner walks in front of the tables to Mr Cook and whispers in his ear. The DA stands up. ‘M’Lord, if the court can indulge me for just a moment?’ The judge nods, Fred continues whispering in his ear. ‘M’Lord, the Deputy Police Commissioner has informed me of recent developments which he assures me has a crucial bearing on this case. I respectfully ask the court that we discuss this matter in chambers.’

‘How long do you need, Mr Cook?’

‘A half-hour should suffice, M’Lord.’

‘Mr Taylor?’

‘M’Lord, I have no objection to an *in camera* discussion, in the interests of justice.’

‘Very well, then; court is in recess for thirty minutes.’ The judge does his business with his toy.

Judge Laughton stands on crutches in his red chamber. ‘Lady, gentlemen, I presume this is a matter to be discussed between prosecution and defence. If you will excuse me? Please make sure the matter is settled in twenty-five minutes.’ He hobbles off, no doubt for some painkillers.

‘Tom, I apologise for the turn of events. I assure you this is not a surprise witness. The Deputy Police Commissioner has just told me of dramatic recent developments which he assures me will bring up evidence that will enable this case to be concluded.’

‘What evidence, Philip?’

‘He did not say.’

‘And you believe him?’

‘Yes, I have known Fred a number of years and will accept his word. I must confess ...’

‘*You*, Mr Prosecutor, want to confess?’ the auntie gives a lovely half-smile.

‘Miss Lambie, with all respect, and I trust you, Tom, will take what I say in confidence. It is, as you have correctly said, the prosecution’s case is weak, being largely circumstantial.’

‘Damn right, Philip.’

‘I am given to understand that the DPC’s investigations will result in evidence establishing guilt of an accused beyond reasonable doubt.’

‘All right then, will you put him on the stand?’

‘Yes, Tom.’

‘What are we waiting for? Let’s go.’

Has the mud-sucking mullet taken the worm?

Cook stands up, clears his throat. ‘I call Deputy Police Commissioner True-May to the stand.’ Fred stands in the dock looking worried. ‘Now, Sir, you have told the prosecution that the police are working on new leads that will produce concrete evidence that will conclude this trial?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you give the court details of that proposed evidence or information?’

‘No sir.’

There is a murmur. The judge bangs his gavel. ‘Order! Deputy Commissioner, need I remind you that even a person of your rank can be held in contempt of court?’

‘Your Honour, it is just that our investigations are not yet complete. It’s at a crucial stage. If I give any details in open court, it will jeopardise our work, and a guilty person may go free through premature disclosure.’

Is this a ploy cooked up by Cook, what he didn’t want to elaborate on?

The judge winces, clears his throat. 'Are you asking this court for more time to conclude your investigations?'

'Yes, Your Honour, in the interests of justice.'

'How long do you need?'

'Not more than a week.'

'Mr Taylor, what have you to say?'

'M'Lord, if the Deputy Commissioner assures the court that he needs merely a week to produce evidence that will decisively conclude this trial, defence is prepared to wait.'

'Mr Cook?'

'I concur.'

'Very well, then. Deputy Commissioner, you will present yourself here as prosecution witness at 10 am on Monday?'

'I will, Your Honour.'

The judge bangs thrice. 'Court is adjourned to 10 am on the 27th March 1961.'

I meet Sham outside the court.

'I expect you'll have a busy week, Rohit.'

'Not really. It's up to Shaun Daniels, who's still unconscious or in a coma. If the police can get a statement or confession out of him, it will help.'

'There's no guarantee he'll talk.'

'No. But the police have to now speed up their investigations. The DPC has asked me to attend a meeting, so maybe I'll learn what they're up to. Sham, you think Taylor will call Anil to testify?'

'Doubt it. He's already done his summation. If new evidence comes up, he could call Anil, but he's told me that putting the accused on the stand will not help his cause.'

'Meaning?'

'For starters, Lamb Chop will have a bite at him, and ...'

I laugh at Sham's unintended joke. His stomach does a quick jelly jive. 'Yes?'

'Anil's memory is not likely to get clear, or he could make up some lies and be caught out. A problem is that the estimated time of death does not help Anil.'

'What you mean, *bhairam*?'

Sham counts on his banana fingers. 'Firstly, we have only Anil's word that he left at half-past three Sunday afternoon, when Liz was, supposedly, still alive. Secondly, he could

have killed his lover, then left. Thirdly, nobody saw him leave, so he could have walked out at any convenient time. Fourthly, apart from the time he spent at the Island Hotel, which can be verified, he was alone until found on Monday morning; so for most of the time, about ten or eleven hours, he has no alibi. Finally, what if Meyer's timing is wrong? There was no second opinion – it's just his word, as with Kowalski. Anil *could* have killed Liz.'

'Shit, Sham; you're right. There's so much mystery and the police isn't clearing things up.'

'Two things may shed light. Kowalski and Meyer. Rohit, you need to look into both these guys.'

'Ja; I also want to talk with Anil – more him talking to me. I'm not sure he knows how to sing. I'm going to see Shaun Daniels; hope Fred can apply some strong arm tactics when the *madhur* regains consciousness.'

I go to once-familiar police headquarters, see some of my colleagues. I get a cup of tea and take some Marie biscuits. I suppose the budget does not stretch to such luxuries as plain or cream or chocolate doughnuts. I shake hands with Detective Inspector Booyesen. Maybe he's seen me frowning.

'What's wrong?'

'Who's babysitting Shaun Daniels?'

'Warrant Officer Moodley.'

'Just one guy?'

'I don't have the manpower.'

'I would hate to see that *bruin ou* busting out of hospital.'

'Don't worry about that Biswas – the guy's in a coma, attached to so many tubes and wires he can't go anywhere even if he had the strength. He may die without recovering.'

'Jesus, save him. I want a confession, Andre.'

'You know, brother, dough can induce a confession?' The man's left eyebrow rises. I wink.

Police Commissioner Kevin O'Shaughnessy and Fred come in, shake hands, and sit at the head of the table, with four cops on each side.

'Gentlemen, may I have your attention please? This meeting will be short. I have called you in to brief you on the latest developments in the case *State v Ramlall*. You see Rohit Biswas back here for a good reason – he has been able to get new evidence that helped

us track down and arrest suspects in a number of robberies that have been plaguing the city for the past year. We have some insurance companies also working with us, but we have to be careful not to tip off other suspects we have not gotten hold of ... yet. Shaun Daniels, who headed up the warehouse break-in group, is now a suspect in the rape and murder of Elizabeth Russell. He is in a coma at King Edward Hospital. We are hoping to get a statement from him when he recovers. Fred, you are in charge of that, and also getting a search warrant for his house and car. Any questions?' There were none. 'Now, if there's nothing else, Broad you work with Booyesen, go back to the deceased's house. Has the husband moved back in?'

'No he hasn't; he's staying in the cottage,' replies Fred. 'We have the property under surveillance. George Russell hasn't been in the main building.'

'Good. He's a suspect, perhaps a mastermind in the warehouse break-ins and other criminal acts. We're in contact with Scotland Yard and Britain's Special Branch; we can't act until we have concrete proof of illegal activities.'

'Do we get a search warrant for Russell's cottage?'

'No, Fred, let the guy hang himself. Keep him under twenty-four hour surveillance. Broad, you and Booyesen take the crime scene techs and look for more evidence. Get Daniels's fingerprints and see if you can identify him as being at the murder scene. Get photographs of his car and ask neighbours if they have seen the vehicle in the vicinity.'

'How long have we got, Sir?'

The PC nods. 'Well, Booyesen, court reconvenes on Monday with the DC as the first and perhaps final witness. He'll need to do a report and present it to the DA and then brief him. As I see it, we've got just three days to do the heavy shifting. Fred you need to have completed your report by Friday, latest, and meet barrister Cook then or over the weekend. Fred is in charge overall; you guys report anything and everything to him, no matter how insignificant it may seem – let him be the judge. All clear? Thank you, gentlemen.'

We leave the room.

'Just a minute, Biswas.'

'Commissioner?'

'Some good news. I spoke with the chief executives of four insurance companies that had insured the goods that Daniels and his gang stole. They have saved a packet and as a reward for your sharp detective work, have formed a pool of ten thousand pounds to set you up. Also, they'll be using you as an investigator. Some life insurance companies are being contacted by these short-term insurers to propose you for investigative work.'

'At least some good is coming out of the bad. You put in a word for me?'

The PC shakes his head. 'Didn't need to. I gave them the details and they came up with the idea.'

'Thanks, Sir. I appreciate it.'

'If I did anything, it's for your daughter. You know the old saying – an idle mind is the devil's workshop. Work will keep you busy. It's not for me to pass judgment, but it may help you cut down booze and *ganja* consumption, eh?'

I smile, raise my thumb, and walk out, then come back. 'Commissioner, you have a minute?'

'Certainly.'

I'm not sure, but hell I need help, sharp. I tell him about my investigations of the connection between Russell and Taylor – no hard evidence, yet, and the potential boycott-busting scenario and inform him that I have briefed the DC, in case something happens to him or me. O'Shaughnessy whistles.

'Christ, Biswas. If true, it seems Taylor was able to pull the wool over James True-May's eyes.' The PC shakes his head.

I don't tell him about his predecessor possibly benefiting from donations by Russell or Taylor or both. It's a tricky one, with Fred in the middle. I hope my dost is not somehow mixed up in this mess. Shut up, Biswas – you are suspicious of everybody.

The PC is speaking. 'With the current government paranoia and a push toward a military kind of state to counter the so-called communist onslaught, things can get tricky – dangerous. You've got to get concrete evidence, man.'

'I'm working on it, Commissioner.'

'And Biswas...'

'Sir?'

'Good luck, but it may help you to say some prayers.'

*

The telephone wakes me from a deep sleep. The clock shows 7.10. News of Daniels? I pick up, hear crying in the background. My mother's older brother, Pravin, died in his sleep. That's the way I would like to leave. I speak to my nephew; ask him to phone Suresh of Rajcoomar's Funeral Undertakers in my name. He'll do the necessary. I tell Bissoon that funeral notices must be placed in the Clare Valley and Clare Estate buses, bus ranks, shops; no need to put anything in the newspapers. May be able to have the funeral this afternoon. Pravin *mama* was a bit of a recluse or hermit in his later years, knew few people, had ... an unremarkable life as a farmer and fisherman along the Umgeni River at the end of Siripat

Road, after working for the South African Railways and Harbours for over fifteen years. A hard life but at least he educated his two sons and a daughter to Matric level.

I have breakfast with ma and Arthi; leave her at school and come back home to give mother the news. No point in telling her earlier, her brother is dead and there's nothing she could do about it. She cries, as is customary; I try to console her. I drive on Sea Cow Lake Road, over Queen's Bridge into Quarry Road, past Tika Singh's Bend, where my adopted father's family still live in well-maintained corrugated iron homes on brick stilts, past Munshi's shop, over the Mbongokazi River into New Germany Road and branch off into Siripat Road. The crying reaches a peak as ma enters the veranda and is hugged by wailing women.

'Where's the body?'

'It's at Rajcoomar's. The cremation is at three; they'll bring the body here at eleven,' my *mama's* son, Bissoon replies.

The women sit on sofas, Globe chairs, benches, and on the floor, crying and sniffing; the men and boys are outside, standing or squatting, making small talk. I sit silent, thinking of my mother, five years younger than her brother. What becomes of Arthi when ma, her stand-in mother goes? What happens when I depart on that one-way ticket? Death is inevitable; the guy with the big sickle can strike at any time. The early mourners ask about the case – seems I'm a bit of a celebrity now. Will I be able to save Ramlall's son's life? Will God punish him for doing such a terrible thing to a *gori*? Should the *balatkari-jaanmari* get what he deserves? I'm in no mood to be interrogated, but fill in my twenty-or-so audience on developments. That'll give them something to talk about as they wile away the boring hours to cremation time. I look at the faded plastic flowers in a small galvanised iron pot atop a crocheted lace doily on the sitting room table, covered in dust. That's what we Hindus become eventually – dust. I sigh, slip my nephew a fifty pound note and drive back to fetch Arthi from school and leave her with a neighbour. An old man's funeral is no place for an eight-year old.

I return at one o' clock to a casket on trestles in the front yard surrounded by men on one side and women on the other, totalling about fifty or sixty. I find people who I haven't seen or spoken with for years. It takes a wedding or a funeral and such-like functions for a family gathering.

I make my way to *mausi*, my mother's sister, Romilla, from Pietermaritzburg, give her a hug. Tears roll. 'Come, *beta*, sing with me.'

'*Tumi hain mata, pitha tumi hain, tumi hain bandhu sadha tumi hain.*'

We chorus: '*Tumi hain mata, pitha tumi hain, tumi hain bandhu sadha tumi hain.*'

‘Tumi hain ...’

The funeral song of mothers and fathers departing earth. The crying and wailing by women and girls reach a crescendo as we push the casket into the hearse. The men get into cars and follow the black vehicle some three or four miles to the Clare Estate Crematorium. The hearse, with Bissoon and his younger brother Sunil, who wears a white *dhoti* and matching over-shirt, stop at the entrance to the cemetery. The casket is pulled out and carried on the shoulders of five men and myself. Every ten feet or so we go down on our haunches and get up to hand over to another six pallbearers. This is a stupid custom carried over from India where villagers had to walk long distances to a river where the body would be cremated over a wood fire and the ashes thrown into the water. Naturally, the casket carriers would tire and sit down. At the steps to the roofed, open hall is a handkerchief held down by four stones and some coins – the ferryman’s fee ... or bribe. Another unoriginal custom or tradition. You pay for everything, even after death. Reminds me of my overused joke: What’s the difference between an attorney and a prostitute? The bottom-feeding lawyer will screw you long after you’re dead; milk the deceased’s estate.

The open casket is placed in the centre at the end of the hall and the fifty or so mourners, small turnout, file past, taking some flowers from a brass plate, circling the face of the deceased three times in clockwise direction, place the flowers near the face of *mama* and clasp their hands in a prayer salute, then shake hands or hug the three or four close relatives at the head of the casket. Mr Kamal Singh, a high school principal and family elder, clears his throat behind the wooden podium, gives a small speech, and then hands over to the *pandit*, who leads us in prayer, ending with a chant sung by most of the mourners:

‘Om jai jagdish hare

Swami jai jagdish hare ...’

Ending with ‘... *shanti, shanti, shanti,*’ a call for eternal peace.

The priest says, ‘If anybody didn’t see the face, you can come here because we putting the coffin in the furnace just now.’ One or two men repeat the flower-placing ritual. The casket is closed and pushed on rollers through a curtain-covered hatch. In the furnace room the pine coffin lined with a cotton sheet is removed from the casket and placed on a trestle. The priest places camphor around the white-shrouded body and lights them. Close male relatives led by the deceased’s *dhoti*-clad youngest son walk around the corpse depositing small handfuls of a mixture of *ghee* and sandalwood as the pundit chants the names of several deities, ending with ‘*swaha,*’ repeated by the men as they deposit the offering over the burning camphor. The prayer ended; the caretaker winds up the steel door of

the furnace while his assistant manoeuvres the coffin on the trestle and gives it a push. Flames lick the sides as the fire welcomes the offering. The hatch is closed and *mama* Pravin is being consumed.

We, ten or so, go outside to a tap and wash our hands, throwing water over each shoulder three times. It's about a ninety minute wait for the remains.

'No point in hanging 'bout here. Let's go to the joint and have some *dop*,' I suggest 'cause I'm parched. We get into two cars and stop at Ashraf's Supply Store, get a bottle of Mainstay and three Schweppes bitter lemon from the aptly-named Pepsi, the one-legged shebeen-keeper, a victim of gangrene from diabetes neglect, who gives us five glasses. Caste and shit don't work here if you want a drink; you have to put your lips where a low down feller's mouth had been. Hopefully the alcohol will kill any germs. All ten *dop* so the bottle empties fast and is replaced. I realise I hadn't eaten since breakfast. The innkeeper brings some fried chicken neck, potato chips, curried chicken pieces, and mango pickle. We tuck in.

'Hey Biswas, you supposed to be fasting,' Ramesh says.

'Fasting, why?'

'It's the custom.'

'I don't think my *mama* will mind; I'm sure he wouldn't want me to join him dying from hunger, right?' There are laughs. The third bottle appears and vanishes. We leave.

On the steps at the back of the furnace room is a handkerchief with two one pound notes and some coins. The caretaker, Roshan, is sharp, trying to fool us that some of the mourners left the cash as a tip. These cremators get a salary. I don't mind taking the pound notes and replacing them with ten shillings. I do so and Rosh gives a crooked smile. I drop a crown for my mother's brother's send off.

Sunil pours milk to cool the ashes in the steel tray; then packs it into a clay pot wrapped in a cotton sheet. When full, he puts the remainder into a galvanised iron bucket. We drive to the beach at Blue Lagoon where a clay lamp and seven squares of camphor are lit on a banana leaf base holding up a coconut, a brass jug of water, and seven half-pieces of lime. The bored-looking *pandit* chants a prayer; he doesn't need to smile because customers can't complain. The ashes from the bucket and the clay pot are poured onto a cotton sheet and *mama's* two sons throw it and the clay pot into the sea. We walk to our cars without looking back. At *mama's* former residence a small fire is lit; returning mourners take a bunch of syringa berry leaves, touch it into a brass jug of water, into a bowl of salt, and finally the fire, then brush each shoulder alternatively three times.

Some neighbours have sent over an enamel bucket of tea and sandwiches – cheese and tomato; no choice – fasting, in the sense of no meat, fowl, fish and oil – goes on for forty days. I'm not a believer so give the sandwiches a miss. I drive ma home; at least she had stopped crying and talking of the past at the same time. Difficult to pull off.

Next morning I go to *mama's* house from where his two sons, three grandchildren, a cousin, and myself walk to the south bank of the Umgeni River. A *mahapathir*, low caste barber, shaves off the hair of everyone, except me, place the cut hair in hollowed dough, making a ball of each, and throw them into the river. This is some kind of cleansing ritual. Not for me. The six then have a bath in the river. I had a shower at home.

Prayers will be held on the third, tenth and thirteenth day after death, at six months, and then annually at a set time where food 'n drink, cigarettes, snuff, and whatever are offered to all deceased. I will have to attend if I'm not busy. Strictly vegetarian and sweetmeat offering, even if the dear-departed was not a vegetarian during his lifetime. Fasting and feasting with and for the dead.

I reflect on death and its inevitability. Makes me think of Anil – I hope him, and his troubled soul doesn't depart soon. I pray also that although Daniels may be comfortable in the *kalyug*, he doesn't leave this earth silently. Maybe it's time for me to put on my brass knuckles and make a house call on the good doctor Meyer?

Monday, 27th March 1961 cometh the reckoning; judgment day for so many of us. Hope the gods are on Anil's side. My hand caresses the beach ball on my filing cabinet, hoping Asha could give me some guidance and support. I know she's with me and Arthi. I watch the rain through the grimy window – I may chuck from this dump, get a place in a cleaner, more central area under a white nominee. I think my client may be able to help, if I tune him nicely, but I know it's possible only if I turn out to be a life-saver.

I'm busy with paperwork, the kind of shit I hate but have to do – a report for Fred True-May and Raj. I didn't know how to switch the *ballie* when he said he's arranging a boat to go deep-sea fishing tomorrow afternoon. I like eating fresh fish; the taste's better if self-caught. I used to go surf fishing when Asha was alive to untangle the line of the low-priced wooden reels – I didn't have the patience then and even less now. I never was a good shore-to-sea angler, alongside the poor pros, as I was on the river. I'm all at sea when standing by the deeply tanned *charous* who catch shad, bream, 74, pompano, rock-cod, grunter, dorado, silvers, pangas, and some I don't recognise even today, by the dozens, sometimes one after the other, lining it up. God knows if the elaborate but fast preparation of the bait – prawn, sardine, the one side of a shad or other small fish, worm, dough or whatever, often rubbed with masala and most times spat on – really helps or it is showing the *ous* from the Transvaal and Free State that without this kind of *muti* you catch nothing in our Indian Ocean. This belief or philosophy may be true for while the *charous* pull 'em in with a home-made bamboo stick; the red-faced families with two rods each and shiny equipment seem to be catching ducks, nix. I try the same but fail and have to buy a good-sized fish or three and lie I caught them myself. I think Asha suspected, but did not interrogate. Let the harmless fisherman be a *joota*; he's only fooling himself. Nothing better to go with a stiff Mainstay and bitter lemon than masala-fried shad. Hmm, I think I'll send Vikash to get me something from Victory Lounge for this wet day. Hope it doesn't rain tomorrow – only the fishes would enjoy that. I work till seven then call it a day. The report done, I'll revise tomorrow and send it to the Deputy Commissioner.

Then I remembered I had promised to take Arthi to the Indian Market Saturday morning. I hope she forgets or calls it off when I say that we'd have to be there early, like six-thirty or seven at the latest, because I'm going fishing later. That evening she curled up on my lap and

asked me to tell a story. I began thinking of fairy tales and realised I didn't know any, really. She saved the day ... night by asking me to continue with the story of my great grandfather. What's with my little girl? I smile and go into Chapter Two: the saga of my grandfather. Halfway through she says let's stop and continue some other time. Good.

I frown. 'Why?'

'We have to go to the Squatter Market tomorrow, remember?'

'Oh yes, *bacha*.

'Early, early?'

'Uh huh.'

'By bus?'

'*Hai*, it's a long way there from the bus rank and back. Too much for your little legs.'

'I'll manage. My father is big and strong and will carry me.'

Damn. I can't argue with this little *shaitan*; she can turn from a lotus flower to a prickly pear just like that. Where she gets such mood swings from? Not her late mother, I know.

At six-thirty we watch from the verandah and leave home when we see Mungaroo's Metro Bus Service vehicle winding down Peter Road. We walk smartly to the bus rank at the junction of Myhill and Sea Cow Lake roads, opposite Ori's house. I didn't catch much sleep with Arthi chattering like a she-monkey above the sound of the chutney music on the bus loudspeakers.

We get off at the Lorne Street bus rank. With a lump in my throat I point out St Aidans Hospital across Centenary Road where Arthi was born on Asha's departure. Next to that is the Durban Fire Brigade with a red fire truck always in shiny display. Behind these, I tell my excited daughter, is Sastri College where I studied for four years, and Curries Fountain, the first sports field for Indians. Alongside that, I point out as we walk on the pavement, is the big bus rank for vehicles going west to Cato Manor and surrounds, then the Scala Cinema where we ate pork and beef sausages 'cause we could not have them at home as they're taboo for Hindus. We cross the busy 'n wide Alice Street and are at the Morning Market, strictly fruit and vegetables. The bulk market is further south but is a boring place, so I tell Arthi we'd give it a miss. We're now at the South Coast bus rank. The shouting of bus conductors, is not as loud as the poor vendors selling anything and everything, using bob whistles, car hooters, bicycle and prayer bells to attract unsuspecting buyers, competing with the cacophony: instrumental music and songs from Hindi movies at ear-splitting volume, the

growl of buses being revved and belching black smoke, the smell of diesel fumes mixed with that of rotting cabbage and cauliflower leaves, and decaying brinjals, intermingled with the fragrance of fresh mint and *dhania* or coriander, burning incense, the nondescript smell of mealies roasting over a coal-burning *bowla* or brazier, the mouth-watering aroma of masala-fried shad or bream sizzling in a *karahi*, a round, shallow cast iron frying pan over a small gas stove. I use Hindi terms which I translate for the education of wide-eyed Arthi.

We enter the Squatters Market, poor little noisy India: rows and rows of concrete stalls with mostly green produce; people, male and female, shouting to draw attention; aunties poking the veggies and being met by scowls. The criers know as time goes by the produce begins to deteriorate and the price drops. Women are sharp, walking along the aisles and making mental notes of prices. Time is on their side, the reward for later return home is low prices and satisfied husbands and mothers-in-law. There is a kind of mad order under the rusting corrugated iron roof and sprinkled-wet rough concrete floor.

This is not a place I come to often because the madness can drive me crazy; also I don't like being accosted by battlers telling me taste this try that, it's for free. Nothing's for *mahala*. I suppose you can buy, cheap-cheap, just about any fruit and vegetable here that you'd get in India. Some of my favourite veggies, if properly prepared, were jackfruit, curried or fried like fish, pumpkin leaves, red herbs, curried or fried *bhindie* or okra, *amadumbi* (African potato) curried in tamarind gravy, and fried green bananas. There are some vegetables I don't know the English names of and which I usually don't like. I've become a tour guide and my sole customer is enjoying it, not I. We don't care for *larnie* white shit like Brussels sprouts, broccoli, lettuce, and spinach (which we use only to make *bhajia*).

We don't eat much fruit although Durban has what you call a surfeit and variety. In my younger days we'd walk the bush and pluck wild fruit, such as monkey bells, guavas (which grow from the shit we deposit when far from home), umdoni, *amatingula*, berries and stuff in pods I don't know but are tasty and not poisonous. Then apart from civilised fruit, we have in eThekwin, pomegranate, custard apple, *tooth* or raspberry, granadilla or compassionate fruit, and what not that I may not have tasted in my almost four decades of existence...

‘*Papaji?*’

I look down, smile at my little bundle of joy. Just then a hag stops, glares at Arthi and then at me. She cracks her knuckles on her head and points a finger at me.

‘This not place for lovely baby like this, you know, *bhaia*? She will get *nazar*, you stupid or what?’

Ah, the evil eye. I put my palms together and thank the ghoul. ‘*Sach bath. Dhuniawad.*’ Arthi is tugging my hand. ‘What you say, *beti*?’

‘Let’s go out now.’

‘We’ll go to the English Market or what’s also called the top market, get something to eat then go home, *ne bacha*?’

‘*Acha, teak he, papaji.*’ *Hai*, for the first time Arthi’s speaking Hindi. I like it, cultivate and maintain some culture, not like the confused heathen father.

We come to the meat, fish, poultry, and *muti* market and the smells tell you where you are, no need for a map like those used by straw-hatted *goras* and *goris*. On the stalls under a corrugated iron roof on one side you get more than you bargain for – spices, curios, hand-made furniture of poor quality, masks, hats, walking sticks, hand-sewn bags, crocodile and snake skins, thirty varieties of whole and ground spices, a dozen kinds of raw *dhall*, a half-dozen species of rice, salted snoek, Bombay duck, dried shrimps, betel nuts and betel leaves, *agarbathi* or incense sticks, and so on.

The source of fifty different kinds of smell or stink is the other side of the market, home of bloody or gory fowl head ’n feet, sheep, goat, and fish heads, tripe, trotters, fish roe, liver, heart, gullets, tripe, and other assorted shit that the battlers buy for a weekly gourmet feast. Had God come sightseeing here, seeing so many different things, He would’ve chucked, complaining of a migraine.

Arthi is pulling up her little nose; better cut a line, but my stomach is making sounds and I’m sure hers is too, although she’d be too proud to admit; after all this tour was her idea. We repair, as that *madhur* Taylor would say, to the eating spots. Fortunately, the *kaka* smell does not linger here, replaced by the aroma of freshly-cooked food. We go into one of the cubicles with a table at the centre and benches attached to the white bathroom tiles on three sides. Kusma’s place. This goblin-like creature is someone you don’t look at when eating meat, but Boy (that’s her husband, Surajpaul’s nickname) she can cook. We finish off a mild mutton curry and *roti* that puts Arthi to sleep. I carry her back to the Lorne Street bus rank. She not heavy: she’s my daughter and my reason for living.

‘Well, Rohit; thanks for the report. I’ll read it tonight,’ Rajshekhar Ramlall says as he and me drop our lines over the railing on the noisy diesel-engine of the *Sarie Marais*. ‘Give me the gist.’

‘I don’t want to get your hopes up, *bhairam*, but it looks like we have the killer lying in hospital. I hope the bush pig will make a confession.’

Raj grimaces, maybe my language is too rough for sophisticated palates? ‘What if he doesn’t?’

‘I attended a police briefing called by the Commissioner yesterday. Acting on a request from the prosecutor, the PC is giving this case top priority – especially Shaun Daniels. They’re fingerprinting him, searching his house and that of the deceased.’

‘Good. What else?’

‘You’ve got a bite.’

Raj is battling with something big. Beginner’s luck or is the *topi* a game fisherman? The boatman comes to help land a *bari*-sized barracuda. Must be a shoal moving hereabouts. My client baits up and resumes fishing.

Now I have a bite, a tug, I reel in rapidly, the line goes slack. Damn!

The sun is setting as we come back to port. Most of the twenty or so anglers have caught something, except for two or three long-faced guys who were more interested in boozing than fishing. Raj ’n me drank to moderation ’cause we wanted to do some serious angling. I’m glad I came, seeing my client in a brighter mood than yesterday. I drive home with three barracuda, a goodish-sized John Dory and bream, and a six pound rock-cod. Even the neighbours will eat well tonight, maybe even tomorrow.

We had just finished breakfast when the phone rings. It’s Detective Sergeant Broad telling me that Shaun Daniels has just come out of his coma.

I fly up Umgeni Road, into Grey Street, then onto the Esplanade, and left onto Sydney Road, reaching King Edward VIII Hospital in Congella after having broken some land speed record with my lawn mower engine. I could have had a heart attack running from the parking lot to the intensive care unit. The nurse, looking like a glass of milk topped with long black hair, a kind of woman a *charou* will leave his mother’s house for, knocks on the door. It’s opened by DS Broad. I see the patient under a white sheet, tubes and wires to his nose, mouth, and I don’t know where else. He seems asleep, or dead. I’m worried as I shake hands with Warrant Officer Krishnan Moodley, asking in a whisper, ‘Is the *gardoo* conscious?’

The WO shows perfect teeth framed in his dark face, ‘Yes, chief.’

‘Can he talk? Has he said anything?’

Broad whispers, ‘He can talk, slowly; confirmed his name.’

‘Did he say anything else?’

‘Ja, he told me, “Fuck off”.’

‘So he won’t talk?’

‘You’re welcome to try your persuasive charm on him, Biswas.’

‘Nurse...?’

‘Fourie ... Annette. He’s not asleep; just got his eyes closed,’ she taps his shoulder.

‘Mr Daniels, someone wants to talk to you.’ The eyes flicker, open, so does the mouth with the gold-capped upper incisors. We got our man, all right.

‘You know me?’

The man rasps, clears his throat. ‘Could you give him something to drink, Annette?’ The nurse puts a straw from a small bottle of orange juice into his mouth. The killer sucks like a Hoover, swallows.

‘Ja, I know you. What the fuck you doing here?’

‘I’ve come to tell you that we have found incriminating evidence that you strangled, stabbed and raped Elizabeth Russell. You’ll be rewarded with a rope necklace for your hard work, *madhur chodh*.’

‘Go fuck yourself, coolie,’ the bushman says in a non-soothing whisper.

Broad must’ve seen the killer look in my eyes. He raises a hand.

‘We have witnesses who saw you at the party, we have ...’

‘You can prove nothing. Now get the fuck out of here.’

‘You’re as good as dead. We’ve found the murder weapon ...’

‘Where?’

‘Guess?’

‘You’re playing games, *coolie*. Get lost.’

‘Okay, will do. Get well soon so we can hang you.’ I see the killer look in the bushie. I step out into the passage; the DS follows me. ‘We won’t get shit out of this *bruin ou*.’

Broad smiles; puts a hand on my shoulder. ‘Don’t be too sure of that. As the Nazis have said, “Ve haf vays to make people talk.” But I don’t want you involved in this.’

‘You’ll make sure Dracula doesn’t get away with murder?’

‘Rest assured,’ Broad gives a broad smile. ‘I’m calling Booysen as back up. You know the Deputy Commissioner is working flat out preparing testimonies and witnesses, with the prosecutor? Who knows who’ll be called up? Cook’s said he’s wrapping up the case on Monday. I suggest you spend a day going over your report and notes ...’

‘You think I’ll be called as a witness?’

‘I can’t say but you’re the guy that cracked this case. You have a major role in getting a killer convicted, so prepare yourself to be roasted, for a good cause.’

‘What you mean?’

‘You could be examined by the prosecutor and take it for granted that your friend who you call *madhur chodh* will try to break and discredit you.’

‘What should I do, DS?’

‘Put the law you’re studying into practice – become a prosecutor and defence counsel. Ask and answer difficult questions, honestly, clearly and logically. Write them down. Don’t get riled, emotional, under examination.’

‘It could be all for nothing. Cook may not call me as a witness – remember I’m working for the defence.’

‘Biswas, you can’t take that chance. You owe it to yourself, firstly, not to be made to look stupid in the witness box, and secondly to your client. Your testimony could be crucial in swaying Judge Langton.’

‘You’re right, Owen. Any suggestions?’ This *gora* is not such a bad *ou*, it seems.

‘You’ve got your notes and report. Use them to write a story line.’

‘I’m no good at fairy tales...’

The DS laughs. ‘No, seriously, a story line is the gist of actions in chronological order. Write all that down; then look for gaps, what’s missing. Ask yourself difficult questions – pretend you’re Cook or Lambie and then Taylor. Be tough on yourself –both of them would be.’

‘Should I talk with the DA first?’

‘I don’t think he’ll have time to see you. Anyway, he has your report and the DC’s locked away with him today and tomorrow. Cook will know how to handle you ... to the advantage of the defence, I hope, if Daniels is the real rapist-killer.’

‘*Ja*, but that’ll work only if we have a confession.’

‘Don’t I know it? Here’s an idea – give your questions to Singh – let him grill you.’

I smile. ‘Shama can’t even grill a chicken, but I’ll let him have a shot at this ox.’

I meet Booysen coming up the stairs. He grins. ‘Did Dracula talk?’

‘Only to insult me.’

‘As I said, *bru*, a confession could be obtained at the right price. Your client has deep pockets, *ne?*’

I nod.

I take Broad's advice, go to the office and hit the papers. I touch the rubber ball with my right hand, like it was a bible used for swearing in court. 'Help me, Asha, to save a life even though I was not there to save yours. Saving one life may be my *dharma* ... redemption, for taking the life of the man who took yours. Give me strength and guidance.' I wipe my tears, fill my pipe. Life saving work this, my mind has to be on full alert.

Four on Saturday afternoon and I'm surrounded by paper, on desk and floor, and by rain above and around. Somebody's outside the door. Vikash enters, bringing two hot quarter mutton bunnies with carrot salad and vinegar chillies, with side order of *puri patha* and potato-spinach *bhajia*. We share the meal and a half-jack Mainstay, then my *tube laaitie* leaves, knowing I'm busy. I call Sham at home; Malthi says he's gone to Curries Fountain to watch the visiting Moroka Swallows team, under cover of rain. Damn fool. She says he'll call back when he's home.

It's six and by now I'm seeing things quite clearly, having done what Broad suggested. The phone rings. I tell Sham of my discussions with the DS and the need for my head to be examined by the prosecution and defence. The attorney is excited, thinks it's a brilliant idea, and we agree to meet at his office at ten and work until we're done, even if it takes all of Sunday. I call Raj Ramlall and brief him then pack my papers into my bag leave Valbro Chambers and drive home, have a nightcap to get a good night's sleep – have to be fresh for the long interview tomorrow and possibly a public interrogation Monday.

Sham Singh isn't what you call a courtroom or trial lawyer, but he's doing his best. We stop at one o' clock and walk east on Victoria Street for Sunday Special lunch at Goodwill Lounge. We are leaving back when Pumpy comes in. I tell Sham to carry on while I brief the proprietor on recent developments.

'So, it all hinges on a confession by Daniels?'

'Ja, but the *madhur*'s tough – he's not talking.'

'You can't go soft on a guy like that. The cops must use their strong arm tactics; they'll enjoy that.'

'I'm not sure it'll work. Maybe the bushie's tough 'cause he has strong protection.'

I call Fred at his office and home – he's not at either place. Should I visit the hospital and lend a hand in making the patient talk? No, the DS said he'll call me as soon as he has any news. I have a glassful of Pumpy's *larnie* single malt for the pavement and head back. Sham continues to grill me. I give in at six, both of us exhausted and unable to think straight. I leave Damjee Building and Walk across the road to Valbro Chambers.

I call Fred. No answer at office or home. I phone King Edward Hospital and ask to be put to Shaun Daniels's ward. The switchboard operator said it's against Health Department policy to speak to a patient in intensive care. Bitch! Sham 'n me have a double each for the road and drive home.

At 10 pm I try Fred for the last time. The guy at the cop shop doesn't know where the Deputy Commissioner is, neither does Karen, his wife. I phone the hospital and ask to speak with the matron. After about three, four minutes of crackle and pop, what sounds like a cheeky white woman comes on the line.

'Yes?'

'I'd like to speak with Fred True-May, he's in ward C of intensive care.'

'Just a minute, please.'

I smile, I may be in luck.

'Hello, are you there?'

'Yes, matron?'

'I'm sorry; there is no patient here by that name.'

'Sorry, ma'am, he's not a patient – he's the Deputy Police Commissioner ...'

'He could just as well be the Pope – you can't speak with anyone in ICU.'

The phone is put down un-gently.

There's something wrong.

Final day of Anil's trial on a blue Monday, 27 March in the year of somebody's lord, 1961: I sit next to Sham waiting for but scared of the action to come. Taylor's not here yet. Cook comes by and says, 'Rohit, I'm going to call you as a witness for the prosecution. I'm sorry I haven't had time to prepare you. Think you will be all right?'

'Yes, Sir.'

The DA leaves, giving me a thumbs-up. At least I won't feel like a gladiator led to the slaughter at the Durban Coliseum. Everyone rises as Emperor Laughton, enters. We sit. The judge three-taps for attention. He's got it.

'Ladies and gentlemen, good morning and thanks for your patience. Hopefully, evidence in chief and cross-examination in this trial will be concluded today. Prosecution, are you ready?'

'We are, M'Lord.'

'Defence?'

'Your Honour, I object ...'

'Mr Taylor, you are objecting before proceedings begin? To what?'

'We've not had adequate time to prepare. Disclosure was made by the prosecution at 4 pm yesterday, and I'm not certain whether we have all the information we need and certainly have not had sufficient time to properly read and analyse what has been supplied by the prosecution.'

'Mr Cook, could you enlighten us please?'

'M'Lord, I apologise to the court and the defence. Your Lordship, you did set a deadline of 10 am today for the final day of the trial. There have been recent developments ...'

'M'Lord, I apologise for interrupting my learned brother, but the term "recent developments" has become a cliché ...'

'Mr Taylor, I sympathise with you and with myself.' Laughton gives the courtroom spectators a rare smile. 'But let's wait for prosecution to conclude.'

'Thank you, M'Lord. We have given Mr Taylor a list of witnesses and statements.'

Judge Laughton clears his throat. 'All right; in fairness to the defence, I will give you, Mr Taylor, some leeway in cross-examination. Let us begin.'

I turn my left eye sideways and notice Taylor seems to have turned red like a just-boiled crayfish. Fred, looking like he's dressed for a posh wedding, is first up.

'Deputy Commissioner, can you summarise what evidence the police have gathered since this honourable court last sat?'

My former *larnie* sips some water. 'We re-visited the crime scene, lifted more fingerprints in the deceased's house; identified some of them as belonging to a suspect who we subsequently arrested; we searched same suspect's house and found a leather bag of jewellery which we itemised and learned from the insurer that all goods listed had been insured by the deceased; we found the suspect's car, took pictures and showed them to the deceased's neighbour who identified it as the vehicle that was seen driving off from outside the victim's property at about 4 pm on Sunday, 1st January 1961. The suspect led a break-in into a warehouse belonging to the accused, with seven accomplices. They were trapped by the police. Two of the warehouse-breakers were killed, as was one of my officers. The suspect was critically injured and was taken to the King Edward VIII Hospital where he was in a coma.'

This is looking good for the defence.

While the Police Commissioner sips water Taylor jumps up.

'M'Lord, this sounds like interesting fiction or a script from a Hollywood movie.'

'You have the witnesses' statements and other documents Mr Cook gave you?'

'Yes, M'Lord.'

'Then please indulge the court. I assume all will be revealed shortly, Mr Cook?'

'Yes, M'Lord.'

Laughton clears his throat of phlegm. 'Prosecution asked merely for the disclosure of a summary of events. I have been informed that relevant witnesses will testify and corroborate evidence led. Please continue, Deputy Commissioner.'

'This suspect was seen twice at the New Year's Eve party given by the deceased and a silver button from his blazer was missing. It was found clasped in the deceased's hand, as testified by Dr Meyer.'

Cook nods. 'Thank you, Deputy Commissioner. Now I call Mrs Amy Thurston to the stand.' The white auntie I interviewed over tea and biscuits walks elegantly-like to the witness box. 'Now, Mrs Thurston, you live at number 122 Roehampton Way, opposite the house of the deceased?'

'Yes, I do.'

'On the higher side?'

‘That’s correct.’

‘I take you back to about 4 pm on the 1st of January 1961.’

‘Yes?’

‘Did Mr Rohit Biswas, a private investigator, question you about a car you saw driving off from the road opposite the deceased’s open front gate?’

‘He did.’

‘Can you recall what your answer was?’

‘I told the gentleman that I don’t know much about American cars, but this one was big and black, looked new, and had a lot of chrome.’

‘Did Mr Biswas recently show you pictures of a car and you identified one?’

‘Objection.’

‘On what grounds, Mr Taylor?’

‘Knowing Biswas, he could have taken one picture and shown it to this witness.’

Judge Laughton scowls. ‘Barrister Taylor, is Mr Biswas not part of the defence team?’

‘Sorry, M’Lord, he is.’

‘Mr Cook?’

‘Go on, Mrs Thurston.’

‘The gentleman showed me black and white pictures of eight different cars. I picked one.’

‘So you chose one black car out of eight that looked somewhat similar?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Was your identification subsequently confirmed?’

‘Yes, Mr Biswas and ... Mr Broad took me to a motor car dealer with a line-up of a dozen cars. I pointed to one.’

‘M’Lord, the car picked out by Mrs Thurston was a 1961 four-door Dodge DeSoto Rebel, sold to the suspect by a dealership called American Automobiles located at the corner of Smith and Cato streets. Mrs Thurston, thank you; that is all.’

The judge looks down to the defence table. ‘Mr Taylor?’

‘Just two or three quick questions, M’Lord. Mrs Thurston, do you wear reading glasses?’

‘No.’

‘Do you wear any glasses?’

‘Yes, for long distance.’

‘Did you have them on when you saw that identified car on the 1st of January?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you, madam.’

Cooke stands up. ‘I recall Professor David Levi. Now, Professor, I don’t want to go through your previous testimony, but did you confirm the identity of the coloured person you saw momentarily, twice, in the deceased’s house during the New Year’s Eve party?’

‘Yes, from the photograph shown to me by Mr Biswas and Deputy Commissioner True-May.’

‘Thank you, that is all.’

Taylor gets up. ‘Professor, how much did you have to drink at that party?’

‘Nothing, just some fruit juice. I do not take alcohol.’

Taylor nods, sits down, red-faced.

Andre Booysen is next on the stand. After being sworn in and setting out his designation, Cook questions him.

‘You were instructed by Deputy Commissioner True-May, along with Detective Sergeant Broad, to return to the crime scene to look for evidence that may have been overlooked?’

‘That’s correct.’

‘What did you find, if anything?’

‘We had in our first investigation found some prints that we couldn’t match. We dusted again and found fingerprints on the toilet flusher, the toilet’s inside and outside door handles, on the fridge, and on a whisky glass in a linen cupboard. All matched that of the suspect.’

‘Please explain.’

‘We took a fingerprint of the suspect, which we didn’t have earlier. It matched with those found subsequently at the deceased’s house.’

‘Were the suspect’s fingerprints on your database?’

‘No, but we believed that the suspect was from Johannesburg and so we faxed copies of finger and palm prints to the Brixton Murder and Robbery Unit. They confirmed the identity of the suspect who had two previous convictions for assault with grievous bodily harm and five for housebreaking. They informed me that the Unit had a warrant of arrest for the suspect but he “seems to have disappeared into thin air”.’

‘Anything else found at the deceased’s house?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Now, what did you find at the suspect’s house?’

‘Suspect lived in a single-storey, two-bedroom house at 71 Ogle Road, Austerville, a coloured group area. We found a shoebox of jewellery in the ceiling. All items were on the inventory of Eagle Insurance which confirmed they belonged to the deceased and had not been reported missing or stolen. We found a receipt dated 9 January 1961 for 450 pounds cash being a ten per cent deposit for a house on Treasure Beach Road attached to a certified copy of a purchase and sale agreement signed by the suspect and the seller. We interviewed him, Mr Sydney Fynn, who provided us with a signed affidavit to the effect that the purchaser would settle the balance in cash upon registration of transfer.’

‘What about the suspect’s car?’

‘The dealership produced a duplicate of a cash receipt for 400 pounds and provided an affidavit that it sold the new car to the suspect on Wednesday, 28 December 1960.’

‘Anything else found?’

‘Yes, sir, a box for a Rolex watch containing a cash receipt of ninety pounds from Damjee Jewellers. The proprietor identified the suspect from the photograph I showed him. Mr Vasanth Naran remembered the transaction because he said “it is not every day that a coloured bloke buys a Rolex”. He has given us an affidavit. The suspect was wearing a new Rolex when arrested.’ Andre takes a sip of water and widens his eyes as he reads his notes. ‘We found 500 pounds in banknotes in a drawer and 180 pounds cash in the suspect’s pocket on arrest. All these banknotes were dusted for fingerprints and filed.’

‘Detective Inspector, did you find evidence of any bank or building society or post office savings account?’

‘No, sir.’

‘For the benefit of the court, what has been done to the physical evidence?’

‘All physical or material evidence have been itemised as exhibits.’

‘Did you find any other evidence, Detective Inspector?’

‘We found a bloodstain on a shoe where the upper is glued to the sole, under the suspect’s bed. We discovered traces of blood on a black lounge shirt rolled up in the corner of a room, and a half-empty bottle of Johnny Walker Black label that had the accused’s, the deceased’s, and the suspect’s fingerprints on it.’

‘I don’t wish to call the forensic pathologist, but did Dr Meyer identify the blood group?’

‘Yes, it was O, same as the deceased.’

‘Had the suspect’s blood been tested?’

‘Yes, sir. Dr Meyer identified it as A Positive.’

‘My research shows that almost forty per cent of South Africans belong to the O+ group and about thirty-two percent to the A+. Would you agree with that?’

‘I wouldn’t know, sir, I am not an expert.’

‘I know, thank you, Detective Inspector.’

The judge seemingly wakes from his sleep. ‘Is that all?’

‘Yes, M’Lord.’

‘Defence?’

Taylor looks like he just heard his mother died. ‘Mr Booysen, firstly the blood group. You heard testimony at this trial that half the world’s population has O group blood?’

‘Yes.’

‘Moving on. Could that whisky glass found in that linen cupboard not have been “planted” there?’

‘By who, sir?’

‘You tell me. Wasn’t Mr Biswas allowed to visit neighbours and also called in at the deceased’s house asking questions?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Could he, hypothetically, not have left it there?’

‘The house was sealed as a crime scene and still is. The housekeeper, Mrs Mavis Ndlovu, made a statement that Mr Biswas walked down the driveway and only entered the lounge, where Mr Russell met him for a minute or so.’

‘Could he not have slipped off, for a short while?’

‘That you must ask him.’

‘Objection!’

Now me and Cook are like pink lobsters.

‘Sustained!’

‘Detective Inspector, you did find new fingerprints in the deceased’s house?’

‘I wouldn’t call them new prints, but more than what we discovered in our first search.’

‘Could these not have been planted in the interim?’

‘Sir, I cannot answer that question as it’s conjecture. We lifted several fingerprints of the suspect, identified later as Shaun Daniels. Mr Biswas, or anyone else, hypothetically, could not have “planted” all of them.’

‘Now, Detective Inspector Booysen, did you find what could be shown to have been the murder weapon?’

‘No, we didn’t.’

‘Thank you, that is all.’

‘M’Lord, I now call ... recall Dr Steven Meyer.’ The doctor looks sheepish-like.

‘Dr Meyer, in prior testimony you stated that you found two strands of straight black hair that came from one, the same person, not so?’

‘Correct.’

‘Do you stand by that testimony, sir?’

‘I’m not sure what you’re getting at, Mr Cook.’

‘Come, come, doctor. No need for me to spell it out when you can elucidate eloquently?’

‘I think prosecution ... and defence may have relied on my preliminary report.’

‘Oh, and how does it differ from your final report, doctor?’

‘One of the strands of hair found on the deceased’s pubis was curly.’

‘I am confused.’

‘This is not fact but opinion. The deceased could have had sex also with a Negroid person.’

‘Please explain.’

‘Simply put: she could have had sex with a white or Asian, and an African or coloured person.’

‘You are saying that you found a curly or coiled hair possibly from an African or coloured person? That was not mentioned in your autopsy.’

‘It is – in my final report.’

This is good for Anil – it creates doubt. But did the pathologist add the other hair, perhaps for a consideration by Raj? Or was the guy bought off earlier by Russell to lie? Thank god Eshwar was able to expose this fraud.

‘Simply put. What’s your hypothesis, doctor?’

‘That the deceased had sex with an African or coloured man.’

‘Could you explain, for the benefit of the court, how you came to your ... recent conclusion?’

‘The hair of an African indigenous person grows in tufts, is compact and tightly wound, like a coil spring, is almost always black, or grey-black, or grey, depending on one’s

age. These two strands were from someone with straight hair and the third from a person with Negroid-type hair.'

'Could it even be the deceased's own hair, say from the head or armpits?'

'No, because the deceased was a natural blonde, with matching light pubic hair. The hairs found were both black.'

'I see. So, it is conceivable that they could have come from someone with straight black hair, say a white or Indian or Asian person, and one from a black or coloured person with curly hair who had sex with the accused?'

'It is possible.'

'Thank you, doctor, for your *eventual* lucid and logical explanation. 'I call Mr Rohit Biswas.'

I silently pray to Asha for support.

The judge taps his gavel three times. All look at him.

'Mr Cook, it is now twenty minutes to four. I do not think we will be able to conclude this case today. I'm adjourning court to ten am tomorrow.'

Judge Laughton gets up and hobbles away on his crutches, not waiting for any protests. I'm not complaining. The time will help me get my act together.

I drive home and over a coupla whiskies go over my notes, making summaries in chronological order, checking the story line and gaps, as Broad suggested, then had supper and a nightcap.

Next morning, my head is clear, as are my eyes. I'm ready, and sworn in.

Prosecutor Philip Cook nods. 'Mr Biswas, you were engaged by the accused's father, Mr Rajshekhar Ramlall to assist in defending his son?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You were yourself in the South African Police, first as a uniformed policeman and then as detective?'

'Correct.'

'How long?'

'Three years as constable; three years as detective constable; and five years as Detective Sergeant.'

'How long have you been a private detective?'

'Eight years.'

'The first Indian private investigator in South Africa, perhaps on the African continent?'

'I'm South African born and bred, of Indian origin. As to the claim, I haven't made nor investigated it.' There's some laughter. *Biswas drawing attention to himself?* I see Puja, Cook's wife, for the first time in court, smiling at my "joke".

'Thank you. Now, is it true you were allowed to investigate the case by the Deputy Police Commissioner himself?'

'Yes, sir, as long as I didn't get in their way and provided I shared my findings with the police.'

'Am I correct in saying that you were not satisfied or not convinced that the accused committed the crimes in question?'

'That's right.'

'What made you think otherwise?'

'Mr Prosecutor, I may have to refer to my notes to answer some questions.'

'By all means.'

I clear my throat. 'My first suspicion arose after seeing the porn movie. Anil ... the accused, was not shown having sexual intercourse with Mrs Swanepoel because he had no erection.'

There is a collective gasp from the audience, spectators.

'Go on,' Cook prompts.

'Sir, I'm no expert, but the movie seemed to have been doctored or edited by or to suit the film-maker. I'm not sure what technology was available five years ago to enable the manipulation. It is not clear how long the break in the movie was, but when the accused reappeared, he seemed almost sober. So, some time must have elapsed.'

'Intriguing. What else did your investigations reveal?'

I'm thirsty at ten in the morning; could do with a *dop* to loosen the tongue. I settle for a sip of water instead. 'A third point about the movie is that if it was made on the date of Mrs Swanepoel's death, 17th August 1956, the accused would have been in two places, as he was then living in London, as his passport, Exhibit G, reveals.'

Philip Cooke nods. 'Go on Mr Biswas.'

'The incident implies that the accused and the deceased knew each other for five years or more. No evidence has been produced by the police to show this.'

'Now, about the party. What are your contentions?'

'It would seem none of the guests saw the accused at the party maybe because he hid in the deceased's bedroom. If he did not want to be discovered, he would have locked the door. But one eyewitness saw him asleep, naked, with the deceased, and another testified that he saw them busy in sexual intercourse.' I look up from my notes.

'Go on, Mr Biswas.'

'These two testimonies were fabricated. After discussion of his political party affiliation, Mr Jabulani Mkhize admitted in a sworn affidavit that he received a "consideration" for his testimony. Mr Kowalski also conceded, after his financial details were disclosed to him, that he never was at the party. Both these witnesses perjured themselves for financial gain.'

There are murmurs. Judge Laughton bangs his gavel.

'What did these two testimonies tell you, Mr Biswas?'

'While the accused spent much time with the deceased, there is no direct evidence that they actually had sex.'

There's a hullabaloo. The judge raises his hammer but does not strike.

'Moving on, Mr Biswas, were you able to corroborate or confirm your theories?'

‘I travelled to Dublin and met with the woman who had claimed some five years ago that the accused had made her pregnant while she and the accused were students at Trinity College. Megan Ambrose, formerly O’Leary, admitted that it was a ploy to get some money from the accused, who paid her three thousand pounds, and left to settle in London. Mrs Ambrose admitted that she and the accused slept together for two years but never had sex.’

There is a hubbub; the gavel sounds thrice. I sip water and scan the courtroom. Rajshekhar Ramlall has a pained and bewildered look. I’m saying things he never knew about Anil. But then, he’s paying me to save his son’s life, not his own dignity or family *izzat*.

‘What convinced you that, as you surmised, the accused couldn’t have raped the deceased?’

‘Megan admitted that the accused had told her he knows this was blackmail and he’d visit a specialist to confirm the child could not be his.’

‘What did you then do, Mr Biswas?’

‘I called on a specialist physician who, because of doctor-patient confidentiality, would not admit the accused was examined by him or discuss the matter. But he said, speaking hypothetically, that a man could be interested in a woman but refrain from having sex, either because of not being able to have an erection due to physical or psychological causes and ...’ I sip some water.

‘Please continue, Mr Biswas.’

‘The doctor said that a non-secretor, a person who cannot ejaculate, could not father a child. He mentioned the hypothetical case of a young man being blackmailed and stated that he told that person he was prepared to testify in the event of a paternity case, but the patient said it wouldn’t come to that as he had already paid the woman involved.’

‘And what’s the conclusion of that story, insofar as relevant to the present trial?’

‘The accused ... or his father paid the woman and her impoverished lover to avoid any unpleasantness or scandal. I saw the child; there’s no way the accused could have fathered her as there’s no resemblance whatsoever.’

‘You said the accused left Dublin for London. Did you investigate his stay there? Do you know if he established any relations with women there?’

‘Yes, with a man.’

There are murmurs. ‘The accused shared a flat with a man for eighteen months.’

‘Did you interview this person?’

‘I couldn’t – he had hanged himself a week before the accused left London for South Africa.’

The Supreme Court now sounds like the Zulu beer hall. The shit is out of the bag. I'm not sure how the judge will take the relevance or value of my evidence. I see Taylor now has a blank, crayfish-pink look.

Barrister Cook clears his throat. 'Mr Biswas, I take it that believing now that your client was not guilty of the crimes he's charged with, you felt it would not be sufficient to create reasonable doubt. Was that your thinking?'

You know it is.

'Having learned of the accused's character and that he could not have committed such horrific acts, I felt that the real rapist-killer must be found. From the witness's account – Professor Richard Levi's – I drew up a description of the suspect and discussed it with some colleagues. They identified him as Shaun Daniels who, as you know, made a deathbed confession of the crimes the accused is charged with.'

'When did you first see the person you've just described?'

'At about 3 am on Wednesday, the 22nd of March 1961.'

'Under what circumstances?'

'I had been told by Detective Sergeant Broad of a tip off that the accused's warehouse was going to be raided by the suspect and his gang of seven men. When I reached the crime scene I learned the suspect had been shot. I saw him in the back of an ambulance.'

'You have seen the suspect since?'

'Yes, on Saturday, the 25th of March.'

'And you confirmed the suspect's identity from the description provided by the witness, Professor Levi?'

'Yes, and from confirmation by Johannesburg's Brixton Murder and Robbery Unit.'

'Thank you, that is all.'

Taylor stands up, smiling, wringing his hands. 'Mr Biswas, the first South African or Indian detective on the African continent. Quite a feat. You served eleven years in the South African Police?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why did you resign?'

'I didn't ...'

'Because you couldn't as you had been fired ...?'

'Objection!'

'Sustained! Mr Taylor, the witness is not on trial here nor is his history. Move on.'

The judge frowns down at defence counsel.

‘You took on this case because of the money?’

‘Yes.’

‘You were paid a lot of money, by the accused’s father, to find or manufacture evidence to exonerate him?’

I open my mouth, shut it quickly.

‘Objection!’

‘Overruled! Witness must answer.’

‘I am being paid, yes. Whether it’s a lot or little, I cannot tell. Small change to you, Sir, may be a lot of money to me. I was told to investigate thoroughly to find evidence, whether favourable or unfavourable to the accused, and to disclose all to the police. This I have done.’

‘So, you see yourself as a knight in shiny armour, saving the son of a rich man from the hangman’s noose?’

‘No, as a seeker of truth and justice.’

‘Very noble, I’m sure. But didn’t you with your pals in the Crimson League, in collaboration with the police, set a trap to capture Mr Shaun Daniels.’

‘Objection!’

‘Sustained! Mr Taylor, I must say that I am perplexed by your attitude to this witness. He is supposed to be, and is, acting in the interests of his client and I believe at the same time in the interests of justice, whichever legitimate way he uses. Let this attitude not degenerate to a personal vendetta. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, M’Lord, I’m sorry. Now Mr Biswas ... I withdraw the question.’

‘Witness may step down,’ says the judge with the hint of a smile on that usually scowling face – must be ankle pain. I get out of the stand and see Fred rushing to Mr Cook and whispering in his ear.

‘M’Lord, may I beg the court’s indulgence, for five minutes?’

‘We wait with bated breath, Mr Cook.’ The *ballie* frowns as he looks down upon us mortals in the arena.

Fred continues whispering in the DA’s ear. ‘M’Lord, could we approach the bench?’

‘Come!’ the *topi* beckons.

Judge Laughton puts his hand over the microphone. At the end of the soundless discussion I see defence counsel looking angry. When they come back I whisper to Sham.

‘What’s going on?’

The attorney puts his thick finger to his fat lips. ‘Shh. Wait.’

The judge clears his throat, knocks three times for attention. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have just heard news that should not be discussed privately in my chambers, but here in public, in the interests of justice. Mr Cook, you may call your witnesses.'

Taylor jumps up. 'I object!'

'I have made a ruling, sir. You may cross examine any witness.'

Taylor sits, down, red as our Kali *jhunda* flag.

Phil Cook has everyone's attention. 'Warrant Officer Moodley, were you assigned to guard the suspect, Shaun Daniels, in the intensive care unit of King Edward VIII Hospital?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Since when?'

'The morning of Wednesday, the 22nd of March.'

'And Mr Daniels has been in a coma since?'

'Yes, sir; he came out of it about 4 pm yesterday.'

'Has he made any statements since?'

'No sir.'

'Has he had any visitors?'

'No visitors are allowed in the ICU – it's hospital rules and also our policy if a suspect is under police guard. Only Detective Sergeant Broad, Detective Inspector Booysen, the Deputy Commissioner, and myself have been in that ward, except for the nurse and the doctor ... surgeon.'

'Anybody else?'

'Mr Biswas came in yesterday, after Mr Daniels regained consciousness.'

'Who invited him?'

'The Deputy Commissioner told me that he did.'

'Did any of the policemen talk to Mr Daniels?'

'The Deputy Commissioner and DS Broad tried; I didn't. When Mr Biswas visited at about four-thirty in the afternoon, Daniels spoke with him.'

'Did it sound like a statement or confession?'

'No sir. Daniels was insulting Mr Biswas knowing it was he who was responsible for him being in hospital.'

'Did Mr Biswas stay, return?'

'He was in the ward for about ten minutes, then left.'

'Tell the court about the incident last night.'

Moodley sips water, licks his lips. 'About ten past two this morning, DS Broad and DI Booysen were in the passage talking. I stepped out for a minute ... to the toilet. As I was returning, some kind of alarm went off. I see Broad and Booysen rush into the ward. Doctor Sher also came running. I go in and see the night nurse, Annette Fourie, on the floor by the patient. Blood was flowing from the back of her head. The heart-lung machine, the pumping thing, was off; the electrocardiogram was running straight. Everything, the wires, tubes, and all going into Daniels, had been ripped off.'

Sweat-faced Moodley sips water, swallows.

'I see Daniels's mouth open, like he's struggling for air. Dr Sher tells us he's dying; and can do nothing for the patient. He bends down to examine nurse Fourie. DS Broad tries to talk to Daniels. He tells the guy that he's dying. Does he want to say anything? Daniels grabs Broad on the front of his shirt, and says, "I killed that woman." The DS asks, "Which woman?" Daniels is going fast but his voice is quite clear, even Dr Sher is listening. The dying man says, "Elizabeth Russell. I killed that bitch, and then fucked her." DI Booysen is writing all this down. DS Broad asks, "Who paid you to kill her?" but Daniels takes a last breath, Dr Sher examines him quickly, says the patient is dead.'

Thank you, Warrant Officer Moodley, that is all.'

'Defence?'

'Did Mr Shaun Daniels make this so-called deathbed confession voluntarily?'

'Sir, I don't understand the question.'

'Did Daniels say the words, that he killed the deceased, on his own or was he coached?'

The WO forehead creases. 'I don't know nothing about coaching. DS Broad told Daniels that according to Dr Sher he was dying and did he have anything to say. It's in the statement ... affidavit.'

'Did Detective Sergeant Broad not say, for example, "Did you kill Elizabeth Russell; mention the name first?'

'No sir, Daniels did.'

Krishnan leaves and the DS takes the stand.

'Detective Sergeant Broad, do you corroborate the testimony given by Warrant Officer Moodley?'

'Yes.'

'Did you see anybody in Daniels's ward who should not have been there that night?'

‘No sir. WO Moodley was distracted, as were DI Booysen and myself, only for a minute or so. It would appear someone slipped into the room and deliberately yanked off Daniels’s life support systems. Seems to be a case of murder, to stop Daniels confessing to killing Elizabeth Russell and possibly also revealing who paid him to kill the deceased.’

‘But you have no concrete evidence for your theory about Daniels being paid to kill the deceased?’

‘No sir; not yet ... we’re working on that.’

‘Thank you; that is all.’ Taylor sits down with a worried look.

DI Booysen and Dr David Sher confirm WO Moodley’s testimony.

‘The prosecution rests, M’Lord.’

‘Defence, any witnesses or rebuttal?’

The deflated Taylor rises. ‘No, M’Lord.’

Judge Laughton knocks three times. There is a minute’s silence, for Anil, Shaun Daniels?

‘That concludes this trial, save for my verdict, for which I need two days to deliberate. Court reconvenes at 10 am on Thursday, 30th March 1961.’

The judge gets up and hobbles away on his crutches. Anil is already disappearing down the stairs to his cell.

We repair to Goodwill Lounge where I brief Pumpy Naidoo and Chota Essop. We have some snacks and drinks.

‘Rohit, I have a special-special for you and Chota *bhai*.’

We two chorus, ‘What?’

‘Goat’s testicles, rubbed with whole spices and powdered masala, marinated for an hour then fried with extra onions and red chillies. Umh.’ Pumpy makes a circle with thumb and forefinger.

Chota gulps his drink, licks his lips. ‘Halal?’

I growl. ‘Balls?’ No thank you.’ I’ve lost my appetite, can’t celebrate just yet, not until judgment, for when the accused is a non-white nothing is guaranteed, especially freedom.

I recall the Springbok Radio serial, *Consider Your Verdict*, except we have no jury here. Anil’s life is in the hands of one *Angreji*. God help him, and the accused.

Thursday, 30th March 1961, two days before the start of the Republic in Kali's the Age of Destruction, a day where a man would again get his freedom, limited as it may be for a non-white in South Africa, or be mandatorily sentenced to hang. I cannot imagine Anil's feeling for I never was an accused, not having been charged with or tried for killing a pickpocket who had taken my wife's life. The birth of a child is a miracle, the ending of it by someone a capital crime, unless done by the state. So a piece of paper, a statute, drawn up to protect and promote *goras'* interests can take away someone's natural right to life? Doesn't seem kosher.

The last two days I spent as a hermit, locked up in my office thinking, in between a smoke and a drink or three, to consider the case and my investigations. I may well be on trial here, alongside Anil and the morals, culture, and traditions of the Hindu community, compared with that of white Christians. Can I do something to serve us Indians, coloureds, and Africans when I qualify with a law degree ... perhaps in my next life?

Sham nudges me; we stand as Judge Bernard Laughton limps, without crutches, to his throne. We sit with bated breath. I see the black cap on the desk; would the judge use that today, as is customary when sentencing someone to hang by the neck until dead? Haven't me and the cops done enough to save Anil, or at least created sufficient doubt to ensure his life will be spared?

'Ladies and gentlemen, today I give judgment in the case *S v Ramlall*. Firstly, I will deal with the trial-within-a-trial, the death of one Candice Swanepoel. I need not go into the details or merits of the case but consider whether evidence, or more correctly information, from that incident can influence the current trial. From testimony on the cause of death it cannot be said with any reasonable degree of certainty that anyone other than the deceased caused her death. Secondly, nobody was charged and tried for Mrs Swanepoel's alleged murder. Thirdly, no trial was held and no sworn testimony given thereat which could be used in the current proceedings. Consequently I rule that any reference to the death of Candice Swanepoel and any inferences drawn therefrom are irrelevant, immaterial, and incompetent to the matter here under consideration. It is up to the South African Police to take whatever action, if any, they want to.'

I wonder if they will arrest Anil for that murder on the grounds that he disposed off the body and therefore must have been the one who murdered that prostitute?

‘Now to the present cause: The police, upon finding the body of Mrs Elizabeth Russell, *prima facie* saw it as murder. Investigations in and around the crime scene did not result in finding either the murder weapon or a suspect. The accused did make a statement that he was on the premises where the deceased’s body was found from about 5 pm on 31st December 1960 to about 3.30 pm on the 1st of January 1961, a total of twenty-two and a half hours. It is expected that the accused would have left some traces of his presence there, as would other persons, like the guests at that New Year’s Eve party. However, no evidence at the crime scene gave rise to any suspicion that the accused was responsible for the alleged rape and murder of Elizabeth Russell. The accused was only linked to the crimes in question some five or six hours after he was found and taken, without arrest, to a police station, some twelve hours after he reportedly left the deceased’s house. The accused admitted to having sex, which need not be defined in this particular instance, with the deceased which ended in a quarrel. That accounts for the evidence found on his person: scratches and blood, and on the deceased: a bite mark on her breast as well as skin and blood under her finger nails. No proof has been provided to refute the accused’s statement and therefore I accept that evidence found on the accused linking him to the deceased came from those incidents, and not from a strangling, *ante mortem* rape, and stabbings, as attested to by forensic pathologist, Dr Meyer, who also provided a sworn statement, supported by one from an eminent urologist, that the accused did not and could not have deposited any of his sperm on himself and the deceased. In the absence of expert testimony to the contrary, I accept their findings.’

I smile inwardly; this confirms Anil was not the rapist or killer because he couldn’t ejaculate; the coloured feller was the guilty party.

‘Police testimony and records show no sign of a break in but confirm that the front gate and the sliding door leading from deceased’s upstairs bedroom to the balcony may have been open from about 3.30 pm on the 1st of January, when the accused asserts he left the deceased’s property, to about 8 on the morning of the 2nd, when the housekeeper reported for work. No evidence has been presented that someone entered the premises but that does not exclude the possibility. Mrs Thurston, who I found to be a reliable and credible witness, testified that she saw a vehicle drive off about 4 pm on Sunday the 1st of January from outside the front gate of the deceased. While she did not say that she saw anyone on the deceased’s premises, that does not mean a person, or persons unknown, was on the property earlier and was only seen, momentarily, driving off. This situation gives rise to the possibility that a third party could have been present, a theory not considered or discarded by the police.’

Why hadn't the police interviewed the neighbours? Seems like they were in a rush to nail a charou, chop-chop.

'I now turn to the time of death. I accept Dr Meyer's findings and explanation but a five-hour window of opportunity gives rise to numerous questions. From testimony it appears that there were about a dozen guests, excluding the accused and the deceased, at that New Year's Eve party. When did the last person leave? When was the deceased last seen alive by any guest? Had the police ascertained who were at the party and interviewed all, there is a possibility that the time of death could have been narrowed down. Could one of the guests have raped and murdered the deceased before leaving the party, or sometime later? We have the accused's affidavit that the deceased was alive and well at 3.30 on the afternoon of the 1st of January. If his version is to be believed, then the deceased could have been killed after that time. The inability to determine, within a shorter period, the time of death makes it unreasonable to accept that only the accused, during that five-hour time frame, had the opportunity to commit the crimes.'

The judge sips water, licks his lips.

'This brings me to the possibility of a third party's hand in these crimes. Professor Levi testified that he momentarily saw the person later identified as Mr Shaun Daniels twice on the deceased's premises, yet he didn't see the accused. Do we take the accused's word that he was on the premises for over twenty-two hours or was he not? It does not matter because it has been shown that Mr Daniels was on the crime scene for an inestimable period. The accused, one of a dozen guests, and Mr Daniels could have had opportunity. These possibilities were not considered by the police then. Hence, reasonable doubt existed, until it was removed.'

The judge is looking directly at me.

'It took a private investigator, Mr Rohit Biswas, to use his skills, intellect, intuition, whatever, to consider the situation unacceptable. Mr Biswas diligently and methodically used information garnered, which he admirably shared with the police, and jointly pursued the case from an angle not considered in the original police investigations. In the process, he uncovered gang-related economic crimes that have been plaguing this city for over a year. Information shared with the police enabled them to trap Mr Daniels and his cohorts. What happened after the arrest of the suspect has been attested to and I will not discuss it here.'

The judge wipes his face, drinks some water, and continues.

'Had it not been for Mr Biswas's dogged determination and meticulous detective work, a grave injustice would have taken place today.' He bows to me; I also bow. 'The state

should be grateful for your efforts, Sir, and the judiciary commends you. Mr Biswas did say that he works for money, like most of us do, but his heart was in seeking justice. I hope he and the accused has seen it work today. Thank you.’ The judge smiles; so do I. Sham gives me a punch, Taylor looks puzzled.

‘To conclude, ladies and gentlemen, I accept the deathbed confession of Mr Shaun Daniels that he killed the deceased by strangulation; then had intercourse with her, thereafter stabbing her seven times. No two persons can be convicted of the same crime unless they acted in concert. The import of Mr Daniels’s admission is that it exonerates the accused. Will the accused stand up please?’

Anil, Taylor and Sham stand.

‘I now give my verdict: On Count 1: Premeditated murder – Not guilty; on Count 2: Rape – not guilty. Mr Anil Ramlall, you are free to go with my apologies for your incarceration.’ The judge stands, bows, gathers his gown around him and leaves.

There is pandemonium: Most of the white men and women appear stunned; some folks at the back are clapping. I see Raj with tears in eyes. I walk to Anil; he comes forward and gives me a hug so tight I can’t breathe, then he kisses me on both cheeks, his tears mingling with mine, and Raj comes along, making it a threesome. We dance in a circle, the Crying Trio. Sham Singh waddles over, clapping on the fringe of the circle, Pumpy Naidoo, Chota Essop, Puja, and others I don’t know, some crying, some laughing, some clapping, as if we are performers needing applause. Philip Cook comes to me hand outstretched.

‘Congratulations, Rohit. Well done.’ He turns to Anil. ‘Congratulations on gaining your freedom.’

‘Thank you, Sir, for being fair and objective.’

‘It’s Biswas and his stubbornness, doggedness, really. If it weren’t for him, can you contemplate the outcome?’

‘It sends a shiver down my spine.’

I’m glad his, Raj’s and my nightmares are over. I introduce Puja to Anil and his father.

Pumpy claps loudly for attention. ‘Freedom celebrations are at Goodwill Lounge. Two guests of honour: Anil Ramlall and Rohit Biswas. All are welcome to some serious eating and drinking.’ Now Pumpy’s talking my language. We take to our cars and go to Victoria Street in a convoy. We all gonna get tight tonight.

After quite a few drinks, I see Raj motioning to me.

‘Rohit, I want to go home and have a rest tomorrow. Can we meet at six in the evening? I’ll send Sunder to collect you.’

I’m surprised; feel awkward, on seeing Anil in the lounge of Raj mahal with his father. Is this some kind of showdown or payoff? Anil comes forward, smiling, hands outstretched, gives me a hug and kisses me on both cheeks. He fails to lift me off my feet. Rajshekhar Ramlall gives a hug and clasps my right hand in both his palms.

‘If you don’t mind, Rohit, Anil, we go into the prayer room first and do a *puja*?’

Raj stands between Anil and me, mumbling, and then placing a brass plate of sweetmeats in front of a framed picture of Ganesha. He lights a block of camphor on another *thari* and turns the *arthi* around, chanting, then drawing smoke with his palm on me and Anil, who’s ringing a small bell. The *topi* blows on a conch occasionally, and ends with thanks for eternal peace, *shanti, shanti, shanti*. He holds my left hand and Anil’s right; we three bow together to the deities.

Anil pours single malt Scotch for three; Raj proposes a toast.

‘Where’s the others? I thought this would be a celebration?’

‘We’ll have another soon,’ the *ballie* gives a tired smile. ‘I wanted to have a chat with you and Anil first. He takes a sip, deep in thought.

‘Rohit, I think I was right in choosing you for the case. You seemed the only one who didn’t accept the evidence at face value. Me, I was just hopeful. But tell me *beta*, what drove you, it couldn’t be just the money?’

‘Many things, *babuji*, but the money helped. I’m not sure you know, Anil, but I got fired after shooting a pickpocket who had killed my wife? I lived in eight years of self-imposed hell.’

‘But, *kaka*, why take the killing of a worthless chap so seriously?’

‘Rohit acted on the spur of the moment. Quite often a person’s life and future is determined by one such incident, a moment in life. It’s like *karma*; as you sow so shall you reap,’ Raj explains.

‘But *kaka*, I heard you were not religious?’

‘Maybe so, Anil. You could say I’m not a practising Hindu, but many of the cultures, practices, beliefs, traditions, values, and so on are ingrained or have settled deep in our hearts and minds, our consciousness. We are who we are. So, in a way, belief in *Satyagraha*,

especially, made me think that I'll pay for taking a human life. It's not for us to judge a man and decide he deserves to die.'

Anil nods. 'So you sought atonement, by taking on my case, thinking if you saved my life, it will balance against the *rawan* you killed?'

'Exactly! But I'm not sure Justitia's scale works quite like that. It's not like me going to a priest and confessing my sins. I was looking for what you call redemption, and something to take me out of the dark hole I found myself in after my wife, Asha, died.'

'What's this dark hole you mention?'

'As I told *babu*, mine was a love marriage. I couldn't face life without my *biwi*. Then, double jeopardy. When she died, my daughter, Arthi, miraculously was born alive.'

'So you had to play the role of father and mother?'

'Right, Anil. But I was doing a shit job – not earning enough as a PI, most of the income I got I spent on booze and *ganja*, lived in the past, never thought of the future. I didn't realise it then, but your *pitaji* offered me the chance to redeem myself. After much agonising, I realised that failure was not an option, for me, you, and for Arthi. I owed her a happy life.'

'And yourself,' Anil grins.

The man who cheated the gallows of *prasad* finishes his drink and stands up. 'Dad, if you don't mind, I'll leave you and Rohit *kaka* together. I'm sure you have much to discuss.'

'Okay, son, you know we have your bedroom ready?'

'Yes, dad.' Anil gives both of us a hug.

'He would have been in a cell in Pretoria awaiting execution if it weren't for you, Rohit.'

'God looks after his children.'

'I wanted to ask you about your trip to London and Dublin, but thought I should not be inquisitive. Now I see what it was all about.'

I feel awkward. '*Babuji*, remember you said I must save Anil's life at any cost?'

'Yes?'

'I didn't take the cost only to mean money. I had to dig deep, far and wide, to find the truth; hoping justice comes out of it. I'm only sorry that in the process your family *izzat* may be adversely affected.'

'As I told you earlier, my son's life is more important than my own, my reputation and family name.'

'I hope this revelation or disclosure does not affect Anil badly?'

Ramlall smiles. 'I spent a few hours with him this morning. He is what he is, and no religion or whatever can change that.' Raj pours drinks. We contemplate.

'Ja, we should not judge a person by his sexual preferences or lifestyle – live and let live, I say.'

'Not many people have your attitude, Rohit, but that's how life plays out.' Anil can survive, perhaps be more at home in London, where he says he's going back to join the Anti-Apartheid Movement and especially this sanctions-busting angle with Russell and Taylor.'

'Good. I think he will be far more comfortable there than in our conservative society in Durban. Maybe he'll be able to come up with something to nail the two *madhur chodhs*?'

Ramlall smiles, 'You must speak with him when his mind is clear. Poor boy, I may be to blame for what he's become...'

'He's still your son, *babuji*, but if you don't mind there's one personal question I like to ask. You don't have to answer if it'll make you uncomfortable.'

'Beta, at my age there's little that discomforts me. Ask away.'

'How did your missus die?'

'Oh boy, here comes my first confession to Father Biswas. Remember I told you that Anil was very close to Uma and did not seem to like me, even for one so young?'

'Right?'

'Well, it happened one night, we had a severe thunderstorm and I think the child got frightened. He came into my bedroom, switched on the light, saw Uma and I, naked, making love. He screamed like a madman, picked up a pair of scissors and stabbed his mother in the heart. Then he came for me. I grabbed the weapon, managed to calm him down. He went to sleep.'

'And then?'

Raj refills, we sip as if savouring imported wine. 'I looked at Uma, she was dead. I cleaned up the wound, waited till the bleeding stopped, then gave her a bath and wrapped her in a clean bed-sheet, left her on the floor. Early in the morning I phoned Neerajan of Rajcoomar's Undertakers and told him to pick up the body and to cremate Uma as is.'

'He didn't suspect anything?'

'I don't think so ... at least I hope not. He would have been satisfied she died of natural causes when he read Dr Bunsee's death certificate which said she had a cardiac arrest or heart attack.'

'Anil was seven, right?'

'Yes, perhaps old enough to remember something and be adversely affected by it.'

But he had a lousy childhood and adulthood. He deserves better.'

'I'll drink to that.'

'And you still have crooks to catch? This case has made you a celebrity, Rohit. Business should be rolling in. I'm going to get you a new office and equipment, help in your search for truth and justice, starting with that malevolent duo, Russell and Taylor, right?'

'If you say so, boss. I'm refreshed and ready for a new battle.'

I wrap one of the two Glenfiddich Ramlall gave me in shiny red paper; tie it with a bow and a "Thank You" card. I'm walking on air as I make my way to Sham's office. Malthi gives me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Damn it, lips denied. Attorney almost lifts me off the ground.

'Rohit, welcome back to the world of light and enlightenment. I hope you're out of your black hole and have also left your dark shadow behind?'

'*Ha ji, bhaia*, thanks to you.'

'Eh? What did I do?'

'If it wasn't for the speeches you gave me ... I shudder to think if I didn't take your advice, what would have become of me ... and Arthi?' The tears flow down my cheeks. Sham comes 'round his desk and gives me a hug. His eyes are watering too.

'The score is settled, Rohit, you've shown the falsity of belief in *karma*; you created, shaped your own destiny. You're a new man, redeemed.'

I shrug my shoulders. 'Aren't you going to open your gift?'

Sham picks up the box, shakes it. 'Wonder what this is?'

'Wonder no more; open the damn thing.'

'It's against Hindu custom to open a present in the presence of the giver, Roy Boy.'

'Bullshit that Irish baloney. Pour a *dop*.'

THE END

GLOSSARY OF HINDI (NORTH INDIAN) TERMS

<i>aja</i>	paternal grandfather
<i>aji</i>	paternal grandmother
<i>akele</i>	alone, lonely
<i>Amadio!</i>	God! (Tamil, a south Indian language)
<i>Angreji</i>	English language, Englishman
<i>ayah</i>	nanny
<i>baba</i>	father or respected elder
<i>babu/bapu/bapuji</i>	respected form of address to a high caste/class elder
<i>bahen chodh</i>	sister-fucker
<i>bahuji</i>	daughter-in-law
<i>balatkari</i>	rapist
<i>ballie</i>	old man (derogatory)
<i>bari</i>	big; hefty man or woman
<i>beta/beti</i>	son/daughter
<i>bhagwan</i>	god
<i>bhai/bhaiya/bhairam</i>	brother or brothers
<i>bhajia</i>	‘chili-bite’ made of spinach, flour, onions, and chillies
<i>bhandari</i>	cook, chef
<i>Bharat</i>	India
<i>biryani</i>	rice-based dish including mutton or chicken or fish or vegetable
<i>carou</i>	hot, especially a curry
<i>chacha</i>	uncle
<i>chai</i>	tea
<i>charou</i>	unsophisticated Indian
<i>chi</i>	expression of disgust, equivalent to <i>sies</i>
<i>chillum</i>	wooden pipe for smoking marijuana
<i>choli</i>	half-blouse, leaving midriff exposed
<i>choochi</i>	breast
<i>dada</i>	paternal grandfather
<i>danda</i>	walking stick (“cultural” weapon); penis
<i>devta</i>	Hindu god/deity
<i>dhall</i>	lentils; soup made of lentil(s)
<i>dhana seth</i>	wealthy gentleman
<i>dharma</i>	one’s moral and social obligations (like <i>ubuntu</i>)
<i>dharoo</i>	alcohol
<i>dhoti</i>	loin cloth
<i>didi</i>	elder sister; respectful way of addressing older woman
<i>dost</i>	friend
<i>ganja</i>	Indian hemp, marijuana, <i>dagga</i>
<i>gardhoo</i>	arsehole
<i>ganjaredi</i>	dagga addict
<i>gardoo</i>	arsehole
<i>ghee</i>	clarified butter
<i>ghos</i>	meat
<i>gora</i>	white or European male; light skinned Indian male
<i>gori</i>	white or European female; light-skinned Indian female
<i>guchoo</i>	idiot

<i>ha/ha ji/ji ha</i>	yes
<i>hai</i>	expression of surprise, sigh
<i>hain</i>	are (e.g. <i>thum hain</i> means “You are ...”)
<i>Hare Ram!</i>	Oh God!
<i>hookah</i>	pipe for smoking tobacco or dagga
<i>hurdee</i>	turmeric; ritual before a wedding
<i>izzat</i>	family dignity, good name in a community
<i>jaanmari</i>	murderer
<i>jahaj/jahaji</i>	ship/sailor
<i>jal</i>	drop of water; nectar
<i>ji</i>	respectful way of addressing someone, attached to name
<i>kaka</i>	paternal uncle
<i>karma</i>	fate, destiny, kismet
<i>kasbin</i>	bitch, prostitute
<i>khoon</i>	blood
<i>lassi</i>	pre-meal diluted yoghurt flavoured with salt or sugar
<i>madhur chodh</i>	motherfucker
<i>mahapathir</i>	barber
<i>mam</i>	(slang) brother-in-law
<i>mama</i>	mother’s brother
<i>mausi</i>	mother’s sister
<i>lathi</i>	baton or stick carried by police officers in India
<i>mahal</i>	mansion, palace
<i>mehindi</i>	henna
<i>mohurram</i>	festival celebrated by Muslims
<i>mota</i>	fat man; gang leader enriched from illegal business dealings
<i>nagarra</i>	cowhide drum beaten with two sticks
<i>nahi</i>	no
<i>nuni</i>	penis
<i>ojardi</i>	shaman, psychic, seer
<i>Om namo Shivaya</i>	chant in praise of (the name of) Lord Shiva
<i>paan</i>	betel leaf (like khat), eaten with <i>supari</i> – betel nut
<i>pagal</i>	mad
<i>pandit</i>	priest
<i>pardada</i>	great grandfather
<i>pita/pitaji</i>	father
<i>prasad</i>	offerings to the deities, usually sweetmeats, fruit, and flowers
<i>raita</i>	‘cooling’ salad of yoghurt, cucumber, onions, and chillies
<i>Ram! Ram!</i>	(God! God!) a greeting
<i>rawan/rawani</i>	African man/woman
<i>roti</i>	hand-made unleavened mealie meal or cake flour bread
<i>sahib/sahiba</i>	respect address to a superior man/woman
<i>samudar</i>	sea, ocean
<i>shanti</i>	peace
<i>shukriah</i>	thank you
<i>sindhoor</i>	vermilion powder/paste, used in hair parting of married women
<i>sirdar</i>	overseer, foreman (usually a sikh)
<i>sunk</i>	conch, seashell
<i>tabla</i>	half-round wooden drum with skin covering (set of two)
<i>teak/teak he/bilkul teak</i>	yes, okay/absolutely

<i>thari</i>	round brass plate used during prayers as receptacle
<i>thufan</i>	storm
<i>thum</i>	you
<i>topi</i>	old man (derogatory)