Saraswati Park

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Chapter One

He held out the book and pointed to the margin. "Do you have more like this?"

The bookseller looked distracted. It was nearly five: a tide of commuters would soon spill past the stalls, towards Churchgate and the trains that would take them home. The heat lingered but already the light was changing: it was finer, more golden. From the sea, at the end of the road, there spread a pale brightness, as though the street and the bookstalls were a mirage that would disappear with the sunset.

The thin young bookseller glanced at the open page, where handwritten notes in blue ink danced next to the sober type. "You'd have to check," he said. "I can't say."

"What's your name?" the customer persisted. He was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow in his fifties, grey-haired, with steel spectacles on which the last light glinted; there was something pleasant about him.

The bookseller raised an eyebrow. "Uday," he said. He turned to stare past the customer's shoulder. At the Flora Fountain crossing, they had started to flood this way: the white-shirted, briefcase-carrying tide. The traffic light held them back.

"I work just nearby," the customer went on. "At the post office, the GPO, near VT station. I'm a letter writer, Mohan Karekar. You're new here, I haven't seen you before?"

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The bookseller grunted, his eyes on the approaching crowd. “I’m looking after the stall for my brother,” he said.

Mohan put the ten-rupee note into his hand. “If you see more like that, with the writing on the side, keep them for me,” he said. He walked into the pressing wave of commuters. He was taller than most; the bookseller saw the back of his steel-coloured head for a moment. Then a fat man with a briefcase stopped at the stall. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face all over.

“Da Vinci,” he said urgently.

The bookseller bent and picked up two copies of the pirated book, each with a slightly different cover. “Complete,” he responded. “Every page is there.”

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Mohan walked through the crowd, crossed the wide junction, and passed under the long porch of the American Express Bank. The arcades were a nightmare at this time of day, but he navigated his way through the continuous stream of people.

Where the arcades ended, outside the McDonald’s, he waited for the traffic to pause. There was an extraordinary sky today: a bright, deep blue like butterfly wing, with streaks of orange that reached towards the west; it was framed by one of the arches. No one seemed to have noticed; there were trains to be caught.

He crossed the road and walked between the stalls selling office clothing – consignments of white shirts, spread out helplessly on tables – past the bus stand and the side entrance of the station, to the tarpaulin and the gnarled, mythic-looking banyan tree where the letter writers sat, next to the pigeon shelter. It was all right; their tables were chained and padlocked in place, and one of the others would have left his things – sealing wax, muslin, packing needles, the directory of postal codes – at the shop nearby. He patted his shirt pocket, where his train pass was a reassuring flat surface; in his back pocket his wallet was undisturbed.

A group of pigeons flew out of the old tree and into the sky, their wings making the sound of wind on the sea; they criss-crossed each other and made for the west. He tucked the new book under his arm and returned to the station, where a Harbour Line train was pulling into platform two.

*

When he woke in the morning his wife was still asleep. In the half-light he saw the back of her neck, a few inches away. At the nape, fine hair curled; one shoulder rose under the sheet into a hillock that sheltered her face. The perfume of her neck, which had astounded him when they’d been newly married, was unchanged: intense, overripe; lotuses mixed with ash.

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He extricated himself gently from the cotton sheet, which seemed to have become needy during the night. He padded into the bathroom, switched on the water heater, and went to the kitchen. It was good, this moment of silence before the machinery of the day began. It had been different when the children were young: Lakshmi would be up early, making tea and breakfast, and sending them for baths. There would be regular catastrophes: someone needed card paper; someone else had a form to be signed. Now all he had to do was float to the kitchen, still in his kurta-pyjama, and make his tea, and a cup for his wife. The habit irritated her, because she wouldn't wake for another hour, but he hadn't been able to come to terms with making tea just for himself, as though she didn't exist.

In the gloom he moved about, putting water to boil, adding sugar, then crushing a chunk of ginger with the kitchen pliers. At this time, soon after he'd woken, incongruous characters moved through his consciousness: his elder son, Gautam, aged about sixteen, rushing out and saying he didn't have time for breakfast; the man from yesterday's book, Lambert Strether, who had just arrived in a foreign city with a vague but important task to execute. The water hissed. Mohan reached for the tea leaves.

Birds were singing stridently outside; the grey covering over everything was slowly being plucked away as the light came. He strained the tea into two cups and covered one, which he took into the bedroom and left on the table next to his wife's head; he opened his mouth to say "Tea", but thought better of it and went to the living room. Amid the clutter of the big table, the old alarm clock, whose pale green enamel paint had broken into rust spots, said six o'clock. It continued to tick, a loud, busy noise, as he moved towards the window.

He sat in the cane chair; from here he'd be able to watch the lane awake. The boys who took in ironing were opening the door of their blue tin hut, at the mouth of the lane, near the watchman's shack. One of them brought out a kerosene stove to make tea; another, bare-chested and holding a plastic mug, went off in the direction of the empty plot. The first of the morning walkers appeared, a middle-aged man in white t-shirt and navy shorts. He began to march doggedly up the lane.

Mohan went to the bathroom and emerged half an hour later, quietly happy after the usual encounter with the white tiles, the morning sunshine, and the clear, warm water. Lakshmi got up when he opened the cupboard to take out a clean shirt.

"Every day," she observed, picking up the covered cup of tea and holding it at arm's length. She sighed. He began to do up his buttons. The shirt was crisp; it hung at a polite distance from his body. He started to roll up his sleeves, and followed her to the kitchen to point out, "But I didn't wake you."

She poured the tea into the saucepan and lit the gas. Her eyes were still heavy. "That's what you think," she said. "You think I don't hear you, clanging about in the kitchen." She covered her mouth and yawned loudly, a cry of weariness at the tiresome nature of the world.

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"I don't clang," he said.

His sleeves were neatly rolled; he felt satisfied, clean and ready for the day; his mind moved ahead to the train, where he might get a seat, feel the breeze on his face, and be able to read.

The tea began to bubble; with a faint expression of distaste Lakshmi removed it from the fire and strained it into the same mug. She drew her housecoat about her and went into the living room.

*

When the train drew into VT the station was alive but not yet swarming. Mohan walked away from the grand building and its light, high-vaulted hall. At the bus stand he moved through the queues and made for the GPO. How strange it had been, years earlier, when the letter writers had been forced to shift from its shaded colonnade, first to the pavement outside, and then under the tarpaulin at the nearby pigeon house, the kabutar khana. He had missed the shapes of people passing through the stone arches all day and the light as it changed – by afternoon, the figures in the colonnade became shadows with bright outlines. But he'd grown attached in turn to the sound of the pigeons when they took off and landed; their little kurr! kurr! of protest and, he sometimes thought, happiness.

He wasn't the first to arrive this morning. When he returned from the stationery shop with his possessions, Khan, the oldest of the remaining letter writers, had already unlocked the tables and sat drinking the first cup of tea, the Urdu Times spread in front of him. He was an irascible, balding man with tiny spectacles; although dark-skinned, he often seemed to redden in the sun. Mohan sat down, stowed his tiffin under his table, and arranged his pen tray; he put the torn red postal ledger into the drawer in the table and laid out the stack of electronic money order forms and a small pot of gum. He opened his book. Soon, to the sound of kurr! kurr! above him, he was deep in an elliptical, drawn-out conversation between Lambert Strether and Maria, a woman Strether had just met. The flow of commuters outside the tent increased.

"Uncle."

He recognized the woman, who was in her early thirties. Today she wore a bright green sari. She beamed at him; he smiled, and took up a money order form. Two thin gold bangles on her arms chinked among the glass ones.

"Uncle, two thousand five hundred rupees."

He uncapped a pen. "Name of the addressee?"

"Ganesh Solanki."

"Name of the village?"

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"Bhandari."

"Chhota post?" She named a town that no one in the city would have heard of.
"Bada post?" A slightly larger town.

Mohan opened the directory to check the postal code. While he flipped through the torn, closely printed pages, she wrapped the free end of her sari around her right shoulder, and swayed on one foot, looking into the crowd. It was hot now, full mid-morning sun. The flowery, synthetic scent of her talcum powder, mingled with perspiration, drifted to Mohan, and he looked up for a second before lowering his eyes again. Got it: 811 307. She would be a different person at work, he thought, copying the code into the form: heavily made up, standing in a doorway and calling out to the men who passed, but this morning, up early and neatly dressed, she was a figure of efficiency, a working woman.

He gave her back the form, which she would have to take to a counter inside. She smiled and took out a roll of notes from her blouse; she held out a twenty-rupee note. He nodded, but her bright green sari was already bustling its way into the sun. As it receded the flash of viridian made him think of the parrots that used to come in a sudden swoop at dusk and roost in trees near the old house at Dadar.

For a while he sat and watched the world, framed at the upper edge by the fringe of the tarpaulin – hairy bits of rope and a jagged piece of packing plastic, once transparent, now grey, hung down. Beyond this, all around the letter writers, life persisted at its noisiest. A fleet of cockroach-like taxis in black and yellow livery waited at the junction outside the GPO. When the lights changed they all, honking, took the u-turn. A man on a cycle passed; he carried a tangle of enormous red ledgers, each wrapped in plastic, atop his head. The gold on their spines flashed in the sun.

A luxury coach lumbered past; it was bound for Rajasthan. Mohan read the inscription on its side: Pushpa Vihar. The bus was nearly empty – it'd pick up returning Rajasthanis throughout Bombay before it left in earnest – but a few curious faces peered out at the start of their long journey. There was a small silver altar on the dashboard, and strings of black pompoms hung from the rear bumper to protect travellers from evil looks. A young man hung out of the doorway, enjoying the breeze on his face.

The morning was always so beautiful here. The location of the shelter, which hid under its dirty tarpaulin and the gnarled, ancient-looking banyan tree, meant that only those who knew about the letter writers came to find them. The workers in the offices, hotels and restaurants in Ballard Estate, Horniman Circle, and the inside streets of Bazaargate passed every day and were used to seeing the writers. But disoriented-looking white tourists, their belongings trussed to their backs and their money strapped to their waists, would pass, stand near the shelter, which served as a traffic island, and peer in; they'd be affronted because they couldn't work out what was going on inside. Khan would call out to them, showing off: "Hello? Yes, Madam?"

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And there were the pigeons, who spent their day moving with apparently frantic urgency from tree to tree. They'd suddenly all take off from the banyan here and rise, wings flapping madly, before heading either to the taller banyan outside the GPO, or the trees in Bhatia Baug in front of the station. If you looked up you saw the birds themselves – in passing, one or the other would casually drop a chalky blot on the road below. But if you remained gazing ahead, you saw only their shadows, which fluttered and moved with even more delicacy and life than the real birds: their silhouettes would rise, flap their wings and return to roost in the shadow of the tree.

He was starting to feel pleasantly hollow – that meant it would soon be time for lunch – when a small, familiar figure with a pot belly hailed him cheerfully. Kamble worked as a peon at the sessions court; he had been to deliver an order at the municipal corporation building. He sat on the stool next to Mohan, smiled, and took out his handkerchief to mop his face and the top of his head, which glistened in the humidity. Mohan passed him the water bottle; the other man leaned, in a friendly way, on one wooden arm of Mohan's chair, a thing of tubular steel and disintegrating plastic webbing.

"Getting hot now," Kamble observed. He tilted his head back to pour the water directly down his throat; a gold ring on one fat finger winked at Mohan.

"Busy day?"

Kamble put down the bottle and wiped his mouth. "Not really," he said. "Summer session. Just a few cases: anticipatory bail, chain snatching, one foreigner who got caught" –and here he waved in the direction of the GPO's enormous dome – "posting marijuana to herself." He raised an eyebrow. "When it didn't arrive she came back from abroad to ask what happened to the parcel. Strange how people always think they won't get caught."

Mohan chuckled. Kamble replaced the lid of the water bottle. He relaxed and leaned back on the chair arm, and his eye fell on the book on Mohan's table. "Hey, the BMC is moving the booksellers today, you heard?"

"Moving?"

"Evicting them. Part of the anti-hawker thing."

"But what are you saying?" Mohan held onto the small desk as though it was about to fall.

"Come, you want to come and see? I'm walking back. One of the peons in the BMC was telling me. The trucks went this morning."

Mohan stumbled up. He looked around; most of the letter writers had arrived. Khan nodded at him. "Yes yes, you go."

"I'll go and come," he muttered. He reached for the book, then left it where it was.

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"Don't walk so fast, re!" Kamble ran after Mohan, who had shot out in front of a taxi. The driver was outraged; he braked, gave the horn a long blast and leaned out of the window to question Mohan's relationship with his family. The letter writer ignored him and hurried on. They crossed the road and headed into the arcades, shot with hot strips of sun.

"Look," said Mohan suddenly. "None of these people has a licence either." He stopped and waved at the hawkers, thin young men in tight shirts and jeans, belts with exaggerated buckles; they folded their arms and eyed him in return.

Kamble shrugged. "It's part of what they're doing everywhere, they say it's to clear the main roads so people can walk more easily in the morning," he said apologetically. He put a hand on Mohan's arm and smiled at one of the more aggressive looking hawkers.

"Corruption. The booksellers have been there for years – people who take the train stop there on their way to office."

"Well –"

"Quickly!" Mohan had seen a bus, rolling to a halt a few yards ahead; he pulled Kamble after him through a white stucco arch and they dashed for the stop.

"You want to take the bus? But –"

"It'll be faster." They climbed aboard as the bus began to move, and pushed their way down the narrow aisle between the humid bodies of the other passengers.

The bus took an age to cover the short distance. Finally it reached the stop just before Fountain: they pushed their way to the front and jumped down. Mohan was sweating; the back of his neck prickled. "Come on," he said. His head pounded. They darted across the first road, waited at the crossing, and started to cross the second, but as he hurried he felt a small release at his right foot: the strap of his sandal had broken.

Two green municipal trucks were parked near the junction. Mohan's hand flew up to clutch his head. Men in dusty blue uniforms were picking up books by the armful and throwing them into the back of the nearer truck. His broken sandal flapping, he ran towards them.

"What are you doing? You can't do this! Stop! Wait!" The man ignored him, and grinned at the drama. Mohan saw the thin bookseller from the day before. "Where are they taking them?" he asked wildly.

"Some warehouse or godown, I don't know where. I don't know how we'll ever get them back." The young man stood still, his arms full of thrillers; he looked adrift, as though he had no idea what to do next.

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"Here, I'll take some." Mohan started to scoop up the volumes scattered around them.

"Oye, you can't do that," the BMC man said. "They're being confiscated." He picked up another armful and walked to the truck. A policeman, smacking his stick into his palm, strutted up. "Come on!" he shouted. "Move on!" He was bored, Mohan noticed; probably he wanted his lunch.

"Come on, re," Kamble said. He took Mohan's arm and tugged at it. Only a few books remained, lying on the ground and beside the railings. Mohan handed those he held to the young bookseller. One fell from his arms and Mohan stooped and picked it up, touched it to his forehead in apology. It was a business book, with confident red letters on the cover: Master of Your Own Fate.

Mohan, still clutching the book, allowed Kamble to pull him towards the crossing. "My sandal's broken," he muttered.

*

He went home early, feeling dazed and unreal. The outer door was closed because it was the afternoon and a time of rest; the flat was warm, silent, and sleepy. His wife opened the inner door.

"I thought it was you! You're not well?"

"Don't attack me right at the door," he said wearily. He came in, and closed the outer door with a soft click.

"Another book," she said.

He walked past her and deposited the books on one of the jars that covered the old table in the living room. He went to the kitchen, reappeared with a steel tumbler of water and sat down heavily; he rested his elbow on the small fringe of available surface on the table and drank. When he'd finished he set down the tumbler, rubbed his forehead, removed his spectacles, and pinched the top of his nose.

"Are you feeling unwell?"

"No."

"Then what happened?" Her voice had become sharp, but she hovered close to him.

He waved towards the books. "The BMC moved the booksellers away today – took all the books and threw them into a truck. They're taking them to a godown somewhere."

"Just like that?"

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He nodded.

She went into the kitchen, came back with a bottle of cold water and a jug and refilled the tumbler, half with the iced water and half with room-temperature water. He closed his hand around the tumbler.

"Maybe it's for the best," she said thoughtfully, and put one hand on her hip. "We're running out of space for all these books anyway."

He stared across the landscape of clustered jars. The table was old, from the house at Dadar; it was good Burma teak, and beautiful when polished, but they'd never used it properly. Over the years it had become a receptacle for jars of pickle, bottles of sauce and squash, tins of drinking chocolate, papers, paperweights, and all kinds of other objects that, someone had reasoned, were about to be in use. What a waste, he thought.

"Oh, I had to tell you," she continued. "Your sister called."

He looked up. "Vimla?"

"How many sisters do you have? Milind's transfer order has come through. They'll have to leave in a few days."

"Oh."

"And they just found out that Ashish can't take his exams this year, he has to repeat."

"What? Why?"

"Attendance," she said.

He put on his spectacles again, diverted for a moment. "Always something new with that boy," he said, almost admiringly. Fecklessness was not a quality one had been encouraged to develop, or that one celebrated in one's offspring; still, it cut a certain dash.

"So they were wondering if he can stay with us till next year."

Mohan smiled. "Of course, where else will he stay?"

"With your brother?" However, she smiled.

"Ha!"

Lakshmi sighed. "It's going to be a lot of extra work. And also expense."

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"But we have the money from the printing shop. And what Megha's been sending, we haven't even touched that." His income from his daily occupation had never been considerable; in recent years it had dwindled to a trickle.

She nodded, then frowned. "You know that I'm fond of Ashish. But it's a big responsibility. We'll have to make sure he studies, attends regularly when college starts. You'll have to speak to him. Make him understand he needs to be sincere."

Mohan snorted. "I'm sure his mother's spoken to him comprehensively," he said. He drained the second tumbler of water, put it into his wife's hand, and went inside to change his clothes.

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