

SALIL DESAI

AN INSPECTOR SARALKAR MYSTERY

THE **MURDER** OF
SONIA
RAIKKONEN

'Killing is a contact sport, my friend...'



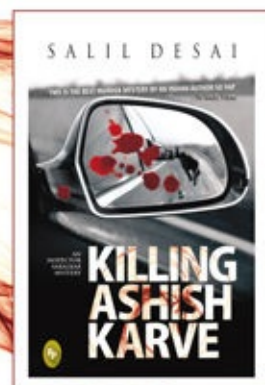
Late one November night, the mutilated corpse of a young Finnish tourist is found in a public garden in Pune. It looks like a case of brutal rape and murder, but Senior Inspector Saralkar and PSI Motkar find themselves probing further . . . delving deeper.

Standing virtually clueless, except for a single white sandal found on the scene of the crime, the policemen duo start looking for suspects . . .

Things get murkier when Saralkar's old friend and colleague, Inspector Patange, seeks his help to establish the identity of another murder victim—an old man found by a wooded hillside on the outskirts of Pune. Not only do the old man's stab injuries match the wounds inflicted on the Finnish girl, but he is also found wearing the other white sandal!

As Saralkar and Motkar struggle to find the link that connects the two murders, nothing is what it seems . . . The emerging truth seems far more dangerous and the motive far more bizarre!

**Who murdered Sonia, and why?
The truth will chill you to the bone!**



*Other titles in the
Inspector Saralkar Mystery Series
by Salil Desai*



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THE **MURDER** OF
SONIA
RAIKKONEN

S A L I L D E S A I



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– *Afternoon Despatch & Courier*

'The literary equivalent of a mouthful of flavour to be savoured and easily consumed'

– *Sunday Tribune*

To

SUOMI



PROLOGUE

Tampere, Finland
1995

“You want to go to jail?” the old man glared at his grandchild as soon as the policemen got into the car and drove away.

The thirteen-year-old did not reply; face set as always in a morose mask.

“Do you know what they do to you in jail . . .?”

The adolescent’s face remained impassive.

“Look at me, dammit . . . I am talking to you!” the old man growled, inflamed further by the lack of reaction.

“Calm down,” his wife quickly intervened, “. . . these indiscretions happen at this age . . . it’s only graffiti . . .”

The old man turned on his wife. “Have you seen the graffiti? Have you seen the kind of shocking horrible things that your grandchild has painted on those walls?”

The old lady anxiously looked at the sulking teenager. “What have you written, dear?”

Her gentle query elicited no response either, just as the old man’s harsh words hadn’t.

“I’ll tell you . . . Blood . . . killing . . . death . . . arson . . . threats . . . torture . . .” the old man grimaced. “Who scribbles such sick things as wall graffiti? That too on their birthday of all days?”

For the first time the thirteen-year-old made eye contact—piercing, remote, and alien. It was just for a split second, but it was enough to send a chill of discomfort down the old man’s spine.

The old woman stared with disbelief as worry and fear converged into the muscles of her face. “What’s wrong? What goes on in your mind? Tell me, dear . . . what’s troubling you?” She moved closer.

The teenager looked at her, eyes frighteningly intense, face giving nothing away, as if wondering whether to confide its innermost thoughts. The words came in a low, throbbing tone. “I hate the world . . . I hate people.”

The quiet declaration took the old woman’s breath away for it didn’t sound like normal teenage talk—melodramatic and immature. It sounded disturbingly matter-of-fact. Her husband was also startled and regarded his grandchild uneasily.

“Who don’t you like, dear? Is it us?” she asked, shaken and anxious.

“Everyone.”

The couple glanced at each other, almost unable to process the situation. This wasn’t the first time their grandchild’s behaviour and words had disconcerted them.

“No . . . no . . . you shouldn’t talk like that,” the old woman said, hastily trying to change the conversation and the mood. “Come, it’s your birthday, let’s celebrate! Grandpa has got you a small present and I have made you a delicious blueberry pie and smoked reindeer!”

She fled into the kitchen, leaving the other two alone. Silence reigned for a few minutes. Then the old man spoke. “Here . . . this is your birthday gift.” He walked across the room and thrust a book into the teenager’s hand. “*Tuntematon Sotilas*. The Unknown Soldier. You’ll like it.”

The thirteen-year-old leafed through the book distractedly. The old man waited for some acknowledgement, maybe a response, but when none was forthcoming, he shrugged and sat back in

huff, watching the kid across the room, whom he and his wife just could not fathom even after twenty years in their care.

The old woman bustled back in with the celebratory meal. "Happy Birthday!" she declared and tried to inject some false bonhomie as they settled down to lunch. But it soon petered out. The grandchild showed no signs of birthday enjoyment or even wanting to talk . . . just sat picking at the food, pre-occupied and aloof.

"How about a sauna later in the evening?" the old woman made another attempt at drawing the teenager out.

The thirteen-year-old refused.

"Why not? It'll be fun in our new sauna."

The old woman received no reply.

"Okay. Then is there something special you would like to do today?" she coaxed.

Her grandchild was silent, then said abruptly, "I want to drive Grandpa's car . . ."

"Are you out of your mind?" the old man rasped with irritation. "You are too young to drive a car!"

The adolescent looked up and riveted him with a scorching gaze that burned with bitter hatred, then turned away.

The table fell silent as the grandparents seemed to lose their appetite for both the food as well as further conversation with their sulking, intimidating grandchild.



A few hours later, as the old man and his wife relaxed in their sauna, he said, "The police suggested we contact social services. They think psychiatric evaluation and counselling might be required."

"Might be a good idea. It's scary . . . I wonder if it is normal for an adolescent of this age to harbour such thoughts," she remarked.

Her husband shook his head slowly, lost in thought, and wiped the sweat off his neck, which had begun dripping down.

"Isn't it getting a bit too hot?" his wife asked.

"C'mon, it's at our usual setting."

The old woman shifted uncomfortably. "Well, this electric sauna certainly needs some getting used to. Our old steam sauna was so much better."

The old man rebuffed her. "Pah! I am too old to keep pouring water for generating steam. The electric one's much better. Convenient."

"Well, turn down the temperature a bit . . ."

"Do it yourself!"

The old woman was too old to argue. She got up and put on her robe to step out of the sauna cabin and adjust the controls.

"Something's wrong," she said a few seconds later. "The door isn't opening."

"Come on," the old man said with irritation. "Just pull harder."

"No . . . It seems like it's . . . jammed, you know."

"Bullshit. That never happens." He got up vexedly, clasped his hand around the door handle and pulled.

The door refused to yield. The old man licked his lips and heaved again. The timber stayed put, as if bolted. The eyes of the old couple met fearfully, the same suspicion lurking in their minds.

Then they heard the car start . . .

Pune, India
2012

Sonia Raikonen could have perhaps lived to a ripe old age, if she hadn't died of unnatural cause. But we will never know for certain, for death came to her violently, late one November night, far away from home and family, at the point of an ugly knife.

Her assailant had shown no qualms in mutilating her tender, young body repeatedly—as determined not to be accused of compassion or squeamishness. The gaping slashes on her torso and across her neck seemed to cruelly inspect just how deep her beauty went.

It should've been a quick but painful death by all appearances, yet she had bled and, apparently lived long enough to crawl up to the garden fencing. Her fingers were clasped around the wire mesh of the fence in what seemed like a bid to raise herself, face framed against it. That's probably when death had overtaken her, and that's how two street hoarding workers on their daily nocturnal assignment had spotted her an hour later.



Saralkar tossed around for the hundredth time and grunted—he never sighed if he could help it. Sighs were feminine. Grunts were masculine—yet sleep wouldn't come.

Damn it, he shouldn't have had that coffee at the Udipi restaurant where he and his wife had dined earlier that evening. So what if it had been cold coffee? Nothing good ever came out of listening to a woman. And now she was sleeping peacefully while he lay tossing about. For the last two hours. Could it have been three?

Saralkar heaved himself into a sitting position. Another less attractive thought just floated into his mind. It wasn't the first time he had been sleepless in the last few weeks. There had been at least four or five occasions he could remember. Could it be that he was developing insomnia? This time he let out a little snarl and made his way out of the bedroom.

His mind was always quick to generate theories while investigating crime, but he was damned if he was going to allow it to deduce insomnia on the evidence of a few sleepless nights! Why on earth would any policeman get insomnia? It was a tribe perpetually deprived of sleep. Yet he knew of a few colleagues who were addicted to sleeping pills.

“No insomnia! No sleeping pills for me,” Saralkar muttered firmly to himself and switched on the television. A few minutes of any television show were enough to put anyone to sleep, he was sure. He began channel surfing in earnest, barely pausing a few moments on each. And although the volume was low, he didn't hear the rings of his mobile in the bedroom.

His wife's grudging voice, however, did penetrate a minute or two later. “Pick up your mobile!” Saralkar lumbered back to his bedroom and was confronted by the rings of his mobile and the recriminations of his aggrieved wife. He couldn't decide which was shriller.

“Sorry, forgot to take it outside with me,” he mumbled insincerely—which hardly appeased Jyoti—and slipped back into the drawing room.

“Hullo,” he barked, taking the call.

“Saralkar sahib, Constable Wanjale from Police Control Room, sir. Shivajinagar Police Chowk has found a body at Model Colony Lake Garden, off Lakaki Road, sir. PSI Salunkhe thinks it’s murder and has requested your presence.”

“Don’t you know you should contact PSI Motkar first?” Saralkar snapped.

“Sorry, sir,” Wanjale replied crisply, accustomed to such raps, “I tried several times . . . PSI Motkar is not answering.”

“Is his mobile switched off?”

“No, sir. The ring keeps passing.”

Saralkar bridled. How dare his assistant be able to sleep through mobile rings? “Who’s the victim?”

“It’s a woman’s body, sir—a foreigner,” Constable Wanjale replied.

Nothing much ever surprised Saralkar, but this fact did. “A foreigner! Okay, tell Salunkhe I’ll be there in half an hour,” Saralkar said and hung up. He felt faintly annoyed at allowing himself to be surprised. Why couldn’t it be a foreigner? After all, Pune had a growing tribe of expatriates, tourists and students, especially since business and industry had boomed.

As he opened the wardrobe in his bedroom for his clothes and stuff, Jyoti grumbled sleepily, “Why can’t you keep a set outside for emergencies?”

Saralkar fought back the urge to break out into a brief rumble of laughter and exaggerate other little sounds while getting dressed, then quickly stepped out of the house, banging the door just loud enough for it to reach his wife’s ears. As he walked towards his motorcycle, he realized it was colder than he had expected. For a second he considered going back for a pullover, but his nerves failed him. He would rather brave the chill.

Luckily, the site of the murder wasn’t very far. But first he had to awaken Motkar. Junior officers had no right to slumber while seniors were up and about! Saralkar mounted his bike and set course for Motkar’s house. He shivered as the motorcycle picked up speed. Perhaps he should have gone back for his jacket. If only he’d had a sweet-tempered spouse. But then come to think of it, no one he knew had one.

He just hoped this indiscretion of moving about without a pullover wouldn’t lead to another bout of his *bête noire*— tonsillitis. It wasn’t a pleasant thought. But it was succeeded by an even more unpleasant one as he zipped past the nearly empty, dark road.

The thing he hated most about being out at ungodly hours was the possibility of encountering stray dogs. They were no respecters of policemen and he had been chased by frenzied canines a couple of times, late at night. Saralkar peered ahead uneasily, hoping this was not going to be one of those times.

He was relieved to arrive at Motkar’s house unscathed. Whipping out his mobile he dialled his assistant’s number. The rings passed unanswered. Still sleeping! Saralkar frowned. The prospect of climbing up two storeys was not welcome. Damn Motkar!

A sleepy voice answered his bell peals five minutes later while Saralkar regained his breath. Motkar’s bewildered face peeped out. “Sir? What’s the matter!”

“Have you gone deaf? The control room’s been trying your mobile for ages,” Saralkar bellowed at him.

“But . . . I . . .” PSI Motkar’s mild face looked perplexed.

“Never mind. Get ready. We’ve to go,” Saralkar said, stepping into the house uninvited, happy to be out of the cold.

“Of course, sir,” PSI Motkar rallied. “Is it a homicide?”

Saralkar gave him a look that Motkar was quite familiar with. It was his facial shorthand for “Foolish question!”

Motkar winced. “Just give me two minutes sir,” he said. “Should I ask my wife to make coffee or something for you meanwhile?”

Saralkar’s reply was a mouthful this time. “No Motkar, I’ve had enough coffee tonight. Just go ready, damn it. There’s a corpse waiting for us out there.”

“My son had put the mobile on silent mode sir, that’s why . . .” Motkar said apologetically as the bike rode towards Model Colony Lake Garden.

He was seated on the pillion behind Saralkar. Normally it would be the other way round, with Motkar riding and his boss perched behind him. But since chasing dogs were more likely to pin their teeth on pillion riders, Saralkar had shrewdly insisted on riding. The unsuspecting Motkar had been surprised.

“What was your kid doing with the mobile?” Saralkar asked.

“Er . . . he sometimes plays games on it, sir.”

“You allow him to handle state property?” Saralkar asked severely.

Motkar was already regretting the confession. “Children don’t always listen,” he replied lamely.

“Ought to be spanked really!” Saralkar asserted.

It wasn’t new advice coming from the senior inspector and Motkar kept quiet. Only those with no children of their own could be so blithe.

Motkar’s silence, instead, uncomfortably reminded Saralkar of something his wife Jyoti had unexpectedly said a few days ago, about adopting a child.

Saralkar had been shocked by the idea and although they had not discussed the matter again, he had hoped it had just been a passing whim.

“Find out from Salunkhe where exactly the garden is on Lakaki Road,” Saralkar said abruptly.

“I know the place, sir. It’s just off the first by-lane when we enter from the main road. The garden’s quite beautiful!”

Saralkar had known it too. “Well, don’t forget it’s a crime scene tonight. We can admire the beauty some other time,” the senior inspector said.

He turned the bike into the lane leading to the Lake Garden a few minutes later. It was one of those rare spots where natural beauty had actually been enhanced by sensible landscaping—like skillful make-up applied on an already ravishing woman.

The lake had a wonderful un-geometrical shape, sealed off on one side by a semi-circular wall of rock that rose almost a hundred feet above. The upper half of the Model Colony locality rested atop this formation and sprawled further away. The rest encircled the lake in a broad sweep, making it one of Pune’s earliest high-end localities, although no longer as new as the posh enclaves that had now sprung up in the city since the mid-nineties.

The ground level bank of the lake had been tiled and lawned, and small sit outs with pagoda shaped roofs had been created on little knolls for people to soak in the serenity and the scenery. The trees lining the perimeter had now grown big enough to create a curtain of lush, green foliage between the garden and the adjoining road.

Hardly the setting for a murder, thought PSI Motkar as he alighted from the bike, or for someone to harbour murderous thoughts. Yet here’s where it seemed to have occurred. Even Saralkar was silent, as if wondering whether the police control room had played an almighty prank by giving the wrong location.

Nevertheless, a police jeep and some motorcycles were parked near the entrance of the garden and the team from Shivajinagar Police Station was huddled alongside the mesh wire fence near the far end of the park.

“This way, Saralkar sahib,” one of the men hollered out, waving a torch in their direction.

~~Motkar’s steps quickened in response, but Saralkar showed no such urgency. How many dead bodies had he seen before? Violated bodies that some human being had hated enough to savage brutally. Was this going to be body number 100 or 150 or 200? Perhaps not a round figure at all.~~

“Control room said it’s a foreigner,” Saralkar murmured laconically to the earnest Motkar. “First time I’ll be seeing a dead one.”

Motkar was too startled to reply. They had reached the crime scene. The group comprised of a PSI, three constables, and two obviously nervous youths, whose statements were being taken down by one of the constables. Another constable stood on the other side of the wire mesh fence, on the adjoining road.

PSI Salunkhe stepped forward. He was a tall, thin, bespectacled man who looked too intellectual to be a policeman. “Sorry, sir,” he addressed Saralkar. “I was told you generally prefer to take a look at the earliest.”

Saralkar nodded slowly, taking in the fate of the victim. The young foreigner lay on her stomach, clinging to the wire mesh. Her low waist jeans and undergarment had been pulled down to her knees, exposing her buttocks and thighs. Her top was tattered and lifted up to reveal a broken bra strap, but there were no knife wounds on her back.

“Who told you that?” asked Saralkar, his eyes still on the body.

“I . . . I read your columns in Pune Police magazine, sir,” PSI Salunkhe replied promptly.

Saralkar gave a grunt of approval, though many could have easily interpreted it as an expression of displeasure.

PSI Motkar who had dropped down on his haunches to make a closer inspection, now looked in the direction of the two youths and asked, “I suppose these are the fellows who found the body?”

“Yes, they informed us at around two,” Salunkhe affirmed.

“What were they doing here so late?” Saralkar asked.

“They are hoarding workers, sir. They had finished their work on FC Road and were heading towards some hoardings in Deep Bungalow Chowk,” Salunkhe replied.

“I see!” Saralkar looked at the duo thoughtfully. One of them was Marathi, while the other was from Bihar—two individuals who for some reason had discovered the same occupation for a living.

“Would you like to question them, sir?” Salunkhe offered.

“Later!” Saralkar turned to the body and asked Motkar, “You think it’s attempted rape and murder?”

“Looks like that, sir,” Motkar said. “Foreigners wandering about in desolate spots are vulnerable late at night.”

“Or it could be a tryst gone wrong, sir,” Salunkhe spoke up, adjusting his spectacles as if he saw farther than the others. “In the past we’ve found foreigners having sex in this park. Maybe the victim too had come with a partner and then things went out of control . . .”

Saralkar gave him a curt glance. “C’mon, Salunkhe, I’m sure our own countrymen also come here for all sorts of naughty things in the night. Why single out foreigners?”

Salunkhe flushed. “I didn’t mean that, sir. All I . . .”

“Never mind. Did she have any identification on her?” Saralkar asked.

“No, sir. In fact no belongings either, not even a cell phone. But identity may not be a problem. There are two hotels nearby—one on FC Road and one on Canal Road—which are the favourite haunts of all these backpackers. I’m almost sure, she must have been staying in one of them.”

PSI Motkar nodded. “Makes sense. I’ll check that out. Sir, she seems to have dragged herself over the fence. There’s a trail of blood right from that bushy hedge.”

Saralkar peered over in the direction Motkar was pointing. It was a good twenty-five yards away

He could see faint patches of blood in the light of the torch, which Salunkhe was flashing on the ground. He could almost visualize the poor girl crawling for dear life, bleeding.

“Where’s the damn photographer? Didn’t you call him?” he demanded of Salunkhe. “I need to see the wounds and that can’t happen till she’s photographed.”

“He’s on his way, sir . . . from Bibwewadi. Ah, there he is!” said Salunkhe, as the police photographer rushed in as if on cue.

“What’s with you, Darekar?” Saralkar hauled up the newcomer. “Probably shooting some marriage video on the sly till midnight and then couldn’t wake up just now, could you?”

“No, sir,” Darekar, who was prone to moonlighting, said with a trace of guilt in his voice “I was a little unwell.”

“You aren’t dead, are you? She is!” Saralkar said, pointing at the body. “Get on with it. I hope you’ve brought some extra lights.”

“Just one battery operated one, sir, and the flash. There’s no power source here so the bigger ones we have can’t be used.”

Saralkar scowled. “You could’ve anticipated this, Darekar, and brought more battery operated ones.”

The photographer who had already started setting up his equipment replied, “This is the only one we have, sir. Had sent in a requisition for another battery operated one three months ago. But you know how it is . . .”

Saralkar turned away without comment. It was always the same. Twenty years in the force and nothing had changed.

“Isn’t one of our freelancers from this area?” he asked Motkar.

“Yes, I think there’s a guy in Gokhalenagar, but I doubt if he’ll come,” Motkar replied, flicking out his mobile and dialling a number from ‘Contacts’.

“Tell him we are taking shots of a nude foreigner and he’ll come hopping,” Darekar quipped with a grin which elicited chuckles only from the constables.

PSI Motkar, shocked as usual by callous remarks, looked at the photographer with distaste. Saralkar too had shot Darekar a withering glance but said nothing.

A sleepy voice answered Motkar on the mobile, “Hullo?”

“Sanjay, PSI Motkar here. Can you come around to Model Colony Lake Garden urgently with some battery-operated lights? Yes, it’s important. . . . A murder. . . . No, we just need the lights. Okay good!”

He turned to Saralkar. “He’s coming, sir,” then gave Darekar another reproachful look.

Saralkar nodded. “Let’s see the spot where she was attacked,” he said, turning to Salunkhe.

Salunkhe led them along the blood trail. Even in the torchlight it was evident that the victim had lost much blood. They rounded the bushy hedge and came upon small islands of flower beds separated by gravelled pathways leading to a platform built around a big tree.

Thick, six-foot-high lines of shrubbery cordoned the area on all sides, as if to hide it from the rest of the garden. There seemed to be only one way in and out.

Salunkhe pointed towards the platform. "She was probably stabbed near the platform and left to die. She crawled across the gravel, out of this area, and up to the mesh wire fence."

Saralkar felt a little shiver as he surveyed the scene. The temperature seemed to have dropped further inside the hedged area. But it wasn't just that. Somehow it was easier to believe that a murder had taken place in here than anywhere else in the rest of the park. The tree above the platform swayed in the darkness, giving one uneasy ideas that would never have occurred during day time.

"Why would any human being want to be here at night for a . . . er . . . romantic rendezvous?" P. Motkar asked, giving voice to Saralkar's own puzzlement.

"You mean when there are cosier options like hotel rooms?"

"Yes, sir," Motkar said, a trifle embarrassed, as if Saralkar had commented upon his private preferences.

"Well, human beings are a kinky lot. Lovemaking in the moonlight or some such idea . . . Saralkar remarked.

"There isn't any moonlight, sir," Motkar pointed out. "It's dark and cold. Doesn't make sense."

Saralkar gazed at him meditatively, as if not amused by the rebuttal. "True," he said finally, almost to himself. "What then, Motkar? Ah, as usual we are jumping ahead."

He shook his head as if disgusted with himself. "Can't see a bloody thing. Give me the torch, Salunkhe."

PSI Salunkhe handed the torch over to the senior inspector, who began flashing it around as if sure to chance upon a thousand clues. There had been a violent scuffle, that much was evident. Blood had spattered on the side and top of the platform. The gravel had been dug into like a dog scooping up sand with its spurs.

"Tell forensics to be here at the crack of dawn. There's a lot they can get," Saralkar said to Motkar, before pointing the torch towards a nearby flower bed. The struggle seemed to have spilled over onto it, with a section of the flowers crushed into the earth and the brick borders overturned. The soft earth also showed up an assortment of indentations, a couple of which looked promising.

"We'll probably get a couple of prints over there. Tell them to look for boot marks and footprints," he added, brightening up a little.

"There's also a white sandal lying a little ahead in the flower bed," Salunkhe informed.

"The victim's?" asked Motkar with raised eyebrows.

"No, it's a male sandal, size six. Those old Quo Vadis types."

"Could be the assailant's, then."

"Ask the constables to make a thorough search for the other sandal in the pair," ordered Saralkar "and make sure your men don't permit morning walkers to slip in by mistake."

"Don't worry, sir," Salunkhe replied.

"Good, I'll talk to the two boys now if your constable has finished taking their statements."

Saralkar said abruptly and began walking back.

Motkar and Salunkhe followed him out of the hedged enclosure. The two young men who had been sitting listlessly on the ground rose apprehensively as Saralkar strode towards them.

He gave them an appraising glance, making them even more self-conscious. "Your names?"

"Manoj Bhurte," the Marathi lad said.

"Rakesh Khushwaha," answered the non-Marathi boy.

"How did you chance upon the body?"

Rakesh Khushwaha looked at his Marathi friend, as if he was in charge of all the talking from now on. Manoj Bhurte cleared his throat in response and said to Saralkar, "Sir, we had finished our work on FC Road hoardings and were driving towards Deep Bungalow Chowk," —he paused then, pointing towards his companion—"Rakesh wanted to take a leak so I stopped the scooter. He got down and moved towards the fencing of the garden and started peeing. I was just sitting on the scooter, whistling and looking around, when my eyes fell on the body."

Manoj stopped and looked at Saralkar indecisively—the first crease of emotion had appeared on his face.

Saralkar waited, saying nothing.

Manoj sank his teeth into his lips, then spoke again, "I just froze . . . couldn't believe what I was seeing. When Rakesh returned I pointed out the corpse to him."

"How did you know it was a corpse?" Saralkar interjected.

The youths looked bewildered, then Manoj spoke again. "What else could it be, sir? There was no sign of life."

"I see. Continue."

"Well, Rakesh also had a look and confirmed what I had seen, so then . . . we decided to report it to the Shivajinagar Police Station."

"Was she lying exactly like that?" Motkar asked.

"Yes, sir!" Manoj replied.

"How come you didn't just flee?" Saralkar probed. He was looking at them with his trademark penetrating gaze which all those he interrogated were subjected to.

Manoj and Rakesh exchanged a quick furtive glance. Then it was the hitherto quiet Rakesh Khushwaha who spoke. "Actually, sir, that was our first reaction. Why to report and get involved in a police case? But then . . ." he shrugged, as if unable to explain the diktat of their consciences.

The best of human motivations are always difficult to articulate, PSI Motkar thought.

"But then what?" Saralkar persisted.

Rakesh shrugged again and said, ". . . we just thought it would be wrong not to report it, sir."

Such people needed to be appreciated, Motkar felt. Nine out of ten people would have ignored the body and gone their way, especially if they happened to be from the educated middle class. But these two, belonging to the so-called lower strata, hadn't done so.

"What time was it?" Saralkar continued without acknowledging these finer sentiments.

Manoj shook his head doubtfully. "Must have been around two in the morning, sir, but I am not sure."

Saralkar turned to PSI Salunkhe who affirmed, "They came to the station around two-fifteen, sir."

Saralkar transferred his gaze back to Manoj and said in a slightly reproachful tone, "Both of you went to the police station? Why couldn't one of you have waited here?"

"But, sir, we were scared. After all it was a murder! What if the murderer was around?" Rakesh replied matter-of-factly.

"Why did you think it was a murder?" Saralkar challenged.

Not for the first time in his life, Motkar felt his boss was asking pointless questions. You didn't

have to be a policeman to know it was a murder. It was common sense.

~~The youths were looking helplessly at the senior inspector. Manoj finally said, “. . . There was so much blood, sir.”~~

“Hmmm,” Saralkar sounded unconvinced. “Did you notice anyone or anything suspicious at all?”

“No!” Both the hoarding workers answered almost simultaneously.

Saralkar regarded them steadily for a few seconds, then suddenly seemed to lose interest in them. He turned to Salunkhe. “You’ve got all their details and everything?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then they can go.” Saralkar stared at them sharply one more time. His voice was more menacing. “I hope you are not lying or hiding something.”

The duo stiffened, as if suddenly aware of his power.

“No, sir . . .” Manoj answered earnestly. His partner shook his head with vigour.

“Motkar, read their statements before they leave,” Saralkar instructed.

Motkar’s affirmation was drowned by Darekar’s loud exclamation. “Ah! Here comes your light man.”

The freelance photographer, Sanjay, was making his way across the park with two battery lights. Reaching the group, he greeted the policemen.

“C’mon quick, bring it here. We’ve been waiting,” Darekar said urgently. To him all the freelancers were upstarts, to be treated with disdain.

Sanjay stepped towards the body and his face immediately went pale. He still wasn’t a hardened police photographer.

“Your first murder?” Darekar chuckled, enjoying the freelancer’s discomfiture.

Sanjay managed to nod, his breathing heavy, his hand flying to his mouth. As a freelancer for the police, he had shot crime scenes before—break-ins, drug hauls, accidents, unclaimed bodies—but this was the first time he was seeing a murder victim.

“If you are going to vomit, go do it in the corner,” Darekar sneered, switching on the battery light Sanjay had brought, and began taking photographs.

Saralkar and Salunkhe watched his obvious efficiency, while Motkar used the extra light to rapidly glance through the statements. For the next few minutes, no one spoke and the only noise came from Darekar’s clicking camera.

“Shall I turn her over, sir? I have finished with the mortal position shots,” Darekar asked Saralkar.

“Okay.”

Darekar gestured to the constables for help in turning over the body, then grinned cheerfully at Sanjay and said, “Some scenes may not be suitable for viewing by children. Adults only. Kids must cover their eyes.”

Sanjay flinched and shifted uneasily, his hand clenching his mouth even more firmly.

“That’s enough, Darekar,” Motkar snapped.

Darekar responded with a wink as he and the constables loosened the victim’s grip on the wire mesh and rolled her over gently.

Saralkar watched with the same feeling of waste he always experienced. The tortured face of every murder victim seemed to harden something within him. His mind took in the details automatically—dark hair, very fair complexion, not sunburnt like many a foreigner—pretty features now frozen in pain forever. Her top was completely soaked in blood, the source of much of it being a deep gash on her throat. The area around her navel was punctured with numerous stab wounds. Her lower abdomen and private parts didn’t seem to have wounds, but the mixture of blood, sand, and sediments on the greenery over which she had crawled, made it impossible to be sure. Only a post-mortem would reveal the exact spread of injuries.

“My God!” Motkar said in a husky whisper, shooting a glance at his boss.

~~The mood had suddenly changed. Even Darekar was looking grim. Gone was his cocky humour.~~

Violence never lost its power to shock and anger, Motkar reflected with a grimace. Not even if you had seen it a thousand times before.

Vaino Gardstrom opened his eyes as daylight streamed in on his face from a gap in the curtain and the buzz of people and traffic on the road beside his hotel penetrated his ears.

He had never come to terms with India and its hustle and bustle, just as he had never come to terms with his own country Finland and its utter silence and solitude. Rather, Vaino had never come to terms with the world. The world was full of people and people were the problem. Mankind was cursed—made up mainly of the unworthy, the unjust, the unfair, the uncouth, the uncultured, the unkind, the unappreciative, the undeserving, the unscrupulous!

Like his drunkard father who had abandoned his family, like his mother who had resented his presence in her life, like his maddening grandparents who had faked affection and tried suffocating his spirit, like those perverse boys who had mercilessly bullied him when he had been in school, like the stupid teachers who had never found him clever or cute, like the idiotic professors who had never recognized him for the prodigy he was, like the greedy corporation which had stolen his product idea, like the corrupt judge who had dismissed his case and instead seemed ready to award damages against him, and like the hundreds of brainless, heartless people—acquaintances and strangers alike—he had met in life.

That's what people were like all over—in India, in Finland, wherever one went! A world without good people would have been paradise. Of course the world could not be emptied of all bad people, but each good person could do his bit . . . to make the world a better place. Why hadn't Sonia understood his high ideals and his lofty goals? Why had she turned against him? Why had she decided to betray?

Vaino got up gingerly from the bed. His mind never seemed to stop thinking and throwing up painful questions like that. Sometimes he wished he had a stop button that would turn his brain off. But he didn't and so it continued brooding 24x7.

Did all relationships end as bitterly as his and Sonia's had? How did people who had been soulmates, suddenly feel nothing but contempt and bitterness for each other? He could picture Sonia now, looking at him as if he were some despicable creature, saying all kinds of harsh, horrible things. How could the one person he had loved so much judge him so cruelly? And the words that had hurt the most were, "You are a bloody coward, Vaino! Just a pair of crazy, shitty pants . . ."

Vaino's blood boiled even now as the scene replayed itself in his mind. Women could be as violent as men. The only difference was they used their tongues, as had Sonia. And violence beget violence. Vaino flinched at the memory. He shouldn't have lost control even if she had deserved it.

All that was yesterday—over and done with. This was today. He got up from the bed, went into the bathroom, and turned on the shower. He required cleansing. They shouldn't have come to India yet again. Sonia and he had been so much in love back home in Finland, but Sonia had insisted, pleaded stubbornly. And like a faithful lover he had accompanied her once more in her quest. So what was wrong if he had expected her to stand by him in his life's mission? God dammit! Maybe none of this would've happened if Sonia hadn't been chasing her own obsession! As he slipped under the shower his eyes fell on the clothes in the bucket. He had not yet washed them. Would the stains go off, he wondered, or would it be better just dumping them in some garbage bin on the road, overflowing with litter? No one would even notice in the mess that was urban India.

Vaino began scrubbing himself with soap. The bath in the night had been a quick one. He had to be more thorough now. He winced as his soap-filled hands passed over the bruises. They had certainly

become more painful and tender overnight. He examined them in the mirror—a purple, red archipelago was spread across his chest and abdomen.

Mercifully nothing that needed medical attention. Considering the circumstances, he had gotten away without any major damage. He began examining his body for other injuries on his hands and legs—scratches and cuts. Nothing that wouldn't heal in a couple of days! Nothing that would leave a permanent mark.

His face was free of injuries fortunately. Vaino's attention turned towards the dirt under his fingernails and he cringed. He had to clean them and cut his nails. Finishing his bath he stepped outside just as his mobile began buzzing.

Vaino's mouth went dry. He instinctively knew who the caller would be. He considered ignoring the rings at first, then cursed and took the call.

"Yes! I remember," he responded to the caller, ". . . not now. No, don't come here! Don't threaten me, okay? And don't get greedy. You'll have what I promised, nothing more. I'll let you know. I said *don't threaten me!*"

Vaino cut the call and slumped on the bed, trembling with rage and fear. Self-pity was not long in coming. It was second nature and quickly took over his frayed nerves.



"Aren't you cold, sir?" PSI Motkar asked Saralkar as soon as he had finished ordering tea. They were seated at one of Pune's characteristic but fast disappearing Amrutulya tea shops that opened at four in the morning to serve a grateful humanity.

Motkar shifted closer to the cheerful blue flame of the open stove that exuded warm waves as the owner boiled the tea on it.

Saralkar was irritated. He was damned if he was going to confess the truth to Motkar. Instead, he turned to the shop owner and said, "Dish out some cream roles, too."

"Fresh cream roles arrive by five, sir. Will buns do?" the owner replied.

Saralkar scowled. "I didn't ask for buns, did I?"

"I don't mind a couple," Motkar told the owner, and then gently suggested to his sulky boss, "Try the sweet buns, sir. They serve very tasty ones here."

Saralkar shook his head. There was silence at the table for a minute or two. The gushing hiss of the stove and the murmur of a few regulars who had started streaming in, added to the soothing, unhurried calm of the pre-dawn atmosphere around.

The problem with a policeman's job was that it dealt almost exclusively with the abnormalities of life, so much so that one almost lost the capacity to savour normalcy. But perhaps that was only his problem, Saralkar brooded, for Motkar seemed quite attuned to switching channels from normal to abnormal and back.

Just as he was slipping back into depression, the stimulating aroma of the Amrutulya special masala tea, served in little cone-shaped glasses, pepped him up.

"Get a couple of Parle G biscuits," he said to the boy, feeling much better with the first sip.

For a second it seemed likely to Saralkar that he too could enjoy crime free moments if he wanted to, but Motkar spoiled it. "Does the kind of brutality we saw point towards a hardened criminal, sir?"

"Strange you should be mulling over possibilities, Motkar, not facts?" Saralkar said with irony.

"I know, sir," PSI Motkar acknowledged wryly. "But it's also unusual for you not to come up with a few theories within hours of a murder."

Saralkar snorted. "I don't understand you. When I spout theories you disapprove. When I don't you don't like that either." He glared at him, popped a whole biscuit into his mouth, and munched aggressively.

Motkar said nothing, just waited. A slurping noise from another customer distracted Saralkar momentarily and Motkar half expected him to chide the man. But that did not happen.

Instead, Saralkar looked thoughtful when he turned around to face Motkar again. "It may be a horribly commonplace crime. The victim is in the park for some godforsaken reason, a goon spots her and decides it's the perfect opportunity for robbing and raping. He holds her at knife point, asks her to hand over money, jewellery. She complies. Then, when she realizes he wants more than that, she puts up some resistance. There's a struggle and our infuriated and much aroused assailant stabs her in the chest in a frenzy. Probably when she loses consciousness or is subdued, he rapes her and flees. The woman is injured, however, not dead. She regains consciousness briefly, tries to drag herself to safety, then collapses and dies."

Saralkar stopped, took a sip and looked at Motkar defensively, like a genius who knows he has been disappointed a protégé by coming up with something that's no masterpiece.

PSI Motkar nodded slowly. "Most likely, sir. It's also possible that the assailant first raped her and then realized he couldn't let her go and decided to kill her."

Saralkar knitted his eyebrows. "Why should it be that way?"

Motkar looked unsure for a second, then said, "Sir, I read somewhere that as a part of standard self-defence instructions that women receive abroad, they are advised not to resist rape in order to stay alive in situations where there is no escape or the attacker is too strong. So maybe, the girl allowed him to rape her, hoping he wouldn't kill her but..."

"Is that what they really advise women?" Saralkar asked with incredulity, putting his glass down. "I mean I have heard about not resisting muggers, but rape . . .?"

"Yes, they certainly do so in America, sir!"

"How do you know?"

"Sir, I was on *bandobast* duty at a seminar on 'Crime against Women', a couple of years ago. I heard one of the speakers talk about these instructions," Motkar replied, half expecting some derisive response.

"Hmmm . . ." Saralkar said after a pause. "But we don't know yet if the victim is an American citizen, Motkar."

"In many other Western countries too, sir, that's what the speaker said. She said the chances of a woman surviving rape are much higher if she doesn't resist a brutal and violent criminal."

Saralkar raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "Another western concept that didn't work in India, then, Motkar. She was killed anyway, wasn't she?" There was a sad irony in his voice. "It really all boils down to ill luck, doesn't it . . . Which way will that crazed, warped mind of the rapist turn?"

"I have always wondered why some of them kill the victim after raping her. Why compound the crime so that you become not just a rapist but also a murderer?" Motkar remarked.

Saralkar's eyes were staring into the distance. He shrugged. "That's why some experts argue that rape shouldn't be made an offence punishable by death. It's like signing the death warrant of a man's victims. If a man knows he'll hang for committing rape, all the more reason for him to kill the victim in the hope that he'll escape detection."

They sat silently for a couple of minutes. Then Saralkar stood up. "Get details of known sexual offenders and violent history-sheeters in the area. Make sure forensics does a thorough job at the site. Try and get a positive identification of the victim."

"Yes, sir," Motkar said, paying for the tea.

Saralkar looked at his wristwatch and yawned. "Let's meet at around noon in office."

What was left unsaid, of course, was that he would get a couple of hours of sleep, while Motkar would have no such luxury. But Motkar, as always, didn't seem to grudge it. A few minutes later Saralkar dropped Motkar at Model Colony Lake Garden and began his journey home. It was much

colder now and Saralkar unsuccessfully tried to fasten the collar button, but gave up. The streets were not completely desolated now, with morning walkers and other creatures of the morning up and about.

An hour or two of sleep would do him good, plus he would have the added pleasure of disturbing his wife yet again. It was barely five-thirty. And then, just as Saralkar turned the corner into a small street, he spotted a gang of three healthy and hostile specimens of the canine species. His heart skipped a beat. They were going to go after him; he knew that much from their looks and low growls.

He revved up his motorcycle in response and drove straight at them with a thumping heart.

Gulab Chandwani hated his first name. Hadn't his parents ever realized what they were condemning him to, that for a life time? His school days had been the worst. Half the boys had pounced mercilessly on the 'girlie' meaning of his name, which stood for rose, and always addressed him as 'Gulabo' or 'Gulabi'. The other half were tickled to death that Gulab rhymed with *jula* meaning loose motions, and never lost an opportunity to invoke titters at his expense.

It was much better now in his forties. Nobody burst into peals of laughter on hearing his name although looks of amusement were par for the course. But the experience at school had left him with a lifelong aversion to being addressed by his first name. He avoided mentioning it as much as possible and stuck firmly to introducing himself as 'Chandwani' to all those he came in contact with.

Sometimes, however, the utterance of his first name was inevitable.

"What's your full name?" PSI Motkar had asked as a matter of course, without any malice.

PSI Salunkhe had just introduced him to Motkar as Chandwani sahib, the owner of Hotel Lake View.

Gulab Chandwani scratched his hairy forearm with obvious reluctance, then bit the bullet and said "Gulab Chandwani," in a voice as low as possible. He was relieved to see no smirk light up on Motkar's face in response.

"Chandwani's hotel is quite popular with foreign tourists all year round," PSI Salunkhe elaborated.

Being on his patch, Salunkhe was obviously familiar with the owner and his establishment. Hotel Lake View was a small three-storey hotel with twenty-five rooms. Two star.

"I see!" Motkar said, but did not quite see at first glance what explained the hotel's popularity with backpackers.

Before the conversation could go any further, two hotel guests—a foreign couple dressed casually—walked up to the reception, greeted Chandwani with a 'good morning' and handed in their key.

Chandwani excused himself from the policemen and turned towards the couple nervously. "Hope you slept well?"

"Fine, thank you," the man answered. "We'll be back by 6 p.m. Ciao!"

The couple turned to leave, glanced at the policemen, and gave them a smile. The man quipped "Are you being arrested, Chandwani?" He gave a wide grin, pleased at his own joke. The woman accompanying him also flashed a friendly smile.

Chandwani gave an embarrassed laugh. "No . . . no . . . just a routine matter."

The foreigner winked at him and smiled at the policemen again. "Good man, Chandwani!" said the woman, as they made their way out.

Gulab Chandwani suddenly seemed pale. "Why don't you come into my office?" he said anxiously to Motkar and Salunkhe. He opened the door to a small cubicle and invited them to step inside.

"Ashok, look after the reception," Chandwani hollered out to some unseen underling before closing the door of the cubicle. "Would you like to have some tea or coffee, sahib? Something to eat?" he asked the two policemen, scratching his forearm yet again.

Salunkhe was about to say something but Motkar spoke up before he did. "No!" They had already had tea at one of the two other hotels they had visited.

"What's the matter, sir?" Chandwani asked cagily, unable to contain his nervousness any longer.

"We want to see your current guest register," Motkar said.

“Constable Shinde checked two-three days ago only, sir,” Chandwani replied looking at Salunkhe his fingers having stopped scratching his forearm momentarily.

“We are pretty regular,” Salunkhe explained to Motkar adjusting his spectacles. “All hotel registers in our area are checked at least once in two weeks since those German Bakery blasts.”

“And we also make it a point to maintain all records properly,” Chandwani added. “Salunkhe sah will vouch for the fact that there’s never been a problem.”

“Did Shinde also check the document copies?” Salunkhe asked.

“I don’t know, sir. I wasn’t present. But I’ll get the file for you,” Chandwani said getting up opening the door, and hollering at Ashok to bring the document file and register. He shut the door again and returned to his chair, suddenly voluble and animated. “You’ll see we are very diligent, sir—copies of passports and all! Best not to take chances. In fact, I give rooms only to Americans and Europeans. No other foreigners. If anyone from other countries turns up, I say ‘No rooms’.”

Motkar nodded, wondering how blatantly racism and discrimination worked. We sought to defend ourselves by reinforcing our prejudices.

Chandwani’s fingers had resumed scratching his forearms, though gently. “Looking for some suspicious foreigner, sir?” he asked eagerly. “Most guests come to me with references from other foreigners who’ve stayed here earlier.”

Motkar shook his head. “We’ve found a body.”

Chandwani goggled. “A foreigner?”

“Yes.”

“Man or woman?”

“Woman.”

“Where?” Chandwani asked all excited.

Motkar looked at Salunkhe, who replied, “Quite nearby actually. In Model Colony Lake Garden.”

It elicited a sharp intake of breath from Chandwani and left him gaping. Then suddenly he averted his eyes.

“Any of your guests missing?” PSI Motkar asked, sensing something.

Chandwani hesitated for just a fraction of a second, looking pale. “No . . . I don’t think so.”

Before Motkar could ask the next question, there was a rap on the cubicle door and a high cheekboned young man with hair that bounced with every step walked in. “Sir, can’t find the documents file. It’s not in its usual place,” he said to Chandwani.

“How can that be, Ashok? Have you looked properly?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chandwani got up from his seat looking perturbed. “It has to be there!” He glanced at the police officers. “I’ll just get it, sir. These boys can’t do a simple task . . .”

He hurried out of the cabin looking hassled.

PSI Motkar turned to Salunkhe. “How long have you known this guy? Any funny business?”

Salunkhe shook his head. “Nothing that I know of, at least not since I’ve been here. No record of any serious incident happening at his hotel. Of course there have been some minor complaints from neighbourhood residents now and then, like obscene behaviour by foreigners . . . you know necking and kissing in public just outside the hotel, some women wearing tops without bras . . . that kind of stuff. It’s a residential locality, you know; so the usual . . .”

“I see. No whiff of drugs or guests complaining about valuables or passports being stolen?” Motkar queried.

“No, never,” Salunkhe assured him.

Motkar nodded. “Do you think he reacted normally?”

Salunkhe considered. “Well, Chandwani has always been a nervous sort of chap I remember when

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