

OPERATION BAMBOO GARDEN

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War is the spectacular and bloody projection of our everyday life. It is an outward expression of our inward state, an enlargement of our daily action.

—J Krishnamurti

CHAPTER 1

The Mighty Take A Tumble

Mumbai, 4th August 2020

The black Mercedes was racing down the Eastern Express Highway, honking and swerving past the few other vehicles on the road.

The state of Maharashtra had been at the eye of the Covid-19 pandemic, and Mumbai, the city of dreams, was yet to wake up from one of its worst-ever nightmares. The Corona case count in the Maximum City had breached the one hundred-thousand mark, even as the death toll remained mounting with each passing day. Fresh restrictions on travel and movement were being imposed at a disturbing regularity—perhaps a manifestation of the authorities’ frustrations in clipping the wings of the deadly virus—leaving the common folk in a state of utter ambiguity and confusion.

The supposedly simple process of applying for and obtaining permissions for vehicular movement was

proving to be very difficult. From a portal that wasn't designed to withstand the barrage of applications that were pouring in, to the inconsistent yardsticks being used by authorities to grant such approvals, the process was proving to be a game of chance for most.

The black Mercedes had a sticker affixed to its windshield proclaiming that the vehicle was approved for *Emergency Movement* across the state. It was therefore among the handful of private vehicles in the city that were not bound by lockdown related restrictions. This, and the sheer abandon with which the car zipped towards its destination, spoke of its occupant being a man of certain means and influence.

'Towards Vashi, Sir?' the driver, Mohsin, enquired. Mohsin had been in Ramanathan's employ for nine years and he couldn't recall a single instance when his employer had kept their destination concealed from him well into the drive. Ramanathan was a methodical man and he liked to make his hours on the road count. Invariably he would tell Mohsin where they were headed while boarding the vehicle and remain glued to his phone or laptop for remainder of the journey. He trusted Mohsin's instincts and his sense of traffic.

Today was different though.

'Take the Eastern Express highway,' was all that Ramanathan said as Mohsin shut the car door behind him. His grave and solemn look had prevented the driver from querying further. Ramanathan wasn't carrying his laptop or even his usual office bag. His phone was

obviously with him, but Mohsin didn't see him draw it out. Instead, Ramanathan kept looking out the window, his eyes affixed on something obscure in the distance.

'Sir, should I take the turn towards Vashi?' after a brief wait Mohsin enquired again. A decision needed to be made. If they continued straight, they would exit Mumbai and enter the Thane district. And, if their destination happened to be Vashi, Mohsin would have to take the next exit and turn right towards the Vashi bridge.

'Uh... oh yes,' Ramanathan responded, emerging from his reverie. 'Take the turn towards the bridge.'

'And once you cross the toll booth, please stop on the side for a few minutes,' he added as an afterthought. Mohsin nodded, turned on the indicator and shifted his focus on changing lanes.

'Shall we stop here, Sir?' Mohsin asked. Given the sparse traffic, it took them all of five minutes to take the turn and cross the unmanned toll plaza. They were now on the Vashi bridge—one of the four entry points to the satellite city of Mumbai, built over the Thane creek.

'Yes, this is fine... Just wait inside the car,' Ramanathan said, stepping out of the vehicle. On a normal day, the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the bridge would have made such a halt impossible. But the pandemic had blurred the lines between the normal and the unusual in multiple respects.

Ramanathan walked away from the car and extracted his mobile phone from the jacket pocket. He looked towards the azure sky and heaved a deep sigh. It was a

beautiful day and the slight breeze, as it brushed past his face, felt good. He looked over his shoulder, perhaps to check if he was adequately distanced from the vehicle, before bringing the phone screen to life.

‘Suppu, can you imagine that it’s been twenty years since we first met? I still remember our first coffee date... it was as though the cat had got my tongue. I was so nervous that I couldn’t put a single coherent sentence together. I feared that I had messed it all up, but you obviously saw something in me and decided to give me another chance... And what a journey it has been ever since,’ Ramanathan started dictating the voice message, pillaging through his memories and looking for the right words to express himself.

‘Over the coming days and weeks, you will hear a lot of things... bad and ugly things and I hope you find it within you to stand by again then. You know that your happiness means the world to me and that is all I have ever cared about. And today, if I am doing something that will bring you nothing but pain and misery, it is because I am left with no alternatives... Please forgive me, my love. I love you, Suppu,’ he said, releasing the microphone icon that would send the message to its intended recipient.

Putting the phone back inside the pocket, he looked at the skies and sighed once again. Then, in a flash, he grabbed the bridge’s railing with one hand and flung himself across.

Mohsin, who had been watching his employer’s actions from the confines of the car, was too stunned to

react instantly. It was as if a gargantuan mallet had come crashing down on him out of nowhere. It took him a few seconds to process the scene his eyes were relaying back to his brain.

When he was able to regain control of his senses, he rushed out of the car screaming. Flailing his hands wildly, he ran towards the spot where he had last seen his employer standing. But by the time he craned his neck and peered down, all he could see were the concentric ripples in the otherwise placid waters of Thane creek.

CHAPTER 2

Decisions And Destiny

New Delhi, 4th August 2020

‘Boss, have you reached home yet?’

‘Just about to reach,’ Ronit replied, one hand resting on the steering wheel, and his eyes peeled in search of a vacant parking spot.

The Type-4 Government Quarters in RK Puram had been allocated to officials from departments ranging from Animal Husbandry to Education over the years, making the area a true petri dish of human diversity. Many of these residents were working from home on account of the pandemic, and their vehicles, like obstinate tenants, rarely vacated the slots they were parked in.

Unfortunately, Ronit was bereft of any such privileges. Every morning, while steering the Hyundai hatchback out of its place, he would mouth a silent prayer seeking divine intervention to find an agreeable spot for the car upon his return from work. Given the limited number of slots in

circulation, he seldom found his prayers answered these days.

‘Why, what’s the matter?’ he asked, the excitement of having spotted a vacant spot inadvertently seeping into his voice. And it was barely a couple hundred steps away from his building block. Ronit had left work early today and if this was a reward for his timely arrival, he wasn’t complaining.

‘An incident in Mumbai... A high profile one. The target was RBG Holdings. Their CEO committed suicide this morning,’ the caller explained.

‘What! Isn’t this Ramanathan’s company... The guy who is married to the ex-minister’s daughter?’

‘Was married! Yes, it’s the same guy... Apparently, he jumped off a bridge in Mumbai today.’

‘Oh my God! Adhiraj, this can get really ugly,’ Ronit replied. A frown had appeared on his forehead and his words were tinged with apprehension.

‘It has started turning ugly already, Boss. The media is having a field day and the usual suspects are busy insinuating that this is an outcome of some elaborate government conspiracy to silence industrialists who oppose their agenda,’ Adhiraj returned.

‘Shit! This is bad news.’

‘In all likelihood the case will land in our lap. So, to begin with, I am reaching out to the concerned agencies, requesting them to share the information that is currently available with them, and I will have a preliminary report ready for you by the time you reach office tomorrow,’ Adhiraj said. ‘Let me know in case you want me to explore

any other angles as well.’

Ronit had reached his building and was about to climb the stairs: a section of the structure known for its tenuous relationship with mobile signals. He paused at the curtail step and said, ‘That should be good to begin with. I am almost home... Let me get better understanding of the situation first and I will call you if anything else needs to be done. Otherwise, I will see you in office tomorrow morning.’

Ronit Biswas was a simple, bespectacled man in his mid-thirties. But veiled behind this humble exterior was a brilliant brain that had once been a prized target for many Silicon Valley majors. An alumnus of IIT Delhi and MIT, Ronit had already carved a name for himself in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by the time he acquired his master’s degree. He was still evaluating the many job offers he had landed when an unexpected phone call from the Indian Ambassador to The United States changed the trajectory of his life forever.

‘Your country needs you,’ were the four magic words that made all the difference.

The Indian government was planning to set up a new department for checking and preventing cybercrime within RAD (Research and Analysis Division), the country’s premier intelligence agency. This was a pet project of the Home Minister, and he had personally sifted through the profiles of many successful Indian technocrats before zeroing in on Ronit. ‘You understand the rapidly changing world of technology and your

approach will be fresh and untainted,' the Ambassador had said, explaining the basis of the choice and inviting Ronit to set up and head this department.

To a Bengali boy with humble beginnings, the proposition was enough to propel his sense of patriotism into a different orbit. Despite mild resistance from Barkha, now his wife, Ronit returned to India and took up the job. Of course, the fact that he had been living in the US, away from her, for the past three years had a role to play in shaping his decision. The long-distance relationship had proven to be more strenuous than he had initially imagined, and he yearned to touch her, to hold her in his arms, to be with her. Ronit knew the importance of Barkha in his life, but her 'role' in shaping his career decision was something he would never acknowledge even to his own self.

'The next World War is not going to be fought by traditional weapons on borders as we know them, but through cyber weaponry—a few lines of code that can bring economies and governments to their knees. It is going to be a war of information, where countries will find themselves battling against invisible enemies in cyberspace... Imagine the things that a sixteen-year-old with an internet connection sitting on his couch in Islamabad can do today! Hell, he can bring an entire government down armed only with a laptop and an internet connection... And that is why we need you. We need your expertise to set up a team that will be at the core of our evolving defense strategy... We can't afford to be caught with our pants down when the

time comes,' the Home Minister had said while inducting Ronit into RAD.

Ronit and his team—his deputies, Adhiraj and Myra, and a dozen analysts—had achieved several triumphs since then. From busting cyber scams to preventing phishing attacks, they had done it all over the years. But the job, which had been a joyride initially, was now becoming something of an irritant for Ronit. No matter how hard they worked or what cyber puzzles they were able to solve, it seemed that they were always falling short on the expectations of their political masters.

With changes in the political leadership, the very premise on which the Department of Cybercrime at RAD had been set up had undergone multiple iterations. Bureaucratic tussles and budget cuts had impaired the department's ability to stay abreast with technological advancements, while their invisible enemies were constantly upgrading their arsenal. This Ronit could still live with, but not the irrational and sometimes annoying demands and expectations of the political brass.

Most of them did not understand the basic differences between traditional crime and cybercrime. The fact that a cybercriminal could be sitting anywhere across the globe and could route an attack that was impossible to track, somehow became extremely difficult for Ronit to explain when something went wrong. Most hackers were lone wolves who did not leave an intelligence footprint like traditional criminals did, making it virtually impossible to pre-empt or prevent such attacks. Hence, most of

the team's time went behind tracking and attempting to expose perpetrators of crimes once they had been committed. Sadly, the political elite viewed this as a sign of inefficiency and mediocrity.

Ronit knew that he wasn't soaring on the minister's popularity charts, and he didn't mind that to the slightest. What irked him most was men with little or no knowledge about his domain chiding his work and in words that often breached the frontiers of civility. The situation often made him wonder if the decision to leave a promising corporate career to come and work for a bunch of ignorant politicians had been a wise one.

Not very long ago, a senior member of the ruling party had summoned Ronit and asked him to use *computers* to figure out the precise location of an ancient treasure that was buried somewhere within the expanse of his constituency. The politician had received the tip from a godman, which obviously made it infallible. After he had spent a major portion of his allocated Local Area Development Fund in commissioning random and fruitless excavations across the district, he had decided to turn to technology for help. And Ronit, if the politician was to be believed, had come highly recommended.

It had taken Ronit all his intellect to explain to the man that computers were inept at performing what he believed to be a simple task. The man finally gave in, but not before he expressed his displeasure at Ronit's *uncooperative* attitude. Ronit's exasperation, as he stepped out of the meeting, had known no bounds.

As Ronit approached his third floor flat, he could feel a nervous weight building inside his belly. If what Adhiraj had said was true, and there was no reason for it not to be, he was staring at a difficult week ahead. Ramanathan's death would certainly be blown into a political scandal by the opposition, especially since one of their leaders was the deceased's father in-law.

And if indeed a cyber attack was found to have triggered it, Ronit would have to drastically expand his ability to absorb expletives over the coming days. The monthly review meeting of RAD department heads with the Home Minister was scheduled in four days, and the minister wasn't going to find a better reason to show Ronit his place.

Ronit raised his index finger towards ring the doorbell but paused midway. He pulled up his eyebrows and took a long breath, as though bracing himself for another unexpected blow, before letting the finger land.

CHAPTER 3

The Fallout

New Delhi, 4th August 2020

‘Hi,’ Ronit said, slipping past Barkha. To an onlooker, this might have appeared to be an expeditious greeting of a tired husband returning home to his wife of several years, but it really was Ronit attempting to escape the noxiousness permeating their marriage. He was like a student avoiding the teacher’s eye while slipping inside the classroom, hoping to avoid being called out. Limiting his interactions with her to the perfunctory was Ronit’s way of promoting peaceful cohabitation.

‘You are back early...,’ she returned after him.

‘It was a relatively light day today,’ he replied. ‘So far...,’ he added, claiming the remote and depositing himself on the sofa chair facing the television. Barkha walked back into the kitchen without offering a response.

‘...MPTV has exclusive access to the voice message that C K Ramanathan had sent to his wife, Supriya,

moments before taking the fatal plunge from the Vashi bridge. Viewers, please listen to the painful parting words of the deceased business tycoon and we will return to our panel of experts and hear their views on what might have pushed him over the edge.'

'You will have tea, right?' Barkha called out from the kitchen.

'Uh, yes please...,' Ronit responded, without taking his eyes off the television screen.

'Let us look at the facts as we know them,' the news anchor was back on the screen after the audio message had been played twice. 'C K Ramanathan had singlehandedly build a large retail empire, RBG Holdings, in less than two decades. Only last year he had been recognised among the top emerging business leaders of India by a renowned international publication. It is shocking that a man who was at the helm of an empire valued at over Rs 2,000 crores would end his own life so unceremoniously,' the anchor spoke as file pictures of Ramanathan's glory days played in a loop on the screen.

'India seeks answers... The country wants to know the real reason behind a successful business leader taking such a drastic and shocking step. So, let me cut across to our first guest, Arshi Sheikh of the LJP, for her opening remarks. Ms Sheikh, C K Ramanathan was married to the daughter of a senior leader of your party... He was not only successful professionally, but had a happy family with two schoolgoing children. What do you think is responsible for this disaster?'

‘Afsha, we all know that the government of the day has been misusing central agencies to silence voices of its critics. This is all a big conspiracy, and today the country has paid a heavy price for turning a blind eye to their misconduct by losing a bright and promising business icon...’ Arshi had only started delivering her well-rehearsed opening lines when another panelist jumped in and started speaking over her.

‘Do you people know anything other than to make baseless and false allegations? Didn’t you hear what the Mumbai Police Commissioner said during his press conference?’ he was yelling.

‘Mr Rana, you will get your turn to speak... Please let Ms Sheikh complete what she is saying,’ the anchor was forced to interrupt in a bid to maintain sanity in the discussion for as long as she could. It was going to be a difficult task though, considering the entrenched political differences between the panel members Ronit could see on the screen. Television debates had become an arena for verbal slugfests lately and Ronit detested them. He usually preferred online aggregators for his daily dose of news, but today was anything but usual.

‘Tea,’ Barkha said, placing one cup in front of him and relegating herself to the adjacent chair. ‘Were you able to call the washing machine guys? How long before they are going to send a mechanic?’ she said, reaching out for the TV remote.

‘No, I need to watch this,’ Ronit stopped her with a wave of his hand, his eyes still glued to the screen. ‘They

are short of manpower due to the pandemic. They have promised to send a mechanic as soon as they can,' he added.

'And what am I expected to do then? Manage, just like I am managing everything else in this house,' she murmured, withdrawing her outstretched hand. By now Ronit had learnt to identify the traps concealed in her words and steer clear of them. He refrained from offering a counter.

Ronit and Barkha's marital relationship had been another unexpected casualty of Ronit's career choices. They were both studying when they first met through a common friend many years back. He had been pursuing his undergraduate degree course from IIT, while Barkha was studying commerce at a Delhi University college. It had been a classic case of opposites attracting, and the effervescent and bubbly Barkha was soon madly in love with the shy and reserved Ronit. To him, it was as if he had found a life beyond books and computer screens in Barkha.

Theirs was a perfect relationship which was meant to go all the way, and it did. When he decided to move to the US for further studies, Barkha assured him that they would make the long-distance relationship work, and they did. And when, in just over a year of his joining RAD, they decided to tie the nuptial knot, it surprised no one.

It was a few years into the marriage, when the initial sheen of their conjugal romance had begun to settle, when Ronit realised that the glue that bound them

together was fast losing its viscosity. They were no longer the two people who had fallen deeply in love and decided to devote their entire lives to each other. He, for one, had changed tracks to becoming a very different person from the high-flying software guru he was meant to be. He was now a government servant, a spy to be precise, who had a taxing job that did not pay even a fraction of the money that his contemporaries in the private sector were making.

On the other hand, Barkha had always been a woman of the world driven by material wants and desires. She had let her dreams be known to him early on in their relationship. Ronit had seen the talk of international vacations, fancy cars and expensive brands bring a sparkle to young Barkha's eyes, and he had secretly fantasised about placing all these luxuries at her feet someday.

He was well on track to making their dreams a reality until a complex surge of emotions had derailed him. And now, whenever she saw pictures of Bali or Santorini bashfully posted on social media by her friends, Ronit noticed a cocktail of envy, disappointment and forced compromise in her dreamy eyes.

They weren't exactly struggling to make ends meet, but what they had was a normal middle-class life at best. A life that warranted prioritisation and planning, even when it came to making purchases like a new washing machine. It was Ronit who had failed Barkha and crushed her dreams, or so he believed.

Barkha had never confronted him on the matter, but

he had watched it gradually erode the joy and happiness that had once been the hallmark of their relationship. She smiled a lot less these days and often he found her words to be uncharacteristically caustic and piercing. The two were like a pair of frogs sitting in a pot of water, which had been put on the stove to boil. The heat around them was rising, but not abruptly enough for either of them to act on preventing the inevitable. Ronit found himself further fettered into inaction by the weight of his own guilt.

‘...the police claim that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) received anonymous email tips—and mind you, not one but several emails—purportedly containing documentary proof of illegal transactions carried out by Mr Ramanathan on behalf of RBG Holdings, which prompted them to open an enquiry into the company and its promoter. I wish to ask Mr Rana if the ED even thought about ascertaining the veracity of these documents before opening their enquiry? And did they even try to find out the identity of this so-called whistleblower? Does the ED spring into action so swiftly to investigate every anonymous email that it receives?’ the politician, Ms. Sheikh, was screaming at the top of her voice.

‘Madam... Madam... It was only an investigation,’ Rana interrupted her. ‘If the ED doesn’t investigate the complaint, how will they ever find out if the documents were authentic? And if Mr Ramanathan wasn’t involved in anything illegal, he had absolutely nothing to worry about. He should have simply cooperated with the authorities. Doesn’t his action prove that he had something to hide?’

‘Mind your words Mr Rana! You have no right to vilify the deceased... It is not up to you or your party to pass a judgement on his character,’ she burst out like a grenade having lost its pin. ‘It wasn’t just the ED... The Income Tax Department had also sent notices to C K Ramanathan. Isn’t it odd that two central agencies should decide to investigate the same person at one time? Mr Rana, even a four-year-old can see what your government is up to. His blood is on your hands and your hands only.’

‘Madam, didn’t you hear what the police commissioner said? The IT department has documents in its possession that prove Ramanathan’s involvement in tax fraud...’

‘Oh please,’ Arshi interjected animatedly. ‘How do you think that so many confidential documents—some, which even the company management does not have access to—decided to turn up in the mailboxes of ED and IT officials? You will say that someone on the inside might have leaked them. But if the documents are indeed genuine, they would implicate anybody else who had access to them. That debunks this theory entirely... Afsha, the reality is that either these so-called documents don’t exist, or they have been fabricated, and the ED and IT department used them to target and vilify an honest and law-abiding citizen of the country. Mr Rana might not understand this, but there are people in this world for whom their honour and dignity mean everything. And when Mr Ramanathan found the very foundations on which he had built his business empire under attack, he couldn’t take it...’

As he watched the panellists emphatically make their points, the creases on Ronit's forehead continued to deepen. The opposition was clearly leaving no holds barred to corner the government on Ramanathan's suicide. This meant that the Home Minister would want answers from him, and soon. Ronit wondered if the Ramanathan's father-in-law had given his consent for making a spectacle of Ramanathan's death for the sake of scoring some political points. But he was quick to brush the thought aside. He had never understood the world of politics, and he was only glad that he had managed to keep himself distanced from it thus far.

'Adhiraj,' Ronit said, when the call was received.

'Yes, Boss,' he heard the youngster's harried voice in response.

'Listen, this appears to be more potent than I thought. We might have to get to the bottom of this quickly. Will you be able to leave for Mumbai tonight?'

'Tonight?'

'Yes! Why, is there a problem?'

'No... No problems, Boss,' Adhiraj replied. 'Just that the request was too sudden... Anyways, yes, I can take the late evening flight.'

'Good, do that! I will have a word with the Police Commissioner in the meantime and have someone meet you at the airport. I want you to join the investigations and figure out the source of the leaked documents. Check the company servers and Ramanathan's personal devices for traces of any malware that might have been used to

hack the systems... I just hope that it was an insider and not some hacker who was responsible for the leaks...'

'I agree, Boss,' Adhiraj returned. 'I will get on with my travel bookings immediately.'

'Also, please speak to Myra and bring her up to speed on the matter. Keep her updated on whatever developments happen in Mumbai... I need to know them on a real time basis.'

'Sure Boss,' Adhiraj said, before disconnecting the call. Returning the phone to the bedside table, he rolled back to embrace the person lying beside him, half wrapped in a white cotton sheet. 'You heard... there go our evening plans... But I do have to bring you up to speed on something before that. The Boss's orders, after all,' he said, pinning her to bed and craning his neck forward.

'You know, your job, your boss and you, all suck,' Myra returned with feigned annoyance, before depositing her lips on his.