

The
HAUNTING WITNESS



C. P. RABINDRANATH

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CHAPTER



The revelers were full inside, with the music and spirit swaying them; unmindful of the circumstances or the consequences of their new found revelry. The bar room of the restaurant had ambient light with the occasional rotation of small bright strobe lights just enough for people, both men and women to find their way around mingling with each other to forgive and then forget their tormenting souls. Around the corner and sides were small groups haggling for drugs or sex; their voices lewd and low, enough to bargain and use.

Outside the air was damp and a cold draught was blowing. Most men stepped in, all covered, to beat the cold and swallowed a few pegs to maintain warmth and then ambled away to roost.

The drummers and guitarist played and swayed to produce a number, scintillating enough for the inebriated to jump, dance and float with the note. The air was misty with the smoke of cigars, mixed with the breath of alcohol. Most had glossy vacant eyes to just perceive and move in the dim light. Others more alert, watched and waited, for an opportunity to beckon them.

The time was well past 9 PM on a Saturday and the show time began to gain momentum. By 12 PM the bar would start filling with new ones trying to quickly gulp and move, the spent ones wavering their way back to their homes. By 1 AM, the stone drunk on the floor were slowly helped

on to their feet and then most would saunter away; some lay by the side of the road in deep intoxicated sleep for Sunday morning sunshine walkers to wake them up.

This was the mundane existence to which Alex was accustomed to, for the past one year. The Galaxy bar was located between the 17th century Bandra Fort, a Portuguese monument on the southwest and Chatrapati Shivaji international airport 6.5 Km away on the North east. He was the chief barman cum server, of this bar “Galaxy” in the suburbs of Bandra West located between Dadar and Khar, the Mahim bay intervening; the owner continuing his services for his honesty and hard work which was a rare commodity among his species. Fear continued to act as a deterrent to the wise and old survivor, but too much lead to abstinence, ultimate avoidance and sudden disappearance.

Alex was wise and knew the art of survival, which was to remain neutral, stupid and thus innocuous. He knew to serve his master well by staying calm and quiet, going about his job with gusto, as a professional wedded to it. He never showed or spoke anything that he saw or heard, imparting a genuine indifference, innocuous enough to repel others and save himself. Everyone thought and knew he was a loner and left him to it. He had the audacity to stay away from trouble; he knew the vanishing act by the back of his hand so that he never became a witness to any event.

An orphan with no known relative to call his own, Alex had grown in the suburbs of Mumbai, poverty for a morsel of food and shelter being his only motivating relative for existence. Ever since he consciously knew about his life, he was on some errand or other, making money and sheltering his body and soul in a rented shovel away from the rain and hot sun. He had survived many times by sheer luck from disease and death that it no longer mattered to him if living became an antidote to death. With no schooling, Alex had joined the army during war and then acquired minimum qualification to sustain and continue in it.

An Ex-service man, who initially joined the mechanized division and later opted to serve in the special corps of the army, his battalion had no name and number as it was mostly clandestine. He was superbly trained in every conceivable usage of latest arms and ammunitions and electronic devices and in the art of espionage, surveillance and self-defense which

took him solely deep into enemy territory for weeks or months for very special covert operations. In one of his assignment he had acted as a women operator for nearly three months and returned back to report to his superior. If he returned unscathed, he was alive, otherwise he was declared missing or dead with no one to claim him, the State offering him a quiet decent burial known only to a few, if they could by any chance retrieve his remains. If he was caught, he would become stateless and nobody would accept him. He was trained in electronic espionage and knew the art of surviving alone in very difficult hostile situations. He was also an expert in martial arts. Following a major gunshot wound injury sustained while trying to apprehend a terrorist inimical to India he was medically boarded out. He left army for good and became a civilian with a lifelong pension. Thereafter, he worked as a guide for a year in New Delhi and then joined the restaurant more to satisfy his penchant for the new and the novel.

Now he was genuinely happy and lived his life as it led him, with dreams and imagination of a good rich life sustaining him. He knew that his trait and proclivity for survival with added coping strategies would one day propel him to richness and a life of happiness.

It was 8 PM on a Sunday night when all his ambition got shattered. Alex was at the wrong place in the worst time of his career; at the service table instead of inside the bar enclosure.

CHAPTER



He saw it coming but could not evade it. A key was thrown over to him and a gruff voice echoed “Park my car nearby on the right side”. Many knew him as Chota Bhai, so called as he was the youngest in the clan, the worst gangster, with more than a dozen murder cases against him, but he continued to move with impunity for want of a single witness. Most of them forgot to see or hear what happened; if they did then they never saw the light of the day again. Alex generally never undertook any errand for the gangs as he did not want to be identified with any particular one, earning the wrath of the other. Still he dare not refuse as it might sometimes ignite him, like a time bomb.

Alex sauntered to the car parked in front of the restaurant. He felt tense and jittery and looked around to see if there were any watchers, a precaution he took to stay neutral and out of trouble as far as his conscience would allow, not that it mattered much now. It was old Chevrolet, but still the best among then. He fidgeted, grouped for the key hole and in the melee accidentally dropped the key. He squatted to retrieve it and almost sat there shocked and glued. A bomb big enough to blow the restaurant was strapped to its underbelly. He heard his heart beating rhythmically fast to the tick... tick sound of the timer in the prevailing ominous silence. He slowly got up, looked around and saw a hefty broad shouldered gangster nicknamed the ‘Bull’ silencing him with a menacing look gesturing with a finger on his lips. He was also another notorious

gangster, each balancing their acts of murder and mayhem to gain more infamy and unsavory reputation to stay ahead in their profession. They belonged to two different families of mobsters each trying to rival and outdo the other. For all purposes he looked like a bull dog. He thought he camouflaged his appearance by wearing hats of different hues and colors; but only heightened it. If he refused the Bull, he would not think twice of putting a bullet in his head.

Alex was caught in a nasty catch 22 situation. Be damned and be dead if you do and if you don't. Alex slowly turned to look at him again. The Bull had a semblance of a remote in his hand with which he gestured him to drive the car. Certainly it was not meant for him. He could take him out in more simple and swift ways.

Alex got in, started the ignition and heaved a sigh of relief as the bomb was not timed triggered to it. He slowly turned the car to park it very far away from the restaurant to lessen the impact on it, should it blow down to kingdom come. He noticed the Bull watching him with the remote, ready. He alighted, locked the door and walked into the bar. As he reached the door, a cold gun metal pushed him to a dark corner and the steel grey eyes of the Bull with his halitosis warned him to shut up and stay alive. Alex did not need any further motivation to do it. Alex prayed to God that nobody else saw or knew him to have parked the car. He strolled in sweating and trembling; to see the gangster Chota Bhai sitting with his cronies on a table sipping whisky on the rocks with a cut Havana cigar in his lips. Alex did not want to hand over the keys back in front of so many of his sycophants, who would be natural witnesses. He made a detour to evade him, but the gang leader shouted "Alex, the car keys" for all to hear and recall.

Alex handed over the keys silently, searching for his conscience whether to tell the owner or not. He turned to see the Bull watching him. The owner of the bar cum restaurant ran a business which he could not afford, but to stay neutral. He was tough and firm with all of them, but he made it a point not to interfere with their business affairs as long as they paid him for the services rendered and left him alone. Alex thought that he had a responsibility to inform him and then to calm up.

CHAPTER



The owner was sitting in his office with a rather round cherubic face and a fat tummy with a well groomed pepper and salt beard. He was nicknamed ‘Khan’ as he had the trait and behavior of a king. He smiled on seeing Alex in spite of all the guests around who were animatedly engaging him. Alex stopped and raised his hand to gesture that he needed to talk to him in private. He rose and walked over to him. Alex led him to a corner out of the sight of all, cupped his hand and told him the gist. He looked shocked, perspiring by the time Alex finished. The owner categorically told him not to tell a soul, alive or dead.

Suddenly the whole area vibrated and shook with the explosion shattering panes, glasses and lights. People shocked, ran helter-skelter for cover not knowing what befell them. Alex trembled like never before because he knew its import, impact and consequences. He reckoned the restaurant for Chota Bhai and his hooligans and the table was empty. People who ran for cover now converged on the scene. Alex walked with the owner, meandered through the crowd and looked at the annihilation. The whole car was blown to smithereens and a few cars nearby was on fire albeit occupants. Luckily the restaurant was spared as he had parked it by the side as far away as possible.

Somebody had called the Police and he heard the distant wail of the siren of Police cars intermingling with that of the ambulances. Alex looked around and saw the Bull, stone faced staring at him as though he

would consume him to the flames if he ever opened his mouth. Alex shifted his gaze swiftly and he appeared to detest it. Next moment he stood confronting him with a cold gun metal point probing his back, near his kidney.

“Shut your mouth if you want to stay alive” he threatened.

Alex just avoided pissing in his pants but drops of rivulets of sweat drained through his back and front. Alex walked inside and noticed his stare focusing on his back burning, like sunlight through a magnifying glass. He huddled close to his boss sitting in his chair still perspiring, unmindful of the Havana cigar burning his finger tip, mulling the consequences.

“What do I do if the Police caught on to me?” he asked in a low tone.

“Why should they?”

“I was the driver to park the car before it blew up.”

“Yes, you did park it; that is all.”

“But I saw the bomb underneath it.”

“You did, but nobody knows it.”

“The Bull knows it.”

“He will shut his God dammed mouth as he has planted it himself, so will you. After all he has eliminated only the scum’s” he concluded.

The logic was correct but bereft of fairness and truth and smelled of deceit. It was the only way to survive and so he would catch on to it, hook line and sinker.

But!..... But!..... Alex stated again as his conscience was turning turtle.

“No buts, or ifs, Just do as you are told” the owner was emphatic.

Alex was about to retort; the owner clamped him shut with his looks which was even more menacing than the ‘Bull’.

Alex left and when he peeked out, he saw five bodies covered with white sheets, lined up by the Police outside the restaurant waiting for the mortuary van. Chota Bhai and his close goons were dead meat. Alex went to the toilet to piss, he might as well discard what he could and lessen the

burden. He opened the door after he finished and saw the Police walking towards the office. He shut the door and walked back to the toilet and suddenly found that his stomach was churning like a washing machine and relieving all of them.

The door of the toilet opened and the boss rushed in. He said that the Policemen wanted to question him and he had told them that you have left on an errand send by him. He evaded them in order to buy some more time. He emphasized again to remind Alex.

“You had just parked the car as instructed and returned the key. It was nearly half an hour latter that the blast occurred. Isn’t that the truth? he asked. Alex nodded.

“So, stay calm and quiet and repeat the same, don’t think, vacillate, change tone or digress” he warned.

“This is meant for your survival. If news get around that you have leaked to the Police than you will be a dead meat before you have time to escape from their dragnet” he finished. Mr. Khan was never quite candid before. He liked Alex and did not want him to die as a stupid singing witness.

Alex decided to stay mute. Fear was a great tactical survivor if one understood to perceive it and act accordingly. If one fumbles with real existing fear then one will never get a chance to fear anymore. But if he remained mute and did not give a lead to the Police to catch upon and investigate, then they would interrogate him as he was the most likely suspect and falsely accuse him of planting the bomb, to solve the case and broach peace between the gangs. He would certainly be the fall guy. The thought stupefied him like icicles piercing his heart and he wretched.

What if the gang that perpetuated it made a preemptive strike in order to prevent him from informing the Police by himself or under duress? Other thoughts was also occupying a part of his mind. The rival gang in order to seek vengeance might annihilate him. Ultimately he was the most expendable person as it suited all their purpose and machination. So he was pitched and sandwiched between the gangs on one side and the Police on the other.

If he stayed mute there was every chance for all of them to hang a noose around his neck and kill him and be done with it. He had to take a tough decision and be proactive as he used to be during special operation in the army; his purpose, to carry out his assignment and escape. He was looking for a chance to be proactive again and here was the golden opportunity to use what he had learnt, for civilian action to redeem the country of such internal scum's who wreck the moral fabric of the society. So Alex decided to inform the police surreptitiously.

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