

MY FRIEND, SANCHO

by Amit Varma

Chapter One: Mosquitos and Death

1

Headline: Man swats himself to death

Strap: Byculla carpenter tries to crush mosquito on his stomach, kills himself instead

Copy: The persistent buzz of a mosquito can get so frustrating sometimes that one is driven to violence. That's what happened yesterday to Sunil Shettigar, a carpenter in Byculla. Shettigar was sitting on a bench waiting for a train at Byculla station when a pesky mosquito started bothering him. He saw it land on his stomach and gave it one mighty blow. He then collapsed in pain, and was rushed to hospital.

Mohsin Ahmed, a fruitseller at the scene, said: "I was minding my own business when, out of the corner of my eyes, I saw this man on the nearby bench hit himself on the stomach. He started shouting in pain, and fell down. I ran to him. He told me, 'I was killing a mosquito.'"

Ahmed and one other passerby took Shettigar to hospital, but Shettigar was declared dead on arrival. This reporter personally examined his shirt, but there were no stains of mosquito blood on it. Shettigar had died in vain.

2

"Did you really examine his shirt?" Mohan asked me.

"Yes," I replied.

“And there was no blood on it.”

“None at all.”

“Did he really tell the fruitseller he was killing a mosquito?”

“Dude, what's the time?”

“It's 11.40.”

“Yes. The deadline is upon us. Do you want to do fact-checking now or do you want to finish the page and go for dinner?”

Mohan sighed. “Dinner, dinner. Cool. And I like the last line, it's funny. I'm sure boss will like it.”

“Boss can kiss my buttocks.”

“Boss is coming.”

I turned around. D'Souza was walking up to us.

“You're late again, Abir.”

“Sir, I work hard.”

“You need to work smart.”

“Sir, fuck you.”

Okay, I didn't say that last bit. D'Souza read my copy and was pleased. But it didn't make front page. Front page went to wardrobe malfunction.

3

I should introduce myself now. My name is Abir Ganguly. I work in a tabloid in Bombay named *The Afternoon Mail*. I am 23. I eat meat. I am heterosexual. I don't believe in God. I masturbate 11 times a day. I exaggerate frequently, as in the last sentence. I am ambitious, in the sense of what I *want to be* rather than what I *want to do*, for there isn't particularly much I want to do, being very lazy, and I wish I could be rich and famous without having to do anything for it. That would be easy if I was rich and famous to start with, for I'd make the page 3 party pictures of *The Afternoon Mail* without any difficulty then, and would be like the restaurant owner Suhel Keswani, who is photographed every day at a party with hot women on each arm looking at him and going weak in the knees thinking: *Oh my god, he's sooo ugly and he smells sooo foul, but he's sooo rich, I'm wet already!*

But I'm not Suhel Keswani, I'm Abir Ganguly, and life being the way it is, I'll probably end up with his paunch and body odour and none of his money, which means there won't be pretty women at my arms but, at most, an old aunty from Byculla saying: *My son died of a heart attack. You reported he was trying to kill a mosquito. He died of a heart attack!*

Ya. But he's dead, no? So what difference does it make?

4

On my first day in this newspaper, a year ago, D'Souza came up to me and asked: “So what kind of stories do you want to write for us, young man?”

“You tell me, sir.”

“No, you tell me. I want to see what you want to do first.”

“Sir, um, I want to do the kind of stories that reveal, um, what this city is all about.”

“What is this city all about?”

“Sir, um, this city, sir, has, um, lots of struggle, and life is hard, and...”

“Enough!”

“Um?”

“Enough. Do you watch movies?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you watch sports?”

“Yes sir.”

“Why?”

“Er...”

“I’ll tell you why. Because you want drama. Our lives are boring, so we want drama everywhere. That is why we gossip. That is why we peek into our neighbour’s houses. That is why we watch movies, watch sports. That is why readers buy *The Afternoon Mail*. Drama! Now, I want you to understand one thing.”

“Yes sir.”

“Your job, as a reporter, is to find drama. People want story: conflict, love, action, violence, sadness, regret. Give them story. You know that old cliché of 'dog bites man' and 'man bites dog'? I want 'man bites dog'. Every story you write must be 'man bites dog'. Drama!”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Now, if you're headed to the pantry, tell Shobhan to send me an adrak chai.”

I headed to the pantry.

5

After filing the mosquito story, I waited for Mohan to finish so we could go for dinner together. He'd be done in about 45 minutes, and we would go to Dilli Durbar and order sensuously meltacious kababs and bitch about the world. Or so I thought. I had no idea that in just a few minutes my life would change. Somewhere in Mahalaxmi, inspector Vallabh Thombre was yawning and scratching his armpit simultaneously, while thinking: *It's time to call Ganguly.*

The worst part about being a reporter is that you can't keep your mobile phone off. I'm on the crime beat, and have sources in the police, in morgues, in hospitals, and if there was an afterlife, I'd have sources in hell as well, calling me to say, *Is that Mr Ganguly? Sir, I'm calling from So-and-So bank, we would like to tell you about our balance transfer facility.*

See, that's the problem with not being able to turn the phone off. I wish all communication happened through carrier pigeons, so I could just eat the ones sent by telemarketers.

Anyway, so Thombre called me. Cops have various reasons to call reporters, but the most common one is to tell them about a crime they've cracked. Then their name comes in the newspapers and their wives read it and feel good about their marriage for about 30 seconds.

“Ganguly, Inspector Thombre. I hope I'm not disturbing.”

“Never, sirjee, that's not possible. Bolo, what's up.”

“Ganguly, I have story for you. I have received tip that few gangster from Chhota Sion gang are spending night in nearby housing society called Samruddhi. We are leaving to arrest. Why don't you come with photographer, you might get story, pictures.”

Chhota Sion is a mid-level don known for extorting money from builders. Was there an interesting angle to this somewhere? I wouldn't know until I got there. Maybe a lot of ransom money would be recovered from them. (*Ten crore recovered in ten rupee notes as Sion gangster breaks down after arrest.*) Maybe I could get to speak to one of them after the arrest. (*Sion gangster reveals childhood sexual abuse by priests.*) Maybe there would be a ferocious gunfight in which all the cops and my photographer would be killed, and then I would snatch Thombre's gun and shoot all the goons, heroically rescuing a six-year-old hostage girl whose nubile sister, rushing to the scene and whipping off her bra from under her shirt to staunch the flow of blood from my wounds in the absence of other bandage material, would be eternally (and carnally) grateful. (*Heroic reporter battles goons, becomes sex symbol of Mumbai.*)

Okay, maybe not that one.

“I'll be there, Thombre bhai. Shall I come to the station?”

“Come fast, we will leave in half hour.”

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Ten minutes later, I was on the back of Santosh Hegde's motorcycle. Santosh is one of our photographers, and often comes with me for late-night stories. It is his ambition to be a top fashion photographer one day. No, cut that – that is his fantasy, not his ambition. While he has the ability to do any kind of photography, it isn't just ability but personality that determines where we end up. He'll always be a tabloid photographer, shooting squalor while he dreams of glamour.

Santosh doesn't speak much on assignment. This is not because he is taciturn but, I believe, because he is bored. I can't blame him. All he does is shoot 'dog bites man'. Then my job kicks in.

We reached the station. Thombre was waiting for me outside, and gave me a broad smile. His hand rested on his paunch. His eyes were red. His hair was moist and neatly combed, as if preparing for a photoshoot. (At the most he'd get a quote. Photos of cops make no sense unless they're decapitated or suchlike.)

“Ganguly, Hegde, hello. I was waiting for you. Exciting story, gangster hideout, police investigation, bold arrest.”

Thombre often spoke in bullet points, and always in English, even though it was his third language. He would probably have been offended if we tried to chat with him in Marathi or Hindi, so we indulged him. His English skills were functional, and functional is all that matters in Bombay.

“Super,” I said. “What's the back story? How did you know their whereabouts? What are you charging them under?”

“Tonight we will probably find drug, but we will file many charge: they are Chhota Sion gang, so there is extortion, attempted murder, theft. Cases have piled up like my backlogs in college. Ha ha. Come now, follow jeep.”

Thombre got into a jeep. A police van followed. Two cops on a motorcycle followed. We followed.

Twenty minutes later we drew up outside a housing society. The cops got down. One of them walked over to the watchman and said something. There was no one else around. The cops gathered near the entrance of one of the buildings as Thombre came to me and whispered: “You two wait out. We will call when we are ready. You can take picture of arrest then. And don't worry if you hear gunshot.”

“What gunshot? There'll be firing?”

“No, we are not expecting. But it is gang. They have gun sometimes. Don't worry – nothing will happen to us.”

His confidence unnerved me. I had expected a routine arrest, not one where there might be bullets fired and a bodycount. I hoped this would not turn out to be an encounter killing, with Thombre spinning a story of a gunfight, with heroic cops risking their lives to take on these hardened criminals. Was he using me to build his legend?

I'm a cynical bastard, I have to admit. But I'm an armchair cynic. I'm cynical about ideas and hopes and so on, abstract things that don't affect me directly. Being cynical about things that have consequences is harder.

I hoped there wouldn't be a gunfight. I hoped Thombre would quietly call us in after ten minutes, let Santosh take pictures of three handcuffed dudes and a table on which packets of cocaine had been spread out for display. Or even homeopathic powder. That would be just fine.

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For a couple of minutes after the cops went in, nothing happened. Santosh lit a cigarette. We shuffled our feet. We listened to crickets. We looked at the watchman who avoided our gaze. We looked at windows. We waited for Thombre to call us.

Then we heard them: loud thuds in the distance, like big doors slamming shut, four or five of them. Then there was silence. We looked at each other. Santosh threw his cigarette down and stubbed it out with his foot. I twirled my pen in my fingers, round and round and round.

For what seemed like half an hour but really was probably a few seconds, we heard no further sounds. Then we heard, in the distance, the sound of a woman's voice. She was shouting; then crying loudly. We heard a few male voices. Then we saw one of the constables emerge from the building. He saw us and stopped. Santosh shifted his camera from one hand to both. The constable hesitated, turned, went back inside.

We heard more noises inside: the woman's voice, and a couple of male ones – presumably the cops. There were no other sounds. No lights came on in any of the windows. No doors opened.

Then Thombre marched out with two of his men. He motioned to me to wait where I was. The three men discussed something. Then Thombre turned and walked towards me. As he did so, one of the cops with him said something like: *"Thank God he was Muslim."*

I didn't hear it clearly then, but I remember it clearly now.

Thombre walked up to me and said: "Listen, this was not what we expected."

I blurted out: "What, you shot the wrong guy?"

"No, no, no. We never shoot wrong guy. But there was not gang, there was one man. He try to shoot us. We shoot him. His name, Mohammad Iqbal."

"He was a gangster?"

"Mohammad Iqbal. You can say, part of Chhota Sion gang. He open fire. We shoot him. Did you write that down? Mohammad Iqbal."

"I got it."

"I know there is not enough for proper news piece. I'm sorry for that. You do one of those brief report. No need to mention me."

"Who was the woman?"

"Woman? Oh, some relative. It's ok. He was a gangster. We got him."

"Ok."

“You should leave now. In fact, you were never here. I will call.”

8

I didn't feel like going back home, so I asked Santosh to drop me back to office. All the editions had closed. I was the only person there. I might as well file this now, I thought. It would go into briefs: the collection of news snippets that comprised a headline and two or three lines of text each. There would be no byline, so my name would not appear.

I switched on my computer. I started typing.

Headline: Cops kill gangster after firefight

Copy: A police team from Thane killed a local gangster, Mohammad Iqbal, at Samruddhi Housing Society in Mahalaxmi today. A group of policemen went to his house to arrest him at about 1.30am. Iqbal opened fire when they confronted him. The police fought back, and Iqbal was killed. None of the policemen were injured.

I copy-pasted the text into an email to the desk guys. Then, just before clicking on 'send', I cut the last line.