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Chapter One

It must have been five to seven. Victor Coutinho was returning from the day-shift at the Air India workshop. Parvati Pawar was waiting for her husband on the balcony of the Central Works Department Chawl No.17 with her thirteen-month-old son Ram in her arms. Night-shift from tomorrow. The thought that he wouldn't be able to see Parvati Pawar for a whole month depressed Victor. Every day he resolved to talk to her as she stood on the balcony of the fourth floor as if she were waiting for him. Shouldn't be difficult to break the ice. They had so many things in common.

Your son and my daughter are almost the same age. Maybe they were born in the same month? Who knows, maybe on the same day. Was your son born at six in the morning? What a coincidence. So was our Pieta. Are you still breast-feeding him? My wife Violet insisted that Pieta switch to solids when she was eight months old. Screamed the roof down for a whole week. You must have heard her, of course. Wants attention all the time. Your son is exactly the opposite. So well-behaved. Isn't that so, Mr. Well Behaved koochi poochi moochi? Your carbon copy, that's what he is. Same big eyes, long eyelashes. A fine forehead. The same peek-a-boo smile. Though of course he doesn't have your pomegranate breasts. Pom-pom, pom-pom, may I squeeze them? Victor could have talked to Parvati for hours. But who was going to translate his Konkani or English into Marathi for her? Frankly, if he'd had the guts, he could have managed well enough in his broken Hindi. They could have discussed the two babies forever, comparing their sleeping habits, their temperaments and tantrums, the first word they uttered. Speak up Victor, talk, say something, anything, he would tell himself as he eyed Parvati's back on the fourth-floor landing. Go to it, Victor. Be a man. Go down on your knees, go on. Tell her how much you love her, confess, confess, confess. Tell her you cannot live another day without her. Tell her that she has begun to invade your dreams. Tell her you love your wife, it's nothing like that at all, nothing physical; it's just that you're going out of your mind lusting for her. Call her on the phone, never mind if she doesn't have one, neither do you. Install one. Write her a letter. Tell her you are a lonely man in love with a lonely, lovely woman. Accost her in the corridor, meet her in the market and buy cabbage and chillies with her, join her at the Maruti temple, accompany her to the flour mill, ask her to fly away with you to the Andaman islands. Victor, Victor, Victor, you're no Victor but a born loser.

How was Victor to leap across the abyss that separated the fifth floor from all those below? A couple of times in the past when Parvati had turned around and seen him, he had missed a step or looked the other way and hurried upstairs. Last chance, Victor, today's your last chance, he tried to prod himself into action with every step forward. When he was standing right under Parvatibai, he realized how much in the realm of the impossible his wishful thinking was. He looked up. What he saw made him feel faint. His eyes singled out Parvati's breasts. It was an ample bosom. There was so much of it and so high, that although Parvati was not wearing a low-cut blouse, a whole lot of it could be seen. It was like a cold, restful glass of fresh lime with honey for a weary hitch-hiker. An altar at which the lame and

the halt could become whole again. A place to soft-land those new planes Air India was buying. It went up and came down with pleasurable regularity.

Victor's hand shot up and waved to Parvati's son. 'Come, baba, come. Come, come.'

Parvati and her son were watching a pariah dog at the corner of the chawl scratching its ear with brisk, obsessive strokes of its left leg. When she finally noticed Victor, she was mystified by his gestures.

'Come, come baba, come.'

Parvati was delighted with the attention her son was receiving. She pinched Ram's chin and tried to steer his gaze to Victor. But the boy was mesmerized by the scruffy dog. Parvati's breasts pressed softly against the child as she transferred him from her right arm to her left to give him a better view of Victor. Victor felt he was witnessing a small miracle seeing them released in front of his eyes. He beckoned to the boy with renewed vigour.

'Come, come.'

Finally, Parvati's son saw Victor waving at him. Little bubbles of happiness burst out of the child's mouth. He screamed and pulled at Parvati's ears. Victor sensed a shadow flicker above Parvatibai's heads. He looked up. His wife Violet and his daughter Pieta were in the balcony of the floor above. There was a strange confluence of revulsion, envy and rage in Violet's eyes. Victor's hands flopped and came back to his sides. And the remaining two come-comes broke off half-heartedly.

Parvati's son bounced excitedly in her arms. Yes yes yes, he wanted to play with Victor, see the dog scratch himself, watch the game of kabbadi kabbadi, get on to a double-decker bus and sit at the very front with the wind in his eyes and hair. He stretched out his arms and leapt.

Those who saw Victor said later that his eyes seemed to be blazing, it was as if they had caught fire and the flames were flaring in every direction. When she recalled the incident in the years to come, Parvati's comment had two words in English, as befitted the seriousness of the occasion. Heart and halt. Mazhe heart halt zale. But despite her cardiac arrest she had enough presence of mind to scream preternaturally. Even today people in the chawl across point to a break in the monumentally solid wall of their building and tell you it's Parvati's crack.

Parvati's son went overboard and along with him almost three-quarters of Parvati stretched out precariously over the balcony. Victor's hands went up again. What he saw was a vision of the child Jesus. The sun was behind the boy like a stellar halo. He had thrown his head back and was laughing. His arms were wide open. How can anyone, Victor wondered, how can anyone but the God-child trust someone so completely?

Nobody could have said with any certainty whether Victor's hands shot up for Parvati's foolish son or for Parvati. And later, it became a little difficult to get Victor to talk about the matter. Despite the hurtling impact, Victor didn't let go of the boy. His hands held Ram under the armpits. He patted the child on the back and set him gently on the ground. Victor then sank down beside him, his eyes turned towards the sky, and lay down quietly on the road.

Tearing down, skipping stairs, her petticoat getting caught in her toes, somersaulting to the landing, her hair streaming behind her, Parvatibai ran out of the chawl. Her son was playing with Victor's shirt collar. She picked him up and felt him all over. Then she kissed him five hundred times in five hundred places. Her eyes fell upon Victor. His mouth was still a little ajar and the air of surprise had not faded altogether. Claspings her son tightly to her breast, Parvatibai bent forward and put her hand solicitously on Victor's forehead.

Victor's wife, nine months pregnant, waddled down the steps and saw her. Holding Pieta with her left arm and rowing the air back with her right, she walked directly to her husband.

'Get up Victor.' Her voice was brusque. Victor was unmoved. Parvati, knuckles crackling against her forehead to banish the evil eye from her son, was keeping up an endless patter. 'My baby, my sweet one, my honeybun, barely a year old and you want to leave your mother, aren't you ashamed of yourself? Talk to me baby, what would I have done if something had happened to you? Your father would have eaten me alive. Khandoba was merciful, that's why you were saved. And because of my prayers to Saibaba last night.' With a sleight of hand that was breathtaking and without opening a single button of her blouse, she flipped out her larger-than-the-dome-of-the-Sanchi-stupa right breast and pressed it into her son's mouth.

Violet couldn't take it any more. From where she stood, she could see Victor's eyes glued to this shameless exhibition of motherly love.

'Stop it Victor. Get up,' she hissed in Konkani.

Frankly, Victor should have got up by now. But he didn't budge.

Violet bent down. 'I hate you. I hate you.'

No response. Violet placed Pieta beside her husband. She tried to get hold of the collar of his shirt but her belly came in the way. She sat down and shook Victor by the shoulders. His head swung back and forth like a cloth doll's.

'Stop playing the fool...'. She stopped suddenly and strenuously tried to ignore a thought worming its way into her mind. But it was no use. Victor's inebriated head fell forward on his chest. She laid him down carefully and looked blindly at the people who had gathered around. She suspected that they were whispering something about Victor and her. Her finger pointed at Parvati's son.

'Murderer, murderer,' Violet said in a hoarse voice. Parvati was quick to grasp that the woman was saying something damaging about her son in a foreign tongue.

'Kya, kya, what, what?' The only language they had in common was Bombay Hindi.

'Yes, yes,' Victor's wife hissed.

Parvati put her son down next to Pieta.

'What's this yes yes? Say what you want to clearly. In a language I can understand.'

Violet either would not or could not forsake English. 'Murderer, murderer.'

Parvati's son climbed on to Victor's chest. 'Murdererrrr, murdererrrrr,' he screamed gleefully.

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The next day at four o'clock a funeral van came and stood where Victor had lain. In fact, he was still lying down, with both his eyes and mouth a little open as if he had not yet got over his surprise. But instead of looking at the open sky, he now stared at the black roof of the van. Black suit, white shirt, black shoes and black tie, Victor was all dressed up and ready to go. His hands had been crossed like swords on a wall. Glittering one-foot-high square poles, joined together by heavy brass chains with diamond-shaped links cordoned off the coffin on three sides.

Behind the funeral van Father Agnello D'Souza was trying to comfort Victor's wife. Crying had exhausted her. Her sobs sounded dry and heartless but he continued to do his duty. 'Nobody's fault, Mrs. Coutinho. You can't blame anyone for Victor's death, not even that child. Who can stop you when your time's up? You have no choice but to go. And those who are gone, go straight to our Lord.' How ennobling it was to see the priest assuage

Violet's grief. The Hindu families watched this moving spectacle from a distance and felt privileged to be a party to it.

Violet held Pieta in her arms. Behind her, their close relatives stood in neat and decorous lines, two to a row. Victor's brother, his mother, his eldest and middle sister (the youngest was in Madagascar), and the sisters' husbands were followed by Victor's friends, people from the Air India workshop and Catholic neighbours from the CWD chawls. The men wore black ties and black jackets, the women black dresses. Victor's brother will wear a black ribbon on his shirt sleeve tomorrow when he goes to work. Victor's mother will be in black for a whole year. Death will make his relatives special. They'll nurse their sorrow for a year and exhibit it with deliberate modesty. They will talk softly and expect to be treated with deference. Wherever they go, people will lower their eyes, give them right of way and remember the departed man in whispers.

Father Agnello D'Souza made the sign of the cross over Victor. The Catholic community assembled there sang a beautiful and solemn psalm along with him.

The Hindus on the ground, first, second, third and fourth storeys of the CWD chawls felt left out.

Two fellows from the funeral parlour arranged dozens of bouquets, wreaths and crosses on and around Victor. White lilies; red, white and yellow roses; and the cool, soothing and delicate green leaves of ferns. On each flower-arrangement was the name, signature and address of the sender and a poetic message. It was not quite clear who the message was addressed to. God? The dead man? The people who were left behind?

'Gone to Jesus forever. Remembered on earth every day.' 'Snatched from us. Folded in God's bosom now.' 'The Lord giveth. And the Lord taketh.' Signed Gilbert Rodriguez, wife, and family; Errol D'Souza, Mr. And Mrs. Quentin Aranha, Julian Fonseca and the Fonseca sisters, Mr and Mrs. Paul Monteiro, Michael Pereira and Mom, Sebastian Veigas and family, Joachim Castellino, Cajetan Figueredo, Peter Menezes, wife, mother and fly, Ozzy Branganza and family.

The last wreath was from the Catholic Brotherhood Club of Air India. It was a huge floral aeroplane. On its white ribbon was a legend in red: 'May your soul fly to our Saviour Jesus Christ.' They tried fitting it into the van but the span of the wings was too big. It was Paul Montiero who finally suggested a solution. 'Why don't you tie the plane to the roof of the van?'

In the future, whenever there was talk of wreaths and decorations, the magnificent floral arrangements at Victor's funeral were recalled with awe. The van looked like the bridal bed in a fairy-tale and Victor was the prince. It was just a matter of minutes before the incredibly lovely princess in white came and kissed Victor on the lips and the two of them flew into the sunset on the Air India plane.

The Hindu boys and girls and their parents from the neighbouring chawls gazed in wonder at the indescribable beauty of a Catholic funeral. Truly, even if you were born a Hindu, it was worthwhile dying a Catholic. How much pomp and glory and solemnity there was in Christian death.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. The earth rocked and the heavens swayed. The people at the funeral looked shattered. Even Father Agnello D'Souza was speechless. Were these the voices from the Tower of Babel?

Loudspeakers placed in Parvatibai's windows were blasting the entire neighbourhood with the Satyanarayana rituals. Parvatibai had hired a Brahmin priest to offer thanks to God for the miracle that had saved her son from certain death, and he was giving her her money's worth. Those ancient buildings, the CWD chawls, stronger than the pyramids in Egypt, even

they shook like onion paper. The Catholic mourners were pounded and assaulted by the indecipherable cacophony. How uncouth and vulgar it sounded. Trust these Hindus to celebrate on such a sad and tragic occasion.

Even the Hindu neighbours had no way of figuring out what the priest recited, though it was in their mother tongue, Marathi. He didn't give a damn about the meaning of the words, the feeling behind them, the poetry of the language or the complex manoeuvres of the plot line. He had no thought for metaphysical implications nor time to translate them in terms of everyday life. He was telescoping words, sentences, paragraphs, hurtling through chapter after chapter. He was vomiting all over the place, choking on his own breathless mess. What came forth were huge boulders and sharp and clangorous bits and parts of iron pistons and bridges and girders.

The Brahmin priest communicated his frenzy to Parvati's child, Ram. The baby became frantic. He bawled and howled as if poison from a scorpion were rising in his veins. Parvatibai tried to pacify him with toys, her inexhaustible nipple, and the shira with bananas that was meant for the god Satyanarayana himself. The boy was beginning to respond to Parvati's array of baits. He was almost quiet when the priest looked at his watch and realized that he had barely twenty-seven minutes to make it to his next assignment, the engagement of a Chitpavan Brahmin girl to a Deshastha boy to be celebrated in much more affluent surroundings. In his haste, he poured too much ghee into the flames of the makeshift brick altar and the whole house was engulfed in smoke.

That did it. Parvati's son couldn't breathe, he couldn't see his mother and he found the smell of the burning ghee overpowering. He was frightened. He went berserk. Parvati picked up the spatula with which she was stirring the semolina in a gigantic pot and whacked the brat's buttocks. 'Who do you think we are performing this Satyanarayana puja for, you stupid fool? What do you think this Brahmin priest is doing in our place? Now, are you going to stop bawling this minute or shall I shove that rolling pin down your throat and shut you up for good?'

Parvati's son invented a whole new octave and managed to drown out the voice on the loudspeaker.

'You got away without a scratch yesterday, Ravan, but if I hear one hiccup or burp or even the slightest sound out of you now, I'll throw you down with my own hands.' Parvati caught hold of the boy's right leg, walked to the window and dangled him outside head down. The eyes of all the mourners on the ground turned to Parvati. She shook the boy like a rattle, above the crowd.

Victor's wife moaned. She went into labour. Her legs caved in first. Then her body folded up. Father Agnello D'Souza leaned forward and placed his ear close to her mouth to find out what she was muttering. But she had nothing private to impart. With a superhuman effort she took a deep breath, pointed her finger at Parvati's son and tore open Father Agnello's ear-drum.

'Cain. Murderer.'

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'Did I hear you wrong? You didn't call him Ravan, did you?' Parvati's husband Shankarrao asked above the din in his home.

'I did too.' Parvati turned to face her husband while her son was still hanging on for dear life outside the window.

'Don't you ever call him that, not even in jest.'

‘From today his name’s Ravan,’ Parvati said with a flatness that made Shankar-rao realize that they had come to some kind of turning point in their child’s life.

‘He’s been Ram since he was born. He’ll remain Ram till he dies.’

‘He nearly died yesterday, isn’t that enough for you? Such a beautiful baby, such a sweet and innocent look in his eyes and a name like Ram. No wonder someone put nazar on him. No. The only way we can ward off the evil eye is to call him Ravan.’

‘Over my dead body. Have you lost your mind, can’t you tell the difference between gods and demons any longer?’

‘I would rather that he was a live devil than a dead god.’

Shankar-rao was screaming by now. ‘Which mother will want her daughter married to a villain called Ravan?’

‘Makes no difference. From today his name’s Ravan.’

‘Wait till he grows up and tries to abduct every Sita in town. You’ll regret it.’

‘Mark my words. Every Sita will be chasing my Ravan.’

‘Call him what you want, he’ll always be Ram for me. The boy will curse you all his life.’

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Something snapped in Violet. She blanched and the blood drained out of her face. Her right hand clutched at her belly and kept feeling around it.

‘It’s coming,’ she said and swooned. Father D’Souza was acutely embarrassed by the investigations of Violet’s hand. A little bemused, he looked around self-consciously. People ran hither and thither. Violet didn’t seem to have any intention of getting up.

‘Who’s coming?’ Father Agnello D’Souza sounded puzzled.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Violet’s mother shook her head in disbelief.

Father D’Souza hurriedly made the sign of the cross. ‘This is blasphemy, Mrs. D’Silva. You are jeopardizing the very soul of your son-in-law by taking the Lord’s name in vain.’

Violet’s mother ignored the threat to Victor’s eternal soul. ‘Father, help me lift Violet.’

‘Why, what’s happened?’

Violet’s mother lost patience. ‘Because I’m telling you to.’

Father D’Souza put one arm under Violet’s back and the other under her knees and lifted her awkwardly. He had not realized she was going to be so heavy. She was sweating profusely. Father D’Souza found her skin unnaturally cold. A particularly vicious wave of pain twisted her body and distorted her face. The breath from her open mouth fogged his glasses. Under the slithery black silk Father D’Souza was keenly aware of Violet’s flesh.

Violet’s mother had got into the van and was pointing to the long seat parallel to Victor’s coffin. ‘Here. Put her here.’

Father D’Souza pushed aside a few of the wreaths and laid Violet gingerly on the seat beside her mother and hurried out.

‘Get back in, Father,’ her voice pulled him up short. ‘Sit down. I’ll need your help in the hospital.’ Violet’s mother placed Violet’s legs across his thighs. Soft silk killing his will power softly. A mysterious black mist that brushed against him and got under his skin and drew him deeper and deeper into the vortices of hell. There were evil spirits moving restlessly in it and scorching his five senses. How it felled him, that lucent black. Father, oh my Father, why has thou forsaken me?

‘Hospital? Why do you want to take Victor to hospital?’

‘No please. Please Mrs. D’Silva, I beg of you. You go with her.’

‘Violet is about to have a baby.’

‘Father, behave yourself,’ Violet’s mother said sharply. ‘In times of crisis, you too have some duties and obligations.’

‘All is lost,’ Father D’Souza muttered to himself. A horned pit viper had got hold of his soul and was leering wickedly as he gobbled it up. It was a tight fit in there and his soul was being pumped into an endless tunnel of serpentine guts. The snake wound itself around the tree of knowledge and spiralled up. Father D’Souza heard his soul crack and crumble. As it was crushed, he got a fleeting glimpse of the snake. It was still smiling. It had Victor’s face.

Violet’s mother got up, closed the door of the van, walked back and opened the glass pane between the driver’s compartment and themselves.

‘Driver, take the van to the J.J. Hospital. Fast.’

‘My orders are to take the funeral van to the cemetery, madam. Nowhere else.’

Violet’s contractions began to come fast and without pause. She arched her back. Whatever was inside her belly was in a state of turbulence and turmoil. It couldn’t seem to make up its mind whether it wanted to stay put or break out. She was grinding her teeth, her nails went deep into Father D’Souza’s arms and stayed there. They would have to cut Violet’s fingers to free Father D’Souza from her.

‘Thank you, oh Lord. Your wisdom and mercy are truly infinite,’ Father D’Souza said as he slowly came out of the fog of piercing pain in his arm. ‘Do what the lady says,’ he told the driver in a voice that would brook no opposition. ‘Hurry. The lady’s going to have a baby.’

The van came to life instantly. People in India are still respectful of funeral corteges. They got out of the way. And a good thing it was they did, because the driver of the van was willing to run them over. This was sacrilege. He was sure that his boss would sack him on the spot if he discovered that his solemn van had doubled as a maternity ward. He tore through red lights, wove in and out of the traffic. The passengers were flung all over each other and at times Victor seemed to rise out of his coffin. Father D’Souza looked straight out of the glass panes of the rear door. The whole of Bombay seemed to be out on the road. There was a festive air about the place. Surely it was not an extension of the thanksgiving puja at that Hindu boy’s place below Victor’s house. Then it hit Father D’Souza. In the rush of events, it had slipped his mind that it was independent India’s first Christmas Eve. Violet screamed, Violet panted, Violet collapses, but he did not hear any of it.

‘It’s all right, Father,’ Violet’s mother told him as they entered the hospital gates. ‘Violet’s got a baby boy.’

‘Praise the Lord.’
