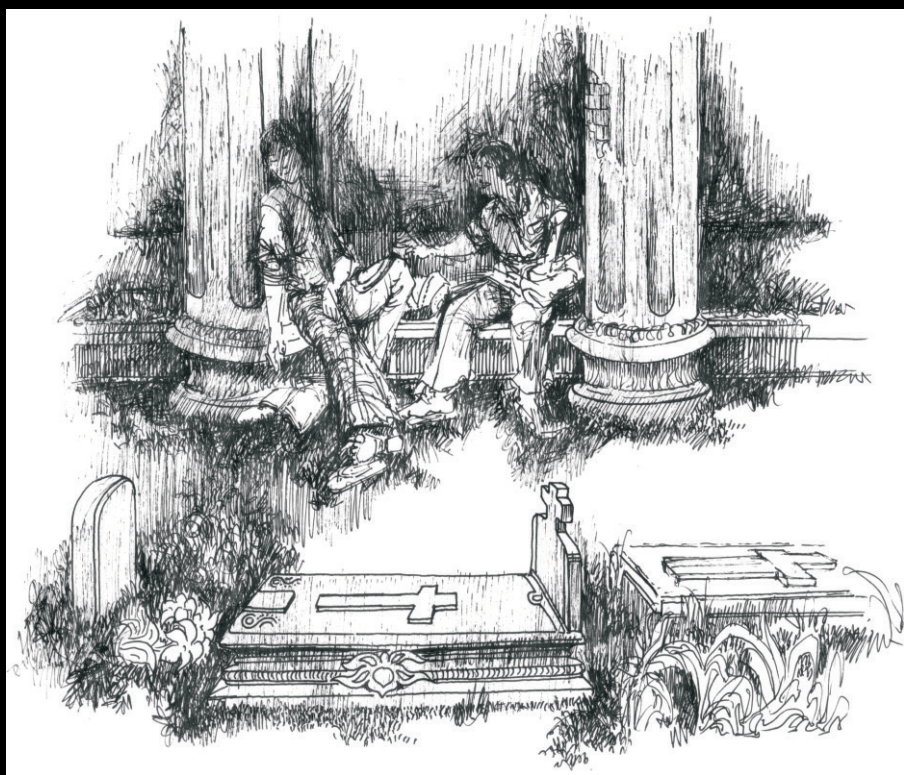


The Invisible AFRICAN

A Novel



KRISHNAN SRINIVASAN

The Invisible
African
A Novel

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Ugly Ambassador

Guesswork

The Eccentric Effect

Non-Fiction

Tricks of the Trade

The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth

The Jamdani Revolution

Towards the New Horizon: World Order in the 21st Century

The Invisible African

A Novel

Krishnan Srinivasan



HAR-ANAND
PUBLICATIONS PVT LTD

The story itself and all the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. There is no intention to portray any individual, personality or policy that exists or has existed.

Copyright © 2012 Krishnan Srinivasan

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the prior written permission of the author and the Publisher.

First published: 2012

Published by Ashok Gosain and Ashish Gosain for:
HAR-ANAND PUBLICATIONS PVT LTD
E-49/3, Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-II, New Delhi-110020
Tel: 41603490 Fax: 011-41708607
E-mail: info@haranandpublications.com
Website: www.haranandpublications.com

For
Bjorn Wittrock
James Mayall
and
Ravindra Kumar

always inspirational

I

Uppsala, Sweden

‘It’s nothing to be alarmed about, Uno,’ the young woman at the reception said placidly. ‘All the bills are settled.’

‘But it’s unusual, to say the least, isn’t it?’ answered the Front Desk Manager. He had come in at his normal time of 9 am, and Sandra had taken him aside to inform him immediately. ‘I just can’t figure it out. You mean they all left together in the middle of the night?’

‘I cannot say when exactly they left, can I? Anna went on their floor to clean the rooms as she usually does mid-morning, and found they were all gone. Each of the keys was left on the beds. She found an envelope in one of the four rooms with the money for the rent, with the exact amount in it, down to the last krona and ore.’

‘You had better go and eat your breakfast and let me think this over.’

‘Don’t you feel we should report it to the police?’

‘There’s nothing to report, is there? We had four guests in the hotel, they left unexpectedly, or rather, without telling us in advance they were checking out, and they have paid their bills. Is that a matter for the police?’

‘Well, they were foreigners. That’s what makes it different.’

‘Yes, it does, Sandra. But let me think about it. It’s best not to get the police involved when there’s no crime committed. They will not thank us for wasting their time.’

‘But if these foreigners go somewhere else and do something wrong, we will get the blame for not telling the police.’

‘You may have a valid point there. Go and eat and I’ll speak to the General Manager first. We’ve got to think of the hotel’s reputation. Has he come in?’



The young policeman arrived later that day when it was already early evening, shaking the snow off his shoulders and boots, and hanging up his overcoat and scarf in the lobby. He wore a thick patterned sweater and blue jeans.

He offered his hand to Uno and Sandra. ‘Bengt Larsson.’

Uno and Sandra introduced themselves, and the three of them crowded into a small room off the reception area. They poured themselves cups of coffee from the dispenser.

‘I’ve been asked to come from the police headquarters on account of a call from this hotel. It was from you, I believe.’

‘Yes, I rang the police station this morning,’ said Uno. ‘Four foreigners have left the hotel during the night without formally checking out. But all the bills have been paid.’

‘I see. Then what are you reporting exactly?’

‘Just an unusual occurrence; one which was out of the ordinary. We thought the police should be informed.’

‘I see. No harm done, of course. I was on my way home in any case. Who were these foreigners?’

‘Four Indians,’ replied Sandra quickly, anxious to be informative. ‘Three men and one woman. They were all together when they checked in. I was on duty then. That was four days ago, on Thursday.’

‘Did they pay any deposit?’ asked Larsson.

‘No. We do not ask for one if they leave a credit card impression.’

‘And they did?’

‘Yes, of course. That was the girl’s card.’

‘You have their names?’

‘I have written them down for you on this paper,’ said Uno. ‘Dinesh Kumar, Neha Robert, Shashi Satish and Sanjay Mohan. Neha is the woman. I’ve put down the passport numbers against each name. And the woman’s credit card details.’

‘That’s good work. Saves us a lot of time. Do you have any idea what they were doing at Uppsala? They were tourists, I suppose? Or prospective students at the university?’

‘I would say, tourists,’ replied Sandra. ‘They had cameras and were usually out after breakfast every day quite early and stayed out till late. They were out before I arrived and didn’t come back while I was on duty.’

‘And the night duty person?’

‘That’s Jesper,’ said Uno. ‘He didn’t see or hear a thing. Mind you, he’s usually asleep on the couch in this room or watching late-night TV.’

Larsson put his notebook back in his pocket with a sigh. ‘Well, I think that’s all. You’ll be wanting to get home, and so do I. The snow’s been falling for three days and the ploughs and buses are having a hard time of it. Thank you for the coffee. Do you mind if I use the bathroom before I go?’



The Police Commander in charge of the investigation, Magnus Pahlberg, visited the hotel a few days later. He rang in advance to ask to see Sandra, and told Uno that he need not be troubled. The Front Desk Manager protested a little about his seniority over Sandra and his greater responsibility, but in truth he was relieved not to be bothered.

When the Detective Inspector arrived, he was offered the same small office beside the reception area for the interview. After they had poured themselves coffee from the dispenser, he made himself comfortable at the small desk and opened a thin notebook.

‘Ms Fellin, our police sergeant Mr Larsson saw you earlier this week–’

‘Yes he did. He came on Monday, the same day we reported about the Indians.’

‘I saw his report on your meeting. I know there was no crime committed, but I was interested, and since I had some time free today, I thought I would come by the hotel and see for myself.’

‘I think we told the police whatever we know.’

Pahlberg looked relaxed, sipped his coffee, and took his time. He had sleepy light-brown eyes and a deep, very deliberate voice.

‘How old were these hotel guests?’

‘You know, it’s so hard to tell with foreign people, especially when they are not white. They all look so young,’ Sandra said with a quick giggle. ‘No wrinkles. I would have to guess that they were between twenty and thirty. Perhaps more like twenty than thirty.’

‘You do not keep photocopies of the passport pages?’

‘No. That is not required.’

‘That’s true. And we also have privacy laws about ages. So, were you on duty when these young people checked in?’

‘I was. They had made an Internet booking on our website, and they came on the day they said they would.’

‘How long had they booked in for?’

‘For a week. But they said when they checked in that they were flexible about their plans, if the hotel had no problem about that.’

‘And you said?’

‘We only have 16 rooms in the hotel, but this is a very slow season for us. Who in their right minds would come to Uppsala in this weather? So I told them that being flexible was all right. I thought that meant they might be staying longer.’

Pahlberg looked at her in a kindly fashion, smiling, his brow wrinkled. He was a burly man with unkempt brown hair, a weather-beaten craggy face and big hands, wearing an open necked flannel shirt, grey trousers and a blue blazer jacket that was too tight round the midriff.

‘You probably wonder why I am asking you questions about them?’

‘Well, I am a little puzzled, Herr Pahlberg. Is there anything special about these people?’

‘I am just thinking,’ said Pahlberg slowly, ‘that this is the first time since I came to Uppsala—and that was a long time ago—that I have come across a group slipping out of a hotel in the middle of the night—let’s assume—without even visiting the front desk. Suspicious, isn’t it? But they paid the bills. In that case, why the secretive way of leaving? Did they have a train to catch? A bus?’

‘I really do not have any idea,’ she said.

‘Ah, I know you don’t. Nor do I. But if we find that they have a problem somewhere else in Sweden, I will have to come back here and ask some questions, and so I thought and said to myself, I may as well do it now, when Ms Fellin may remember more than she will after some days or weeks. Do you agree?’

‘Certainly. That’s true.’

‘So let us have some more of this excellent coffee, let me take a little bit more of your time, and please try to remember as much as you possibly can about these young visitors. You told my police colleague Mr Larsson that they were out all day sight-seeing.’

Sandra frowned in concentration. ‘Did I say that? Well, I have to suppose I did. What else could they be doing?’

‘Indeed. And you said they had cameras.’

‘Yes, they had. Especially, I remember one of them carrying a big camera like the ones you see in the TV studios.’

‘I see. For shooting our spring songbirds? The reindeer? Perhaps. And the others in the group? Can you describe them at all?’

‘I got a close look at them only when they checked in, and that was over a week ago. Let me see. The girl first. I would say quite pretty, cute really, slim, lively, you know. A lot of positive energy. Loose jet black hair down way past her shoulders. I remember she

did most of the talking. She had the credit card. Not very tall. I recall she wore designer jeans. And she looked good in them, I would say.'

'The three men?'

'All of them with brown skin and black hair—you know, Indian-looking. One of them was tallish with short hair like a crew cut. He wore bomber trousers and he was the one who carried the camera thing. The other one I can hardly recall at all; didn't say anything and didn't leave any impression. I don't have much of a visual picture of him except he was a bit more stocky than the others. But, oh yes, he also had some kind of technical equipment apart from his luggage—you know, one of those extendable poles with a microphone on the end of a fuzzy pod.'

'Ok, I get it. And the third man?'

'I remember him better,' said Sandra, colouring slightly and smiling. 'Nice looking boy, with a baby face and always cheerful. Thin and with lots of thick hair parted in the middle like Tom Cruise the film actor. Not very tall. Shining dark brown eyes. That was Shashi Satish, I remember that.'

'Did you talk to him?'

'I saw the group one time in the street outside as they were going out and I was coming in earlier than usual for some reason. Must have been the day after they checked in, that is, Friday last week. They were carrying that equipment around. I said hay to them and the boy Shashi I remember greeted me back.'

'Did he say anything special? Did you ask them where they were heading?'

'I didn't really. Of course I wish I had now. And Shashi said something ordinary like "nice to see you and have a good day". He had a pleasant voice, and was friendly. They seemed rather anxious to get away.'

'A group of four Indians sightseeing and taking photographs at a time like this, when we have three feet of snow, is not so normal. If

we need to, we can ask around. Someone must have seen them. From what you tell me, my guess is they were an amateur film crew—the good looking girl and the boy you spoke to were actors and the other two the camera and the sound persons. But that's just a preliminary theory. Did they make any phone calls?’

‘Not from the hotel phones. But everyone has mobile phones these days. Hardly anyone uses our hotel phones, which are more expensive.’

‘Do you know that they had mobile phones with them?’

‘No. I never saw them use any.’

‘Did they eat hearty breakfasts? Like stocking up on food for the whole day? Did they order any packed meals?’

‘We have a breakfast buffet here at Grand Eastern Hotel. They did not order anything extra, as that would have shown up on the bill. And no order for take-aways.’

‘So they may have stopped somewhere for meals during the day. If they did, it will make our enquiries easier.’

‘I think you really believe there's something wrong with this group, Inspector Pahlberg?’

‘I can't say, Ms Fellin. I'm just trying to think ahead in case I get a call from Stockholm or somewhere asking what these people did over here. How is it that no one in your hotel saw them leave?’

‘Jesper is our night person. He is retired and works part time during the day as a porter at the Uppsala General Hospital. He is naturally rather tired already when he gets in to work. We have just one person at night at the reception because we don't need more. Jesper has been with the hotel for many years, and he makes no secret of the fact he dozes off in this room or watches late-night TV. I can't blame him. There's nothing much doing in Uppsala at night and there's hardly anyone coming in or out between 10 at night and 7 in the morning. That's when I come in and take Jesper's place. Breakfast starts at 6, but there's usually no customer around till close to seven, unless people have an early transport out of town to catch.’

‘So what you are saying is that they could have tip-toed past the reception with Jesper in this office, perhaps asleep, perhaps watching the TV?’

‘I’m saying it’s possible. Not very likely, though. Our wooden floors creak loudly, as you will have noticed.’

‘Yes, I did. Very nice old floors; I wish I had such splendid wood under my feet at home. As a matter of fact, I also noticed as I was looking around before our meeting that the Indians would not have had to walk out this way at all. You have a back door leading to the rear car park and an exit from the parking area to the lane at the back. The way from the stairs to that back door is not visible from this office or even from the front desk.’

‘Again, it’s not likely, Inspector. The parking lot is not cleared of snow during the night. They would have had a big problem walking out there. And why would they sneak out if they had the money to pay the bills?’

Pahlberg’s rugged square face broke into a broad smile. ‘That’s exactly right! Ah now, you are speaking like a policewoman, Ms Fellin. Think hard, take your time. Was there anything at all unusual that you noticed? Anything in the rooms, for instance?’

‘Like what?’

‘Had the showers been used, the bed sheets and duvets pulled aside, anything found in the wardrobes or cupboards?’

‘I did ask Anna, my colleague who cleans. She’s the one who found the keys and the envelope containing the money on the next morning. She said everything was normal, that is, that the bedrooms and bathrooms had been used as they would have been on a normal day.’

‘I see. So what that means is that our Indian friends came back late as usual, went to their rooms, turned in for the night and after a few hours sleep, suddenly decided to leave the hotel without making a sound.’

‘I suppose you must be right.’

‘My guess is that they must have been startled by something – a phone call, perhaps, a message of some kind, and decided on the spot to leave. Being honourable people, they paid up before they left.’

Sandra thought for a while and nodded. ‘That seems to be the case.’

‘Did they leave anything at all behind, anything personal, like shampoo, toothpaste, razor blades?’

‘Absolutely nothing.’ There was a pause. Sandra bit her lower lip and sucked in her rosy cheeks. ‘There was a scrap of paper torn off a page which Anna found when vacuuming under one of the beds, quite far under. But it could have been there a long time and may have belonged to one of our earlier guests.’

‘Where is that paper?’

‘Anna gave it to me and I threw it away. There was no reason for me to keep it, was there?’

‘No. I suppose not. Whose room was it found in?’

‘Shashi Satish’s.’

‘I see. And what was on it?’

‘Just one word written with a ball-point pen in a kind of block lettering. It said Marco. Yes, Marco. Spelt M-A-R-C-O. It was, like, wavy and scribbled in capital letters as if written in a big hurry.’



Calcutta, India

‘Marco ... Michael? That’s a strange name.’

It was not a question, just a man mumbling to himself at 3.30 at Calcutta airport in the middle of the night.

It had been a ten hour flight in the economy class and Marco felt exhausted as he looked glumly over the high counter at the Indian immigration officer. He did not feel inclined to respond. He knew that the official did not think that the name itself was odd: he thought it was strange because the name did not accord with his black face. It would take too long to explain.

Marco said quietly; 'It is true that the name is quite unusual in Somalia.'

'Father's name?'

'James Hobyo Marco, deceased.'

'Same name, Marco?' The man riffed through the pages of the passport. He then found something else that he regarded as puzzling. 'This is a diplomatic passport.'

Explanations were required. We spend our whole lives explaining things that we find hard to understand ourselves, or which cannot be fully explained anyway

Was Michael Marco to explain to this lowly official that in his past career he had been an Ambassador for his country, an envoy of the African Union to the United Nations and the United Kingdom, and the UN secretary general's special representative? Somalia now had no government and no embassies. It was a wasteland overrun by armed warring factions. If you had a valid passport, you clung on to it, even if you were retired and without any remaining government links. You could not afford the mistake of giving up your passport; they weren't making any new ones in Mogadishu, and they didn't want to know about you.

Exhausted by his ten-hour flight in a cramped seat next to a woman with a crying baby, hungry, his head aching from the blinding neon lights of the immigration hall, Marco resisted the urge to yell: 'Don't you read the papers? I am the citizen of a failed state. There's no one I could hand the passport back to, and even if there was, I would never get another one.'

Instead, he said reluctantly: 'I have the occasional diplomatic assignment.'

The official was properly incredulous. 'What, here? Here in Calcutta?'

'In a sense.'

The immigration officer noted that the Indian Embassy in London had endorsed the passport with a diplomatic visa, and

started laboriously writing something on the landing card that Marco had filled in. He then clunked a square rubber entry stamp on a blank passport page and slid the document wordlessly across the counter back to Marco.

Ambassador Michael Marco shuffled to the baggage retrieval belt. The luggage had not yet appeared and the belt was immobile. He read a huge intimidatory notice of eight 'Do's' and eleven 'Don'ts' in respect of a manoeuvre as simple as removing a suitcase from the moving belt. However hi-tech India might recently have become, its reputation for the ever-present negative would never change, as only befits a civilization that thought up the value of the zero.

At length, there was an electric buzzer sawing through the doleful atmosphere. The single functioning belt started to unwind with a whine. Marco collected his battered suitcase and wheeled it towards the counter where he could purchase a coupon that would get him the service of a taxi that would convey him into the town without haggling over the cost, though the quantum of the obligatory tip on arrival would always be disputed and acrimonious.



The Chairperson, a gaunt lady in an elegant cream sari with flowered border, thick spectacles in black frames, vivid red dot on her forehead, matching finger and toenail paint and very high heeled shoes, switched on the microphone although the room was small and the audience consisted of less than twenty people. She cleared her throat and coughed loudly into her palm. She tapped the live mike repeatedly to check its output and alert her listeners, despite the fact that there was already a respectful and expectant silence. She then proceeded to introduce Ambassador Michael Marco as a scholar-diplomat, a person whose record spoke for itself, and whose presence in the Calcutta School of Advanced Studies added lustre to the institution. A lustre, she added in a menacing

tone, glaring down the long seminar table, that was badly needed in the School, considering the financial instability caused by its unsympathetic government sponsors, the lack of integrity in its internal administration, and the deficient quality of its scholarship in terms of seminars and publication output.

The members of the audience were clearly unaffected by this hectoring and looked vacant and bored. They had heard this complaint all too often to be stirred from their accustomed torpor. At regular intervals, mobile phones would ring, and their owners would hurry outside to attend to them. The Chairperson was not deterred by this indifference; she had a complaint, and was going to make it, and the burden of it was that she was a person much imposed upon, a victim of malign forces out to make her position as troublesome as possible, perhaps even to force her to give up this high appointment. She had heard rumours, she reported darkly, that certain changes were contemplated by the supervisors of the School. For the good of the scholars, whom she regarded as dear to herself as her own children, she would resist any moves that would be to their detriment, including and especially, the removal of herself, their leading champion and protector.

Even in the face of these grievances, the members of the School remained strangely impassive. They wondered with good reason if the wizened, tribally-scarred face of the African with the wispy white-grey hair seated on the Chairperson's right warranted the term lustre being used for his unexpected presence among them.

The Chairperson was insensitive to the unspoken longing for brevity. She went on to speak of conspiracies, dark designs, vendettas and villains whose insufficient command of English was matched by their lack of appreciation of true academic worth. It was indeed remarkable that upright women like herself had been able to survive in this nest of snakes.

In the end, she had much less to say about the virtues of her distinguished visitor. Michael Marco was that uncommon

creature, she claimed, who was a diplomat and scholar; also unusual in being a Christian—or rather, with a Christian name—in a Muslim Somalia. This no doubt was a consequence of the colonial occupation of Somalia by Italy and Britain for a long time in the last century. Indians were more used to names of Africans like Olesegun Obasanjo or Jayaka Mrisho Kikwete. But names were misleading. Most Indians did not share a family name with their parents; the obscure villages where they come from are often incorporated as an addition to the name, and so are their father's personal names. Caste names are also sometimes included. In many cases, the last part of their names was their personal name, as was the case in countries like Vietnam. When the traveling Indians leave Indian soil, they prudently bid adieu to this traditional nomenclature that creates serious and understandable problems with immigration authorities abroad. Twenty five percent of the Chinese population shares the names Wang, Li or Zhang. All the men belonging to the Sikh religion in India rejoice in the name of Singh. Women in the West kept their maiden names in a creditable spirit of independence from their husbands, and here in India the leading modern musician-composer called A. R. Rahman was not born a Muslim despite his name. The Mozart of Madras, as he was described by Time magazine, was a Hindu and self-selected his name after being advised by a Sufi sooth-sayer, rightly as it turned out, that it would bring him luck. The initials A and R stood for unused initials and nothing else, like AB de Villiers, the South African cricket player. Dilip Kumar, the erstwhile heartthrob of the Indian movies, was on the other hand a Muslim who chose to act with a Hindu sobriquet to enhance his popular appeal, and it had certainly worked to his advantage.

After this long and not uninformative digression, the Chairperson referred to Marco's project as being connected with the African diaspora, and abruptly invited him to say a few words, turning the live microphone in Marco's direction.

Michael Marco hunched uneasily over the table and spoke in a low voice with a slight lisp to the effect that he was delighted to be able to visit this eastern part of India, to interact with many distinguished scholars in India, and that he would benefit greatly from these contacts. Then he leaned back in his chair, signifying that his involvement in the proceedings was over.

The Chairperson was somewhat taken aback at this laconic reply, but found the arrival at this stage of tea and biscuits a timely intervention. She fell to chomping at the cheap Britannia cookies and conversing in Bengali with the person seated on her other flank, while Marco sat impassively, gazing down at the table in front of him. She presently brought the meeting to a close by standing up and asking if Ambassador Marco could spare a few minutes to meet her in her study.

Everyone then also stood up, noisily pushing back the heavy chairs, and started to file out. Marco was on the point of following the Chairperson when he was intercepted by a slim man of middle age whose face was one he vaguely remembered.

‘Ambassador Michael Marco? You will not remember me, I think. My name is Vincent Johnson, whom you met some years back when you were on business in New Delhi with the Commonwealth. I was Secretary Chandrashekhar Rishikesh’s deputy at that time in the Ministry of External Affairs.’

Suddenly Marco did remember him. There had been at the time one of the perennial problems between India and Pakistan that had eventually been calmed down thanks to Marco’s efforts. It had boiled down to an intrigue between two high officials in the Indian Foreign Ministry. Rishikesh’s adversary was the guilty party, but had subsequently been promoted as head of the Ministry. Marco smiled at Johnson shyly.

‘I am very happy to see you, Mr Johnson. What are you doing now? Do you live here in Calcutta?’

‘No, Ambassador Marco, as a matter of fact, I don’t. You see, I am still with the Ministry. I was Ambassador in Brunei and have

just returned to Headquarters in Delhi. I have now been given charge of the Northern desk, and I am stopping here for a couple of nights on my way to Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan. I heard from a friend that you were at the School today and came along on the chance of meeting you again.'

Marco was keenly interested in Rishikesh's whereabouts. 'That is very, very kind of you. Is there any news of Ambassador Rishikesh? Wasn't he last serving in Latin America?'

'Yes. He was in Costa Rica, but he resigned quite soon after reaching there. He had some difficulties with the Ministry—you may remember that. He could be somewhere here in Calcutta actually, but I am not sure where exactly. It's a long story. Perhaps we can talk about it after you have finished with the Professor?'

'Certainly. Do you mind waiting for me?'

'Not at all. That's why I have come here. When you have finished with her, we can drive out somewhere and have some coffee. I have a car waiting.'



Professor Monidipa Bagchi, tall, thin and hyper-active, had been taken aback that morning when she saw Michael Marco for the first time at the School. She had not exactly been expecting a Harry Belafonte or Will Smith to appear at her door but the sighting of a short, bent and shabby African wearing a much-worn shirt with a fountain pen in the top pocket, rumpled trousers with turn-ups that scraped the floor and scruffy black shoes with their laces hanging loose, made her wonder if indeed this was the renowned Somali diplomat who had been highly recommended for a research assignment at the School. His downcast watery eyes and face faintly lined with tribal scars completed the unprepossessing picture.

But now she rose politely to greet Marco as he walked diffidently into the Chairperson's office. She was prone to stare fixedly at him, which Marco ascribed charitably to astigmatism. 'I

must apologize for the inertness of our fellowship,' she said in a sharp and graveled voice, 'but they are cowed down by the prevailing political climate, and never open their mouths except to consume the refreshments. They are afraid of informers who keep an eye on everyone for political correctness.'

'No doubt they will get used to me,' said Marco deferentially. 'I am a bit of an odd-fish among academics.'

'Nonsense!' replied Monidipa Bagchi sharply. 'Certainly you are a most welcome change among us, and a very distinguished person internationally, unlike the rest of us. We are accustomed to Negroid people in India, but they are our indigenous blacks, from Southern India and places like Tamil Nadu and Kerala. But to entertain an eminent African is a trophy for the School.'

Marco lowered his head modestly. 'Nevertheless, my colleagues will never change,' continued the Professor confidently. 'They are Bengalis. So am I, of course, an unfortunate accident of birth that has coloured my entire destiny. You will of course recall, Mr Ambassador, what Thomas Babington Macaulay had to say about the Bengali? "What horns are to the buffalo, deceit is to the Bangalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, chicanery, perjury, forgery are the weapons of the people of the Lower Ganges." I may not be word-perfect, but that is the gist.'

Professor Bagchi waited for concurrence if not approval, but Marco was not to be drawn. He replied, 'I was under the impression that Macaulay also praised the Bengali with the words; "I have traveled the length and breadth of India and have not seen one person who is a beggar or a thief, such high moral values, people of such high calibre."'

'But it is the first statement that is the accurate definition of our character. You will observe its veracity in the days to come.'

'I shall keep my eyes open,' said Marco, without any hint of sarcasm. 'But I am not quite sure how long I shall be able to stay. You have been good enough to give me a carte blanche in this matter and I appreciate it.'

‘Yes, we at this School are most flexible. We have to be to attract any dignitary of your great experience. We have our intellectual vanity in Bengal, and we shall aspire to benefit from your presence with us, however long or short you wish to make it. But you will not escape our clutches that lightly, Mr Ambassador. Even if your tenure with us is very brief, it is prescribed in our Statutes that you will be required to address our fellowship on a subject of your choosing.’

‘I shall be happy to, if the topic of my present interest is not too dull a matter to place before your colleagues.’

‘Nonsense!’ cried Monidipa Bagchi again. ‘Nothing is either too dull or too exciting for them. You will speak to blank uncomprehending faces, whatever the subject. Some of them have a small spark of originality, but this is revealed only behind strictly closed doors, and on a person to person basis. They are equally alarmed at being thought of as stupid or intelligent. The Communist Party in power in Calcutta embraces mediocrity, not extremes.’

‘Being of the left is itself an extreme, is it not?’

‘The left means nothing here, my dear Ambassador. The Marxists have long ago lost the urge to extol the virtues of social justice. Their sole reason for existence is to remain in power. They mouth platitudes, do absolutely nothing, and think and plan only of mobilizing the vote for the next election. Here in India we call it electoral engineering.’

‘Is that why,’ asked Marco, ‘their rivals such as the other leftist political parties and the non-party militants and activists oppose them? The platforms of those groups do not seem to me to differ much from the Marxists.’

The Professor was sardonic, her stare more fixed, her voice becoming even shriller. ‘Yes, opposition is mounting, with increasing violence between the security people and the tribals and poor peasants mobilized by the Maoists, Naxalites, insurgents