

THE CASE OF THE MAN WHO DIED LAUGHING

*From the Files of Vish Puri,
"Most Private Investigator"*

Tarquin Hall



McCLELLAND & STEWART

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A True Story of the Hunt for a Man-killing Indian Elephant

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A Year in the New East End

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Ensconced on the back seat of his Ambassador with the windows rolled up and the air conditioning working full blast, Vish Puri kept a wary eye on the crack in the car windshield. It had started off as a chink – the work of a loose stone shot from the wheels of a speeding truck on Mathura Road that afternoon. But despite the sticky tape fixed to the glass like a bandage, the fissure was beginning to spread.

Delhi's infernal heat was bearing down on the windshield, trying to exploit its weakness determined to conquer the defiant pocket of cool air within. The detective imagined what it must feel like to be a deep-sea explorer, listening to your tiny craft creaking under thousands of tons of pressure.

That Monday in early June, the top temperature in the capital had been 44° Celsius, or 111 Fahrenheit – so hot, the tarmac on the roads had grown pliable and sticky like licorice. So hot that even now, an hour after darkness had fallen, the air felt like fire in the lungs.

Nothing dampened the frenetic spirit of Delhi's rush hour, however. Everywhere Puri looked, thousands upon thousands of people were making their way through the heat, the roar of the traffic, and the belching fumes illuminated in the headlights. Labourers, servants and students crowded into non-air-conditioned buses; bicyclists in sweat-soaked shirts strained against their pedals; families of three, four, even five rode on scooters, mothers sitting sidesaddle, infants in their laps and older children sandwiched in between.

And everywhere commerce flourished. Chunks of ice-cooled coconut and bootleg copies of Booker Prize novels were being sold by children meandering through the crawling traffic. Watermelons were heaped on the pavements. Handbills advertising the powers of a hakin who promised to exorcise malignant spirits and counteract curses, were being slipped under windshield wipers.

As Puri watched countless faces slick and shiny with sweat, eyes blinking in the pollution, lips parched with thirst, he was struck by how stoically “Dilli wallahs,” as Delhiites were known, went about their lives, seemingly resigned to the capital's harsh and, for most, worsening conditions. Part of him admired their resilience, their surprising good humour in the face of such grinding adversity; but he also mourned humanity's capacity to adjust to any conditions and perceive them as normal.

“The survival instinct is both blessing and curse, also,” was how he put it.

For his part, the detective had grown accustomed to air conditioning. Without it, dressed in his trademark safari suits and Sandown caps, he fared badly. At the height of summer, he stayed inside as much as possible. When venturing out was unavoidable, Handbrake, his driver, had to walk next to him with an umbrella to ensure that his employer remained in the shade. Puri had also invested in a small battery-powered hand fan. But in temperatures like these it had the opposite effect for which it was intended – like putting your face in front of an exhaust vent.

He could only pray that the windshield would hold. Tomorrow was the earliest he could afford to send Handbrake to get it replaced.

It was going to be a long night.

Puri glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to eight – ten minutes until the drop was due to be made at Fun 'N' Food Village.

“Subject is approaching IGI overbridge, over,” he said into his walkie-talkie.

The silver Safari he was tailing left the gated colonies and posh villas of South Delhi and headed onto the new, elevated three-lane expressway that snaked past Indira Gandhi International Airport.

“In position, Boss,” came back a voice. It belonged to one of Most Private Investigators’ top undercover operatives. Puri, who was in the habit of giving nicknames to people, called him Tubelight because he was usually “slow to flicker on” in the morning.

“Tip-top,” replied the detective. “Should be we’re with you shortly. If only this bloody fellow will get a move on. By God, such a slow coach!”

From the moment they’d started to tail the Safari, the detective had watched its slow progress with incredulity. Unlike all the other cars, which treated the road like a Formula One racetrack, slaloming through the lumbering heavy-goods vehicles and diesel-belching buses, it had kept precisely to the speed limit. It was the only vehicle on the road that didn’t straddle two lanes at once and have its headlights on full beam. And its horn remained silent despite the instructions painted on the backs of the trucks, HORN OK PLEASE!

“Arrrrey!” exclaimed Puri in frustration as the Safari gave way to a lowly auto rickshaw. “I’m all for sensible driving – speed thrills but kills, after all. But this man is some sort of joker, no?”

Handbrake was equally bewildered: “Where did he learn to drive, sir?” he asked in Hindi. “Ladies’ college?”

“No, United States,” the detective answered with a laugh.

In fact, Shanmuga Sundaram Rathinasabapathy, Most Private Investigators Ltd.’s latest client, had got his licence in Raleigh, North Carolina.

According to Rathinasabapathy’s dossier – Puri had managed to get hold of a copy from one of his military academy batchmates who was now working in Indian intelligence – “Sam” Rathinasabapathy was the son of a Tamil heart surgeon, who had been born and brought up in the Tar Heel State. A nuclear physicist and MIT graduate, he had “returned” to India a month ago, bringing with him his fellow “non-resident Indian” (NRI) wife and two young children. He was meant to be working for a joint American-Indian partnership building a new generation of nuclear reactors but had so far spent all his time dealing with problems and corrupt practices as he had tried to find an apartment to rent, enrol his children in school and find his way around the city.

Three days ago, facing a crisis, Sam Rathinasabapathy had come to see Puri in his Khairat Market office and outlined his predicament.

“This is my children we’re talking about! What am I going to do? I’m absolutely desperate!”

The detective had agreed to help him, advising the earnest, clean-cut Rathinasabapathy to play along with the demands of the middleman who had contacted him.

“Pay this bloody goonda the two lakhs and leave the rest to me,” was how he’d put it.

After that first meeting, Puri had marvelled to his private secretary, Elizabeth Rani, about the naïveté of “these NRI types.” More and more of them were being posted to India by top financial institutions and multinationals. Like the Britishers before them, the majority lived in pampered luxury, spent a good deal of their time complaining about their servants and Delhi belly, and didn’t have the first clue about how things were done in India.

“A topper this Sam fellow might be, but here in India he is quite at sea,” the detective had said. “What is required in this situation is experience and aptitude. Fortunately, Vish Puri can easily and willingly supply both.”

Having bestowed on his new client the sobriquet “Coconut” – “The fellow might be brown on the outside but he is one hundred ten percent gora inside” – the detective had put his plan into action.

That afternoon, Sam Rathinasabapathy had withdrawn the two hundred thousand rupees demanded – a hundred K For each of his children – from the bank. He had brought the cash to Most Private Investigators Ltd., where Puri had made a note of the serial numbers and packed the wads of notes in a brown duffle bag.

The call from the middleman explaining where to make the drop had come at six o’clock. This had given Tubelight enough time to get to Fun ’N’ Food Village first and get into position.

Now all Rathinasabapathy had to do was hand over the money.

“Estimated time of arrival ten ... by God, better make that fifteen minutes, over,” Puri said with a sigh as Rathinasabapathy’s Safari turned off the expressway and onto a dusty single lane road.

Here, confronted with potholes and unmarked speed bumps, as well as the usual honking cacophony of traffic, the vehicle slowed to a crawl, narrowly missing a bicyclist transporting a tall stack of full egg trays. Handbrake, struggling to keep a safe distance and incurring the wrath of a Bedford truck, was forced to brake suddenly. At the same time, he instinctively leaned on his horn.

“Sorry, Boss!” the driver quickly said apologetically. “But he drives like an old woman!”

“All Americans drive in this style,” affirmed the detective.

“They must be having a lot of accidents in Am-ree-ka,” muttered Handbrake.

It was a quarter past eight by the time Rathinasabapathy reached his destination and parked outside Fun ’N’ Food Village. He hurried to the ticket office, duffle bag in hand, and got in line.

Bracing himself, Puri opened his door and the heat and humidity hit him full on. He felt winded and had to steady himself. It was only a matter of seconds before the first trickle of sweat ran down his neck. Perspiration began to form on his upper lip beneath his wide handlebar moustache.

Fanning himself with a newspaper, the detective bought himself an entry token and followed his client through the turnstile.

Fun ’N’ Food Village, a distinctly Indian amusement park with popular water features, was packed with giddy children. Squeals filled the air as they careered down Aqua Shutes and

doggy-paddled along the Lazy River: “Phir, phir! Again, again!” Mothers in bright Punjabi cotton suits, with their baggy trousers rolled up just beneath their knees, stood half-soaked at the shallow end of the Tiny Tots Pond playing with their toddlers. In the Wave Pool, a group of Sikh boys in swimming trunks and patkas played volleyball. On benches arranged along the sidelines, aunties dipped their toes into the cool water and ate spicy dhokla garnished with fresh coriander and green chilies. Occasionally, cheeky grandsons and nephews splashed them with water.

Puri followed Rathinasabapathy as he squeezed through the crowd toward one of the many plaster-of-Paris characters dotted about the park: a fearsome ten-foot-tall effigy of the ferocious, ten-headed demon king Ravana. With savage eyes and sneering lip, he brandished a great scimitar with which he was preparing to smite a hideous serpent.

It was in front of Ravana that the middleman had instructed Puri’s client to wait.

Rathinasabapathy stopped in the shadow of the towering divinity. His apprehensive eyes scanned the crowd of revellers passing back and forth. Meanwhile, the detective, keeping his client in his sights, joined the unruly queue in front of a nearby dhaba. When it came to his turn, he ordered a plate of aloo tikki masala. It might be hours before he got to eat again, he reasoned, and the Gymkhana Club’s lunchtime special of “veg cutlet” had left him craving something spicy – no matter that he had drenched the food in a quarter-bottle of Maggi Chutney Sauce.

The food was delicious and when he had scraped every last bit of chutney off the bottom of the tobacco-leaf plate, he ordered another. This was followed by a chuski, a jeera cola order with extra syrup, which he had to eat quickly before it melted, avoiding incriminating stains on his clothes that would be noticed by his eagle-eyed wife.

By eight thirty, there was still no sign of the middleman. Puri was beginning to wonder if the plan was blown. He cursed under his breath for not having anticipated his client’s poor driving skills. But then what sort of fellow didn’t employ a driver?

An announcement sounded over the PA system, first in Hindi and then English. “Namashkar,” said a pleasant singsong voice. “Guests are kindly requested not to do urination in water. WC facilities are provided in rear. Your kind co-operation is appreciated.”

Another five minutes passed. Puri diligently avoided eye contact with his client in case the middleman was close by. A balloon wallah, who had been doing brisk business in front of the Wave Pool, came and stood a few feet to the left of Rathinasabapathy.

Then a short, chunky man with a thick neck and dyed black hair approached the nuclear physicist. His back was turned to the dhaba so that the detective was unable to see his face. But beyond the obvious – that the man was in his early to mid-fifties, married, owned a dog, and had reached the rendezvous within the past few minutes – Puri was able to deduce that he was having an affair (there was a clear impression of an unwrapped condom in his back pocket) and had grown up in a rural area where the drinking water was contaminated by arsenic (his hands were covered in black blotches).

Puri pressed the mini receiver he was wearing deeper into his ear. It was tuned to the listening device housed in a flag of India pinned to his client’s shirt pocket.

“Mr. Rathinasabapathy, is it?” the detective heard the middleman ask over the din of the

children. His voice suggested a confident smugness.

“Yeah, that’s right,” answered the nuclear physicist, sounding apprehensive. “Who are you?”

“We spoke earlier on phone.”

“You said to be here at eight o’clock. I’ve been waiting nearly half an hour.”

“Eight o’clock *Indian* time, scientist-sahib. You know what is Indian time? Always late than you would expect.” The middleman let out a little chuckle. “By that account I’m extremely punctual. But enough of that, haa? What is that you’re carrying? Something for me I hope?”

“Look, I’m not handing over any money until I know exactly whom I’m dealing with,” insisted Rathinasabapathy, repeating the words Puri had coached him to say.

The middleman gave a petulant shake of the head and turned his back on the balloowallah.

“Don’t be concerned with my identity. Important thing is, I’m a man who gets things done,” he said.

“You must have a name. What am I supposed to call you?”

“Some people know me as Mr. Ten Percent.”

“That’s very amusing,” said Rathinasabapathy dryly.

“So glad you think so, scientist-sahib. But I’m not a joker to do rib tickling. So let’s do business, haa? You’ve got the full amount exactly and precisely?”

“Yes, I’ve brought your two lakh rupees,” said Rathinasabapathy, returning to the dialogue Puri had scripted for him. “But how do I know you’ll keep up your end of the bargain? How do I know you won’t just take the cash and my kids still won’t – ”

“Listen, Textbook!” interjected Mr. Ten Percent. “In India deal is deal. This is not America with your Enron. Everything’s arranged. Now you’re going to give over the cash or what?”

Rathinasabapathy hesitated for a moment and then handed over the duffle bag.

“It’s all in there. Two – hundred – thousand – rupees,” he said, raising his voice and enunciating each word clearly.

The middleman took hold of the bag and held it by the straps in his right hand, gauging its weight.

“Very good,” he said, apparently satisfied.

“You’re not going to count it?”

“Here? In such a public place?” He chuckled. “Someone seeing so much of cash might get a wrong idea. Who knows? They might rob me. I tell you there’s dacoitery all about these days. One more piece advice to you, scientist-sahib: keep hold of your wallet, haa. The other day only, a thief grabbed my portable straight out my hand. Can you believe? Right there on the street in daylight hours. Luckily for me I got it back one hour later. The thief himself returned it. That is after discovering to whom it belonged. He was most apologetic.”

Mr. Ten Percent extended his hand.

“Good doing business with you,” he said. “Welcome to India, haa, and best of luck.”

“That’s it? When will I hear from you again?”

“You’ll not be hearing from me. Next communication will come from the principal.”

With that, the middleman walked off in the direction of the exit, soon vanishing amidst the crowd.

The balloon wallah was close behind him.

His bunch of silver helium balloons bobbed along above the heads of all the happy children and parents, indicating his position and that of his mark as accurately as a homing device.

Puri watched their progress for a few seconds. Then the detective signalled to his client to stay put for at least ten minutes as per the plan and went in pursuit of Tubelight and his balloons – and Mr. Ten Percent.

At five forty-five the following morning, Dr. Suresh Jha reached India Gate, the centrepiece of Lutyens's colonial New Delhi. He looked calm, in spite of having been told this was the day he was going to die.

Leaving his old Premier Padmini Fiat in the usual spot in the car park, he set off along Rajpath, the grand imperial boulevard that led past Parliament House and the Secretariat to the gates of Rashtrapati Bhavan – once the home of the British viceroy, but now the official residence of the president of India.

There had not been a hint of a breeze for days and the collective emissions of sixteen million souls hung heavily in the morning air. The dense haze created halos around the Victorian street lamps and made keen edges of the headlights of passing vehicles. The rising sun was but a feeble glow in the sky. With visibility down to less than a hundred feet, the sandstone domes and chuttris of the Indian seats of power lay far off in the distance, shrouded from view.

On either side of the tarmac boulevard lay sandy paths and, on either side of these, wide lawns edged with trees. Dr. Jha made his way down the path on the left-hand side, having first smeared a daub of eucalyptus balm on his upper lip to disguise the nauseating pollution emanating from the Yamuna River a mile and a half away.

Despite the hour, he was far from alone. Many of the other regulars who came to Rajpath every morning to exercise before the heat of the day made such activity unthinkable passed him along the way: the flabby, middle-aged couple in matching sun visors who did rigorous “brisk walking” but never seemed to lose any weight; the tall, muscular Muslim army officer who always jogged the full length of Rajpath and back in a sweat-soaked T-shirt; the decrepit gentleman with the pained expression whose servant had to push him along in his wheelchair.

Dr. Jha, too, cut an instantly recognizable figure. He had a long, white beard and wore open-toed sandals and a dhoti. Anyone seeing him for the first time might have been forgiven for assuming that he was an ascetic. But the retired mathematician was the very antithesis of the ecclesiastic. The founder of the Delhi Institute for Rationalism and Education, or DIRE, he was known to millions of viewers who had watched him debunking and unmasking Indian Godmen on national TV. They knew him as the “Guru Buster.”

This newfound celebrity was something Dr. Jha had neither sought nor welcomed. It had crept up on him over the past few years since the twenty-four-hour news channels had started reporting on so-called miracles as if they were newsworthy events, leaving him with no choice but to take to the airwaves and preach the gospel of reason and logic.

In doing so, he had lost his anonymity. Star-struck admirers were forever approaching him in public to shake his hand. And he was often hassled by ignorant people who, having seen him on TV demonstrating how simple “miracles” were performed – like walking on red-hot coals or making holy ash pour from the hands – believed he had acquired the very powers he was trying to discredit. Only last week, for example, he had been asked to exorcise an evil spirit from a boy of five who was unable to speak. Subsequently, Dr. Jha had made some inquiries and learned that the boy had suffered from jaundice during infancy, was partial

deaf, and therefore unable to mimic sounds like normal children. But here on Rajpath, where the early birds were drawn from the educated middle classes, Dr. Jha's privacy was rarely invaded. It helped that his body language was reserved. He walked with arms held studiously behind his back and head stooped in contemplation.

On this particular morning, as his mind mulled over the death threat he had received the day before, his thoughts turned to his childhood and the first time he had set foot on Rajpath.

Suresh Jha had been seven at the time, still small enough to sit on his father's shoulder. From that dizzying height, the view in all directions had been unforgettable: a vast ocean of people, their heads adorned with every kind of gear – pagris, Maharashtrian turbans, Gandhian topis – surging around the walls of the Secretariat and Parliament House.

The date: August 15, 1947, the day India gained its independence and, at the stroke of midnight, Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, made his famous "tryst with destiny" speech.

"A moment comes which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new ... when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance," Pandit-ji had said. "We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again."

Nehru's enthusiasm, his belief that as a secular, socialist democracy India would modernize, build factories and power stations, schools and universities, clinics and hospitals – that India would retake its rightful place as a leader of the civilized world – had been infectious. The young Suresh Jha, brimming with optimism for the future, had been one of the first students to enter the newly formed Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi. Later he'd helped design India's first indigenous telecommunications network.

But during the 1970s and '80s, while China, South Korea, and Taiwan pumped billions of dollars into research and development, Indian technology lagged far behind. Economically, the country fared no better. The so-called Licence Raj ensured that a small number of industrial families monopolized manufacturing. Corruption ate at the heart of the political system.

Now in his sixties, Dr. Jha felt bitterly disappointed by his country's failures.

"While the middle-class elite grow richer and maintain an exceptionally high degree of tolerance for the inhuman levels of deprivation around them, India still languishes among some of the poorest countries in the world – on the Human Development Index just behind Equatorial Guinea and Solomon Islands," he had written in the latest edition of *Proof*, the DIRE quarterly of which he was editor in chief. "India will remain a feudal society as long as people continue to believe their destinies are governed by some nonexistent higher power, whether it be God, Allah, or Vishnu, and don't take control of their lives for themselves."

His campaign had made him countless enemies. Many a village fakir and travelling sadhu had sworn vengeance after the Guru Buster had unmasked them as frauds. Dr. Jha had been denounced as a "devil" and a "monkey" by the church and the mullahs. He had also provoked the ire of India's Hindu right wing. But his most famous – and arguably most powerful – adversary was His Holiness Maharaj Swami.

"Swami-ji," as everyone referred to him, had risen to prominence in the past three years. Revered as a living saint by more than thirty million followers and watched by millions more.

around the world on Channel OM, the saffron-robed Godman claimed miraculous powers. He often levitated, produced precious stones and valuable objects out of thin air, and communed with an ancient rishi whose ghostly face thousands claimed to have seen materialize before their very eyes.

Dr. Jha had described him in the past as a “fraudy,” a “crook,” a “David Blaine in saffron robes.” On numerous occasions he had also challenged Swami-ji’s claim to be able to cure the sick of cancer, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS.

And then a month ago, the two men had finally come face to face when, unbeknownst to one another, they had been invited onto the same live TV talk show for what the host had billed as a “showdown.”

Seizing the opportunity to rail against Maharaj Swami before an audience of millions, Dr. Jha had angrily denounced him as a “charlatan” who was swindling the public.

“You should be prosecuted as a common criminal,” he’d said, adding: “If you can levitate, show us now!”

With his equable, beatific smile, Swami-ji had calmly explained that he only performed miracles when “there is a purpose and a need” and that such feats were designed to “inspire humanity to understand its true potential.” He’d also added that he was not “a circus performer.”

“Scientists seek to undermine our belief in the divine,” the guru had continued, fingering his Rudraksha rosary. “The power of the intellect and modern technology is insignificant compared to the power of love that each and every one of us carries in our hearts. At times people must be reminded of this – they must be shown something truly miraculous. This helps to renew their faith. Thus within the month, I will perform a spectacular miracle that will leave no one – not even atheists like my friend Dr. Jha here – in any doubt about my powers.”

The talk show host had pressed the Godman to explain the nature of the “supernatural occurrence” he had predicted, but Maharaj Swami had refused to elaborate. He had promised, however, that Dr. Jha would “be left speechless.”

Then yesterday the death threat had been delivered.

“Whenever there is a withering of the law and an uprising of lawlessness on all sides then I manifest myself.

*“For the salvation of the righteous
and the destruction of such as do evil,
for the firm establishing of the Law,
I come to birth, age after age.”*

UNBELIEVER! TOMORROW YOU DIE!

The Hindi words had been made up of letters cut from a newspaper and pasted onto a piece of paper.

Terrified, Dr. Jha’s wife had called the police. They in turn had advised her husband to stay indoors. But the Guru Buster had been determined to keep his regular early morning

appointment.

Dr. Jha passed several other groups on the wide lawn that lay to the left of Rajpath: the first was a ladies' yoga session, the supple participants arching their backs so that they looked like giant snails. Next, five bare-chested south Indian men were practising the ancient Kerala martial art of Kalaripayat, their long wooden staves clattering against one another sounded like drumbeats. And finally members of the local chapter of the Rashtriya Swayamseva Sangh (RSS) were conducting their morning drill in Hitler Youth-style khaki uniforms.

In the past, Dr. Jha had challenged the RSS's right to gather on Rajpath; in his view, the group presented a clear threat to public law and order no matter how much social work they carried out. The swayamsevaks had not taken kindly to his protests, and on a number of occasions, there had been heated exchanges between them. But this morning, the Guru Busting Group passed the "hate-mongering fascists," as he had often referred to them, without incident.

A quarter of a mile farther on, in the shadow of a Jamun tree, four men dressed for exercise were standing in a circle.

As Dr. Jha approached them, they raised their arms and stretched toward the sky. An instructor's voice called out a command and they lowered their hands to their hips. Then, but one of the men tilted their heads back and began to laugh. Not a titter, chortle, or snigger: they ejaculated hee-haws like drunken men.

For ten seconds, they shook with infectious mirth, going abruptly silent as if the joke they had caused their collective amusement had suddenly lost its appeal. The instructor's voice boomed out again and, with varying degrees of success and groans of discomfort, the men bent forward to touch their toes. Then they flung their arms wide and burst into another bout of joyful hysterics.

"Welcome, Dr. Sahib!" said the beaming instructor, Professor Pandey, who was in his late fifties. He had a big face surmounted by a shock of white hair partially stained yellow from smoking a pipe. "Welcome, welcome, welcome! We're doing our warm-up! Join us!"

Dr. Jha, who had been a member of the Rajpath Laughing Club for two years, greeted the other men before taking his place in the circle.

"Unfortunately there are only a few of us present today because so many people are away on holiday," continued Professor Pandey.

The Laughing Club was usually attended by at least a dozen regulars. Their morning sessions were always noisy and rambunctious and there had been complaints from some of the other exercise groups, which was why they gathered so far down Rajpath.

"Now that we're all assembled presently and correctly, good morning to you all!" said Professor Pandey.

"Good morning!" chorused the group.

"I'm delighted to see you, gentlemen!" The instructor carried on, grinning as he spoke. "First order of the day, we have a newcomer. Allow me to introduce Mr. Shivraj Sharma. Please make him welcome."

"Good morning!" chorused the others with a round of applause.

“Mr. Sharma, what is your profession, please?” asked Professor Pandey, addressing the distinguished, middle-aged gentleman in the purple track suit.

“I’m a senior archaeologist with the Survey of India,” he answered haughtily.

“Very good, Mr. Sharma,” Professor Pandey said, smiling, as if he was talking to a child who had correctly recited his twelve times table. “Now, you must know that here at the Laughing Club, we do laughter therapy. It’s a really wonderful approach that involves exercise and breathing as well as laughter, which is good for the heart and the soul. And what are we without heart and soul?”

There was a collective “Nothing!” from everyone except Mr. Sharma.

“Exactly! The ultimate goal of laughter therapy is to bring about world peace. People anywhere belonging to any culture can laugh. Laughter is the common language we all share. So how can we bring world peace through laughter? Very simple! When you laugh ...”

Here the other men joined in again, chorusing: “You change. And when you change, the whole world changes with you!”

“Very good, very good, very good!” exclaimed Professor Pandey, addressing each part of the circle in turn. “So, Mr. Sharma, do you know what a jester is?”

Before the archaeologist could answer, the instructor continued: “He is a comedian and therefore laughs loudest of all. So let us now do jester laughter. On the count of three. One, two ...”

On three, Professor Pandey pointed at the man opposite him in the circle, as if he had just told the funniest joke the world had ever heard, and started giggling feverishly.

The other men mimicked him, staggering about like intoxicated teenagers while holding their hands over their mouths.

Sharma tried his best to join in but looked awkward and self-conscious.

“Ho ho, ha-ha-ha! Ho ho, ha-ha-ha!” sang the group at the end of the Jester Exercise, doing a little jig and clapping their hands together.

“Very good, very good, very good!” cried Professor Pandey. “Next, Gibberish Exercise. What is gibberish, Mr. Sharma?”

The newcomer’s scowl suggested he was thinking: “Everything that comes out of your mouth!” But again Professor Pandey answered for him. “Gibberish is nonsense,” he said. “What infants speak.” He grinned again. “So let us now pretend we are two years old again.”

Professor Pandey spent the next minute uttering embarrassing baby noises while swinging his arms around him like a windmill.

More exercises followed: Silent Laughter (which involved puffing out their cheeks, holding their fingers over their lips, wheezing like old bellows, and pumping their shoulders up and down) and finally the Chicken.

“Ho ho, ha-ha-ha! Very good, very good, very good!”

At the conclusion of the session, which lasted thirty minutes, Professor Pandey invited anyone with a funny joke to share it with the rest of the group.

“Strictly no non-veg jokes, thank you very much!” he said. “Nothing you wouldn’t tell your

nani-ji!”

“But, Pandey Sahib, my nani-ji is telling the dirtiest jokes of all!” cried out Mr. Karat, one of the other regulars, who could do an alarmingly realistic chicken impersonation.

This comment provoked more laughter – genuine, natural, and wholly spontaneous laughter, that is. And then another regular, Mr. Gupta, announced that he had heard a crackle the night before.

“Manager asked a Sardar-ji at an interview: ‘Can you spell a word that has more than five letters in it?’ Sardar replies: ‘P-O-S-T-B-O-X.’”

Professor Pandey followed this up with a knock-knock joke.

“Knock, knock,” he said.

“Who’s there?”

“Bunty.”

“Bunty who?”

“Bunty,” repeated Pandey with a giggle.

“Bunty who?” the others said, prompting him again. But the professor could not answer. Like Uncle Albert in *Mary Poppins*, laughter had got the better of him.

“Really, Professor Pandey, you must finish your joke. Otherwise what is the point?” said Mr. Karat, smiling. But then he, too, erupted into a fit of giggles.

Dr. Jha and Mr. Gupta followed suit, chortling like little girls.

This time, however, it was different; this time they were unable to stop.

“I ... I ... can’t control my ... myself!” Professor Pandey declared through his laughter. “And I ... I can’t move my feet!”

Dr. Jha said he felt rooted to the spot as well. To their alarm, Karat and Gupta found the same. They all looked down at the ground, trying to ascertain what was holding them in place. As they did so, a mist started to form around their ankles. Soon, it blanketed the earth, lapping up around their shins.

Only Sharma was not affected by what was happening. But he dared not shift from his position. The stray dogs that had been lazing in the shade of the trees along Rajpath had started to surround the group of men, howling and barking. Dozens of crows were also circling overhead, cawing menacingly.

The sky seemed to darken. Thunder rumbled. There was a blinding flash. And then, in the middle of the group, a terrifying figure appeared.

Hideously ugly, with four writhing arms, a jet-black face, and a large tongue slithering from her bloody mouth, she wore a garland of human skulls around her neck.

The men, still laughing but struck by sheer horror, recognized her instantly as the goddess Kali.

“Unbeliever!” boomed a screeching witch’s voice as the mist rose up around her.

The goddess pointed one of her long, wizened index fingers at Dr. Jha and rose up into the air, hovering several feet off the ground. In one hand, she wielded a bloodstained sword,

another a man's severed head.

"I am Kali, consort of Shiva! I am the Redeemer! I am Death!"

A jet of fire shot from her mouth.

"You! Who have dared to insult me! You who have dared to mock my power! You who have
taste blood!"

The goddess glided through the air toward Dr. Jha, spewing more flames. The cawing of
the crows and the howling of the dogs grew louder.

"Mere mortal! *Now* you are speechless!" she cackled.

Dr. Jha was now face to face with the goddess, still unable to move his feet thanks to some
invisible force. He looked terrified and yet he was still laughing.

"Now die!" screeched Kali in a chorus of voices.

She raised her sword and drove it down into his chest. Blood ebbed from the wound and
spewed from his mouth. Clutching his chest, the Guru Buster uttered a last guffaw and then
fell backward onto the grass, dead.

Puri's day began without any indication that he would soon be investigating a "supernatural occurrence" destined to capture the imagination of the entire nation – a case that he would later describe as "a first in the annuals of crime."

His Ambassador pulled into the car park behind Khan Market at ten o'clock. Handbrake was dispatched to replace the windshield while the detective walked his usual route to his office.

Now the most expensive commercial real estate in all of India, Khan Market was home to new boutiques selling exorbitantly priced cushion covers and "size zero" Indian couture. Trendy bars and restaurants had sprung up, the nocturnal playground for Delhi's nouveau riches. Where a greengrocer had once traded, trays of American-style macadamia chocolate chunk cookies were on offer at eighty rupees each, more than a day's wage for most of the country's working population.

But a number of the old family-owned businesses still thrived and the place remained scruffy and unkempt, retaining – in Puri's eyes at least – a reassuring character lacking in the new sanitized shopping malls. Paint blistered and peeled from concrete walls, and spaghetti tangles of wires and cables hung overhead. Many of the shop signs leaned at angles. And the Punjabi princesses who flocked here with their proprietorial airs, high heels, and oversized designer sunglasses had to negotiate cracked, uneven pavements cluttered with sleeping pyedogs and hawkers.

"Kaise ho?" Puri called out to Mr. Saluja, who stood outside his tailor's, overseeing one of his employees sprinkling water on the pavement to keep down the dust. The key wallah was also getting ready for the morning trade, laying out his medieval tools on a potato sack on a small patch of pavement: hammer, chisels, long metal files, and a giant rusty key ring holding the uncut blanks he would use to make duplicates for his customers.

Mounting the steep, narrow steps that led up to the Most Private Investigators office above Bahri Sons bookshop, Puri was greeted with a warm smile and a "Good morning, sir" by Elizabeth Rani, whose desk took up a quarter of the small reception.

The first thing he did upon entering his office – that is, after turning on the air conditioning – was to light an incense stick in the little puja shrine below the two frames hanging on the wall to the right of his desk. One contained a photograph of his father, Om Chander Puri, the other a likeness of Chanakya, the detective's guide and guru, who had lived around 300 BC and founded the arts of espionage and investigation. The detective said a short prayer, asking for guidance from them both, and then buzzed in his secretary.

Elizabeth Rani brought his mail and messages and ran through a list of mundane matters that required his attention: "Kanwal Sibal's wife birthed a son. You'll visit them or I should I send nuts and fruit?"

Door Stop, the tea boy, then brought Puri his morning cup of kahwa, Kashmiri tea steamed with saffron, cardamom, cinnamon, sugar, and slivered almonds.

The detective savoured the sweet liquid while bringing himself up to date with the cases of

his books. Most Private Investigators was as busy as ever. So far this month, the agency had dealt with seven matrimonial investigations, which required background and character checks to be done on prospective brides and grooms having arranged marriages. An insurance company had hired the firm to ascertain whether a certain Mrs. Aastha Jain, seventy-four, had died of natural causes during the annual pilgrimage to Gangotri (the detective had found her alive and well, living it up in Goa under an assumed name). And Puri had brought to a speedy conclusion the unusual kidnapping of Mr. Satish Sinha's father. Sinha Senior had been reincarnated as a monkey, and the detective had located him by following the local banarasi wallah's best customer home.

Still, it had been a while since he had dealt with a truly challenging, sensational case. The Case of the Blue Turban League had been a good six months ago.

As for nuclear scientist Rathinasabapathy's crisis, well, that was standard fare, albeit satisfying and decently remunerated work. Puri was looking forward to his client's visit at twelve o'clock, when he would dazzle him with his results. In preparation, he spent ten minutes putting all the photographic evidence in order.

It was then that he noticed something outside his window – a loaf of white bread dangling like bait on a string.

It dropped out of sight. But soon a carton of cornflakes appeared. A minute later, a carton of Mango Frooti.

Zahir, who was blind and owned the tiny general store next to Bahri Sons, was restocking from the storage space he rented upstairs.

Puri was not altogether happy about this practice. Only recently he had been in the middle of a meeting with a distressed client whose husband had been murdered when pots of instant masala noodles had started knocking against his window. But beyond cutting the string with a pair of scissors, there was little to be done.

Besides, Puri was particularly partial to some of the products stocked by kindly Zahir – like those nice coconut biscuits, for example. And sometimes, when they appeared in his window, he hauled them in and settled his bill later.

It was almost uncanny the way packets of coconut biscuits often appeared around the same time every afternoon.

Soon after eleven o'clock, Elizabeth Rani entered Puri's office, her voice trembling as she placed a copy of the *Delhi Midday Standard* in front of him.

"I thought you would want to see this, sir. It's terrible news, I'm afraid. Such a kindly gentleman he was. Really, I don't know what the world is coming to."

FLOATING GODDESS STABS TO DEATH LAUGHING GURU BUSTER. COPS CLUELESS.

"By God!" exclaimed the detective, sitting up straight in his executive leather chair. He studied the coverage of Dr. Suresh Jha's murder intently, letting out several sighs and, on three occasions, a pained "Hai!"

The newspaper quoted the members of the Laughing Club, who described how, after killing Dr. Suresh Jha, the "apparition" had "vanished in a big flash."

“She was at least twenty feet high, a terrifying sight, like something from a nightmare” said eyewitness Professor R. K. Pandey. “I thought we would all be killed.”

Senior advocate N. K. Gupta added: “There is no doubt in my mind it was the goddess Kali. Today we have witnessed a supernatural occurrence. No one should be in any doubt.”

The article continued: “Many Delhiites have started flocking to temples across the city to seek protection, while hundreds of Kali worshippers have converged on Rajpath to celebrate the goddess’s appearance, which they believe is a divine event.”

“SKEPTICS SKEPTICAL,” read the headline of another article on page two, which quoted a Mumbai-based rationalist as saying that he was certain Dr. Jha had been murdered not by the goddess – “How could she have done it when she does not exist?” – but by someone masquerading as her.

“The rationalist was unable to explain, however, how a murderer could have carried out the crime in broad daylight in front of so many witnesses” the article continued. “He noted that last month, during a live altercation between Dr. Jha and Maharaj Swami, the Godman had promised a miracle to prove his powers. When asked for comment this morning, one of Swami-ji’s aids said off the record that His Holiness was certainly capable of summoning Kali. But so far, the Godman himself has been mute on this point.”

Puri pushed the paper aside with a look of anger and disgust.

“Madam Rani, you remember this deceased fellow?”

“Of course, sir, he’s – ”

“Dr. Suresh Jha, the Guru Buster,” said the detective, finishing her sentence for her. “I did one investigation for him a few years back. You remember?”

She did indeed and indicated as much with a nod. But Elizabeth Rani had worked for Puri long enough to know that he was going to recount the details of the Case of the Astrologer Who Predicted His Own Death regardless.

“It started when one astrologer by name of Baba Bhola Ram predicted the time and date of his very own death,” he began. “Twenty-four-hour news channels, forever chasing eyeballs, got hold of the story and turned it into a national spectacle.”

Elizabeth Rani remembered watching the live coverage on the *Action News!* station.

“Vedika, is there any indication yet of how he’s supposed to die?” the anchor had asked the young lady reporter standing outside the astrologer’s front door before the appointed hour.

“There’s been a good deal of speculation on that point,” the reporter had answered without the slightest hint of irony. “One local tarot card reader is claiming she’s foreseen that something will fall out of the sky and hit him on the head. Baba Bhola Ram himself says he knows only when he’ll die, not how. Will his prediction come true? Certainly he has a lot riding on the outcome, not least his reputation. Back to you in the studio.”

“Millions tuned in to find out whether this fellow Baba Bhola Ram would live or die,” continued Puri. “Minutes after the predicted hour, only, the astrologer’s wife came out and in floods of tears, announced that her husband ‘by grace of God almighty went to great abode in sky.’”

Dr. Suresh Jha visited Most Private Investigators Ltd. the following morning. His charity

cum-foundation, DIRE, laboured to “explain the unexplained” and the rationalist wanted to hire Puri to disprove the so-called miracle performed by Baba Bhola Ram.

“The wool is being pulled over our eyes,” he’d told the detective at the time. “If people carry on believing in this kind of thing, they will remain blind.”

“Through deductive reasoning and the most thorough examination of evidence at hand, I came to know Dr. Jha’s suspicions were quite correct,” recounted Puri. “The astrologer had indeed been murdered. The evildoers were Baba Bhola Ram’s most trusted and dedicated disciples themselves. Fearful of their guru’s reputation getting ruined, they took it upon themselves to make certain his prediction came true. Knowing of his weak heart, they put some ground castor beans into their master’s chai and thus he expired.”

Puri lapsed into a contemplative silence. By now, he was leaning forward with his elbows planted on his desk.

“Naturally I saw to it justice was done,” he added. “But one thing about the case has always been there – one thing that frankly and honestly to this very day troubles me.”

“What is it, sir?” asked Elizabeth Rani, although she could anticipate what he was going to say.

“Would Baba Bhola Ram have died at that hour had he not predicted his own death?”

“I believe that is something we will never know in this lifetime, sir,” said Puri’s secretary.

“Undoubtedly, Madam Rani!” said the detective, shaking off his mournfulness. “As usual, you are quite correct. Only the God can know, isn’t it?”

Puri’s mobile phone rang and he looked at the name on the screen, JAGAT. He answered it.

“Inspector! Kidd-an?”

The call lasted no more than two minutes. It ended with the detective saying: “I will be reaching in one hour.”

He glanced at the clock on his desk, a gift from the Federation of Automobile Dealers Associations (India).

“Mr. Sam Rathinasabapathy would be here any moment,” he told Elizabeth Rani. “Thirty minutes maximum is required. After, my presence is requested on Rajpath. Not for the first time, Inspector Jagat Prakash Singh would be needing my expert guidance.”

“You’re going to investigate Dr. Jha’s murder, sir?” asked his secretary, sounding hopeful.

“Nothing is confirmed, Madam Rani. But I can hardly be expected to stand by and watch this crime go unpunished, no? Myself and Dr. Jha were not in agreement on all matters, though much is certain, but he was a most upstanding fellow all round.”

Elizabeth returned to her desk, fully confident that her employer would be taking on the case, even though it would mean working without pay.

The idea that Vish Puri could resist getting involved in such a tantalizing murder was preposterous. There was as much chance of him going without his lunch.

Sam Rathinasabapathy was fifteen minutes late. A traffic jawan had issued him a challan on

“The cop said I failed to signal when I turned right! Can you believe that? I mean, Mr. Puri, have you ever seen *anyone* in this country use their signals – ever? Personally, I think he was bribed after a bribe. He kept mentioning the word ‘lifafa.’ That means ‘envelope,’ right?”

“Correct, sir,” said Puri patiently, the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

“I can’t *believe* how corrupt this place is. Everyone’s got their hand out the whole time. I can’t even get a cooking gas canister without paying baksheesh. No wonder the country’s such a mess!”

“Sir, no need to do tension,” said Puri, motioning Rathinasabapathy into one of the comfortable chairs in front of his desk. “Allow me to give you some advice. Most definitely, you will thank me for it later.”

“Sure, Mr. Puri,” said the nuclear physicist with a sigh as he took a seat.

“An educated, well-to-do gentleman such as yourself should not go round hither and thither without a good driver. Frankly speaking, sir, it does not look right. Just you should sit in the back seat, only. That way you won’t be facing this type of harassment. Police wallahs will know you’re someone of importance and not a part of the riff-raff.” Puri rolled his Rs with gusto.

“But I’m used to driving myself,” protested Rathinasabapathy.

“Believe me, sir, I understand. You value your independence. But allow me to find you a suitable driver. He should be of good character and naturally not a drunkard. Those from hill states are best. Such types have to learn to control their vehicles on all those tight bends. Otherwise they’d go right off the edge.”

“Yes, well, I suppose that would be an advantage,” said Rathinasabapathy.

“Very good! Later, I’ll get my man to revert with some candidates. You need pay five, six thousand per month max-i-mum.”

“OK, Mr. Puri, whatever you say. Now are you going to tell me what happened last night at the Food Village place? Where’s my money?”

Puri reached down behind his desk and picked up a sports bag, setting it down on his desk.

“It’s in here, sir. Two lakhs exactly.”

“You got it back! But how?”

“Actually, sir, it never left this room.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Just I’ll explain. It was necessary for you to make the withdrawal in case they were keeping an eye on you. But the cash you gifted was not the money you withdrew from the bank.”

“I don’t get it. What was in the bag I gave to what’s-his-name? The fat guy in the silk shirt, Mr. Ten Percent.”

Puri smiled. “His real name is Rupinder Khullar. He’s a professional lizer.”

“A what?”

“Lizer,” repeated the detective. “Means a man who gets things fixed up. Delhi is full of such types. I tell you, throw a stone in any direction and most definitely you will hit one. Such individuals will arrange anything for the right fee. Get your son a job in a government ministry, lobby the right MLA to get emissions certificates passed on your factory. Mr. Rupinder Khullar is particularly well connected politically. You might say he’s got a finger in every samosa.” Here Puri uttered a light chuckle.

“So what did I give him?” asked Rathinasabapathy, who didn’t seem to find the metaphorical humourous.

“Counterfeit money,” answered the detective.

“I gave him *what?*” cried the nuclear physicist, rising half out of his chair.

“Please, sir, remain calm. Rest assured everything is two hundred percent all right. Pukka. I borrowed it from an old batchmate in the Anti-Counterfeit Section. Naturally on condition every last note be returned. It is evidence from another case. These days so much of funny money is being sent across our borders by Pakistan, I tell you.”

“Is that legal?”

“Sir, in India the line between what is legal and what is not is often somewhat of a fuzz.”

Puri opened the Rathinasabapathy file and pulled out the photographs that Tubelight had taken of Mr. Ten Percent. They served to illustrate the narrative about the middleman’s movements after the meeting.

His first stop had been a hotel bar, where he had “taken a few pegs imported whisky” with a local politician. Two hours later, Mr. Ten Percent visited an apartment in Sector Nine, Delhi City, where he spent a couple of fun-filled hours with his mistress, a twenty-six-year-old woman with a job he had fixed for her on a prominent music channel.

“The place is registered in his name. She is a PG, so to speak.”

“PG?”

“Means ‘paying guest.’”

Mr. Ten Percent then returned to Raja Garden, his home, wife, two children, three servants, and a Pekinese.

“This morning first thing, he drove to Ultra Modern School,” continued Puri. “There, he handed over the two hundred thousand to Mr. S. C. Bhatnagar.”

Bhatnagar was the school principal. Last week he had offered Rathinasabapathy two places for his children in return for a hefty bribe.

“Their entire conversation was captured on hidden video cameras secreted inside Mr. Bhatnagar’s office,” continued Puri. “On tape, these two can be clearly seen and heard, also discussing your case and Rupinder Khullar’s fee.”

“Let me guess. Ten percent?”

“Correct.”

“But how did you get the money back – the counterfeit money?”

“I called this principal fellow and made the situation perfectly clear – that we are having all evidence to take to authorities and he is in possession of so much of funny money.”

Forthwith, I gave him instructions where to return it – that is, two lakhs total. He was more accommodating.” Puri paused. “Sir, I am pleased to say he has also kindly assured me your two darling children have confirmed places in Ultra Modern School.”

“You mean they’re in?” exclaimed Rathinasabapathy. He was half out of his chair again.

“They may start Monday, only.”

Relief swept over Puri’s client. “That’s fantastic news, Mr. Puri!” he said. “I don’t know how to thank you. I was so worried. I had tried so many schools and they all wanted kickbacks. The thought of the kids not getting into a good institution ... well, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Rathinasabapathy sighed, relaxing his shoulders, and leaned back in his chair. But then a thought occurred to him and he frowned. “Hang on a minute ... what about Mr. Ten Percent? He’s going to be pretty upset!” he said.

“That one will keep quiet. He would not wish to be on tonight’s news.”

“But won’t he come after me?”

Puri shook his head.

“Won’t he come after you?”

“Not to worry about me,” said the detective with a chuckle. “I have my connections, also. Besides, my identity remains top secret. Vish Puri is a voice on the phone, only.”

Rathinasabapathy’s forehead was still crumpled with anxiety.

“I don’t know, Mr. Puri,” he said at length, shifting in his chair. “I’m not sure how I feel about all this. It all seems ... well, risky as hell.”

The detective held up both his hands and shook them, a gesture that communicated “What worry?”

“Trust me, sir,” he said smugly. “I have taken care of everything.”

Rathinasabapathy stared at the floor for a while, weighing it all up in his mind, and then said: “Well, if you say so. But I still can’t believe how much people in this city go through to get their kids into schools.”

“I told you when we met few days back, no, schools in India are a huge racket. And the business is about supply and demand. In this case there is excess of demand and nowhere near the supply. Thus schools can charge a premium for admittance. I tell you, parents in Delhi go to hell getting their children into good schools.

“What all my niece Chiki went through you wouldn’t believe,” continued the detective. “She made applications to six schools total. All demanded a registration fee of four hundred to seven hundred rupees. Naturally there were countless forms to complete. Each and every time, the boy had to sit a test and do the interview. And each and every time, his parents were interviewed, also.”

“The parents?” exclaimed Rathinasabapathy.

“Most certainly. They were interviewed separately in order to cross-reference their answers. What all were their aspirations? Their views on discipline? Chiki joked she and her husband had to cram for the test themselves. Made university look like ABC.”

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