



The Flight and the Fall

(V Chapter of *The Persecution of Madhav Tripathi*)

by Aditya Sudarshan

This is an excerpted chapter from my just-completed novel, The Persecution of Madhav Tripathi. The novel represents the literal nightmare of its protagonist, bringing home to him a spiritual crisis that only his subconscious knows. As the chapter begins, Madhav, an elite, successful government servant, has become aware that an unknown group of assassins is chasing him. Who are they and why do they want to kill him? The story develops at a party full of his elite contemporaries.

Stars hung like lamps in the night, that had been pressed into service for the illumination of the occasion. Lamps grew on stalks from the earth, shining fulsomenly on the dew-capped grass. Men and women moved about the lawns, in languid self-possession. They strolled, though there was space enough to leap; they talked, though they were happy enough to holler; so that in both stride and speech they showed the restrained abandon that is the signature of grown-up joy. Beyond the perimeter of the lawns, the thick forest pulsed with corralled life.

At one end of the grounds was a stage, on which two grandly decorated chairs had been set up across a low table. The thrones were fit for bride and groom, but their arrangement was for conversation, and it was two men who occupied them at present, conversing laconically, while acknowledging the good wishes of those who came their way (and thus, over time, of every person present). The Secretary was with Jonathan Carry, when Madhav walked over to greet them.

'I hope', said Madhav, 'that I'm not interrupting anything important.'

The Secretary turned his huge and unsmiling face towards him.



'We were discussing the meaning of life.' The voice seemed to rumble inside Madhav's own head.

'Oh good', Madhav laughed, 'Then that's alright.'

Only one who had spent much time in his company could have gleaned that the Secretary approved of the joke. His great eyebrows had knotted together, marking his forehead with the dark furrows of a frown. But this, in him, was a sign of good cheer. Had he smiled instead, had his cheeks plumped outwards with joviality, and the pale eyes come dancing alive- then his interlocutor had reason to beware.

Jonathan Carry, observing without comprehending the significant glances that passed between the two, settled deeper into his seat with a sigh and a chuckle. There was a special comfort about being happily ignorant in a safe and entertaining environment.

'We haven't been introduced', he bellowed, 'Jon Carry.'

'Of course', said Madhav, 'I've read all your books. My name is Madhav Tripathi. I work in the Ministry.'

'He works with me', said the Secretary, 'And not only is he one of our best young officers, but he's an author too. He's published a book.'

'How wonderful', said the Englishman, with a well-practiced air of interest, 'I must get hold of it.'

'Well, it's fiction', Madhav explained, 'It's a novel.'

'Oh I read fiction', said Carry, 'I'm very interested in Indian fiction. What's your book about?'

Madhav felt the Secretary's gaze resting meaningfully upon him. He knew then, that it was necessary to be impressive. A man like the Secretary should have been free to look anywhere, but his interest in these proceedings had put a crimp in his ease, and laid a burden upon Madhav. However, he had no doubt that he was equal to it.

'It's a sort of coming-of-age novel', he said, 'About a young civil servant in rural India. It is auto-biographical, but not, I hope, self-indulgent. Not the terrible self-indulgent sort of thing one sees all over the place.'

'In a job like yours', said Carry perceptively, 'there must be little room for self-indulgence.'

'Exactly', said Madhav, 'And there is great opportunity for observation. I write so that I can learn about the country.'

'It's a fascinating country', said Carry.

'The most fascinating in the world', Madhav assented.

At that very moment, as though to underline his point, a great wailing sounded through the forest, a noise such as the beasts were wont to strike up, from pain or ineffable pleasure, one hardly knew. It sent, in turn, waves of excitement riding across the lawns. Madhav already knew he had won. His intuition about such things had proved itself many times over the successes of the preceding years- and even before.



Just so had he stood, glowing with anticipation, when they announced the gold medals at the University.

'Do you know my agent', said Carry, 'Nicholas Brand?'

'Of course', said Madhav, 'Though not personally.'

'Come to my book launch next Sunday. I'm going to introduce you to him.'

'That would be great', said Madhav.

Jonathan Carry nodded and then, instead of leaning back, he sat up straight in his chair. Simultaneously it occurred to Madhav that he was really a very handsome man. His skin was clear and almost effulgent, as though polished many times over, and his eyes, a piercing blue, seemed to see much farther than ordinary people's eyes. The golden crown that Madhav now saw perched on his golden hair was only fitting, for a man who had attained so much for himself, and who gave so generously to others.

Carry held his position, with the static authority of a sculpted idol. Madhav understood what was expected of him, just as he had understood in his childhood, when brought before his grandfather and asked to perform a traditional farewell. Those genuflections had wounded his pride every time, because the reverence they were intended to express had no justification in the old man's actual merit. They were irrational. These, of course, was not. Nevertheless the difficulty, then as now (though lesser now than then) lay in squaring one's dues with one's dignity. Madhav was conscious of the importance of not 'prostrating before the white man', that pathetic affliction of so many of his countrymen. He was conscious, also, of the Secretary looking on. He did not want to embarrass him with a foolishness one way or the other.

The solution he hit upon was a brief bow, with the right hand extended in the direction of Carry's feet, but really nowhere near. As soon as the gesture was done, he knew it was exactly right. Carry, re-animated, sat back at ease. The Secretary pursed his lips.

'Come on Madhav', he said, 'Let me offer you something special.'

He stood up then, all six feet four of his giant frame, while the vast invisible cloak of his authority settled about the stage and the lawns and even beyond; blanketed bravely even the unruly menagerie. His stirring gave pause to the chatter of the guests, as the stirring of a lion will cease the idle bird-song. Voices were lowered. Faces turned in deference. Hearts filled, undoubtedly, with love or with fear.

Shoulder to shoulder with the great man, his blood churning with pride, Madhav went over to where the drinks were being mixed. The senior-most bartender gave them his immediate attention. The Secretary made a certain gesture, accompanied by a certain look. The bartender nodded and disappeared.

'Isn't it terrible?'

It was a woman's voice at Madhav's side. Her name came to him, while he nodded his greeting. Meenakshi Triveni had once been a publisher of academic books; now she had a column in a Sunday magazine, wherein, week after week, she gave her opinion on



the affairs of the day; that, and her scrubbed, nose-in-the-air attractiveness, were all he knew of her.

'Here we are, living like royalty', she explained bitterly, 'and all about us, is reality, the real, unvarnished struggle for existence!'

Madhav said something that did not interest her. She looked at him with mingled pity and contempt, a look that implied that only her great good breeding had killed the expletive on her lips, or rather, thought Madhav, she looked at him afresh, because this was her stock expression.

'Do *understand*, Madhav. They are so *much* nobler than we. Didn't you read Samrat Sen's book?'

'It was very good', said Madhav.

'I have never seen such empathy, or such enlightenment. Surely you can see, having read that book, that they have feelings just like we do.'

'Of course they do', said Madhav, 'That's why we try to help them.'

'We presume to know best for them. It is such an oppression! And you, Sir, I have a bone to pick with you especially!'

with you especially!'

She had deference enough to say it with a little jocosity. But she was mad enough to have said it. The massive frame of the Secretary bowed in humble acceptance. About his mouth, however, were the first signs of a smile.

'Of course you do', he allowed graciously, 'What can I get you?'

Meenakshi Triveni already had a drink. 'The rangers are *brutal!*', she complained. There was a long shudder in her high voice. 'And people like *you* cover for them! Why are the rules not enforced? How many poor creatures must die, before someone is finally punished? You know, of course! A hundred and thirty three! Starved to death! This complete negligence-'

'It is shameful', the Secretary interrupted. To interrupt such a woman was not easy. One either did it quickly and decisively, or one suffered. 'You are quite right, Meenakshi. Heads must roll for what happened.'

She was faintly mollified, largely flattered, but far from finished.

'I'm glad to hear you say that', she said, 'I'm glad to see you agree. But it's easy enough to *say*', she prepared for another sally. 'The difficult part is *doing* something. To *do*-'

'And I', said the Secretary, 'am glad that you appreciate the difficulty. The wild is a very difficult place indeed. The rangers know it far better than you and I. They are crooks, it is true, they despoil what they ought to protect. Nevertheless, we have to use them. You see,' he said, and then he paused, the better to pick his words. To Madhav's amazement Meenakshi did not pounce on the chance to speak. She leaned closer, to listen. 'You see, Meenakshi', the Secretary continued, 'the environment, that we live in... it is challenging.'



In the quiet that followed, the walls of the forest seemed to draw ever closer around them. It was bearing down on them now; that stench-filled darkness, teeming with vermin, rife with disease, flooded with shadows. Madhav saw the shapes of the jungle creatures; wretched humanoids, one part undeniably men but three parts merely bestial, doomed, it seemed, to struggle and die in the unforgiving wild. Then came the cries, the jungle cries, snorting, spitting, growling, screeching. And lamenting, most of all lamenting- the only note of symphony in a thousand cacophonous tongues, was lamentation. But from above them all sounded the Secretary's clear and controlling words.

'The place is hardly habitable. Not for the creatures themselves, though they are used to it. Therefore, we try to improve it. For their sake. With that said, Meenakshi... I do welcome your criticism.'

She was blinking rapidly now. She murmured something about dust in her contact lenses. In truth, the vision of the sanctuary had shaken her. The woman was fifty, but the years had suddenly fallen away, recast her as the raw, untested college girl that she had really never ceased to be. Simultaneously, Madhav's heart softened for her. He knew that he would always know Meenakshi Triveni, even if he didn't.

A ranger came up, loudly and ungraciously demanding a drink. A junior bartender set about attending to him. True to his tribe, the ranger was both unfit and uncouth. He was dressed, even here at the party, in full working uniform; the Nehru cap, the white kurta pyjama (bulging at the waist), the shotgun slung over the shoulder- for use against poachers, so it was claimed. Meenakshi seemed not to notice him, but she waited until he had left. Then the blankness went from her eyes and she lavished on the Secretary a smile that must have been dazzling in her youth.

'We have to use them, yes. But must we drink with them?'

At this she laughed, an ebullient, extended giggle. There was warmth in her laugh, the warmth of a cozy living room on a winter's night, of fluffy blankets and sunny vacations, of a great deal of love received, and in return, well, no harm intended. A proud, vulnerable little laugh, much more endearing, thought Madhav, than the apology it substituted for.

The Secretary did not laugh.

'We can stand here', he said, 'and argue these points in a mature fashion. That is the achievement we must be proud of, not any of this'- the flick of his hand dismissed the party. 'Those are the values that we have to spread, as far and wide as we can. Free speech. Debate. Reason.'

'Civilization', Meenakshi summed up.

The senior bartender returned with two glasses of a clear blue liquid. The Secretary took a glass in each hand.

'Enjoy the party', he bade Meenakshi. She laughed again. She wanted, Madhav understood, to talk more with them, to end the conversation on a friendlier and less



formal note, to expunge her sudden loneliness, but he knew there was no time for these very nicest niceties. Following the Secretary, he plunged into the party.

The cocktail was new to him. The first sip went down like a mouthful of shimmering air. He could not even taste the alcohol.

'I like her kind', the Secretary was saying, 'They will clash swords with us, again and again, but they will never draw blood. That man, on the other hand-'

He was looking at Krishnan, passing them by; Krishnan, the journalist par excellence, the acerbic crusader of justice who spent half the year in the forests in the company of the beasts; who could look any evil in the eye and condemn it to its face. He was a steely-faced man with iron-grey hair; he prowled the lawns in a near-tangible blaze of crackling energy.

'When S. Krishnan strikes', said the Secretary, 'he does draw blood.'

'He's formidable', Madhav agreed.

'Which is why', said the Secretary, 'he is so wonderful an ally.'

'I don't know about that', said Madhav, 'I mean- he's constantly criticizing the bureaucracy.'

Someone was waving at Madhav. It was Vinay- what party was complete without Vinay? Moments later, Madhav watched his dandy friend, in his white linen trousers, saying something that made the leonine Krishnan suddenly kittenish. The journalist spluttered with laughter.

'A constant critic', said the Secretary, 'is a constant ally- if you only turn him around.'

Madhav took another sip.

'What is this drink?'

'He'll come in handy, you'll see', the Secretary paused, to flick something off his wrist, 'He'll come in handy to take care of your trouble.'

Madhav stared at him. 'My trouble?'

The Secretary was looking away, out across the peopled lawns.

'You know', said Madhav, 'you know already?'

An elation, unimagined, was burgeoning within him.

'Of course I know.'

He had hardly realized! He had not known what worries had dug their claws into his soul, until now that he felt them loosen and drop away. That casual, ironic tone! That pout of easy good humour! Help was here! It had been here all along! His unspoken, even unthought anxiety, that his strongest ally might yet be too weak, had proved to be only the unfounded and ignorant worry of a child, who has still to learn that his parents are truly his caretakers. The wild sense that everything was going to be alright hugged him to its bosom. It came with a welcome shame that he had ever imagined otherwise.

'Drink up', said the Secretary.



Flushed with obedience, he raised the glass to his lips. He could barely wet them, however, before he had to hold it aside again, to assist the oncoming embrace of a burly figure in gold spectacles.

'Dear fellow!', said the newcomer. Madhav grimaced in the too-tight clasp that would crease his suit, and the rising fumes of sickly sweet rose perfume. 'Beloved fellow', the man whispered, before looking him over with appreciative mutterings and the twitching of fleshy lips. This was the businessman, Atul Pradhan, whose licences Madhav had helped clear some years ago, and who had since expanded his leather empire to ten separate States. His English, however, had expanded very little.

Having made clear his love, he made it known that, by the same token, he was greatly disappointed. Madhav had not kept in touch. Their relations were not as warm as their mutual affection ordained.

'Why', Madhav laughed, 'Do your licenses need renewal?' He knew Pradhan did not follow the language well enough to grasp the joke, or he would have been offended- and after all, he was a powerful man. They merely joined in meaningless laughter, the froth of cordiality.

'So how is business', said Madhav. What else, he wondered, could one talk about with such people?

But Atul Pradhan was having none of it. His eyes gleamed with the benevolent lasciviousness that was his stock attitude to the weaker sex.

'Where is your missus?'

'Not my missus.'

Madhav gave him a mocking smile, disguised as camaraderie. And with an answering leer that sought to pass for sophistication, Pradhan rephrased.

'Your lady friend. Where is she?'

Where was she? She was dancing. Madhav saw her then- a reckless, whirling figure in a crowd of fancy dresses. Snakes of light writhed freely in the pool, and she by the poolside. The on-lookers' faces were rapt with delight and astonishment, not merely the socialites, but the important men, the elegant women. Nobody did such things, but Shivani.

'Somewhere around', said Madhav.

He felt a shadow stirring. It dawned on him suddenly that Pradhan had not even acknowledged the Secretary. That said a lot for both the Secretary's discretion, and Pradhan's ignorance. Had he an ounce of real learning, he would have recognized the man's face from every cultural event of consequence. But he was only a businessman.

Even now, as Madhav made to perform the introductions, Pradhan's gaze welcomed a new arrival instead. A darkly bespectacled man with a two day stubble emerged sanguinely into their midst. He, at least, knew whom to greet first.

'Danesh', the Secretary gripped the proffered hand. Madhav knew him too. Danesh Khan, the brilliant young film-maker, the voice (they were saying) of a nation, long-



fettered, now on the cusp of flight. That is, if the potentates of caste and religion would only allow him to use it.

Suddenly they were in the midst of the usual discussions.

'When the audience finally matures...'

'The country is not ready for grown-up films.'

'You can't say anything without some madman protesting.'

'In fact, I blame the suits. Leave aside the lunatic fringe, the audience is actually quite evolved.'

'But what is wrong with item numbers?'

'We're forgetting the real India.'

'Oh it's all about the money.'

An amusing episode followed. Pradhan took Danesh aside and, eyes starry and mouth slack, confided in him his long-cherished idea for a sure-fire 'block-buster.' It was the story of a small-town youth, born into a home where a Bajaj scooter was the only conveyance, who by dint of sheer hard work, not to mention genius, had risen up the rungs of the economy to the ownership of a fleet of sports cars, the leadership of a grand business empire, and the company of a hundred desirable women.

The young Khan was hiding his laughter under cover of his glass of wine, and the occasional glib comment that, whatever they meant, had sufficient English-language fluency to keep Pradhan nodding. Madhav also was laughing; in between heaving chuckles he took little sips of his drink. The Secretary looked on indulgently.

Then a gasp went up from the direction of the pool, then a splash and a set of squeals. Madhav knew, without looking, that Shivani had jumped in. He felt, turned on him, Pradhan's startled delight, and determined to ignore it. Not that any snub could quench the businessman's prurience. He abandoned his castles in the air to scurry over to gape at the flesh and blood girl. Khan, though he feigned disinterest, strolled in the same direction.

The Secretary and Madhav watched them go.

'Pompous fool', said Madhav, 'if there was ever proof needed that you can't buy taste...'

'Yes', said the Secretary, 'All the same, he is quite right. His own life's story is indeed the block-buster of our times.'

'More's the pity', Madhav sighed. 'Well', he added, 'I suppose not. The success of the likes of Pradhan is a mixed blessing, but I suppose it is a blessing.'

'For you as well. In any battle, money is a vital ally.'

The lawns were crawling with life now; the party was at its peak. Madhav scanned the familiar faces, as they said the familiar things. He tilted his glass and the airy blue liquid went coursing down his throat.

'Khan also is an asset', the Secretary continued, 'He has fought these forces himself.'



'But he caved in, didn't he?', said Madhav, 'He made all the cuts the right-wingers demanded.'

'He made the cuts', the Secretary assented, 'But under protest. He exposed their narrow hatred of those with different beliefs. He gained a great deal of sympathy. Sympathy is a very valuable friend. Khan did not surrender quietly.'

'I don't want to surrender at all.'

'Of course you will not surrender', the Secretary laughed- the thought had offended him, 'One picks one's battles. Yours is life and death.'

Madhav heard the dire words through a building mist of intoxication. He felt light and agile, and it was not from worry that he asked, but only a kind of formality:

'Do you really think it's that serious?'

A song had struck up in a corner of the party. *Rise and Shine*, someone was chanting, *Fly Fly Fly, Ever so Hiiigh*. Madhav did not recognize the music, but it was pleasant enough and right for his mood.

'What a racket', he grinned, 'God, these people... Som Bakshi! The ubiquitous Bakshi! How did I miss him before!'

There he was, when was he not? Fat and sleek, in a three piece suit, with his coiffured hair, the drink always attached to his hand; the head thrown back in laughter; fawning on Jonathan Carry. Bakshi, who had been born to the bright lights, and had learned nothing since, except the assiduous art of never stepping out of them. Bakshi, who had made a career out of attending parties and massaging egos and providing sound-bites on the English news channels.

'Does he never see himself?', Madhav wondered, 'I mean, everybody networks, but *this* guy...'

'Yes', said the Secretary, 'But at this moment, in this battle, he too is an ally.'

'Not him!', Madhav protested.

'You are light-headed', said the Secretary, 'You are happy, that is good. Finish your drink and you will feel even better. But the enemy is stalking you all the while. Do not mock even the meanest foot-soldier of your own army. Even a fool like Bakshi will fight against tyranny.'

'He'll fight like a fool', said Madhav.

'And still', said the Secretary, 'he will be of use.'

The Secretary drained his glass and rose, at once, six inches into the air. Madhav now saw that all about the lawns, as though at some intuited signal, the guests were doing the same. Not everyone, of course, was equally successful. Pradhan was floating comfortably; the young Danesh was doing very well, rising almost as quickly as the Secretary himself. So was Krishnan- but Krishnan did not care to fly; Krishnan was leaving. Then there was Bakshi; floundering for all he was worth, barely off the grass, laughing raucously in a transparent attempt at concealing his shame. Madhav drank off what remained in his glass and shot up to join the fun.



Everyone was more at ease off the ground; everyone nicer and more tolerable in the throes of their common ecstasy. Conversation flew light and casual; the laughs were knowing, the jokes too private and glib to even need to be completed.

'How about this new Shah Rukh 'block-buster'?'

'So, did you read Anand's essay in EPW?'

'Apparently she once *taught* English... In an actual University...'

'I hear that Baba is doing another fast-unto-death. I hope this time they let him succeed.'

'Madhav! When are you going back to the boondocks to save our suffering farmers?'

Madhav laughed heartily. There was no need, of course, to reply, especially since his questioner had already drifted away into the night.

He caught sight of Shivani, wading through the air towards him, hips swaying determinedly and sensually. Little droplets of water still clung to her cheeks; her hair was not quite dry either, but she was cooling off quickly high above the ground. She came to him, her face glowing with achievement, her nerves- he knew- waiting to be soothed.

Madhav took her hand. For a while, he felt that it was just the two of them, far above the dark and fetid forest; separate, also, from the glittering guests; free from drudgery and sophistication alike. Utterly free!

'You're having a good time?', said Madhav.

'Yes.'

'You danced?'

'I did.'

'You look beautiful.'

She nodded and looked away. He felt a sharp pinch of annoyance.

'Yeah, you really showed them, didn't you?'

'Excuse me?'

'You made quite a spec-'

But she wasn't listening. Her eyes were scanning the floating crowd. They paused and narrowed as she spotted her target. Then she did a little shimmy, a maneuver specially gossamer in mid-air, to compose herself down the length of her body, before the smile came bounding to her lips, where it stayed.

'Let's go talk to Carry. I need to talk to him.'

Madhav, sullen, resisted her tugging hand.

'If you just want to flirt some more-'

'Don't be silly! He's on the organizing committee of the Arts Festival next month, in New York. You're the one who keeps telling me to be more savvy about these things!'

'Alright', said Madhav.

They glided on the air, hand in hand. Madhav felt the flickering eyes of many hovering guests, passing over them in admiration or jealousy. He had the further



satisfaction of stepping over Som Bakshi, who was snatching from a waiter's tray glass after glass of the blue liquor (if indeed it was liquor), but, for all he consumed, he remained nearly grounded. Clearly, the drink could only stimulate one's innate ability to soar.

And what a beautiful sensation that was. Madhav took long breaths of cold, clean air and wiggled his feet in the sheer bliss of uprootedness. The only down-side to being afloat was the inability to access the food, because the waiters, of course, stayed stuck on the grass. However, a solution was now being implemented. A ladder had been propped up along the side of the tallest tree on the lawns. The waiters were taking their positions at different rungs, to cater to the guests at every height.

Jon Carry, deigning to descend a few feet, was sampling the kebabs at the top of the ladder. The Secretary was with him. His huge and billowing body seemed now truly in its element. Looking at him, Madhav realized suddenly that if the Secretary's girth ever stood out of proportion, the blame resided, not with him, but with the meanness of earth-bound life, of four-walled interiors, little tables, little chairs, and the ground ever intrusive beneath one's feet. To possess such a frame was to demand such space, as only the bowl of the sky truly permitted.

Shivani made a bee-line for the crowned figure and kissed Carry on both cheeks.

'Did you see me dancing?'

He nodded happily. His pale cheeks had coloured faintly, where her lips had pressed. On his own was a benign smile, an unquestioning acceptance of whatever fresh favours the party brought before him.

'My partner, Shivani.' Madhav explained.

'What you saw was nothing', she said, 'I've been dancing Bharatnatyam and ballet for fifteen years. I'd love to be part of the Arts Festival.'

'The Festival!', Carry grunted, 'Ah! Well- you know how it is- it's all fixed up, you know.'

'Oh I'm sure you can find space for me- I don't take up much space, you know! I'm just a little girl, don't you see?'

Carry laughed.

'You do know my partner? Of course you do- he's Madhav Tripathi, he's in the Ministry, he's-'

He felt lighter than ever as he smiled at Carry, in solidarity with her desire. Carry grinned.

'Yeah, I'm told he's a real high flyer.'

Shivani levitated straight up. She crooked her right leg to ninety degrees, and standing on the toes of her left foot, began her pirouette. Her red lehenga fell with aplomb, though her body held only wobblingly to the axis of her rotation. Once, twice, she went through with the circle, and then on the third rotation she stumbled badly.



Recovering with a rudimentary curtsy, she descended to the level of the men and looked them straight in the eye.

'I too', she paused, to catch her breath, 'I too am a high-flyer. Just a little out of practice.'

Wreathed in mysterious smiles, Carry exchanged a glance with the Secretary, who revealed nothing save what was expressed by his entire attentiveness. Madhav smiled as well. Shivani threw him a quick look of pride and triumph, before going over to the ladder to get herself a drink, from the waiter who had climbed up to serve them.

He seemed bowled over by what he had seen; he offered her a glass especially. She took it without looking at him and puckered her mouth to sip. But she couldn't.

The glass went flying through the air, breaking soundlessly on the greens below. The waiter gasped as the Secretary slammed his liveried back to the trunk of the great tree.

He was a wispy, sallow man, with a weak mouth and a weedy frame. The force of the Secretary's thrust had knocked the air from his lungs; he could make nothing now but noises.

A terrible quiet ensued. Madhav, Carry and Shivani herself were too astonished to speak. The Secretary, in the meantime, was waiting for his victim to recover his breath. He was biding his time, without any attenuation of the strength in the arm that pinned the waiter off the ladder, single-handedly defeating the force of gravity. In the nearby night, other guests now noticed- and responded with obedience to the great man's enforced calm.

'Who', said the Secretary, some moments later, 'are you working for?'

Madhav's lingering idea, that the Secretary had attacked an innocent man, fell away in shock and wonder, as the waiter turned up his eyes. They were shining with fanatic light.

'Did you think you would not be noticed?', said the Secretary, 'Did you think I would allow you to poison our guests?'

An awful smile, full of pain and twisted pleasure, contorted the waiter's face.

'Yes', he said.

From the murk below came a wail. It was not the familiar lamentation of the creatures in the forest. It was filled with surprise, with an indignant and spluttering anger. Som Bakshi doubled over; losing the few inches he had managed, he fell, with a pathetic exclamation, like the moan of an over-stuffed man; then he lay still on the grass.

'I would clip your wings, Madam.' The waiter's speech was strangely fluent, strangely powerful, as he stared over the Secretary's shoulder, 'I would bind them. I would shackle them. I would do you the favour of sending you to the earth. I would-'

His voice was choked to nothing, beneath the grip of the Secretary's fingers.

'Who are you working for?', the Secretary repeated.



'Our numbers', said the waiter, when once he could speak again, 'are limitless. Our members infinite. Wherever you go', and he was looking now straight at Madhav- boring into Madhav's vision with his single-minded eyes, 'we will find you- wherever you hide. But I will give you a name.'

Where were his hands? They had crept down to his stomach. Suddenly Madhav perceived the bulge in the waiter's jacket.

'Siddharth Pant', said the waiter, pulling free the gun. Madhav opened his mouth to scream. But the Secretary was faster still. In one unbroken movement he took his arms off the waiter's body and, as the body fell, dashed the weapon from its grip. But the man fell on, dropping swiftly to his death.

Aditya Sudarshan is the author of two published novels (*A Nice Quiet Holiday*, Westland Books, 2009 and *Show Me A Hero*, Rupa and Co., 2011) as well as several published short stories, stage-plays and television scripts. His play, *The Green Room*, won the Hindu Metroplus Playwright Award for 2011. He lives in Mumbai, India.

aditya.sudarshan@gmail.com