The Other Man

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For Karuna

At dawn the condemned men were let out of the guardhouse, a narrow, oblong cage in a corner of the police station. Taken into the courtyard, they stood blinking sleepily, rumpled and haggard after a cold, uncomfortable night. They had been handcuffed for the journey.

The station wagons standing in the yard were plain, without markings. One, parked against the furthest wall (which stank of piss), had mesh windows. The taller of the two prisoners flexed his shoulders and drew a deep breath, the other nodded to a man entering the gate. Policemen in plain clothes scurried in and out of the building. The light was silver, breaking into gold where the sun rose above the hills.

The unmarked vans were finally made ready. The station officer stalked into the yard, nodding curtly to one of the prisoners; the other he pretended not to see. The plain-clothes men, dark-skinned and young, huddled in small groups without speaking. A ragged boy trotted into the yard carrying a metal tray with glasses of tea. The plain-clothes men propped their guns against the wall and drank, glancing covertly at the station officer who stood to one side. The sergeant kept obsequiously at his heels. The prisoners raised their glasses awkwardly with manacled hands.

Finally, they set off.

The town dropped behind them as the convoy climbed the rolling hills. Sunlight silked the foliage; a bird signed the dipping arc of the sky. The wagon in which the prisoners sat was sandwiched between two jeeps. A policeman lit a cigarette, and the acrid smoke eddied for a moment before being sucked out of the window. One of the prisoners asked for a drag. 'Take it,' the guard said amiably.

He placed the cigarette between the prisoner's lips, where it dangled as he drew avidly upon it. After a few moments the prisoner felt dizzy and let it drop.

Some hours later, they were bumping down a dirt road enclosed by trees, thrown awkwardly against each other as the wagon jolted over the ruts. The silence became furred with tension. The policemen clutched their weapons tighter and no longer glanced at the prisoners. The road wound through the forest, skirting a village, straightening, turning again, before ending abruptly at a stream. The convoy halted and its occupants tumbled out. The station officer sent a couple of men ahead to reconnoitre – they returned with the news that the road had been swept away.

The station officer descended from his perch. The prisoners pulled themselves out of the wagon, stumbling a little. Trees towered above them, broken by sunlight.

'We'll have to walk,' the station officer said to the taller of the prisoners. His men surrounded

them in a loose bunch. The party forded the stream and disappeared down the track.

Some time later there was a clatter of gunfire, audible in the village they had passed. Its inhabitants looked up nervously.

'We'll stop at Kakrana on the way back,' ordered the station officer, sweating a little but otherwise unmoved.

Three weeks later, on a cold winter's day in Delhi, Inspector Dayanidhi of the federal police agency entered his director's office.

'Damnable weather, isn't it?' said the director breezily. 'Sit down, have a look at this.' He pushed a file across the table.

Daya opened the file: it contained two sheets of paper. He read the signature on the first and looked up inquiringly.

'A *local* affair,' said the director, emphasizing the word 'local'. 'An encounter.'

A false one, thought Daya with habitual scepticism. 'Was it in the papers?' he asked.

'Obviously. Here in Delhi you can't shoot anyone without the press piling upon you. In the provinces they're not so cautious.'

Daya said nothing.

'A place called Kakrana,' the director went on. 'Two Maoists killed while trying to escape – at least that's the story. Unfortunately for the local police, one of them was a well-known man, an intellectual. There was a fuss, the press weighed in, and in the end the state government decided to order an inquiry. Which has been turned over to us…'

'I see,' said Daya. And already he could see truculent faces, doors slamming shut, lies building up like a wall. 'Is there any doubt that they *were* Maoists?'

'One of them was, without question. Oddly enough, it's his death that set off the furore. About the other, we don't know. That's something you'll have to find out.'

'When?'

'At once. You'll be working alone; we're short-staffed as it is.' The director looked at Daya shrewdly, drumming his fingers on the desk. 'I gather you prefer that,' he added with a hint of exasperation.

'When it's possible,' admitted Daya.

'It's possible,' echoed the director peevishly.

Daya left the office with a feeling of relief. It was his habit to gauge the amount of 'influence' that might be brought to bear upon an investigation should its direction prove unwelcome – much as an ox might gauge the weight of the load it is harnessed to pull. In this case, from the director's gnomic pronouncements, he carried away the impression that he'd been given a free hand.

Unusually for a policeman, Daya combined an acute realism about the nature of his job with an unwavering commitment to the ideal of justice. It was to pursue this ideal that he had chosen to enrol in the police rather than the administrative branch. Eight years in the job had taught him the

futility of his expectations, tempered his ardour with weariness. The very qualities that made him a good detective – reticence, intelligence, a capacity for self-effacement (which prompted people to open up to him), curiosity – were all but guaranteed to make him unpopular with his colleagues. In the agency he enjoyed a reputation for intransigence in the conduct of his cases and the unambiguous clarity of his reports – a troublesome, prickly officer, but not without his uses.

Daya paused in the capital only long enough to present his credentials and obtain a copy of the case files. The officer who met him made no effort to conceal his disapproval.

'Where would we be,' he complained, 'if this happened every time the police shot someone? I don't blame you; you're only doing your job. It's the recommendation that sticks in my craw. A minor incident, two terrorists killed…a certain amount of fuss, I grant you, some bad publicity, but surely nothing to warrant a witch-hunt…'

'Those men weren't terrorists,' Daya pointed out. 'They were Maoists – there's a difference, surely.'

The officer waved the difference away. 'Terrorists, Maoists, it's all the same…I have a friend who was posted in Bastar. D'you know what it's like, driving into the jungle, not knowing when a landmine is going to blow you sky-high? They' – he jerked his thumb towards the window, from which another office block was visible – 'want us to stamp rebellion out as though it was as easy as cracking an egg…well, it can't be done, not with an inquiry ordered every time someone gets shot.'

'You think so?' Daya asked neutrally.

'I expect you'll appreciate our difficulties when you get out there and see things for yourself.'

As he had expected, the case files were thoroughly uninformative. He noted that the police party guarding the prisoners (who had been taken to Kakrana 'for purposes of further investigation') were members of a special unit, whose remit was anti-insurgency operations. Specializing, no doubt,

in arm-twisting, torture, murder. All we need are paramilitaries, thought Daya with disgust. There was nothing he hated more than the conflation of the functions of policeman and executioner – embodied in 'encounter specialists' posing for photographs, smirking and cradling their pistols like babies. As for those of his colleagues (all too many) who justified these methods by citing the inadequacies of judicial procedure, he suspected them of bad faith and worse.

For what is the arbitrary power to coerce and kill but the negation of justice? Take the word *'encounter'* (a metallic taste of ashes and aloes filled his mouth) with its implication of something accidental, unplanned, contingent – in this case, a fracas in which shots are exchanged. But when accidents become routine and the results are always the same, it acquires a technical, bureaucratic connotation corresponding to its function of endowing arbitrary acts with the fig-leaf of due process. And, since even euphemism has its limits, it is at this point that it becomes

hedged around with adjectives: the staged or false encounter, a theatre of death with the props carelessly arranged.

Daya tossed the file upon the table. His room smelled musty; from the window he could see a tree and a patch of sky stained with neon. In it shone a single star. The brittle roar of traffic had dwindled. He flicked off the light and stood by the window, watching the star.

It was still dark when he boarded the bus for Sirkhedi. The streets through which the bus nosed resembled a dreamscape, their detritus of filth and human flotsam tucked safely out of sight. Gradually the city petered out; now the lunging headlights could only pick out the grey bulk of trees, the ghostly presence of fields. The light of dawn drifted up from the ground enfolding each object like an eggshell before hardening to a dazzle. The bus kept stopping along the

highway until it was full. Daya leaned back in his seat (which smelled of dust and cigarette smoke) and closed his eyes. He slept in snatches, vaguely conscious of the ruts in the road, the crush of bodies in the aisle, the raised voice of the conductor.

They stopped at a checkpoint where he got down to stretch his legs. Then for hours the bus climbed and descended a series of hills, through intervals of forest where the wind blew cold, before reaching a plateau. The landscape became wilder and more rugged. Villages emerged from the wavering line of trees and bushes, the familiar elements of houses, fences, fields arranged in strange, unfamiliar patterns. Some of the fields were slashed by enormous trenches with bones of rock jutting through. Mining pits, said the man next to him, sizing the stranger up. Dump trucks passed the bus at intervals.

Looking out of the window, Daya was transported back to the landscape of his childhood. For many years they had lived in a small town

in the Deccan, where a line of hills was visible on the horizon. The front garden had a border of rosebushes. At dusk the roses would gather up the light as the statuary of trees dissolved around them. And when the roses were finally quenched, the bland moon would shed its indifference and begin to glow.

They reached Sirkhedi at midday. Daya groggily picked his way through the rubbish in the square where the bus disgorged its passengers. The thread-like lanes leading from it were crammed with shops and kiosks. At the blind end, above a retaining wall, rose the crumbling facade of an old fort. Crossing the square, Daya entered the first lodging house that he saw. He wrote his name in the register, putting 'Delhi' in the column marked 'Coming From'. After the completion of these indispensable formalities he was shown into a tiny cubicle. He washed his face, changed his shirt and came down again. The receptionist directed him to a restaurant nearby.

After eating, he wandered aimlessly up a street lined with rickety buildings set flush against each other, without a chink of light in between. Gradually the shops thinned out, a small temple appeared, then workshops, offices, the wall of a school, a junction. Daya turned right. After a while the road divided again – the branch road had an arch at its mouth to underscore its significance. A sign announced the way to the pilgrim shrine which was Sirkhedi's chief claim to fame. Obediently, Daya followed the sign. The town seemed to peter out into patches of wasteland and fields, only to reappear abruptly – houses and shops, empty lots, a yard packed with dump trucks. Next to it loomed the wall of the shrine, spires visible above it. The entrance was a narrow gateway opening into a large flagstone courtyard.

It took Daya a little while to realize that the original temple had been relegated to a corner, usurped by an unfinished concrete building with giant plaster idols flanking the doorway. For all

our boasts of antiquity, he thought, we don't like its remains: stone is quickly painted over, frescoes whitewashed, new shrines built to replace the old. To the superfluity of ancient temples, promptly abandoned when those who commissioned them are dead, we add new ones, ugly where their predecessors had at least been beautiful. As was this temple, despite the fact that its stone was pitted and eroded, the carvings worn away.

He peered over the rear wall, standing on tiptoe. It abutted a river whose dimpled surface was covered with rotting flowers, incense sticks, all the usual paraphernalia of worship. An expanse of scrub scored by narrow paths separated it from higher ground. A door in the wall opened to a small bridge; on the other side rose a huddle of buildings stacked tightly against each other. A rich endowment, he thought idly, to have a bridge built especially for it.

Daya crossed the courtyard and walked back to the hotel. Ten minutes later there was a peremptory knocking on the door of his room. He

opened it to find two policemen standing outside. Roughly, they demanded to see his identification.

The station officer sat behind his desk, hands folded over the shelf of his belly. The windows of his room opened into the courtyard; a curtained doorway led to the outer office where the constables sat. One was standing by the door, watching them with the strained attentiveness of a hunting dog. When Daya lit a cigarette, he hurried over to place an ashtray on the desk. Daya thanked him courteously.

'You have an efficient system of informers,' Daya remarked.

'This is a disturbed area…we like to keep an eye upon strangers.'

'It must be difficult to sort out the suspicious characters from pilgrims.'

The station officer steepled his fingers judiciously. 'I wouldn't say that. The pilgrims don't come from

too far afield…it's the look that counts if you take my meaning. The hotel owners have instructions to report anyone who looks suspicious to us – people with city clothes, strange accents…'

'Do you see many of them here?'

'Not more than usual, no,' said the station officer. Something about Daya's unruffled demeanour was making him uneasy. Mentally he cursed his luck.

'What do people hereabouts think of the Maoists?' asked Daya.

The station officer emerged from his gloomy reflections. 'This is a small town. The mining company. The temple. Shops, traders, farmers… the temple's head priest is a good man, a power in these parts. Naturally he hates the Maoists' guts. The respectable element is terrified of them and more than happy to cooperate…'

'How long have you been working here?'

'Twelve years.'

'That's a long time. Obviously your superiors think highly of you.'

'The job is nothing but trouble,' the station officer said vindictively. 'Your inquiry for instance… Well, I do the best I can – which is not to say I don't wish they'd find someone else to do it…'

'Then you've nothing to worry about,' Daya remarked.

'Eh? I'm just letting off steam. If you were in my place, you'd do the same I expect…no offence meant.'

'Right,' said Daya amiably. 'I'll have to question you formally, but not now, later. Right now, I need a place to stay. Where is the circuit house?'

'I'll ring them up,' the station officer offered. Without waiting for a reply, he picked up the phone. After a brief conversation, he hung up beaming. 'There you are, it's all arranged…a nice place, near the river. I'll have you dropped there… no, not at all, it's my pleasure.'

The circuit house was shabby and dilapidated, with an overgrown garden sloping down to the river. The caretaker's family lived in a corner of the yard. After unpacking, Daya went for a walk. A man was wading across the river – apart from his silhouette the landscape seemed deserted. The sun had set, the light was fading. What remained of the day was enfolded by the water, which held up the light in sheets of silver before letting it sink. When the last glow had faded from its surface, Daya turned back to where the pitched roof of the circuit house loomed like a tent above the garden.

He ate dinner in a bare room illuminated by two unshaded light-bulbs. It was served by the caretaker, a scrawny, middle-aged man. His son went to school and his oldest daughter had just got married. He complained about his pay, which was low because he hadn't yet been 'made permanent'. Someone in the district commissioner's office had promised to get this done; when Daya inquired how much the favour would cost, he looked embarrassed and remained mute. His wife was

on the payroll too, though, like him, on contract. As for the town, it still did some trade thanks to pilgrims visiting the temple, but, for the rest, things were going downhill. No one ventured into the countryside after dark, that was when all the buses stopped. A few months ago, the Maoists had blown up one of the mining company's depots. In the jungle they did what they pleased, for the forest guards had stopped their customary patrols. If they ventured out it was only during the day, and who could blame them? As for the local people, it was difficult to make out what they thought; whether they were afraid of the Maoists or hand in glove with them – a bit of both probably. A few had become civilized, but as for the rest – well, the inspector would see for himself. Most of them wore clothes now, some had become Christians, but still… The caretaker shook his head. It takes more than one bath to wipe off the stink of generations of barbarism. They still carry bows and arrows and their women copulate with any man who takes their fancy, like bitches in heat…

'I bet plenty of people cut deals with the Maoists,' Daya interrupted. 'Contractors and bus owners, the mining company…'

The caretaker looked away. 'What can a poor man say?' he said finally. 'These are matters for… others.' Using a word that signified both *'higher-up'* and *'socially superior'*. 'Sometimes one has to be…flexible.'

The station officer was truculent and nervous. The door to the outer room had been closed. A procession of constables knocked, entered, saluted. He signed papers and barked instructions, seemingly oblivious of Daya's presence. When the last man had left, he turned to him, laying his hands on the table as if to say: Now what can I do for *you*?

Daya stubbed his cigarette out. 'Do you know,' he began conversationally, 'that there's a proposal to outlaw smoking in public places? Other

countries have laws like that apparently… When I think about it, I'm torn between my approval on principle and my predicament as a smoker. Not to mention my sovereign right to poison myself if I feel like it. They say one should give it up and they're right – cancer is no joke – but personally I've never felt any inclination to try.'

The station officer blinked.

'When did you arrest them?' Daya went on amiably.

'Who?' the station officer asked, confused by the sudden change of subject.

'These two.' Daya tapped the file in front of him.

'I arrested only one of them.'

Daya consulted his notes. 'You mean Stephen Murmu?'

'That's right.'

'Murmu was picked up first, Shanker later… Tell me about them.'

'Well, Shanker's arrest – that's not his real name, by the way – was something of a coup. He was the highest-ranked Maoist we've captured in these

parts. The other man was a born troublemaker–'

'What were they charged with?'

'Hold-ups, extortion, murder. There was an ambush in which a policeman was killed some years ago – it happened in Kakrana... With Shanker we didn't need much evidence: his position spoke for itself. As for the other man, I had an informer's report tying him to the ambush. Obviously we never got to the stage of filing a charge sheet in court...'

'You keep saying "the other man". But he has a name.'

'Sure,' said the station officer indifferently. 'What difference does that make? He was a Maoist.'

'Shanker was a Maoist too.'

'That's different...he wasn't a savage, he was educated.'

'Like you and me?'

'You perhaps,' the station officer said maliciously. 'But not me...not everyone is lucky enough to go to university.'

'You think so? It seems to me that almost everyone in India goes to university – even waiters and taxi drivers – but to very little effect. What about Stephen Murmu? Was he educated?'

'He was a lawyer.'

'So he was educated. What made you suspicious of him?'

'He would appear in court for Maoists we picked up. Sometimes a lawyer came down from the capital, but Murmu did all the actual work.'

'That was his job surely.'

'To defend Maoists? I don't think so. We have lawyers more patriotic than that. They wouldn't touch those cases…'

'Maybe that's why Murmu took them. What else?'

'He was involved with an outfit that went around stirring people up against mining…it claims to be peaceful but everyone knows it's a front for the Maoists. He'd go during the day to make speeches in villages where they'd come at night…a dangerous man, a born troublemaker.'

'I'm talking about evidence.'

'From what Murmu let slip we established that he'd been in touch with Shanker.'

'Is there a record of the interrogation?'

'Not of that kind of interrogation, no. But Murmu confessed that he'd visited Kakrana in order to reconnoitre the ground for the ambush. Not just a verbal confession, mind you – he signed it.'

'How was Shanker arrested?'

'We nabbed him through an informer's tip-off. Useful men, informers…he got wind of a meeting, an important one. We laid a trap. There was shooting. Unfortunately most of them got away. But not Shanker.'

'Were they remanded to judicial custody?'

You know the answer as well as I do, thought the station officer. In the confused jumble of his thoughts, rage – and alarm – rose steadily, like mercury in a thermometer. Aloud, he said: 'Only Murmu; Shanker was killed before we could produce him in court.'