The Third Squad

Praise for the Book

'A melancholy cop's obsessions are just the tip of the iceberg as he leads a two-fisted team determined to clean up Mumbai's mean streets . . . Kumar's style, blunt but often by turns poetic and droll, is arresting . . . As unusual as it is compelling, this entry lays the groundwork for an entertaining series.' *Kirkus Reviews*

'Kumar evokes [Mumbai] with lyrical prose.' *Publishers Weekly* (Included in a *Publishers Weekly* feature on Crime Fiction focused on police corruption and brutality)

'[A] gripping thriller . . . Kumar has created some thoroughly intriguing characters . . . but the most fascinating of Kumar's characters is Mumbai itself – enormous, crowded, hyperactive, roiling, stunningly rich and grindingly poor, and teeming with almost unfathomable energy. International-crime fans should flock to this one.' *Booklist*

'*The Third Squad* ends with an emotional wallop, making it stand out among crime novels. It has the chiaroscuro effects of classic noir, but also the philosophical depth of highbrow literary fiction . . . Mumbai teems with lurid intrigue in this smart and affecting work of postmodern noir.' *Shelf Awareness*, starred review

'Kumar does a masterful job building the story's tension level as Karan draws closer and closer to his final confrontation with his superiors in the Indian Police Service.' *Book Chase*

The Third Squad

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juggernaut

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Dedicated to my parents Sumedha and Vijay,
my siblings Ashok and Rajiv, and the idea that
willy-nilly you can get caught in the middle.

Once upon a time, a woman was picking up firewood. She came upon a poisonous snake frozen in the snow. She took the snake home and nursed it back to health. One day the snake bit her on the cheek. As she lay dying, she asked the snake, "Why have you done this to me?" And the snake answered, "Look, bitch, you knew I was a snake."

—*Natural Born Killers*, 1994

Somewhere Outside Pune, India
Police Headquarters: Special Training Unit

"You don't have to strip a man to see his face," says the controller. "But it helps."

I examine myself closely in the handheld mirror. The first rays slant through the wooden slats in the dark barracks. The sun rises between two peaks of the Sahyadri Hills, a range that shelters our training camp. In the last year we have grown to hate this valley. It has been a rigorous incarceration. Today it is all over and done with, and one way or another we will be freed. I am anxious; I feel like I have never seen myself before.

I get dressed quickly. The summons comes and the four of us soon file down a narrow corridor, shuffling and stumbling and smelling of sweat. We duck through a low door and emerge into bright sunshine and we arrange ourselves as we always do, forming a straight line with the tips of our polished boots. The roll call is poignant; one of us is missing.

He keeps us waiting as he examines each of us. I hold my breath.

"Spell discipline," he says.

I begin spelling the world and am cut off.

"*Chutiya*, define it!"

I glance around at the three others who are staring

straight ahead. Munna, Tapas, and Kumaran. It suits them to behave like three monkeys. I start again.

"Discipline: training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior."

The controller nods. He holds a polished stick in his hand that he raps on his thigh.

The fleshy sound brings back memories and I wince. He has his back turned toward us. His worn brown belt has a tear and sweat is building under his armpits. He talks to the wall.

"And how do we go about achieving this?"

I look to my colleagues and they are still motionless, backs ramrod straight and showing no signs that they are about to respond. It is up to me again.

"Discipline is instilled by a combination of repetition, physical and mental challenges, and punishment for failing to meet certain standards." I could rephrase that. I could use *sister this* and *mother that* and tell you more succinctly that we were taught to follow fucking orders, or else.

In truth, there was no real need to teach us discipline; it was something that came naturally to each of us. We hardly spoke to one other and none of us made friends. And we busied ourselves in routine. Like taking apart and assembling our firearms every day. The whole day was lived by the clock, the week was lived by the calendar, and changing seasons made no difference to us. In the worst of rains we would still be out on our run every morning. We would still go to the range and shoot our socks off.

The controller nods again, gripping the cane firmly in the palm of his other hand, and a rap follows. He pivots on the toes of his left leg. He regards each of us in turn

with bulging eyes and a hint of distaste around his mouth. Somebody needs to clean his spectacles.

"Why have you been called here, gentlemen?" he barks. He speaks without pausing and his phrasing is confusing—nobody has ever called us *gentlemen* before.

None of us wants to say why we are here. We all know it but are loath to speak. I sense his irritation and I crack first; I always do.

"To learn from those who have passed on?"

He clucks his tongue. "Why do you talk like this, Karan? Vague, roundabout, and always with a question. Say it as it is. One of you has died, has fallen, has failed. It is a failure."

I breathe deeply. One of us had taken a bullet between the eyes. The rest of us were asked to inform the family.

"He did not die in vain," I say. I sound like a schoolboy.

After a moment of silence the controller shrugs. "We need to learn. If you men learn from this incident, then what you say is true." And then he speaks in French: "*Dans ce pays-ci, il est bon de tuer de temps en temps un amiral pour encourager les autres.*"

I alone understand what he is saying. He looks toward me expectantly.

"Karan, you seem upset. If you know the meaning of this expression, why don't you translate it for the others?"

I rephrase it to make him seem less heartless than he is: "It is strange how it is good that from time to time someone dies so others don't have to."

Ranvir Pratap looks at me. He is surprised and there is a hint of respect as he nods slightly in my direction. They do not expect us to think, and they get worried when our

gray cells start working, because thinking is their job and doing is ours.

"You may be feeling raw right now but I will not lecture you. Get used to death. I have operated in its realm long enough to respect it. It is extreme, and its finality is hard to stomach. You guys are not meant to respond like the rest of humanity. That's not your nature. Right, Karan?"

He wheels around and glares at me because I am a known weak link, someone who occasionally gets muddled and hesitates. I am in the squad only because I topped every shooting test, busting their all-time records. They could not dump me on paper. But I was on the case that claimed my friend and colleague. I was the backup and the sod who was slow to pull the trigger, who gave benefit of doubt to his target, and my colleague paid for it with his life. I did make amends. I finished the target, made him pay. A rage I never knew I had ruled me for a few minutes. The controller had arrived at the scene and was speechless at my handiwork. I guessed then that I had lost my chances of qualifying and they would post me back to a desk job in that morass of clerkdom from which we were pulled out. Rage is not good in this business because it's unpredictable.

Summing-up time, and Ranvir Pratap is brief. I expect the worst.

"We experienced a live situation and, despite your training, you came up short. None of us know how we will respond in a moment of extreme stress, when a split second decides life and death. We try to train you for it but that is only half the job. The other half comes from who you are, your genetic code. As trainers, our job is to choose

correctly." He looks at each of us and settles his gaze on me. "Karan, you have barely survived this program. But I have decided to back you—I was the deciding vote. You will be under my direct command, so if anybody has to hold the can it will be me."

Later he pulls me to the side. "What I said there was for the others. Do you know why we chose you despite your mistake?"

"Sir?"

"All trainers look for just one thing and you have it. You have something that cannot be taught."

We entered Mumbai by road; there was no welcome committee. The four of us were in an unmarked jeep and as instructed we were in plainclothes. We hardly spoke during the winding journey through the hills. I felt a tingling sensation as we approached Special Branch which I chalked up to pins and needles. Ranvir Pratap's words still rang in my head. *You will lead a simple life*, he said. *There will be no statistics in the Third Squad, not if I can help it. There will be no presentations, no bar charts, and no medals. You will clean your guns, mark your ammunition, and do God's work.*

Arriving at Special Branch I caught myself smiling as we stepped out of the jeep. Kumaran had a pronounced limp, Munna the "lookout" was bumping into objects animate and inanimate, and Tapas was memorizing all the signs including one that said, *No paan chewing, no spitting, and no loitering*.

The four of us walked up to a drab building with a low entrance on the side. At the door we turned, stood with our backs to it, and clicked our heels.

"Stand down!" barked Munna, imitating Ranvir Pratap.

"Gentlemen," said Tapas, sotto voce.

We flipped open our minicameras, raised our hands in unison, and took selfies.

Book I

The First Encounter

Some Months Later

The priests lit a fire in his house and fed it some cow fat. Flames leapt and the smoke licked the ceiling before spreading to the corners of the large hall. The small group of guests coughed and sneezed as the chanting reached a crescendo and tapered with, "*Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti*." They looked around the hall for Swamy, their host. Swamy was seated on the floor in a hidden chamber, head bowed, his legs folded beneath him. He was breathing deeply. "*Shanti, Shanti, Shanti,*" chanted the priest corps. Swamy scowled. It wasn't working. What was the point of having priests on his payroll?

He left quietly, a thief in his own house. Three bodyguards checked for any signs of trouble, ushered him into a black SUV, and then got in behind him. Swamy jockeyed for space to breathe. "All clear," said the driver. They pulled away. The vehicle weaved its way through lanes and alleys before arriving at a nondescript building. Inside was Swamy's lifeline. A doctor escorted him up some stairs and they entered a white-tiled room where Swamy rolled up his sleeves, exposed his veins, and submitted himself

to the machine. A middle-aged man who was already waiting in the room shuffled over and sat beside him. It was a practiced routine. They spoke occasionally, cracked some jokes over the next three hours before their heads dropped and they dozed. Swamy's phone rang, breaking his stupor. He peered at the number absently.

"Would you like to live longer, Swamy?" asked the caller.

"What?" Swamy stared at his phone in horror. The SIM card was half a day old and they had traced him already.

"Take a deep breath, Swamy Anna."

He took one. He wanted to kill the call. The tainted SIM would give away his location very soon.

"You need blood, Swamy Anna, good clean blood. Stand up now, go take a piss."

He couldn't and they knew it. "How much longer?" he asked the nurse.

"We are done," she said. She massaged his wrists and his feet.

He stood up abruptly and his head swam.

"Go see your granddaughter, Swamy. She is traveling soon."

He rubbed his temples as he grew furious. He slumped on the bed, opened the back cover of the phone, and pulled out the SIM card. His hands shook as he broke it in two.

"They are threatening me." He pointed at himself. "Me." The bodyguards who stood near the door snorted in unison.

The middle-aged man spoke softly: "That is their job, Anna. They wouldn't dare take on someone as important as you."

Swamy wanted to get up and leave. He half rose before falling back, his head hitting the backrest. This new police encounter team bothered him. It was headed by Ranvir

Pratap, a name that brought bile to Swamy's lips. He coughed and almost retched.

"Get me a damn towel—you, quickly!"

A burly guard brought a white towel. In his hurry he dropped his automatic weapon and it clattered on the floor. The doctor jumped first and the nurse jumped next as the weapon's snout raked the room and came to rest pointing at their feet. Swamy glanced at the ceiling and then slowly lowered his gaze. His outburst was preempted by a pinging sound. The middle-aged man pulled out his phone and he read the message aloud. "*A week from now is an inauspicious date.* Message from Mumbai police."

"That would be the eleventh," said Swamy, his voice down to a whisper. "They have even declared a bloody date." He ruefully examined the veins in his hands. What had they done to him?

They left the makeshift dialysis clinic. It was night in this obscure middle-class neighborhood with its crowded streets, where the local population worshipped the Don of Wadala, who now sat in his SUV and allowed himself some filtered coffee. He took a couple of sips and his body relaxed, relieved to be away from the stern gaze of Mrs. Swamy. They headed to a small temple where a bare-chested priest was waiting impatiently, watching the clock reach the appointed hour. The priest lit some camphor as Swamy crossed the threshold, right foot first, head bare, hands folded. He then rang a small bell and made three circles with the flame chanting a Sanskrit *shloka*. The priest would often offer some fruits and flowers to the deity on Swamy's behalf. The stone deity was small and black and the sanctum was dimly lit. Roaches and rats scurried in the dark reaches.

In the first floor of his chawl Karan flung off the covers, brushed his hair, and threw on his uniform. He slammed the door behind him, took the stairs two at a time, and ran across the quadrangle down a narrow lane into a small nook where he parked his dented car with one wobbly wheel. His Fiat had bucket seats and a floor-shift and it rattled as he drove down the western arterial. When he exited at the office blocks near Haji Ali and headed toward the sea, he saw another version of the chawl. The chawls came in various shapes and sizes and this one was built on common land. The roadside here was a public convenience. Power was available on tap and water came in tankers paid for by the brotherhood. Everything (his car, the chawl) seemed makeshift and temporary and rightly so, because in Mumbai poverty was considered a temporary affliction. This was the faith, the one illusion that kept the murky reality at bay.

A single command before the voice on the other end of the line hung up: "Head to the seaface."

After a while the Worli Seaface turned genteel. Karan parked his car, locked it, and got down to his favorite pastime: watching. A rain-bearing cloud hung over the sea, thinking about landfall. The tide was low and the rocks jutted out of the water near the shore, where two men completed their morning ablutions.

"Don't get out of your car yet."

In a holster near his midriff, Karan carried an American pistol, a Ruger, just like his infamous predecessor, Inspector Pradeep Sharma—Karan admired his senior because of how he stood, hands folded across his chest, the matter-of-fact way he spoke, and above all the uncommon reputation he left behind him. Pradeep Sharma was from the Class

of 1983, a Mumbai police class that eliminated hundreds of gangsters but subsequently did not age well.

At the stroke of nine, just as the second hand of his watch aligned with the hour, his phone rang again. Karan waited for three rings, flipping the cover open as he took it to his ear. After a small pause someone spoke.

"I hope you are not wearing your uniform."

"I am," he replied. He thought the uniform would help.

"Have you lost your mind?" shouted the caller. "Is that how you meet an informer?" There was a murmur in the background. "Well, because of your stupidity we'll have to change the location. Start the car and drive slowly past the Worli Dairy. There will be a traffic signal up ahead." The caller spoke again to someone who was with him: "Yes, that light will turn red when you approach. Don't worry, it will. Someone will come up to your window selling magazines. Keep your window down. You will buy a magazine from him. Inside there will be a message that will tell you when and where to go. Got it?"

"Why all this drama?" asked Karan.

"You do your job, I'll do mine. I have to keep the informer alive."

Karan looked to see if there was anybody around. The seaface was deserted. He did as he was told.

That night he reread Swamy's bulky folder. It was incredible how someone like Swamy had survived for so long despite the attention shown by the police and the judiciary. The court case against him began twelve years ago. Two witnesses were dead, one had gone missing, and fourteen had turned hostile. A decision was due next month and the file said it was likely the prosecution would lose.

Swamy began his career as a porter in a railway station. Tired of small change, he began to loot goods from trains that passed through it. In all he killed three people as he rose to the top of the heap in the railway yards. Each of the deceased was tied to the tracks and left to the vagaries of the overnight express train. Soon his leadership was undisputed. He granted people favors and in return he adjudicated their lives. His gang collected a daily or weekly fee from most commercial establishments in Wadala. He had the traders by the balls. Even Muruga, the ruling deity, was a lesser entity than Swamy in Wadala, a god with a weaker sovereignty. Swamy's followers knew that while Muruga might be a superior being above, in this life they'd have to reckon with this bloody goon.

Swamy was a Tamilian from the south of the country and built up his fearsome network between 1975 and 1985. A phone call from Swamy was a dagger to the heart. People who answered his call died twice. Every year Swamy would conduct a show killing and the press built his mythology by going into a feeding frenzy every time, making him out to be the most fearsome don since Haji Mastan and Karim Lala.

Meanwhile, nobody dared search Swamy's pockets, and for some decades they swelled with ill-gotten gains. Some of it went to cops and some to magistrates. The rest was naturally seen with a blind eye. Who the fuck cared?

"I do," said Ranvir Pratap.

A couple of years back a reputed astrologer told Swamy he was past his due date. Swamy disappeared and went underground. Nobody had seen him since, though it was rumored he came out at night in an SUV with tinted windows and that he visited temples where he prayed for his own longevity.

He had reason to feel threatened. The Bombay police had taken out a contract on Swamy, after all. That was just how it was done. The local term for this practice among the crime gangs was *supari*. No one in the police force wanted this particular *supari*, and so it landed in the lap of a greenhorn, a relative newcomer in a new squad who had a reputation for never missing in target practice. His name was Karan and he was reported to be a little mental. He had agreed on one condition—the encounter would not happen in Wadala. There was no question of challenging Swamy on his own turf.

"Do we have a date?" asked Karan.

"Yes," said Desai, his controller. "The eleventh. Boss likes the eleventh."

"Why?"

Because on January 11 Surve died. He died, man. They were waiting for him and they waylaid him. He lay in an ambulance and cursed till the moment he went. Karan saw the body and the grimace in a grainy photograph. Surve was a burly figure with a chestful of hair. They trapped him when he emerged from a taxi near the Ambedkar College junction. The police had been tipped off and two cops got him. Surve was armed; it seems he fired first, but he missed. Raja Tambat and Isaque Bagwan entered history books by firing a clip of bullets into Surve's chest and shoulder. This was history, the first encounter killing carried out by Mumbai police. And it happened in Wadala on January 11, 1982.

It was said of Karan that he seemed like a "decent" person when he joined the force. The fact that he would kill people would color his résumé somewhat but that was a

departmental thing—a job description—and something he had to do to get a salary and a promotion. His boss Ranvir Pratap had ground to make up. Too many hoods who had practiced mayhem for so long had lived well into their eighties and nineties. It felt unnatural, almost a failure for cops like him that so many of them died from natural causes.

Karan was an unlikely specialist. He was prone to stand for hours on the roadside, an uneaten dish in front of him, speaking in a monotone to either his wife Nandini or to his controller, a disembodied voice named Desai. And this would happen in the midst of an assignment. It was scary that he could still execute successfully.

"What was in the magazine?" asked Desai later that night.

"A list of two things: the temple he will visit tomorrow; and his preferred seat inside his car."

"Is that enough for you?" asked Desai. He sounded skeptical. "Do you need backup? Should we get you a semiautomatic weapon?"

"No, it will be too obvious. His people will spot me." There was no point in telling Desai that he had never used an automatic weapon.

"Who was that?" asked Nandini when he returned to the table. They were having dinner.

"No one important," said Karan. He sat down heavily and stared at his plate.

"Then eat."

He couldn't. He poked at the food. "I'm not hungry."

"Then go to sleep," his wife said.

The night was too quiet and the chawl was full of furtive sounds. In bed, he couldn't toss and turn as he wished

because Nandini was a light sleeper. He stared at his phone in the dark and watched time pass slowly.

"Why aren't you asleep?" she asked at one point.

He found an excuse to walk into the outside corridor where he could glimpse the city lights. Beyond the chawl Bombay was shape-shifting. The factory worker and the trade unionist had walked into the sunset, pulling down the curtain on the era of local manufacturing. The militant political party had thrived using jingoism and strong-arm tactics. Spiffy office-goers arrived, and they too thrived thanks to liberalization and the opening up of the economy. A certain licentiousness had seeped into the city, a rowdy good nature exemplified in its cuisine and its festivity. Then, with the arrival of immigrants, Bombay retired, its suburban identity prevailed, and the city called Mumbai found its voice. Mumbai turned its back on Bombay, then dropped its pants and showed its rump. One survivor in this transformation was the chawl. It was a distinctively Bombay creation, and a hardy piece of architecture that was now a curious remnant in Mumbai.

The next morning Karan stood in the shower and let the hot water burn his back and his arms till they reddened. He toweled himself down slowly and deliberately. This would be his first kill. It was a strange assignment and he had been told if he had a clear shot he should take it, even if it was fleeting. He knew that it would happen near his home, too close, but still . . . it would be public and brazen.

"Aren't you going to the office today? It is raining, Karan, so you better leave early."

What should he tell her, that he was waiting to find an auspicious time for a kill? She left for work after packing his lunch. He stood by for a call that never came, and finally

at noon he sat at his dining table and ate his lunch. And later, he snuck out like a thief.

It was raining hard on his chawl in Parel. The chawl was covered with blue plastic sheets held down by bricks. Beneath them was a tarpaulin cover and the few cracks in the tiled roof were filled with black tar. Karan waited under an awning but water still found a way to drip onto his head. From his vantage it seemed parts of the city were literally going down the drains.

His thoughts traveled back to a time when the city bled. It wasn't long ago when Bombay was divided on religious lines. The Mumbai riots were terrible and right here in this gully there was arson and looting. Today no signs remained; nothing except the figureheads and their sycophants. The *shakhas* were still around, and then there were the local *mukhyas* and *prajapatis*. These were the true *satraps* of this city. They sponsored the revelry on the streets. At festival time they would take money from the residents and fund their *pandals* and processions.

He was meticulous in his preparation. Karan had readied his weapon the night before but keeping it dry in the monsoon was a challenge. The roadside gutters had flooded into streams. A large, ungainly rat looked on as the swirl consumed its hideaway; a child gleefully watched the animal get carried away by the deluge.

Umbrellas formed herds at traffic junctions. The office workers waited impatiently for the traffic lights to change before heading to the new gleaming towers that had sprung up where the mills once stood. When he got tired of taking practice shots Karan joined them, walking with them for a couple of kilometers before returning, a black umbrella hiding his head. Another hour passed and still no news,

so he zigzagged across the road, visited some shops, and returned to his spot once more. Occasionally he stood in the open, defying the driving rain.

A few vehicles clattered past the chawl, splashing water and making waves, a street vendor shouted in vain as his wares were sodden, and the gears of a double-decker bus clashed as it rounded a bend. This was getting tedious. The delay continued. He held his umbrella high and negotiated a crossing. When he tired of holding it he folded it, exposing his mop of soaking black hair.

He was just another tall man wearing a gray raincoat and plastic shoes.

The day departed and the rain mercifully eased. Nightlife arrived in a taxi, an old yellow-black Fiat, a braveheart that had seen three engine changes. The cab and the cabbie idled by the roadside, their engines ticking, keeping an eye out for cops. Their passenger was clearly a woman on the make.

"*Mangta kya*?" she asked passersby, thrusting a hip, parting her lips, and twirling a bag around her right wrist. She posed next to the Fiat, trying to entice. The interior of the taxi glowed and was playing a song from the film *Pakeezah*. A drunk leered at her. "*Chal phut!*" she shouted. Get lost.

"*Randi*," said the drunk. "*Raat ki raani*." In his stupor he was a connoisseur of women.

Across this tableau stood Karan, a silent observer, patient, still, black umbrella by his side, his hair wet and streaming. After four hours of waiting his phone finally rang. It was time.

"Where are you?" Nandini demanded, breaking his concentration. "You forgot your lunch box. Wait, it's empty."

He flexed his fingers, rotated his neck and shoulders, and blinked a few times. "Can you get off the line? I'm expecting a call."

"Are you at work? How long will you be?"

"I don't know." He hung up on her, then reached inside his coat, felt his holster, and pulled out his gun in a single smooth motion.

A black SUV came speeding below the overpass, turned, and swerved. Its dark windows were rolled up and its bright lights screamed momentarily into Karan's eyes. Two traffic lights turned green and the vehicle began to accelerate. Karan took aim at the green lights and fired. Two muffled thumps and then confusion as cars braked and skidded.

"*Thamba!*" shouted a nearby duty cop, waving his arms.

"Motherfucker!" cursed a driver as he braked, screeching into another car before hitting a pole. Glass shattered and pedestrians jumped out of the way. In the ensuing slowdown the SUV drew alongside Karan, blasting its horn, its tires crunching over the strewn glass. Its custom license plate glinted as Karan's gun sparked again; the bullet pierced through the windshield glass, spreading a small spiderweb. He waited for the telltale sign as the car swept past. He finally exhaled; there was red splatter on the rear windscreen.

The SUV jumped the red light and made a sharp U-turn, its tires squealing as the driver shifted gears and gunned the engine. Black smoke and diesel fumes spewed behind the SUV as it sped away. The duty cop futilely ran after it, then jumped onto his motorcycle and set off in chase. A couple of street urchins looked toward Karan wide-eyed. They had heard something but they weren't sure. He was standing erect and seemed to be brooding. Karan's gun felt

warm in its holster. After a brief pause Karan opened his umbrella and moved toward the chawl, entering it without glancing back. Elongated shadows followed him home, stretching around the bends.

Soon, at half past twelve, the traffic lights were turned off and would flash orange till the sun rose again. Dogs settled back down on the pavement and in back alleys. The city dragged its feet for a while, its moral compass awry. Down south the famous Rajabai Tower stood tall between a university and a high court. Its clock chimed desolately into the night.

The day after the assignment Karan stayed home and counted sparrows. He had heard that sparrows got fried out of existence by electric towers, so seeing some of them buzz in and out of the sloping roof gave him a sense of hope. Nobody called him, which itself was eerie after yesterday. For some reason he remembered the church at the Don Bosco School in Matunga, where he had studied as a young boy, and how he once by chance attended an emotional memorial service there. He had to stare at a stained-glass window to distract himself from the outpouring of grief. An old man next to him kept smiling through the function.

"Are you a relative?"

"No." He shook his head. "I come here for all the memorials."

The chawl was customarily quiet at this midmorning hour. Nandini had seemed quizzical since waking up. She was relentless. "What's the matter?" she asked again as she ironed his uniform. The iron wove around his buttons.

"Nothing," he replied.

"What are you thinking?" He was midway through brushing his teeth.

"Nothing."

She sighed and smiled gently. "Don't worry, I'll eventually get used to you and your moods."

When she left he removed his uniform and changed into his pajamas. He slunk on a chair and waited for a call that might not come. At the chawl domestic life proceeded at its own pace; he was the interloper.

"Karan *bhai*, you are at home?"

He nodded. Wasn't it obvious?

"*Su* Karan *bhai*?" asked a Gujarati neighbor. "*Majama*?"

"*Majama*," he echoed, managing a smile.

"Karan *kaka*, all well?" asked a maid.

The inquiries were polite, his replies were tart, and the air was pungent with the smell of spices that were seasoning lunch. He sneezed often. He detected the scent of detergent and the slapping sound of clothes being hand-washed. He snoozed for a while and awakened to find the sun in his eyes. He had to retreat further into his small abode and there he rediscovered the small things that made this place home. He puttered about, discovering Nandini in her absence. Her taste showed up in the carefully placed bric-a-brac, her mauve Kashmiri shawl, the two-layered curtains filtering light through the windows, casting shapes on crowded stacks of books that spoke of their shared love of cities. He settled down for a while with a coffee table book called *Bombay: The Cities Within,* and found that its observations spoke to him. Finally, he sat at the one item that truly belonged to him: his writing desk.

You are not a writer, he said to himself. He really wasn't, though he had tried. *Your attempts are surreptitious and*

your thoughts are clandestine. He read aloud from passages he liked, taking care to pronounce each word correctly. And he often sat with a thesaurus, sometimes attempting an original composition with esoteric equivalents of commonly used words. He envied his boss Ranvir Pratap, a man with a mordant wit and a quicksilver tongue. What did he look like? He was stocky and unathletic with no six-pack to boast of.

After lunch, time passed slowly in his head as he tired of checking his phone for messages. He lay listlessly on the sofa. He felt like he was seated in a railway waiting room or at a doctor's clinic. He twirled a blue paperweight and rapped it against a table, admiring its sound. He watched TV, flipping channels and hoping to get lucky. For a while he slept again. And he dreamed of his city, of its various parts that assembled before him like an archive of the quotidian, an everyday life that he could write about lucidly when he slept.

Words are easy on the tongue but work is hard to find in Mumbai. Old men vie with chokra boys, and sisters vie with mothers. All day they climb up and down the rickety stairs of the chawl doing odd jobs. The city scrimps in its daily life. Chai from a tumbler is shared in groups. Car cleaning pays but only in small change. Elevator attendants, security guards, and peons are proof that vocations trap you for life.

Every chawl is a bunch of kolis, *small rooms that house the middle class. During the day they run* kiraana *shops, tailoring shops, coaching classes, and crèches right out of their homes. There are doctors too who practice where they live.*

My Parel chawl has good proportions. It has a family life. You flirt in the landing, get engaged in the corridor, your

marriage takes place in the quadrangle outside, and your honeymoon is in the cupboard.

Dust is unhurried in this city. It never settles. Summer brings clichés and the measles, and rain brings the thundering clap. Men wander at this time for nightly visits with painted folk.

"Don't be fooled by the bright saris, the kohl eyes, and painted lips," warn our elders. "Before you flirt with streetwalkers take our hands and check the gender."

Chawl life is intimate. The men lean on railings with feet apart, wearing tight pants. The women sit on the floor with feet apart, wearing nightgowns. The neighbors are second rate and the amenities are third class. The scenery is underwear, displayed like newspapers in a kiosk. Every clothesline speaks.

This is our theater, our darling middle-class Center for Performing Arts. Life is a truthful bore so a little acting helps us all. We know we are God's rejects but at home we pretend we are Mama's favored infants. The elders keep telling us that we matter. You are the inner city, they say. This is the soul of the city that resides in chawls everywhere; even in pretentious South Mumbai. Look out for a U-shaped two-storied structure around a quadrangle, with corridors and rooms in a row. Here you will find no entitlement. If we need subsidy we are told to go out and beg.

In the chawl we roll up our sleeves, hang our shirt on a wall, and really examine ourselves. Can you? Good. See here, two arms are all it takes. Both hands now. Submit. Remember, power is hungry.

Late in the evening Desai called, finally. Karan grabbed at the phone like it was a life raft.

"Yes?" He breathed deeply, shutting his eyes.

"Yes," replied Desai in his lackluster manner.

"What?"

After what seemed an eternity Desai spoke again: "You are unbelievable. You shot through glass into a dark cave but you got your man."

"He is dead?"

"Yes. Internal bleeding killed him, luckily. Go to sleep, you are now officially an encounter specialist."

There was a big splash in the newspapers the next day but it was the location of the incident that gave him away.

"Karan, where were you the night before last?"

He sat her down and told her that he had been assigned to an encounter squad.

"What did you do? I mean, were you assisting someone?"

He coughed. "I shot him." He tried telling her it was a prestigious posting, one that any officer would want. "I am lucky. Do you know my predecessors have appeared on national television?" He even had a recording of a field interview which she insisted on seeing, so they sat next to each other and watched. The people who were being interviewed were his seniors. The anchor was stout, bespectacled, and he was behaving like a fanboy. He spoke animatedly (was that a smile?), aware that this *Walk the Talk* episode on the NDTV channel was the best-rating material he would ever have. Two men with black, well-groomed hair and mustaches walked alongside him. They seemed casual, diffident, and their eyes buttonholed their neighborhood and never wavered. Behind them walked a lithe, uniformed security cover with an automatic weapon. This was a self-aware tableau that expected retaliation.

Inspector Pradeep Sharma and Subinspector Daya

Nayak were being questioned by the anchor, an admiring Shekhar Gupta. They remained expressionless through all of it and made no attempt to gloat. Gupta used the cricket analogy of a century score that ended up sounding frivolous and macabre. He spoke glowingly about Pradeep Sharma's scorecard of ninety-two hits ("nervous nineties," he called it) and wondered whether at seventy-eight hits Daya Nayak felt the competitive pressure.

The cops conveyed what they felt; nothing deep but a quiet satisfaction. They said they shot only in retaliation. A rooster crowed loudly in the background. They complained about their silly portrayal in Hindi cinema where the cops did nothing and always arrived late. The threesome walked through a slum along a narrow path that had low shanties on both sides, disturbing a boy in shorts and a woman in a doorway. Another rooster flew up to Daya Nayak's side and flapped its wings at him. Talk of killing continued with what happened on New Year's Eve 1996, going back to 1992, touching on their feelings before an encounter and after, seeking out how they felt (if they did) doing God's work and dispensing death.

They passed a tattered signpost that said, *Welcome to Seaface*. People trailed behind them, curious about the cameras and the gun-toting. A small child sat with one leg crossed over the other, ignoring them. The talk veered to the film actors and producers who were the soft targets for extortionists, who lacked bravery in real life when confronted with the filmic tactics of the underworld.

"Injuries? Did you ever get attacked?"

"Bullet through the thigh," said Daya Nayak, breaking stride and showing his leg. It still hurt sometimes but no longer in the leg.