

[Home](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Spring 2005](#)

[Winter 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Mail](#)

THE MISSION BY RAMJAN DAS

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Stop fiddling with the damn thing," the older man said. "Get a grip on yourself." He crushed the cigarette butt into the full ashtray on the coffee table and sat back straight on the old, yellowed sofa. The younger man gingerly dropped the 9-mm Marakov on the table next to the pile of dusty magazines and two empty Styrofoam cups.

"Raise the volume," the older man said.

The younger man leaned sideways to the 12-inch black-and-white TV, and tweaked a piece of exposed metal that had once been covered by a volume-control knob. The TV finished playing the Ponds talcum powder jingle, and started the eight o'clock news. "Good evening," the anchorwoman announced in Assamese. "First the headlines: Security forces are on a red alert after receiving a tip-off that eight hard-core ULFA guerillas have slipped into the city. Authorities have warned that the militants would attempt to strike public places and vital installations to disrupt the Independence Day celebrations. And in sports, India won the third one-day international by seven wickets. Now the news in detail..."

"Shit, they know we're here," the younger man said.

"What did you expect, kid?" the older man said with a sneer. He was tall, muscular, and in his early thirties, and had a deep, long scar that ran across his left cheek. "It's always a close call in the city."

The younger man looked away toward the TV. He was crouched on the smaller sofa, shaking his legs. He was in his early twenties, clean-shaven, and a little shorter but more muscular than the other man.

The older man lighted a cigarette. As he took the first puff, suddenly the lights went out and the TV blipped to silence.

"Sons of swines," the younger man said. "One drop of rain, and they cut off the fucking line."

"Relax! Don't get so worked up before the operation. Go get a candle from the kitchen."

A ceramic object, probably the vase on the side table, crashed on the floor as the younger man stood up.

"Where's your fucking lighter?" the older man said.

The younger man flicked his cigarette lighter on and headed to the kitchen. He returned with a lit candle and placed it at the center of the table. The flame flickered as he stepped back.

The two men sat quietly. The younger man slapped in the air to kill a mosquito. Then he walked to the window, lifted the curtains, and peeked outside. The rain had begun to fall after a brief respite. It was one of those long spells of the monsoon that sometimes lasted for over two weeks. The strong wind ruffled the leaves of the <i>krishnasura</i> tree next to the house. It was an ordinary brick house with a slanted tin roof. The narrow street in front was dark because of the broken streetlights and flooded with rainwater and sewage from the overflowing drains. In the distance, the Khasi Mountains looked like a herd of sleeping elephants under the occasional bolts of lightning.

“Lombu, shouldn’t Rahman have called by now?” The younger man returned to the sofa.

“It’s only eight thirty,” the man called Lombu said. “You’re scared shitless, aren’t you?”

“I’m not scared. I’m tired of sitting here and becoming fodder for the mosquitoes.” The younger man slapped his ankle and scratched it vigorously.

“Just sit tight. We can’t leave before Rahman drops off the supplies with Sahu.”

The low buzz of the mosquitoes hovered over the room, and the rain fell on the tin roof relentlessly.

The younger man cleared his throat. “You don’t think we’ll have to shoot tonight, do you?”

“How many times are you going to ask that question?”

The younger man drew a deep breath. “I’m asking only because of the civilians.”

“Welcome to the real world, kid. Besides, I’m the one who has to deliver the cargo. What the hell are you getting so wired about?”

The younger man looked down. The flame flickered, and its yellow glow cast shadows of the men on the dirty, white walls of the room. The rain kept pounding the roof. Lombu sat quietly, while the younger man played with his cigarette lighter, twirling it over and over again on the table.

“You okay, Powali?” Lombu said.

Powali, the younger man, nodded.

“Don’t freeze up if anything funny happens tonight.”

“Oh, cut it out.”

Lombu shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m stuck with a rookie again when the whole goddamn army is combing the city. I hope you have a little more mettle than the last guy.” He ran his fingers along the scar on his cheek.

“You know, I was the best trainee in Bhutan.”

“Bhutan is a fucking joke. Try the real thing with the Nagas in Burma.”

“Talk to Lieutenant Gogoi if you have a problem with me. He handpicked me to

work with you.”

“Gogoi can suck my bamboo,” Lombu said. “When was the last time he was in the field? He’s having a good time banging *billas* in Bhutan. I should also start kissing the C-in-C’s ass. Tell Gogoi I’m not going to baby-sit his rookies any more.”

Powali looked away. Suddenly, a car screeched to a halt in front of the house. Both men lifted their heads, but the car sped away.

They became quiet again. The leaves rustled in the wind. A dog barked somewhere nearby. Powali slapped his ankle and coughed.

Then, the silence was shattered by the sound of a police siren. Powali jumped up startled.

“Don’t panic,” Lombu said. “See if they’re stopping here.” He remained seated.

Powali banged against the side table as he dashed to the window. He lifted the curtain and peeked outside. The raindrops splashed against the windowpanes ferociously. The headlights of an army jeep, followed by the lights of a convoy of jeeps and trucks, pierced the pitch darkness as they approached the house. The neighborhood dogs started barking.

“It’s an army convoy.” Powali’s voice cracked. He reached to the coffee table and picked up the Marakov.

“Take it easy, man. They won’t stop here.”

Powali kept looking through the curtain. The convoy passed the house. He turned to Lombu. “They’re not stopping here!” He looked out again, and kept gazing until the lights faded away completely.

“You wouldn’t have heard them if they were coming for us,” Lombu said. “They’re just doing the rounds. This is a new safe house. They don’t know about it yet.”

Powali plopped on the sofa.

“Put away the stupid gun. You’re going to shoot a convoy with that toy?”

Powali put the Marakov back on the table.

“If you want to bail out, you should do it now,” Lombu said, looking Powali in the eyes. “Remember, there is no going back after tonight.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Powali’s voice cracked and his eyes were squinted. “I didn’t join to bail out.”

“Relax.” Lombu shook his head and chuckled. “You’re not going to turn the world upside down.”

He picked up a magazine from the coffee table and started flipping through it.

“Where did we find a *mokkel* like you, anyway?”

“You guys begged me to join for three years,” Powali said.

“You’re giving me *botola*.”

“I’m not shitting you, Lombu. Gezu asked me to join after I won an all-state boxing championship in college.”

Lombu looked up from the magazine. "Boxing champion, eh? Why didn't you join right away? Too scared to go underground?"

"I'm not scared of anything. Everybody knows I never back down. I won the championship only three months after I fell and broke my back. You can ask Gezu."

"So, why wait three years, tough guy?" Lombu leaned closer to the candle to read the back cover.

Powali stretched forward, touched the Marakov, and took a deep breath. "It's no big deal to knock someone out. But it's another thing to..."

Lombu looked at him with raised eyebrows.

Powali touched the gun again.

"Never mind." He cleared his throat.

"I don't want to end up like my brother, always running from one minister's office to the other," Powali continued. "There's nothing out there. The job interviews, the call letters are all fucking meaningless. Forget it if you're not the highest bidder."

"Tell me a story I haven't heard before."

Lombu took out a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket, leaned forward, and lit one with the flame.

"Let me tell you about this business." He tapped the cigarette on the ashtray. "You said you want to learn from me, right?"

"This is no boxing match, kid. There's no referee to stop the fight. You throw in as many punches as possible before they finish your game."

Powali sat with his arms tightly crossed in front of his chest.

"The army is the worst," Lombu continued. "Those sons of swines treat even stray dogs better. If they don't shoot you right away, they'll beat you until every organ in your body becomes a bloody pulp and you die of internal bleeding."

Powali leaned forward, with his arms still tightly wound around his chest, and shook his legs.

"There's only one rule in this game. Gogoi and the others will tell you a bunch of crock. But believe me, there's only one rule that matters. The match can end at any moment. Without any warning. Just like that!" Lombu snapped his thumb and middle finger.

Powali stopped shaking his legs.

"There's still time to bail out."

"I told you I'm not bailing out," Powali said. "I've never backed down in my life."

Lombu took a long puff and crushed the cigarette in the ashtray. "Listen, like I said, the first time is the hardest. But you have to pull the trigger sooner or later. If you're smart, you'll get it out of the way now."

Powali coughed, and the flame almost went out. His face was pale and tight in the yellow light.

"Believe me, it gets easier," Lombu said in a softer voice. "Soon it'll be like drinking water with your meal."

The two men became quiet again. The rain pounded the roof, and the leaves sougled in the wind. Powali slapped in the air to kill a mosquito, and started humming the talcum powder jingle. Lombu lighted another cigarette and continued to smoke and blow rings in the air.

It was a few minutes before midnight when Lombu's mobile phone rang.

"What happened to you, man?" Lombu answered the phone. "I've been babysitting the rookie all night."

"What happened?" Lombu said. Powali sat up straight and looked at Lombu with raised eyebrows.

"Why?" Lombu asked.

"Is the mission off?" He asked again.

"Another train. Which one?"

"Wait, let me tell the kid."

Lombu turned to Powali. "Change of plans. The new target is the Northeast Express. We have to go now."

"Where is the cargo?" Lombu returned to the phone.

"Hold on. Let me get him to write it down."

He turned to Powali and motioned him to write.

"On GS highway. Petrol pump." Lombu repeated what he heard on the phone. The flame flickered again. Powali's hands shook as he scribbled on a piece of paper. "Gupta Services. Got it."

"Petrol pump?" Powali said.

"We pick up the cargo from the petrol pump," Lombu said to Powali. "Rahman just dropped it off with Sahu there."

Powali nodded.

"Rahman, you sure that the pump is only a hundred meters from the station?" Lombu was back on the phone. "Not like last time, right?"

"Okay, okay. It could be two hundred meters." Lombu laughed.

II

They reached the petrol pump in Ulubari on the Guwahati-Shillong Highway a few minutes after midnight. Lombu jumped out from the pillion seat of the bike even before Powali switched off the engine. The cashier and the pump attendant were chatting inside the small office.

The rain continued to fall and the wind howled against the coconut and banana trees.

"I don't see Sahu in there," Lombu said. "You can never trust these middlemen."

Lombu looked around once more. An emaciated, brown dog had climbed into the open garbage dump at the entrance of the petrol pump, and was feeding on the trash, ignoring the rain and the fetid stench. The two men walked to the office after finishing the inspection. Halfway through, Powali stopped, turned his head around and gazed at the empty highway. The raindrops splashed against the asphalt. He turned back after a moment and followed Lombu.

The pump attendant – a dark, scrawny Bihari teenager – met them just outside the office.

"How much?" the boy asked, revealing his yellowed buckteeth.

"Go back in," Lombu said.

"Who are you?"

"You ask too many questions, *zohora*." Lombu grabbed the boy by the shoulder and shoved him into the office. Powali stood guard at the door.

"Where's Sahu?" Lombu asked the cashier, a short, dark Marwari with a mustache and oily hair parted in the middle like Shahrukh Khan's. The radio played the "Pepsi Generation" commercial.

"Who are you?" the cashier said.

"You know damn well who I am. Where's Sahu?"

The attendant tried to say something. "Shut up, *kela*," Lombu said. He pushed the boy to the wall opposite the register, under Hrithik Roshan's gray-eyed steely stare from the poster for *Mission Kashmir*. Lombu swiftly pulled out a .38 from under his shirt. Powali brought out his Marakov.

"Face the wall and raise your hands," Lombu said to the boy. "Keep them up. And one more thing. Keep your fucking mouth shut."

"Where the hell is Sahu?" Lombu now pointed the gun at the cashier.

"He left a few minutes ago." The cashier stuttered. "He waited for you a long time."

"Where is the cargo?"

The cashier pointed to the cupboard behind him.

"Anybody else here with you?"

The cashier shook his head. Lombu took a quick glance around.

"I asked you a question."

"Nobody else is here," the cashier said.

"You sure Sahu didn't call his friends in the *thana*?"

"He didn't call anybody." The cashier drew a deep breath. "Sahuji doesn't want any *panga*."

"Bring out the goods." Lombu pointed the .38 to the cashier's head.

"Please don't shoot, please." The cashier's voice quivered as he folded together his palms in front of his chest and bowed to Lombu. He turned around, opened the cupboard, and pulled out a backpack. He placed it on the register and unzipped it. Inside was a yet-to-be-assembled Timing Power Unit. Lombu ran his fingers over the battery, detonator, timer, and the explosive charge.

"Where's the rest of the goods?" he said.

The cashier pointed to the cupboard again.

"Why the fuck didn't you bring it out with the bomb?"

The cashier brought out a VIP briefcase. It was stacked with bundles of hundred-rupee notes.

"Count it," Lombu said.

The cashier counted the bundles loudly. "Ten <i>lakhs</i>. It's all here."

Powali looked away for a moment and checked the highway. The rain continued its assault on the asphalt. Suddenly, there was a loud pop. A man leapt from behind Lombu and shot him on his right arm. The .38 fell on the floor. Lombu turned around in an instant and kicked the attacker in the groin. The man collapsed on the floor. "Sahu, you <i>gaddar</i>," Lombu yelled. "I'm going to kill you." Then he started kicking the attacker in the ribs and stomach. Sahu curled into the fetal position. The pump attendant turned around and started yowling.

"Stop!" The cashier picked up Sahu's gun, which had skidded near him, and pointed it at Lombu. "I'll shoot you." The cashier shook like the banana leaves outside.

Lombu stopped kicking the body on the floor, touched the wound on his arm, and then stared at his bloodied fingers. "Shoot him," he shouted looking at Powali.

Powali pointed the Marakov to the cashier, who still had the gun aimed at Lombu.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" Lombu shouted. "Shoot the bastard."

Powali aimed his gun at the cashier's head, but his hand shook a little. He firmed his grip. The pump boy sobbed with loud hiccups.

"Drop the gun or I'll shoot," the cashier said.

Lombu clutched the wound with his left hand. The right sleeve of his shirt was soaked with blood. Powali touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip, and firmed his grip again.

"Shoot!"

Powali pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the cashier in the middle of the forehead. He collapsed and the gun fell from his hand.

Lombu picked up his .38 and pumped two bullets into Sahu. The body stopped moving. Lombu dumped the money into the backpack and strapped it on his back. The radio started playing "<i>Yeh meri</i> India, I love India."

Lombu and Powali ran to the bike. Lombu clasped the wound on his arm, his blood mixing with the rain on the concrete. Powali started the engine.

“Mission aborted,” Lombu said. “We better report to HQ.”

The engine sputtered a few times and stopped. Powali fumbled as he started it again, but it just groaned.

“Steady yourself! We have time.”

Powali waited for a moment, and restarted the engine. This time it roared to life. He pushed the gas hard. The bike skidded over the concrete with a screech, and reached the highway. The fat monsoon raindrops fell on them as they sped toward the Khasi Mountains, away from the city. In the distance, the mountains loomed like a dark, towering fortress under a bolt of lightning.

“I knew Sahu was going to pull a stunt like this.” Lombu screamed over the crackle of the engine. “The bastard got too greedy.”

Powali kept driving silently.

“You did good.” Lombu talked over the thunder of the bike and the splashing of the raindrops. “I’ll put in a word with Gogoi.”

Soon, they passed the lights at the city limits, and began their ascent into the mountains. Powali started negotiating the sharp turns on the dark, deserted highway. An Ambassador crossed them from the opposite direction, heading to the city. He looked back momentarily at the taillights, but turned his head just in time to navigate through an acute curve.

“What the hell are you looking back for?” Lombu screamed. “You’ll get us both killed.”

A few minutes later, another car approached them from the opposite direction. Powali looked back again for a moment.

“You didn’t hear me or what?” Lombu shouted. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I heard you,” Powali said. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I’ll be fine.”

Lombu said something but his voice was drowned by the thunder. Moments later, Powali negotiated yet another vicious curve on the slippery, winding highway leading to the bosom of the dark, inviting mountains.

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