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The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra

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INSPECTOR CHOPRA RETIRES



On the day that he was due to retire, Inspector Ashwin Chopra discovered that he had inherited an elephant.

'What do you mean he's sending me an *elephant*?' he said, turning in astonishment from the mirror in which he had been adjusting the collar of his uniform to face his wife Archana, who was hovering anxiously in the doorway, and who was known to friends and family alike as Poppy.

'Here, see for yourself,' said Poppy, handing him the letter. But Chopra had no time for that now. It was his final day in office and Sub-Inspector Rangwalla was waiting for him downstairs in the police jeep. He knew that the boys at the station had planned some sort of farewell celebration, and, not wishing to ruin their surprise, he had been feigning ignorance of the preparations going on around him all week.

Chopra stuffed the letter into the pocket of his khaki trousers, then headed for the door with Poppy in tow, her heart-shaped face pulled into a pout. Poppy was annoyed.

Her husband had not even noticed that she had worn a new silk sari for this special day, that fresh lotus flowers garlanded the silky black bun of her hair, that kohl had been expertly applied beneath her almond-shaped brown eyes. A frown now sat above her small nose and two spots of colour glowed on her milkmaid-fair cheeks. But Chopra's thoughts were already at the station.

What he couldn't know then was that the day would hold another, entirely unanticipated surprise – a murder case, the final case of his long and illustrious career, the case that would rock the city of Mumbai to its foundations and herald the birth of its most singular detective agency.



'It will be forty degrees today,' remarked Rangwalla as they juddered along the potholed access road leading out of the Air Force Colony within which Inspector Chopra lived. Chopra could well believe it. Already his shirt was sticking to his back, a rivulet of sweat snaking down from under his peaked cap to drip onto his nose.

It was the hottest summer in Mumbai for more than twenty years. And for the second year in a row the monsoons had failed to arrive on cue.

As usual the route to the station was clogged with traffic. Auto-rickshaws buzzed through the dusty urban maze, a menace to man and beast alike. A low-lying cloud of pollution curdled the heat, stinging Chopra's nostrils as he leaned out of the rickshaw and squinted up at another of the

numerous giant hoardings that had sprung up around the city since the start of the elections. A labourer in shorts and a tattered vest was balanced precariously on bamboo scaffolding painting a moustache onto the grinning face of a well-known politician.

Chopra leaned back as the local market slid by and the air became hazy with spice particles and the smell of rotting vegetables. A line of roadside food sellers added to the noxious miasma: iron-stomached construction workers queued for early-morning rations sizzling on giant frying pans heated by butane cylinders.

Further along they saw an elephant lumbering down the road, a mahout perched on its back, a bamboo sun hat pulled down low over his ears. Chopra watched the beast sway past. 'An elephant!' he muttered to himself, recalling his recent conversation with Poppy. Surely there had to be some mistake!



A crowd had gathered in the station's courtyard. At first Chopra thought that this was the 'surprise' the boys had been planning for him . . . and then he realised that the gaggle of sweating citizenry was of the type that seemed to materialise, as if by magic, at the scene of any altercation on Mumbai's pavementless streets.

A loud voice could be heard emanating from deep within the bovine press of bodies.

In the centre of the crowd Chopra found the plump,

sweating form of young Constable Surat being loudly berated by a short, dumpy woman in a dun-coloured sari.

'My son is dead, and they won't lift a finger!' the woman was shouting. 'They are only here to serve their rich masters! I won't let them get away with it!'

A number of purse-mouthed clones of the woman muttered encouragement from the edges of the circle.

Chopra immediately noted that the woman's eyes were red and swollen as if she had been crying. Her greying hair had escaped her bun, and straggled around her sweating forehead, on which a red bindi had run, adding to the overall impression of derangement. Confronted by Chopra's uniform, and stern expression, the woman momentarily stopped shouting.

Chopra knew that he cut an authoritative figure. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a handsome head of jet-black hair greying only at the sideburns, he had aged well. His brown skin was as yet unlined. Dark soulful eyes beneath thick eyebrows gave him the aura of a serious man. Beneath those eyes sat a nose that his wife assured him had 'character'. Privately, Chopra was proudest of his moustache, a bristling, well-groomed affair like a double-handed salute held steady beneath his nose.

'What is the matter, madam?' asked Chopra, severely.

'Why don't you ask *him*?' She pointed at Rangwalla, who swivelled his eyes away from the woman's accusing finger and towards Chopra.

'Look!' howled the woman to her crowd of followers. 'He hasn't even *told* the inspector sahib! If I came here in a big white Mercedes they would be jumping around me like

pye-dogs! But for a poor woman and her poor son, there is no justice!'

'Enough!' barked Chopra. He was pleased to see that everyone, even the woman, fell silent. 'Rangwalla, explain to me what is going on.'

'What will he explain?' exploded the woman. '*I* will explain! My son, my precious boy, has been killed! His body has been lying in your police station since last night. Until now, not even one officer has come to my house to take a report. Whole night I have waited, crying for my dead son.'

'Rangwalla, is this true?'

'It is true that we have a body, sir.'

'Where is it?'

'In the back, sir.'

'Madam, I must ask you to wait here. Rangwalla, come with me.'

Rangwalla followed Chopra into the rear of the station, where the cells and the storage facilities were housed. In the cells a brace of drunks slept fitfully, and a local thief, well known to Chopra, salaamed as he strode past.

In the storeroom, on a stack of banana crates, lay the body.

Chopra pulled aside the white sheet with which it had been covered and looked down at the bloated, greying face. The boy had once been handsome.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'It was your last day. The boy was dead anyway. Clear case of drowning.'

'The world hasn't stopped because it is Inspector Chopra's last day,' said Chopra sternly, then: 'Where was he found?'

'In Marol, where the pipeline ends. He must have fallen into the sewage creek. He certainly smelled like it.'

'The creek must be almost dry,' frowned Chopra. 'There's been no rain for months.'

'It seems he was drunk. A whisky bottle was found beside his body.'

'Who found him?'

'A local raised the alarm. They sent a boy over to tell us. I had the body brought here, and sent Surat along to ask a few questions, but no one had seen anything.'

It was funny, thought Chopra, how, in a city of twenty million, where it was virtually impossible to enjoy a moment of privacy, his fellow citizens so often managed to see absolutely nothing.

'Why was the body brought *here*?' It was unusual for a corpse to end up at the station. Usually it would be ferried straight to the local hospital.

'We contacted the hospital but there was some trouble going on over there. I believe some lunatics had set up a roadblock and were harassing vehicles going in and out. I thought it would be better to pick up the body ourselves and keep it here until the morning.'

Chopra understood. The ongoing elections were a heated affair. Up and down the country ordinary people – the 'lunatics' Rangwalla referred to – were making their voices heard. It had been a particularly busy time for Mumbai's police officers. Indians, on the whole, did not believe in demonstrating quietly.

'Do you have a panchnama?'

'Yes.' The panchnama was prepared by the first officer at

the scene and countersigned by two local people of 'good standing' who attested to the fact that a body had been discovered and that the police had been duly summoned. Rangwalla had done well. In many areas of Mumbai, finding two citizens of good standing was harder than finding the killer, Chopra had often reflected.

'How was the body identified?'

'The boy was carrying a driving licence. We contacted his family. The mother came in last night and confirmed the identity. She made quite a scene. I had to send her home.'

Losing a son, thought Chopra. What a terrible shock that must have been! No wonder the poor woman seemed unhinged.

'Look, sir, don't take this the wrong way, but . . . this will soon be Inspector Suryavansh's problem. Let him deal with it.'

Suryavansh was his successor at the station. Chopra hesitated, but then realised that Rangwalla was absolutely correct. It was a matter of protocol, after all. In a few short hours he would no longer be a police officer. He would no longer be Inspector Chopra, just plain old Ashwin Chopra, another member of the billion-strong *aam junta* that made India great.

He was suddenly overcome by a deep feeling of melancholy.



The day passed quicker than he could have thought possible.

After Rangwalla had taken the woman's statement, she had finally agreed to be driven home. Chopra had then settled into the well-worn wooden chair behind his desk to complete the various formalities of his last day in office.

Above him the creaking ceiling fan ladled the hot air around the room, while the *Times of India* wall-clock counted down the final moments of his career. To Chopra the clock sounded like a ticking bomb.

At lunchtime he opened his tiffin-box and sniffed his food. It was a ritual. Chopra was fiercely allergic to ginger – in the presence of which he would sneeze uncontrollably – and had made a longstanding habit of authenticating his meals, even though he knew his wife rarely forgot his aversion. Today Poppy had made him a meal of aloo gobi and chapatti, still warm inside the tiered tiffin-box. But he had no appetite.

He pushed the steel containers aside just as Poppy called to remind him to take his pills. Dutifully, Chopra removed the bottle of tablets from his pocket, shook two into the palm of his hand, then gulped them down with a glass of water and a shudder.

The ritual depressed him greatly.



At three o'clock Chopra was surprised by a call from Assistant Commissioner of Police Suresh Rao. Chopra had

been reporting to Rao for years – the Sahar station was one of three that lay within ACP Rao's remit. He and Rao had never seen eye to eye. Rao had once run the nearby Chakala station and Chopra had found him to be a mealy-mouthed thug; a round-faced, pot-bellied little dictator known for his cronyism and exuberant use of police force. In the way of things in the Brihanmumbai police, Rao had been promoted whilst Chopra himself remained in post.

Briefly Chopra wondered if Rao had called to gloat. The ACP had been on cloud nine ever since he had discovered that Chopra was being forced into early retirement. But Rao surprised him by launching himself in another direction altogether. 'Chopra, it has come to my attention that a body was discovered in Marol last night.'

'Yes,' Chopra said. 'That is correct.' He could not bring himself to punctuate his sentences with 'sir' when talking to the ACP.

'Can you tell me by whose authority the body was taken to your station, instead of the hospital?'

Chopra hesitated, then said: 'By my authority.' He had no wish to see Rangwalla on the carpet. 'What exactly is the problem?'

'Well, it is not procedure, is it?' the ACP whined. 'At any rate, make sure the body is sent to the hospital right away. Remember, Chopra, this is your last day. Your interest in matters is at an end.'

'My interest in matters ends at precisely 6 p.m. this evening,' Chopra said.

'Always pig-headed!' Rao said, losing his temper. 'Well, let me tell you, Chopra, your days of insubordination are

done.' He drew a deep breath. 'Get that body to the hospital. That is an order!'

'And the autopsy?'

'What autopsy?'

'The boy's death may have been the result of foul play. I will be authorising an autopsy.'

'You will be doing no such thing!' Rao exploded. 'The case is open and shut. The boy drowned. There is no need of any autopsy.'

What is going on here? Chopra thought. 'How do *you* know the boy drowned?'

Rao seemed to splutter on the end of the line, then said, 'I make it my business to know. That is why I am an ACP and you are not. Now listen to me very carefully. There is to be no autopsy. The boy drowned. Case closed.'

'Perhaps I will decide for myself,' Chopra said hotly.

'By God, man, who do you think you are!' Rao exploded. 'I'll have your badge—!' He stopped as he realised what he was saying. Then, 'Just get that body to the morgue.'

Rao banged the phone down.

Chopra stared at the wall for a long moment before finally returning the receiver to its cradle.



The end of the day arrived. Inspector Chopra began to clear away his things. He had brought a box with him and into this he neatly emptied the contents of his desk and cupboards. After all these years, there really wasn't much. He

had never been the kind to adorn his office with personal bric-a-brac. There were no pictures of Poppy or children; no garlanded photos of his late parents. There was a gold-plated pen stand and inkwell, which his wife had gifted him for one of his birthdays. There were the plaques he had received for completing ten, twenty and thirty years of service. There was his anglepoise desk lamp, by whose light he had written out innumerable reports in the quiet of the station evenings. There was the glassy-eyed stuffed lizard which his old friend, Ashok Kalyan, had given him many years ago as a joke, to remind him of the time he had fallen into a well back in their village of Jarul in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra. Ashok had had to rescue him, but not before Chopra had screamed himself hoarse in terror of the numerous lizards that had, in their own blind panic, clambered all over him. (Chopra still hated the creatures, and a shudder would pass through him each monsoon, when they tended to slip into Mumbai's apartments and lurk behind curtains, or in bathrooms, scurrying out when you least expected it.)

Chopra was disappointed not to have received a call from Ashok. Ashok was the MLA – Member of the state Legislative Assembly – for the Andheri East constituency of Mumbai, where Chopra lived. Chopra knew that Ashok was extremely busy these days, what with the elections, but had nevertheless hoped he might call. After all, they went back a long way, right back, in fact, to when they had both started out together on the Mumbai police force over thirty years ago.

Chopra hesitated momentarily as he regarded the framed

photograph of himself receiving his Kirti Chakra, a gallantry medal from the Deputy Commissioner of Police. It dated from nine years before, when he had led the raid on a warehouse in the nearby MIDC-SEEPZ industrial quarter, where the notorious gangster Narendra 'Kala' Nayak had been hiding. Nayak had been the target of a Mumbai-wide manhunt, but it was Chopra and his brigade of local officers who had finally taken him down.

Chopra removed the photograph from the wall and put it in with the rest of his possessions.

All in all it was a depressingly meagre hoard.

A curious thing happened as he completed his packing. He discovered a strange sensation arising from the pit of his stomach, and gradually engulfing him. 'It's just another day,' he muttered to himself, but the words sounded hollow, even to his own ears. He had been preparing for this moment for eight months, ever since the doctor's report had confirmed his worst fears; and yet, now that it had finally arrived, he found that he was only mortal after all.

Even Inspector Chopra, who never allowed his emotions to get the better of him, who was always rational and sober, could be overcome by sentimentality.



And finally it was time to leave. 'Rangwalla, please fetch me a rick.'

Rangwalla looked at him, aghast. 'But, sir, I will take you home in the jeep!'

'No,' said Chopra firmly. 'That would not be appropriate. As of this moment I am no longer a police officer. I am a private citizen, therefore I am not entitled to ride home in a police jeep. And you do not have to call me "sir" any more.'

'Yes, sir.'

Chopra could not help but note the diamonds glistening at the corners of Rangwalla's eyes. Twenty years they had served together, a long time in anyone's book. If Chopra considered any of his junior officers to be friends, then Rangwalla came the closest to that description.

Rangwalla, a thin man with a dark face ravaged by childhood acne – the craters now partially hidden beneath a close-cropped black beard – was a devout Muslim and had proven, over the years, to be a more than able lieutenant. His lack of a formal education was compensated for by his tough upbringing on the streets of Bhendi Bazaar, a Muslim enclave of south Mumbai. It was rare for someone entering the force through the constabulary exams to rise to the rank of Sub-Inspector, but Rangwalla had what Ashok Kalyan would call 'street-smarts', a commodity that Chopra felt was fast becoming unfashionable in modern India.



The auto-rickshaw arrived. Constable Surat loaded Chopra's box of possessions onto it and Chopra solemnly shook hands with each of the station personnel, many of whom could not hold back their emotions. Each man had brought him a gift, which they now handed over with due

solemnity. Constable Surat, who was young, overweight and impressionable, and hero-worshipped Chopra, gave the inspector a small marble statue of Lord Krishna playing his flute, weeping bitterly all the while.

Chopra, standing by the rick, took one last look at the station, its whitewashed outer wall, the barred windows, the little palm tree in the terracotta-tiled courtyard, the sun-cracked, hand-painted sign above the permanently open saloon-style front doors on which was displayed the station's name . . . Twenty years! he thought. Twenty years in a single posting!

He realised that he knew this place more intimately than he did his own home. The thought brought a lump to his throat.