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The Accidental Apprentice

Written by Vikas Swarup

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The Accidental Apprentice

VIKAS SWARUP



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For Aditya and Varun
who heard my first stories

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Prologue

In life you never get what you deserve: you get what you negotiate.

That was the first lesson he taught me.

For the last three days I have been putting that guidance into practice, negotiating frantically with my prosecutors and persecutors in a desperate bid to stave off the death penalty, which they all believe I deserve.

Outside the lockup, the press are circling like vultures. The news channels cannot get enough of me, holding me up as a cautionary tale of what happens when greed and gullibility collide to create the blood-speckled train wreck called culpable homicide of the first degree. They keep recycling that police mugshot taken after my arrest. Sunlight TV has even dug up a grainy class photograph of me in school in Nainital, sitting stiffly in the front row next to Mrs Saunders, our Grade 8 teacher. But Nainital seems a world away now, a never-never land of lush mountains and silvery lakes, where, once upon a time, my youthful optimism had tricked me into

believing that the future was limitless and the human spirit indomitable.

I want to hope, to dream, to have faith again, but the soulless weight of reality keeps crushing me down. I feel as if I am living a nightmare, trapped in a deep, dark well of endless despair, from which there is no way out.

As I sit in my sweltering, windowless jail cell, my thoughts keep straying to that fateful day when it all began. Though it was more than six months ago, I can still recall every detail with an unwavering clarity as if it were yesterday. In my mind's eye, I can see myself walking towards the Hanuman Temple in Connaught Place on that cold grey afternoon . . .

It is Friday, 10 December, and traffic on Baba Kharak Singh Marg is the usual chaotic snarl of heat and noise. The road is jammed with lumbering buses, honking cars, whining scooters and spluttering auto-rickshaws. The sky is cloudless but the sun is invisible behind that toxic cocktail of smog that smothers the city every winter.

I am wearing a grey cardigan over a demure, sky-blue salvar kameez, having prudently changed from my work uniform. It is a routine I follow every Friday, slipping out of the showroom during the lunch hour to make the short walk across the marketplace to the ancient temple dedicated to the monkey god, Hanuman.

Most people go to temples to pray; I go to expiate. I have still not forgiven myself for Alka's death. Part of me will always think what happened to her was my fault. Since that horrific tragedy, God is my only refuge. And I

have a special bond with Goddess Durga, who also has a shrine inside the Hanuman Mandir.

Lauren Lockwood, my American friend, is perpetually fascinated by the fact that we have 330 million gods. 'Jeez, you Hindus sure like to hedge your bets,' she says. That's probably an exaggeration, but every temple worth its salt does have shrines to at least half a dozen deities.

Each of these deities has some special powers. Goddess Durga is the Invincible One who can redeem situations of utmost distress. After Alka's death, when my life was a dark tunnel of sorrow, pain and regret, She gave me strength. She is always with me whenever I need her.

The temple is unusually crowded for a Friday afternoon and I am caught up in the ceaseless scrum of devotees jostling to get to the sanctum sanctorum. The marble floor feels cool under my bare feet and the air is heavy with the intoxicating blend of sweat, sandalwood, flowers and incense.

I get into the ladies' queue, which is considerably shorter and manage to make my communion with Durga Ma in less than ten minutes.

Having finished my *darshan*, I am about to go down the stairs when a hand drops on my shoulder. I whirl around and discover a man gazing at me intently.

When an unknown adult male accosts a young woman in Delhi, the instinctive thing to do is to reach for that bottle of pepper spray one always keeps handy. But the stranger looking at me is no street loafer. He is an elderly man, dressed in an off-white silk kurta pyjama, with a white pashmina shawl draped casually across his shoulders. Fair and tall, he has an aquiline nose, a hard, resolute

mouth and a head crowned by a shock of backswept, snowy-white hair. A vermilion tika adorns his forehead. His fingers are loaded with rings glinting with diamonds and emeralds. But it is his penetrating brown eyes that unsettle me. They seem to search me with a directness I find slightly intimidating. This is a man who likes to be in control.

'Could I have a word with you?' he asks in a clipped tone.

'What do you want?' I respond curtly, less acerbic than I would normally have been out of respect for his age.

'My name is Vinay Mohan Acharya,' he says evenly. 'I am the owner of Acharya Business Consortium. Have you heard of the ABC Group of Companies?'

My eyebrows arch in acknowledgement. The ABC Group is well known as one of India's largest conglomerates, making everything from toothpaste to turbines.

'I have a proposition for you,' he continues. 'Something that will change your life for ever. Will you give me ten minutes to explain?'

I have heard these words before. From pesky insurance peddlers and door-to-door detergent salesmen. And they always make me wary. 'I don't have ten minutes,' I say. 'I have to return to work.'

'Just hear me out,' he persists.

'What is it? Say it.'

'I would like to give you a chance to become the CEO of the ABC Group of Companies. I am offering you the opportunity of heading a business empire worth ten billion dollars.'

Now I know he's not to be trusted. He sounds just like

a confidence trickster, no different from those ubiquitous hawkers on Janpath trying to flog shoddy Rexine belts and packs of cheap handkerchiefs. I wait for that half-smile that will tell me he is kidding, but his face remains impassive.

'I'm not interested,' I say firmly, and begin descending the stairs. He follows me.

'You mean to say you are turning down the offer of the century, more money than you will ever see in seven life-times?' His tone is sharp, cutting like a whip.

'Look, Mr Acharya, or whoever you are. I don't know what your game is, but I'm not interested in playing it. So please stop pestering me,' I say, as I retrieve my Bata slip-pers from the old lady at the temple entrance who safeguards unattended footwear for a small tip.

'I know you probably think this is all a joke,' he declares, slipping into a pair of brown sandals.

'Well, isn't it?'

'I've never been more serious in my life.'

'Then you must be from a TV prank show. I suppose the moment I say yes you will show me the secret camera that's following you around.'

'You expect a man of my stature to be doing silly TV shows?'

'Well, isn't it silly to be offering your business empire to random strangers? It makes me doubt if you are even who you say you are.'

'Good point.' He nods. 'A little scepticism is always healthy.' He reaches into his kurta's pocket and retrieves a black leather wallet. Extracting a business card, he offers it to me. 'Perhaps this might convince you.'

I examine it cursorily. It does look impressive, made of some kind of semitransparent plastic, with an embossed logo of the ABC Group and 'VINAY MOHAN ACHARYA, CHAIRMAN' etched below it in bold, black letters.

'Anyone can get these printed for a few hundred rupees,' I say, returning his card.

He pulls out another piece of plastic from his wallet and holds it up. 'How about this one?'

It is an all-black American Express Centurion card, with 'VINAY MOHAN ACHARYA' engraved at the bottom. I have encountered this rare species just once before, when a flashy builder from Noida used it to pay for a 60-inch Sony LX-900 TV costing almost 400,000 rupees. 'It still doesn't change anything.' I shrug. 'How do I know this isn't a forgery?'

By now we have crossed the temple's forecourt and are in proximity of the road. 'That's my car,' he says, pointing out a shiny vehicle parked alongside the kerb. A chauffeur is in the driver's seat, wearing a peaked cap and a starched white uniform. An armed guard in military fatigues scrambles out of the front seat and stiffens to attention. Acharya flicks a finger and he opens the rear door with alacrity. His zealous servility does not seem fake; it looks like it has been honed by years of unquestioning subservience. The car, I note admiringly, is a silver Mercedes-Benz CLS-500, with a price tag of over nine million rupees.

'Just give me a second,' Acharya says, and ducks inside the car. He removes a magazine from the rear seat and hands it to me. 'I had kept this as a last resort. If this won't convince you, nothing will.'

It is the December 2008 issue of *Business Times*. A man's portrait is on the cover, with the blazing headline, 'BUSINESSMAN OF THE YEAR'. I glance at the face on the cover and then at the man standing in front of me. They are identical. There is no mistaking the distinctive, back-swept, silvery hair, the curved nose or the piercing brown eyes. I am indeed in the presence of industrialist Vinay Mohan Acharya. 'Okay,' I concede. 'So you are Mr Acharya. What do you want from me?'

'I already told you. I want to make you my CEO.'

'And you expect me to believe you?'

'Then give me ten minutes and I will *make* you believe me. Can we sit down somewhere and talk?'

I look at my watch. There are still twenty minutes of my lunch break left. 'We could go to the Coffee House,' I say, indicating the rundown building on the opposite side of the road that serves as the social hub of the chattering classes.

'I would have preferred the Lobby Lounge at the Shangri La,' he says with the reluctant air of a man accepting a poor choice. 'Do you mind if a colleague of mine also joins us?'

Even as he says this, a man materialises out of the crowd of pedestrians like a ghost and stands by his side. He is much younger, probably in his early thirties, and dressed casually in a dark-blue Reebok tracksuit. Just under six feet, he has the sinewy, wiry frame of an athlete. I take in his crew-cut hair, small, ferret-like eyes and thin, cruel mouth. His nose is slightly out of joint, as though it has been broken once, providing the only memorable accent in an otherwise unremarkable face. I reckon he

must have been shadowing Acharya all this while. Even now his gimlet eyes dart constantly from side to side, scanning the surroundings like a professional bodyguard, before fixing on me.

'This is Rana, my right-hand man,' Acharya says, introducing him. I nod politely, withering under his icy stare.

'Should we go?' Rana asks. He has a weathered, raspy voice, like dry leaves rustling along the ground. Without waiting for my reply, he begins leading the way to the underpass.

The heavy smell of frying dosas and roasting coffee assails my senses the moment I step through the eatery's swinging door. It has all the ambience of a hospital cafeteria. I can see Acharya wrinkling his nose, already regretting the decision to come here. This being lunch hour, the place is packed. 'Minimum twenty minutes' wait, please,' the manager informs us.

I observe Rana slip him a folded hundred-rupee note and instantly a corner table is readied for us. Acharya and his flunkey sit down on one side, and I take the lone seat opposite them. Rana brusquely orders three filter coffees and then Acharya takes over. He looks me in the eye, his gaze steady. 'Let me be frank with you. This is like a blind bet for me. So, before I explain my proposal to you, would you tell me a little bit about yourself?'

'Well, there's nothing much to tell.'

'You could begin with your name.'

'I'm Sapna. Sapna Sinha.'

'Sapna.' He rolls the word around on his tongue, before nodding in apparent satisfaction. 'Good name. How old are you, Sapna, if you don't mind me asking?'

'Twenty-three.'

'And what do you do? Are you a student?'

'I did my graduation from Kumaun University in Nainital. Now I'm working as a sales assistant at Gulati & Sons. They have a showroom in Connaught Place for electronics and home appliances.'

'I've been there. Isn't it close to here?'

'Yes. In B-Block.'

'And how long have you been working there?'

'Just over a year.'

'What about your family?'

'I live with my mother, and Neha, my younger sister. She's doing her BA from Kamala Nehru College.'

'What about your father?'

'He passed away, a year and a half ago.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. So are you the breadwinner in the family now?'

I nod.

'If you don't mind telling me, how much do you earn in a month?'

'With my sales commission, around eighteen thousand rupees.'

'That's all? Then shouldn't you be jumping at the chance to lead a multimillion-dollar company and acquire a fortune?'

'Look, Mr Acharya, I'm still quite confused about your offer. I mean, first of all, why do you need a CEO?'

'Why? Because I'm sixty-eight years old and not getting any younger. God made the human body like a machine with built-in obsolescence. I'm about to reach my expiry date. But, before I go, I want to ensure an

orderly transition at the organisation I have nurtured for forty years. I want to ensure that I am followed by someone who believes in the same values that I do.'

'But why me? Why not your own son or daughter?'

'Well, for one, I don't have a family any more. My wife and daughter died in a plane crash eighteen years ago.'

'Oh! Then what about someone from your company?'

'I've searched far and wide within the company. I couldn't find anyone remotely suitable. My executives are good implementers, excellent subordinates, but I don't see the traits of a great leader in any of them.'

'And what do you see in me? I don't know a thing about running a business. I'm not even an MBA.'

'These degrees are simply a piece of paper. They don't teach you how to lead people, only how to manage stuff. That's why I didn't go to a management institute to pick my CEO. I came to a temple.'

'You've still not answered my question. Why me?'

'There was something in your eyes, a sparkle that I'd never seen anywhere before.' He searches my eyes for confirmation before glancing away. 'I have always been an observer of people,' he continues, looking around the hall, at the middle-class shoppers and office workers sitting on the other tables. 'And, of all the people I observed in the temple, you seemed the most focused. Call it intuition, psychic sense, whatever you want, but something told me that you could be the one. You alone had the compelling mix of determination and desperation I was looking for.'

'I thought desperation was a negative virtue.'

He shakes his head. 'Happy people don't make good

CEOs. Contentment breeds laziness. It is aspiration that drives achievement. I want people with hunger. Hunger that is born in the desert of dissatisfaction. You seem to have that want, that hunger.'

I am getting caught up in his sweeping statements and grand assumptions. But the logic behind his rhetoric still eludes me. 'Do you always take decisions based on whims?'

'Never underestimate the power of intuition. Eleven years ago, I bought a troubled factory in Romania called Iancu Steel. It was losing money every day. All my experts advised me against the purchase. They said I was throwing good money after bad. But I remained firm in my decision. I was attracted to the factory only because of its name. Iancu means "God is Gracious". Today, fifty-three per cent of our steel revenues come from that factory in Romania. God is indeed gracious.'

'So you do believe in God?'

'Isn't this proof enough?' He points at the vermilion mark on his forehead. 'The main reason I came to a temple to select my successor is because I wanted a devout like me. We are living in Kalyug, the dark age, full of sin and corruption. Religion is no longer in fashion. The youngsters working for me are consumed by consumption. They've probably not visited a temple to pray in years. I'm not saying they are all atheists, but their god is money, first and foremost. But you . . .' He nods at me approvingly. 'You seem to be just the pious, God-fearing candidate I was looking for.'

'Okay, I get it. You act on whims, and your latest whim tells you that I'm the chosen one. Now tell me: what's the catch?'

'There is no catch. But there are some terms and conditions. You will have to pass a few tests.'

'Tests?'

'Don't worry: I'm not taking you back to school. A school simply tests your memory. But life tests your character. My seven tests are rites of passage, designed to gauge your mettle and potential as a CEO.'

'Why seven?'

'In my forty years of running a business, I have learnt one thing: a company is only as good as the person who runs it. And I have whittled down the traits of a successful CEO to seven basic attributes. So each of the seven tests will focus on one of those seven traits.'

'And what exactly will I have to do to pass those tests?'

'Nothing that you wouldn't do in your daily life. I will not ask you to steal or kill or do anything illegal. In fact, you won't even be aware of the tests.'

'What do you mean?'

'My tests will come from the textbook of life. Doesn't life test us every day? Don't we make choices every day? I will simply evaluate your choices, your responses to life's daily challenges. That will reveal the stuff you are made of.'

'And what if I fail any of those tests?'

'Well, then I will have to look for someone else. But my gut instinct tells me you won't fail. It almost seems destined. The biggest lottery ticket of all time will be yours.'

'In that case my decision is quite clear. I'm not interested in your offer.'

He seems astounded. 'But why?'

'I don't believe in lottery tickets.'

'But you believe in God. And sometimes God gives you much more than you ask for.'

'I'm not that greedy,' I say, rising from the table. 'Thank you, Mr Acharya. It was nice meeting you, but I really must get back to the showroom now.'

'Sit!' he orders me. There is steel in his voice. I swallow hard and sit down like an obedient student.

'Listen, Sapna.' His voice softens. 'There are only two types of people in the world: winners and losers. I am giving you the chance to be a winner. All I ask in return is for you to sign this consent form.' He gestures to Rana, who produces a printed sheet of paper from the inside pocket of his tracksuit and lays it in front of me.

Since Alka's death, I've developed a sixth sense about some things, a little warning bell that goes off in my head whenever a situation is not quite right. That bell is ringing as I pick up the form. It is short, just five sentences:

1. The signer hereby agrees to be considered for the post of CEO of the ABC Group of Companies.
2. The signer hereby permits the ABC Group to perform necessary checks and procedures to assess the signer's suitability for the job.
3. The signer is not permitted to terminate the agreement mid-way, while the necessary checks and procedures are still being conducted.
4. The signer agrees to maintain complete confidentiality of this agreement by not discussing it with any third party.
5. In consideration of the above, the signer has received a non-refundable advance of ₹100,000.