

AMAVAS

RV RAMAN

A Short Story

AMAVAS

Tomorrow would be another *amavas*.

Oh God! How many more deaths will it bring? The last four new moons had seen eight throats slit.

Why did it have to be Delhi? Why so close to her world? Why now? Minal's despair threatened to overwhelm her.

All the victims had been rich, young and inebriated. Not *her* kind of people; total strangers. Yet, it had shattered her family. Even little Ruhee seemed to sense it. She had grown quiet and clung on more than usual. The household was on the edge; more than Delhi was. Far more.

Minal threw a glance at her husband as she fed Ruhee her dinner. How much he had changed in the past two months, over the past four new moons. He used to take such pleasure in feeding Ruhee, bathing her, reading her stories, putting her to bed. No longer.

He now sat glowering morosely at the TV, watching the news but only half listening to it, clenching and unclenching his large hands. Abruptly, he picked up the fruit knife and began viciously peeling an apple. The fruit knife, looking absurdly small in his large hands, moved swiftly, surely. The peels were *so* thin.

Ruhee held out her little hand, asking her father for a piece of apple. But Harith didn't respond; his attention was on the TV anchor as she revelled in recounting the gory details of the past four fortnights. Wedges of apple disappeared into his mouth.

Neither Ruhee nor Minal might have existed. His face was a frozen mask.

Frightened, Minal picked up Ruhee and took her into the kitchen. The look on her husband's face was an excruciatingly familiar one; one that she had hoped never again to see. She had seen enough of it during the last days of their stint near the India-Burma border. She was an army doctor and Harith a commando captain.

Fighting insurgents in the jungles that straddled the border had been very much like what the Americans had faced in Vietnam. The enemy had been ruthless, cruel and vile. Commandos preferred death to being captured alive. Every outing, every patrol had been psychologically devastating. They had left deep mental scars on Harith.

One of Harith's men, Ramesh Bose or 'Rambo' as they had called him, had been tortured for seven days before being rescued. S.L. Umesh Das Gupta, 'Sludge' to his mates, had gone psychotic. Harith had not lived it down. He had gone into a deep depression after the terrors he had witnessed, and after seeing the impact on his men. As one of the army doctors on site, Minal had treated him.

He had subsequently been sent back to civilization and to a training role, but the damage had been done.

As if that were not enough, Shreya, his younger sister had been killed a week after he had returned to Delhi, run over late one night by a drunken kid returning from a nightclub. He driving an Audi A8, a car worth more than Harith and Minal's life savings. That broke Harith. His hatred for inebriated drivers knew no bounds.

As Minal began cleaning Ruhee up after the meal, Harith turned up the volume. The TV anchor's voice came through to the kitchen.

‘The killer strikes only on *amavas* nights,’ she cried in unholy glee, ‘and kills only young people returning from nightclubs. We know nothing about him other than he is ruthless and quick, and that he strikes when his victims are close to where their cars are parked. Perhaps when they are about to get into them.

‘Of course, the big question is “who is he?”. But an equally important one is about how he manages to kill so quickly and silently. As many as three young men were slaughtered during the last *amavas*. All in a matter of seconds.’

She turned to her ‘medical expert’ to ask for his view.

‘He is most certainly deranged mentally,’ the expert weighed in as enthusiastically as the news anchor, stating the obvious. ‘That is what gives him such inhuman speed and strength. There are two possibilities. Either he has a congenital problem, or some acutely traumatic event unhinged him. Either way –’

With a hiss, Harith snatched up the remote and switched off the TV. Without a word, he strode into the third bedroom they used as the study, and locked the door. From the sounds that came through the wall, Minal knew exactly what he was doing.

He had opened the trunk in which he kept his commando weapons. Whether he had brought them away legally or not, she had never figured out. But she knew that he could not bear to part with the devices on which his very survival had depended. During trying times, they served as his psychological crutches. They gave him a comforting sense of security.

He had always been particular about keeping the devices of death out of reach. The trunk was always locked with two Navtal locks. When the locks were opened, the study door was invariably locked.

Minal closed her eyes and shuddered. She could visualise it now – the short double-edged dagger in his right hand and the long serrated one in his favoured left. Both had non-reflective

grey blades and black handles. She had watched Harith at training. How swift he had been, how deadly. Like a striking cobra. He would hit three dummies in three seconds. The long serrated dagger was unstoppable. The commando captain had been a killing machine.

Be that as it may, what proof did she have? Maybe, she was just linking up unconnected things. All of Delhi was on the edge, not just she. Not just Harith. Yes, there were disconcerting coincidences. Like his not being at home during the last three new moon nights when the rich kids had been killed. But that didn't *prove* anything, did it?

So, after the last *amavas*, using her position as an army doctor, she had gained access to the morgue where the latest victims were kept. One glance had told her that the fatal wounds had been inflicted by a long serrated blade. The direction of the blade had been from the right side of the victims' throats to the left. On their left cheeks were marks of four large fingers, and on the right cheeks were depressions that matched a large thumb.

It was all very clear. The killer had struck from behind, clamped their mouths with a large right hand, pulled their heads back to expose their throats, and slit them with his left hand. Exactly the strike she had seen Harith practise time and again.

Serrated blade. Large hands. Left-handed.

What more proof did she need?

But why? Why him? Why us?

Wasn't one nightmare enough?

* * *

Today was *amavas*. Another new moon. The sun had set. Night was coming.

Minal wasn't a devout woman, but she had prayed all day.

Incessantly, one prayer or another had been on her lips. She had surprised herself with the number of prayers she had known, even if many of them were bits and pieces. Faint memories, some were, recalled from childhood.

Harith wasn't back from work. When would he come? Would he even come tonight?

On the last *amavas*, he had called at 8 o'clock to say that he would be late. He had returned in the wee hours of the morning. Well after the three young throats had been slit.

On the previous two new moons too, he had stayed out until the wee hours. She couldn't remember if he had been home on the first *amavas* when the killer had made his debut.

Eight o'clock came and went without news. A faint, ephemeral wisp of hope began rising in her heart. Maybe, just maybe, his not calling meant that he would be coming home tonight.

Ten minutes later, her hopes were dashed. The phone rang. It was Harith. He would be late tonight, very late. She was not to stay up for him. He had the house key. Minal listened dumbstruck, only a faint croak of acknowledgement escaping her before he hung up.

She dropped the phone and hurried into the study. She knew exactly what she needed to do, and she knew where the keys to the trunk were hidden.

Three minutes later, she was staring into the open trunk in the study. The daggers were missing.

In the trunk was a folded map of Delhi. She opened it and stared in horror. Four spots were marked in red with the name of a nightclub written beside it. The first letter of each name was highlighted in florescent yellow. The first letters of the four names were S, H, R and E.

At the bottom of the map were written the dates of six

successive new moons. Next to each date was a letter:

3 Aug – S

1 Sep – H

1 Oct – R

30 Oct – E

29 Nov – Y

29 Dec – A

Shreya. Harith's dead sister. The one who had been killed by an underage drunken driver returning from a nightclub.

The amavas killings were acts of revenge.

Minal shuddered and let out a soft wailing breath.

The next target would be a nightclub whose name began with 'Y'.

Minal's tear-blurred eyes scanned the map. Ten seconds later, they were staring in horror at a nightclub marked in pencil. The name of the nightclub was 'Yellow Mischief'.

Pencilled beside it was today's date: 29 November.

* * *

Minal's mind was made up. She began bundling Ruhee into her nightclothes and assembled an overnight bag. Ruhee would spend the night with her grandparents in the flat above, while Minal went in pursuit of Harith.

There was no other option. *She* had to save him.

He was not himself. He was not responsible for what he was doing. It was the army that had done this to him. Only *she* could stop him, bring him back.

He *would* respond to her. His love for his wife and daughter was deep, all encompassing, especially after Shreya had died.

That love would bring him back.

In any case, what alternative did she have? She couldn't let anyone into her secret. There was nobody else to do the job. If she didn't intervene, they would eventually catch him. They would hang him, if they did not kill him outright in an 'encounter'. Then, Ruhee would be fatherless, and she would lose her Harith.

She wasn't going let that happen.

Two hours later, armed against the night with a sweater, scarf and an overcoat, Minal was on the sidewalk near the nightclub, Yellow Mischief, oblivious to hostile glances from garishly painted women in short skirts and tight blouses, and studiously ignoring leery calls from single men. She had no idea what she would do next. It was too early for a killer to strike; the roads and the sidewalks had too much traffic.

She thought vaguely that she should find out where nightclub's patrons parked their cars, and strolled towards the nightclub's entrance, intending to ask the doorman about it. The bouncer beside him threw her such a glance that it halted her in her tracks. Sudden realisation seared her mind with shame – he had taken her for a hooker!

Tears stung her eyes as she turned and hurried away. Never had she felt so humiliated in her life.

As midnight approached, her feet were aching and her head spinning. The night chill had given her a stuffy nose. Her back and arms were stiff. But she stayed on, enduring both the chill and the openly leering or disgusted glances that came her way from the near-empty road.

In the meantime, she had located two spots where the nightclub's patrons were parking their cars. One was a shopping complex across the road, and the other was a wide street on the same side of the road as the nightclub, a few dozen yards from it.

The shopping complex was where the valet drivers at the nightclub were parking customers' cars. It was seeing more traffic, and there were a couple of attendants loitering around. It wasn't a good place for a killer to strike.

But the street beside the nightclub was deserted, and had few lights. That was where the attack would come. She began walking up and down the street slowly, relieved to be away from the humiliating looks she received on the main road. But she was all alone now.

The silence began to lull her. It had been an agonising day that had come after a sleepless night. She had no energy left.

Yet, she would confront Harith. Whatever it took. *She had to.* The street being deserted made that easier.

Suddenly, out of the corner of an eye, she sensed a movement. A dark figure shifted soundlessly against the darker shadows behind it. She whirled and peered down the street, her back to the main road. She could detect no movement.

She felt light-headed, dizzy. Was that Harith?

Hesitatingly, she took a few unsteady steps down the street, unaware that her light-headedness was making her walk as if she was inebriated. She could have been walking towards any one of the big cars parked down the street.

After a dozen steps, she halted. She was at least fifty yards from the main road.

A faint scraping sound reached her ears, but she knew not wherefrom it came. It was all so confusing in the deserted street. Sounds, it seemed, bounced off walls. She took a few more steps and halted again. She realised she was trembling.

'Harith?' she called softly, her unsteady voice questioning rather than calling.

No answer.

'Harith!' she called again, a little louder, a little more

uncertain. 'Is that you?'

Would he hear her voice and come to her? She hoped so. When the next sixty seconds had dragged by without drawing a response, she took a few more steps, going deeper into the street.

She was seventy or eighty yards from the main road now. Far enough from prying eyes. Here, she could talk to Harith unseen by anyone, prevail upon him. She would take him home.

She drew a photo of Ruhee from her pocket – her weapon to soften his heart. When she looked up, a man was standing in front of her. Three feet away. She had not heard him come.

Her heart almost stopped in fright. He was over six feet tall, dressed entirely in black and vaguely familiar. Covering his face was a ski mask. Only his eyes and lips could be seen through the holes of the mask, but they too had been darkened. Commando routine.

He was looking at her as if she were a stranger, as if he didn't recognise her. In his gloved left hand was a commando dagger, long and serrated.

'Harith!' she whispered. 'Come home.'

The flinty eyes she no longer recognised showed no recognition in return. So, she raised her hand and thrust it out at him, Ruhee's photo held face-up.

For a moment, the gaze flickered to the photo. Then he acted, swift as a striking snake.

In an instant, he was behind her. How he had moved from the front to behind her, she didn't know. His right hand came up from behind and clamped down on her mouth, squeezing her nostrils shut. She couldn't breathe, much less call his name.

She sensed his left arm, the one with the long serrated dagger, moving. Instinctively, she responded.

Her arms shot up to her chest, crossing each other just under her chin and forming an 'X' in front of her throat. She dug her

clenched fists into the hollows behind her jawbone just under her ears. Into the sides of her neck, she pressed them.

Now, the dagger couldn't reach her throat unless it cut through her arms, bone and all. Not easy even for a commando.

He let out a soft snarl, a feral one. His right hand released her mouth and grasped her right wrist painfully. Pain shot through her arm, and from her freed mouth came a piteous gasp of agony.

'Harith!' she wailed. 'It's me ... Harith!'

Meanwhile, his right hand had moved to her other wrist. It was about pull it away from her throat, when it froze.

Beside them, three yards away, was another tall figure dressed similarly in black. But this man wore no ski mask. In his unwavering left hand was a black pistol pointing at a spot just behind her head.

'Sludge!' the man called. 'That's my wife! Let go!'

Time froze for Minal. In that fraction of an instant, the world changed. Trying to kill her was not Harith! It was Sludge, Harith's buddy and fellow-commando.

Suddenly everything clicked into place, as Minal remembered. Sludge, six years younger than Harith, had been in love with Shreya. It had happened when Shreya had visited her brother in Imphal during her holidays, and had stayed there for a month. And, Sludge too was left-handed.

The rest of the puzzle also fell into place. Immediately after the first *amavas* murder, Harith must have seen the unmistakable signs of an ex-commando, and must have joined the police's investigating team. That was why he had been out every *amavas* night thereafter.

She, like a fool, had seen the signs only after the third *amavas*. And not knowing better, she had suspected her husband. She felt terribly foolish.

'Sludge!' Harith called again, cutting into her thoughts. His

voice was clear and firm. A commando captain's voice. 'That's my wife you are holding. Let go!' His voice softened. 'I promise, I won't shoot.'

Both men remained frozen.

'If you hurt her, Sludge,' Harith continued softly, 'you are dead. Buddy or no buddy. I have you covered. You have no choice. You know it.'

Minal found her voice.

'Sludge,' she croaked. 'It is me, Minal. You know me. I'll help you. Just as I did before. You are not yourself, Sludge. We'll all help you. What you are doing will not bring Shreya back. Let me go.'

She felt the man behind her tremble. His arms slackened. He gasped for air, and a shuddering sob rose in him.

He stepped back and stood limp, his arms hanging at his sides. The serrated dagger clattered to the road.

Freed, Minal darted to Harith, who swiftly pushed her behind himself, even as his pistol followed Sludge. The red laser dot from Harith's pistol danced on Sludge's ski mask.

Suddenly, the night erupted with the roar of gunshots. Minal had not noticed five policemen creep up silently behind Harith. She screamed.

'No!' Harith shouted in desperation. 'No! Sludge! Buddy!'

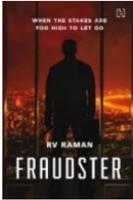
Too late. Sludge slumped to the ground, killed without a weapon in his hand. A serial killer, the police had decided, didn't deserve a trial.

Another encounter was over.

Stories by RV Raman

Novels

FRAUDSTER

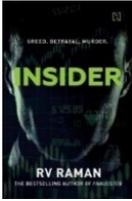


There are people who will do anything to silence the ones who come in their way, those who will stop at nothing, including murder ...

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A DOYEN OF CORPORATE INDIA falls to his death from his south Bombay flat...
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INSIDER



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Saboteur is the third novel in RV Raman's corporate thriller series that explores white-collar crime in India.

Short Stories

AMAVAS

GULSHAN PANDEY

UNWITTING ACCOMPLICE

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