

The Last Monsoon at Calcutta House

(inspired by Agatha Christie's fair-play clueing, P. D. James's psychological depth, and Satyajit Ray's meticulous atmospherics)

I arrived at Calcutta House the evening the rain decided to pulverize the city.

The mansion stood at the far end of Ballygunge Place, a colonial relic with Corinthian columns that had once been alabaster and were now the color of nicotine. Strangler figs gnawed at the balustrades. The brass nameplate—Calcutta House—had the hauteur of an aristocrat forced to share a table with clerks. I came because Aniruddh Basu had asked me to authenticate a cache of nineteenth-century letters rumored to be from a poet whose name still radiates cachet in academia. As a forensic linguist, I specialize in the provenance of words—syntax as fingerprints, commas as confession. I seldom decline a puzzle.

The caretaker, Jiban, opened the door without preamble. He was reticent in the way of old retainers who have watched families curdle and survive. Water drummed on the slanted glass of the verandah. Inside, the air smelled of damp roses and mothballs.

“Madam, guests already here,” he said.

“Sahib waiting in study.”

In the drawing room, the others were arranged like pieces in a problem set. Tuhina Bose reclined nearest the fireplace—a socialite with phosphorescent bangles and an ostensible nonchalance that looked rehearsed. Opposite her sat Ronit Sen, an industrialist whose jaw looked chiseled by accountants: nothing superfluous, everything deductible. Perched on a faded velvet chair was Mrinal Kundu—laconic, thin as a fountain pen, Aniruddh’s lawyer. Their eyes cataloged me as one more variable.

At the mantle, in silhouette against a painting of a stormy Hooghly, stood Aniruddh himself. He was in his fifties, handsome in a lugubrious way, a man whose melancholy had acquired the chic of an accessory. He greeted me with a clammy enthusiasm that felt less like warmth and more like apprehension.

“Avni,” he said, pronouncing it with a cultured softness that skimmed the consonants. “Your reputation precedes you. You will vindicate me.”

“Vindicate you from what?” I asked.

“From the city’s inveterate rumor mill,” Tuhina interposed, her voice sugared with derision. “He thinks the letters will resurrect his reputation.”

Ronit’s laugh was truculent. “One doesn’t resurrect with ephemera. One negotiates.”

Mrinal glanced at his watch with performative boredom. “If we could proceed to the testamentary matter—I do have filings in the morning.”

Aniruddh ignored them with the ostensible gravity of a man living for one last performance. “We’ll address the will after dinner,” he said. “But first, I want Avni to see the letters.”

He led me into his study: a room of dark teak, a panoply of glass-fronted bookcases, a desk arranged with perfunctory symmetry. A grandfather clock in the corner ticked with the obstinacy of a witness. The rain, amplified by the skylight, threshed at the roof. He produced a tin box lined with velvet, its key dangling from an anachronistic chain. Inside lay the letters—thick paper bloomed with sepia ink, long loops, em-dashes like the slow pulses of a heart. I felt the old fever of professional curiosity. I lifted one with my left

hand without thinking; the ink's iron gall scent was faint but intact—an accretion of decades.

“Authentic?” he asked, too quickly.

“Inchoate opinion,” I said. “But the diction isn't ersatz. There's a cadence I recognize. I need time, a good light, quiet.”

“You'll have all three.” He locked the box again, the tiny key clicking with an oddly theatrical crispness.

At dinner, lightning illuminated the dining room with pagan zeal. Jiban served moong dal and fish curry with the watchful tact of a man who understood that appetite is a form of surveillance. Conversation was desultory until Aniruddh put down his spoon and declared, almost casually, “I've decided to amend the will. Calcutta House will become a public trust—an archive and school for letters. The rest, after legacies, goes to the trust.”

A silence fell that wasn't awe.

Tuhina's smile became porcelain. "Darling, philanthropy is adorable when one has surplus. You don't."

Ronit scraped his chair back. "Our consortium negotiated renovations on the assumption of a sale. You cannot capriciously divert assets."

Mrinal's voice was low. "We must observe procedure. Any reallocation triggers statutory obligations."

Aniruddh's eyes found mine, seeking something—absolution, perhaps, or an ally. I looked away. Outside, thunder detonated like artillery.

The generator failed at ten. The house sank into a chiaroscuro of candles. We retreated to our rooms—mine at the end of a corridor that smelled of mildew and memory. Rain strafed the shutter like a reprimand. Sleep, that perfidious ally, eluded me. At some point I

rose, a candle in one hand and a notebook in the other, compulsion tugging me back to the letters.

The corridor was a nave of shifting shadows. I passed the study; its door was closed. Voices murmured beyond it—male, then female. The sussuration of an argument, then a perfunctory goodbye. A minute later, a soft clink—the sound of porcelain against wood. I hesitated, rationalized my curiosity as professional diligence, and moved on.

By morning, the city had become an archipelago of water. The gate was a lake; the trees had leaned into a supplicatory bow. Jiban's face found us at breakfast with catastrophic news: "Sahib not answering. Study locked from inside. No response."

We assembled at the study door as if to pay homage. Mrinal knocked with officious knuckles. "Aniruddh?" No answer. The antique keyhole gaped like a grim eye. Jiban

fetches a skeleton key and tries, but the inner key obstructs.

“Push the key out and catch it on paper,” I suggested. It is a common locked-room expedient. We slid an envelope beneath the door, jiggled a hairpin, heard the inner key drop with a muffled resignation. When the outer key turned, the door yielded.

Aniruddh sat at his desk, head lolling at an unnatural angle, eyes glazed to a translucent film. The teacup at his right hand wore a brownish halo; the saucer was an eclipse. On the blotter lay a single page of writing in a slanted hand—Bengali, a short note, a line from a poem, a valediction. The window latches were fastened; the rug was undisturbed. A locked-room tableau, tidy as a lie.

Tuhina’s scream fractured into sobbing. Ronit’s mouth compressed into something resembling pity, or indigestion. Mrinal moved

with measured calm, checking wrist, throat, and, finding nothing that resembled life, pronounced in a courtroom voice, “We must notify the police and not touch anything.”

“Poison,” Jiban said hoarsely, pointing with shaking finger at the cup. “Smell.” A bitter, medicinal scent rose—narcotic, insidious.

Detective Inspector Arindam Dutta arrived with the rain still officiating outside. He was neat, trim, with a stare like a ledger. He listened to our disjointed accounts with a patience that felt strategic. His questions were laconic: who last saw the deceased, whether he had enemies, who had access to the study, who slept where, what time the generator failed, whether anyone had been ill, who drank tea and how.

“I brewed tea at ten,” Jiban said. “Same for everyone. But sahib likes extra cardamom. I took to study later. He said leave. Door closed.”

“You saw him alive then?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You carried the tray back?”

“No, sir. He kept cup. I brought kettle back.”

Dutta nodded, examined the cup, held it under his nose without theatricality, and ordered photographs. He eyed the blotter with its cryptic line, then turned to me.

“You’re the linguist.”

“By misfortune, yes.”

“What does the note say?”

I translated neutrally. “‘What remains is rain and silence; forgive the intrusive footnotes of my life.’ Then a signature.”

“Suicide?” Ronit said with visible relief, accounting for reputational liabilities.

“Perhaps,” Dutta said. “But suicide notes have a curious habit of telling us more about authorship than despair.”

He crouched beside the rug, ran a finger along the skirting. “No damp footprints. Windows locked from within, key inside, no signs of struggle. If it is murder, we are dealing with competence. Competence is rare and therefore personal.”

He sent the cup for toxicology and sealed the room. We were corralled in the drawing room, a sorry congregation. Dutta began the kind of interrogation that divests people of pretense by increments.

Ronit said he had retired early with a migraine induced by balance sheets and the barometer. Tuhina professed insomnia and then, under the sustained tide of Dutta’s gaze, amended her story: she had gone to “fetch a shawl” from the landing and had heard voices in the study — male, then male again. Mrinal admitted he had discussed procedural language with Aniruddh after dinner. “He was resolute but not suicidal,” he said

clinically. “We disagreed, but on jurisprudential grounds.”

“And you?” Dutta asked me.

“I read, I wrote notes, I wandered a bit. I heard a porcelain clink near the study. It could have been anything.”

“Left-handed or right-handed?” he asked abruptly.

“Left,” I said, surprised.

He made a notation as if I had confirmed a theorem.

By late afternoon, the report returned: aconitine, a pernicious alkaloid, in the residue of the tea. Aconite kills with an almost literary malice—tingling, arrhythmia, respiratory collapse, a gradual smudging of the boundary between body and silence. Dutta’s eyebrow ascended by half a millimeter. “Not datura in the garden, then. Aconite suggests procurement. Someone planned.”

He brought the note to me again. “Humor me. Style?”

I read it slowly. There it was: a palpable incongruity. The line quoted from the poem contained a deliberate archaism—but the postposition was wrong, a calque that Bengali purists avoid. The comma before the conjunction was startlingly Anglo. The em-dash, long and elegant, had the typographic audacity of academia.

“Not a native phrasing,” I said, aware of the heat on my face. “At least not one writing under duress. It feels... curated.”

“Curated,” he repeated. “A choice word.”

Tuhina exhaled in relief. “So a forgery! Whoever wrote it wanted it to sound anguished. Mrinal?” She smiled an apologetic simulacrum. “Your legalese sometimes infects your letters. He is very ‘therefore’ and ‘whereas,’ Inspector.”

Mrinal's mouth twitched. "And you, Tuhina, are very 'darling' and 'absolutely.' Everyone has a lexicon. That proves nothing."

Dutta leafed through the page. "Ink looks recent. Nib width steady. No hesitation strokes. Whoever wrote it had time."

"In a suicide," Ronit said, "time is not uncommon."

"In murder," Dutta replied mildly, "time is curated."

The hours accumulated like damp. Dutta searched rooms with methodical discretion. From Ronit's leather bag emerged a contract draft with clauses sharp enough to cut. From Tuhina's vanity case came ampoules of cosmetic toxins—botulinum, hyaluronic—nothing akin to aconite. Mrinal's attaché contained codicils, neatly ribboned; his pen, an old black nib polished by habit. Jiban's quarters were impeccable in their paucity.

In my room, Dutta found notebooks, a portable magnifier, a loupe for ink inspection, and, embarrassingly, a small packet of dried monkshood roots wrapped in newspaper — aconite — labeled in cursive with an apothecary's flourish. My stomach dropped like a misfired elevator.

"For research," I said with flustered precision. "I am studying the pharmacological imagery in nineteenth-century poetry — the recurrent motif of toxic florals. The packet is sealed."

He weighed it in his palm, didn't open it, didn't smirk. "Of course. Scholars and their props."

If guilt has an odor, it is metallic.

Evening convened with its damp officiants. Dutta called us again. His voice had changed timbre — it carried a denouement's composure. "Locked-room puzzles have a reputation for legerdemain," he said. "Most

are solved with air, keys, or indolence. This one is simpler. Consider sequences.”

He counted on his fingers, an accountant of doom. “Ten o’clock: generator fails, house in low light. Ten-fifteen: tea delivered. After dinner, Mrinal speaks with the deceased—witnessed by two. Later, voices again—witnessed by one. Around eleven: a clink—witnessed by another. Morning: locked door, key inside, windows latched. Poison in tea—aconitine. Suicide note in a hand that apes Bengali lyricism but stumbles on a postposition and indulges an Oxford comma. Now: who has motive? Many. Who has means? All. Who has style? That is rarer.”

He looked at Ronit. “Your motive is fiduciary. Yet aconite is not an industrial man’s signature; and you, sir, are impatient. Poison is patient.”

He turned to Tuhina. “You thrive on optics. Murder is catastrophic optics. Also, your

Bangla is fluent; you wouldn't misuse that postposition. You would misplace adjectives, not particles."

He faced Mrinal. "Your pen is impeccable; you would never allow so flamboyant an em-dash. Also, your visit after dinner is no more than a red herring. You kill with clauses, not alkaloids."

Then his gaze settled on me, and the room underwent a curious modulation, as if the air had chosen sides. "Dr. Avni Kapoor," he said with a civility that flensed. "You are left-handed. The ink smear on the lower left margin aligns with a leftward drag. You used the blotter—but the pattern betrays a southpaw's angle. You translate Bangla with elegance but are not a native user of its postpositions; your occasional calques are charming in essays, lethal on death notes. You favor the Oxford comma—I found three in

your marginalia. And you own, for research, a packet of monkshood.”

Silence poured itself into the room and took the shape of judgment.

“Inspector,” I began, keeping my voice equable, “circumstance is not culpability. I did not brew the tea.”

“No,” he said. “But you did not need to. The kettle returned with water, yes? Aconite dissolves. The caretaker’s routine allows an interval. You, whose room is opposite the kitchen stair, had opportunity. You wandered at night. A porcelain clink—perhaps the cup settling after a swirl.”

I felt the peculiar composure that arrives when evasion becomes untenable. There is a point in every argument where rhetoric is merely a filigree over a verdict.

“Why would I kill him?” I asked softly.

“Motive is sometimes an answer we invent to reassure ourselves that actions are explicable,” Dutta said. “But we do have a plausible one. Your mentor, Professor Samar Srivastava, wrote an incendiary article last year accusing Mr. Basu of plagiarizing curatorial notes—appropriating students’ translations, their glossaries—yes? The lawsuit that followed bankrupted your mentor and, according to public notes, precipitated his cardiac arrest.”

I closed my eyes. Rain excavated the gutters with a furious persistence.

Dutta’s voice gentled, which is a cruelty of its own. “You agreed to authenticate letters from a poet you venerate, for a man you revile. If you authenticated them—imagine the cachet Mr. Basu would acquire. If you declared them inauthentic—imagine the elegiac essay you could write about forgery and hubris. Either way, he was a fulcrum in your narrative. But

revenge often chooses efficiency. Poison does not prevaricate.”

Tuhina whispered, “My God,” as if astonishment were philanthropic.

Ronit, suddenly solicitous, said, “Surely we need more than commas.”

Mrinal, clinician of causality, interjected, “The locked door?”

Dutta smiled without mirth. “Ah, yes. Our theater trick. The key was inside, yes, but the lock is of the sort that permits the key to be dropped on a string through the keyhole, turned from outside, then tugged back under the door by thread, to rest near the desk. The envelope you slid supplied the runway. The thread dissolves in water or can be reeled in later and burned—our house provides both water and candles.”

He turned to Jiban. “You saw anything?”

Jiban's face worked. "I am small man, sir. I see and I don't see. But last night, when madam went for water, I saw shadow at the study—candle light like a halo. A hand put paper under the door. Later, I find small burn marks on tray in pantry."

I had underestimated him. The humble witness. The one mystery writers deploy as furniture until he decides to speak.

"Avni," Dutta said, forgoing the courtesy of my title now, "you count punctuation with forensic zeal. Words are your fingerprints. You wrote the note, after he was dead or dying. You wanted us to suspect a cultivated Bengali, so you chose a poem. But you could not resist curating it with your own habits. That is the hubris of experts. We believe our expertise can obfuscate our signature. In fact, it illumines it."

I found myself smiling. It was involuntary, the musculature's concession to relief.

Confession is a kind of grammar—you move from dependent clauses of justification to the main clause of truth.

“He was not dying yet,” I said, and Tuhina choked on air. “I went in after the last argument—Mrinal had left, Ronit had hovered, Tuhina had lingered. I waited on the landing, candle guttering. When silence became contiguous, I entered. He was fatigued, pulse fidgeting, complaining of a ‘needle in the chest.’ That would be the aconite. He asked about the letters; he wanted reassurance. I told him they were authentic. They are. I think he bought them in good faith. That almost deterred me.”

“Almost,” Dutta said, not unkindly.

“I told him a line to write. He wrote it the way I said it, and I placed the em-dash, because he never used them well. Then I took the paper and wrote the valediction myself, trying to imitate his hand. He protested mildly, the

way vain men do when improved upon. He reached for his cup; I let him. I suppose this is what culpability looks like when it tries to pass for editorial zeal.”

“Why?” Dutta asked again, and the word was less a demand than a benediction.

“Because plagiarism is a pernicious theft,” I said. “It steals not just words but the hours that made them. Samar died believing he had failed to defend the provenance of his own mind. Aniruddh’s gallery parties were a simulacrum of merit. He practiced a genteel predation. I thought the city would be marginally more honest without him.”

Ronit made a noise that could have been a laugh or a cough. “Honesty,” he said, “is bad for business.”

Dutta nodded to the constables waiting in the corridor. “Business will survive your ideals, Mr. Sen. It tends to.” He turned back to me.

“You are erudite, meticulous, and, until yesterday, law-abiding. I have no pleasure in this.”

“I know,” I said. “Neither do I.”

I looked past him, through the rain-pocked window, to the fevered world beyond.

Ballygunge Place had become an estuary; the banyans wore garlands of debris. Calcutta House stood as it always had—magnificent, mendacious, melancholy. The letters waited in their velvet coffin for a future that would not include the man who had gathered them.

“Take care of the archive,” I told Mrinal, and he inclined his head, the concession of a man who will do the correct thing when it is convenient.

As they led me away, Jiban pressed a folded paper into Dutta’s hand. “From sahib’s drawer,” he said. “For madam—if allowed.”

Dutta glanced at it and passed it to me, a small mercy.

It was a receipt, crinkled, for a donation Aniruddh had made the previous week to a scholarship in Professor Srivastava's name. The amount was not performative; it was consequential. My breath hiccuped into a silent cry. Motives, like postpositions, can be treacherous.

"What remains is rain and silence," I had made him write. The line returned to me as judgment and absolution, a paradox I could not unwind. Outside, the monsoon redoubled its catechism. Inside, footsteps practiced their bureaucratic rhythm. The house watched with the implacable composure of architecture that has survived better stories.

Inspector Dutta paused at the threshold. "For what it's worth," he said, "the letters will go to the trust. The city is a palimpsest; we add,

we erase, we add again. Someone must mind the margins.”

I nodded. Words — those loyal conspirators — rose to the tongue and stood down. When guilt colonizes language, silence is the only precise instrument.

In the police jeep, the seats were damp, the air vegetal. The constable hummed a film song almost apologetically. The siren remained decorously off; there was no hurry now.

Through the sluicing windshield, Calcutta House receded into an ink wash. I imagined the archive it would become — the careful shelving, the soft pencil notes, the tedium of catalogues. I imagined students opening the tin box, their fingers trembling over artifacts that outlived us all.

If there is any consolation in denouement, it is the knowledge that narratives absorb their antagonists, metabolize them into footnotes. I had wanted to be a footnote in a larger text.

Instead, I had become a cautionary example: an annotation that mistook itself for authorship.

The jeep turned onto a road newly made of water. I watched a paper boat—handmade, obstinate—tilt, right itself, and continue. Its persistence felt absurd and exemplary. Some things refuse to drown even when they should. Some things drown even when they shouldn't. The grammar of weather is merciless.

I thought of Samar, of em-dashes, of Oxford commas, of monkshood and its blue hooded petals, of all our dangerous elegances. I thought, too, of Aniruddh, who, in the last ten minutes of his life, had tried to tidy the margins.

The city held its breath, then exhaled rain. Somewhere a school bell rang—diffuse, implausible in the storm. I closed my eyes and counted the beats like a metronome. It is how

linguists pray: syllables, then silence, then the sentence the world insists on writing anyway.

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- Kinjal ma'am