

“Here, take this onion and put it in your pocket.”

“Do I need to cut it first?”

Onions are apparently recommended for trouser pockets in Vidarbha. In summer the average daily temperature hits 44 degrees Celsius by mid-day. In Chandrapur, where Naxalites were fighting a guerrilla war against the government, it would hover around the late 40s. Rookie police trainees or officers that fell afoul of the government and got transferred here as punishment were welcomed with onions, juicy and tart from the markets of Nashik.

“The onion absorbs the heat from your body if you keep it in your pocket. But if you still faint, we can use it to revive you. Or if you get a nosebleed, you can crack it open and hold it under your nose to absorb the blood.”

I stood staring at my escort as he said it, waiting for a smirk to break out. He did not smile, and continued to hold his hand out. The air of gravity was further confirmed by the fact that he was standing in the area past the security gate telling me this. Everyone was looking at us, without looking directly, rather unusual in a culture that does not forbid staring. The man in the gently stained safari suit had nodded past the police and the metal detectors with a cricket-ball sized purple onion instead of a placard with my name on it. My first image of him was like that of a child standing with all five fingers stretched out, while policemen, like his minion babysitters, stood around with their heads bowed. For the first time in my life, I introduced myself with the words, “Do I need to cut it first?”

“No.”

“Vitthalrao?” I asked

“Yes, sir is waiting at the office, please come.”

Vitthal Rao Malewar worked for Kranti Patil. Jatin, my friend from Berkeley, was Kranti’s only nephew, and he had called Vitthal himself and told him to pick me up and take me to Kranti. He was a small man in his late 30s, and wore a lot less gold than I had thought would be apt for a political henchman. After he handed me the onion, he took a step back and gestured to someone behind me towards the baggage claim.

I did not have to pick up my bag, because what seemed like a police constable stepped forth kindly just as I put my hand out towards a bag. “Any more bags, sir?”

I tightened my shoulders slightly and went boldly to the exit. I walked on with an air of impending doom as the contamination of air-conditioned air slowly increased as I approached the door. The moment I went past the exit-door air cushion, something else came my way before the heat did. A large man in a white shirt and one hand behind him took a brisk step towards me, and right behind him two others almost in unison leapt in.

All three of them had their faces covered with a large handkerchiefs from right below their eyes, and thin towels turbaning their heads. I instinctively stopped.

“Taxi?”

“Hotel?” Said the one of the guys behind him.

“Ay,” said a voice from behind me. All three looked spotted something behind me. Almost in an instant, they had stepped away sheepishly, making the connection between me and a policeman carrying my suitcase.

“They look like terrorists, but it’s just the heat,” said Vitthal. “But some of them really are.”

Are what? Terrorists? In Nagpur? Doing what? Shouldn’t they be someplace with more important people to terrorize, such as Mumbai or Delhi? That’s the kind of statement you are never certain on how to react to. Should I look quizzical, or concerned, or was it better to assert in agreement, “yes yes, terrorists of course” and if so, would he ask, “Ah, so you know?” I knew the thing not to do was to look doubtful and invite, “What? You don’t believe me?”

Because frankly I did not. “No, there are no terrorists in Nagpur. If there are, there certainly isn’t statistically significant evidence that there are more here than elsewhere in the country. A random sampling of people from this street would evidence that the head covers are ubiquitous. They probably all have onions too, though the onions should have no immediate correlation with terror. Your assertion is purely one driven by the right-wing posturing of your fascist party,” I said to myself.

I smiled meekly.

The streets were uncannily wide. Nagpur was bang in the center of India, and besides being a major cargo hub, it was a politically sensitive location. It was the seat of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the parent organization of the entire right wing Hindu movement in the country, and was a hotbed of activity for separate state demands from amongst centrist parties. Here, they were asking for a separate state of Vidarbha, broken away from Maharashtra, and its evil capital city of Mumbai which stole Nagpur’s electricity and corrupted her politicians. But right now, the statehood issue was secondary. We were in the middle of a horrific farm crisis. Suicides were being reported daily, and farmer relief had become the main issue of discussion at every state political meeting.

I was here on a mission from California. Kranti Patil, one of the most influential politicians in Vidarbha, was pushing for a new scheme. Computer aided learning for farmers’ children in farm crisis areas. I was to do a feasibility study of the project.

“When you go to Chandrapur tomorrow, you will see that they are all wearing turbans. If you see someone without one, it’s a journalist.” He paused for a moment. “That is our contribution to Indian media.”

It was true. The farmer crisis has given India news its first consistent thread of rural stories in years. Even before I arrived here, a friend of mine from the Washington Post had agreed to do a story on this initiative, regardless of whether my feasibility study figured it was bunk. “Technology to solve farm crisis?” I liked the idea of a question-mark in a headline. The surest defense against libel.

* * *

The drive into Kranti’s home was less impressive than I had expected. Frankly, I was expecting at least a gate.

Kranti lived in a large apartment on the ground floor of an apartment complex that his family had been in for over 20 years. The entrance was a plain narrow driveway, and it wasn’t until the car had made it past the entry area that the consciousness of being someplace ‘special’ came through. There were three policemen in the driveway, all seated in one neat row along a small wall, resting .303 bore rifles against their knees. One younger looking cop stood with an automatic gun slung over his shoulder. One row of plastic chairs lined the wall along the driveway from the entrance till the door of a ground floor apartment at the extreme end of the building. There were about 20 men waiting in the driveway. The apartment was conveniently secluded to the corner of the building in a way such that a good part of the building could be ‘usurped’ for the party’s activities without the explicit interruption of anyone’s daily inertia. Schoolboys played cricket at one side of the chairs, peacefully at ease with their self-contained audience, like the birds that pecked the scraps off gaping crocodiles on National Geographic. Occasionally the ball strayed towards the policemen who leaned over from their seats to pass it back, letting their rifles bend over 45 degrees to a cozy gun salute squarely aimed at the boys as they picked up the ball.

Some men sat on the plastic chairs, but most stood in gently buzzing huddles around the chairs. Almost all of them wore white. There was a solemnity to the men that seemed funnily out of place. Most of the men looked at least slightly thuggish, but momentarily well-kept, somewhat like slacker students bathed and lined up for a post-reformation scene in a poignant finishing school movie. On the wall outside the house were pictures of two founder members of the political party, both dusty but garlanded. Despite the crowd, there wasn’t the bluster of a party, nor the silence of a disciplined wait. There were just a number of random whispers interspersed through the minor sea of white. For anyone who has known a similar image in India, the *déjà vu* is unmistakable between this and the other likely setting of a gang of white-dressed men standing barefoot and talking in whispers. Kranti’s court had the eerie likeness of an Indian funeral home with men standing outside apparently discussing the guest of honor.

Vitthal parked the car taking up half the cricket pitch of the boys, who readjusted quickly but not without a stare. I got off and walked behind him towards the apartment door. There was instant second-order recognition here too, but here they were looks of acknowledgement than looks of awe that followed me through the airport. It wasn't so much who I was, than the fact that Sonny Corleone himself had been sent to pick me up at the airport.

Like carriers of backstage VIP passes, we walked straight into the people, and it was they who stood aside for our path to continue. As the white kurtas moved away, the door appeared. Unlike at the backstage, we had to stop, and take our shoes off. There was a huge clutter of shoes, sandals, slippers at the marble entrance into the house, such that you could just about get a foot on the marble floor to leap into the house. As I stepped into the house, there was nobody there I could see, but the eerie feeling of people watching me, swishing past doors, and cooking meals for me in the background somewhere. Some of them may have been women.

The main hall was unusually designed. The furniture seemed quixotically placed at unsystematic spots, and the room itself had an unusual L-shaped structure. As you entered past the door, there was about ten feet of nothing, just open space with no furniture, followed by three three sofas arranged in a U-shape. One was a large 4-seater sofa with its back towards the entrance of the house, and two sofas on its flanks were smaller two-seaters. Exactly opposite the larger sofa was a large wooden sofa-cum-swing hanging from the ceiling. The swing was centered exactly in front of the door, such that everyone who came through stood uncomfortably in front of it.

Behind the swing, there was a dining table vertically laid out with eight chairs around it. On the left wall, as one entered, was a large flat screen television. It struck me as rather unusual for an Indian living room, where furniture is typically arranged around a television with the aim of maximizing social utility. Here, the TV seemed to be in viewing comfort of only two spots – the swing, and the two-seater sofa immediately to the left of the swing. With some neck-craning from outside the door, one could get an askance view of the screen, but it would have been hard to keep constant eye contact. On the wall, there were two large portraits of Kranti with the prime minister, and with the current party president, and a number of pictures of Kranti with various major political leaders, though only ones from his party, and only ones who were above him in the party hierarchy.

Vitthal on the sofa to the left of the entrance, with the flatscreen behind him, and pretty much pointed at where I ought to sit, exactly across from him. As I sat, it became clear that the ten feet of space between the large sofa to my left and the door further out was the standing galley for the audience, and the swing was the screen. This was where Kranti sat. Even in his absence, like Lord Ram's slippers on the throne of Ayodhya, this was a revered space, its stillness never disturbed except when the master swayed on it.

Another man, came and sat down with a large thud right next to Vitthal, almost too close for a two-seater sofa. This was Ramoji, Kranti's personal assistant. I realized quickly that

the availability of other space in the room did not deter the equilibrium of where people were supposed to be. Kranti stayed at the swing, his trusted men always sat to his left. His audience sat on the four-seater, when consequential, and stood behind it all the way back to the door, when not. To his left, I guessed, was the sofa that was excluded from business. It was the space for his friends, for the people who were allowed to watch the flat screen in front of them and be distracted from the proceedings of the court.

I noticed myself gently moving to the edge of the seat, and bending forward slightly to speak with Vitthal, as though I deliberately did not want to make myself too comfortable on the sofa. Frankly, I wasn't sure what sitting to the left of Kranti meant – whether it made me closer or more important than the ones who sat right across from him. I realized later that one was true – I was probably less threatening. Petitioners always sat right opposite, keeping an adequate gap between themselves and Kranti. How far back in the sofa you sat, or how close you wandered to the edge was a factor of the extent to which you felt servility to Kranti was important. In time I would realize that if you were moved from one seating position to another, that definitely meant something. Moving up is always something that happened through Kranti – he asked you to come sit next to him. Moving down was something that you figured out for yourself and self-imposed willingly. I was Jatin's friend, by that association, I had started off in the inner circle.

“Sir has gone for campaigning,” said Vitthal. He had an unusual tone to him. It was neither warm nor distant. He sounded like he would do whatever was needed for me, but that moment it also felt as though he would not think twice about throwing my bags on the street. There was a sinister efficiency to him – his economical brisk walk, his repeated acknowledgement nods, his tight cut safari suit, his easy slip-off shoes. He had an uncanny ability to sit in one place, be doing absolutely nothing, and look neither fidgety nor bored. Chaperoning me was a cut-rate assignment for him, and he made no effort to mask that. Without explicitly giving me anything to complain about, he kept the equation deliberately cold.

“Is this your first time here?” said Ramoji. He seemed to have a friendlier disposition than Vitthal. I nodded with an acquiescent grin and moved myself closer to the edge of the sofa.

“The sofa you are sitting on is the one which Kampani sat on when he made his famous offer to Madam. Sir bought it as a souvenir.”

It took me a moment to register. I was expecting the conversation to go in the direction of weather-related pleasantries, but this had taken an unusual turn.

‘Madam’ headed a major political party in the country. At first, people weren't sure if she could stand her ground against the vultures of Delhi politics, she was after all a no more than a beautiful consort to a political heavy without so much as a reputation for tantrums. When he died, she was a seemingly unwilling heir to a legacy that could not stand tall without the dynasty.

I had heard this story from Jatin. Kampani was at the time one of the richest men in the country and a political associate of one of Madam's political rivals. Kampani had taken a 30-minute meeting slot with Madam at her office in Delhi. There, he had made her an offer relating to the upcoming election.

Kampani proposed roughly this. Madam's party would stand down from demanding the prime's position in the government, and support the bid of Kampani's political associate for it instead. In return, Kampani would personally arrange for Rs. 10,000 crores for her.

Madam, charming and unflappable did not answer, but immediately smiled sweetly and said, "Excuse me please" and taking his permission walked into the room inside. Kampani sat in her sofa quadrangle on this sofa, perhaps a lot farther back and waited for her to emerge with a counter offer. Mr. Menon, Madam's secretary emerged after five minutes and said, "Thank you sir. Your time is over."

Kampani never met Madam again, and before the year was over, his company had been split in two following a bizarre set of coincidences. His own brother denounced him publicly and sold off half his stake in the industry. Rumors of a scandalous affair started doing uncomfortable rounds of social circles and flash mobs started a campaign of stoning Kampani's offices for collusions with imperialist powers.

"You know that story, don't you?" He said with a bland twinkle in his eye. I could imagine Vitthal was a very efficient henchman. Now that it had been pointed out to me that my seating here was not accidental, I was beginning to wonder whether there was anything specific in store for me, or whether this was just a bit of cheery hazing by Vitthal and Ramoji of the newbie in their midst. Thankfully, I was too well aware of my inconsequential status.

* * *

I had been introduced to Kranti during a trip he made to the US. Back in the old days, Indian politicians rarely went to the US. Nowadays even the communist party members were welcome. The San Francisco Bay Area became a particularly important hub for visitors. A huge population of wealthy formerly middle-class Indians with a range of political beliefs resided there. Practically any political or economic ideologue could find a base of supporters here. Kranti belonged to the best subscribed political, religious, and economic faction. Even without any 'official' parliamentary post, Kranti was a widely recognized politician and most of his public appearances went over-subscribed. Besides the fund-raising, Kranti also visited to meet his favourite nephew, Jatin, my roommate.

I first saw Kranti in person at a meeting organized by an organization of Indian technology entrepreneurs which ran a venture funding group to invest in new promising ventures primarily in the Silicon Valley, but with a strong Indian component. As the organization grew in size, so did the total investment of Indian expatriates into India, and consequently grew their political influence. Kranti had been invited for a two day

conference called The Great India Technology Symposium (T-GITS) where he was invited as keynote speaker to discuss the topic 'India Rising.'

Kranti was a fantastic speaker. He made a 30-minute speech, impromptu, which summarized the title of his talk in several different ways without once making the audience feel bored. I realized midway through the talk that his genius was not in his ability to mask the inanity of his talk, but in his brilliant ploy of using the dias as a forum for baring his soul. Human rights groups had railed against him in the past for being a crass and insidious ruffian who had used an ideological card to create a divisive political environment in Maharashtra. But this talk was one of a patriot, to who the dream of a resurgent India superseded ideology, caste, religion, and the environment. This was no brute from the hinterland who sent out men with sticks to lean on his rivals, this was a man in a crisp Armani who looked straight out of the First Class lounge for British Airways. The Valley Indians loved him, and informal networks of political cronies ran their hats around through referrals to people who bought the right to walk into Kranti's home anytime they wished and seat themselves right here on the two-seater sofa in front of the flatscreen TV.

I did not know who Jatin's uncle was when we found each other through the campus referral system. After I eventually found out, a thing or two changed. I was a bit more careful about voicing my political opinions in his presence. I rarely went out of the way to make my real political opinions known, even though we were equally well aware of his knowledge of my political beliefs. His, on the other hand, I was not sure I entirely understood. In fact, after meeting Kranti, I wasn't sure I knew where he stood either.

Jatin took me to meet Kranti right after the talk, and introduced me as his roommate and close friend. He went on to mention that I had worked for the media in India, and that I was currently an 'expert' on computer use in rural areas. I was completely dumbstruck. When Jatin turned to me to tell him more about my work, I stood gaping like I was about to have a heart attack. My voice had dried out completely in a single instant. I did not even have a confrontational question for him or anything such, I had apparently frozen out of sheer awe. As a range of emotions featuring anger and embarrassment and a sudden terrific need to urinate went through me, I stood by letting Jatin continue my introduction, certain that if I opened my mouth now, it would be mainly to choke.

I somehow managed to start talking about my work on technology adoption. I had expected Kranti to be defensive, I could be a subversive out to embarrass him. I was from Berkeley, and not an MBA student like his nephew. Instead, he listened with perfect attention and eye contact, even as a few rich expats stood behind us in impatient wait. "Come to Vidarbha," he said. I had never heard Vidarbha used as a descriptor for a place before in the active voice. "We are starting a project to give computers in schools. We need experts like you to work with us," he paused. "When I say we, I mean India."

He then turned to Jatin and said in Marathi, "Let me know when he is coming next." And he gave me a business card with just his name and a phone number.

Months later, he actually took the call, and remembered me by name. The phone conversation was very abrupt, but I was given the date. Here I was at the edge of the sofa.

* * *

Kranti was out campaigning for a candidate up for election from the constituency I was to visit tomorrow. I frankly did not think it was terribly rude of him not to be there when I showed up. I was so amazed at his willingness to even meet me that I was nervous enough to be satisfied even if he never showed up. In fact, that way I could turn around and just go back to Bangalore claiming to have tried and failed.

The tension of sitting there grew towards an unknown crescendo. I did not know, nor had the courage of asking when Kranti would come. Vitthal sat motionless across me saying nothing, Ramoji sat equally still. I would assume that around election time, they would be busy enough doing something or at least tending to their master enough to not be sitting around. I waited for some conversation to break out involving Kranti's schedule, but nothing happened. I waited for the two of them to get up and leave.

The buzz of people standing outside remained in the same state of still life. The buffer of the door into the house kept me on the side of privilege, away from the eyes that occasionally stole a glance at me to figure out who I may be.

I was told then that it was unclear when Kranti was expected back. No further instructions were given to me. I was told that he had been on the road since 6 AM, when he drove out 70 km. to speak at a public meeting. I did not ask Ramoji where this information had come from and I certainly was not about to ask him to call Kranti and tell him that the graduate student who does computer stuff was waiting for him.

Campaigning is when the Indian politician really comes to life. Regardless of what the criticisms of Indian democracy are, few could claim that the typical politician could sit by during the campaign and assume that god, cash, or the threat of violence would take him or her through. No candidate expects to sleep a full night during a parliamentary elections. Every single day for the month preceding the day of polling, candidates had to go from neighborhood to neighborhood, meeting local leaders, visiting homes, waving their symbols as they went along. It did not matter how big the candidate was, or how entrenched a party was in a certain location. Without campaigning, tables could be turned even for the safest constituencies.

Kranti had very strong draw in these areas. He had started as a union leader in college in Indore back in the 70s, and earned fame as a tenacious negotiator. He moved back into his home in Vidarbha after finishing with the college and coming out of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency as a small time hero. Immersing himself into Zilla Parishad elections in Chandrapur, his ancestral home, in the sweltering heat of eastern Vidarbha where naxalites fought an incessant war of attrition with successive governments. Negotiating effectively with all sides, Kranti managed to stay alive through the 80s, never losing a

single election he chose to stand for. He single-handedly took credit for turning eastern Vidarbha from an establishment voting district to one that developed a voice of its own.

Ten years ago, he became the establishment, quite unexpectedly. The seat he had contested for for years was reserved for scheduled castes, throwing him out of contention. Kranti took the transition remarkably well. This was his ticket to everlasting youth. He could never be served a humiliating defeat at the polls again, at least not directly. If the desire to re-enter the fray came, he would go the Rajya Sabha route, entering government by selection than election. At the actual polls, Kranti would run by proxy through his protégés. Sunil Kamble, the son of Kranti's colleague from Indore had been the sitting member of parliament in the constituency since 1996. Every single election, Kranti went door to door with Kamble, sharing space on posters with him. Every loyalist of Kranti's dutifully showed up with his supporters on polling days with their entourage to vote. Kamble was the problem now.

Kamble had fallen out with the party General Secretary in Delhi, and defected along with another few MPs from other parts of the state to the opposition. It was a complicated situation with multiple levels of intrigue. Some said Kamble had become a threat to Kranti's overlordship of Vidarbha, and that his continuing in the party had been made impossible by Kranti. Others say Kranti had started to challenge the General Secretary's post in Delhi, which led to the situation being engineered directly from Delhi. Whatever the case, Kamble's shoulder seemed most likely to have been one that was used purely as a prop to shoot from – who shot at who was unclear and perhaps would never be known to any except the aggrieved.

Kamble seemingly had neither the personal charisma nor the economic wherewithal to win an election. The General Secretary was from the same state and used to be a long-time political heavy even at the grassroots, but unlike Kranti had moved away from electoral politics to party administration. If their party lost this seat, Kranti's position in the party would be significantly weakened vis-à-vis the secretary, who would then hold the key to ticket distribution in the next election.

Now I was in Kranti's camp, so I know only what I hear here. Kranti's camp would admit quite vocally, in private, that it believed Kamble's defection out of the party as being planned from Delhi right from the start. Despite his new found home, Kamble publicly blamed larger politics, but never took Kranti's name through the dirt. This is actually quite common in Indian politics – denouncement of the party is acceptable by a defector, but the mentor remains sacrosanct. Disloyalty to a cause is more acceptable than public treachery with a teacher – especially an ideologue, even this was well and truly known to all. Annadurai never deprecated Periyar publicly, nor did Raj ever talk down Bal Thackeray in public. The guru remained a god, his advisors and circumstances were the ones to blame. Kranti likewise maintained that the problem existed in the party than in Kranti's person.

That's not how Ramoji saw it. "In politics, it takes a very big member, or a very big appetite to defect. In Kamble's case, he has neither. Larger circumstances be damned, Kranti sir will throw him down, and he will never stand again."

* * *

Two years ago, Kranti was entrenched as the powerhouse in Vidarbha. He had practically carried Kamble on his shoulders through the elections. "Sir let Kamble stand in front. Now he thinks that it was his bandobast," said Ramoji, referring to the 'arrangement' of the election. "He used to sit like a beggar, right there.." he pointed exactly to the spot next to me, "...at Sir's feet."

Thankfully, before I was expected to react to that, he continued his rant. It turned out that the current situation was particularly annoying for Kranti since it threatened to undo a lot of his good work from the last election. The previous victory had been very strategic since it was accompanied by another parliamentary seat in a neighboring district that the party had wrested away from its main rival. Also, much as Kamble was a comparative political lightweight, he was still an insider moving away, taking with him a good fraction of votes. Added to this, of course, he would have his new party's vote. To neutralize him,

Kranti would not only have to reconsolidate as much of his loyalist vote, but probably go out and convert a large share of fence-sitters. But if he could pull this off, it would pretty much seal the case. As Ramoji proclaimed, "Even a bandicoot can stand for election here – if Sir decides to support him, the bandicoot will turn into a lion."

Regardless of the personal charisma, the campaigning had to be done. Both Kamble and Kranti were out from the break of dawn each morning meeting local leaders, attending functions. The bandicoot was Srinath Malusare. By taking him on, Kranti had taken the perfect risk. Malusare had no sizable personal charisma or reputation to ride votes on. Had the party selected a more known candidate, perhaps a film star or a wealthy industrialist willing to underwrite the cost of the election, the responsibility for the election would be spread wider. Malusare had never even fought a municipal corporation election, let aside an assembly post, and now he had been elevated straight to a parliamentary election. If he won there was no question who got the credit, indeed any mammal could win in Vidarbha sitting on his shoulder. This arrangement suited the general secretary, in fact it needed to, since the party secretary would have to approve of the choice of candidate. His calculation was that Kranti would fall on his face with Malusare.

The parliamentary ticket was an incredible honor for Malusare. It was the ultimate reward for his loyalty. When Kranti had given Kamble the seat eight years ago, it wasn't the same level of favor. Kamble had been a leader in the entire district gram Panchayat and a troublemaker of some local repute before Kranti took him under his wing eight years ago. Besides the votes that Kranti had passed on to Kamble, there were also a number of his own lieutenants who were assigned allegiance with Kamble through the period of their

association. Now that the sides had switched, several of these had to pick sides all over again.

“In this business, the leaders can afford to change allegiance, but foot soldiers cannot sell or move over so easily. For them to move, the general has to retire first,” said Suryakant Naolewar. He was a small thin man who in a kurta-pyjama who had walked through the door and dived into the conversation as though he had been listening all long. As soon as he entered, Vitthal got up and exchanged a two-handed handshake with him. “Kranti sahib is not going to run away to Delhi on his Rajya Sabha ticket. There will be no void to fill. Every single one of our Zilla Parishad members is going to stay with us.”

“You must be Janghia,” he said. “I am Naolewar. Sir has told me about your computer project. Jatin also called me just this morning. Please come with me.” He said leading me outside the room. “You can take the onion out of your pocket now, we won’t be in the sun much. Please come with me.” I did not realize it was that obvious.

This was fabulously timed rescue, just before I could disintegrate under Vitthal’s nonchalant glare, or fall off the edge of my sofa. Naolewar used to be a Panchayat Block President, which is basically like the head of a group of villages, until the caste reservation threw him off the seat as well. He was a known loyalist. He knew Kranti from the days of the Emergency when they were both underground for significant lengths of time. Despite their starting more or less together, Kranti’s career had skyrocketed whereas Naolewar still remained in the village, but nevertheless a kingmaker of minor domains.

“We are going to be a little bit busy because of the elections, but you’ll understand better how we work here. Tomorrow I will take you with me to Shilmaula where we will be setting up the computers.” I was amazed that I was being entertained at all, given the urgency of the elections. From the look of the reception he got it Naolewar was evidently a person of some significance, so it was even more surprising that Jatin had arranged for him to personally escort me. “Let me arrange for your luggage, I am taking you to a party, where Krantibhai will meet us directly. This is Sampatbhai who will be coming with us. Please give me two minutes.”

The party was the birthday of a party worker, in which there were 4000 invitees, each of who would be fed fresh first grade mutton Biryani. This was the single largest party the worker would ever throw in his life, and it just so happened that Kranti and Malusare had been invited as guests in the party, and of course they would spend most of the time mingling with the guests and talking to them ‘informally’ about the election. Of course, the party technically had nothing to do with the campaign. In other words, the entire cost of the food was not deductible from the Election Commission’s budgetary restriction for Malusare. After all this was a party thrown by random party worker X. I wasn’t sure Kranti or Malusare even knew whose party it was. “Food is one of the biggest expenditures of an election campaign, and one of the most effective.”

The answer came from the gregarious middle middle-aged Gujarati man that Naolewar left me with. He had been waiting in the gang of white outside, and I hadn't particularly noticed him. "Rs. 50 plus two fried potatoes per slogan chanting party worker in Nagpur, Rs. 100 in Mumbai. At our party today, everyone eat all you can eat, and take home as much as you want – no limit on eggs either." Sampatbhai was dressed in a white shirt with an off-white trousers and the same leather slip-on sandals that seemed to have a monopoly here. He had the gusto of an insurance salesman without the same pushiness, and started talking to me animatedly right away. "You are Jatinbhai's friend, eh?"

He told me he had known the family for over twenty years, and Jatin had practically grown up with him. He spoke with a genuine fondness for Jatin and his younger brother Nilesh, and reminded me some seven times during our brief conversation that when I returned to the US I should tell Jatin that I met Sampatkaka in Nagpur. "If you ever need anything while you're here, just tell me, and it will be done."

"So what do you do, Sampatbhai?" This was the first time I had actually been comfortable asking that question.

"Hahahahaa, what do I do...! Well, what is there to hide from you, you are now a family member, Jatin bhai will tell you anyway."

My head reeled at the range of possibilities, given where we were standing that moment.

"I run a Satta (gambling) business."

I stood rather speechless, trying to come up with a blasé response, but my bulging eyes probably gave it away. I could see how Sampatbhai would be a good gambling den operator, or any person involved in high visibility criminal activity. The man was incredibly easy to talk to. He would effortlessly offer bribes, and you could take them from him with no consciousness of the power relationship. He could refuse to return your money, and you'd believe him each time he said next week.

"You're wondering what I am doing here, aren't you? Don't be afraid to ask."

I did not want to ask him straight up if he was paying off Kranti, which I was sure he did one way or another. There could be another number of things, and my only point of reference was the movies. I worked in fucking development – this was a gambling den owner standing outside a politician's home. I was not even sure I wanted to ask what he did.

"I have come to discuss the rates. Don't worry, I am not telling you anything that everyone here does not know."

Rates? Was he negotiating costs to bump off someone on Kranti's behalf? Given what I just knew, I could see a sinister quality to Sampatbhai that I hadn't earlier. My mind was like that of a child at that moment. Was he going to use the phone he was holding in one

hand to arrange a contract? What did he mean everyone knew? Was this like the 'encounters' in Mumbai where apparently everyone including the gang bosses know which one of their men is about to get bumped off, and when?

“Krantibhai and I are in the exact same business. We are gamblers. Every now and then we need each other. I am going to talk to him about the rates on Kamble, Malusare, and Bhimrao. Any election, you will find me or my brother around with every candidate in Nagpur. Krantibhai is my friend, but in business, I work for everyone, and they all come to me because I keep my friendship out of my business.

Sampatbhai then proceeded to explain to me what he was doing. He would meet Kranti and tell him the rates on the various candidates. He did not go into specifics of the rates, but told me that even for the politicians themselves, the local bookies are more frequently used terms of reference than things like exit polls. For a large number of people who are fence-sitters, the Satta rate is often a very important thing in helping make a decision.

“Politics is not like cricket. There is no huge underdog that you can get a fantastic rate on, and hope to cash. Nobody with a 1:5 rate has ever won an election, and nobody will. Usually only one of two candidates are really in contention. The third candidate has only two jobs – first is to make life difficult for the other two, second is to make money for me.” But it’s not that simple. The rate is not entirely economics. Sampatbhai will give out a rate only if a corresponding bet has been placed. So if all the money that ever comes through is Rs. 300 on one candidate and Rs. 100 on the second, then the latter gets a rate of just under 1:4, and the former gets a rate closer to 1: 1.4. So even a candidate who has no chance whatsoever, could by virtue of being appealing to gamblers make a very significant dent on the market.

Satta is used as a weapon for fence-sitters. “For many people, especially those who enjoy gambling, the election is just an excuse to gamble more. The lower the odds, the higher the chances of winning, so someone who bets on the election before the polling ends up voting for the person they supported in the bet. Do you know how many fence-sitters we convert each year? Nagpur is the 2nd largest gambling center in the state after Mumbai, and every single fence-sitter who has ever gambled can be pushed in one direction or the other through me.”

And there was a simple economics to it. Sampatbhai wasn’t meeting Kranti just to give him the rates. Sampatbhai would accept bets from Kranti. If Kranti put a huge sum of money on Malusare, the rates for Kamble would rise immediately, and every fence sitter who waits till the last day to put a bet on a candidate will bet against Kamble, and show up on the day of polling to bet on Malusare. Anything that is placed on any of the large list of other candidates in the fray is simply spare change for Sampatbhai. At this very moment, his brother was meeting with Kamble at an office barely two miles away.

“Sampatbhai, don’t corrupt the youngsters,” added Naolewar. The two shared a few jokes about my generation being beyond corruption, just then Vitthal stepped out of the house

and turned to me. “Jatin Bhai says you are a very great orator. Today, we are taking you to a Choocha meeting. You can address the group there.”

This was one of those moments where the close-up of a man’s face could be used for a comical candid camera shot as it changed expression drastically to a sudden uncomfortable revelation. ‘Address the group’? What group? What address? Presumably there would be no power point slide backing me up, but before we got there, something more fundamental seemed unanswered.

“What is a Choocha meeting?” I asked, still not entirely comprehending whether I had just taken an order.

“It’s a meeting that takes place in the evenings, usually on the terrace or courtyard of some local leader. We go there to talk to various Panchayat people and party workers. We are going to a PPI group leader’s home tonight, and one of the things Krantibhai wants us to talk about there is the computer program we are setting up for the children,” added Naolewar. Vitthal did not deal with clarifications.

“But I don’t know anything about it.”

“You don’t have to. Just discuss how computers have helped from other areas, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

A ‘chooha meeting’ literally means a ‘rat meeting.’ These are technically illegal, since they’re held after the stipulated campaigning hours by the election commission, which end at 10 PM. Everything is technically hush-hush, but these are probably the meetings where the most important and substantive alliances get forged. Malusare and Kranti would both be present at this meeting, exactly why they wanted me to speak there I wasn’t sure of, but I knew what I was getting into was going to be comical at best, disastrous at worst.

Worse, I was given no time to prepare. We were leaving right away for Shilmaula, the village I was originally supposed to go to tomorrow. Naolewar would accompany me, since Vitthal was busy, and Kranti would join us later with Malusare, the candidate. During the drive, Naolewar would brief me on what my role was to be at the meeting.

Basically, my job was to hold the fort until Kranti and Malusare arrived. Personally, I thought this was an extraordinary responsibility and what surprised me most was that they were willing to let me do this at all. I wasn’t sure whose idea this was, but presumably the buck stopped at one point only – Kranti. My friend from the US, Jatin had apparently fed his uncle some babble about my non-existent public speaking skills and here I was stuck in this bizarre situation. Kranti was coming the Shilmaula from another village meeting, and it was quite possible he would be delayed, so till he showed up, I would talk to the council members on the advantages of computers for their village.

To make matters worse, the drive was an adventure in itself. Before I landed in Nagpur, I read online that the drive to Shilmaula was perilous since it was scattered with disgruntled Naxalite elements who on occasion attacked convoys. Naxalites were about as alien to me as a witty analogy this moment. Really the only thing I could come up with each time I thought ‘Naxalite’ was pictures smaller pages of big newspapers like page 7 with a picture of neatly arranged corpses in a single line with a terse headline “Naxalite attack claims 10” with the material seriousness of “Spurious liquor claims 10.” I started visualizing a scene of a Naxalite encounter. There was a full conversation going on in my mind – much like the series of counter-monologues of “I should have said that...” that follows a botched situation. For some reason, my daydream included no heroics – instead there was a scene of me bargaining the release of my laptop computer with thugs who looked like Neanderthals checking out a bottle opener. “This is a lot more valuable to me than it is to you, Mr. Naxalite. I understand the struggle of the people sir, and I promise to pay you for the favor of letting this laptop go once I am back home.

We drove in a Tata Sumo. It officially seats nine tightly, and has replaced the Ambassador as the most valued car for political campaigning. For one, the car was not explicitly opulent, it had already become a popular inter-village shuttle transportation. On another hand, it was a comfortable car with a modern design – and the campaign candidate would feel no particular loss of face traveling in it as his or her primary vehicle. Just three cars could make a full campaign team, and with the amplitude of flat steel rods of standing space below the doors and back of the car, each Sumo could be a small army of its own.

While campaigning the candidate always in the front seat of the Sumo with all windows open – visually and metaphorically accessible to the people. Of course, after elections, the windows are pulled up, air conditioning turned on and the representative moves to the back seat. Naolewar sat up front with the driver, and I sat at the back. Three others got into the car, two sat sideways on the bench seats at the back, one sat next to me. None of them said a word through the entire drive. I guessed the seating wasn’t entirely random in arrangement. The two guys on the bench seats were probably the lowest in the hierarchy. The guy immediately next to me had a thuggish air to him, and was probably some kind of group leader among the sub-gang of three. Naolewar sat in an alpha male spread on the front seat his shoulders curved back over the back of the bench seat, and one arm planted along the top of the seat all the way across to the driver’s back. I crouched halfway to the front edge of my seat.

The first half of the journey was fairly uneventful. The highway was great, and the traffic remarkably disciplined. Naolewar was talkative, but in an unusual abstract way. He gave a lot of information, but maintained a normative vagueness on everything. The conversation certainly gave me a lot of background into the actual election. It turned out that the ‘chooha meeting’ was to win over a village council leader who was about to throw his weight behind Bhimrao, the third candidate in the fray. Everyone knew that Bhimrao would lose, but by taking part in the election, he would hurt both Malusare and Kamble by eating into their votes.

Bhimrao appealed to one category of caste voters that almost always voted in a block, though rarely with any dependable loyalty to any particular party. It wasn't like Muslims or right wing Hindus who were also seen as a voting block, and more or less each time went with one or the other party. This was the third block. The remaining voters were the fence-sitters, and often relied on things like real issues, and were therefore unreliable in elections. If either side captured this third block then the election was as good as over. In practice though, neither party has ever really got this block in entirety, if it came down to the line, the block would be usually be split several ways.

In the past, the policy of his group was to negotiate either seats or straight cash to broker deals with one or the other major party. This was a fairly safe strategy, at least for the senior party members. Although his people as a group did not see eye to eye with castes that comprised both the other parties, they knew that the warring was more useful in state elections than parliamentary elections. As a result, each parliamentary election had a 'political compromise' and one or the other major party. Not this time. Bhimrao was not going to stand down. He knew he was going to lose, but was part of a larger strategy of unifying his caste in the district. He figured, and quite rightly, that a unified vote bank and not allowing the block to split over various factions was the correct long term way of setting himself up as a real contender. Plus, Bhimrao would never break into the elite of either major party, unlike in the PPI.

"Bhimrao's real target is Kranti sir, not Malusare. He wants to push both the major parties till he can show that his group is 100% united and is always going to be a deciding factor. Once he does that, he will bargain for a coalition, and will ask for this seat for PPI. Krantibhai will be coming with the local representative of one of PPIs rival parties from the same caste, which is much smaller, but is trying to set up base in Vidarbha."

The real purpose of the visit was to break Bhimrao, or to do it before Kamble did. In the last election, Bhimrao did not exist, and Kamble played his own caste card to win over that faction. Almost immediately after the election Kamble successfully alienated his former supporters, though it mattered less then because he had Kranti's supporters behind him. "We don't have much time to stop PPI, but at least if we know where which caste is going, the election gets cheaper – so we don't have to waste much money on an election whose outcome is decided."

"For a smaller election like a corporation or a Zilla Parishad election, it's easy to buy votes – anything 200-500 per vote, but at the parliamentary level, the partnerships are everything." That said, it wasn't as though the elections were without perks for the typical voter.

"So is it true about the dancing girls performing for elections?"

"Not in Maharashtra. We throw parties and all that, we give away video compact discs – which can be of any quality, but no live shows."

“What about alcohol?”

“Wholesale.”

Usually, the booze is stored at the home of some local known to be a ‘jugaadu.’ Jugaadu is a term commonly used in India for people who are ‘fixers’. Finding jugaadus is a key task of lieutenants like Naolewar. Its quite critical that the Jugaadu is clearly associated with one party, and is the official gift giver for them. In the booze case, this person will use his home to do the entire distribution. Usually people will just stop by at his place in the evening and pick up a quarter bottle of alcohol. Naolewar will occasionally ask someone he knows from the village to check on the jugaadu to make sure he’s doing his job right. Last year during the Zilla Parishad elections, they started a coupon system, whereby each male would get coupons, each which could be encashed for a one peg of ‘foreign’ alcohol (usually meaning alcohol made in India, but originating from British tastes – such as rum, whisky and so on) served in little plastic cups with each drink served with one packet of water, one slice of onion and a dash of mango pickle.

“What about the women? Don’t they vote against you for getting their husbands drunk?”

Naolewar had figured out a nice enough strategy there too. India had the natural advantage of having a festival practically each month. Right now, they were having a “haldi-kumkum” festival, literally meaning a festival of turmeric-vermillion, usually celebrated by married women. Vermillion is a form of dried turmeric powdered with lime, that is adorned daily by every married Hindu woman as a signifier of her wedding vows. On this festival, a fairly insignificant one, women are gifted vermillion, prayer materials, and other symbols of marriage. Naolewar arranged for ‘parties’ at practically every large parties, much like the ‘birthday party’ in Nagpur that I stopped at earlier today.

These were hosted by the wives of some of the well-off figures in each village, and every female guest was fed, and offered a coconut, vermillion, and a set of 20 green glass bangles. Of course, Mrs. Naolewar and her friends were there too, talking to the women about who to vote for. “Women who can talk to women voters are very important in elections,” added Naolewar. “With men it is easy, but also hard to say what they actually go and do. With women, they have been used to voting for their husband’s choice for decades, but now we know that women don’t always do what their husbands tell them to either, they make their own choice even if they are illiterate. In almost every meeting of women, one of the most important things we slip in gently, but repeatedly is ‘nobody, not even your own family members, should ever know who you vote for.’ Of course, we also inform the women that the opposition is giving away free booze to their husbands.”

Then of course, there were the sloganeers. In Maharashtra, you couldn’t make a pleasant career out of it like you could perhaps in West Bengal, where political graffiti and sloganeering have been converted into an art form. Here it wasn’t as pervasive, but auto

rickshaws with political slogans were the standard. From the good old style “Chali Chali, Hawa Chali, Malasure ki Hawa Chali” which meant, the winds are blowing the winds are blowing, and they are the weather is calling for Malusare. Then the classic negative ad “Cycle Kuthey Chalawnaar, Sadak Kaka Banawnaar?” which basically means, where will you ride the bicycle, is your uncle going to fix the condition of the roads for you first? This is a pun on the party with the bicycle as its political symbol, and on the apparent condition of roads wherever it has been in power. Finally, wit is fine, but Kranti knows well enough that nothing works like simple commands “Jyaachee Khaa-il Mutton, Tyaacheech Daab-il Button” – which quite simply requests that you pay the price of the mutton at the voting machine, by gratefully pressing the button against the electoral system of whoever fed you the mutton.

Of course, all sides do this. Elections are also a good time to stock up on your popular music collection. Top ten song compilations are abundantly available, with little snippet ads in between songs for the candidates. The car was playing a CD top-ten right now, and each time the ad for Malusare came on, Naolewar would press the skip button. “That stupid fuck Malusare,” he suddenly interjected. “At least Kamble could fight an election, this one needs a bottle with a nipple in his mouth. Oh, we came to figure out how to a stop people from skipping the ad on this song.”

The car suddenly came to a stop. Listening through Naolewar’s story, I had long forgotten when we had got off the highway and moved onto a semi-tarred forest road. In the headlights, I saw another Sumo parked across the street. One man stood at the driver side door of the car, and our headlights were directly pointed at him.

Our headlights were the only illumination in the forest that night. Our tinted windows did a great job of keeping the sun out but now I wished they weren’t as dark. From the backseat I could see nothing except the flashing white reflection from the Sumo in front of us, and the face of the bearded man facing us from in front of the car. Everything around him was a blur of black. I could sense there were trees around us, but suddenly, I could not tell how far they were from us – whether the broken edges of the potholed road were lined with trees or whether there was a buffer of a lake, or a hundred yards of shrubbery, or an unexpected desert. I waited to hear the sounds of nature – were there crickets, frogs, bats? Could they tell me what the land around us looked like?

I love the sky by the countryside. You only really understand the brightness of a starlit sky away from a city. Tonight, we had no moon, and a cover of cloud. I would not see my hand in front of my face if I stepped out of the car and decided to walk. The whiteness of the Sumo blocking our way helped me see just enough. There were shadows outside my window which I could see, standing unmoved about a few feet away from the car. I wasn’t certain if complete darkness would have been better.

We sat in complete silence. I did not know whether it was better to hope this was a typical situation or not. I could barely think straight that moment, in between the numbness and paralyzing fear of the unexpected stillness, but in the flash of a few seconds every horrific possibility crossed my mind. I could feel the gentle trembling of

the car with the ignition turned on, just enough to mask the sounds outside such that the quiet of the car became a terrifying inertia. The air conditioning added a baleful hum that fluctuated in sullen fits as the battery of the idling car slowly discharged. None of us even turned to look at each other; the only sign of life then in the car was the moodiness of the air conditioning.

The man in front of us had been standing still against his Sumo longer than I had expected. I desperately hoped that I was the only blindsided guy in that group, and that this was a typical situation for the rest of them, but the longer Naolewar waited to open the window, the worse it got. Clearly, the move was ours, I was wondering if the wait was well thought, whether it was a psychological game with whatever was outside our car. From whatever I could tell, it would seem we had a clear disadvantage, irrespective of the genius we could come up with sitting in this mousetrap. I was simultaneously desperate for, and dreading, the passenger seat door opening and Naolewar stepping out.

He did not. For what it was worth, we seemed to have won the psychological war. The man in front of the Sumo slowly walked up to the driver's window. The driver pulled down the window as he approached.

“Turn the car off.”

The driver complied immediately.

“Step out,” he said, craning into the window.

It wasn't clear who the instruction was to, but I instantly turned to Naolewar. The man saw this from the window, and it confirmed in his mind that Naolewar was the person he should be talking to.

As Naolewar opened the door and stepped out, I had this momentary morbid sense of relief, like passing on an empty click to the next player in a game of Russian roulette. But the moment he stepped out, the man next to me also opened his door and got out alongside Naolewar, as did the two others in the back seat. That left me sitting in the car wondering what to do next. I took one look through the tinted window to my left to see if I could make sense of the shadows outside, it was still a blur. I tentatively clicked the door open and stepped out briskly with a slight face of fake surprise. I did not know if people would be looking at me when I got out of the car, and I was even less sure about whether outrage was a valuable emotion to project now. What if they had already decided the fate of everyone in the car?

The shadows were in fact men. There were about ten or fifteen in all, most standing to the side of the one lane road, in the thick shrubbery.

“Where are you going?”

“Shilmaula”

“It is dangerous to travel late at night”

“What can we do, our work is such.”

“What work would that be?”

“The Election Commission Observer is here with us.”

I was quite surprised at how deceived I was by the looks of the guy next to me. An election commission officer who looked like a thug? Moreover, he was probably an engineer, fixing ballot machines, here I was wondering if he stole them on Kranti's beckoning.

“Why are you in a private car?”

“See behind the car, there is a sign there that says ‘On Election Duty’ The car is from the Government's official taxi service in Nagpur. Why do you think we have a plainclothes escort?” said Naolewar pointing at the two men who had been sitting at the back all the while. I never noticed they were wearing brown trousers which had come to be such a dead giveaway of plainclothes cops that they may as well have been part of their uniform. Nor did I notice the scratchy little note stuck with scotch tape to the back window.

I was amazed. There was an entire agenda here that I was entirely unaware of. But was it even legal to have an election observer in the car with us? Why were we giving him a ride on our way to a Chooaha meeting, which was illegal to begin with. Not just that, we just had a full conversation about how Kranti distributes booze to his electorate, not to mention coconuts for women. For all I knew, the Election Commission probably wasn't new to any of this information, but still, knowing the system was so hand-in-glove was shocking. I always thought the Election Commission was the one sacrosanct body in Indian politics.

“You tell me ‘What are *you* doing here?’” said Naolewar to the man, in a slightly different tone. “Do you want to explain to sir why you are here with a large group at night during an election? Which party are you from?”

I froze. I was ‘sir’. Naolewar's eyes were pointing straight at me.

I waited for him to ask me for some identification, wondering if I should say something to pre-empt it. He did not immediately react to Naolewar, but continued to stare at me. He seemed to be checking out my clothes, perhaps to see if I looked adequately like a government officer.

“What's in your pocket?” he asked

I reached into the bulge with the urgency of someone ready to prove there was no firearm in there, and pulled out a fully intact onion. The man reached out and took the onion in his hand. There was an epiphany as he held the onion. I could feel all eyes, including the ones from the darkness around frozen on the juicy stem. “The first thing the government gives any of you when you come here! Sir, if you cannot handle the heat for even one day, how can you come here and work with us?” Little did I realize that the onion would give me life save me sooner than I had expected.

“Sir,” the man addressed me, “I won’t lie to you, we are working with Bhimrao-ji. We are not here to create any trouble, just that this is our area, and we are just protecting it from the thugs of Kamble and Kranti’s parties. Nobody informed us that you were expected here tonight.”

“Does the Election Commission tell you political fellows where it goes? Our job is to keep you in check, not to phone you every morning with our daily agenda. Did you inform the police that you will be running your private roadblock here?” Naolewar’s tone was increasingly aggressive.

“See, sir,” he addressed me again, “We are not here to argue with you, but we are not answerable to you either.” Now both sides were equally aggressive again, “What exactly is your job?”

“I do computer work.”

“The Automatic Voting Machines, you know – he makes those.” added Naolewar exactly as I had finished, before our inquisitor’s eyebrows had risen entirely.

“Sir, you are big educated people,” he said, “We are poor villagers – what do we know what is good or bad for this world. We sit and watch while you decide our fate. It took us years to train people to put stamps on paper against the names of the correct candidates. At least they knew how to put their thumb impressions, training for stamps was not so bad. Now you go and set up these computerized machines, you never ask us, you do it, and then you tell us to learn. Now we have no idea what our people do when they go inside a booth.”

I was wondering if that last statement was the point of democracy, or a tragic consequence. There was a moment of silence there. This was one of those off-hand grievance moments where the aggrieved party had full ear of the apparent authority. “What can I say sir, I am an illiterate myself. All these computers are great big things, what do I know. Whatever you do must be good for us.”

I looked at him for a long moment. In faint headlight I could see some part of his face, but I would not remember it for long. I held my hand forward to shake his, he did the same. He had the hands of a rice farmer – probably a farm laborer. It’s a distinctive battle scarred hand that you can’t miss.

“Sir, you please go and sit in our car, we will make sure you reach Shilmaula safely.”

“Nonsense, Election Officers can only travel in government cars, don’t you know that much?” interjected Naolewar.

Suddenly, I went from being the goat to the axe wielder. It must have been the refreshing reference to the greatness of computers that brought me back to life. “It’s okay. These are the people, and it is they I work for. I will go in your car.”

It was Naolewar’s turn to freeze. The last bomb he had prepared for. This would be his real test. “But Sir, this is against the law...?”

“Please follow us till Shilamula, then you can overtake us.”

Out of the darkness two men came running and opened the door of the Sumo for me. Their body language had changed immediately, now they stood crouched a little before me with their heads bent in the darkness. I was given the front passenger seat.