

GULSHAN PANDEY

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A Short Story

GULSHAN PANDEY

Abhinav's sister ran into the room, waving the morning's newspaper.

'Bhaiya!' she yelled into his headset as he sat at his desk trying to string together the opening sentences of his new story. 'Here's your chance to do something from your bucket list.'

'Why do you have to yell?' he snapped back at her, yanking off his headset in annoyance. 'Can't you see I'm trying to get some work done?'

'I have to yell because you don't hear anything when you put that stupid headset on your turnip.' She spun his chair around and slapped his face playfully with the folded newspaper. 'Want to do something you've always wanted to do?'

'What's that?'

'You keep wondering what it would be like to be a prisoner, right? In a jail?'

'So?'

She thrust the newspaper under his nose.

'Now, here is your chance. You can stay in a real jail and experience first-hand what it is to be a prisoner.'

'Really? Show me!'

Abhinav's annoyance vanished in an instant. He snatched the newspaper from his sister and looked at the headline at which she jabbed her finger:

Now you can rent a cell for a day in jail

For Rs. 500, the locked-up experience provides khaki clothes and jail food

It is a trip to the jail without the fear of the warden

throwing away the key. The old district jail has been converted, and its gates opened for everyone to experience ‘prison life’ for a fee.

Those who want to ‘understand freedom’ can pay the Jails Department Rs.500 and get a ‘24-hour confinement’ ...

Abhinav read the article twice before looking up. When he did, his eyes were shining.

‘I’m going to do it,’ he exulted with suppressed excitement. ‘Today itself. Imagine! Just five hundred rupees, and I can live the life of a convict.’ He seized his little sister’s arm and whispered. ‘Don’t tell mom and dad. I’ll say that I am travelling out for a day or two. Okay?’

His sister nodded enthusiastically, her face glowing with the excitement of a hatched conspiracy. She knew that her journalist brother had tried several times to get into jail and stay there for day, but in vain. The authorities just didn’t want the trouble of a reporter – freelance or otherwise – sussing out inconvenient realities of a prison. They had flatly refused.

‘The only way you can get in and stay there,’ a jail administrator had said in jest as he had shooed him away, ‘is to commit a crime.’

With Abhinav writing a book on urban crime and rehabilitation of felons, he desperately sought to experience the inside of a prison first-hand. Descriptions from people who had been there, even from convicted criminals, weren’t good enough substitutes. And so, the news that he could experience prison for a fee was a godsend.

* * *

Some hours later, clad in rough khaki garb that the prison authorities had given him, Abhinav followed a warder into the renovated old jail, which was just behind the new one. He had left all his belongings in a locker, including his mobile phone, watch, wallet and clothes. All he carried was a notebook and a couple of pens. Secreted inside the notebook were three thousand rupees.

When they stepped into a corridor lined with prison cells, Abhinav stopped in dismay. The cells were empty! No sounds came from them

except the echo of their own footsteps. The air smelled of fresh paint and Dettol.

‘There are no prisoners here!’ he protested to the warder.

‘Of course, there are no prisoners,’ the warder replied as he turned to face Abhinav. ‘We can’t put guests along with convicts. It would be far too dangerous.’

‘Then this isn’t the real thing!’ he objected. ‘It is just some rooms with iron bars. No people, no voices, no smells, no despair, nothing! *This* is not the real experience you claim to offer.’

‘This is all we have, sir –’

‘Isn’t there an empty cell in the new prison? I appreciate that it would be dangerous for me to share a cell with a convict. But if there is a separate cell –’

‘No, sir.’ The warder shook his head firmly. ‘The prison is full beyond capacity. We are holding twice the number of prisoners than what the prison was built for.’

‘Not even a single cell available?’

‘No.’

‘But I want the *real* experience of a prison!’ Abhinav lowered his voice. ‘Listen ... I write books ... stories, you know. I want to experience a prison in its real form. If you can arrange it for me, I’ll give you something.’

The warder scratched his chin thoughtfully.

‘I’ll get into trouble,’ he said softly.

Despite his words, it was clear that the warder was considering the offer. Encouraged, Abhinav flipped the pages of his notebook.

‘I have Rs 3000 here,’ he continued softly. ‘I have some more in my wallet.’

‘A part of this renovated old jail has some convicts,’ he said slowly. ‘But they are of the most dangerous sort. Murderers.’

‘Where?’ Abhinav looked around the silent, empty cells.

The warder nodded to the far end of the corridor. ‘Through that door.’

‘Is there an empty cell there?’

The warder nodded slowly. ‘There is one ...’

Abhinav extracted the six five hundred rupee notes from between his notebook’s pages and rolled them into his palm. The warder’s hand slowly

opened and moved towards Abhinav's.

'Let me see the cell,' Abhinav said, his fingers firmly clutching the money.

'Okay. But don't talk when we are there. Not a word. I'll show it to you and we come back here. If we reach an agreement, I'll put you in that cell until tomorrow morning. You'll have to vacate it before the morning roll-call.'

'Agreed.'

The warder turned and strode down the corridor, his hand reaching for a bunch of keys on his belt. Abhinav followed close behind, his heart thudding. At last! Will he get to experience the real thing?

The warder unlocked the door at the far end of the corridor and stepped through. Abhinav followed.

The transformation was immediate.

The change in atmosphere was almost physical. A low hum filled the air – voices, coughs, shuffling of feet, sounds of metal cutlery, and dozen other sounds of habitation. The lights were brighter and more numerous. The air was heavier and smellier with stale sweat and other bodily odours. He didn't know if it was his imagination, but he sensed despair in the air. The hair on Abhinav's arms stood on their ends.

The warder walked past a few cells – some occupied by sole men, some by two or three – and stopped in front of an empty one. Abhinav stepped up and peered into it. It was about eight feet square, and had a bunk on one side, with a plastic bucket beside it. The far wall had a grimy ventilator near the roof, heavily barred. The floor was of rough cement.

The front of the cell comprised closely spaced vertical bars about an inch and a half thick, and a few horizontal bars. One of the side walls – the one against which the bunk was placed – was of cement, but the other was made bars like the front of the cell. In the adjacent cell was a young bearded man clad in a dirty blue prison uniform. He was staring intently at Abhinav.

A shiver ran down Abhinav's spine, and he became aware of heady frisson coursing through him. This was *exactly* what he had come for. Even if the man in the next cell had struck fear in him.

Abhinav and the warder turned without a word and headed back the way they had come. Once past the door, and among the empty cells,

Abhinav nodded.

‘That is what I am looking for,’ he said.

‘You sure?’ the warder asked, searching Abhinav’s face.

‘Yes. Absolutely sure.’

‘You know who your neighbour is?’

Abhinav shook his head. Something in the warder’s voice made his fingers tingle.

‘Gulshan Pandey.’

‘Gulshan Pa—’ Abhinav choked and began coughing.

Gulshan Pandey was the psychopath who had terrorised Hyderabad for eight months. Thirteen pavement dwellers had been killed, and the murderer had left his calling card beside every single body: ‘Gulshan Pandey’ scrawled in charcoal or chalk.

He had finally been apprehended three days back, but his real identity was still not public knowledge. He was still referred to as ‘Gulshan Pandey’ in the media.

‘I’ll take it,’ Abhinav heard himself saying. ‘Can I talk to Gulshan Pandey?’

‘I wouldn’t recommend it. If you do, the risk is entirely yours. Don’t call him Gulshan Pandey. He gets very angry. Absolutely furious. Every day, he shouts at the top of his voice: “*Mein Gulshan Pandey nahin hoon!*” I am not Gulshan Pandey!’

‘He denies he is Gulshan Pandey?’

‘Of course, he denies it. He says he didn’t kill anyone. They all say it. Always.’

‘Who does he claim he is, then?’

‘He gives a new name every day. Now, give me five thousand.’

‘I have three thousand here.’ Abhinav handed over the currency notes he was clutching. ‘I’ll give you the rest on my way out. I should have just enough in my wallet.’

‘Okay. No tricks. I’ll come for you at 7 o’clock tomorrow morning.’

‘Don’t worry. No tricks. 7 o’clock is fine. That will give me several hours today, plus one night.’

‘Ready to go?’

‘Yes.’

‘Remember, not a word to me when I take you to the cell.’

Abhinav nodded. 'I understand.'

* * *

Five minutes later, Abhinav was sitting on his bunk, soaking in the putrid atmosphere and scribbling words and metaphors to describe something strikingly unfamiliar. There was something so moving about the atmosphere that it touched the very core of his being. Something that overwhelmed him. Something he struggled to put into words.

Eight feet in front of him, on the other side of the iron bars that separated his cell from the next, stood Gulshan Pandey. Unabashedly staring at Abhinav. Intensely. Silently.

Abruptly, he said something to Abhinav in what seemed to be a cultured voice.

'What?' Abhinav asked, looking up and meeting the fiery gaze.

'I am not Gulshan Pandey,' said the other softly in impeccable English.

So perfect was the enunciation, that Abhinav was momentarily dumbstruck. For some reason, he had assumed that a psychopathic killer would speak crudely. To hear him speak English as a well-educated man took Abhinav's breath away.

He remained speechless, staring at the man across the bars. There was a manic look in his eyes. Feral. Malevolent. Captivating. Fascinated, Abhinav continued to gape. He couldn't tear his gaze away from those eyes.

'Do you believe me?' the man asked, almost conversationally. 'Do you believe that I am not Gulshan Pandey?'

Still incapable of speech, Abhinav nodded mutely.

'Thank you. They don't believe me, you know.'

He swept his arm vaguely towards the corridor, presumably referring to the prison authorities. Tension ebbed, and all of a sudden, Abhinav found his voice.

'What is your name?' he asked softly.

'What's in a name?' the man countered. 'One name is as good as another. Except Gulshan Pandey.'

Abruptly, the disposition of the man changed. From a soft-speaking, literate individual, he turned into a belligerent madman. He began shaking

the bars separating the two cells, rattling them noisily.

‘I am not Gulshan Pandey!’ he yelled with a wild look in his eyes.

Then, like a caged animal, he ran to the front of his cell and began shouting at the top of his voice.

‘Mein Gulshan Pandey nahin hoon!’ he screamed. *‘Sunte ho? Mein Gulshan Pandey NAHIN hoon!’*

The other prisoners shouted back at him, telling him – in colourfully profane language – to shut up. Abhinav couldn’t see any of the other prisoners from his cell, but could hear and smell them. A couple of prison guards came to Gulshan Pandey’s cell to shut him up. In vain.

Gulshan continued ranting for fifteen minutes. Then, out of exhaustion, he went to his bunk and collapsed. But he was up within quarter of an hour, and when he got up there was no sign of his belligerence. He came to the iron bars and began chatting with Abhinav, who seized the opportunity with glee.

Over the next few hours, he learnt that the police had arrested him when he was strolling along a street late one night, and had carted him to this jail. He had been dazed that night, and couldn’t remember what else had happened. As he didn’t have his wallet on him, he couldn’t prove to the police that he wasn’t Gulshan Pandey. They had no clue who he actually was. They would have to set him free because they didn’t know his name or address.

Anyway ... a sly look had come on his face ... anyway, he had managed to send a message to his father, who was an important man. A real big shot. He was sure that his father would have him released soon. Sooner, rather than later, they would catch the real Gulshan Pandey too. Then the joke would be on the police, wouldn’t it?

After dinner – an unappetising mishmash offered on a steel plate – three men came to Gulshan’s cell door.

‘Ah, here they are,’ Gulshan said brightly. ‘Time to get a nice shave.’ He ran his fingers through a beard that seemed at least a month old.

Abhinav watched silently as one of the three men shaved Gulshan, taking note of where the guards stood and how the barber kept sharp objects out of Gulshan’s reach.

Soon, Gulshan looked surprisingly presentable except for his malevolent eyes and the dirty blue uniform. He looked a different man

from the one that had occupied the cell fifteen minutes back.

When the men left, Gulshan extended his hand into Abhinav's cell. In it were a couple of Bengali sweets.

'To my only friend in this horrible place,' Gulshan said, offering Abhinav the sweets. 'As a celebration for my imminent release.'

'They are going to release you?' Abhinav asked in surprise.

'Tomorrow. The barber who shaved me was sent by my father. He's made arrangements. He also sent some sweets.'

That evening, Gulshan did not yell that he wasn't Gulshan Pandey. He continued chatting with Abhinav, and as night approached, he bid Abhinav good night and retired to his bunk.

With nobody to speak to, Abhinav went to the front of his cell and craned his neck to see if he could see find anyone else to talk to. But in vain. No other cell was in his line of sight.

He returned to his bunk. Much as he wanted to stay awake and soak in the prison at night-time, he fell asleep.

* * *

It was bright when Abhinav awoke. And he felt groggy. Uncommonly groggy and woozy. His mouth was dry. It took several moments for him to recall where he was. And when he did, he sat up, only to be assailed by a spell of dizziness.

When that passed, he felt that something was wrong. The cement wall had been to his left when he had fallen asleep, and the bars separating his cell from Gulshan's to his right. Now, they were interchanged.

Something else was wrong too. He gazed down at his clothes in bewilderment. What was wrong? When the answer came, it was akin to a physical blow. He was wearing a dirty blue uniform! It was not the khaki uniform in which he had fallen asleep.

The next moment, realisation seared his mind. He was in Gulshan's cell! And wearing Gulshan's clothes!

His eyes darted to the adjacent cell, scanning it for the psychopathic killer. The cell was empty.

He rose in panic and rushed to the front of the cell. He saw a prison guard, sauntering along the corridor, and called out to him.

‘Where is the man who was that cell?’ he asked the guard, gesturing to the adjacent cell.

‘The guest?’ answered the guard in Hindi. ‘He left before 7 o’clock. He had come here only for a day.

‘What!’ Abhinav screamed.

‘A long sleep you had, eh, Gulshan? It’s well past noon. We were wondering if your visitors brought some sleeping tablets. Eh?’

‘No!’ Abhinav croaked. ‘I am not Gulshan Pandey! *Mein Gulshan Pandey nahin hoon.*’

‘Of course, you aren’t!’ The guard grinned and walked away.

Slowly, understanding dawned on Abhinav. Gulshan had drugged him with the Bengali sweets and swapped cells with him during the night. And clothes. For all practical purposes, identities too.

Someone within the prison must have been hand-in-glove for that to happen. Of course! Gulshan’s father was an important man. A big shot. They had shaved Gulshan so that he looked more like Abhinav – a man of similar age and build.

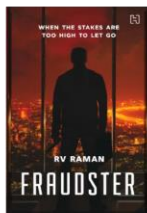
For all practical purposes, Abhinav was now Gulshan Pandey!

An anguished cry rose from the cell, followed by racking sobs. Soon, agonised screams could be heard:

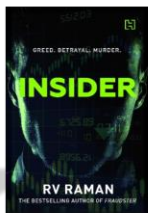
‘*Mein Gulshan Pandey nahin hoon!*’

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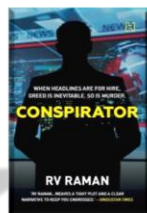
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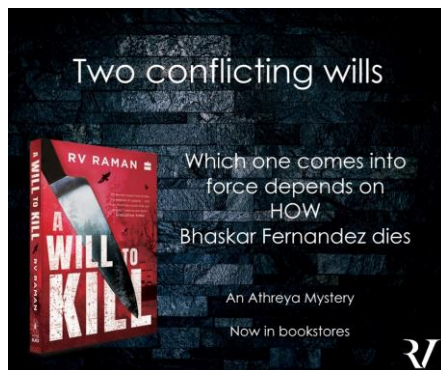
A STOCKBROKER IS
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ESPIONAGE & MURDER
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