

EVERY SECRET LEAVES A TRACE.
SOME CHOOSE TO FOLLOW IT.
HE LIVES IT.

കൂട്ടിപ്പുരം
KUTTIPPURAM
कुटिप्पुरम MSL-7.00m

HE IS NOT A POLICEMAN.
NOT A CRIMINAL.
HE IS **THE GAP**
BETWEEN THEM.

ZERO DAY

A STACK TRACE

A STORY FROM
KUTTIPPURAM RAILWAY STATION

"The wrong we point out in another,
when we do it ourselves,
that finger completes a circle
and **turns back** to point at us.



A FALSE UNIFORM
TO CATCH A CRIMINAL



TOOLS OF THE LAW
IN THE HANDS OF A MAN
OUTSIDE THE LAW



JUSTICE ISN'T
THE GOAL.
SETTLEMENT IS.



FEAR IS CREATED.
TRUST IS SOLD.



TWO IDENTITIES.
ONE MAN.
NO ANSWER.

A FAKE MESSAGE.
A FAKE UNIFORM.
A GAP IN TRUST.
THE SAME CRIME.

PURE WATER.
SAFE LIFE.

UNSOLVED CASES

OPEN FILES
HALF CLOSED
NO ANSWERS

POLICE RECORDS

ACCESS GRANTED

1
PLATFORM

Zero Day — A Stack Trace

Kuttippuram Railway Station | A Story

One — Sunrise

The grey of dawn had not yet fully lifted. At the eastern edge of the sky the sun split open slowly, like a wound — red first, then orange, and finally a pale gold spilling across the iron of the platform. The train from Bangalore to Mangalore stood panting at Kozhikode station with one long sigh. The groan of metal, the whistle, the muttering of people who hadn't slept enough — the station woke slowly, like some large animal.

Through the crush of those climbing down, a man of thirty-five or forty stepped onto the platform from sleeper coach S1. Blue jeans, a black t-shirt. The night's creases still in the cloth. In his hand a bag — not heavy, but always held tight. General-compartment passengers had crowded into the reserved coach too, and he slipped out through that press of bodies with the ease of a fish slipping free of a net.

For a while he simply stood there. The crowd moved past him. There was something particular in the way he stood — unhurried, watching everything, yet caught by no one's notice. His eyes measured every corner of the platform in a single moment: the ways out, the police booth, the eye of the CCTV camera.

Then he found a steel bench and sat. The cold of the metal crept up through his jeans. A little distance away, near the tap, a man of forty-five or fifty was brushing his teeth. The sight stirred a habit in him. He took a brush and paste from his bag, walked to the tap, brushed, washed his face in the cold water. The film of sleep ran off his face; beneath it, the same tired face remained.

Then he looked at his phone. Sent a few messages. His fingers moved quickly, but his eyes kept drifting to the door. He was waiting for someone's call — or getting ready to make one.

A little later the call came. Two or three words. He asked nothing, held the phone to his ear and listened, then put it away. The moment he hung up he walked straight out. He asked an auto driver for directions — *the railway police station*. The driver, still drowsy, pointed down a side lane. Bag in hand, he walked that way.

Inside the bag was a set of casual clothes — a track pant, a collared t-shirt — and beneath them, folded, a khaki pant and shirt. Two lives in a single bag.

When he reached the station the assistant sub-inspector saw him — and smiled the smile you give someone you know. He led him into an inner room: the room where the police changed uniform. Iron lockers, the smell of old sweat, a faded calendar on the wall.

As they walked, almost idly, the ASI asked:

“Is this your first time at the station?”

For a moment he stopped. The question was simple, but the answer snagged inside him. His eyes dropped; a thought flickered across his face.

“No,” he said. Then, suddenly, “...yes.” Silence again. At last, with a thin smile, “No.”

The ASI looked at him with a doubt. He added quickly: “I mean — when I was in the NCC I came to police stations many times for election-duty support. And when I was working in Bangalore I’d drop by some station now and then. So these are familiar places to me.”

The ASI nodded, but a suspicion lingered in his eyes. The answer was right in its words, yet a truth lay hidden behind those words. This man was no real policeman — that much was clear. But then who was he? Why did these stations take him in so naturally? Something is not right, the ASI felt — but didn’t find the nerve to ask.

“Want to freshen up? I’ll get you a towel and soap,” the ASI said finally, as if changing the subject.

He took them and went into the bathroom. Shut the door. Turned on the shower. As the water ran down over his head, the old questions came down on him with its chill. At every new station, beneath every new shower, they would come — like uninvited guests.

Why did I come here? Who am I? — No, yes, no. All three were true. Maybe that’s why none of them was an answer.

The water had no reply. But the memories did.

Two — Assam

Memory carried him to a field. But the hero of that memory was not him — it was someone else. Far away, a dust-blown ground in a village in Assam.

A young man who had woken that morning, brushed, got ready, and gone out to play. Somewhere in his late twenties. From Assam. He was good at cricket. Batted well, bowled well. Two wickets in the very first over. His friends shouted, slapped his back. In that moment he was the freest man in the world.

After the game he walked to the shop. Smoked a cigarette, drank a tea. As the smoke and

the heat went down his throat, the high of the win brightened once more. Then he started for home, the game's spring still in his legs.

Around eleven o'clock a jeep pulled up, kicking up dust. A police jeep. A man stepped out, asked his name and his details — in the firm voice of an officer. Then drew him aside and spoke low. Something had happened. Words were exchanged. His friends didn't hear them, but they saw his changing face.

Fear spread across the Assam man's face. First disbelief, then recognition, finally fear.

He came and stood there frightened — fear on his face, but with it a thin thread of hope. Because the officer did not take out handcuffs. He was talking. He was bargaining. *The aim isn't to take you in — it's to settle*, those eyes said.

The two of them spoke a while. At last the young man went inside and came back, with trembling hands, carrying some money. Twenty-five thousand rupees. Perhaps the family's savings, perhaps borrowed. The man took it, said a word or two more, climbed into the jeep and left. The dust rose again, then settled.

The man who came in that jeep — it was him. The one we saw on the platform at the start of the story. The Assam man never knew he was not a real policeman. The same lie he gave the ASI — *no, yes, no* — there, it was a uniform.

Once he had handed over the money, it was as if some weight that had sat inside him for a long time had lifted — the case was over, no jail, no disgrace. And yet, along with that relief, it was with a sorrow inside that he climbed back home. The crime had been small. The punishment had been large.

Three — Threads

The shower brought him back to the present. The water was still running.

This is his work — work the world doesn't know, recorded in no file. He hacks police records. From between those records he picks out certain crimes the police don't reveal: investigations stalled halfway, or ones no one bothered to notice. He finds the people behind those crimes himself — faster than the police, more precisely than the police. And then he catches them. But not to take them to court — to settle, in the arithmetic of money. He catches those the law cannot; not for justice, but because he holds a truth worth bargaining over.

Every criminal is a secret. Every secret has a price. He knows how to calculate that price.

That is how he reached the Assam man.

The Assam man's crime was this: he would buy unreserved tickets. To the number of the clerk issuing the tickets he'd send fake messages, making it seem an online payment had come through — when in truth not a single rupee had changed hands. Then he'd go to another counter, cancel that same ticket, and take the "paid" money back as a refund. The money had never reached them; but he'd make it look as if it had. "It's a network problem, the message to your number came from a different phone," he'd say, and convince the clerk. And through that gap in trust, the money would slip away.

Small sums. Many stations. Many days. Trivial on its own; gathered together, a crime. It had been logged as a case — but no one could find the culprit.

In the end a clever officer investigated it. He hacked the CCTV footage, found the exact time of each transaction, and stitched together from many frames the same face that had stood before the counter at those times. Then he hacked the Aadhaar system and gave that face a name and an address. At last, in a jeep, he arrived at the gate of that ground in the man's village.

That clever officer, too, was him. The officer without a uniform. A nameless man of many disguises. A man who uses the tools of the law, but lives outside it.

Then, beneath the shower, he asked himself — *what is the difference between me and the ones I catch? He made a fake message. I wear a fake uniform. He took money through a gap in trust. I do exactly the same.* No answer came. He turned off the water. But the question did not close.

Four — Pure Water

After the bath at the police station he changed — not into khaki, this time a collared t-shirt and formal trousers. One costume off, the next one on, he reported for "duty." Straight to an office.

There the staff received him as if they'd been expecting him — shaking his hand, smiling, offering tea. Here he is a consultant, an expert, a guest. He went into the boardroom, set his bag in a corner — inside it the clothes from earlier and, among them, a laptop. He opened the laptop, brought up the presentations he'd prepared one by one, and waited for everyone to gather.

They assembled. He stood and, with a calm confidence, explained the company's complete branding and marketing plan. It was a water-purifying company. The science of how water turns foul in the rains, the necessity of purification, the strategies to sell purifiers to different classes of customers — he laid out each in turn, through slides, through graphs.

Then, lowering his voice a little, he put forward a plan.

"A news story," he said, "that makes it seem the purity of this area's public water has gone bad — we'll create it ourselves." A silence in the room. "That story will make fear. Fear will make demand. Demand will sell our product."

There were two or three ways to do it, he explained — through a local paper, through a social media campaign, or through an "independent" testing report. Which way to choose was what remained to be decided. How to get a water-lab approval into their hands, how — in the coming monsoon, the season when fear runs highest — to capture the maximum market.

An arithmetic that, in order to sell water, makes water itself out to be poisoned. The trick of turning fear into a product.

As he spoke, for one moment, the face of the Assam man rose inside him. *He sent a fake message and made a little money — I called him a criminal and caught him. Now I'm about to manufacture a fake story and frighten an entire city.* The same crime, a different scale. When I find the crime in another man, that same crime returns to me.

And yet there was no change in his face. Because this too was only a costume. But that thought — that was not a costume.

Five — Sunset

When the meeting ended, hands shaken, smiles exchanged, he turned back toward the railway station. Outside, the afternoon sun glinted off the platform's iron.

He climbed once more into the police station near the railway station. This time not as a guest, but as a helper. The policemen were waiting, as if expecting him. Some digital evidence from a recent case — what they couldn't find on their own — he had gathered and now showed them. A clear lead to the culprit. The policemen nodded, took notes, thanked him.

With one hand he helps the law, with the other he lives in the gaps of that same law. To the police he was a necessity; to criminals a nightmare; to himself a riddle. Somewhere among these contradictions was his life — without a fixed address, without a real name.

Handing over the evidence, packing his bag, he went in to bathe once more — to get ready for the next costume. This time the bathroom was not as it had been in the morning; an unpleasant smell hung in the room. There wasn't a single woman police officer there, yet something in the air was like the faint trace of someone having passed through. This space belongs now to many, to no one — like him. Bearing the smell, he washed quickly.

Then, packing the bag again — the same bag, the same two lives — he walked to the railway station.

Now the day was ending. The train standing at the platform was the same one he had seen that morning — but now it was returning from Mangalore to Bangalore. The same track, the opposite direction. The same sun that had risen at dawn was now sinking in the west. The whole sky burned gold — that last, dying golden star of a single day. In that light the iron rails became two shining lines, seeming to meet far away.

In the morning, when the sun rose, he had stepped down carrying a question. Now, as the sun set, he was returning with the same question — *Who am I?* — but now there was a weight along with it. He had called the Assam man a criminal. Yet all day he had committed the very same crime — deception, betrayal of trust, fear sold for money. The wrong we point out in another, the moment we do it ourselves — that finger completes a circle and turns back to point at us.

Two minds ground against each other inside him — one the judge, the other the one to be judged. Which is the real him? No. Yes. No. Perhaps both. Perhaps that is man — a contradiction at war with itself, in a single breath both hunter and prey.

The train whistled. Holding his bag tight, walking through the golden light, he climbed into the same S1 coach. The door swallowed him. The train moved off slowly, into the gold of the sunset, toward Bangalore.

Outside, the steel bench lay empty, waiting for the next traveller.

Because tomorrow there is another station. Another sunrise, another costume, another criminal, another settlement. This story does not end here — it is only one of his many days. Each day he will judge someone, and each day that judgment will find its way back to him.

— *To be continued*