

SUNIL GUPTA



FINAL INNINGS



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THE FIRST INNINGS

Chapter One



Ramdas Upreti adjusted the top strap of his left pad, tightened the wristbands of his gloves and looked around the field.

India were 18 for 2 on the last day of a Test match in Adelaide in early 2016, a match they had battled long and hard to save, and with that save the series as well. There were only two hours to go till stumps, but the pitch was dusty and turning, there was uneven bounce and of course the Aussies were in his face.

It had been an ill-tempered series. Sledging had been raised to new heights (or had fallen, depending on which way you looked at these things, to new lows); the umpires had to intervene on more than a few occasions as the language and gestures became increasingly vulgar. The media soaked it all up and then regurgitated it in a gushing frenzy of almost lascivious proportions, especially since the Indians had not taken it meekly but had given as good, or bad, as they got.

And today was no exception. If anything, it was worse, with the Aussies sensing that the series had almost gotten away from their grasp, and the desperation that shows when a sense of entitlement might be negated was manifest with the reception he received as he'd walked in when the second wicket fell.

Spin had been brought in early to try and bowl as many overs as possible at the Indians since time was short, but the added incentive was that the close-in fielders would be able to really get under the batsman's skin from close quarters. The invective could therefore be more vicious and could be whispered to ensure that the umpires wouldn't hear clearly, even though they knew fully well what was probably being said.

And the fielders looked vicious as well, with the shades, sun cream and helmets combining to make them seem like painted barbarians from a bygone era. Ramdas often felt that some of them purposely overdid the

gladiatorial imagery to try and develop the blank masked faces which were all the more frightening for their lack of expression. Somewhere in the back of his mind the scenes from the movie *Gladiator* jostled like ghoulish imps, reinforcing his sense of loneliness in what was after all a Coliseum of sorts.

In a way, though, Ramdas didn't mind, because right from childhood he had developed a sense of him against the world, a role which he carefully cultivated and played to the hilt, right from his school days. *'The "Lone Ranger"'*, *'Once more unto the breach, Ramdas'*, *'One for all but none for One'* and so on were some of the newspaper headlines that had marked the more intense of his efforts to salvage many sinking Indian ships, especially on jousts abroad. But the scars were showing, and the will to battle it out repeatedly was beginning to fade.

In fact, if he was honest with himself, it had got the better of him on this very tour. Oh, of course, he hadn't done anything glaringly silly like trying to hit his way out of a tight spot (that would have been almost as alien, and therefore as conspicuous as a Ponting who chided his players if they sledged); but he had been lazy in his running between the wickets, hadn't dived to make his ground and had been run out at the MCG (his excuse that there were only a few minutes to go in the game and he wasn't as lithe as before had sounded lame even to himself), and a couple of times he had essayed drives which had more chances of finding the edge than finding someone not littering back home.

But all that was like a muted background score in a long movie in which he was unwillingly starring. It had not been a good series for him, and murmurs about his abilities waning were increasing as the series wore on. Just a couple of fifties to show for his efforts in nine innings, and though he didn't really feel as if he was losing his touch, perhaps, the eye-hand coordination and the movement of his feet upon which he had built his reputation were not as precise as they were before. So when they commented upon those things, he wasn't too perturbed, even though the comments had begun to get a trifle snarky: *'Ramdas is looking increasingly ponderous: is age and Aussie wine finally catching up?'* was one of the kinder critiques he had received. (Yes, he'd always had a fondness for the good things in life courtesy a childhood of some deprivation, and if he wasn't careful, 'ponderous' might well become an apt description). It was when they were more in the vein of *'Ramdas had better get his act together. He's keeping out some good young talent just on the basis of his reputation'* that they began to scrape bone.

“Mate, give old Ponders a corkscrew, maybe he’d be better off using that than his bat!” brought him out of his mini-reverie. Trust the Aussies to pick that one up. “Hey Ponders, you fatass, want a jack to help yer lift yer feet?”; “He don’t know the difference between red and white, mate, give him the red ball in his teeth!”; “Hey mate, no vino out here, this is a cricket match, but we’ll get you off the pub soon enough,” and so on.

“No profane stuff?” wondered Ramdas. Maybe later if he hung around long enough to get the snarls going. His mind drifted again, thinking of what he might do after the series was over and he was back home. Another snide one brought him back to the stark reality of the cracked and scarred Adelaide pitch: “Turn around, mate, Jacko’ll give you a rocket up yer ass so you can run back to the hutch double quick.”

Ramdas looked up at his batting partner, Pandey, at the other end. Pandey had been in his ear while he’d walked up to the wicket. “Weiner’s” (Sean Weiner, the legendary leg-spinner) “using more wrong’uns today, look out for them,” and “Jackson’s getting some reverse” and so on. Good lad, Pandey, if he stays away from the girls, he thought absently, quite conversant himself with inevitable feminine allures that follow young and successful cricketers. God knows he’d been in the same boat but had managed to sail safely away without too much headwind.

Anyway.

It all seemed an eternity, but in truth had been less than a minute. Jackson was a fearsome left arm quick, whose all-out aggression had destroyed many a career, and he was pawing the ground at the top of his bowling mark. His latest feat had been to reduce Canter, the England No. 3, to a quivering wreck through some of the most hostile short-pitched bowling that had ever been seen, even by those who were old enough to remember the Bodyline series. Canter never played for England again.

The umpire, Khalid Azam from Pakistan, was wearing shades and looked as inscrutable as always. Ramdas’s mind wandered again to something he’d often wondered about: Do umpires wear shades to prevent people from noticing the indecision, even fear, in their eyes when called upon to make a tough call? He’d asked one of them a long time ago one morning at breakfast, and had got no answer, but from then on he’d made it a point not to sit at Ramdas’s table. But Khalid Azam was one of the better umpires, seemed to be quietly efficient and didn’t make too many dodgy calls. Ramdas hadn’t been at the receiving end of any, as it happened, since

all his dismissals when Azam had been the umpire at the bowler's end had been clear-cut.

With another effort, Ramdas dragged himself back to the present, settled into his stance and waited for Jackson. It had been a ball that had cut back in sharply from outside the off stump and had beaten Minz (the man whose dismissal had brought him to the crease) all ends up as it snuck in between bat and pad and hit the top of middle. The commentators were raving about it, and the dressing room had fallen silent. Jackson at one end and Weiner at the other was a combination to be feared, especially on a fifth day pitch.

Then suddenly, from somewhere, the blood rose in Ramdas's veins. "What's up, you guys? Has daddy tied your tongues with your jocks? You'll be going to Sunday school next!" Then the snarls stared in earnest. That was good. It helped Ramdas focus and stopped his mind from wandering.

He finally settled into his stance, and that eerie silence that always overtook him when he played his first ball, right from his school days, enveloped him. It had been one of his biggest strengths, that ability to cocoon himself in the moment. Jackson started running in, and half Ramdas's mind nodded in appreciation of the smoothness of the stride, the rhythm just right, like a thoroughbred cantering in a dressage event, into his delivery stride now, braced front leg, left arm high, pulling the body through in a whipping arc, more terrifying because of its grace, and then the ball was on its way.

At the top level, it's all played in the mind. When basic ability is taken as given, playing on the international stage is a battle of wits more than anything else. Think, counter-think, outthink. Some said don't think, just let instinct take over, because you'll overthink and then the ball's on you and the game's up. But you had to find your own comfort zone, and Ramdas's was to think and prepare. What was that first ball going to be? Another in-cutter because it had worked, and Jackson might think that Ramdas wouldn't be expecting him to repeat it right upfront and so would play for the one that straightened or went away? Or the double bluff?

It would be the one that went away, Ramdas knew, because he'd been caught behind a couple of times in the series off Jackson and Jackson knew it too. And he was going to leave it alone, not push at it, just raise his bat and let it whump into the keeper's gloves.

It wasn't. It was the triple bluff, damn it, Jackson had outthought him, the ball pitched short and screaming towards his ribcage even as he was about to raise his bat in anticipation of it moving away.

Too late. All he managed to do was to twist his body so that the ball struck him on the side of his ribs and not full on. The world stopped for a millisecond and then the shock and pain erupted. It wasn't as if he'd not been hit before, but those had been mostly on the gloves and arms. The impact on the ribs felt like he'd run full tilt into a metal ball protruding from a locked gate. Winded, he sank to his knees, vision blurring, legs turned to mush. There was a vague sense of Pandey running up to him, the umpire from square leg too, and then the baked sun in a blue oven seemed to burst upon his eyes and as he collapsed, his one impression was how the smell of the grass was not fresh but dusty and acrid.

But somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that this was not the way he wanted to go, not the way that he'd ever dreamt he'd leave a ground, stretchered off or leaning wearily on someone's shoulders. That reality forced its way up in his consciousness like a child throwing a tantrum, a tantrum which he could not ignore because it was so strident. He knew the physio had arrived because he could smell the pain relieving spray (Spraytrigger's here, his mind said to him from a million miles away, using the nickname the team had given the physio because he was so quick to use the spray), and he heard what seemed to be a disembodied voice ask if he could breathe, see and speak in that order.

The shock was easing, he could hear more voices, the blur was clearing. He forced himself to breathe, one by one, slowly, dragging in the air in little whoops, like suet down his windpipe. He coughed, dragged his gloves off from his hands which had been clutching his chest, and levered himself to his knees.

The painted faces were there, of course, asking the right things but the eyes, the eyes, they were leering. Jackson wasn't one of them, he realized as things became clearer. He thought he heard a chuckle from behind him, not loud, just choked off but there. All he could think of was that they'd be at him again with the 'ponderous' jibes, more malicious, more cutting because he'd been hit, he hadn't been able to get out of the way, he had failed in a sense to read the bowler's mind.

The two umpires were there too, of course, Khalid Azam speaking in Urdu, which even in his dazed state Ramdas found touching, as if it

brought them together in some indefinable manner, two South Asians in a battlefield of westerners. His mind wandered again: were Aussies westerners or easterners? He coughed, the effort searing his ribcage and he clutched it, which was worse, because the pain felt like an electric shock.

Spraytrigger was trying to get him to lie down so that he could remove his shirt completely and assess the damage. But Ramdas was in no mood to oblige, what with the Aussies all around him, who he was certain would snigger at the sight and use it as fresh fodder in the sledging that was certain to be doubly jagged when he got back to bat.

His shirt was half off now, and he was beginning to focus better. He felt Spraytrigger's fingers pressing gently around the area where the ball had hit, and then he heard his tongue clicking and he knew immediately that the news wasn't going to be good. "Seems like a crack," he heard him say.

But he was also certain of one thing, and that was he was going back to bat. He pushed Spraytrigger's hand away and tried to get up. The pain hit him like the piercing of a rapier as bone grated. The grass seemed like saw-teeth as he steadied himself on his palms, then levered himself on to his feet. His head swam, big giddy waves of nausea and a faint red mist.

Azam was holding him by the shoulder and asking if wanted to go off. Spraytrigger was picking up his bat and helmet, and the twelfth man and a couple of subs were there too, with a stretcher. He suddenly felt very lonely, almost like he was adrift at sea, or on a faraway mountaintop. He shook his head, pulled his shirt down, asked for water and heard himself telling Spraytrigger to give him his bat and helmet. It sounded like the croak of a very old crow.

Voices broke out on all sides. Spraytrigger almost squeaked in agitation, the subs were mumbling "No, no, Ramu-*pa*", Khalid Azam was gesturing to them to put him on the stretcher, and the other umpire, Ian Adams from England, was, true to form, murmuring things about how time was passing by and that the game had to start as soon as possible.

He reached for a bottle of water and tried hard to stop the tremor in his fingers. First sip, throat tight, he coughed and spat; poured some water on his head, tried another sip and this one went down like iron scrapings, but it went down, then another and slowly the pain began to ease, voltage down from 280 to 200 but retreating all the same, and he looked up and around. The Aussies had begun to melt away, not looking at him almost in an exaggerated manner as if to say they'd done what protocol demanded

and that was enough, and in truth it was, and in any case he didn't want them anywhere near him.

He gestured to one of the subs for new gloves, located his helmet, put on both slowly, picked up his bat, found that it was like lifting a log, put it down, pretended to adjust the straps on his pads, and tried again. Still a log, but a smaller one, and then finally he looked up and around, summoned up a weak grin, and walked carefully back to the crease.

Khalid Azam looked at him, decided not to say anything, and neither did Pandey. He heard sporadic applause from the stands, the Aussie crowd and sprinkling of Indians acknowledging his effort, took guard and settled. His heart drummed against his chest, adding to the stabbing pain, and then there was Jackson on the move.

"Think, think, think" he muttered to himself, "what's it going to be now?" but even before his brain could process the thought Jackson was on to him, arm high, the sun in the background even whiter, and there it was, the bouncer again, no subtlety of 'push him back and send down the fuller one' with Jackson, it was to be blood on the sword again, but Ramdas's feet refused to move and all he could do was stand hunched in his stance waiting for the blow, but Jackson's venom propelled him to pitch it just that bit shorter and so the ball flew high over his head and smacked into the keeper's gloves.

Silence for a fleeting second and then the voices came at him. "Lucky bloke, Jacko was aimin' for yer head," and "One more, Jacko, do it to Ponders," and sundry other such helpful suggestions.

"That's one for the over," said Khalid Azam to Jackson, who gave him his customary blank glare, turned at the top of his mark and stopped. Ramdas knew he was trying to get into his mind, what he'd be expecting, whether it would be the double-double bluff or whether he'd save the bouncer for later in the over. He gestured Khalid Azam to ask how many deliveries were left in the over, and Khalid Azam signalled two.

So, mind games once more: one of them would be the bouncer for sure...but this or the next? Then came the sudden clarity that accompanies acute pain, the splitting of the mind into that pain and this moment, and he knew, just knew that this one would be the bouncer because if it wasn't, then Jackson would know that he would know that the last ball would have to be the bouncer and he'd be able to navigate it...or at least be better prepared.

Ha. Jackson was one step ahead...he informed the umpire he wanted to go round the wicket and was gesturing Billwell, the captain, that he wanted a bodyline field, i.e. two catching behind leg, a forward short leg and a man out in the deep on the onside for the miscued hook just in case Ramdas was brave (or foolhardy) enough to try one, and then a short point, a gully, a fly slip (for the uppercut in case he tried that route) and two slips: virtually no one in front of the bat anywhere on the field. The crowd bayed in support as they realized what the plan was.

Many years ago, Ramdas had heard a tune by Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass called *The Lonely Bull*. The melancholy moan of the trumpet echoed the aloneness — so different from ‘loneliness’ — of the bull inside the *Plaza de Toros* looking at the matador, the red haze of pain and anger, the desperation of defeat that prompts the bull for another charge only to be pierced again, the chant of “*Ole*” from the crowd emphasising the unequal contest, all was brought to vivid life by the music, music that often brought him to tears. Ramdas could feel the same echoing emptiness of isolation now in that vast Adelaide Oval, and the plight of the bloodied bull came alive to him as he squared up to Jackson running in.

There was no sound in his ears at all now. Almost metronomically he moved back and across, and then the ball was upon him, shorter than perhaps Jackson had wanted and so it bounced higher and he was able to sway out of the way, not elegantly but effectively enough and there was a collective *whoosh* from the crowd, his heart hammered and the fielders were in his ear again, “That was close, mate,”; “He’ll get yer next time, no worries,”; “Did yer see it at all, fatso?” The diatribe was unrelenting.

He stood still, unclenched one hand from the bat handle and used that to prise open the other, and tried to flex it but couldn’t. He closed his eyes, waited for the blood rush in his head to fade, then looked up at the sky but saw nothing, no clouds, no sun, no colour, just a shroud that seemed very, very far away.

Back into his stance, hands tight on the handle as if it were a club, the throb in his ribcage like an insistent drumbeat, and there was Jackson again. It couldn’t be another bouncer, he’d had his two for the over, and so it would be fuller, not a bouncer but just short of a length, targeting the ribs again because the field hadn’t changed, and there came the ball, it was the bouncer, third of the over be damned, no-ball for the third in the over be

damned, Jackson couldn't care less. It flashed into vision and even before he felt it he heard the *thunk* as it smashed into the tiny gap between his helmet and the grill, and as he fell he saw Anne looking at him and he knew that the shroud might well be for real.

Chapter Two



He was dreaming.

His helmet was smashed and he was on the ground. There was no pain, just a clubbed daze, and then there was Anne, but she didn't hold out her hand, just watched as he was picked up and then she wasn't there as he looked up to the sky and it was twinkling now, a million stars dazzling him as they slowly turned to dark.

He was dreaming.

It was winter in Delhi. It was a beautiful day, crisp and bright, and he was with Anne, lying in the grass and watching the clouds make their soul pyramids above. She was watching him with a look he could not fathom, and he reached out to hold her hand. But she didn't reach back out, and when he took her hand finally it was stiff and dry. He tried to ask her why, but the words didn't come. He tried to get up but something held him down and when he looked at the ground he saw it had turned to mud. Mud that stuck and clung and glued him down.

He looked up again but she had become a shadow, a cold shadow on a warm day that obscured the sun, and he saw his hand was cold and white and as it dropped to the mud he could not lift it up.

The shadow moved up, up and away and he tried to call, to cry, to pull it back but it slipped through his other hand and he could feel only sand and dust. He wept.

He was dreaming.

He was with Anne on a boat on the lake in Nainital. She was dressed in white, a white dress with a white cardigan, sitting in front of him on the seat while he rowed. The oars were yellow and the water had a greenish-blue tint and together he thought it made a pretty picture. Her hair was open and teased by the breeze. She smiled at him and said something, something he could not hear so he leaned forward towards her, and as he did so the

boat tilted and she floated into the lake, still smiling, holding out her hand and this time he couldn't get to it, he saw her drift away and then he was alone on the lake, not a soul in sight, and the lake became a river and then a sea and he was all alone.

He was dreaming.

Anne. Anne of a Thousand Days. He used to joke about it with her, teasing her that a thousand days were all they were going to get and they should thus make the most of them, and she would put her finger on his lips and say shush, he shouldn't joke about such things because he was so susceptible to the evil eye and he loved her for that because as anyone knows what a man wants to hear is that his love fears the evil eye and somehow it makes it all the more intimate. And then she kissed her finger, the one she had put on his lips and it was even closer than a real kiss, and his stomach felt all funny.

He was dreaming.

He was batting. He knew, just knew, that the match depended on him playing out the next and last ball, and he tried to focus hard but when the bowler arrived at the crease it was Anne and he was so surprised that he didn't see the ball at all and it hit the stumps and there were howls of laughter all around from the fielding team and she looked sorry, so sorry, but the deed was done, though he tried remonstrating with them that the bowler had changed mid-stride, it wasn't fair, but they laughed even harder. So he turned to her but her eyes were blank, remote, and he knew it was over. "Why?," he asked, but there was no reply. She just looked at him. "It's only 999 days, its unfair, it has to be a thousand" he heard himself saying and while he said it he knew he was being plaintive, a cry-baby, the desperation of separation drove out self-respect and he sank to his knees and said in a very low voice "why here?" Here, where he had respect, he was known, he was looked up to? All taken away in seconds. And then he realized that they weren't laughing because he was bowled, they were laughing because he had allowed his love to be stripped by a woman on a cricket field.

He was dreaming.

He is at the movies with friends. It was *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, not the Ronald Donat but the Peter O'Toole version. He'd always liked him, his near-manic look, his precise way of speaking, his arctic-blue eyes which pierced you like a pair of ice-picks, the intensity in even the most trivial scene, but most of

all the way he portrayed characters which could and did lose out. It was one of his favourite movies because he identified with the shy teacher who is attracted to an unhappy girl-about-town, the inability of Mr. Chipping to speak confidently, and the utter softness of a quiet romance that brings two very different people together, bound by their own loneliness.

The scene is when Mr. Chipping is retiring as Headmaster and leaving the school; the bereft look in his eyes haunts and suddenly Ramdas feels a sharp pain in his stomach and chest, the pain of loss and grieving, a physical pain that makes him retch and hold the seat. He looks around but the hall is empty, and then the film suddenly unspools into multiple images of Anne.

He was dreaming.

It promises to be a better dream. He's just hitting the winning runs and hears the roar of the crowd as the ball speeds away towards the boundary. He savours the moment and looks for Anne in the pavilion. There she is, waving and jumping. He runs all the way to the pavilion but when he gets there, there's only a large picture of her flapping in the breeze. And then the pavilion turns into the same cinema theatre as before.

Dreams are dreams, after all. So are promises. No one says they're true.

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