

Secrets of the Midnight Nuclear Deal

It started with a kiss, a regulation diplomatic peck on the cheek, but it left Sarada flustered, unable to pay undivided attention to the morning's opening salvos between the Israeli and Palestinian delegations on whether Iran had or had not nuclear capability.

His hand had been on her bare skin at the back, above the deep cut of her blouse, pressing her to him for just a second. As Foreign Secretary in waiting, she was not unaccustomed to meaningless Western greetings in cold friendship, so she was surprised his touch had got through so easily to some secret spot under her skin. Was it the onset of menopause, she questioned again, listlessly rifling through the papers obsequiously handed to her from time to time by an Undersecretary sitting behind her. No, that crisis was at least two years away she had judged that morning, pinning the cascading folds of her silk sari to the thin strip of blouse at her shoulder.

She had not felt the need of a husband throughout her hectic career, you missed out if you didn't catch them early at the training academy, but she had had no regrets, in fact only relief, and she was still free to enjoy the occasional discreet friendship her career permitted. Was his touch a signal, a query? No, it had never started like this before...

The German studiously ignored her during the coffee break. She had unconsciously drifted in his direction, holding a coffee cup and two arrowroot biscuits on the edge of the saucer, but he had continued a technical discussion with the Moroccan expert. All right, she could play games as well. She plunged into light-hearted chatter with the Danish boy almost half her age, but as far as the German was concerned she need not even have been there. A little cross, a little uncertain about herself mostly, she returned to her seat at the deserted conference table and purposefully shaking herself free plunged into her papers. During the buffet lunch she was steered to a corner by her minister, and she politely nodded at all his meaningless instructions. Yes, it was vitally important for the country, for half meeting the growing energy requirements of industry, that a deal should be struck. Yes, it had to be done without fanfare. Yes, God only knew what the crazy environment brigade would think of next. Yes, no, they could not afford to be stymied this time. Yes, she was very grateful the honourable minister was entrusting her with the delicate negotiations. Yes, the best technology must be secured at all costs. Yes, yes, she knew that, without his breathing a word even to cabinet colleagues, that the system must be able to supply plutonium for defence needs. Of course everyone knew that, but, yes, it cannot be talked about, God only knew what the stupid peaceniks would do – he knew and she knew that they could masquerade as so-called 'Gandhians,' but really who knew if it was not after all a Pakistani ISI plot? It was a relief to get away from her minister, partly because she got very tired of listening to diplomatic clichés as if they were heavenly revelations, but more so because of his bad breath. Had he never heard his wife complain? Most probably she had never gone near him in twenty years, except for giving him the conventional early morning cup of coffee.

During the afternoon session 'he' was absolutely brilliant. He spoke on the international necessity of cooperating on the development of safe nuclear power, sharing of knowledge and expertise so that all humanity would benefit. It was her own favourite theme. Unlimited sources of energy were needed if poverty was to be abolished from the earth. The only such source lay in the heart of matter, everyone knew that. Without access to nuclear power all nations, big and small, would be in competition, in disastrous competition, for scarce resources, and that would lead to unimaginable consequences. Her heart warmed to hear him take up her own passionate pleadings at international conferences. The situation, he said, was not dissimilar to what Europe faced before the Treaty of Westphalia. Small states at war or in fear of war, a Hobbesian scenario. That treaty established a framework for international cooperation. He went into details. Not all the princes of Europe were ready for it, or even willing to consider an international binding agreement. He regaled everyone with comical anecdotes of all the behind-the-scenes deals, the affairs, the idiosyncrasies of the negotiators and their princes. Of course, she knew he was a historian of repute with a deep knowledge of medieval diplomacy, but it was not mere dry erudition, he made the times come alive, as if he had been a direct eye witness. Through her eyelashes she looked at his handsome Germanic profile, the startling contrasts of his face, long straight black hair framing the white bloodless pallor of his skin, and striking light blue eyes which pierced her soul. He had chilli red lips, they could burn her mouth...she realized her fingers were trembling slightly as she doodled on her pad. She shook herself free of fantasies. If it was to happen, it would happen, but she must focus on the job at hand, to secure the best possible advantage for her country. By late afternoon she had almost fully recovered from the passions that had haunted her earlier. She had plunged determinedly into the discussions, and political negotiating had had a calming effect on her nerves. It always did.

Dinner was a lavish affair, as usual, and as usual the Brazilian made an obligatory pass, and she responded with her expected flirtatious smile. The BRIC brigade were to be shown special consideration. The minister was seated next to the imperturbable, impenetrable Chinese delegate. She smiled to herself. They would both bore each other without saying anything over the long evening. Her senior as was to be expected was volubly seated next to the Russian. She would have been Foreign Secretary if he had not been given a year's extension on the strength of his knowing Russian like a native. Well, he should, after having run through two Russian wives. So, she had got Brazil to sit next to. His hand was on her knee once again, and smilingly she brushed it off, once again. Would he try and seek the bare skin of her back? That thought reminded her with a thrill of the German's light touch that morning. The thrill turned to a shiver as the Brazilian sought that exact moment to grip her waist and massage her skin invitingly with his fingers.

'You have to let go of me, Dom Antonio,' she whispered with a smile, bending her head low towards him, to convince anyone who might be watching that it was all in play.

'But, of course, Madame,' he said releasing her with a polite dip of his head, 'with the greatest regret.'

His lips smiled provocatively at her beneath his straight black moustache. If she had not been a highly trained diplomat she would have punched him one in his rotund paunch, or even better swiped his bald head off. All she could do under the circumstances was give him a non-encouraging coquettish smile and turn to the Canadian on her right. A straight up and down fellow who bored everyone with his fixation for a global non-proliferation treaty. Which world was he living in, other than the one he had inhabited in the protest-filled sixties?

It was later that night, upstairs in her room, that she noticed 'his' card. It fell as she removed her bra. He must have slipped it into her blouse at the back as he touched her that morning. With a suddenly pounding heart she picked it up. He had scrawled *Moghul Bar – midnight. Yanam*. She flung it away indignantly, stepping towards the bathroom, but then turned and picked it up again. Yanam? Oh, God! How did he know about Yanam? It was a most secret project, protected from newsmongers for fear the crazy environmentalists would get there and spoil everything. Yanam, a sleepy hollow, as sleepy as when the French had been there a million years ago. Now, a place for cheap liquor, and a bit on the side, for Andhra landlords who wanted to get away from bossy wives for a weekend. The villagers fished, boozed, earned what money they could, not much, pandering to rich folks tastes. On the forgotten part of the Coromandal coast, the perfect spot for a fast-breeder reactor that could feed the grid but more importantly supply fissionable plutonium. Few in the cabinet knew about it, certainly not those below the salt, ministers dealing with agriculture, social welfare, rural development, those with that sort of non-consequential portfolio. Then, how had 'he' come to know? Some of her staff would sell their mothers for a hundred rupees, she thought bitterly. Well, the news was out, but it was in his interest to keep everything as quiet as possible. If the world's crazies got wind of it, there would be no deal for anyone. So, what would he want, demand, of her? He could demand a great deal, and she would have to give in. No choice, even if exclusive purchase agreements were demanded. She had one card to play. She could involve him, soften him. She smiled to herself. Who was she fooling? She wanted him, never mind the nuclear power plant. It could be besieged round the clock by environmentalists for all she cared, if she had him safe in her arms. She sank luxuriously into her bath.

She felt and looked rose-petal fresh as she stepped into the darkened bar in a soft white Bengali sari lined in gold. She would pretend she had come down in the line of duty, but that charade would not last more than a few minutes, he was no fool. He would end it masterfully, she knew ahead of time, and her waiting and the tense knot she felt in her tummy would be released in a flood of passion.

She did not see him at first, and then he rose from a darkened corner. She went over and squeezed herself next to him on the small sofa. In the darkened room his face looked pale as a ghost, but his thigh was warm against hers. She started to say something, then desisted as his red lips reached out to hers. Without saying a word he had her in a crushing embrace, his lips locked to hers, his hands searching her body. She gasped and then he kissed her again. She had almost swooned in his arms, when she felt him picking her up with swift ease. He swung her out of the bar, and then they were in the brightly lit

yellow corridor outside. Gently, he lowered her down. She leaned back against a marble pillar in the corner, bewildered. Was he going to take her there in the bright light, standing propped against the pillar, or on the rough carpet below?

‘Out of range of CCTVs,’ he said softly. ‘It will look like I have taken you to a bedroom, but they are all bugged. We can talk here.’

She looked at him with wide open eyes, searching his face, trying to understand.

‘I know about your government’s plans for Yanam,’ he said evenly. ‘I also know you want to do a Reagan on Pakistan, lead them into an unsustainable nuclear arms race that will split the country.’

She gasped. Oh, God! What next? He was looking at her through that deathly white face, and a little smile hovered round those chilli red lips.

‘What, what do you intend to do?’ she managed to whisper at last.

His smile widened. ‘Nothing. We are no friends of Islamists,’ he said. ‘We must protect Israel – punishment for the past.’

She had to pull herself together, she had to, she had been trained to do so. Her personal life had always come second, anyway till that moment, but even now when she longed for him, she had to do what was required of her. She gave herself a little shake like a puppy.

‘We – we were going to come to you for the technology,’ she ventured as an opener.

He smiled even more broadly, and flicked the tip of her nose with a long finger. ‘Liar, sweet liar,’ he said, ‘you would have gone to the French. I know everything.’

She wanted to ask him how, but no sound came from her throat.

He bent down and kissed her very lightly on the lips. ‘I have had agents here for a very long time.’

She had guessed as much, but she still felt bitter about it. It somehow reflected poorly on her abilities. But the detection and the firings could wait.

‘Do the Americans know?’ she asked, a desperate edge to her voice.

He shook his head reassuringly. ‘No, of course not, silly. They don’t know if they are coming or going.’

‘They should not know!’ she gasped.

‘No, no, no. They are clinging to Sunni Pakistan as a base for attacking Shia Iran. They think they can bring back the Shah’s grandson.’

This was news to her and it left her breathless. ‘No! That can’t be true! They – they can’t, they are not that stupid...’

‘I am afraid they are. Anyway, they don’t need to bother us.’

She was trying to be cool, and get back to just plain manila envelope wheeling-dealing.

‘But your people don’t want nuclear power now,’ she said in a business-like manner. ‘And environmental agitation in Germany may jeopardize our supplies.’

He smiled. ‘No, it won’t. Germans only want a clean backyard, and they have a flexible conscience how they get it. Most will understand why we must sell nuclear technology to you. If we don’t, the Euro will sink, and my government with it.’

She drew herself up with some assurance. ‘Perhaps...an enhanced power grid is in our national interest, anyway. We have hesitated so long, because, because your guys will set up a human rights howl.’

He smiled again. ‘It will be all quiet on the western front,’ he whispered.

She nodded, and moved out of the corner. ‘Our actions will be based on how you react next week at the General Assembly when the issue of regional terrorism comes up. We will speak about the necessity of protecting our people, however expensive defensive mechanisms become. We would want your support.’

He nodded. There was nothing more to be said. ‘Good night, then,’ she said cheerlessly, turning to go.

He caught her hand and clasped her to his bosom. ‘There is one more thing,’ he said quietly into her ear.

She looked up into his pale face, and the open red lips. A strange sweet smell came from his mouth. What could it be? She should know, but it was just beyond the edge of her reasoning. Those cold blue eyes were looking deep into hers, deep into the very depth of her soul. Strangely, very strangely, that look of his reminded her in an inconsequential way of a tiresome movie she had watched the other day with her young niece. A wild thought entered her head which she dismissed instantly. She was being absurd! But those blue eyes were insistent, persuasive, and as she gazed back into them a longing gripped her to belong to him, forever and ever, till time had no meaning. Her eyes swimming, she saw his face change, grow harder, leaner, bluer. Even his everyday jacket turned into a silken blue coat, his own hair grew crowded under a powered periwig. She knew the wild truth then, she struggled slightly against it in her own mind, and then, sighing, surrendered herself deliciously into his world.

‘You were there at Westphalia, centuries ago?’ she whispered, as if it was the most ordinary thing to ask.

‘Yes, I made them sign the treaty,’ he said confidentially. ‘And many others, over the years.’

She bent her head obediently. Her soft creamy white neck looked delicious like a dish of panna cota. Greedily, he sank his canines into her neck, and started to suck the ruby red drops of her blood.