

Bombay's Republic

By

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The old jailhouse on the hilltop had remained uninhabited for many decades, through the construction of the town's first grammar school and the beginning of house-to-house harassment from the affliction called sanitary inspectors, through the laying of the railway tracks by navvies who likewise succeeded in laying pregnancies in the bellies of several lovestruck girls, but fortunes changed for the building with the return of Colour Sergeant Bombay, the veteran who went off with the recruitment officers to Hitler's War as a man and came back a spotted leopard.

Before Bombay's departure when everything in the world was locked in its individual box, he could not have believed such metamorphosis was possible. A man was still a man and a leopard a leopard while the old jailhouse was a forsaken place not fit for human habitation. A white man was the District Officer who went by in an impressive white jacket and a black man was the Native Police constable who saluted as the white man passed. This was how the world was and there was no reason to think it could be otherwise. But the war came and the bombs started falling, shattering things out of their imprisonment in boxes and jumbling them without logic into a protean mishmash. Without warning, everything became possible.

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Months preceding the arrival of the military bands, news had been filtering in that the foreign powers were clawing at each other's throats. In the papers, there were

cartoons showing how bad things would be if Hitler won. Posters appeared all over town encouraging the young men to enlist and then the recruitment officers showed up accompanied by drum majors who conducted smartly-uniformed bands through the streets. Unmoved by the marching songs and colourful banners flying above the parades, not a single volunteer stepped out. Shrugging, people just said, the gecko and the lizard may decide to get married, fine for them, but it would be silly for the butterfly to dance its garments to shreds at their wedding celebration. The next day, traditional drums accompanied the bands to rouse enthusiasm but this also failed to inspire and speculations became rife that conscription will be used as in some other places. But that was not to be because reports came that Hitler himself was waiting with his ruthless army at the border and that with him things were going to be much worse than the imagination could conceive. Those he didn't pressgang into slavery would be roasted alive for consumption by his beloved dogs, this was the word on the street, and panic began spreading with virulent haste.

There was only one thing to do. Hitler had to be taken on before he overran their homeland, so the young men began enlisting in droves. Among them was Colour Sergeant Bombay. He would quickly find out that someone must have confused his nation's domestic frontiers with a place half the world away. The only terrain on which he would war was forty-four days and several bouts of seasickness from his homeland by ship, in an alien jungle where after two years of nightmarish combat as part of the Forgotten Army he would be stunned by the realisation that everything he thought fantastic was indeed credible.

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When the bugle sounded and Bombay woke with a jerk in the darkness, he didn't know where he was or what on earth he was doing there. The space in which he found himself was too large to be his bedroom. Its array of double bunks stretching away into the dimness was spooky in the waning moonlight and the shrouded

figures rousing on the bunks seemed like creatures materialising out of a bad dream. The bugle sounded once more and it all came flooding back to Bombay, the long lorry ride from his hometown with the other recruits and the thickness of the dust on their bodies and, on arrival at the camp, the granite face of the warrant officer who supervised the distribution of kits to the lost-looking recruits. Bombay's joints still ached from the rattling of the wooden floorboard on where he had sat, cramped with his colleagues in the lorry's rear like livestock huddling together for warmth. He didn't wait for the third and final bugle before jumping down from his bed. That was the beginning of his first day at training camp.

He went mechanically through the warm-up exercises and completed the arduous challenge of the roadwork. After a quick breakfast, he stood ramrod stiff as the drill sergeant moved between the files barking instructions. Later that day, with his muscles sore and his head throbbing from the day's long exertions, it suddenly struck him that he liked it. Everything in military life was clear and ordered. That was what he wanted and he found nothing more satisfactory.

At dinner time, listening to the recruits drawn from distant places on the continent speaking a plethora of languages he did not know existed, Bombay marvelled at his superior officers' ability to whip that Babel with just a few commands into a single martial unit. As he continued eating, the polyglot buzz of impenetrable speech swirled on around the dining hall without unleashing bedlam, contrary to what Bombay would have predicted. There are many things I know nothing of in this world, Bombay exhaled as he shovelled another spoonful of barracks mess into his mouth. Things he never knew were possible.

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Bombay had to like Ceylon, if only because it provided an escape from the nausea. In the weeks at sea, he had vomited so much he would have loved any land, but the

coconut-dotted beaches of Ceylon and the bullock carts plodding down the lanes and the monkeys that sneaked into their base to dash off with whatever was not secured made Bombay's fondness for the island easier.

The recruits had completed their basic training before setting sail. On disembarking, they began preparations for jungle combat. Their base was in a village just outside Colombo. The training at the village was good. As the recruits jogged past, the women picking leaves in the tea estates would stop to look. Every evening a cart brought down containers of coconut wine for the soldiers to drink and, sometimes, Bombay dared the local gin that tasted fierier than gasoline.

Bombay did not mind that the baths were segregated, one for the African soldiers and another for the Europeans. The village headman often came around when the men were bathing. As the days went by, the crowd that came with him grew larger. The visitors always headed straight to scrutinise the Africans as they washed but never bothered to check out the lathering Europeans. It was then Bombay became puzzled about what was going on. He made enquiries and was assured that the villagers meant no harm. Reports had come that the pants of the African soldiers were sewn three-quarter length to conceal their tails and the headman was bringing his villagers to confirm if this was the case. Bombay was not angry. He simply found it interesting people could assume he had a tail. The chance of anyone having such a belief was something he had not considered possible.

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Bombay's discoveries of the possible would come faster than the leeches in Burma's crepuscular jungles. At first, Bombay's tasks were limited to mule driving and porting baggage. If there are people trying to kill me, it would be stupid of me not to be in a position to kill them also, he repeatedly grumbled to his superiors. To shut him up, he was posted to a combat unit.

The campaign to recapture Buthidaung was in progress. Bombay's unit was deployed to a swampy pass of the Kaladan Valley where they got isolated from the main army for weeks. Their situation got dire and it seemed they would have to feed on wild bananas lined with pawpaw-like seeds but tasting like detergent. Then Bombay's squad ran into enemy ambush. They had no option but to dive for cover as hostile gunfire reduced the vegetation above their heads to shreds. Their ammunitions had already gone too low to mount a credible resistance but Bombay thought it wiser to go down fighting and his squad agreed. They charged shrieking at the machinegun position with pangas raised, their common howling and bawling coming as if from a primeval horde of lunatics hell-bent on murder. The firing stopped. Perhaps a freakish mistake damaged the enemy's equipment mid-operation, anyone would have assumed. When the manic charge Bombay led reached its destination, the enemy was gone. The squad met three machineguns and several abandoned magazines, the operators of the weapons long melted into the greenery like frost crystals blown into the jungle's humid oven. To Bombay's astonishment, all the firearms were in excellent working condition. The captured guns ensured the squad's return to base. On arrival Bombay was made a lance corporal, the first of the promotions that would elevate him to the rank of sergeant and carrier of the regimental flag, and given the Distinguished Conduct Medal for bravery, one of the three medals he would be awarded on the front.

Shortly before the decoration ceremony, Bombay protested to his Lieutenant that he had taken his action not because of bravery but out of fear, and deserved no honour for valour. The officer smiled. That was the first time Bombay had seen him grinning. Oh poor you, so you don't even know why the Japs fled, the Lieutenant said. The stories that preceded you to this war said that the Africans are coming and that they eat people. We fuelled those rumours by dropping leaflets on the enemy, warning them that you will not only kill them but you also will happily cook them for supper. The Japanese, as you very well know, are trained to fight without fear of

death. They don't mind being killed but, like anyone else, they are not in any way eager to be eaten. Their training didn't prepare them for that. That was why they scrambled when they saw you screaming towards them like bloodthirsty savages. But anyway, that you know nothing about the situation only makes your action more courageous. Report in an hour to receive your decoration. Okay?

Bombay saluted. The normally stern-faced Lieutenant, recalling the incident, was tickled out of his reserve. He started chuckling as he walked away, finding the comedy of the engagement with the Japanese so hilarious that tears streamed down his cheeks as he burst into outright laughter. He contemplated the emotions experienced by the Japanese soldiers as Bombay's squad bore down on them and the terror that must have gripped the enemy on concluding it was a clan of cannibals from Henry Rider Haggard's gory tales making a sortie for lunch. His laughter was still sounding a minute later when he made his entrance into the canteen, desiring to calm the mirthful paroxysms rocking him with a drink.

In the Lieutenant's wake, Bombay stood perplexed for a long spell, trying to come to grips with the revelation he had just received. Perhaps human flesh may be prime grade meat but he had never imagined eating anyone for a meal or even as a quick snack. Thinking more about it, Bombay's stomach got queasy and he had to steady his rising urge to puke. That people would imagine he was a cannibal was something he had not thought was possible.

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Bombay would never hear the Lieutenant laugh again. Some weeks after Bombay's decoration, the Lieutenant's unit was separated from the division by blazing howitzers during a large push to drive the Japanese out of the winding road leading to Kalewa. Before nightfall, everyone in the group was accounted for except the Lieutenant.

Bombay admired the officer despite his mirthless countenance. The tactics he deployed when he led a tricky assault on a troublesome hilltop battery had struck Bombay as brilliant and, in those anxious moments only a cigarette could relieve, the man did not need to be asked before offering his last half-stick to whoever needed it the most. Oftentimes he had sat late with Bombay, sharing stories about his childhood on a farm bordered by a tiny lake near the Cumbrian Mountains and lamenting how much he missed the mooing of the cows when they were being led back from grazing in the unpredictable fog. This was why Bombay was happy to be included in the party tasked with finding the missing officer.

It was a dangerous mission. The more tenacious pockets of enemy combatants were still booby-trapping the jungle. The captain who led the search had recently arrived from Europe to the front. The men complained about his dismissive bossiness and the way he bragged about himself as if he was the special one sent to conclude the war singlehandedly. Someone once wondered why a man who could not even relate well with his own people was given charge over soldiers from a continent whose cultures he knew nothing about. Bombay though never griped about things like that. The front had been a good teacher to him. He was confident that the captain, by the time he ceased being a sophomore under the jungle's tutelage, would learn that life and war were more complex than the textbooks he read in the military academy.

The lessons provided by the search expedition would be brutal on the new officer. It was the height of the monsoon and, for weeks, the rains had been coming down with pestilential resolve. The search was just beginning when the downpour became even more oppressive. The dampness was no longer news. Squelching around in soggy boots and dripping fatigues was a constant drudge they endured with amphibious fortitude, and the men found the captain's continuous bitching about the weather irritating. He stopped talking when they came upon a mound of charred enemy corpses in a ditch which served as a gun pit. Their burns were clearly not from

grenades or kindred explosives. The corpses had been incinerated by their vanquishers with flame throwers to prevent disease. Executing such cremations had long become routine for Bombay. The mission moved on.

Dim shards of light constituted all the brightness able to breach the vegetation canopy. In the half-dark, having to beat new paths through the undergrowth was a thankless chore. Far more vicious than the stinging nettles and topping the jungle's sundry tortures was the omnipresent menace of the tiger leeches. The bloodsuckers were like fair punishment on both sides for their collaborative orgy of mass slaughter.

Since the encounter with the immolated bodies, the captain had been in increasing distress. His condition worsened after the party chanced on one of their soldiers who had fallen into an enemy poison pit. No one could say if he had bled to death from gashes inflicted by the sharp bamboo spikes or if he had succumbed to blood poisoning from the rotten meat with which the spikes were laced. From his advanced state of decomposition, it was evident he had been there for a while. The group advanced after retrieving the soldier's name tag and noting the location. By then, the captain had become a liability to the expedition. His constant lagging behind was hampering the group's progress and his unbroken whimpering and jabbering was only tolerated because the muffling drone of the rain made it a manageable risk. The next ranking officer had taken de facto command and, with night rapidly approaching, he was thinking of calling off the search mission when the flashlights of Bombay and his colleagues picked up a figure. The man was stripped stark naked and tied to a tree, as if on death row awaiting his executioners. It was the missing Lieutenant. He was dead but there was no sign that he had been shot. His body had been severally pierced. The spectacle of his entrails spilling out of his excavated stomach and drooling down to his toes could not have been ghastlier. Bombay winced. The pain eternally howling from the Lieutenant's frozen face left no

doubt that he had been used as bayonet practice by his enemy captors while still alive.

Confronted by that horror, the captain's visage turned ashen. It seemed his dilating eyes would soon pop out of their sockets. His breathing deteriorated into a sharp gasping for air, as if from lungs compromised by pneumonic failure. Then the captain began weeping, slobbering for his dead mother to emerge from her grave and save her innocent son from the Japanese and the gluttonous leeches, to take him away from the monstrous labyrinth of the jungle because he had no idea what he was doing there and how to get himself out of it. The oblivious blankness of his eyes confirmed that something had snapped. The captain's own volition could not sustain him on his feet. Two soldiers on either side had to support him back to base.

Over the next few days, the captain's condition deteriorated. He stayed in bed all day, shivering and whimpering. Everything terrified him, including daylight, and he kept his face shrouded with a blanket. The stench reeking from him became overpowering because the bed which he never left also served him as toilet, and at night he was always sedated because of fears his impromptu yelling could provide bearings to troops attacking in the darkness.

The captain's dead mother did not come over to spirit him away from the jungle, possibly from a dread counterpart to her son's for the enemy's eviscerating bayonets. Instead, it was a single-engine Moth that could only evacuate one patient at a time which finally flew him to a psychiatric hospital. Bombay was deeply shocked by the captain's fate. He remembered the white-jacketed District Officer back home with his manicured nails and the imperious airs of one in absolute control of the cosmos, the white man oozing superiority over the khaki-clad Native Police constables as if merely exercising his natural birthright. That the captain, a countryman of the colonial administrator, had disintegrated to a condition that pitiful meant the impeccable District Officer could likewise descend to the same animal depths.

Bombay had seen a lot in the war. Diarrhoeic Europeans pestered by irreverent flies while the men shat like domestic livestock in the open. Blue eyes rolling in mortal fear as another enemy shell whistled past. But never before had he imagined one of his imperial masters degenerating into a state so wretched. He found it good to know that was also possible.

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Bombay's universe of the feasible continued expanding with inflationary acceleration. Buthidaung was successfully occupied and his division advanced down the Mayu Valley, manoeuvring into position as part of the pincer movement to prevent the Japanese escaping through the Kaladan corridor. In the Mayu basin, Bombay's platoon had to traverse an extensive stretch of elephant grass. The plants were especially tall and their leaves slashed like a field of razors, lacerating the face and making progress on foot through their scarifying gauntlet interminable. In the middle of that grassy stretch, the platoon came upon corpses from a friendly battalion. The European cadavers were left whole but the African ones had been chopped up.

The Japs are convinced black soldiers resurrect, said an officer, so they dice the corpses to forestall having to kill them twice.

Bombay was incredulous. You mean... they believe it is possible we rise up to continue fighting them after we are killed, he asked.

Yes, the officer replied, chuckling.

Every one of us?

Yes.

Just like Lazarus?

Why?

And like Jesus Christ, your saviour?

A scowl had replaced the smile on the officer's lips. Yes, he said.

In the silence afterwards, the only sound came from the rustling of the elephant grass. I could not have reckoned anyone would think black people can rise from the dead, Bombay thought. He would never forget that. The platoon moved on.

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At Bombay's new base, a bombardier was grounded after roughing up a fellow airman competing with him for the attentions of a pretty military nurse. The affections of the nurse belonged to his rival but the bombardier still carried her picture, like an ancestral amulet, in his wallet. He had to be restrained within a makeshift stockade when his unrequited passion spiked up his aggressiveness.

A few days into his confinement, the bombardier broke out in the small hours and overpowered the soldier guarding the corral. Bombay was standing as sentry outside the barracks that night. The manic bombardier had killed one man and injured another three with the Bren gun he seized from his guard before Bombay shot him. Once. The bombardier died on the spot.

Afterwards, smoking as daylight began reddening the east, Bombay remembered his countryman Okonkwo whose story would become famous some years after the war when it was told in a book titled *Things Fall Apart*. Decades before, Okonkwo had

killed an arrogant constable of the new colonisers. To deprive the white men the pleasure of doing same to him, Okonkwo hanged himself. Yes, those Bombay had been killing in the war were of a lighter hue than he was but they were not white men and, even then, their killing had been sanctioned by his imperial overlords. Now, Bombay had killed a white man, not the black servant of the white man or the alien antagonists of Europe. Bombay vowed to take the brave route of Okonkwo rather than having anyone lead him to the gallows.

The next day, Bombay received a letter from his commanding officer. To Bombay's shock, it commended Bombay for his quick thinking which prevented a bigger carnage from decimating the barracks.

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So Bombay was surprised to know it was possible to be praised for killing a white man, as he would also be astounded in the Kabaw Valley on observing that the Japanese snipers were still resolute in their refusal to target his side's stretcher bearers. This was the same enemy who not only slaughtered their opponent's wounded in captured hospitals but also shot their own injured men if they lacked the resources to evacuate them during hasty withdrawals, yet here they were still refusing to shoot at their opponent's stretcher carriers. Bombay shook his head in confusion, lost in bewilderment as he would the evening his platoon leader told him that a strategic bridge over a tributary of River Irrawaddy no longer needed to be taken.

What about the enemy soldiers on the other side, Bombay asked.

We no longer have any enemy on the other side, the platoon leader said.

They were still shooting only a short while ago.

Yes, but we no longer have any enemy on the side.

Bombay could not get it but he shrugged off his befuddlement. If they are gone, that means we will soon be going to Malaya, he said. People are saying we will soon be invading Malaya since there is not much fight going on here anymore.

We won't be going anywhere.

Bombay noticed that the platoon leader looked unusually exhausted. What is happening, Bombay asked, his apprehension mounting.

Nothing. The war is already over, you know. Nothing will be happening except our respective journeys home, the platoon leader replied.

The big bomb had sprouted its mushrooms over a week before. The documents of surrender were already signed but news of the ceasefire was slow in getting to the troops who, in their ignorance, were still fighting on days after the war had been declared ended.

We have won the godforsaken war, said the platoon leader, without any euphoria. The only place we are going now is home.

Considering both men's downcast looks, they might as well have lost. Along with the crudity, the war had brought along its own kindergarten certainty, kill or be killed, and the confirmation of its end brought no joy, only difficulty in comprehending the sudden evaporation of the matter which had dominated their recent years. On arrival at the front, Bombay like every other soldier was buoyed by the deluded faith that, unlike those dying around him, he would survive the enemy's bullets. With time such thoughts went extinct and the only things he

bothered about were pragmatic routines, like drying out his wet boots and getting his gun loaded and enduring the fangs of the ever-thirsty tiger leeches. In that robotic existence, Bombay had no luxury to indulge in speculations about victory or defeat. Now, the war was over. To his surprise, he was still alive and he had to begin thinking of the return journey home which only minutes earlier was so remote it wasn't a practical possibility.

We should begin packing our bags, Bombay said.

Yes.

The platoon leader began walking away and then he turned back to Bombay.

On your way home don't worry about what you will tell your loved ones or your friends about the part we played in this war, the platoon leader said. No one will know where you were and, if you try informing them, they will not know where this is. We call this the Forgotten Front and we call ourselves the Forgotten Army. That is the lie we flatter ourselves with. I tell you, this is not the Forgotten Front and we are not the Forgotten Army. Nobody has ever heard of us so they can't even begin forgetting about us. That is the plain truth. To the world, we might never have existed.

The platoon leader, a no-nonsense combatant from the Welsh highlands, was almost in tears as he pondered the destiny of their common struggle on that neglected front, an effort that true to his prophecy would remain anonymous, like the travails of faceless and nameless characters forever entombed in a book of fiction that will never be written. The platoon leader plodded away with heavy steps, his spirit sapped to the lees by his valedictory agonies.

Bombay watched him go. He sighed. Bombay didn't care much about memory or forgetting. For him things would never be locked in boxes again and that consciousness, the irreversible awareness handed out not by charity to Bombay but appropriated by him from the jungle without gratitude and by right, was enough recompense from the war. With the campaign over, the only thing that mattered to Bombay was the brand-new universe of possibilities he would be taking home with him from the front.

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Politics was pungent in the air when Bombay returned to his homeland. The nationalist leaders had gotten more clamorous in their criticism of the colonialists and there were editorials in the dissident newspapers denouncing the big bomb's deployment as racist because it wouldn't have been dropped on Europeans. The atmosphere was spiced up by the evening assemblies under the acacia tree near the market. Having discovered the necessities of parliamentary representation and the right to self-rule during their travels, the brightest of the veterans freshly returned from Burma zealously quoted Gandhi and Du Bois at incendiary gatherings which constables from the Native Police Authority oftentimes had to break up.

Much was expected of the veteran who distinguished himself above the lot by receiving not only the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the George Cross but also the rarely awarded Victoria Cross for conspicuous bravery. People were disappointed though because Colour Sergeant Bombay showed not the slightest interest in populist agitation. The taciturn man seemed content strutting around in his blue PT gear and staring with unseeing blankness through the eyes of anyone who looked in his direction. Whenever grownups asked him if the Japanese were really as brutal as the other veterans reported, Bombay would reply with one his newfound cryptic sentences. We did them no harm and they did us no harm, he would say, we only tried to kill each other as often as we could. And when people

pressed him further to say something concrete about the war and his Japanese enemies he would truncate the discussion by saying, the white man dropped the big bomb on them but they are talking with each other now. They were good friends before and they are back as good friends again.

It became obvious Bombay was more comfortable chatting with the younger ones. He spoke to them of the tiger leeches and the horror that surges through the body at the instant you feel their fangs sinking into you, the discharged Sergeant schooling the wide-eyed children about how the leeches must not be plucked out because they leave their fangs behind and, instead, should be scorched off with a match or lighter since burn marks are kinder on the skin than the sepsis festered by their abandoned fangs. He exposed his torso and the children saw the dark stains singed by the flames all over his skin, like rosettes on a leopard's coat. This is the story of how I became a spotted leopard, he said, and his juvenile audience gleefully sprang back in mock fright when he snarled at them like the feline beast.

He got the name which replaced his original one from the tales he told about Bombay. The city was called Bombay because its streets were littered with bombs through which pedestrians must carefully tiptoe, the veteran said, except if one fancied levitating sky high as blown-up mincemeat.

The youngsters had overheard their teachers speaking in school about the Black Hole of Calcutta. They asked Bombay if he came across the hole during his sojourn abroad and the man replied, Of course. Bombay described the sinister darkness of the abyss into which after dropping a coin you could wait for all eternity without the shadow of an echo returning from the fathomless deep. That is why it is called the Black Hole of Calcutta, the veteran said. When sheep fell into the hole, an occurrence whose regularity wasn't surprising since they were the most foolish creatures alive, continued Bombay, the sheep tumbled for days on end down the Black Hole of Calcutta which ran straight through the centre of the earth but he assured his

enraptured listeners that, luckily for the foolish sheep, their owners always found the dazed animals grazing happily on the other side of the globe close to where they popped out of the pitch-black shaft.

The children were pleased to hear him narrate his barehanded battles with the crocodiles lurking beneath the muddy waters of the Irrawaddy, the veteran whispering to them that the females had gold nuggets for eyes and the males stared coldly at the world with fist-sized diamonds which, if plucked from their sockets, would be sold for an amount large enough to make the wealthiest man around seem the most miserable pauper.

The story the kids requested he repeated over and over was the one about the clan of weeping jinni who followed him for seven days and seven nights through the jungle pleading to buy his rare African soul with the most fabulous riches this world has to offer. A bit envious of the attention Bombay was giving the youngsters, some grown-ups made mockery that, considering the strange light burning in Bombay's eyes, it was not impossible that the veteran, as substitute to his three-medalled soul, had bartered off a slice of his sanity to the desperate creatures.

Wit morphed into reality when confirmation came that Bombay had taken possession of the long-empty jailhouse, disregarding the accounts of ghosts and dreadful presences which had long kept everyone away from the building. On the day of housewarming, Colour Sergeant Bombay lowered the imperial flag in his new residence and proceeded to declare his person and his house thenceforth independent from the British Empire. That action got many people wondering if the ravenous leeches Bombay moaned so much about had not sucked his head hollow during the jungle war, siphoning out his brains and leaving behind only the most idiotic dregs for him to bring home to Africa.

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The morning the tax collectors visited the old jailhouse, Bombay was drinking from a large gourd of palm wine and puffing a cigarette on the landing attached to the upper floor. In front of the building, a flag with a spotted leopard leaping in its centre fluttered its sedition in place of the colonial banner whose deposition by Bombay had culminated his eccentric housewarming ceremony. The newest free nation of the world, this was how the veteran referred to his newly inaugurated People's Republic of Bombay.

Near the mast, rough-hewn busts commemorated the founding fathers of the infant republic. The figures increased in scale from the first to the last, concretising Bombay's perception of their order of importance. Major General "Fluffy" Ffolkes, Commander of Bombay's Division in Burma. Lieutenant General Slim, Commander of all the Divisions of the Forgotten Army. Lord Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Commander over the Allied Armies in the eastern theatre. And, finally, triumphant at the apogee of that evolution as if the Seal of the Generals, stood the bust of Colour Sergeant Bombay, pioneer President and Commander in Chief of the newborn Republic of Bombay.

The visiting tax collectors interrupted their progress towards the veteran's residence to read the names etched below the figures, bemused by the cheekiness of the iconography informing Bombay's diminutive Mount Rushmore Memorial. They were still laughing at the veteran's impudence when they reached the staircase winding up to the upper floor of the old jailhouse. Bombay had been watching them all along, panting with rage as the visiting bureaucrats jabbed their fingers in ridicule at his ancestral totems. The collectors were surprised when they looked up to see Bombay standing right above them. They greeted him. He didn't reply. After some seconds, he spoke. Did you collect the necessary visas?

The taxmen were stumped.

Are you deaf? I said did any of you collect a visa before crossing the border?

We are tax collectors. Bring out your tax receipt.

Bombay got angry. This is an independent republic, he thundered. And get this into your rotten heads, this nation is not part of your bloody Commonwealth and it will never join. You and your children will always need visas to enter here. Next time you trespass into this territory, you will be shot dead. Like the enemy spies you all are. Every one of you. Is that clear?

The threat of gunfire brought about nervous movements from the taxmen. Their leader, who was accustomed to being dreaded rather than confronted, tried to assert his authority as delicately as he could. We simply came here to do our job, he said. We are not here to make trouble but if you give us trouble then we will be forced to give you trouble in return.

Is it that clown, Charles, who sent you here?

Charles? We were not sent by any Charles. We are tax collectors. The District Officer would be annoyed if we report you to him. Of course, you would not want that to happen, would you?

Ah, the District Officer. The goat is called Charles. Isn't that his name?

You are calling DO, the white man... like any name.... that he is a goat. The DO is the DO. You are looking for big trouble, said the scandalised team leader.

Charles is the name his father gave him, so let him use it. From today on you must call him by his first name, Charles, not DO. Is that clear?

Bombay had threatened to shoot. In the silence, the uneasy tax collectors kept an alert eye on the wine-guzzling veteran looming over them like murder. They fidgeted with anxiety about where the situation was heading.

Call him what you like and we will call him what we like, one of them mustered the courage to say. But please tell us, have you paid your hut tax? We are here to collect your hut tax. If you don't cooperate, we will call the Native Police and they will take you straight to prison.

Bombay laughed. Tell Charles that this is a big building built of stone. It is not a hut and it is much larger than that his useless house where he wastes his evenings planting flowers that can't grow in this weather and rearing cats like a white witch. How dare you all come here asking for something as ridiculous as my hut tax? It is a shame that, in your slumber, you all choose to point your empty heads in a single direction. If your employer Charles is a blind fool, are you all also dumb that you can't tell him this is not a hut but a free and independent republic which he has no right to invade?

But that wasn't really the point, the collectors were explaining when Bombay stormed in, banging the door on their explanations that the tax was necessary for the smooth running of the colony.

The taxmen were discussing their next course of action when Bombay came out dressed in full ceremonial uniform, the Victoria Cross glistening in concert with the other medals dangling around his neck. He bellowed at the officials and demanded to know where they were when, after crossing the River Chindwin, ten men from his division died drinking from a lake the enemy had poisoned. He asked them what they were doing when his superior officers told him not to take his pants off as he washed in a stream so as not to frighten people with the exposure of his monkey tail.

Still screaming with fury at the taxmen, Bombay asked if Charles, the stupid fellow who calls himself the District Officer, knew anything about Kabaw where, in the Valley of Death, tiger leeches descended on his platoon like an ambush of assassins and if any of them, arrogant white master or cringing black servants, will ever in their petty lives visit Rangoon where a full General decorated him with one of the many medals around his neck while, resplendent, a military band trumpeted its exultation. Then Bombay stopped talking. He fiddled with his trousers and began roaring a Gurkha song whose lyrics were in a language none of the collectors could understand.

Later, in the report they gave the District Office on their return to Colony House, the tax collectors would admit that they thought Bombay had exhausted his mulishness and was making to bring out his hut tax from his trouser pockets so they were caught unawares when the veteran's penis popped out instead and urine began jetting down at them like a waterfall from above. Being bathed in excrement is a taboo in our culture, they would note, so we had to scamper back from the disgusting horror sprinkling towards our heads.

They ran even faster when the first gunshot sounded. The taxmen, who on the evidence of that day might have made a good career for themselves as Olympic sprinters, were already at the compound's gate when the second shot came. A good distance from the building, the only one among the collectors who had the courage to glance back saw the golden liquid still shooting out of Bombay's fly, the endless torrent fed by the gallons of palm wine the man had been imbibing since daybreak.

The District Officer pondered over the incident for several days. Bombay was adamant in his refusal to pay his tax and he had scared away representatives of the Crown so he deserved to be arrested. An utterly contemptible cad, this was how the District Officer described Bombay. The colonial administrator, though, was not so naive to conclude that the resolution could be any simple. He regretted Bombay's

possession of firearms which complicated the issue. Yes, there were enough arms-bearing Native Police constables to execute a successful storming of the old jailhouse but the veteran was a screwball with sufficient knowledge of warfare to mount a stiff and suicidal resistance from his hilltop position, an engagement that could also be fatal to a good number of the constables. An Empire-tired MP could take interest in the affair and, notwithstanding the fact that Bombay was no more than another native conscript, the rebellious veteran could become a poster boy for the Empire's detractors, held up by the home country's troublemakers because of his status as a multiply decorated war hero. The District Officer did not fancy having to defend the slaughter of such a person at the Foreign Office or in Parliament. Involvement in a messy situation like that could very well be it for his career.

To worsen the scenario, the native firebrands campaigning for independence could latch on to the matter as a fulcrum on which to hinge their campaign. It was that final realisation that clinched the District Officer's decision for him. Better let sleeping dogs lie, he resolved. Bombay was like a disease which had quarantined itself. There was nothing smarter than letting him be, if only to guarantee his disconnection from wider political activity, the District Officer resolved, grudgingly allowing Bombay an independence whose legitimacy the veteran could not recognise because he had long before then unilaterally imposed same upon himself.

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The District Officer's reasoning proved sound. Bombay stayed away from the nationalist agitators, devoting his efforts instead to drafting a seven hundred and ninety-two page constitution for his hilltop republic and sending communiqués to the world press about the first general elections in the domain which, inevitably, returned the enclave's sole citizen as President.

Many years after Bombay's renegade republic was inaugurated, the colonial flag descended for the last time in the veteran's abandoned nation. Bombay wrote his counterpart in his nation of birth, congratulating him on the belated independence and promising that Bombay's older republic would be glad to volunteer wisdom to the rookie state whenever necessary. The letter was never replied but that rebuff only fired President Bombay's resolve.

He wrote endless letters to the heads of state of the newly independent nations of Africa and granted interviews to any pressman who wanted one. Soon, people began paying attention. Impressed by his credentials as a war hero and intrigued by his rhetoric, national leaders from all over Africa invited him to grace ceremonies in their countries. Bombay called these trips state visits. He always reminded his hosts that giving your guest something good to take away, if possible cash, was a venerable African tradition so he never returned empty-handed from his trips. Whenever there was a coup or a regime change, Bombay's Republic was one of the first to grant recognition to the new government. In appreciation, more gifts came Bombay's way and the GDP of his republic kept up a healthy annual growth.

The longer he stayed in power, the more Colour Sergeant Bombay found it necessary to give himself ever more colourful titles. Lord of All Flora and Fauna. Scourge of the British Empire. Celestial Guardian of the Sun, Moon and Stars. Sole Discoverer of the Grand Unified Theorem. Patriarch of the United States of Africa. Chief Commander of the Order of the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean. Father of the Internet. When Bombay ventured out of his hilltop republic, it was in a convoy of siren-blaring vehicles as interminable as those of the rulers he hobnobbed with during his continent-wide trips, and he always flew into a rage if anyone failed to address him as His Excellency, President of the People's Republic of Bombay, followed by a listing of his titles which were so numerous that not even Bombay could remember them all.

Bombay would rewrite his republic's constitution eleven times and serve as the enclave's President for forty-seven arbitrary tenures after elections won with landslide support from his republic's sole citizen, himself, until death finally unseated him from office.

The obituary titled *Bombay's Republic*, penned by a columnist working for a newspaper published in Bombay's birth country, would have pleased the veteran. Colour Sergeant Bombay, war hero and perpetual president, was loved without exception by all the citizens of his People's Republic of Bombay, so ended the tribute. No one argued with the claim since it was only natural for a person to love himself without reservations.

Before Hitler's War spawned possibilities in his universe like body bags on the Burma front, Colour Sergeant Bombay would not have believed an obituary so affecting could come from a newspaper based in a country he considered foreign.