

5th **Dimension**

(A collection of short stories, reflections and memoirs)

Arunoday **Sharma**

Preface:

Short stories do not happen at a stretch, at least not with me. I did pen a novella at a stretch; still in between I would write one or two short stories or my experiences of that day's film shooting.

I had uploaded a short-story book in 2014 with 20 stories, on a digital platform. It stayed there until in early 2021, I realized that I now had many more stories. I added them to the old collection and now I am presenting this book with 34 stories. So, it is difficult to say that why I wrote this book; the book just kept happening. To prepare for this new version I had to reread and edit everything, making it more effective.

One point to mention here is that I have used Gautam as a character in many stories. I formatted this person, as very calm, strong, swift and compassionate. He has been given a different settings in all stories. In every story he remains in control of the situation he is in.

I also love the genre of 'mad' or 'crazy'. There may be 3 or 4 stories with that setup, like 'Why' and 'Red Eye Effect'. I also like mixing genre of science and spirituality, because physics, math and spirituality do merge at a point.

Length of the stories varies between 400 words to nearly 6000 words.

Dedications

I dedicate this book to those special people, who cannot hold back a smile, when they think of me ;-)

Published

2022, Mumbai

Immortal side of life

He was in the far end of the room, sitting cross legged. Eyes were shut and face tilted up, just a little, as if concentrating on his forehead or somewhere high up. No movements could be seen outwardly, except for the faint expansion and contraction of his chest with his breath.

Train must be going somewhere but was passing through nothingness. They were sitting on the floor of the train door; with their legs hanging out. Young boy was very tired. Every now and then a village would pass where little children would wave at the train and get overly excited if someone waved back at them. At the end of every village would be a sleepy unshaven man holding a green flag at the railway crossing... Rhythmic 'takaak takaak' of tracks was relaxing and so was the hide and seek of setting sun from behind the trees. With lullaby rhythm of train along with sun going on-off, sleep overpowered boy. His eyes shut and his body bent over forward with a jerk. Ramu's swift arm blocked his fall and held the door rod on other side.

Small beads of sweat appeared on his upper lip and forehead. Gradually his face began to shine as a layer of sweat spread around. He seemed to be fighting to resolve his eternal inner conflicts, calmly, as his face did not show any signs of disturbance. It was difficult to judge whether he was a 'yogi' or not.

Don't talk to me like this. I am not going to take it lying down any more. How dare you throw my books like that! You have no respect for books, bloody illiterate! Or you have no respect for people of this house? How dare you raise your voice here?

He moved a little. His shoulders tightened. Then without opening his eyes he took his shirt off and dropped it on the floor. He must be feeling hot. His shoulders, neck and back were wet. Little drops were becoming bigger, then turning into a stream. What in the hell... is happening to him, and why?

She was rolling on the ground writhing with pain, while he watched her from the other room. Was he so helpless to get up and go near her; call a doctor or an ambulance for her? But he did call his relations to do something about it. How could he see this sight so passively? After all they had spent 67 years of their life together!

His face turned towards right with a jerk, as if he was trying to avoid looking on his left. He was now beginning to look worried, distraught and even scared. He seemed to be going over something that was forbidden for him; going over the 'past'. No one is allowed to revisit past or indulge in fantasizing about the future. The 'time' whose time is yet to come, cannot be thought about. It imbalances the present and wastes the most important resource, 'peace of mind', which affects the capacity of fair judgment, which in turn is important for smooth functioning of universe.

No!!! He screamed suddenly, please don't go. Wait, wait you cannot, please, just... I will sort it out with you and with everyone here. It will be fine. No... I will leave everything and everybody... This had to happen and weren't we supposed to be ready for this? No? Didn't we decide that?

His arms went forward. But there seemed to be something drastically wrong with his arms. They extended much further than they normally should. In fact soon his palms

went out of the door and his fingers were making the desperate actions of 'come back' to someone. It was frightening to see human arms, so long. They were beginning to look a bit diffused or a bit translucent, perhaps due to reduced density. One could see through them. His left palm came in and wiped sweat from the forehead, while the other held on to the door. In spite of his body showing tremendous turmoil, his eyes remained shut. A guttural sound came from his mouth. It carried no intelligent meaning.

His hair flew in strong sea breeze and so did the flames. Black hair, red flames... Put his feet inside they are sticking out! Push them, push them in, under the wood. Pour some oil on them. There is no fire this side. Add some wood this side too... Yes I know him. Two of us shared the room. Yes this is his diary. I have known him, for the past two years... Where are you people taking the ashes? He took a pinch of the ash and stealthily placed in his mouth!

Something out of the world was happening to him. He was sitting at the same place; but now his body seemed to be spreading all over. It was expanding in all directions. It was also getting porous. It looked huge in this condition. After a while small little particles of his body started rotating and buzzing in the air, but remaining in the form of his body. A gentle wave of breeze entered from the door and displaced his left shoulder, making him look rather strange; but soon the dislodged particles returned to their place. His right hand had come back in too. As he was expanding continuously, it was difficult for the body to retain its form inside the room. Particles were trying their best to retain the shape of the body. In a while the body morphed into a large, round spherical shape. This somehow made the particles excited and they started buzzing around in a large circle at an ever accelerating speed. Entire room was full of the little atom like particles humming around in the shape of a perfect globe. There was no sign of him, of his real shape...

In the space, outside the room similar clusters had started appearing. They would turn left and right as though looking at each other. They noticed a row of particles in the window. New clusters came closer to meet them. In a flash, trillions of particles from inside the room had come out and joined the visitors. There was an instant communication between them. In no time they all started rising up...

They moved towards the setting sun with the speed of light and in a flash they had dived into it... Sun was becoming bigger, redder, heavier... and soon, it sank down into the darkness.



2

Ringling Ears

It is dark. So very dark. Why I can't hear anything? Where is everyone gone? They were all here just a few minutes back. Perhaps I have lost gauge of time. I don't know how much time has passed. May be they all are meeting in the passage outside. May be they have gone to the canteen. It must be so boring to sit with me. There was no sound of any kind. That perfect silence was deafening. Suddenly I heard something. A straight flat note of a single frequency. I am used to it. I have been hearing them all my life, since childhood. Whenever there was total silence, my inner ears would start resonating in various frequencies and that sound would go on changing its amplitude, getting louder or weaker. It sustained itself as long as there was no external interference. Even my thoughts would not be able to stop that sound. So, there is this single frequency note ringing in my ear.

Finally I decided to check it myself. Very gingerly I put my feet on the ground, placed my palms on my knees and got ready to stand up. I extended my arms in front to feel anything, a wall, a curtain, a person... my fingertips did not touch anything. I swayed my arms sideways - nothing. Then I swayed them all around, still nothing. I hope they all are fine. I had to stand up now. I did that very carefully. I was standing. I bent forward and again extended my arms. It was surprising. I thought I should be touching something. I took two steps forward, but felt unconfident. So I retraced two steps back and found my bed. Now in desperation I decided to risk it all and go forward, until I found someone.

I moved with a resolve and kept going. I had decided that even if I don't find my bed again, it is fine. Even if I cannot find anyone, may be someone else will find me... And then, I felt my whole body touched a wall made of soft cotton, actually more like a cloud. Cloud! What the hell! How come there is a cloud in here or even cotton?

Strangely, I went through it. But why is it so dark? I tried to find a light, room light or any other light close by or at a distance. Nothing. Where am I? Am I on a high mountain at night? I was frightened now; very frightened. As I had felt earlier that I walked through a wall of clouds; I felt something passed through me too. After this I went through another smaller cloud and freaked out. I felt the floor had vanished from under my feet, literally. In a hurry, I turned back. At least I thought so.

I did not find my bed. But I did hear that frequency again. That meant I was back in my own space, at least mental space. I felt someone walk towards me. Then many more came closer. They all seemed in a huddle. None of them looked at me but kept looking in the same direction above me. I remember there was monitor that side.

They were all watching a straight line in the middle of the screen... That line perhaps was the origin of that single frequency ringing in my ears.

With a click the straight line went off and with it the sound of that frequency. My ears were not ringing any more.

Gautam suffers

It is not an unusual situation if Gautam is in a pitiable state. Gautam had started suffering for others more than 25 centuries ago. He had decided to meditate to solve the problem of 'sorrows' of the humanity. But that was then. Today's Gautam is not the same.

Today he seems to be falling into a trap of getting depressed himself... due to other's problems. He is surrounded by multiple people with multiple unsolvable problems, which is not unusual. There are too many people with too many problems. He himself is generally fine; but due to others he is attracting trouble on to himself.

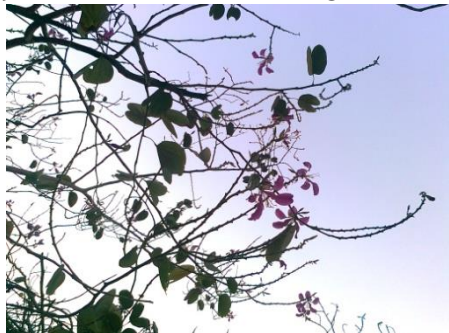
He has an old uncle, who has been a dashing, strong and confident young man in his hey days. But now he is none of that. His voice is weak and movements are slow. Gautam is not able to handle it. Gautam has always been affected by problems of people who loved him and he loved them back with all his heart.

Obviously not too many people feel bad if someone unknown is going through a bad phase. In fact this Gautam is in habit of cursing some of his sworn enemies. Yes, this Gautam has enemies, quite a few of them. He says it proudly, 'so and so is my enemy and I wish him hell'. Well this is the new age Gautam. He curses his enemies openly. Well, but right now it is not about enemies, it is about the people he loves.

There are at least six people he is close to and all have some or the other incurable situation in their lives. And they all are suffering as things are not in their control. It might get sorted, when it gets sorted. But in the meanwhile they are suffering and they don't know that Gautam is suffering along with them, for them. Someone's entire family is having tough luck. People are scattered all over and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Gautam is very fond of these people; but can do nothing about anything.

Then there is someone who has covered herself with misery as she has no idea what she wants. Gautam has known her too as a very strong and confident person in life and now such a weak side of her has cropped up. And from where? Perhaps all of us growing older and in old age weaknesses of all kinds spring up. But in the meanwhile she is suffering and Gautam is suffering too.

There are some more examples; but it's no point going into them and make matters worse for himself. The point now is, is it worth falling sick because he is a compassionate person? I guess NOT. I told him buddy, you take care of yourself and your mental health. Right now in life things are going fine for you. So don't drive on



the wrong side because you constantly feel bad for others.

But I tell you, it is not going to be easy, for anyone. It is one of the hardest thing to take your mind off people you love and even harder to not worry about their problems. But that is a challenge. Gautam has to find a balance. Perhaps if he can contribute as a problem solver he must go ahead and do so; but when

he is going to be a mute spectator, he must not allow himself to be worked up. He must save himself from falling prey to the deadly mental condition called 'depression'.

4

To wish or not to wish

Everyone in entire world is wishing for something or the other. Someone is wishing for a job, another for a new job, yet another for a promotion or a raise in her job. Many are wishing for love, respect, position of authority, easy money or topping the college in exams. One person wants a dog; other hates dogs and wishes that all the dogs in his locality were just taken away. He wants his daughter to get married soon, she wants to see the face of her grandchild before she dies; he wants a car better than his neighbors'. Some are also wishing to find God... so if there is anything in the world that is overflowing with abundance it is 'wishes'...

Gautam had been reflecting upon the phenomenon of 'wishes' or wishing, in life. Why do people have so many wishes? And why do they spend so much of their precious time and energy pursuing them? Why in the first place do they believe that whatever they wish is going to be good for them and everyone else? Are they equal to God in brain power or in making predictions? Because Gautam believes that He is the only person who has the privilege to be 'Mr. Right' or 'Mr. Know All', always.

For example Gautam says if he wishes that he had one billion dollars in his bank account, which will settle all his setbacks in life and then he will be able to lead a perfectly so called 'happy' life. He is mistaken, because he is short sighted on this count. He has no idea how many million problems will tag along with one billion dollars! And he will not even have enough time to regret about it.

If he has just fought with so many people and wished that they all died. He will be the first person who will come under scrutiny. We don't know what to wish for. I am not equipped to make future changes in my life, as I don't know how those changes will affect mine and other's life. Again if Gautam is able to force a minutest change in his life today, it is going to make a world of a difference in entire future course of his life and everything and everyone connected with him. We have to realize everything depends upon everything else. Everything affects everything else. Nothing in the universe stands alone or by itself, without being affected or affecting its immediate atmosphere or even far off planets. Hemoglobin or the iron in our blood stream, is in our blood stream not because we take iron supplements or eat spinach that gives us iron. It comes from supernova explosions hundreds and thousands of light years away!

So, wishing that supernova should not occur because I am scared is the most unintelligent wish to make.

Finally if one reduces one's excessive mental occupation with wishes, it will enhance his/her peace of mind. Just the occupation of 'wishing' has negative value unless of course you are working on them to come true.

You will always be at an emotionally disturbed state if the life was not going as you wished, which is a very bad idea if you want to lead a good life. So, stop wishing for good things in life and start leading a good life without any 'wishes'.

5

Myth of freedom

I am not too old. But I clearly remember how India was about a thousand years ago. Or how the life was in Bharat way back then? Well, we had many, perhaps hundreds of small little kingdoms. And obviously they all had kings and queens, princes and princesses. People like me who were not a part of king's family were ordinary people. Rulers were known as royals. Equation was, rulers ruled and the rest were ruled by the royals. I was free to live the way they thought, I should live. I was not to live the life that I wished to live. But at the same time I did not have too a clear a concept of freedom. No one ever thought that they should be allowed to do things entirely of their own choice. We got our two meals after following the orders from the royalty. I could not travel to another kingdom, in case I liked the other kingdom more than this one or disliked my own king compared to other. We hardly heard stories about what was happening in other kingdoms.

Much later Bharat was attacked, rather invaded by Mughals. They were ruthless. They demolished many of our temples and desecrated deities, killed priests and pulled out precious temple gems. They killed, maimed, looted, plundered, raped at will. That demolished the moral of public at large. Kings here could not handle swarm of such brute killing battalions. They came from far off countries on boats and were armed with swords, spears and explosives. It was really so terrible to see our women being raped and everyone being chopped like vegetables. These invaders also destroyed some of top places of learning in the world then. The building was destroyed and gutted and most sadly precious books were set aflame. After years of ruling ruthlessly for centuries they did mellow a bit and some of them even grew a liking of local people of Bharat. Many local craftsmen and artists were awarded a place in the king's royal team. They earned a lot of respect and perhaps money too; of course after unwillingly converting to their religion. Everyone was free to do what rulers ordered them to do.

Few more centuries passed, more people came to Bharat's shores by boats. These people had strange milk white skin. They held our hands and said we came to trade with you. We were very happy, but we didn't bother to see that hidden in the false bottom of the boat, were thousands of loaded guns. They too killed, raped and looted. They too pulled out precious gems from our temples, as well as from Mughal monuments. They also said, 'you are free to do what we ask you to do. You can be a normal working man or woman if you are not thinking of rebelling against us. We are here and we will be here for a real long time.'

They were right. It took more than two centuries to get rid of them. But sadly Bharat was sliced into three pieces. They chopped off left and right parts of us and left the center piece for us. Any ways all the ruthless rulers had finally left us in peace. I thought finally I am free! And now I could do what I wanted. Well, again there were some things that I was free to do; like I could follow all the rules made by new rulers to the best of my ability. If I wanted to buy something I had to pay its cost to the vendor and also to the rulers, now called as the government and Bharat, called India. So it was freedom with riders. If I want to see a film then I must pay the cinema ticket, but also pay same amount to the government. If I buy a car I have to do the same. Filling the petrol in the car is also possible by paying two or sometime three entities, pump owner, state and the center government. These laws were made by politicians. Like Mughals had axed our necks with ruthless taxes. They taxed our income, our sales, our creativity, our art, even our education and teaching. In a sense our entire life is taxed. Anything I do, I end up paying two or more entities. I don't even know real cost of sugar, without taxes, brokerage, transportation, commissions etc. If I make a call from my phone many people are getting richer. Finally, I guess no one ever has been free, no one will ever be. Freedom is only a concept. Rulers will never let you be free, be it a king wearing a jewel studded crown, bearded men carrying gleaming swords, white skinned foreigners with hidden guns or the politicians in white *khadi*.

**"No price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself."
- Friedrich Nietzsche**



6

Gautam's dilemma

Gautam had just come out of his hut and was strolling nearby. Anand was watching him. He carefully scrutinized his master's steps and his balance. He mentally checked how far his master might go in this state of mind. Anand was a complete companion to Gautam. He did everything for him, like cooking, washing, cleaning, taking care of occasional students and guests, keeping wild animals away... he also discussed higher spiritual matters with him, as a friend and sometime even as an adviser.

Gautam had been working on the emotional aspect of feeling one with entire creation, with nature. He was very thoughtful. Whenever he was working on a problem, he remained thoughtful, until he cracked it... He was playing with his hair and strolling, constantly looking at the ground. Physically his walk seemed aimless; but his mind was at its busiest. He watched dry leaves, his own steps, his wooden foot wear, little bubbly stream, grass, life supporting itself within the growth of grass. He moved away. He was afraid he will step on them. Anand smiled; he knew why did Gautam move away?

Gautam's dilemma was, what does being 'one with nature' mean? Does it mean he is nature itself, like oceans, trees, air, stars or space, and all that, that he can see right now, like his own feet, grass etc? Secondly, since he is a part of the super conscious, does the creation belong to him too? As in people say, 'all is created by God and so all belongs to Him.' And Gautam being a part of Him, it belongs to Gautam too. Is Gautam the owner or the owned? Or thirdly whether there are no owners or owned and everything is at the same level.

He looked back to see the hut; but couldn't. It was left far behind. Anand must be cooking, he thought. He felt a little hungry, but did not want to go back to eat. The thoughts were about to get crystallized. A large fruit fell near him. He picked it and started eating. He did not realize that the fruit had fallen just when he felt the hunger. He looked up to see the source of the fruit and found himself under a tree that he had not seen in a while. It was a very friendly tree. He sat down under it for old time sake.

...and closed his eyes.

7

Diabolic Games

After carefully wiping the brass name plate, 'Vinod Natarajan-MP' the servant entered the government bungalow in New Delhi. Inside, a driver in uniform is dusting a white Ambassador car in the drive way. Vinod Natarajan is on phone, pacing up and down in the verandah. His large rough hand is holding a gleaming cell phone to his

hairy ear. There is motion of head nodding up and down along with hmm, hmm. Inside two uniformed servants are organizing breakfast on the dining table, Natarajan's wife Sandhya is busy getting children ready for school.

A large mahogany board room table in Patel&Patel's corporate office. A cordless phone is placed on a huge table with speakers on. There are six powerfully dressed men around the table. The phone is close to immaculately dressed Kirit Patel.

Kirit Patel: Sir, I understand your situation. We have always dealt with each other in the best ways possible... i.e. in cash with you and with cheques for your party. But I must say this time your demand seems very illogical... Yes, yes I know that business is big, but we don't know about the profits, just as yet. Kirit Patel looks up to others, who nod in affirmative.

Vinod Natarajan: what are you talking about? You are doubting profits in communication field? You should not be acting so naive... at least not with me please. You are the third generation in your family business and you all know very well how to make money.

Kirit Patel: I don't know sir, if it is a compliment or... but this time you are really being very difficult. (Looking at others) If I am allowed to be frank, you seem to be doubtful about yourself in next elections, so you want to collect as much as you can with both hands, fair or unfair.

Some men smirk at this remark.

Vinod Natarajan: (Irritated takes the phone away from his ears and looks towards heaven). See, I am ready to leave. Parliament session is on and after that there are few meetings. And as you know that after two days, I am off to Europe for four days. By that time it will be too late for you to send in application. Now you decide.

Kirit Patel: Sir, this has to be tied up before you leave. Sir, why can't I hand you over one thousand crore in any form other than issuing one crore shares for Re 1 each! Boss, it is an official matter. It is like me asking SEBI, RBI and ED to come and kill us. We could be banned forever! We must find another way to go about it. Please. Just think of our millions of shareholders at least.

Vinod Natarajan: Umm... that, you think. I am leaving... (loudly) Is my breakfast on the table?

Kirit Patel: Ok sir, give me time till evening. I will get in touch with you.

Vinod Natarajan: Fine, between 9 and 11pm. Thank you.

Both phones disconnect.

Kirit Patel: (talks in an intercom) Hemant please check the replay. Did you get everything clearly?

In a few seconds a voice returns over the intercom, "Yes, Kirit Bhai it is fine."

Kirit Patel: Good, thank you Hemant. Download a copy of this on my phone, email to our personal IDs and rest you know where to store it safely.

Looking at other company executives, "this time he has put me in a lot of trouble. Problem is that we need the spectrum badly. Actually, everyone needs it, but some need it more badly than others."

In spite of serious problems created by that impossible Vinod Natarajan, a short burst of laughter was heard. After all a joke told by the boss is funniest in the world. He talked into the intercom, "send Mr. Singh in, he has only a few minutes to show me a way out of this 'chakravayoooh'."

"Ok sir."

An elderly Sikh gentle man entered and took a seat with others.

"Let me freshen up a little Singh saab. By that time Manoj Bhai will update you with our most serious crisis until date. Manoj please. And please get some tea, coffee and healthy snacks with proteins. We all need energy to handle this super patriot leader."

After Kirit Patel emerged from the toilet and looked at Mr. Singh who shook his head sideways a few times showing 'no way out' as yet.

Kirit Patel taking the command, "What is the main roadblock in this transaction?"

Mr. Singh: "sir, Re 1/- per share will never work. We will have to compensate the balance Rs 999 per share externally, but on the same transfer account."

Kirit Patel: "hmm... we know the problem, so let us find the solution. Now no one will talk about the problem and concentrate only on solution."

Vinod Natarajan's large frame is spread in the back seat of his car heading towards parliament. He is on phone with his wife Sandhya.

Vinod Natarajan: "How are Shweta and Sharad doing in school... that's it? 60% is not good... see that Sharad doesn't miss his cricket practice. I have spoken to coach Archarekar in Mumbai. He will accept him. He is the one who made Sachin and Sunil... I am in talks with Kirit Bhai for some arrangement that will secure our family forever, whether I am an MP or not." Sandhya keeps adding 'yes' in between. She knows if she even raised her eyebrows in a question, he will turn abusive. She can't take that risk.

Mr. Singh: “Sir, we will have to draft the contract in such a way that shares must seem to be in company’s possession. I mean a kind of, ‘waiting to be transferred’. For this there will be few strict conditions Vinod Natarajan will have to adhere to.”

Kirit Patel: “Like?”

Mr. Singh: “Point ‘one’, the shares will be jointly held by two parties, primarily him and second owner will be our own company. ‘Two’, shares will be transferred to his name entirely only after five years. ‘Three’, there will be no nominations from either party. Point ‘four’ goes in his favor, annual dividends will go to Vinod Natarajan in his personal account, being primary though owner.”

Kirit Patel: “That’s a good idea. See now brains are working. What else?”

Mr. Singh: “‘Five’, we must also insist, if Natarajan is ever found on the wrong side of the law, like if any court ever pronounces him guilty of any charge, he will be cease to be part of this arrangement. And finally ‘six’, in least likely case of his death, obviously all the shares will be automatically be transferred to the second owner, as there is no nomination from either side.”

Kirit Patel: “Thank you (thinking) Mr. Singh. Please draft the contract. I am sure Vinod Natarajan too is in a hurry to start earning the dividends of his good deeds.”

A faint smile appears on some faces.

Kirit Patel: “You all can go to your cabins now.”

Vinod Natarajan: “Ok listen and don’t talk about it to anyone yet. We might become part of Kirit Bhai’s business family soon... no, no stupid I am not talking about any marriage. Our children are so young... I may be getting a large chunk of shares from them... as a gesture of helping them in their business... one crore. It is fine, with my signature they will be making hundred times more than this... again! You always doubt my decisions. If I lose next election we will not have enough even to run our house... Leaders have to make money for the unavoidable periods of uncertainties... ok hang-up, my BP is shooting... Security post is also here.” He disconnects abruptly. Sandhya has a very worried look as she keeps holding the phone.

A very good-looking woman in her early thirties is listening to Kirit Patel intently and without any visible tension.

Kirit Patel: “As you can see the matter is very complicated. We can take our time. I have told you the points of the contract that we will offer to him... I know he will refuse some points...”

Pratima: “But sir, joint ownership, five years period before total transfer, court order and death must be a part of it.”

Kirit Patel: “Yes yes they are. I am sure he will object to all or at least most of these points. He will never agree to ‘court’ part. These leaders keep having brushes with law all the time. This is the only point which we will use to work as compromise.”

Pratima: “Good idea sir.”

Kirit Patel: “So in such a case what will be your first step?”

Pratima: “As soon as Natarajan is flies away, I will call his wife Sandhya from the corporate office for some authentic but silly reason, like when is Mr. Natarajan coming back... maybe we can send a car to receive him... in case Mr Patel wants to have a word with him has he left a phone number... and very next day send a bouquet of flowers in his name with a gracious grateful note. We will use one of office cars for this. May be I will take the flowers.”

Kirit Patel: “Sounds fine. But just be very soft, discreet and genuine in all calls you make. Always make a reference to previous conversations between people. You could quote, mine and Natarajan’s conversations, to make a point. His wife will talk about it to her husband that will help in confidence building.”

Draft approval meeting was at Vinod Natarajan’s residence at 10pm same evening. His frowns are very prominent. He could not believe Kirit Patel would draft a contract like this! Surely he is the first owner, but co-owner is the company itself! He couldn’t believe his eyes. He was grunting as though there was a bone stuck in his throat which was neither going down nor coming out.

Vinod Natarajan: “What is this? Is this my ‘cut’ or some kind of noose around my neck? Five years to transfer the shares? Then why am I doing you this favor today?”

Kirit Patel: “Boss, sorry we had no other way to do it. It was either we drop the entire game or we share the burden equally. You can’t expect us to risk being banned by SEBI due to transfer of huge number of shares for Re 1 each!”

Finally the draft was signed with most clauses intact except the ‘wrong side of law’. Natarajan gave in to realization that finally it should be fine, as five years was not really a long period. An MP’s term of five years flies off in no time. He signed on the dotted line.

Two days after Natarajan's airplane took off, a courier service delivered a large envelope to Natarajan's wife Sandhya at their official residence. Same day a sealed envelope from the ministry was delivered to Kirit Patel's office, allocating them the band of spectrum they had applied for.

Same evening Kirit Patel personally called Sandhya Natarajan to confirm about the most expensive delivery yet received by her.

Kirit Patel: "Hello can I speak with Mrs. Sandhya Natarajan? Oh hello Sandhya ji, did you receive our envelope?"

Sandhya: "Yes Kirit Bhai thank you sir, I have got it. I will show it to him as soon as he returns. And if he calls, I will inform him anyways."

Kirit Patel: "Sandhyaji, we are having a small celebration at our clubhouse tonight. It would be great if you could join us for dinner. Since Mr Natarajan is not here I thought at least you could be a part of it. After all it has been fruitful give and take between us."

Sandhya: "Thank you so much but with children at home... driver also goes away by 5pm when Vinod ji is out."

Kirit Patel: "Oh don't worry about such petty things. Our driver will pick you around 9 o'clock and drop you back whenever you wish to return. And Sandhya ji, I am sure your children will be safe in one of the most secure houses in the country. Ok?"

Sandhya: "huh... alright, I will be ready."

Kirit Patel: "See you then."

He hinted to Pratima that her work starts now.

Company Club had world class facilities. Bar, food, décor, service, staff would pop any commoners' eyes out. Sandhya also had seen a lot in life, moving with her minister husband. But she thought this might beat the best, by a small margin. She was warmly received by Pratima, who escorted her to the prime space reserved for the richest of this world. Kirit Patel was looking bright and talkative in the company of his executives and other business partners. There were also some of the most glamorous women on the table. After exchanging greetings, Kirit Patel introduced one of them as his wife, Sonal and some more and... even more.

As Sandhya took a chair, Pratima sat next to her. Sandhya gave her a thank you smile. The waiter placed white wine in front of them. Kirit Patel ordered fresh snacks. The evening was going by happily. As the glasses filled and refilled, happiness graph in the group turned north. Sandhya met many high profile Indian and foreign industrialists and executives. Some asked her for her background, qualifications and some... "Oh,

then why don't you join our organization, we need someone like you". "Someone with your personality should be not sitting at home. Send the children to a boarding school and you make your own place in the world." She was feeling heady with these compliments and offers. After three glasses of wine, she asked to be excused. She made a familiar gesture at Pratima and they both walked towards the 'Ladies'... Kirit Patel's eyes followed them...

Around 2am, Sandhya said she wanted to leave. Pratima gestured for the car instantly. After many affectionate handshakes and good nights, they walked off. In the porch a driver was holding the door of a black BMW 7 Series sedan.

After a 20 min drive, they reached the house. Driver rolled down Sandhya's side of window and security opened the gate. After 2 minutes, both women emerged out of the car laughing, may be sharing a women's joke. Arm in arm, a bit unsteady on their feet, they moved towards the main door. It was difficult to guess, who was supporting whom.

Sandhya: "Please call me, when you reach home, ok? And shall we keep in touch."

Pratima: "Of course yes, to both points."

Sandhya: "I have to discuss a lot with you, especially about some those offers that were made to me."

Pratima: "You are lucky... charmed so many big guns in one evening. I have been stuck with this company and Kirit bhai for five years now."

As Sandhya stepped in, she waved to Pratima.

Sandhya: "See you soon."

She shut the door, stood still and looked up. She shut her eyes as the sound of powerful car engine faded away. She moved to children's room and peeped in. They were sleeping peacefully. It was past 2.30am. She changed and lied down on her bed. She was wondering what kind of life Pratima led. She was not married and was well in her thirties. Women need a lot at that stage. They need male attentions, money, worst of all they need to feel secure and find a so called 'shore', someone who might marry them. Sex too is important; but if the man is not yielding to marriage, then it better be with 'no strings attached'.

Sandhya's train of thought got derailed with phone ring.

"Oh, so you reached safely. I was waiting for this. I will catch some sleep now. Children will be up at 6.30. Yes I will call you after breakfast. Bye"

Pratima typed an SMS, 'it will work. Response is good. But too early to decide a final course of action.' She sent it to a number from her diary.

Sandhya was not surprised to see Kirit Patel at the airport with his entire executive team. It was such a big deal, they had to be there. He wished her warmly. She too was proactive with her good morning Kirit Bhai. Vinod Natarajan emerged in vision. He waved out in their direction. Everyone was together. Kirit Patel and Sandhya too waved back.

Kirit Patel: "Sandhya sorry but I will be kidnapping your husband for an hour or so. Pratima will take care of you. Please don't mind."

Sandhya: "Oh, I understand. It's fine."

Kirit Patel: "But he will be with you for lunch... on second thought we all can have lunch in our corporate office after the meeting. That is, if you are fine with it."

Sandhya: "Sure, I will be fine with Pratima."

They let the empty car with red light move first and rest followed it. At a point Pratima and Sandhya's car changed direction and entered the same club again. We will spend some time here until lunch, Pratima said. Soon after they settled down in the executive lounge with glasses of virgin pinacolada, Pratima's phone rang. She said can you call me on the club phone, signal is weak here? Sandhya was surprised; but understood. She has just met them. They will surely share a lot of information that could not be leaked to anyone. She gestured to Pratima to go ahead and take the call. Pratima gestured, 'will be back in a bit.'

Pratima took the call inside a private cabin and kept listening and nodding with 'hmm' throughout the conversation.

Voice: "You can give her some leads that will mess her mind."

Sandhya was going through the menu card, when Pratima returned.

Sandhya: "Some important secret? I hope it has nothing to do with me." (Laughs)

Pratima: "You? Oh no, how can that be. (Laughing and fixing her gaze on her) Mr Desai inquired about you."

Sandhya: "Me why?"

Pratima: "He is stupid you know, he was wondering if you were really interested in his offer."

Sandhya: “What offer, oh that day in the club?”

Pratima: “He has really taken up for you.”

Sandhya: “I don’t think I am that good. It must be due to my husband’s position.”

Pratima: “umm, I don’t think; because it is not an Indian company and there is a lot travel involved.”

Sandhya: “No way, I cannot travel. My children are small and he would not allow it.”

Sandhya’s phone rang again. She took it and a second after hello, she disconnected.

“Let’s go. They are done and waiting for us.”

Sandhya feels relieved too. During lunch Sandhya sat next to her husband, who seemed rather happy and chirpy. He said he had told his secretary for us see a good movie today, whichever one she wanted.

Gradually Sandhya and Pratima became close friends. Pratima would come over for lunch often to Sandhya’s place when her husband would be out and late in evening they would plan something else. Natarajan did not mind it at all as his wife was with a woman who had a senior position at Patel&Patel.

One day both had gone to the club in the evening. Pratima was working on her laptop, when suddenly she said that she has got some nice photographs to show and clicked on ‘Celebration’ folder. The occasion was the first dinner after Kirit Patel had got the permit for the spectrum. Sandhya moved to the other side to see the pictures.

Pratima: “You see them peacefully, I will just freshen up then we will order drinks.”

Sandhya: “I can order, I know now what you like. You take your time.”

With a smile she started seeing the photos. She featured very prominent in many of them. She noticed Mr. Desai too. She was feeling very important that day meeting rich and famous. In her husband’s circle she met only dirty and corrupt. She thought she will ask a CD for herself too. The folder got over and she shut it. There were many more folders on the desktop. She became inquisitive about folder ‘Kirit Patel.Pvt’. Pratima hadn’t come back yet. She quickly double clicked on it. Her eyes widened. There were pictures of many of her husband’s politician friends and secretary level officers. Most of them were drunk silly and many of them were clinging to different women. She knew most of these men, some of them were in very compromising positions with semi naked girls... she lost her balance when she saw her husband right on top of a woman in a sari, whose blouse was fully open and her breasts spilled out. Sandhya was sweating. She clicked once more to find another, in which Vinod Natarajan’s hand was between a woman’s legs. She couldn’t handle it. There was

internet connection in the laptop. She selected some of these pictures and mailed them to her own ID. She didn't know what she will do with them; but she knew she should have them. She shut the folder. Pratima was chatting with the waiter near the bar and perhaps asking him if any order was placed. She returned to her seat. She had noticed the expressions on Sandhya's face. She knew her job was done.

Pratima: "Nice pictures no? I will give you a CD."

They had many glasses of wine and both had got out of control. Her face showed a mix of sadness, anger and anxiety; but she kept her spirits up. She clanked 'cheers' with every new glass of wine. Pratima too was drunk. Somehow she kept going to the toilet often.

A little after midnight Pratima dropped her home. Sandhya walked in stumbling. She went to sleep next to her daughter in children's room. Vinod Natarajan too was very high and couldn't care less. He thought Sandhya is working her ways to get into international business, which is good for them. She will be busy traveling and he can be free too.

Next two days Pratima and Sandhya did not contact each other. Vinod Natarajan asked about her. But Sandhya didn't encourage the conversation. Same day she called up Pratima and asked if they could meet.

With the first clank of the red wine Sandhya asked how she could get in touch with Mr. Desai, "I want to get more details of this job". "Sure, no problem", Pratima said. "I will call you in the morning and give you details. I have to find out his whereabouts from his office. Ok?"

Next morning when she was having breakfast with her children, her phone rang. Vinod Natarajan shouted from bedroom "call for you". A servant went in and got the phone for her.

"Yes I am Sandhya speaking... oh Mr Desai. That's very nice of you, calling me personally... yes I do have time... but I need to know a lot more about this Mr. Desai before I... oh that's great, if Pratima is meeting you, then I will come with her... yes we are very close. Thank you, sir. See you."

Vinod Natarajan had overheard his wife on phone. "Is this the same guy who owns a cable networks in New Zealand?"

"Yes, he is same. I am trying to see if there is any merit in what he had said earlier. You don't mind, if I work with them?"

“No no, it is always good to be in the company of rich and influential. But be careful as he is not very dependable with women.”

“How do you know that? Moreover, he knows, I am a minister’s wife. Why would he take such a big risk, in acting fresh with me?”

“I don’t know that; I feel don’t say ‘yes’ to him if you have to travel. But if work is in this city, then you can take care of children too and come back home, to me also. You know what I mean?” “If I want the job, I can’t be dictating my terms. Normally it is the other way. I also feel all my education and ambitions are being wasted. It will be nice to meet cultured and smart people that are around him. I hate people in your company.”

Kirit Patel and Pratima are sitting in the backseat of a car. The car stopped at Patel&Patel’s head office and he got off. The car sped away with Pratima and soon Sandhya was sitting next to her. Car entered a very swanky gate of ‘Desai Cable World’. Pratima walked ahead and spoke to the reception. They were graciously asked to take a seat in the huge lobby. Glasses of water were placed on the gleaming glass table in front with a question, “tea, coffee or cold drink?” Sandhya wanted tea and looked at Pratima. She did not want anything. Sandhya noticed she looked off color.

“What happened? You don’t look too good.”

“Yes that deal that your husband wanted from us to give us the band of spectrum is troubling Kirit Patel a lot.”

“Why is it troubling?”

And Pratima gave her the explanation in detail, elaborating the technicalities making it impossible for their audit and accounts department to handle it. She added dramatically, “Just imagine Vinod Natarajan blackmailed us to sell Patel&Patel’s shares to him at the rate of Re 1! That too one crore of them!”

Sandhya was shocked, “but your share in the market is more than 1000.”

“You are right. That is the main problem. We would have given him entire amount in cash, if he allowed us. We have done it in the past; but this time he was very unreasonable. He knows that it can’t be done and yet he pressurized us. And that is how we had to make a strict contract with him.”

She opened the laptop and showed her the final contract. Sandhya’s eyes popped out reading the language. Casually Pratima added, “See we never had any issues with him dealing in cash. We gave him holidays, cars, wine, women whenever he demanded.” Sandhya’s jaw dropped. “I somehow feel that he is sensing to lose the next election; that is if he gets a ticket in the first place. After all Kirit Bhai also knows people in

each political high command. If this shares episode ever gets leaked to them, your husband's political carrier is over. He is acting like this due to extreme insecurity. He should not be so pessimistic. ”

Sandhya could not take a sip from the tea placed in front of her.

“Madam Sandhya Natarajan?”

She looked at the well-dressed man.

“Please follow me”

“Mrs. Natarajan, it is so nice to meet you one more time”, Mr Desai sang and came forward to shake her hand.

“You can call me Sandhya.” She added shaking his hand.

“Why, you don't look too well. If there is any problem we can meet any other time. Absolutely no hassle.” He picked up the phone, “I will tell them to drop you back.” That's when she realized, what was happening.

“No, no Mr Desai. I am sorry I was just lost in some random thoughts. You don't worry about it. I am fine now. Really, I mean it. Let's get down to business.”

He sat in his chair and told her clearly how she could contribute in their office. There was going to be just a little travel, may be only 4-5 days in a month to New Zealand.

“It is a beautiful place. You will have no trouble handling it.”

Sandhya looked straight at him and said: “Mr Desai, I can start from 1st of next month.” In a few minutes they had a formal contract in front of them. She was to be paid nearly 10 lakh a year with office car pick up and drop. They both signed it and she emerged from the cabin with a victorious smile. She ran towards Pratima waving the sheet of white paper. Pratima hugged her warmly.

Sandhya was not going home today to that stinky and corrupt ambience, called home; but to the club with her best friend. She knew it was too early to drink; but what the hell.

Both the women were flying high at 8pm only. With the strength of the job letter in her bag, Sandhya asked in very drunk but determined voice, “what are the options to save Kirit Bhai from the jaws of my husband, Mr. Vinod Natarajan? Give me the full list of them. I want to see where I can help you and Kirit bhai.”

Pratima pulled out her phone from the bag and played the phone conversation between Kirit Patel and Vinod Natarajan recorded earlier. Sandhya was shattered with her husband's voice. He was behaving like a seasoned extortionist. Oh god, my husband? Is he the reason behind all this money crap? Pratima pulled her for a walk in the empty jogging track. They strolled slowly going over various possibilities. Sandhya found most were not practical and would leave them in difficult long term troubles with government, until Pratima came out with the last one...

They returned to their seats. Sandhya sat down with a thump. She couldn't believe her ears! How could anyone even think of such an alternate? But as she thought more and more about it, it started sinking in. After all Kirit Patel's company has hundreds of thousands of employees and millions of share-holders. If and when the government finds out about free transfer of shares to someone, hell will break lose! Too many lives and livelihoods were at stake. Patel&Patel will lose their entire reputation in a flash! Yes it made sense... it did.

Now the details of who, how and when, had to be worked upon. Kirit Bhai was ready to support anyone for life who would take up this project. 'Who' or the actor was most important, because he/she had to have a very good motive to bump off someone otherwise it will look that he was a hired professional. So finding that person was the major task. It has to be someone who should have lifelong serious grudges against the man; like if a pregnant woman was left in the lurch or took away somebody's entire source of livelihood... or it could be a deranged or mentally unstable person, who doesn't know what he is doing. Such a person might be better since even law cannot convict him like it would a normal person. Many criminal have hidden behind the curtain of lost mental balance when cornered in a court.

Sandhya had gone into a shell for many days after that day's meeting. She was thinking of the kind of sex she had with her husband was so unnatural. He seemed to act as though he was acting in porn movie rather making love to his wife. All the memories of dirty remarks and orders in bed were making her sick...

After two days Pratima called her and they met in the evening, in the same jogging track of the club. They talked for a long time.

First Sunday, after parliament session gets over, was zeroed in. Breakfast time. Sunday morning was most suitable, as everyone is in a lazy and holiday mood, even the law keepers. Sandhya chose her own semi-retarded brother as the 'man' for the mission. His mental state that was against him all his life; was going to be an asset suddenly. There was a lot of discussion in Kirit bhai's beach house about this. In such a fool proof case, there was no scope of taking a chance. Although Sandhya said she will take care of it, experts made arrangements for tier 2 and tier 3 also. Sandhya was getting eager to get over with her stinking life with a horrible human being. She was also looking forward to her new job, traveling and some fresh air. She had a mission and she knew it. She had to get rid of this uncouth, corrupt and sex hungry man, who couldn't even perform in bed. He being her husband was not going to stop her.

Sandhya's brother Prashant had arrived on Friday morning. Soon his classes started. He had been explained over and over where the piece will be lying. He has to be right in front of him, across the table, and when Sandhya didi calls the servant to the kitchen Prashant will do the needful and do it three times. He is going to help his very depressed sister. His family will be very rich after Sunday.

Final day arrived. Official staff was less than normal. Driver was given an off; mercifully he had asked for it. Children will sleep till well past 9am...

Vinod Natarajan was at the breakfast table at 8, sipping his tea and scanning the newspaper. No one noticed an athletic shadow jumped into the compound and hid behind the large flower pots, just behind the dining room window. He looked like any gardener or dhobi. After looking around, he took the red 'angochara' from his right shoulder and wrapped it tightly on his face, leaving a narrow slit for his eyes. Prashant had taken his place on the chair opposite Vinod Natarajan. He fiddled under his cushion, pulled out the revolver and placed it securely on his thighs under his long shirt... Sandhya called out from the kitchen to take other dishes. The servant who was setting plates and glasses left the dining room. Prashant pulled out the revolver and aimed at Vinod Natarajan, who looked confused and dismissed the mad man with serious hesitation. He turned the page of the newspaper but kept Prashant in his vision. Prashant's hands shivered violently, as he tried to squeeze the trigger. Natarajan's confusion turned into horror as the first bullet hit the ceiling. In a split second Natarajan got up from his chair and dashed towards Prashant to disarm him. Just then the shadow appeared, calmly placed his own right hand neatly on top of Prashant's and finger on top of the finger on the trigger. And as they had planned 1, 2, 3, game was over. Sandhya and the servant appeared in the dining room hurriedly in a few seconds. They noticed a movement in the curtain. The shadow moved out of the door, went behind the house and vanished. Prashant was still holding the revolver.

On the face of it: Prashant is retarded. He cannot shoot anyone and why should he? The unknown shadow might have done it. As it had moved the curtain while leaving the scene of crime. But no one saw the shadow and the shooting. To add to it there were no other finger prints anywhere, except Prashant's. After effect: Prashant is put behind bars as he surrendered to the nearest police station immediately. Surrendering guidance provided by Sandhya Natarajan. Getting his bail accomplished by lawyers recommended by Kirit Patel. Prashant's family gets 25000 every month for killing/ not killing Vinod Natarajan. Sandhya is happy in her new job. She feels very important and useful. Vinod Natarajan's death certificate was submitted to authorities with a copy of the contract between Patel&Patel and Vinod Natarajan. It accompanied a letter saying since the primary owner was no more, one crore shares were to be transferred back to the company's official shares ledger.

Gautam's research

It was 9pm. The train was full. TC, Gautam had been checking passenger's tickets for the past two hours. He is in charge of four non-AC-3 tier-sleeper compartments. He had reached the end of the fourth one. No wonder he was tired and it showed on his face. He removed his white cap for a few seconds, showing his unruly hair. "Ticket, ticket, excuse me, show your tickets please. Where are you going? Ok, here. What about you two? Fine here you go."

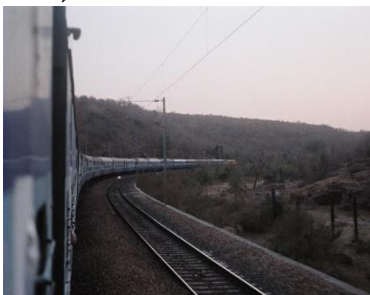
He entered the last section of the compartment. Everyone gave their tickets but a young couple was sound asleep on the same berth. One leg of the woman was on top of the man's stomach. "Excuse me", he said rather softly. She had 'mehdi' on her hands. Newly married, he thought. He could not check a little smile escaping his face. Turning away, he changed light to night lamp. He took off his white uniform cap and stirred up his mop of hair with his fingers. He felt relaxed. The waiter asked him if he will have dinner now. He nodded yes and went into the toilet to freshen up.

He looked at himself in the mirror and wanted to be critical of what he saw, but couldn't. He organized his hair, beard, shirt, tie... The sound of train changes so dramatically in the toilets. It becomes much sharper or what they say, 'shrill'. The rhythm remains the same, obviously. It is a part of the same train and compartment. He always enjoyed noticing such changes. He felt, it was like a research topic on 'sound of train in its various areas'. Toilets have the potty tube that is open to the railway track or ground. That creates a lot of difference to the sound here. He wondered how it will sound to the person, placed in a hammock and tied under the compartment; close to the wheels... he felt it was going to be too noisy. His face grimaced and showed clear discomfort due to this sadist thought. It was like a torturous Nazi idea... Someone was knocking at the door. Enough research. He came out. Waiter had kept his vegetarian food tray on his seat.

He sat down, opened the foil and looked at the food. So unappetizing! Same dry rotis, dal and same color gravy in the vegetable. He hesitated. Waiter was waiting,

"Any problem sir?"

"No, not with the food... But my stomach is not feeling too good." It was the turn of



waiter's research faculty to wake up, 'now I know what he was doing in the toilet for so long.'

"I will take it back."

"Sorry, but I think I will have a vegetable sandwich at Jalgaon with tea." Waiter took the tray back and Gautam lay down with his overnight bag as the pillow. His hair was flying due to strong wind from the open window...

Tuk tuk... tuktuk, Tuk tuk... tuktuk, Tuk tuk... tuktuk...

He wondered if the swings for little babies also were as relaxing. Why does he like this sound and this sideways movement so much? Was he born in the train or perhaps brought up in trains? Could be. His father was a motorman... His father always wanted him too to be a motorman; to follow his steps... Gautam wanted to be a painter. His father couldn't understand him. He thought of him as weird! Painter! Finally with mother as a mediator, they settled for the job of the ticket checker or TC, as is mostly called. At least I don't get black all over; and my lungs must be in much better shape than 'baba's'.

Train stops at Jalgaon.

Waiter is talking to the sandwich man on the platform.

Soon the train starts. Waiter jumps in.

Gautam turns to his side, untangling the numerous knots of his life.

9

Hope? What hope?

The man in dirty rags had managed to drag himself near the railway station. Strangely there was darkness all around. It is not the period that we know about, no at least not yet. It is the future. This is much after politicians had finished ruling and looting the world. They were being very stupid, though they thoroughly believed in their own smartness. They did not know that when you steal from your own home (planet), you are stealing your own stuff. Gradually they lost their significance, importance and finally they became irrelevant. Unnoticed, they kept dying one by one and meeting their destined unsung fate.

Man in dirty rags stepped into the dark train station building. Taking support of a pillar, he looked at the ticket window. It was dark inside there too. No one seemed to be manning it. He entered the platform. No one asked him for a ticket or identification. He was on the first platform. As his vision adjusted to feeble light from the thin slice of the moon, he noticed numerous people everywhere. It was difficult to guess if they were waiting for a train or they were just... there. He felt dead tired. He looked around for a place to lie down or to sit with support of a wall. There was no empty place anywhere on the floor. Every chair, stone benches, carts, book shop, and tea-stall everything was taken. People were lying all over. There was no tea being made. No fruits being sold. There were no newspapers on the stand. There were just, people everywhere. He looked at a distance. He decided to walk towards the end of the platform. He had to dodge sleeping people all the way; sometime even jump over few of them huddled together.

He reached the post where the name of the station is written in large alphabets and then platform slopes down to meet the ground. He was not interested but decided to

read which station it was. He touched the large slab of stone and moved his palm over it to find the name, like brail. He thought he found the name, but did not find it familiar, 'Zamboudti'. He had never heard such a name.

Any ways he was not here to find where he was; but to find a six feet space to rest. He found it one foot short, under the name board. He sprawled on the ground and placed his legs up on the pillar of the board. Comfortable was not the word. It was more like heavenly or blissful. He started fantasizing about the past when trains must be running on electricity, stations had food stalls, every place was lit up brightly and people moved around energetically...

He thought, if by chance that brightness suddenly returned here, he might have to close his eyes for a long time to avoid over exposure. Suddenly he felt a strong red light was hitting his eyes. He opened his eyes to see what that was, but realized that morning sun was splashed on his face. He turned to see the platform. Everyone was sleeping as if they were only bodies. Feeling depressed at the site he turned towards the sun and tried to see far in the distance... for a train... for a movement, someone



walking; but all he could see was the rail tracks playfully winding themselves like a pair of snakes and disappearing into the oblivion. Suddenly, he felt something stirred very close to him. A little movement, right by his side. A dog had snuggled up next to him for warmth. He looked up at him but did not panic. Finally, he seemed to have found some life and hope, in the form of that dirty little dog.

10

Hrs. 24 only - a love letter

My dear, I am writing this from the running train that is taking me away. It was a very difficult moment for me, when you got down from the train and it started to roll. Your receding face is still in my vision. You waved for long and in the end turned around to go back. I remember exact position of your hand; your right hand, to be exact. All this seems like a dream or like a badly conceived and scripted film by some egoist writer. The scenes and their content don't make any sense. They are so unreal. Such films don't succeed. It can never happen that two people meet over a drink with ten others around them and end up the way we did. You were the most unlike person I would even say hello to in my own city. You were so raw and at best, a kid and I was already a married woman, older to you by a year or two.

Yet I was amazed that my eyes kept following you, in spite of my friendship with all the other senior higher ups there. It was ridiculous. Perhaps I was too high, and now I guess you too were no better. People take extreme steps in two situations, one when they are drunk and two when they are angry. Both give you power to go all out.

At the dinner table I found myself next to you and even before the dinner arrived, we were holding hands under the table. How come even a fleeting thought of my respectable loving husband did not cross my mind... unbelievable and unpardonable! After all you had taken up that film as your first ever job and I bet you wouldn't be making any serious money from it, still...?

After dinner we again found ourselves together. No one even noticed that I was not going where I was supposed to stay that night. I was an important guest from another city and someone must have been given responsibility to see that I was fine and put on the train, next day. I just cannot believe no one even checked that out. How come? I was holding you to avoid falling down when it started raining. Luckily we found a cab without knowing where we were going. It was too late at night and it was bizarre for me to think of walking on the beach in that heavy down pour. How come I did that, falling and banging into each other? Finally I don't remember how, but I found myself in your room, in your bed with scores of other people sleeping all around us...

I guess that was it. I couldn't have experienced this kind of supernatural 24 hours with anyone else. And that is why you are on my mind. I have been drinking the gin and tonic that you gave me and with each sip I feel like turning the train back. I am smoking the cigarettes that you bought for me and have been blowing the smoke on your face. I know you don't smoke, but I can't help it if I can see you right in front of me, right now. I have no idea what is going happen when I reach home. How am I going to handle this situation? Will I get over it soon or after a while or maybe never? Do I talk to anyone about it? And what do I say? No one would digest that I met a raw kid in Bombay and I think I am in love! People will make fun of me. How could a person of my stature (sorry to use this word) even think like this? In fact I am surely the part of a badly scripted film and seriously hope that the film ends soon. I can't pray for much, but for me 'The End' will be happy, if no lasting harm is done to us, especially to you. Bye.

11

Gautam's blissful state

Deep inside a dense forest, Gautam was sitting near the bark of a very tall tree. He had been meditating for many days. His awareness had risen to a very high level. He felt he is able to feel the top of all the trees. He could see small birds, perched on the swaying delicate little branches with new born delicate leaves. The air is clear. Vision is clear. He could see across the horizon for miles or may be as far as the

horizon existed. He could feel no boundary at the end of his vision. Edge or the boundary ceased to exist for him. It was not only his vision through his eyes. It was his inner vision that made him so elevated and light.

His eyes were shut; but he could see everything that existed all around. He felt that no star or planet or galaxy was hidden from him. Everything was right in front at the same time, in the same frame. It was a view that went all around - 360 degrees, front back, up down and sideways and in between all sides. Gautam was crying. Tears rolled down freely from his eyes, onto his cheeks and his chest. He did not know it. But he did feel eternally blissful. This was the state, known as the state of '*anand*', which every seeker wants to achieve. This is when you feel one with entire creation, entire universe, dark matter, dark energy, what have you. You don't only connect with what is visible; but also what is unseen by the naked eyes, unheard of or even un-thought of. There is a lot of matter that cannot be seen. So, that matter and energies must be felt through inner senses and awareness.

Gautam had achieved this by feeling unconditional love with everything at the same time, with entire creation. Right now he was able to reach out to all that is there, all which supports existence at the same time. This realization made him feel at the height of his emotions which made his tears roll.

We feel such a surge of emotions due to just one person, a group, our religion or even our own country, we love; but if anyone can feel love for everything at the same time, the height of those emotions cannot be fathomed. It has to be achieved to be believed.

12

Power of letting go

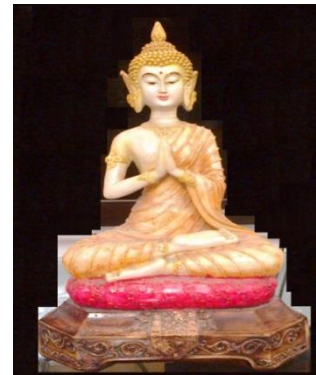
It was 4 am and Gautam had woken up with a strange feeling - a feeling of control. The feeling of control strangely came from the lesson of 'let go'. During the last few moments in bed, he had let everything 'go' mentally. It happened just a few moments ago. He lost interest or rather did not feel interested in controlling anything or anyone. He suddenly felt light as a feather because he had decided to 'not' hold reign of any situation. He was enjoying this new feeling of lightness. It amused him. He might even be having a smile on his face. No, he did not regret that he did not learn it earlier. Everything and everyone has an assigned entry time and duration to be on the stage, to perform the act and exit, exactly after the part is over.

Gautam has been underperforming in his family scenario. He was either, not interested to act, not expected to or not allowed to act as the decision taker in his family, of which he was the head. He was eldest; but over a long period of time he had allowed the leadership to slip from his hand. It may even have been taken away

from him, which too he didn't care, too much about. Whenever any family discussion took place, he occupied his favorite back seat; that is if he was in that room at all.

But what happened all of a sudden? Gautam just woke up and instead of feeling drowsy, he found himself so comfortably awake. He went to the kitchen, made tea, lit a few lamps and sat down with his palm leaf, peacock feather and the inkpot to write.

He had made up his mind or his mind itself got into this new phase, 'now on whenever the sun rises; it will show Gautam in a different light'. He was feeling completely renewed; with new lightness, new energy, new thoughts and a new power of control. Now he is not afraid that he might lose or confident that he will win. All he believes in, is that all will be well. Regrets from the past don't bother him nor any anxieties about the future. He just thinks it's all right. It's all fine. He was now a part of the natural flow of universe. And he was not going to alter it.



He felt immensely powerful to finally, 'be with what is'.

13

Just Think



Do you know how old is this earth? It is billions of years old. To be almost exact its age is more than 4.5 billion years! Life did not exist here at that point of time. On the timeline of eternity man has evolved very recently compared to earth's age. We have all come up from a single cell organism to this present advance state, if we can call it that. Some theories say we evolved from fish, to birds, to monkeys and then came 'us'. According to a scientific study, if entire time of the earth's existence is condensed into 100 hours then the modern times would measure only a few seconds. By modern times we can say when spoken word developed and we started using intelligence for our benefit. We started staying in groups to be safe, to flourish and to avoid being robbed or killed by wild animals or natural calamities.

As the time flew many inventions kept coming, starting from rough stone tools for hunting, to the wheel. Along the way we developed clothing to save us from acute

weather conditions. We started keeping animals as pets to serve us, either for milk, meat, or even to carry us around and later to work for us in agricultural fields.

Sometime later psychology and mind games entered human domain. For the first time the 'leaders' emerged who would guide their group in everyone's interest. A belief or even scare was developed in the community, in order to stay together, to fight the enemy jointly and keep the produce, women and children of the tribe safe from other tribal attacks. Yes now we had groups that had tasted robbing other groups for benefits. Somebody intelligent and commanding respect would advise the community with, 'when in danger, always gather under such and such (strategically located) tree, a stone or a cave'. I guess this was the beginning of politics and religion. Leaders learnt that 'leading' gave them immense power over people and that was very beneficial and intoxicating... So from that time onwards we have only been the victims of these two social orders, religion and politics. And since then the benefits of religion and politics, have been out performed by the harms of its misuse.

Due to the religion, we have gone through the worst period of wars, mass killings, ethnic cleansing, countries breaking up etc. I seriously question the utility of religion for providing any benefit to human race, what so ever. Any sensible businessman will just drop any harmful and useless item from his list of articles, which costs much more compared to the benefits reaped from it. The balance sheet must show profits and not losses.

No one needs religion, to be a good human being. People can be 'good people' and do very well in any field without the interference of religion in their lives. People who are too busy making money to look after their families may have no time for visiting temples. If a beggar starts praying in place of begging for alms; without doubt, he will have to starve.

Well, I hope sooner than later, constructive people will get to know the value and real utility of conventional religion and will revolt against this concept. Charity begins at home. So, I have put religion out of the list of 'important things' in my life. Hoping that many others too may have started thinking like me and thus the process may have already started. I sincerely feel it is worth trying to live without religion or at least reduce its importance and then check the so called 'balance sheet'. I am sure we will have more time to meet friends, play with our children and do our jobs well at the office.

We should also allocate some time for us to 'think', just as we go through activities like eating, sleeping, talking, traveling, having sex, exercising... We never think that it is important to close our eyes and just 'think'. It is such a constructive mental exercise. Think about new ideas; think how to solve a mystery, find creative solutions to family's problems, think what are we doing or where are we headed, are we on the right path? To make our lives fruitful, we need to think what is realistically useful and attainable in our life and what is not and then weed out the useless parts.

To wrap it up, I recently read that amount of happiness 'science and technology' have given us in the past 100 years is far more than the happiness that religion might have given us in the past 2000 years!

So let us start thinking and change our lives and the world.

14

Road rage and Gautam

It was shocking to see a person like Gautam involved in a road rage! He was known to be very cool, calm and even introvert. But perhaps times have changed far too much for anyone to be at his or her normal calm self. You see wisdom says that do not try to help anyone whose nature is unchangeable.

Once upon a time there was a saint who lived on the banks of Ganga near Haridwar. He was very kind hearted and compassionate being. One morning when he was praying to the sun in Ganga water he saw a scorpion being washed away. He felt scorpion's pain and decided to save it. So, he put his hands under the scorpion, picked it up and brought it to the dry shore and gradually put it down. But sadly as he did so he was stung by the scorpion. It was very painful. He fainted due to the venom. Other saints came to his help and asked him, how he got stung. After he narrated the incident, an older saint smiled at him.

A few days later similar incidence re-occurred. This time he was bitten by a snake. The senior saint came to him and said, ' I know that you are very compassionate, but it is also important to understand the nature various living beings. It is in the nature of scorpion to sting if it feels threatened. A scorpion has no concept of compassion or knowing that it is being rescued. It may not even realize that it was about to die! So, do not waste your good heart in saving such creatures. Gautam understood it and installed it in his mind for all such situations...



Gautam was driving to work through a crowded road. The roads were fairly wide; yet the cars were nearly touching each other sideways and bumper to bumper. The traffic moved at snail's pace that too only occasionally. There was a cacophony of horns. People cursed under their breath and many vented their frustration loud and clear. Air was saturated with carbon emission, suspended dust particles and foul language. Gautam got some space in front of his car and thought that he will move when traffic actually starts moving. But the car behind him started gunning and revving and honking. Some young boys rolled the windows

down and asked him to move. Gautam indicated that he knew that but there was no way after 3 feet. So they should chill. They could not take it that an old man had not yielded to them. One of the four young ones came out. Gautam's window glasses were rolled down and the engine was shut. Gautam said politely, I don't mind moving ahead, but there is no space. I don't want to start and shut the engine just for 3 feet. So please relax when traffic moves we all will move. The boy looked back at his friends and indicated that this person does not understand his language. He opened Gautam's car door and asked him to come out. Gautam was fine with it. Other two boys also came out of their car and surrounded Gautam. 'What is your problem? Why are you not moving? If you don't move we will have to use force. You don't know us. My uncle is a politician, his father is a police officer and his father owns a mall and...' Gautam said, "Ok fine, now I know about your uncle, your friend's father and the mall owner... but could you please tell me who you are and what do you do? I am only an ordinary chap. I have this non-a/c car and I want to save fuel by not restarting the car..." Before he could complete himself, the boy in front pushed Gautam and then landed a blow on his temple. Someone else slapped him. Generally they had started manhandling him. Gautam had fallen on the road and was being kicked by all of them. One boy came close his face and picked him up by his collar. Gautam stood up with bleeding lips, bruised face and torn shirt. One boy had pulled out a stick from their car and shattered Gautam's wind screen. Gautam thought, maybe it will give him better breeze in this heat of the moment.

When the strongest one held Gautam's throat and repeated himself, "move your car now", was the first time Gautam's hand moved, but imperceptibly. No one noticed the movement at all. The firm and threatening voice of the boy in front seemed to have lost its venom. His face looked confused. Other two were wondering why their leader had become so quiet. They did not notice the damage, until the boy started slumping down. They left Gautam and held their friend to help him. Someone said he has poisoned him. Another fetched a knife from the car. The traffic had started moving by now. Gautam had lifted the injured boy to put him in his back seat for medical treatment. As he opened the door to place him in, he felt a knife close to his neck. Still carrying the boy Gautam turned swiftly around and with the legs of the injured boy other two were thrown off balance and banged on a moving tempo. A punch from the tempo blew the nose of the boy. He sat down instantly. A car reached close to him asked him to move away, "idiot, you are blocking the road! Move fast." Only when the car touched him he realized and moved fast from being run over. He staggered to the side. Last one had a knife too. Gautam said, "See, I want to take your friend to the doctor, so back off." But he did not listen. In a blink their long knife had flown off from his hand and vanished. The boy behind noticed it and was shocked. With another movement he too was down with a stunned look. They both lay like vegetables. Gautam picked them up and put them in their own car.

They were awake but looked thoroughly confused.

The car in front of Gautam's had moved quite a few paces ahead. He returned to his car. Glancing at the unconscious boy at the back seat he turned the ignition key.

Leopard in my dream

Sometime back a dog in his playfulness scratched my right arm with his sharp broken tooth. Not his fault. I was advised to take full course of five anti-rabies injections, as dog's tooth had made a slight crack in the skin. After the course was over, a friend told me that now I was safe for the next five years of any dog bites. In a humor I asked him, will the injections work if a tiger bites me? Laughing aloud he said, of course it will.

In Mumbai's National Park there is supposedly a good leopard population, who keep venturing into their 'No Entry' areas quite often, in search of food. Generally small children and dogs get killed by them; but most grownups who are attacked generally escape with some bites or missing pieces of flesh from their body. But of course attack by a leopard does shake anybody badly.

So, armed with the anti-rabies shots, I thought that meeting a leopard would not be a bad idea. If the animal attacked me, my name will definitely appear in newspapers and personally for me it would be rare honor too... doesn't matter if I survive to tell the story or not. I can see, not many people are in agreement with me. Well, traveling thousands of miles at a great expense to climb the Everest is such an honor that is fraught with worse dangers. Quite a few climbers have not come back home to show the pictures of the summit or to tell the story. I think it will be proportionately honorable and dangerous to meet a leopard nearer home and click his pictures leaping towards me. If I stay in my senses, ward off the leopard somehow and run away like a gazelle; I will be able to tell my story punctuated with related real pictures. Just like anybody who has climbed or tried to climb that peak has gone into the record books, wild cat attacks on humans are also well documented and covered by news channels. All such encounters immortalize the person into the ocean of internet data for ever...

One day (night actually) with all this unrealistic rubbish in my mind, I went to sleep and dreamt of an 'encounter of the real kind' - with a leopard.



Location, Mumbai's 'film city', night shift. I am shooting for a television program. It is drizzling. The scenes are being shot inside a running taxi. I am in the back seat recording sound. I have my headphones with a Beta-recorder by my side. The girl actor sitting on the other side of the seat is enacting her part. In a while due to change in camera position, there is a short break. I get out of the cramped space to stretch my legs and pee in the bushes at the side of the road.

As I walk ahead with my hands in position to unzip, a light-boy shouted from the back, 'sir be careful, don't go far. It is not safe at this time.' It was past 2.00 am, then. I took the advice seriously and wanted to get back in a hurry. Rain drops were creating

very soothing soft sounds hitting fallen soggy leafs. Instead of sharp clicks of 'tup tup', the drops fell with soft 'dhub, dhub'. On the ground there is a dense cover of leafs in the thick forest. It is pitch dark ahead and I have no intention of straining my eyes. I am about to finish and zip up, when I notice two small dots of faint light in the dark. In a moment they both vanished and then lit up again, together. They moved sideways, but together, retaining the distance between them. A shiver went through my spine. I kept my movements very slow and small and started retreating keeping my eyes at those dots. The light dots simultaneously lowered towards the ground and moved forward. Now I was able to see the figure of a small leopard in the light from the 'sky pane' provided for the shooting crew. In panic I turned swiftly and ran towards the taxi. I didn't know that the taxi had been pushed a few meters back. I ran with long paces and grabbed the taxi handle. Silence of the night got shattered by an animal's roar. Taxi door opened, I rushed in and as I was about to shut the door, the animal too managed to push its roaring face inside. I was kept pulling the door in with all my strength to keep the spotted leopard out. His bare teeth and smelly strong breath were inches away from my own face. I did not have enough time to slide further down on the seat as the girl and the recorder were there too. His roar in surround sound had scared the hell out of everyone. I could hear the girl's squeak too in between. Holding the door tightly was the life test for my strength to keep the hungry leopard away from me. After a while for some reason, leopard started pulling away to release himself from this unfamiliar tangle. May be he was tired or his neck may have started hurting...

Gradually all the wild sounds died down and a faint regular breathing faded in. His face was not as ferocious now. Even as I felt easier and safer; I decided to do the most unthinkable. I touched leopard's nose with tip of my fingers. His ferocious face squirmed and rotated aggressively to bite me. But he was getting tired. So in a few moments again, very carefully, I touched him between his eyes as if it was a dog. He protested less this time. Encouraged, I started moving my hand on his face. He shut his mouth and looked at me with wonder in his eyes. Obviously he had never met a human so up close. I remembered there were some omelet sandwiches on the seat. I fumbled behind my back and found them. Slowly I took one near his mouth and released the pressure on his neck, just a little. He smelled it, looked away and then suddenly snapped and gobbled it up. It was the best thing ever that had happened in my life. Seeing this scene, the girl passed some more which also were eaten up in no time. Everyone was quiet and stayed locked up in various vehicles. I gestured for more edible stuff, which was placed behind me by an adventurous spot boy, Shekhar from the half open window on the other side. Soon all the sandwiches were over, although I was sure my esteemed guest could have eaten a hundred more. Now I was getting restless due to lack of distraction and entertainment for the leopard. I had made the grip on leopard's neck quite loose so that he could eat comfortably. I felt that this was the time to let him go. It was also the time that was full of risk, apprehension and perhaps loads of sadness. Just as final moments were approaching, I felt leopard's face one last time. His head pushed my hand with affection to increase its pressure.

Meeting a leopard was the most valuable incidence of my entire life. I again moved my fingers on his head, between his eyes and on his ears. He was quiet. I released the pressure on the door. He pulled away a little and finally he was out. There was enough space for the door to shut. And I did shut it. The animal was confused. I rolled my window down a bit and looked at him. He put his front legs on the door and stood on his hind legs. As I was about to put my hand out of the window, the girl screamed and pulled my hand away. The scream shocked the leopard and he sprinted off with a jerk. Somewhere an ignition key turned and engine started with rickety sounds. I turned to see who this was. It was the camera van. I turned back, but the leopard had vanished. I could see no trace of him anywhere. There was darkness all around. I got off from the car and tried to search for those two dots of light, but could not...

I felt very sad that I could not go further in this relationship; but was extremely happy for whatever I achieved. We had to restart the shooting. Continuous sound of all the vehicles that scared the leopard was irritating me now...

Right outside my bedroom window a school bus was revving its engine. Kids were boarding the bus. I left my bed feeling fresh and happy and went out for a walk.

16

Gautam's guest

It was 4 am. Gautam had woken up to drink a glass of water. It was too early to do anything else except to go back to sleep. As he was about to slip his slippers off to get into his bed, the doorbell rang. Bell?! Who in the hell is this? Gautam doesn't even get milk delivered. May be someone from his family in north. He has a brother who is known for giving such untimely surprises. By this time Gautam had reached the door. The bell did not ring again. Why? He thought. Is he checking out, if anyone is in or not? Obviously if the bell has rung by a guest to meet me, then he should perhaps ring it once more. Of course he is not a postman. Telegrams have ceased to exist. As his hand moved to turn open the latch, he stopped and waited for another second. He had seen it in movies. He rolled a newspaper and took it in front of the peephole. A shot rang out, shattering the peephole. Gautam saw the paper roll had a neat little smoking hole in it. He he, good judgment, he thought. Gautam knew there was a possibility of that. In the movies the spectacle of the man who looks through the peep hole gets cracked and the bullet gets lodged inside his eye. Hmm... he swiftly went in the kitchen and returned in a moment. He climbed the table near the door and quietly opened the latch. The door was now ajar for the guest, if willing. Gautam and the guest couldn't see each other. But soon muzzle of a pistol touched the door and pushed it gently. With a soft creak the door opened half way and stopped. A face entirely covered with a soiled white cloth entered, then retreated back. Entered again slowly and looked around from a safe position. As he reached a safe optimum

distance, Gautam threw the content from the kitchen on his face. That was certainly very mean of him to do that. Obviously the hooded man was in agony. He was rubbing his eyes with both his hands. He had taken the dirty white cloth off his face and was trying to wipe his watering eyes. Poor guy, Gautam thought. He was in agony but was still holding the pistol. He needed help. Quietly Gautam reached closer to him and gave a hard 'yoko geri' (circular kick) on his left knee. Being an Indian host this was the most hostile behavior Gautam had ever shown towards a guest. Well, at least the 'yoko geri' had helped the guest loose his pistol, which had flown off his hand and settled peacefully under the sofa. Esteemed guest had fallen on the floor with a rather loud thud and started screaming for water to clean his eyes. He was also holding his knee. Too much pain?

For the first time Gautam spoke, "don't scream so loudly. If the neighbors wake up, someone might call the police. Do you want that?"

"Hell, no, don't call the police please. I will leave now."

"Sure, you can leave anytime you want. You decided on your arrival time, you are free to choose your departure too. I have no problem. But it has never happened that someone visits me and I don't even know his name. So, please tell me your name and what was it that you wanted so urgently from me at 4 am?"

"Please give me some water. I want to clean my eyes."

"Yes, sure I will bring the water, so that you can wash your godly face and then let us greet each other with a Namaste."

He threw the cloth. Gautam didn't think he knew him. He looked like a watchman or a newspaper man or milkman... one of those common featured-men with eyes shut. Gautam picked up the newspaper now having a non-smoking hole and went to keep it away. The man instantly jumped and moved towards where the pistol might have fallen. His arms were extended out to make sure he did not bang into anything. But poor chap; his 'bad luck' was desperate to stay with him. Gautam took his extended right hand and twisted it inwards. At the same time he placed his forearm on the elbow of the guest. As soon as he knew the point was accurate, he moved his forearm back and banged it hard on his elbow. With a sound of crashing bone the guest had his arm bent - in the wrong direction! Now he was screaming really loud. It must be a lot of pain, Gautam was sure.

Oh god! Wails of police sirens had filled the air. Gautam said, "I told you not to make too much noise". Promptly the bell rang and two neighbors walked in gingerly. They were aghast with what they were seeing. They were being good and helpful neighbors. After hearing the screams they had called a police inspector who was also related to them.

The cops looked at my guest and then at me. Neighbors pointed towards me. The Inspector smiled. Gautam pointed towards the gun. A gloved hand retrieved the pistol

and dropped it in a plastic bag. Gautam seemed unhappy as they handcuffed his honored guest...

In the police station, Gautam was sitting on a wooden bench opposite a uniformed cop, who picked up a pen in his large hands and started writing, “It was 4 am. Gautam had woken up to drink a glass of water. It was too early to do anything else except to go back to sleep. As he was about to slip his slippers off to get into his bed, the doorbell rang...”

17

Soothing Night

It was deep into the night. Even dogs had stopped barking. Only the changing notes of cricket sounds gave a semblance of time dragging itself.

He was restless; turning and twisting on his sunken bed under the thatched roof of the hut. His every little movement made the bamboos of his cot squeal loudly in the deafening quiet of the night and then... quieted down. He was used to it. He felt as



though the sound was being produced by his own body, from his bones. There was nothing to be noticed in it. Cot actually seemed like extension of his body. Was it a month... less... or more? It has been just too many days... and nights on this cot, knitted with zigzagging ropes made of grass and coconut hair. Her ruffled hair was flying all over her head. End of her sari was on the floor, exposing her ill-fitting torn blouse.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Disturbed, he turned to his side. Cot’s ropes had deeply etched their pattern on his thin bare back. It seemed as if the pattern was his nerves and not impressions from the cot. Nerves in geometrical form! His own nerves have all gone haywire, with no symmetry; thin somewhere, thick elsewhere, knotted at some place and suddenly getting entangled around a bone. Her flying hair! Nerves are meant to hold people together. Like nerves of this cot, keep the cot in place. Hold your nerves, they say.

“You should have told me that you can’t do this.”

A thin layer of sweat appeared on his temple. Involuntarily his palm wiped it off before it trickled down to his eyes.

“Uhh... ohhh, unnnn”, he moaned in sleep.

“I am leaving... And listen, I am taking Bubbli with me... So don't go informing the police... How can anyone trust you with a one year old?”

With a jerk, he sat up. Instantly darkness enveloped every detail in front of his eyes. His head spun due to weakness. He waited for his eyes to get the vision back. After recovering, he reached out for the jug of water. He has been doing it for many days now, living on water. He finished it in two swigs. It had to be refilled from the hand pump. He got up. But due to next bout of darkness, he banged into the wooden pillar. He knew he had to find ways to handle his weakness. He hadn't seen food for days. He didn't know when he ate last. But there was an image of some rice and a piece of jaggery. Was it day or night? Memory failed him, forget it... he did not want to tax himself. He moved very carefully towards the hand pump. He grabbed the handle rather heavily, involuntarily pushing it down by his own weight. Few drops of water emerged from large mouth of the pump. He kept the jug where the drops fell.

Straining his back, he lifted the handle and pressed it down, and again, and a few more times. When the sound of filling jug said, it is half full; he stopped. His entire energy was emptied in filling half a jug of water. He turned back, took a few swigs again and put the jug in the niche. He then carefully moved towards the inner room; stopped at door and held onto to it for support, to face the void. A beam of moonlight was angled across the room. Entering from a hole in the thatched roof, it had settled on Bubbly's pillow in a small circular patch...

For a shocking moment, patch of moonlight seemed like Bubbly's face on the pillow. He sat down in a surge of grief... dragged himself to the empty little bed, started feeling it with his trembling fingers and then lied down on it.

The patch of moonlight now, settled on his face.

18

Enlightenment of the day

‘Pumm’, is the first note of the wake up alarm in Gautam's phone, then comes a silence of a few bars and then a ‘pum pum’ and later melody with rhythm starts; but there is no point overloading this space with this extra information. Of course there is a valid reason for this. Reason is that Gautam always manages to gently touch the ‘stop’ button soon after he hears first ‘pumm’. Today was no exception. So, after ‘Pumm’ at 5.47am Gautam stopped further details of the alarm. You know all that

'pum pum' and the melody with rhythm etc. Phone became quiet and in a few moments the screen withdrew its bright good morning smile with a dark huff. Gautam was used to it. His phone always gets upset, if it is not given a decent hearing. But again, we are not here to discuss Gautam's love hate relationship with his phone.

Gautam hadn't slept well last night. There was no one in particular to be hanged for this. Not getting deep sleep can be attributed to many reasons. But stupidly all that attribution happens only after he has not slept well. He starts to think of points like, over eating, too much activity before hitting the pillow, too much on his mind etc. Although he had tried to get relaxed when he realized that his alertness was still with him, even though its time had long run out. Alertness and sleep have to take turns to be with Gautam. It is more or less like a smooth take over. At one time only one of them can be in control.

But in spite of below average sleep Gautam was fine. His 'yog' class starts at 6.15am. After stopping the alarm, he takes a few moments, just being there. Someone had told him not to dive into a new day in a hurry, but slide into it smoothly and gradually. It made sense to him. After a little body stretches on the bed itself he stood up.

At 6.05 he was walking briskly to Arya Samaj, which about 0.75 km away. Arrival of winter had made the sun lazy and he had turned a late riser. So, exterior wasn't too bright. His weak eyesight made the Arya Samaj building seems like a ghost from that distance. A faint yellow light in the center indicated some students may have arrived.

Inside all the mats were in place. Gautam had to take his place on a mat right in front of the teacher at the center. Everyone avoids sitting right in front of teacher.

"Good morning everyone. Please sit in 'sukhaasan, ardhapadmaasan or padmaasan. Keep your hands on your knees. Pull in your stomach slightly, throw back your shoulders slightly, keep your neck and shoulder muscles relaxed, gently close your eyes and passively, watch your breath... Keep breathing normally... If any thoughts appear in your mind, gently ignore them and bring your attention back to your breath... Normal breathing, and watch it passively... Now we will chant Om. Take a deep breath in, Oooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaamm..."

After 7 chants teacher speaks gently: "Enjoy the peace and quiet you gained by chanting Om... and passively... watch your breath."

From more than 10 years these words have remained unchanged; but Gautam doesn't mind it. In any case Gautam feels rejuvenated after the class and walks back home briskly.

Gautam's Enlightenment of the day: 'You don't have to be active and reactive for everything that you encounter. Watching it passively also has its own positive use.'

Absence of presence

Yes sir, I am Gautam.

Sorry sir. My name is Gautam Jha sir.

Thank you sir. Sir before coming to witness box, can I speak to my lawyer sir?

Tripathi ji good luck to you and please wish me the same too.

Thanks. Yes I do remember all the points. It is my first time in a court. So...

Thanks for giving me hope. Yes I will speak only when I am asked, to speak.

No no, I will say only and exactly what had happened; as we spoke earlier in your office.

I hope that the other lawyer and the magistrate will be not be too tricky in their questions.

No, I am not very excitable types; but yes if it does happen it will be... rare, huh.

I too hope. Yes as you say the case is clearly one sided. I mean a man entered my aunt's home and flashed a gun at us... yes, yes. Sorry we spoke about it already many times.

Hmm... I know; the point of robber's gun has turned in our favor now.

Thanks...

I swear on Geeta that I will speak the truth and nothing but the truth.

Sure sir. It was around 10pm and all of us were about to go to sleep. My cousin asked me if I wanted to have a cup of tea.

Yes sir everyone sleeps very early there. But since I was a guest and was to stay only for 3 days with them, Shyam thought we will be able to catch up a bit over a cup of tea. But my aunt realized we will be awake much longer, she wished us goodnight and went in to sleep.

Sir, Shyam, is husband of my cousin. Yes my nephew, Nishu was out. He is in transport business.

Yes sir there were three women in the house, and two men including me.

Yes sir, my niece wanted to sit with us.

Well, because she wanted to hear my stories.

Ok sir. It took about 10 min to make tea. I was with Shyam in the kitchen, while Sakshi was in living room watching TV, alone.

We both returned to the living room with our cups of tea. Sakshi switched off the TV and got up to shut the main door, as was the usual practice. But Shyam said that he will do that after finishing tea.

Well, it was a bit stuffy inside. There was no breeze. So keeping the door ajar was going to help.

Yes sir, I was coming to that only.

Yes, I will tell you what happened next. I heard a motor cycle approach and park somewhere close by.

No, I don't know. But I am sure Shyam also heard.

Yes since we both were in the room, so I assume Shyam also must have heard it.

No he did not react to it. There is nothing to the sound of a motor bike. Isn't it?
Sorry sir. Yes it was somewhat late, for the small town like that. But I heard the bike slowing, engine shutting and being parked.

Then we heard sound of footsteps.

Sorry, I heard the footsteps. Not hard boots. They sounded more like sneakers. Sound was soft; but I could hear it since it was very quiet.

It must be nearly 10.30 pm.

Then the sounds stopped a little right of the door.

Yes the bike also came from right and parked on the right side only.

Fine sir. I noticed the footsteps becoming slower and softer. I thought someone must be going to the adjacent house.

No, I did not see anyone peeping inside.

Yes sir, there are two windows in the living room, one to the right and second to left of the main door.

Sir as Shyam went in the kitchen to keep empty cups, I saw this man of average built enter the door with a cloth bag on his shoulder. I thought he came to meet Shyam. At that moment only Sakshi and I were in the room. As she was about to call her father, Shyam returned from the kitchen. He looked confused and asked him, who he was and what did he want. Putting his finger to his lips man gestured us to be quiet.

Yes, that made Shyam rather angry. I too found it weird. The stranger had not knocked and did not speak anything from the door.

Stranger asked Shyam if it was his house.

Then he asked him to come out of the house with him. Now I knew the matter is a bit serious if not really dangerous.

Sir Shyam was very confused but moved towards the stranger, may be to avoid any unwanted violence inside. But as he got closer to him... sir as Shyam got closer to the stranger to guide him out, the stranger put his hand in the cloth bag, pulled out a revolver and pointed it directly at Shyam. Sakshi screamed instantly and flopped on the ground with a thud. I sat down in front of her to cover her with my own body, just in case.

Yes sir they did. My cousin called out from the bedroom asking us about the noise.

Stranger again gestured us to be quiet. So Shyam shouted to them saying it was nothing. Sakshi was still on the floor.

No sir, thankfully she had not fainted.

After that... after that I noticed Shyam's voice also had changed. He clearly seemed frightened. He softly told Sakshi to go in; but the stranger said no one should move from there.

Then he, the stranger asked him to get all the cash, gold, silver etc.

Sir, he said, "Give me all the wallets and jewellery kept in the house, without making any noise." That's what he said.

No, he did not shout.

Ok sir, then he noticed my bag kept near the door and asked whose bag was that. I told him, it was mine and said there were only clothes and my return ticket to Mumbai. Perhaps hearing name of Mumbai he bent down and to check it. Pointing the gun towards me, he asked me to open it.

Yes sir he must have realized it was better to ask someone else to do the work and he should keep the gun in his hand pointed at us.

I stood up to move; but with a stern gesture he made me sit down. He asked me to move in squatting posture. I obeyed. He also told me to move slowly.

Distance? May be 10 ft or so. It took me about 10 to 12 steps to reach my bag.

No sir, I cannot tell you how much time. May be close to 30 seconds. I have heard, in such cases you should not make any sudden or jerky movements, because even robbers are very nervous. They may involuntarily shoot if things go out of control.

Fine sir. I knew this was the matter of quick thinking and decision taking. Accuracy in execution of the action was necessary.

No sir, in the beginning I did not know what I will be doing. I just had to watch for a possible opportunity.

Sir, I am a senior citizen. But I also like to keep fit. I have lived best part of my life well and that day I was ready for any eventuality.

Yes sir, I mean in case I get seriously hurt or even if I lost my life. I was ready for that.

Right sir, any which way it went, something had to be done to undo the dangerous situation.

I thought about my actions just 2 or 3 steps away from my bag.

But sir such ideas come in a flash only, sir.

Ok sir. I was getting tense. Shyam was telling the stranger to relax from a safe distance. He will get whatever he wanted. But this man for some reason had decided to check my bag first.

May be sir, he thought that he will pick up whatever he gets from that first bag and get out fast.

No, I cannot say sir. But I would imagine any robber would like to flee the crime scene as quickly as possible.

Yes sir, as I moved closer he kept pointing his gun at Shyam only; but in between he moved it towards me too. He wanted to keep both of us in control.

I was coming to that sir. I made myself purposely slower for him to relax and myself to get more focus. He came a bit closer to me. I could see the gun clearly now. Just for a moment, he turned towards Shyam to keep a check. That's when I moved as fast as I could and thrust my elbow into his groin. He threw his arms sideways to keep balance. I then stood up and held his right hand with gun and twisted it towards his own chest.

Yes sir, he was holding the gun in his right hand.

His jaw had dropped with this move. And he was in a state of shock. My hands too were trembling. His finger was on the trigger. I was struggling to make sure that the gun was pointed away from me.

No sir, I had no idea how strong he would be. But using all, that I had, I managed to keep the gun away from me.

Either sir. May be he was not very strong or he got too nervous due to sudden change in fortune. Maybe it was his first time. At the same moment Shyam also got hold of him from his back. So we had overpowered him completely. And that's when he started kicking his legs violently trying to aim and kick between my legs and that

made me turn away from him. My grip was also getting shaky and slippery with sweat. Finally sir, we saw Sakshi reaching the phone and was dialing a number.

Number, no sir I didn't see it, but it could be only 100 or the nearest police station. As she said 'hello', the robber pulled hard to get away and due to that pressure the trigger got squeezed and a shot was fired.

All this was very quick sir.

Sir I was confused and didn't know where the bullet hit. I was trying to feel, if I myself was hit. Then I saw the shock on robber's face. I also noticed a streak of blood from his chest. Sir they say it does not pain immediately after the bullet penetrates the body. So I did not know whether I was hit or not.

No, he did not fall straight away. I think, in movies they show it wrongly that the man falls instantly and dies. Mostly villains and his henchmen die instantly but the hero sir... sorry sir. Yes sir I will stick to the point.

Sir, gradually the gun fell from his hand and Shyam kicked it away.

Yes sir, we were still holding him but now it was to stop him from falling down. Blood was flowing freely.

Sakshi had put the phone down. And yes, my cousin and aunt also had woken up and seemed horrified to see a bleeding stranger.

Sir it just was under his throat, top of the rib cage in the middle. That is why he survived for 3 hours in the hospital. I am sure it did not hit his heart.

Of course sir, it was an action in self-defense. The robber entered the house with an intent to rob and would have killed anyone or both of us, if required. Otherwise why would he take out a gun straight away?

No sir, nothing more.

Moreover sir, the trigger does not have my fingerprints. It has his.

No sir, I don't mean he committed suicide, but...

Yes sir. If you allow, could last part of my statement be deleted?

20

A mosaic of gloom

1972, that's when I adopted this city of Bombay, as my own. Actually I had to, due to my professional association with movies. I feel very lucky about bagging both, the movies and Bombay. I fell in love with both instantly. I enjoyed Bombay's rhythm, efficient local trains, buses, civic sense and work culture. Due to these qualities, I started bragging, "Bombay doesn't seem to be a part of rest of India." I also fell in love with the most awe inspiring, luxurious, hotel with a strong gothic structure, The Taj. Visiting Taj always gave me a sense of having arrived. I felt there was no higher steps to climb. It was the ultimate in luxury, beauty and importance. Taj gave me a sense of wellbeing, rich feel and immense pride with its comforting ambiance.

Though not very often; but I could afford to use the Taj salon once in a while, which was being run by celebrated stylist, Hakim. It was rumored that he did Amitabh's hair. At at Sea Lounge I could order a carefully chosen (cheapest) snack, Shamiana's VFM burger and milkshake both costing Rs 25 each, a glass of draft beer was priced at Rs 15. I also spent a lot of time in its book and music shop, Nalanda. When my father visited me in 1977, I took him to Sea Lounge to show off. Sitting by the window opening towards Arabian Ocean, I ordered tea and some snacks that cost me Rs 25. My father's face, I remember; had become rigid after noticing that fat bill!



Well, the time has to move on and move it did. After many long years that also included a new millennium; the calendar registered the date of 26 November, 2008. I was home when I heard the news of a vague shoot out in city. I switched on the TV. I was sure that it must be a usual case of some underworld rivalry. But soon I realized that was not the case. It revealed that some Pakistani terrorists had entered India's maximum city from the sea! They had split themselves in 3-4 groups and

had randomly killed people at CST station, Cama Hospital and Leopold Café at Colaba. Soon the news reader added names of Chabad House, a Jewish center at Colaba, Oberoi hotel at Nariman Point and last but not the least, Hotel Taj. All these places had been 'taken over' by groups of heavily armed men. It was beyond my comprehension. I was glued to the TV. Soon news channels had set up their cameras in all three locations. Now the sounds of bullets, bursting grenades, raging fires and shattering glass panes became 'live'. And all this was happening, right in the heart of my own city!

There was no chance of me 'not watching' it. I did not want to leave the television when Taj was being mauled by those three Pakis who were killing guests and staff. They were throwing grenades inside those grand rooms to set them on fire.

State and central government had no immediate reaction to this crisis. It took them many a fumbling hours to take a focused approach. Finally politicians at 'New Delhi' took a lot of risk themselves to spare us a team of NSG commandoes from their personal duty.

Violence in the form of blasts, flames and smoke from inside Taj, was going on unabated. I was afraid that some part of the hotel might cave in. It was a very frightening thought. As news switched between Taj, Oberoi and the Chabad House, I felt I was in a theatre of war, in my own city! I lost track of time. I was eating at odd hours and sleeping very little. I would get back to TV first thing in the morning after sleeping for a few hours.

Gradually there was clarity - there were 10 terrorists in all. But these were not like those cowards who plant the bombs and then melt into the crowd shamelessly.

Experiences of many serial bomb blasts seemed nothing compared to this. How well prepared and motivated these 10 Pakis must have been to battle India right at the best addresses of the country and, it was not over, yet. They had come with full knowledge that they will not be going back. Only such 'they' can have that kind of motivation.

In the meanwhile commandos were dropped on the roof of the Jewish Center from a helicopter! Utterly unimaginable! A chopper dropping commandos in the most congested part of Colaba and everyone knew that it was 'not a film shooting'. Both terrorists there were killed by our forces; but not before they had killed everyone inside. There was a heartwarming story of a little boy who was smuggled out to safety, by his nanny.

Oberoi was next to be sanitized. All the terrorists were killed by NSG, but again not before many guests and staff had been shot down in cold terror. Facing bullets inside the most familiar, comfortable and secure place must have been an utterly unbelievable experience for those who died there. Dozens of grenades were hurled inside the plush suites in the old wing of Taj in an effort to destroy them totally. Most rooms were on fire on top two floors. Smoke was billowing from large windows under the prominent domes.

Finally nine terrorists were killed. One 'jihadi' was seen 'live' on TV as he fell out of a ground floor window of Taj in hail of Indian bullets. That was satisfying; but other than this, I had seen so much of real blood on the floor of CST station and numerous bodies of poor passengers lying around. Entire print and electronic media started showing such images. And all this kept making a terrible collage in my mind...

This piece is being written in order to get back to writing. I take my motivation to write from incidences that unfold and affect me. But after those 60 hours long war, nothing new felt important enough to affect me. A writer needs to get excited about the topic she/he is going to expand on. I wasn't getting excited about anything. Everything seemed too small or insignificant to write or care about. I suffered a 3-year long 'writer's block' born out of extreme emotions of anger, disgust, hatred and helplessness... I had suffered a very real fright that Taj would collapse right in front of my own eyes and then my life and Mumbai will never be the same again. Thanks to motivations from a niece, I somehow managed to assemble this piece in late 2011, after third anniversary of notorious 26/11. I wish to turn the leaf over and get back to my earlier sensitive self, by becoming 'writer of small things' once again.

Red Eye Effect

My right eye has turned red. It hurts a bit too. As if I got something sitting in there. But I know there isn't anything. So, I got some eye drops on my chemist's suggestion. He said, 'you will be fine in a day'. I had not ventured out for a walk for two days. Didn't feel like it. So, I corrected myself today. My back also was getting a bit stiff. I thought flu might be lurking around to grab me. I again went to my again as a precautionary measure; got some more tablets, again of his choice. I swallowed 2 of them to start with, to stop the surging virus. In one hour I knew I was out of danger, at least for now. No more stiff back. But I decided to take my exercise regimen a bit easy for a few days.

I was at a friend's place in Bandra for dinner. I ate a lot, specially the Indian sweets for three reasons. One, it was Dasshera day; two, there was a lot of that exotic stuff lying around; three, I decided to gorge on all those goodies as I was clearly greedy. After a heavy lunch I went for a long and strong siesta and ended up seeing a very interesting dream. Luckily I also remembered it in good detail. It was about a weird conversation between me and three other friends, whose names strangely were, 'One', 'Two' and 'Three'. Here are excerpts of the conversation that almost never took place between me, One, Two, and Three:

One: Hey, your right eye is red.

Me: Yeah, (joking) maybe it is the red eye effect.

Two: Red eye effect? But that happens to the people in the photographs.

Me: Yeah? Then maybe I am also one - photograph, I mean.

One: Ha ha. Are you a photograph? How can you say that

Me: No; I may not be a picture, like a flat 2-D print or something; but maybe I am being projected like a 3-D movie!

Three: Oh, so you are getting into film technology here, your own field, huh?

Me: I don't know that, but I really feel I am an image being projected from somewhere high up... may be from, near the sun.

Two: From the sun?

Me: (excited) yes that's it. The sun is the bright Helium (Xenon) lamp inside the projector and I am being projected as a 3-D film from there. It looks pretty real, doesn't it?

One: Real? (Straining his brains) Does that mean that you here are not real? And the 'real you' is somewhere between 'you here' and the sun.

Me: Hmm... That seems very likely.



Three: (to others) Oh come on. If he is being projected from the sun, then even that would be only his image right?

Two: And (chuckling) who might have made that film? Touché!

Me: (lost) Oh please.

Three: Do you know what you are saying?

Me: What? What I did I say?

Three: You are saying that your film has already been shot and is being projected right NOW from near the sun.

Two: That's what you are saying.

Me: Yes, I am saying that... I guess. Or maybe we all are part of a movie that has not been made... It is live action then! Yes! That's what it is. 'Live' it is!

One: You obviously mean that all of us are also part of this 'live' 3-D film that you are talking about.

Three: What are we? Are we all just illusions or Maya, or are we real?

Me: (confused) I guess Maya in reality is illusion.

Two: (More confused) so, where does that take us?

Me: Where do you want to go? We are real illusions...

One, Two and Three look at each other's faces, get very angry, beat me up real bad and leave fuming and grumbling. I am left with a red right eye that hurts just a little bit...

But after using the drops twice only, color of my eyes has already turned pale pink instead of red. I will be fine in the morning.

22

That 'he'

He walks very fast. It has been his natural instinct. As soon as he is out, he shoots off. It has happened in the past that he shot off in a wrong direction and when he realized it he shot in reverse with the same speed without feeling sorry or stupid.

That day he walked towards the station to go home. Half way down he realized his left shoulder did not have the usual strap of his bag. Oh no! He turned back swiftly and headed towards the studio he had been. Due to walking with the bag his left shoulder sometime gets a bit sore. He then shifts the bag to the other side. He had gone quite a distance without bag. But there was no alternate.

He had do this. He walked even faster. As the door of the studio appeared in vision, it



wasn't looking right. It was locked. They had told that, that was the last job for the day for them. He asked the adjoining shop but was told they all left 10 min back in a cab. You could have met them at the station. He said actually he wanted to walk, so...

So much confusion! Disappointed he looked around, as though trying to find a solution. A man was looking at him quizzically. What! He thought, what is he gaping at me for. He realized he was wearing worn out shorts, a faded t-shirt and a pair of house slippers. How! He wouldn't step out of his house in such attire. And he is here at the other end of town. So shabbily? No way! He has always been well dressed if not one of the best dressed. This is not him. But; there he was.

He sat down on step outside the locked door. He had to figure his next move. Since his bag is safely kept in the space behind that securely locked door; so is his wallet, phone, house keys and other smaller stuff. Main problem was phone and wallet. He couldn't figure a plan was feasible. It wasn't appearing in his mind. Not even a foggy or rough one.

He cannot go to a bus stop or train station because they invariably sell tickets at a price, right now unaffordable. He decided that he need to move from there. A solution if any isn't here. He started walking yet again in a direction but without intent. Maybe he felt should he walk home, that was nearly 35 km. He was confused and foggy. There was metro tunneling job being done. Huge number of workers were milling around carrying things. He did not realize that he had walked into a non-pedestrian area. No one noticed that. He was in 'no entry' zone and was wondering why suddenly walking had become so difficult. Path was full of iron rods, wood planks, bags of cement, bricks and the related things. Somehow he could not realize that he was on the wrong side. Many workers passed by him but did not care as they too busy themselves. Only a security or some engineer could have stopped and guided him what to do. His slippers were soiled and rest of him had splashes of wetness. Finally someone perhaps thinking he had 'lost it' guided him out of the mess and he found himself at the Marine Drive. Here he knew which way to head.

He started walking again with same speed but with a heavy heart. He was about to ask the most asked question in such situations, "why me". Façade of a familiar building emerged. He recognized it. It was Famous Laboratories and recording studios, Tardeo. He had been here for many song recordings of his films. But somehow everything about the building was looking very depressing. It was very shabby. It was perhaps had been painted years ago. Walls were broken in many places. In fact side wall of the building had fallen in the lane. Unknowingly he took a look at himself. Is Famous looking like him or he is matching Famous? Back of the building leading to the film laboratory also was in ramshackle condition. People had to dodge and walk between bricks and other broken parts. In such a scenario he found something weird and surreal. He saw a small group of well-dressed people organizing some kind of sale or exhibition. They had a banner in which name of a book and its author was mentioned. Copies of a rather fat book were placed around; on a soiled hanging wooden plank. They had made small platform of the bricks fallen around and placed

some copies of the book on it. Just one book was placed high on front wall, where some photo frame might have existed ages ago. A man perhaps the author was signing a book. He recognized him, but couldn't exactly place. Man looked at him and said, 'hello here take a copy. It's a gift'. He refused politely. He did not want it and no way could he have carried it. Author insisted, 'please I will be happy if you took it.'

He had started walking away. Swiftly distance started growing between him and Famous. As he walked Famous was being left behind. Soon he had put a lot of distance between them. The Lab now did not look so bad. The author in the crisp white shirt seemed insistent. He held up a copy of the book looking at him as though calling him out, 'here! Your book.' Figure of the man in soiled clothes was fading fast. And soon it merged among others.

It was difficult to distinguish the man in soiled clothes from crisp ones.

23

Reason to smile

Ramesh is a simple, hard-working youth. He is a Marketing & Accounts Clerk in Neelkamal Ad Co, Rampur. He makes very little money, just enough to support himself and two more, the old and frail mother and a young sister. He wants to save enough for his sister Pushpa's wedding. Three of them live in a simple home, and possess old and rusty things. They cook simple food and lead a very basic life. Only kind of expensive articles with the family are two bicycles.

Sick! Isn't it? So boring. But I did try to add some spice in my language and tried to make the family's financial situation more tragic. When people are younger and their entire life is ahead of them, that's the time money should not fall short, for boys and perhaps more so for girls. Everyone young girl wants to dress up and look nice, go out once in a while, perhaps see a movie, have an outing with friends etc. But Ramesh couldn't afford to indulge at all:

Panwala: Saab finally today you want to spend one rupee on smoke?

Ramesh: Hmm I thought I may be getting some overtime in the office, so might as well relax a little.

Panwala: very good idea. I know you do scrounge for the sake of didi's marriage. But sometime you should relax. How can one cigarette in two weeks harm your savings?

I have added a suspense angle in the story, when Ramesh is waiting for his worst friend at a bus stop at night. It was 8.15pm. Ramesh is always home by 6.30 and by 8

he is through with his dinner and sleeps off by 9.30, reading a book. But his unannounced delay had put his family in a deep state of worry:

“Subhash placed his briefcase on the table and looked around, then a second later he opened it. He withdrew a fat brown paper packet, its contents held together with two rubber bands. Ramesh could guess its contents only as a lot of papers. A glass of country liquor some Pakoras had arrived. He had a swig and offered him the Pakoras right into his nose. Ramesh found it quite aggressive, he picked one any ways. Subhash said, I want you to deliver this to Lalaji, of that big hut at the end of Teli lane. Ramesh was apprehensive. He hates Subhash and also had not heard good things about Lala.”

I hope I am able to really complete “Reason to smile”. Not that it’s a great story; but only that I started writing it in a very strange way. I had no plot in my mind, no characters and no idea about its genre, comedy, tragedy, love story or suspense... I just started punching the key board:

“Ramesh was walking to his office.”

Ok. Now what?

“He seemed a bit tense today. He was walking a bit more briskly than he usually did. He did not stop at the ‘paan-wala’ and not even waved at him in usual daily namaskar Mishraji.”

Well it seems that Ramesh will be the lead character and he is tense right now. So, situations have to be created in the past that have made him tense in the present. Also the situations have to be good enough for him to ‘not’ turn towards his friends and wave at them. And more importantly they have to be strong enough to be included in the story. I was not in a mood of adding villains or fights with his family. So I decided to add that he received a phone call in the office and he went into his shell after that. I had no idea what the phone conversation was going to be:

“Phone rings. Peon picks it and points to Ramesh, “You have a call.” Lata and Ramesh both are confused. Who could be calling him on office number? Hesitating, he gets up and takes the receiver. Hello. His face distorts. He looks at heaven, stunned. He only listens. Then a yes, hmm, very difficult, it’s too far. I don’t even have a cycle today. Sweat appears on his forehead. Finally he says ok and hangs up.

“Who was that”, Lata asks.

“An old college friend”, he says.

“College friend, but then why are you so worried?”

I had introduced people in the office where Ramesh works. Lata was one of them. She and Ramesh are good friends, you know what I mean. Then I named the town the story is set in, Rampur. Now to match the small town Rampur, everything becomes small in size and status; office, business, people, their conversation, topics, salaries... but what doesn't change are friendships and love, its intensity and spice that goes with it. Ramesh and Lata have been seeing each other without anyone seeing them, seeing each other. They have to work real hard to not bump into any familiar person around them. In a small town it is a near impossible task. But no one can fight what a young heart demands. A telephonic conversation between them is here as I end this last part of 'Tragedy...' with this:

Lata on phone, "is our evening plan still there?"

"Yes, 6.30, Mahatma Gandhi park." Ramesh has called her from a public phone.

"Umm, but it is too bright at 6.30pm."

"7.30, then?"

"Better. You know how this town is. Last Sunday we nearly bumped into the office peon in the park. It is not Bombay, you know."

"Huh, as though you have been there. Listen should we try to take a bus a little out of town today?"

"It will be too late to return."

"That is true, it will be late. We could find the last bus time and go next time."

"We can plan that when we meet now. See you then. By the way, are you wearing the shirt I gave you?"

"Yes, I am and are you wearing that what I gave you?"

"Shut up."

Reason to smile? Hardly; but for a small town like this, may be.

To pray or not to pray

Many years back I read a book titled, 'The Energy of Prayer', by spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh. The book starts so perfectly with, "urge to pray is universal. We know of no culture, past or present, in which prayer does not occur..." The book managed to start a frantic inquiry in my mind.

Without meaning any disrespect to the book or to the prayer, I would like to put my own thoughts on this point, meaning importance of prayer. My religion allows me to have my own intellectual interpretation of religious rules or tweak the religion according to my own analysis, intelligence and needs. Well, I feel sometimes prayers work and sometimes they don't. There are no rules that it will surely work, just like no one can claim that it will never work. But millions of people pray in different religious ways. Some people quietly drop loads of money, gold and precious jewels into the temple donation-boxes. For them this too may be a prayer. Getting rid of hard cash keeps them safe from robbers and income tax. But also their prayers are answered with more cash and even more diamonds in return. So are their prayers working? Most people in this world do remember God, mostly as a natural instinct. When I yawn I might say 'ooooh god'. I don't mean to remember god, it is just a reaction. For people of all faiths, speaking out the name of their God has been a habit, part of psyche, and genetics for centuries. In my opinion prayers too fall in the same genetic habit category.

The book tells a story of a young kid losing his pet white mouse, who has walked into a hole. Kid prays for 2 hours, but the mouse does not emerge. Kid is upset. He derives prayers do not work. Later the moral of the story is revealed, 'since the kid was not praying for the wellbeing of the mouse; but was being selfish to get his friend back and that is why his prayers did not work'. Well isn't everyone attached to various things and people around them and pray for the welfare of those. There would be no reason for anyone to pray unless there is something to pray for. But as soon as you have something to pray for it becomes a selfish motive. Asking God for upturn in your fortune, good health of a friend, getting a son, getting admission in IIM... is asking God to run errands for you. Praying with benefits in mind is reducing God's value... Let me analyse my own life as a sample case. I do not pray to anyone or any God. I am not a praying type, period. I believe in science and logic and thus do not find prayers logical. Praying is no way to get results in life. I cannot depend on prayers for success. In my younger days I too wished, prayed hard and worked hard to get so many things, but whatever I wanted never came to me. On the other side whatever I have got in my life has fallen in my lap on its own. So, prayers did not come in the picture. It is a simple law; 'you get some, you don't get some'. As the Urdu couplet goes, 'har kisi ko muqammal jahan nahin milta, kabhi zameen to kabhi aasman nahin milta' (people's wishes do not get fulfilled entirely, sometimes the earth and sometimes the sky is missing)

So if you want something in life, use all the faculties God has already blessed you with like intelligence, strength, cunning, will power, smartness... and what have you. Just use these and get your piece of cake in life. You don't need to pray for anything. Getting results on your own merit makes you more content and happy, than struggling on your knees and then getting it. People always have more respect for things they earned the hard way. If you have received a gold medal in a field, you would value it much more than all the expensive gifts that family receives every X'mas or Diwali. No one will ever part with any medal; but all the easy coming gifts are hauled away into a dark loft, to be lovingly gifted to other praying mantis, later on.

In recent times there has been only one occasion when I prayed desperately hard to get a certain result. It was because the nothing was in my hand, neither the action nor the result, only prayer was. But I did not pray to any usual, run of the mill known, but unseen and unfelt God. I chose to involve real entities like mountains, rivers, sun, moon, rain, sea, wind etc. I asked for their strength. Well, the result did go in my favour. If I want I can easily call it as my victory; but I don't want to. It could have gone the other way too. It was only a matter of chance. Logically I doubt the effectiveness and dependability of prayers. For example 'if you prayed for something and you got it, can be one part. But there is no proof that if you didn't pray for it, you will not get it!' For this you have to repeat the scene with same and not similar situation. It is not even a take 2. Take for example a Sikh couple in Punjab prays hard for years, to get a son as their first child; and they get it. Now to complete the experiment there has to be another but same situation. Same couple has to be used to determine the sex of their first child, but this time without prayers. It is impossible to do it. And that is a lacuna. There is no way to check both sides of the story; unless of course we ask the superman to turn the earth around in reverse direction and take the couple back in time, before the wife conceived for the first time. Prayers are a way to keep oneself content and happy, especially if things do go wrong. We can say, 'we did pray hard for this but hard luck.'

Here I will narrate an incidence that happened in my family. Long ago an astrologer told my aunt that her son, Suresh (name changed) had a fatal confluence of planets in his birth chart. Obviously everyone at home got worried. Astrologer recommended a full course of 'Maha Mrutunjay Yagna'. It was sincerely performed at the earliest available date. Years passed, after his education Suresh joined Indian Air Force. He used to enjoy flying and he was good at it. Soon he got married and had a daughter. In due course he was promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader. One day he was taking his wife and the baby girl for an outing on his motor cycle, when a speeding truck driven by a drunk driver smashed into them. Suresh died on the spot and other two thankfully survived. If I take astrologer's true reading as a 'constant' - which means that the accident has to happen.

The lesson that I learn from this story is that if 'Maha Mrutunjay Yagna', was not performed and same accident would still happen; then the entire family, especially the parents would have never forgiven themselves till eternity. But performing it, kept them away from the guilt and scare of the eventuality, until the very day, it happened. And even after the accident, they would not feel guilty; since they did, what was in their power to do.

With every passing day this planet will go on becoming harsher and less inhabitable. Day to day survival will depend on your own strength, alertness and reflexes. You may find this statement entirely nonsensical, since today no one is ready to think this way. All the religious blabber has been so 'politically correct' for centuries. But after a century we will say, 'who needs God, I have to do it myself', or 'you can sit on your bottom and pray; but I am going out and getting it done.'

Obviously the world will grow less dependent on prayers, gods and religion; until a day will come when the 'Word' would have lost its significance... and forgotten.

25

Depressing...?

After a very long time we are renovating our home. It must be a good 7-8 year back when we went through the motions of spending money on painting and other usual wear and tear jobs. I had enough spare money then, for using it on such necessary luxuries...

Somehow the winds changed direction, as they always do; the flow of money got restricted and an unusually dense fog of lull enveloped my professional life. A string of projects that were lined up to roll any day- did not roll at all. In India we like blame the poor distant planets. So, for a true Indian the planets seemed to have turned their favorable face away. All this had started after my main employers downed their shutters under the demonic burden of their bad financial situation. For the next 18 months I was very busy doing some of my most high profile and better paying jobs. I did some serious 'audio' work for television in the United States and India. Then I was picked up and appointed as 'general manager' in the office of a high profile film maker.

Soon I had another offer from a 'distance learning' company. Here I was working in a very high technology area. This job gave me experiences of using VSAT and software used for online education. I enjoyed this job the most, since I have been looking to get away from the glaring lights of media related environment. Perhaps enjoying the work here seemed to have made the company run aground. I said 'seemed to have'. I am a die-hard optimist. If I have to take cues from twists and turns of my life, then a massive surprise is waiting for me in the wings, about which I have no idea.

Well today I am in a mood of counting the chickens that did not hatch. It's rather amusing to count that in last five years of my professional life how many high profile and exciting projects surfaced, but never swam ashore. So many films were conceived but never delivered; they remained on the idea and project levels only. The most important one was 'Singularity'. It was a Hollywood film, being directed Oscar

nominated Roland Joffe with Brandon Fraser and our own Aishvarya Rai. I had done documentaries with foreign teams, cinematographers and directors. But I was excited that this time I was going to experience the making of a pure Hollywood cinema, for the first time. I was on cloud nine; but treading cautiously. A very close old friend of mine was involved in the film as an executive. I visited him often, gave him my CV, kept in touch on phone, went to his office and read the script of the film twice over. I had asked to be a part of the direction team at any capacity. If there were going to be 12 assistants I was ready to be the twelfth. Desperately yours, but I was dying to be exposed to the experience of 'Singularity'. I wanted to see how is it done in Hollywood, how does everyone gets ready, actors are given lines, makeup tested, lighting and sound levels checked, each shot being taken... After all Roland Joffe was going to be in Mumbai next week and he was to meet and interview the direction team. That next week hasn't arrived for the past 2 years. As per the last update this project has been re-announced for Jan 2007.

Next in line was a friend of mine actor/director Dolly Jena, who was to shoot a film in Goa. It was a period film depicting Portuguese times. I was to be her associate on this project. I read her script too many times over and got involved in production process. Film was to roll in six months, so we were busy getting hotels rates and identifying old houses for shooting. The period of six months has over shot by three years.

Among all these dream productions, three films managed to break through and reach a stage of getting themselves (a) married print. And that's where they too stopped. I was involved in them in various capacities like script, direction, production design and sound. Presently they all are far from getting a commercial release. Coincidentally, my dues from all these films are also awaiting release.

Most interesting part of this long 'touch and go' sequence was when an unknown person phoned me to ask, if I would make a children's film for him. 'Of course' was the best answer I could think of. He said he had seen my name on the IDPA festival brochure. That's it! Soon a contract was signed on his official letterhead and a cheque equivalent to \$20, was handed over to me. It thought things have got serious this time. I called up a scriptwriter, organized our meetings and started the work briskly. Producer was in a hurry. I struggled and finally handed over a fairly good version of hand written script to him in two weeks. The Gentleman went back to his hometown to organize adequate funds. After that he never made a call to me or sent any note. No not even to ask for the refund of his money. None of his telephones worked. I wonder why was he in hurry to lose his money on us if he had to do a Harry Houdini. I was never approached by cheats. There was no fake person among all these. All of them had been well meaning people and serious filmmakers. They just did not have it in them, to finally swing it. Whenever someone has asked, 'so what are you doing these days?' I have formatted a humorous answer for this situation, 'only serious job that I have been doing for years; is looking for it!'

Under these unavoidable circumstances, I decided to take a relaxing stance, instead of usual stance of struggling and worrying. I thought of changing gear as I step into the next stage of age in my life. I started reading and I started writing. I would never have read and written, so much satisfying and meaningful stuff, if I had been busy making small money from the mundane motions of making movies. Of course many do not agree. But I really feel very satisfied with my growth as a writer. I am not bothered if it has not been financially rewarding. This was the right time for me to start using my time doing un-ordinary things, things that gave me a chance of making my immortality a little longer. This would be the best thing to come out from all this nothingness.

26

Conversations

A few days back an old tree in the Jogging Park had fallen due to heavy rains. Luckily it fell outwards, away from the walking track and also it did not stop the traffic on the narrow road on the other side. Mr. Sharma who is regular in that park saw the fallen tree and felt bad. The sky in that area had opened up. During the walk he met Mr. Shah, who is in charge of the maintenance of the garden.

Mr. Sharma: Mr. Shah what do you want to do with this fallen tree? I am sure if lifted up it would survive.

Mr. Shah: Yes it will. I have asked the municipal authorities about it. But they said it is an engineering job, because a large crane will be required to lift it and also it will have to be given adequate supports. It may take some time.

Mr. Sharma: Oh, but that's fine.

10 days later Mr. Sharma entered the park and found that the tree bark has been chopped off and entire wood has been taken away. Mr. Sharma felt the smooth sawed off cut of the fallen tree. He felt a little surprised that in place of replanting the tree has been disposed off. Just then Mr. Shah arrived.

Mr. Sharma: Sir what happened? This tree was to be replanted!

Mr. Shah: Yes, but in my absence the municipal people came and took it away.

Mr. Sharma: Oh!

Mr. Shah: If they had to do what was promised then they would be spending from their resources to save it; but by taking away the wood it becomes a source of resource for them.

Mr. Sharma: (looks blankly)

Mr. Shah: It was good wood. They must have sold it.

Mr. Sharma: What can we do now!

Mr. Shah: I am finding out from some agriculturists and horticulturists to replant this 3 ft stub now. I will shift it a bit and it will grow back.

Mr. Sharma: I know of a banyan fallen tree in Pune which was 100 ft. tall and 90 years old. But somehow many right agencies came together, chopped of extra weight of the tree and lifted it back into its large hole of its roots.

Mr. Shah: Oh it was a banyan tree?

Mr. Sharma: Yes. That tree was older than Prabhat Studios of V. Shantaram!

Mr. Shah: I know of three biggest banyan trees in India and have seen them all.

Mr. Sharma: Is one of them at the theosophical society at the Tamil Nadu?

Mr. Shah: Yes that is the biggest one. Many years back in a cyclone many of its parts got uprooted. But the authorities contacted the competent scientists, made the funds available and replanted all of them.

Mr. Sharma: Oh I thought if a banyan tree is allowed to grow more trees from its hanging roots then it is not possible for it to fall.

Mr. Shah: Yes, but perhaps that was a very big cyclone. Any way the second big tree is in Gujarat called Kabir Wad, because it is said that Kabir had visited that area sometime. And the third one is in botanical gardens, Kolkata.

Mr. Sharma: The biggest banyan tree that I have seen is in Khusro Bagh at Allahabad. It was in an area of 500 meter radius. And at that stage too it was not known which one was the original tree.

Mr. Shah: The tree In Tamil Nadu is in more than 10 km area.

Mr. Sharma: Oops that's huge!

Mr. Shah: Yes it is.

Mr. Sharma: I was quite fond of this tree.

Mr. Shah: Really? Many times I hug the trees. It gives me great satisfaction.

Mr. Sharma: I too do it, but for me that is a spiritual experience. During a spiritual camp, we were given this exercise of hugging a tree and asking the tree 'how was it feeling?' It is quite a weird experience.

Mr. Shah: I am sure.

Mr. Sharma: OK Mr. Shah, I will carry on with my walk.

Mr. Shah: Nice talking to you.

Mr. Sharma: Same here sir.

I met my friend Gautam yesterday. Like me he too is very regular in his exercise regimen, especially the walks. His doctor has told him that at his age, one-hour walk every day is a must. If he wants to go to a gym, do Yoga, learn karate or any other activity, it has to be 'walk'+ that activity. During one such walk something strange happened with Gautam. He narrated to me the story next day.

Gautam had already completed his daily walk quota in the morning. He had come out again in the evening for a stroll in the park; maybe just to stay a little ahead in life. He was only half way down the track; he spotted a wad of money on the ground. He stopped right next to it, keeping his shoe near the neatly folded notes and looked down directly at it. Watching an awkwardly static person in the jogging park; other walkers too followed his look and also saw the money. Gautam looked up at some passing men engrossed in serious walking.

Gautam: does this belong to any of you? He stayed near the money. But it seemed that those people had already started breaking their carbohydrates into glucose and water. So, no one was in a mood to break the pace for little money that didn't even belong to them. A tall man just nodded 'no' and walked off without slowing his pace. A dark lady in short hair said smilingly, 'finders keepers', not bothering to stop. Gautam picked up the money. Watchman from his cabin had also noticed this. Gautam walked to the watchman, showed him the money and told him, "I found it (pointing to the spot) there. Did anyone inform you about their lost money?"
Watchman: "no (extending his hand to grab the notes); but I will keep an eye."
Gautam: "wait, let me count it (he counted the money). It is 110 rupees. Keep it but if I cannot find the owner then I will take it from you before I leave. It is 110, ok?"
Watchman: "ok sir." But just as Gautam was about to hand over the money to watchman, Gautam noticed a large bunch of women entering the garden. He stood at the edge of walking area and raised his hand with the money.

Gautam: "anyone lost this... any one?" Most ladies laughed and passed him by; but a thin woman with greying hair said, "you are giving so much of your time for someone else's money. Everyone is not so nice." Gautam."

"That's no problem; I will give it just a few minutes more."

Thin woman with greying hair: "good luck to you" (she walked off laughing away).

Gautam: (trying his luck again) "hello any one dropped this right here, anyone?"

Next was a group of four women, chatting loudly. Among them there was a fat lady in yellow suit, "Yes, it could be mine. I had a 50 rupee note with me when I was shopping." She showed her empty handkerchief. So careless! Gautam thought.

Gautam: "you should have at least tied up the money in your handkerchief."

Fat woman in yellow suit: "yes. I don't know how it slipped."

Gautam: (placing money in her hanky) "here, take this."

Other women started complimenting him and smiling, as they always do. Gautam was hugely relieved; but by now he had lost precious five-minute walk. So he picked up

speed thanking women for their complements. The women too continued walking for a while. Gautam paced faster in the next two rounds. That group of women was now sitting on a bench and chatting. So every two minutes Gautam passed them, he knew they were looking at him. He felt very uncomfortable.

Soon there was a surprising twist in the tale. A small made woman had walked to that group of four women and was talking to them. As Gautam passed again, group of women stopped him.

Fat woman in yellow suit: "actually the money belongs to this lady. She has come back all the way from her house trying to find it."

Gautam: "so now you are giving it to her?"

Fat woman in yellow suit: "yes. I thought it was mine; but it is surely hers."

Gautam: "but what about your fifty rupee note? Do you have it or is that lost too?"

Fat woman in yellow suit: "no, it is in my bag."

Gautam: "sure? Otherwise tell me I will keep an eye on the ground for your money too."

They all laugh aloud. Gautam coolly started his walks again. He was pleasantly surprised at what had happened.

Dark lady in short hair: "you can't go on finding money in every trip."

Gautam: "yes I know. But even if I do find more money, it will be a big headache to find its owner every time."

Dark lady in short hair: (laughing) "true. I don't think anyone thinks like you do."

Gautam was moving away from her.

Gautam: "oh that's no big deal. Bye."

Dark lady in short hair, "bye."

28

My locality

Our home in 7-Bungalow area in Andheri west was an oasis of peace and quiet when we just moved in, in July 1980. In fact my building was the last one in the lane. It had a dead end on the right and there was a barbed wire, running across the lane. Beyond the barbed wire there was a large puddle that turned into a regular pond during rains. It remained slushy throughout the year and later turned into breeding bed of mosquitoes. It was also very quiet as there was no through fare for traffic. No noise. No pollution of any kind. Soon the young ones started using the dead-end as a perfect area to play cricket. Although I stay on ground floor flat of this building, yet if I stood on a small table, I could see the sea from there... well now the view is blocked by many layers of buildings. So 'Sagar Darshan' (view of the sea) is impossible now even

from my terrace. The road in front is no more a dead end. As my apartment faces the road, there is abundance of traffic noise and variety of pollution. One can see a thin layer of dust reappearing on our furniture every hour. During morning and evening rush hours it can take 1-2 min to cross this narrow lane. There were some changes that were also good, like greening of this lane. Initially it was all barren and bare; but over the years the trees grew tall; but that reduced the size of our sky and patches of sunlight...

So, as I mentioned nothing is same in front of my house compared to 1980... the only exception is a loud and clear voice calling, "dabba batliwallaaa..." (Used stuff, rubbish, bottles)! You can say that 'voice' is not a thing. It is just a voice, which cannot be called as a part of this lane. Agreed, but I do hear it in my house, morning and evening, just as I hear the traffic noise. Therefore, for me it is part of this ambiance. It is the voice of a short and thin Marathi guy, a scrap dealer, mainly old newspapers and anything that others don't want. Perhaps he was well built under his white shirt and dhoti - since he walks such a lot all over, and carries all his stuff on his shoulders. He does not own a cart, like many others. Be it summer, winter or thrashing rains, he was very regular in his business trips. He weighed newspapers with his small weighing scale that has a mettle hook. Somehow I never sold old newspapers to people who used a kind of weighing scale, with a spring. I knew their scale would never be right. I had experienced it once. I called out to a young man to sell my old newspapers. He arranged them in a neat heap, tied it up, pushed the hook of his scale in the string... and pulled it up with his elbow on his knee. Simultaneously his face distorted, right arm shivered and his gorging eyes gave out his failing strength. Putting it down heavily he said, "3 kilos". I laughed, "Does lifting only 3 kilos of weight makes you shit in your pants?" He was sheepish. He didn't know whether to admit he was weak or he was a cheat. I asked him to get lost... Years passed, I did not change my view of scale with hook and never dealt with that dabba batliwalla too.

Coming back to only constant 'dabba batliwallaaa...' years passed, but he was still making his rounds, though virtually doing no business. May be he was too simple and did not have will to push his business. His bag remained empty in the morning and in the evening. He looked older as he had been walking on this road for more than quarter of a century. I realized his walk is a drag now, as though he is pulling himself in an invisible cart. I realized I too had changed. I do not react that strongly towards that cheat weighing scale. I had become soft towards him.

Once we had many empty liquor bottles to dispose. My wife had called him and handed the bottles to him. As he fiddled in his pocket for coins to pay her, she told him not to bother and instead gave him Rs 5 from her side. He was shocked! It is not the way this business works. He seemed nonplussed... feeling very confused, he went away. After that whenever we have an empty bottle, I call him in Marathi, "kaka, ikde ya" (uncle come here). Very gingerly he would come to our door. We would hand him the bottle along with a 5-rupee coin. Our business model has been modified. My wife said he is so old now. I too liked the idea. Now he takes the bottles, which actually helps us in clearing the clutter and we pay him for it. He says a parting

'Namaste' and both parties are mutually grateful.

Later I worked on making this business relationship to next level. Whenever I passed him on the road I started wishing him, 'Namaskar Kaka'. He would raise his hand and acknowledge with his "Namasker". It must make him feel good. One day I stopped him, made small talk with him and asked him for his name. "Sukhdev" he said. I found his name a little surprising. I always imagined him to be 'Sakharam' or 'Ganpat' or 'Tukaram' or may be just 'Patil'. Sukhdev was so unlikely a name for such a typical Marathi Manos. Moreover I did not have too many Sukhdevs in my memory. One of them was this huge documentary filmmaker of 1960s and another was a freedom fighter - both Punjabis. Never mind I thought. He says his name is Sukhdev. So be it. After that I started addressing him with his name rather than just 'Kaka'. That must have made him even feel better, because when someone living in an apartment addresses a 'dabba batliwalla', by his name and makes a small talk, must be ego booster for him. That was my intention...

It has been 4 months that I have not heard him calling out. There were quite a few bottles lying under the kitchen sink. After waiting for quite a few days, I decided to find out about him from the nearby cobbler, Parmeshwar. I stepped out immediately and met Parmeshwar. I asked him for Sukhdev's where about, saying he has not been seen for some time now. He at first could not place the person, but then he said 'oh him? He met with an accident.' I did not like it. 'When?' I asked him. 'May be about 4-5 months back.' He added, 'he was in hospital for some time after that I don't know.' 'Oh... I see!' I felt very bad. Noticing my genuine concern he offered, 'I know where he stays. I will go and find out how is he feeling and let you know.' 'Fine' I said and feeling a bit uneasy, returned home. Two day later Parmeshwar was calling out to me from my balcony. I knew he has some news for me. Sukhdev has become very weak, he said. He cannot get up. He is perhaps too old to recover completely. I felt like going to meet him right then, but in that hot afternoon it was not so easy to get up and get out. My 'wish' lost to my will power. In a few days bunch of empty bottles got disposed of to someone else. The ambience surely seems to have changed on my road.

Back to a distance past... I was in my balcony. Sukhdev was passing and 'calling out' in his powerful patent style, 'dabba batliwallaaa'. In a light mood, I thought, I have never seen this Dabbawalla sitting somewhere relaxing or eating anything, ever. He just walks and walks and walks. That means he would be burning many more calories than he is consuming. That would also mean that one fine day he may just vanish in thin air and someone will find his clothes on the street, without any trace of him in it - scientifically speaking!

Sepia Relationships

My work was over and I was passing through the crowded passage of the office, when I heard a 'hey'! The voice was familiar. I looked at the person. The gait was familiar too; beard also was same, except the color. Siba - Siba Misra, a photography student from my batch. In forty years all he had developed was hint of a paunch. Earlier he used to be like a banana leaf. He was completely recognizable to my forty years weaker eyes, even in that dim evening light. 'Siba', I shouted and we hugged. We barraged each other with, 'How are you? How is your family? Children? What are they doing? How is wife?' and then answered each other. Don't ask me if the answers are still in my system. I told a fellow recordist in the office that we know each other since 1969!

You joined them recently? He asked. I said, yes, less than three months. Very good. It is the best TV software company in Bombay. They are very strong. I did not know those details, so I said, I am sure. Siba said he is in the team of directors that make CID. His production team surrounded him, so he got busy discussing work. I patiently watched him do that. After he finished we both walked out together. He was limping. I knew the story. I also knew that when we meet and time permits, he will narrate it to me himself with all the details and underlined passages. Although, the incidence had happened more than six years ago, it still is a strong experience for anyone...

He was accompanying his son to a college in Pune. They were going by train. As the train moved, Siba lost his balance and fell between the track and the platform wall. Train wheels pulled off a large part of his flesh just above his foot. There was panic. His son pulled the chain and jumped off the train. Soon he was pulled out and made to lie on the floor. As Siba lay unconscious, his very upset son was making calls. One of them was to owner of this TV production house. Brij reached there and got him required medical care until he was fine and ready to go home...

On the staircase of the office, he pulled up the bottom of his pant and showed me his right foot. It was jet black and was very badly swollen. He wore a sock over it to keep it hidden. He was always in chappals. But that was his usual style too.

We walked talking for about 10 min to reach his humble Maruti 800, just stood there and kept exchanging more notes. We had missed personal contact for years. I asked if his foot pains while walking. It is always paining, he said flatly. Only when he gets up in the morning and swelling is less, pain is a bit less; but as the day passes it swells up and pain also goes up.

We spoke about 'Aangan Ki Kali', a movie that we did together. We had many good things to talk about it: it was a clean, well-made film on child adoption as its central theme. You couldn't find any part that was done unprofessionally. It was shot well. Actors were good, Rakesh Roshan and Lakshmi. The child artiste, Geeta won a

national award. Music was very nice too, 'na rona munni na tu', 'saiyan bina ghar soona', 'tumhe kaise kahoon'. Bappi da was at his melodious best then. Siba said many years back he too directed a movie, which did not fare well on the box office, forcing a setback in his career. We spoke about a lot of setbacks in both our careers. In our unorganized entertainment business, there is no security. You can be out of job for years and then suddenly bounce back sometimes without even working on it.

We both were in no hurry for anything. Our comfort zone was completely in place. I said let's find a place to sit and have a cup of tea. It was a bit noisy there. We looked around and found a decent Udipi restaurant, but he said, forget it; we will have a 'cutting chai' from the pavement. We walked some more and found a tea stall. As we sipped tea from little plastic cups, he said his injured foot reacts a second late to the mental commands. So he has to be very careful while driving.

There is so much to talk about so many people you have spent time with, especially as young students. They say every human being is a volume, if you know how to read him/her. So if the story is about two people it could become an epic...

On my last day, rather last night in the FTII in 1972, we both got very drunk on desi (local) 'ilayachi' liquor. We slept in the same room. Due to overwhelming insecurity, we started making promises to each other that would make us feel better: we will stay together in Bombay too. If possible even work together.

When I took an auto for Poona railway station on May 3, 1972, I don't remember if I was upset and to what degree. But I noticed that familiar places like the main theatre, wisdom tree, canteen, badminton court that I started, security cabin and finally the overhead sign board of FTII seemed different that day. All that had been a part of my every moment for the past 3 years. I also knew that it was going to be lost for a very long time to come. No, I don't think I had time to feel sad, because I must have been too tense about my immediate future in the most ruthless dream city. To put it on record, I went back to FTII just for a day in 1974 for my convocation and then could never go back for next ten years!

It was about time. We walked back to his car. I said I will take an auto from here, but he said; I will drop you to the signal. So just for hundred meters I sat in his car and 15 seconds later got off; jumped in an auto and waved him bye. Strangely the content of our entire conversation was far from pleasant. It was mainly about sickness, failures, accidents, joblessness; but we went through it without feeling emotions attached to such conversation. I guess because the positivity of our meeting did not allow the sadness to take over. With such friends you are always on the same page, same pitch. No loss occurs in relationship, due to time lost.

Muddled strangers

Hello there. How are things?

Hello... err, I didn't recognize you. Have we met?

Yes we have.

Really? When?

A moment ago!

What! You mean when you said hello to me?

Yes, precisely. It may be more than a moment, now! How time passes. Isn't it?

I don't know if you are a funny guy or some kind of crook?

Good dual observation. Well, why don't you take a wild guess, about me?

About you? How can I do that? I barely know you, now... well perhaps for two minutes.

Yes. That's very good.

Good! What's good in it?

You are already learning to be like me.

Is that better?

What do you mean?

I mean is it better to be like you? Why can't I remain like myself only?

No one is stopping you in doing that. In fact you have been like yourself all your life.

Are you saying that you have changed to this new type from your earlier type?

I must have.

Oh! Okay, so you don't know if you have changed or not.

That's a valid question.

That fine, but what is the answer.

... You know what; I am getting a bit muddled here.

Okay. Fair enough. What do you want to do to clear this... well muddle?

Start over again.

Are you sure?

Yes.

Okay here we go...

Hello there. How are things?

Hello, err I didn't recognize you. Have we met?

Yes we have.

31

Air Virus

It is set in the future. Not too far in future, may be nearby. Actually you can chose the year if you so like. I really don't mind. You just give me the figure and I'll place my story in that.

Okay did you say 2032? Seems fine to me. Because it's not typical kind of futurist movie scene and also it is far from science fiction. I would say it is more like 'social medical science fiction'.

So the thing is coronavirus of 2020 has gone from the world long back; but don't be too hopeful, since many other similar, deadlier and smarter viruses have been visiting earth and have taken deadly toll on human life. But more importantly viruses affected people's psyche. Since the 'lockdown' of March 2020, when people stayed home for many weeks, it changed the way people thought and went about their lives. They were always ordering stuff online. They had not been inside a store to look, pick, check and buy things.

Maybe viruses arrived from outer world or from an enemy country. Who cared? Maybe over time covid-19 mutated and formed new ones. I could search the internet and find names of some more of those viruses; like covid-22, covid25, covid25+, covd.supr, AirVirus... etc.

So AirVirus is the virus in the times of 2032. But entire humanity has been living under severe stress since 2020 when covid-19 had covered the population of entire globe. Internet says it had started from China. TV News channel used symbolic red color for countries affected. And soon the redness on the world map went on spreading and soon it had covered 200 countries! Red was chosen aptly as starting point, or mark of danger. Whoever chose red, chose well. Well due to entire population living with continuous fright of getting infected, not meeting anyone, not going out, not using expressions of handshake, hugs etc. Now all you could see was long faces, faces covered with masks, large caps and hand gloves. AirVirus, as the name suggested, did not only spread through coughing or sneezing, but also with tiny skin exposure. It spread through 'air'. If two people passed by each other, they had to be careful that the 'air' displaced by both did not touch each other. So as soon as you saw someone approaching from opposite side, both would go to the extreme edge of the path and reduce the speed to dead slow. AirVirus could be contracted through any part of skin showing. It may be part of your calf, lower arm, neck, forehead... According to some rumors or fake news (though impossible in 2032), it seemed that AirVirus had mutated itself as micro-electronic-organism. It could figure smiles, happy chuckling sounds, voices with romantic tone...

Well I could go on and on making this look completely horrifying and frustrating. So, let's change the topic and move to a better scenarios... well nearly. Remember it is 2032, you chose that year, didn't you?

Once 5 friends decided to 'meet up' for drinks in a house; house of one of them. It is dark inside, windows are shut tight and curtains drawn. There shouldn't be any hint of celebration, visual or aural. All the fiends kept their voices low and gestures muted. Thankfully they had gotten rid of caps, gloves etc. Everybody's voice sounded as if he was speaking from his grave or was burying someone. In fact it was not that they were scared, they would be picked out by AirVirus; but gradually habits were formed due to 12 long years of continuously living modifying behavior. They had got used to be like that. Life had become slow, scary and drab. Most important emotion most people lived would be of 'scare'.

Suddenly a shocking sound was heard. Door-bell! How? Who could this be? Host got up opened the door just a crack and saw Rakesh's grandfather outside. Old man walked in straight away. Also it was not desirable to keep him out.

"So you all having good time, after long, huh."

"Oh no, we are just exchanging notes about the new special overall that will keep us safe if we walk fast and pass others."

"I see. Thankfully I don't have that problem of walking fast. He he."

Everyone held their breath. These people of older generation do not know how to adjust with our times. A soft hissing sound was heard outside the window that faced the road. No it wasn't a car or an electric bus or...

After drinking a glass of water old man decided to leave. Ramesh got up to open the door for him and more to close it properly after he left. I think in 2020, even the postman did not get such a dry send off. Soon they settled down again. Chicken and parathas were great; but no one praising it was considered good adequate.

Suddenly they all heard the sound of a sac rolling down the first floor staircase. Decisive part was: before the rolling sound there was an "uhh" and in end an "aah".

And then there was this screaming silence!

32

Why?

I will go for a walk later

Why?

It is too bright right now

Bright? Do you want to go when it is dark?

Yes

Why?

Because...

What because

Because they all whisper,

Whisper? Who? What do they whisper?

They say, 'here he is again'

Who says that?

Them... they say

Who them, who are they

They. They hide behind the trees and say it

Are you crazy?

No, I mean it. They look at me and I feel they are noticing me

You are having illusions, who will look at anyone and say anything

No I am sure no illusion

Why whisper about you only? Who in the hell do you think you are?

I don't know that, but they especially notice me

Oh god! Okay, tell me more about them. What exactly do they do?

... As soon as I enter the garden, they look at me and share a glance with others. Then they start chatting. When I turn to look at them they hide behind trees. Then I can't see them, but their flowing white clothes flutter out in breeze. One day I was really angry. "Why don't you leave in peace!?" I shouted at them.

Then?

Then they climbed up the tree, and merged themselves in the green. They went behind the thick leaves and kept looking at me from there.

What an utter nonsense story!

No please I will go later; after it is dark.

Have you ever been there in dark?

No

Then? Don't you think they can harass you more in dark?

Oh I... I don't know that.

Okay try going around 8 today. There may be only some garden lights. But it will be quite dark otherwise.

You think they will trouble me more in dark?

Why don't you go and check it out, since you know what they do in day time.

Umm... actually. No I think I will go now only.

No no try walking in the dark today. Why not?

... Okay, but why can't I miss my walk once in a while?

Remember what doctor told you? If you miss your walk, you will be in deep trouble.

I am going now... bye

Fine see you in an hour. Phew...

33

Gautam and the driver

The other day Gautam heard the story of someone taking a long walk in suburban Mumbai. He came to know how upset that poor guy was watching the condition of the pavements under his feet. It seemed to him that authorities have absolutely no empathy for the plight of the citizens, especially senior citizens. They are so vulnerable to trip and fall, hurting themselves seriously. And any fracture in that ripe age can ultimately result in his or her death...

Yesterday Gautam was coming home in an auto rickshaw. It was drizzling. He was thinking about that guy walker. Same sight was playing in front of him right now. People walking hurriedly holding their plastic bags in one hand and the umbrellas in the other but their eyes were focused on the ground. No one dared to look up straight and walk. They all had to be alert to all kinds of bumps, ups and downs, broken tiles etc on the surface right under their feet. The traffic signal had turned red at the last minute. There was going to be a fairly long wait now. Gautam decided to strike a conversation with the rickshaw driver. He does it often. In the bargain he often ends up getting enriched by experiences. So today too, internally a little playfully, but serious outwardly Gautam dragged the driver into a shockingly unlikely topic;

Gautam: If I should leave Mumbai, then where should I go? You have some place in mind?

It took quite a few seconds for the driver to register this strange topic. It certainly was very surprising for a passenger to talk about such deep personal problem to him. People mostly ask them about maps and routes or talk about driver's village, their land, family etc. But this guy wasn't a regular one.

Gautam continued: the roads and footpaths are so horrible here. I really feel that we are being given a raw deal by the authorities.

Driver: go to your village.

Gautam: I don't have a village or a native place. My parents are no more and any ways they had sold everything. So, I have nowhere to go.

Driver: (looking away) go live with your children then.

Gautam: my children are here only.

Driver: then Mumbai only is fine. It is a good place.

Gautam: but look at the city.

Driver: sir, like that every place will have some or the other problem. You can't keep running away from problems. The best city according to you will also have problems, may be of a different kind. But problems surely will be there.

Gautam: we are being treated like animals here. Can anyone think that our good money has been spent on making such horrible roads and footpaths?

Driver: (with surrender and finality in his tone) sir, as long as we live, problems will live with us. No one can run away from them.

Light turned green. He put the rickshaw in first gear and moved ahead with traffic. Gautam had earned his points.

34

Escape to death

He didn't hear the phone ring. Perhaps he was dreaming. So, he thought. On the other end a rough and strong hand held the line for full three minutes until the ring turned to beep. It was timed out, indicating no response. He stirred a bit and picked up the phone, few moments too late. He also heard the beep. He wondered how come ringing turned into a beep. He decided to be ready next time. He turned towards the phone, dragged his right leg near his chest and felt comfortable. He fell asleep again. Soon he developed a frown. His eyes trying to shut tighter as if someone wanted to force them open.

“No, I don't want to see it. Don't show me her picture. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The room was dark. The woman was lying on the floor. She was shackled. The chains were secured tied to the walls behind her. She had long given up her struggle to fight. She just lay lifeless with open eyes. She looked at everyone and everything without

any emotion. No hatred, no fear, nothing. She knew she was alive. That's all she knew. She had no idea when will she see the sun or the moon or when will she find herself under the sky, in the open and breathe normal air. She does not know how long has she been there. She vaguely knows the reason for which she was brought there. She knew it initially of course, but now after weeks or months of torture she has lost the clarity. Men around her speak loudly with questions in their voice. But she doesn't know what are they asking for? She can't get the words. It is impossible for her to help them if she doesn't know what is being said and it was equally impossible for the men to let her go without knowing what she was hiding.

They prepared to leave. A lump of rice was thrown in front of her on the floor and then they left. She heard the familiar clanking sounds of strong metal doors shutting. She used to scream aloud when she was just brought here. She felt that perhaps someone outside on the road will be able to hear her; but she was wrong. Perhaps the doors were made with a purpose or this place was far away into the wilderness. She remembered being blind folded. She looked at the yellowish rice lump and closed her eyes. May be she should try to die by not eating. But then she will have to hide the food somewhere. There was no place where it could be hidden. It was a large hall and everything was visible. Being alone too was playing on her nerves. She had started shivering, she didn't know why. Was it weakness, frayed nerves or was it cold. She would feel cold on the floor at nights.

From where was the fresh air coming in? There was a faint glow of light on her extreme right. May be there is a window there. If that opening was not there it would be better. I would have died long back, she thought. That light and air through that hole has been giving her a false hope for so long.

She wished there was no light, no air, no food. If there were only those faceless men beating her, throwing cold water on her, pulling her hair! She would have escaped to death long back.

The End