

Laughter

IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

KAVITA DAS



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Foreword

Dear Reader,

When I look back on my life, this is what comes to mind:

Here I Am

Exodus 3:4 When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Here I am". It sounds so simple. But to answer a call takes a rare courage and a measure of faith that few have. For to do so entails giving up your own life, your personal desires and ambitions and setting off down the road 'less traveled'. The amazing part, however, is that when one does so, one finds a degree of peace and an accompanying wisdom that far exceeds one's wildest dreams, for to follow God's call is to rest in His word and therein lies the answer to all the truths we spend our sad lives seeking. It is then that we are fulfilling the true purpose God has for us. The irony lies in the fact that the 'rare courage and faith' are actually available to each one of us, for the good Lord Himself provides this, once we set off on His path. It is simply for us to say "Yes".

Edmund Rice did so. Mother Teresa did too.

Do we have the courage? Do we have the faith?

All it takes is a simple "Here I am".

God bless

Kavita Das

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3 Idiots!

COVID was upon the world and educationists were struggling to educate their reluctant charges who were revelling in the new found freedom of no school and no education. Creativity, or the lack of it, was posing its own set of challenges, as was the marked lack of digital knowledge (forget experience – that’s a different story) that the so-called gurus of the globe suffered from. Combine this lethal combination with a resounding reluctance to plunge into the new-found age of cyber technology, and one would have a glimpse into the chaos that was reigning supreme in pedagogical places. Hysteria is mild compared to the agitation



and palpitations that were on proud display. It is as if histrionics was the demand of the day and the teaching community was doing its determined best to out-drama the Oscarites of panic and frenzy.

Cue the stepping onto the stage of the heroes of the age.....the leaders of the institutions. Bravely facing their own limitations in this new scenario of technology, they set about coaxing, pleading, cajoling, wheedling, flattering, inveigling (you get the idea) their mentoring community to set tentative foot into the confusing dimension of digitization. For those who doggedly dug their heels in, the pleas graduated to commands, warnings, coercions and finally, to downright threats! Learn or.....!! Do or die!



Be that as it may, the upshot of all the efforts to bring everyone on board, slowly but surely, was that academia graduated to becoming fairly competent in the electronic world.

Classes were held with reluctant panache and ways and means found to meet the challenges of unwanted intrusions, indiscipline, looped videos (played while the student concerned was sleeping/playing video games/just wasting his time), lack of attendance, unacceptable comments etc. It was a veritable chess game at play. A full-on war between the students and the teaching community, with check and counter-check being played at every stage and at various levels simultaneously!!

Slowly but surely, however, the inevitable uneasy truce was finally reached and classes progressed with remarkable equanimity.

Until it came to the examinations.

Suddenly World War III erupted! Once again, the students were at their creative best, seeking ways and means to answer questions they had no clue about, by any means available. Values, integrity and morals took a hasty backseat and, in fact, hid under the said desks, in an effort to keep themselves alive. Even attempting to peek above the furniture they were cowering under, would result in a barrage of uncomplimentary verbiage and veritable physical assault! Vitriol, is putting it mildly. The scholars of the world were united in their cause to find suitable responses to the questions posed, without once perusing the pages of their text books! Pointing out to them that it would be easier to just read



the prescribed publications, fell on deaf ears. The challenge of outsmarting their mentors was just too much of a temptation to resist.



Now it was the turn of the pedagogues to display their skillful countermoves. And did they flabbergast their freshmen! Their adroit responses stupefied their mentees and left them nonplussed. The list of rules put into play for each assessment grew steadily longer and longer, till it soon bore close resemblance to a thesis! One's heart went out to the struggling sophomores who had to go through the endless commands prior to sitting for a simple test! One often found them cross eyed and close to jumping off a cliff!

However, never underestimate the artistic innovativeness of the student body. There came the day when one particular assessment had to be conducted. The boys in question had worked out an unbeatable strategy. To begin with, each one took up a strategic position in different rooms of the same abode, and stationed themselves before their computers. Each criminal had a particular chapter covered and would swiftly dispatch the response to his fellows in crime. They, in turn, transcribed the said reply, but took infinite care to ensure that the phraseology was changed, so that no accusations of replication could be made. Voila! As I said....unbeatable!



Having completed their papers to their personal satisfaction, they clicked pictures of each page of the same and uploaded their answer scripts. A round of congratulations followed and they

swaggered off to their respective residences, wallowing in the supernatural success of their inventive endeavours. They chuckled with glee, slapped each other on the back and indulged in a veritable orgy of self-congratulation. They had finally beaten the system and were one up on their instructors.

2 days later.....

Each one of the miscreants received a call from the front desk of the school, bidding them report to the institution by a given time. Non-plussed, they called each other up to ascertain whether they had also received the identical summons. On learning that they had, a sense of dread suddenly overcame them. An immediate council of war was held and each minute of the said day replayed moment by moment. A slow-motion rehash of each nano-second then ensued, with each culprit carefully grilling the others in an attempt to find a flaw in the system.



None could be found.

Their confidence soared.

Ergo, they had probably been summoned for some other reason.

In a state of complete perplexity, but a high degree of sanguinity, they sallied forth to meet their inquisitor who was disguised as a sage of academia. They strolled into the complex, casually greeted the guard, sauntered down the corridors and came to a crashing halt outside the coordinator's office. The abruptness of their halt can be understood, dear reader, when I reveal the sight they beheld. Have you guessed? No? Well, permit me to enlighten you.....they had glimpsed their honoured patriarchs lined up

like sitting ducks, in front of the dangerous dragon who was posing as a mild mannered coordinator.



Consternation now reigned supreme. Anxious glances were exchanged, quizzical looks abounded, and an impending sense of doom slowly settled upon their young shoulders. As if by magic, there was a dramatic redefining of demeanour. Gone was the relaxed slouch of over confidence. In its place stood 3 ramrod straight backs that would have done a marine proud and melted the heart of the sternest sergeant major. Stiff as 3 corpses in a highly advanced state of rigor mortis, the 3 delinquents slow marched into the jaws of death (read...their fathers' murderous glares).

I will say one thing for Johnians though. They don't go down without a fight.

Before a word could escape the authorities' lips, they were in full flow. "Ma'am, we did not do it. We swear on our fathers' that we have not done anything wrong". (I must mention in passing that at this point the said fathers, wearing hunted looks, started looking over their shoulders for the angel of doom to descend, as they had no illusions about their offsprings' integrity). Deniability was the theme of the day and our bravehearts were defending it with their dying breaths.

A pall of gloom gradually settled as the protestations faded away in the face of the stern, sustained silent wall (read Coordinator) that their disaffirmations fell upon. In the ensuing quietude the statue that sat behind the desk, slowly came to life.



It reached into a drawer and gently placed a mobile on the table. Turning to the meekly lined up, by now cowering

parents (let me inform you, dear reader, that these poor men were, in the normal course of events, in the world of commerce, giants and lions in their own right), she dropped her bombshell....."The papers have no similarities whatsoever, but if you can each call your homes and *ask your mothers to bring in the identical bedsheets as the one in the photograph*, I will apologise."

The 3 idiots had photographed their papers on the same bed!!!!

A Blazing Idiot Shines!

The matrimonial read ‘Wheat complexioned’. My instant response was, “A miller’s daughter!”



The next words were ‘Good natured’. My retort: “Who on earth is going to admit otherwise?! Only time will tell and by then it will be too late!”

And so it went. Each adjective in each advertisement being derided in the most scathing terms. I was enjoying myself hugely from the superior heights of my enlightened worldview – the perfect way to pass the time till the hour struck for me to leave for the University to determine how I had fared in my MA English finals.

And that’s how it all began - as a joke. I continued scanning the ads, freely commenting on each one, when suddenly, the matrimonials came to an abrupt end and my eye fell on a teeny tiny advertisement at the very end. Curious, I took a closer look at it and one word jumped out at me – Columba’s. The name struck an immediate chord as my brother had studied in a school with the identical nomenclature. So I decided to take a closer look. Sure enough – it was from St Columba’s School. They were advertising for an English teacher.

I sprang off the bed, where I had been reclining and dashed towards my father. “Pay attention! St Columba’s is looking for an English teacher. Think I should apply?”



My esteemed parent peered at the miniscule lettering (he had forgotten to wear his reading glasses) and replied with great sagacity, "Well, it wouldn't do any harm. You need to start appearing for interviews and this is a perfect opportunity to get some exposure without being disappointed because you know you are extremely unlikely to be selected for such a prestigious institution considering you have absolutely no teaching experience whatsoever."

My youthful, arrogant self took umbrage at this statement but I chose to play it humble and meekly agreed. As the school fell enroute to the University, we decided to stop for the interview and then proceed onwards to my college, to determine my destiny.

Well, an interview demands formal clothing. My free spirited, University bred self rebelled but better sense finally prevailed and I climbed into a salwar kameez, albeit darkly muttering about "institutionalization killing the freedom of choice." Worse was to follow. My parents took one look at me and marched me right back to my room with strict instructions to don a saree. A saree?! You have to be joking! But any and all protests were silenced with the words, "If you want to be taken seriously, you have to stop looking like a baby." At 23 years of age, such adjectives do not sit well on one. Today, I would be delighted! Ah, the vicissitudes of time....



So dressed in the full nine yards, I struggled my way into the car, tripped when getting out, righted myself in the nick of time and marched up the stairs with the remnants of my dignity wrapped around me as tightly as my traditional apparel. The

sight that greeted me nearly made me turn tail and run. Matrons of every size and shape stood there waiting to be interviewed, their hair grey with years of chalk powder and with eyes so piercing that a hawk would give its left claw to possess even one of them. In comparison to these demi goddesses of learning, I looked like a kitten that had strayed into the lionesses' enclosure. I quailed. Who was I kidding? My dad had been right. As the saying goes: I didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. I resigned myself to rejection.

Mustering my courage, I settled down on a chair to await my turn. Whilst I was busy doing my best to imitate a wallflower and thus remain as unobtrusive as possible, someone thrust a piece of paper into my hands and told me to study its contents. An exam? I looked down and saw a printed poem. Now we're talking! Poetry happens to be my passion. With a happy smile, I got to work.

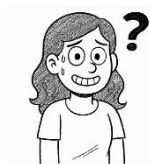
"Next!" came the stentorian cry. I looked around. All eyes were on me! So taking my cue from all the baleful stares coming my way, I meekly followed in the footsteps of the peon preceding me.



With trepidation I entered the lion's den. There, seated majestically behind his desk, was the all-powerful head of the school – Bro Paulo (name changed). Seated next to him was the vice Principal, Bro Hal (name changed!). Bro. Paulo gestured courteously for me to be seated, (his charm is legendary) and once I was settled into the chair, proceeded to grill me on the poem I had studied. God bless the recently done MA exams! The papers on poetry had more than adequately equipped me for any inquisition and I

calmly and steadily responded to each question, no matter how difficult, with a growing confidence.

I had nailed the interview!



Then came the curved ball – Bro Hal hit me with a totally technical question on grammar! I hadn't the faintest clue what the correct answer was. In an instant all the carefully acquired calm took flight and soared into the distant horizon. I looked helplessly at the ceiling for inspiration, but I am no Moses and so no heavens opened up for me, nor did a little angel whisper anything in my ear. What on earth was I supposed to do?! There was only one recourse left open to me – “My mother is really good at grammar. She teaches English. I will ask her and get back to you.”

Don't ask me who was more surprised by my blurted response, the Brothers or I. They looked at me as their jaws slowly dropped. Then, shaking themselves as if awakening from a bad dream, they threw their next googly at me. “Where are your MA documents? Only your first year results are attached.”



I didn't have any option, did I? My mother had brought me up to tell the truth. (Why are parents such a bad influence?) “I am on my way to collect my final results. Don't worry. I am confident I have got through”.

They now looked as if they were trapped in the middle of a very bad dream. Struggling to retain their sanity, they gently asked, “You are very young and have no experience. How are you going to manage the boys?”

Well, that's when I truly covered myself in glory – “I have 2 older brothers whom I have handled all my life. I'll cope!!!!!!”

That they managed to usher me out politely speaks volumes for the Brothers and their self-control. I am quite convinced that the carpet in the office must have come in handy as they rolled about on it, helpless with laughter. I doubt they have ever had such a naïve creature turn up for an interview, and that too (did I mention this earlier?) for the Sr Secondary School!



Well, having made a thorough fool of myself, I exited, no longer looking like a kitten but very much like a bedraggled, wet hen that had narrowly escaped the kitten's attentions! Once again, scraping together the remnants of my self respect – a very, very, scanty amount, I assure you - I departed from St Columba's with my metaphorical tail firmly tucked between my legs and my confidence shredded beyond belief. The only comfort(?) lay in the bitter truth that my father had been right. I had at least gained some experience (though of what kind I have still to figure out).

On my return home, I disappeared into my room to skulk (read 'sulk') and to nurse my badly bruised ego. Never before had I been so humiliated. The worst part was that I had done it to myself! Isn't it terrible when you have no one to blame? The last vestiges of my dignity were fast disappearing into vapour trails.



I woke the next morning to the dulcet sound of my brother yelling into my ear, "Phone for you from St Columba's!" What on earth could they possibly be ringing about? Were they bored and in need of a little more entertainment? Dragging my reluctant limbs out of bed, I headed for the instrument, my heart filled with a nameless dread.

“Is that Kavita?”

“Yes”. Keep it short. Stay in control. The less said the better. You can’t make a fool of yourself – yet again – that way.

“Would you be able to come in tomorrow?”

“Why?” Keep it short. Stay in control. The less said the better. You can’t make a fool of yourself – yet again – that way.

“Aren’t you interested in the job?”

“What?!!” Keep it short. Stay in control. The less said the better. You can’t make a fool of yourself – yet again – that way.

“Look, miss. Either you are interested in working in St Columba’s or you aren’t. Will you be coming in tomorrow?”

The shreds of ego coalesced around me. The vapours became solid again. My bent spine straightened with a snap and I was suddenly waltzing my mother around the drawing room. I had done it! I was going to be a teacher. In the Senior Secondary School. In St. Columba’s.

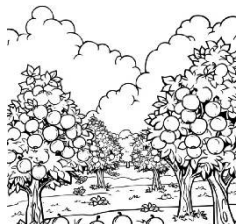


Call it Destiny or name it God’s Will, but in truth, what began as a joke - a “time-pass” - materialized into a job that changed my life. Bro Paulo swears to this day that I twinkled at him across the table and didn’t display an iota of nervousness. I maintain the opposite.

But, in the end – what difference does it make? I got the job, didn’t I?!

Almost There!

THE HIMALAYAN RANGE



I have travelled the world. Literally. Flown over vast spaces on holidays and sailed the 7 seas (with my Merchant Navy husband). But never have I ever seen any place as beautiful as the orchard we own

This stunning piece of property lies nestled in the Himalayan Range at a height of about 8000 feet. Unlike the usual stepped horticulture of the region, it undulates along the top of a mountain ridge and stands bathed in sunlight all day long. If one were to take a few steps beyond the front gate and settle down with a hot cup of tea, one would have the most marvelous, uninterrupted view of the valley as it gently slopes down to the legendary Sutlej River. The tiny “chappad” (pool) adjoining the wall to one’s left, attracts creatures from all around, who pause on their way up and down the mountain, to slake their thirst and rest in the cool shade of the overhanging trees.



To the right, is an open plateau. The sunsets are particularly picturesque here, because as Bhaskara sinks down to sleep, the horses, sheep, goats and cows gather to graze and rest for the night. A peaceful, serene spectacle to calm the soul. Have I mentioned that the silence is so surreal that one can hear a bird calling from the adjoining mountain?

The piece de resistance, however, is the majestic cedar (deodar) forest that encircles the entire rear of the orchard, framing this tiny fragment of farmland and turning it into a magical masterpiece of stunning, unparalleled beauty.

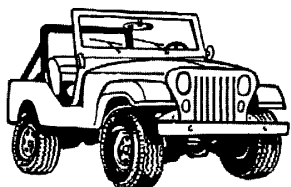
It goes without saying, that it transforms into a winter wonderland when the snow blankets it all in pearly white.

Is it any wonder that everyone wants to visit?

Well, my revered father was no exception. Staking his claim to seniority, he booked a berth in our vehicle, demanding that he be transported to this famous fairyland the next time we journeyed there. He brooked no argument and overrode all appeals.

And so it came to pass.

Permit me a brief digression here, dear reader, to paint yet another portrait....of our transportation (in due course, you will understand the significance of this). They say the mountains are ancient. Well, our beloved Jonga belonged to the same era. One of the fabled 'discards' of the army, it had been refitted with a truck engine and was inordinately powerful as a result. However, thanks to Father Time and the vicissitudes of rough travel, this conveyance had reached a stage where the adjective 'decrepit' was nothing



short of a compliment! Suffice to say that break downs were not a norm but a rule, and that I had gradually transformed from a wife into a mechanic's able assistant as the years had gone by.

To continue with our tale.....

The day dawned and we set off in the month of November, bags packed, our faithful canine ensconced behind and my dearly beloved patriarch seated next to me. Do bear in mind that these were the days of yore when bucket seats and seat belts were still unknown features of the future. The Jonga had a single, straight bench in the front, which constituted the sole seating of the vehicle. And so there were the 3 of us – yours truly squashed in the centre with my husband behind the wheel and my pater on my left.



The initial bit went well. We cruised along gently curving, well tarred roads and soon the elder amongst us relaxed and became quite chatty, entertaining us with stories of hair-raising adventures he had been on.

Needless to say, he starred in each episode and emerged the triumphant, rugged hero. Like well-trained offspring, we dutifully congratulated him each time a tale reached its conclusion, admiring his tenacity, strength and courage. Unfortunately, this only served to inspire him to serve up yet another embellished fable and so there we were travelling up the mountainside being regaled by our daredevil.

Until a sudden silence fell upon us. This was followed by an unrelenting pressure on my left that sent me crashing into my spouse on my right. He, in turn found himself hugging the door on his right and thanking the Almighty for the said resistance, or else we may well have found ourselves sans a driver with yours truly literally in the driver's seat! Of note – those were the days when I had still not learned to drive.

Seizing the wheel firmly, my husband applied a strong counterpressure and soon we were all once again back in our original spaces. Curiosity however, made us look towards the originator of the near catastrophe, only to find said perpetrator gazing fixedly out of the window whilst



firmly holding the fixture in front of him in a white knuckled grip. Further exploration revealed the cause of this ungainly posture – we were on a narrow mountain road with his side close to the edge. From where he sat, he had a bird's eye view of a steep 800 foot drop straight down to the rocks below and might well have felt he was suspended over the said precipice, with no life-saving seat belt to prevent the plunge. Suffice to say that most of the rest of the journey consisted of overt demonstrations of Newton's 3rd law, with action and reaction being the game played all the way up the mountainside!

Evening fell and we were close to our destination. One more road to traverse. When disaster struck. We found our way obstructed by a truck that had broken down in the dead centre of the road. Every manoeuvre to pass it failed miserably and then – our beloved Jonga decided to emulate the deceased roadblock. As befits a vintage vehicle, it too decided to exercise its freedom of choice and, with a mighty gurgle, gave up the ghost. No amount of coaxing would resuscitate it. Like an old codger, it refused to budge and we were now faced with the grim reality that there was no way up except on foot, even as the sunset fell upon us.

Now, dear reader, do permit me one last digression. I promise it is relevant to the proceedings.

The final stretch of road that led up to our orchard had been built by us personally. In an effort to preserve the forest as well

as our pockets, the shortest route possible was decided upon - obviously. Unfortunately, this also meant that the gradient of the said passage was extremely steep. To walk up it was nothing short of participating in an extreme sport.

So there we were, as the day passed into the night, boldly venturing forth where no man had gone before.....up our extreme sport road, in the biting cold. That the moon had chosen to hide behind the clouds was of no help whatsoever and that leopards came out to feast on such occasions, only served to add flavour to the already over-spiced dish of trauma.



By the way, have I mentioned that my dearly beloved papa had grown up in the mountains of Nainital? I haven't? Well...he did. And I have lost count of the number of times we kids were told how unhealthy we urban progeny were as compared to the mountain goats like him, who had been bred on clean mountain air and steep, challenging slopes. So when we started on the ascent, it was a brave and bold man who swung into action. Our intrepid hero sallied forth with vim and vigour, scathingly beckoning us slow coaches to catch up.

Until he hit our road.

In the dark.

20 short steps up the incline, he decided to declare his close kinship with the Jonga and emulated it by abruptly coming to a halt. Inhaling mightily (read – huffing and puffing), he magically transformed from a swaggering sailor (he is from the Indian Navy) into a plaintive geriatric, declaring pitifully, "I'm old, I'm asthmatic. I can't go on", and that said, he plonked himself down on the nearest rock.

Imagine our plight! We were faced with the herculean task of getting our self-proclaimed champion up that impossible road in absolute darkness.

Now you may well ask - why do I keep stressing the lack of light? Elementary dear Watson – what one can't see can be transmogrified. And that is precisely what happened. In the most soothing tones imaginable, I coaxed said dying duck up onto his feet with the complete fabrication, "It's not too far and the incline is a truly gentle one"! With that I hauled him up and quite literally heave-ho'd him up the offending ascent, all the while cajolingly assuring him about how magnificently he was doing and wasn't it an easy stretch of road to traverse?!



Unfortunately, the 8000 foot high rarified atmosphere, combined with the physical strain of the slope soon brought about another collapse. This time he flung himself dramatically onto our dear frozen mother earth and from that supine position pathetically declared, "Leave me behind sweetheart."!!!

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was when I truly rose to the heights of mendacity. Keeping in mind that we had the steepest part of the steep slope dead ahead, I magnificently declared, "No worries Baba. We are over the hill. From now on, it's level ground"!!

God bless the blackness. Such is the power of suggestion (and prevarication) that, sighing a weary sigh, our relieved conqueror rose to his feet and staggered up that slope, fully convinced that he was on level ground. To keep the fable alive, I followed, crooning, "See, I told you – the worst is over."!



And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how we got our triumphant victor home!

I will leave you to imagine what happened the next morning, when the literal light of day, revealed the truth. I leave you with a hint.....I suffered from extreme frostbite for the remainder of that holiday, thanks to the cold waves emanating from our offended lionheart. As for the rest of his days....my credibility rating lay in negative figures!!

Bag it Every Time!

[illegible]



Who says God doesn't have a sense of humour - or at least a great appreciation of the ironies of life? And have I ever mentioned that an intrepid traveler I am NOT? Well, put the two statements together and you get someone who is the world's worst traveler, busily travelling around the world!

So it came to pass that a girl who cannot sit on a swing for more than twenty seconds before succumbing to a bout of dizziness that would make an expectant lady's legendary morning sickness look like an advertisement for good health, came to be married to a Merchant naval officer. Now you may well raise your eyebrow superciliously and ask, "So?" The answer is tragically simple - Haven't you noticed that a ship rolling on the seas is nothing but a great big swing?! I still recall how I covered myself with glory the first time we left port in excellent sailing weather (how was I supposed to know that?) by racing onto the bridge and dramatically declaring, "It's a storm!" The look of acute embarrassment on my newly acquired husband's face, bracketed by the disbelieving looks of the Captain and the Bosun who were standing on either side of him, is a recollection that I do my utmost not to recall!



Anyway, be that as it may - there is nothing like constant torture to make agony bearable - and three ships later, I was a



seasoned sailor who could 'roll' with the best them in the most surrealistic of storms. Back-and-forth and forth-and-back I would sway, like a tender flower at the mercy of a strong breeze, whilst busily carrying on a conversation or making coffee on the

bridge, as if I were completely stationary and my feet were on solid ground. As I said – puke often enough and very soon there is nothing left to throw up! At that point you either give up the ghost and become the star protagonist of a burial-at-sea, or else your body decides that enough is enough and magically ceases to become sea-sick any more. By God's grace, I belong to the latter category and so am alive to tell this tale.

Which brings us to the fantastically named port of Coatzacoalcos. Never heard of it, have you?! Well, neither had I till our perambulations on the high seas led us to the said named place and we found ourselves anchored off the coast of New Mexico, readying ourselves to take on board a cargo of blackened coal (yes, smarty, I made the connection too - coal from Coatzacoalcos!). Now the fact that we were anchored off-shore, meant that we needed to take the launch to get to dry land, and so that was precisely what yours truly set about doing.

After carefully getting my trusty handbag ready, and arming myself with some basic survival



vocabulary (eg: 'aqua' = water), I settled myself into the launch and headed for shore, accompanied by some fellow sailors.

Once on terra firma, we proceeded to enjoy ourselves, as all mariners worth their salt do, and were soon engrossed in the simple pleasures of sampling the local wares and shopping for our families.



All too soon, it was time to return to the metallated framework we called home.

So there we were, on the jetty, waiting for our royal chariot to take us back when, all of a sudden, one of our lads let loose with an expletive (no, I will not elaborate – there are tender ears reading this!). Now when one lives on ships one becomes fairly inured to such volatile expressions and takes them in the spirit in which they are said, rather than literally. Without batting an eyelid I therefore enquired with the greatest concern – “What’s wrong?”

The response was a look of acute embarrassment followed by a low voiced response, “My button has broken.”

I know intuition is a woman’s best friend, but have you noticed how it always deserts one when one needs it the most? So, instead of picking up the signals from the look and the voice of the young man in question, I proceeded to do my bull-in-a-china-shop stunt and, raising my voice, said, “Which button?”

When am I ever going to learn?!!

That he didn’t throw me into the sea speaks volumes for the young sailor’s self control! (Or perhaps it was the fact that I was the Captain’s wife that had something to do with my safety – we’ll never know, will we? But I digress...) One look at his face warned me that discretion was the better part of valour. So choosing to fall back on the wisdom of the old adage ‘Action speaks louder than words’, I hastily reached inside my trusty handbag, pulled out a safety pin large enough to fit the bill, and thrust it in his general direction, all the while taking great care not to look him in the eye (or anywhere else for that matter).



Having rescued the situation to a certain extent (and his trousers), I fell into a pensive silence, while gazing vacantly into the horizon. Truth to tell, I was doing my best to neutralize a very awkward situation, when, to my horror, yet another cuss word (strong enough this time, to set your hair on fire)



rent the air. I quailed inside, but mustering my rather shredded nerves together, I turned towards the perpetrator and asked in a low voice (as low as the first sailor's), "Is

everything alright?"

The retort that greeted my solicitous enquiry struck me dumb – quite literally. "I need to be stitched." Why oh why is it my misfortune to be surrounded by tight trousered humanity?! Having, however, learnt from the errors of my previous ways, I refused to ask for any clarifications, but simply once more dived into my bag, yanked out a needle and thread and held out my arm, while averting my eyes. I thought I was being the soul of discretion. So you can imagine my surprise, when my Samaritan act was met by a deep throated chuckle. Swinging around in indignation, I strove to look for the perpetrator of the rude sound, when I perceived that it was the author of the hair raising vocabulary himself! Frowning at him, I barked (in a most unladylike fashion, I humbly confess), "What's so funny?"



Instead of replying, the sailor simply raised his arm and it was then, to my everlasting chagrin, that I saw the rent in his shirt sleeve. I had jumped to the wrong conclusion!

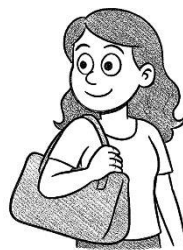
Slowly I raised my shamefaced eyes to his grinning face and with elaborate courtesy, he dropped the stitching apparatus back into my hand.

Once again I averted my gaze and pretended to take a great interest in the horizon. Anything, I repeat **anything** was preferable to meeting the eyes of the by now deeply amused members of my ship!



So I surrounded myself with a dignified silence and continued to stare into space (I would rather have been in **outer** space at that moment). However, as the minutes dragged by (relativity sucks) I became aware of a disturbing increase in the volume level near me. Being a lady (read ‘woman’) my curiosity started getting the better of me. But my dignity (or marked lack of it at that moment) demanded that I not reveal said (by now overwhelming) curiosity. So I tried to make both ends meet by striving to encompass the gentlemen next to me in my peripheral vision – with a marked lack of success! All I could see were some vague forms floating in and out of the corner of one eye, like ghosts flitting by at the edge of one’s vision.

What did not however, cease, was the ever increasing buzz and from the distant corner of one straining eyeball, I could dimly make out what seemed to be a great amount of unnecessary nudging going on. Just as I was about to succumb to the temptation of finally turning around to have a proper look, one of the gentlemen came staggering towards me. No, he wasn’t inebriated – he had been propelled towards me by the unwanted force of a nudge in the back. And as he approached me with unsteady gait, his face



broke into a huge grin as he asked, “I’m hungry ma’am – got anything there in that bag o’ yours to eat?”

So THAT’S what they had been up to! I could see the speculation in his eyes. I scanned the other faces.

The bet was on.

Never challenge a lady about her handbag.

I raked him over with a seemingly cursive glance. But in that one look I had got his measure.

My fingers flexed with the practiced ease of a dedicated gunslinger.

No one, . but NO ONE was going to out gun me



With deceptively casual ease I dipped into the bottomless pit that is rather elegantly called a lady’s ‘purse’ and pulled out – an apple!

Roars of approval burst forth from the gathering that had surrounded us without our knowledge, so focused had we been on our personal duel. Applause filled the air. And with the air of a prima donna who deserved nothing less than her due, I gracefully bowed!

My equanimity was restored. All was well with my little world.

That evening, when we were gathered around the dinner table, my vanquished opponent ventured into the dining room to deliver the final epitaph to the story. He looked at the Chief Engineer, glanced sideways at the Captain (my husband) and dropped the following bombshell into the expectant silence:



“Begging your pardon sir, but just wanted to inform you – if you ever lose your engine, or need a new one – just look inside madam’s handbag!!”

He beat a hasty retreat.....with yours truly in hot pursuit.....

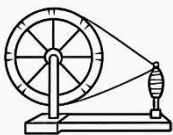
A Moment in Time

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to Him,
and He will make your paths straight.*

It was an 'overnighter' to remember. For the very first time 5 sections of Class 4 spent a night within the school premises. Games, bonfires, tug of war, shared meals and secrets, bunking down in the hall, a movie to watch at night and finally closing one's eyes at the unheard, exciting hour of 3.30 in the morning – only to jump up at 5 am in order to bag the 'early bird' prize!



But the grand finale lay in the unexpected arrival of the much awaited award, even as they packed their belongings in anticipation of their parents' arrival. One hundred and seventy five 10 year olds' voices suddenly raised in a triumphant battle cry as they laid eyes on the trophy that declared their school as having made the "most outstanding contribution to boy's education in the country." A moment to remember. A fierce, joyous shout of victory that will echo down the corridors of time and memory. A moment in space that captured the very essence of the young men who walk through this great institute – proud eagles, with triple H written all over them. Head Held High.



But hovering behind the seeming arrogance and pride is the long shadow of the Mahatma's gentle voice exhorting the young not to limit themselves to the three Rs of education but to attach to it the evergreen virtues of Head, Heart and Hand. Coupled with that is the deep and abiding spirituality that defines their school. An essential simplicity that reaches out with true compassion to embrace those at the margins and to blunt the arrogance into an 'attitude' that makes for the finest young men of each generation. Young men who walk the talk of their alma mater's motto – For God and Country.

And so it begins. They say it's an ending – yes, we made it to the top. Finally! But for us, it was simply the start of yet another journey. One that is designed to make our eagles soar ever higher as they ride on the winds of faith, overcoming challenges with wisdom, courage and an abiding integrity that sets them apart from their fellow men.



A Place Called.....!!

Himachal Pradesh could well give Kerala a run for its money when it comes to the title of “God’s own country”. Not simply because every hill has its own home-grown deity (much in the manner of Ireland’s bountiful Patron Saints), but also because it is not



uncommon at all to chance upon breathtaking vistas with staggering regularity. The drive to our orchard is no exception. We cross valleys that would put the famed Swiss landscapes to shame, and the upward climbs towards the distant mountain peaks, has one traversing forests of pine and oak redolent with the scent of resin and the sweet mountain breezes.

However, it is a sad truth that reality has a crushing way of crashing the party and ruining the most beatific of moments. And so it was with us. There we were, ascending the majestic slopes towards the perilous peaks, lost in our enjoyment of Iris covered valleys and towering cedar trees, when our eyes were rudely interrupted by the most jarring sight imaginable.....we were passing a signpost that unceremoniously announced that the town we were approaching was called.....Lundsu!!

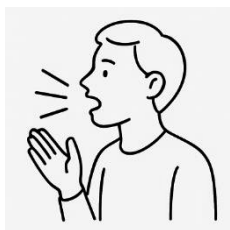


Lundsu? Really?! Who on this planet would take pride in naming their village with such an outright ridiculous name?! Lundsu! It sounds like someone was delusional and decided, in a moment of temporary insanity, to look for the most unlikely label on the face

of the earth. He/she put some deep thought into it and came to the conclusion that the moniker should a) have absolutely no musical lilt to it, b) zero elegance and c) not even an iota of meaning. And while casting about for a suitable nom de plume, came across the local alcoholic who was weaving his way home, muttering something akin to “a loon did sew” and, eureka, the name was born!!

Now, dear reader, I seek your indulgence in this matter. I beg you not to infer that it being impossible for anyone of sound mind to title their hamlet with the unlikely honorific of “Lundsu”, it therefore brings one to the inevitable conclusion that the claimant’s authenticity be doubted. I assure you (cross my heart and hope to die), the townlet was well and truly named..... Lundsu!

But one thing I must admit.....saying the name aloud, repetitively, is a true source of delight. Just try it, my friend. Wrap your tongue around the L, then raise the ND towards your upper palate, and finally, explode the SU into the surrounding air.



Satisfying, isn't it?! Repeat it a couple of times and it just rolls off the tongue ridiculously! A true attention grabber!

I'm sure you've guessed by now that my husband and I are not exactly passive introverts. No sooner had the signboard been sighted that a series of exclamations ensued, closely followed by a string of derogatory comments that would have made a sailor blush! !

In the midst of this raucous commentary, another deeply interesting fact was chanced upon.....we found ourselves driving by what looked suspiciously like a miniature university!

That was it!



Before one could say Batata Vada, my husband's phone was in his hand and he was frantically dialing our beloved daughter. She made the biggest mistake of her life when she responded to that call. No sooner had she picked up, than we were announcing in deceptively dulcet tones, "We've found the perfect college for you sweetheart."

"Really?!" came the excited response. "Where?"

"Oh, it's so scenically located, small, exclusive and with a name to die for."

"This is awesome!" came the unsuspecting rejoinder. "It sounds perfect!"

And then transpired the moment we'd been waiting for with bated breath, when the trusting soul walked straight into the artfully constructed trap.... "What's its name?"

With one accord, we hooted, "LUNDSU"!!!

And so began the family joke. The poor lamb dreaded going to the orchard because it meant she had to drive past her 'beloved alma mater' and invariably had to face the prospect of her favourite (and only) mother calling up and cross questioning her as to whether the treasured daughter of Lunds University had been garlanded and feted as was her due as the sole luminary of the august institution!!



What added charm to the whole scenario, was that our innocent adolescent had no clue that the entire story was a figment of our imagination! So convincing were we in our description of the "university" that for years on end she

actually believed it to be a living entity!! It was only several years later that the truth came to light and to her chagrin, she discovered that she'd been the victim of the world's longest running con!!



In time, as is wont with truly deserving legends, the story began to take on a life of its own. One fine day, after the umpteenth battle royal between the siblings, her brother exacted his vengeance by airily declaring the long-suffering soul, the valedictorian of the year! Henceforth, the poor mite had to face detailed cross questioning by her ever loving (and only) mater, about whether due diligence had been done and whether the crowned queen (read our daughter) had blessed the land called Lundsdu when speeding past it!

As if that wasn't bad enough, on a certain occasion, when my dearly beloved spouse had sallied forth to the orchard on his own, our mobiles suddenly took on a life of their own as they madly buzzed and beeped, signaling the receipt of numerous incoming messages. You can imagine our delight (and our female offspring's dismay) when the missives proved to be a series of photographs. Evidently some construction had been undertaken in the area and our chafing child's adoring pater had promptly taken photographs of the same and duly labelled them, "the Science Block", "The Psychology Wing" and "the New Reception area"!!





Time has since flown, as is its wont, and our little one has now joined the ranks of the working class. (She has also, since discovered that her deplored “alma Mater’ was simply a figment of her incorrigible parents’ combined, evil minds. But that’s a story for another day.)

She is a veritable Pied Piper with the tiny tots and so she inevitably comes home full of tales and regales us with anecdotes about the antics of her young charges. We listen with pride as she details how she handled potentially explosive situations and then switches to telling us about the hug she received from another smallie.

We reach out to congratulate her on what an incredible human being she has become and then gently remind her that it’s all thanks to her beloved alma mater in.....**Lundsu!!!!**

Danielle in the Lions' Den

In a world of make belief it is so easy to tidily tie the knots and find a resolution to all the meandering, entangled lines. To straighten them out at the end and say “ C'est fini”. To close the pages and walk away with one's soul contentedly replete, knowing that all has ended well. Good has prevailed and the baddies have met with their just desserts.



But reality has a wicked way of determinedly moving in the opposite direction - of crossed wires, no happy endings and a befuddled walkway that branches out endlessly. Just when you think you've found your delightful desire and can settle in to a peaceful place of quiet satisfaction, good old Father Fierce comes along with a huge “Ho, ho, ho,” and stirs up the waters until the turbulence lifts you, willy-nilly, out of your contented corner and throws you once again into the bewildering maelstrom called Life.

And so it came to pass that a young lady managed to undertake a quest that would have daunted the fiercest warrior on the planet and succeeded where hundreds of other, more experienced combatants were left by the wayside – she journeyed through the harrowing hell that, for some inexplicable reason, is given the vastly understated pseudonym of an “interview” and.....emerged triumphant.



Now, by all the rules of good fiction, her story should have concluded there. The fair damsel, having bravely faced the vicissitudes of being grilled beyond bearing succeeding, should have been left in quiet solitude to rest and recoup and

recount her tale of trial-by-fire to any and all who crossed her path. But, as mentioned above, Father Fierce is not so kind, and so, in all innocence our lovely heroine made her way into the hallowed portals of learning, completely unprepared for the adventures that were to follow....

To begin with, let this teller-of-tales give you, my dearest reader, a little glimpse into our lovely lass' life. The day she marched into the jaws of death, she was a mere two decades and two years old, and the only alphabets she could, in all honesty, append to her name, were the letters M and A, which when combined, gave her the rather dubious distinction of being one of gazillions who were Masters of the language proudly known as English. And if you think these letters had been appended to her name for a sufficiently lengthy period of time – enough to make her gracefully comfortable with them....then perish the thought. The simple truth is that the M and A were extremely precariously perched for the equally simple reason that she had acquired them a mere two days before starting on her latest adventure!



Number Zero



As for the much needed term “experience”, the currency most acceptable in lieu of academia, I am (un)happy to say – she had absolutely NONE.

So there you are, dearest reader – a precious inexperienced princess, marched cheerfully into the death defying arena known as the Senior Secondary wing

of an all-boys school.....and proceeded to stand her new world on its head!!



On her very first day, as she trotted into class....she promptly experienced what is popularly known as the 'Daniel-in-the Lion's-Den' syndrome. Imagine yourself happily walking along a peaceful, scenic road, lost in your own thoughts, when suddenly, you find yourself accosted by not one, not two, but FIFTY giants – each one taller than the next and each one equally determined to test your mettle and see whether you are a fit enough leader for the troupe! Now, in the first place, to the best of your knowledge, you have never applied for the said role of leadership, and secondly, even if you had inadvertently done so, no one told you that the designation involved bringing not one, not two, but FIFTY giants to heel! So there you are – our royal scion found herself nose-to nose with no less than fifty hirsute young heifers pawing the ground and ready to do battle!

If, for a moment, you were to assume a godly demeanour and ascend in lofty majesty to the skies, to gaze down on the lesser mortals below, the scene that you would encounter would closely resemble a rather painfully comic scene with a very tiny, puny, pygmy-like Daniel on one side of the battlefield, whilst on the other side, confronting our pint-sized hero(ine), would be half a century of fierce, bison-sized lions roaring out a challenge with undiminished ferocity.





And what did our intrepid heroine do? Did she turn tail and flee the scene? Did she break out into hysterical weeping and dramatically cry “Nooooo!!”? Did she crumple to the ground in a maidenly, genteel swoon? Did she.....

None of the above.

There is a wonderfully trite saying that I am now going to use with unabashed glee – it goes like this – “Ignorance is bliss.” And this was absolutely true of our young damsel.

First: No one had told her that her situation was an impossible one.

Second: Being an avid reader of fairy tales and fiction, she had grown up with the entirely misplaced belief that an honest heart always emerges victorious.



Third: She was fully conversant with the said story of Daniel and the Lions and, to the best of her knowledge, Daniel had emerged uneaten and triumphant.



Ergo....she walked in as calmly as you please, settled herself, her saree and her books (in that order) and proceeded to conduct her class with all the calmness and élan of the truly hugely ignorant.

And what do you, dear reader, think transpired? Permit me to introduce you to yet another trite saying – “Fortune favours the brave”....er...um....kindly substitute ‘brave’ with ‘ignorant’/’foolhardy’/’blind’/’plain stupid’....!

Be that as it may – so unnerved were the fifty ruffians by the calm (foolhardy) serenity of the diminutive damsel standing before them, that they subsided into incoherent, muttering confusion and by the time they rallied, it was far too late. For, by that time, she had managed to stir the chivalric sentiments (God bless the unwritten law wherein a single, unmarried maid in an all-boys school, WILL win the hearts of all and sundry, be she as unattractive as a moth-eaten carpet) in the breasts of a few of the self-appointed leaders and that, ladies and gentleman, was the beginning of the end!!



Suffice to say that Danielle emerged unscathed from the lion's den!

The rest, as they say, is history.....

~~~~~

50<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary

So there we were deciding on the next step, keeping in mind that it must be awe-inspiring, impressive, majestic, stately, monumental, spectacular, stunning .....SIGH.



So we girded for battle. We set about holding trials for the cast, allocating responsibilities, organizing information, collecting material, practicing dialogues, choreographing steps, selecting the choir.....just recalling it all is exhausting enough, so you

can well imagine our state in reality, dear reader. 'Frazzled' is putting it mildly!



Adding to everyone's woes, the Principal (yours truly) decided, in her infinite wisdom, that we would "do it ourselves"!! So there were the poor staff in charge of makeup, yanking in a professor from the university and shanghaiing him into giving them

lessons on body painting the 'animals' in the cast! The music teacher was pulling out her hair trying to find kids who could hold a tune. The dance in-charge was giving her strong competition in the hysteria department as she was finding it nigh impossible to find any lads who did not have 2 left feet. The gentleman handling the props gave a whole new definition to the Indian 'jugaad' (improvising), in his efforts to create the stage accessories. Identifying a suitable costumer was yet another headache in the making, whilst the plight of those responsible for casting was definitely in a league of its own! Do remember....they had to find *female* leads in an *all-boy's* school! In short.....everyone was at sixes and sevens.

The only concession the Principal made was to get assistance in 2 fields....mask making and directing. In that as well, she was able to enlist 2 amazingly talented gentlemen who also happened to be the husbands of teachers in the school! Now it was an all-family affair!

Of course, needless to say, the larks that were happiest, were the ones who would actually be finally onstage...the boys. It was a grand adventure for them and they rose to the occasion, to the manner born. Suddenly

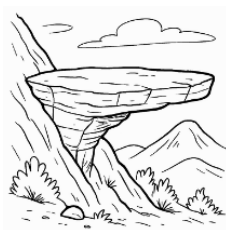


they were the stars of the school. Everyone gazed at them admiringly as they passed by, teachers greeted them affectionately and granted concessions when it came to Homework, their classmates made way for them....and they took all the adulation in their stride. With slightly altitudinous chins, tilted at just the right angle, they strolled casually along the corridors, stopping occasionally to address a lesser mortal or bestow their lordly gaze upon an adoring smallie. Talk about 7<sup>th</sup> heaven!



After a great deal of confusion, numerous shouting matches and the odd nervous breakdown, we were finally ready enough to try out our very first practice....with props. In walked the lead characters with their incredible masks in place (many thanks to the mask artist-husband), the choir burst into song, the dancers gyrated in a truly professional manner. Everything was actually progressing smoothly, thanks to the brilliant direction of the husband-director. And there we were, congratulating each other on how well we had done.

But, dear reader, if there is one lesson life teaches us, it is the evergreen adage, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch." Just as we settled comfortably into our seats, preparing to enjoy the show, the symbolic chickens not only hatched, but abruptly flew the coop as well, en masse! So at what point did this happen? Well....the lion climbed onto the projecting Rock, accompanied by his lioness, with his cub closely following in the arms of the gorilla. All 4 main characters traipsed to the very edge of the projecting precipice (as they



had been instructed to) and said gorilla turned to raise said baby above his head for all the devoted animal subjects to behold.



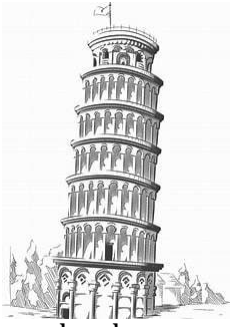
Allow me to digress for a minute here, dear reader. Do you recall what I had said about the props-in-charge being a truly remarkable 'jugaad' expert? Well, the greatest challenge in his long list of tests, was the creation of the humongous Rock ledge. Do remember, this juggernaut had to take the weight of at least 5 people, without collapsing, be portable (so we could roll it on and off the stage) and yet compact enough to fit between the wings and not take up the whole backstage. The permutations and combinations that had to be kept in mind while constructing this masterpiece were truly mind boggling! It was a genuinely genius creation.

So how did he design it? Elementary dear Watson - He created a metal skeleton, with a ladder at the back, to make it easy to access the top. The projection was a mini ramp. Wheels on the base allowed it to be rolled back and forth and then the whole shebang was covered with tarpaulin and sackcloth and painted to look like a gigantic rock! How proud we were of it!



That is - until said hero-lion walked the ramp arm in arm with said heroine-lioness and said mini-hero cub and gorilla. Have I mentioned that they were accompanied by one or 2 other extraneous creatures?

So back to the “*The lion climbed onto the ledge of rock, accompanied by his lioness, with his cub closely following in the arms of the gorilla. All 4 main characters traipsed to the very edge of the projecting precipice (as they had been instructed to) and said gorilla turned to raise said baby above his head for all the devoted animal subjects to behold*



..” And that’s when all hell broke loose. Suddenly the entire Rock started to emulate the Leaning Tower of Pisa and did a slow tilt forward, as Father Gravity took over, thanks to the sudden weight of the combined actors closely congregated at the very tip of the projection! We watched with horrified fascination as Rock ledge did a slow motion nose dive whilst the motionless crew suddenly galvanized into action figures and attempted to either spring to safety or counter the forward descent by desperately trying to scale the Mount Everest that had magically appeared behind them.

As they scrambled to safety, the support staff on the stage also miraculously transitioned into a super-hero rescue contingent. 2 dived for the stairs and hung on for dear life, in an attempt to counter the weight in front. 2 others levitated (I kid you not) and grabbed the newly instituted mountain climbers, urging them ever onwards and upwards (in keeping with the school anthem....*Onwards and upwards shall we strive.....*but I digress). Sundry others transformed into the St John’s cricket team, with one difference....each and every member was now a fielder, bobbing and swerving, arms extended, dangerously attempting to grab a flying figure that





had launched itself into the air from the ramp/diving board. Inevitably, all successful attempts ended in both parties sprawled in a rather ungainly fashion, on the stage, with groans and cries adding suitable sound effects to the horror movie unravelling before our eyes.

The icing on the cake was the baby lion who had somehow managed to slip off the landscape, but had grabbed onto the very edge just before plunging off, and was hanging perilously from the offending structure, even as it gradually descended in an attempt to kiss mother earth (read Stage).

All that was left to us to do, was - pray.

Well, dear reader, you will be glad to know that God **does** answer prayers! To date, I firmly believe that the combined prayers raised skywards that day, led to a miracle.....Pride Rock suddenly stopped its downward motion, stayed suspended for all of an eternity (actually, it was more like 10 seconds, but then do remember the Theory of Relativity that was in full play at that moment in time) and then ever, ever so gradually, reversed its direction and creaked its way back onto the stage.



What a sigh swept through the auditorium! More fervent prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude have never been sent heavenwards! And we all raced for the stage, gathering our little ones (and not so little ones) into our motherly arms, carefully checking each one out for any bruises or broken bones!

I always maintain that the eagles that somehow always seem suspended over St John's are the guardian angels of the school.

It is the only explanation I can find for the fact that not a single child or staff member was even bruised!

All that remains to be said is that the final show/s were a smashing success. Our boys did us proud, the audience was loud and enthusiastic and – most importantly – the Rock stayed firmly in place! I may mention in passing, that this was thanks to the addition of 6 staff members (including the Principal) who were very strictly designated to charge and stolidly seat themselves on the steps of the prop, each time the baby cub was hauled into the air!!!



# Bulletin Blockbuster!

Ever tried getting young, energetic members of the masculine gender to decorate a bulletin board? The attempt throws the combined trials of the 12 tasks of Hercules into the shade. For 'boys' consider it the most undignified task in the world; one that is well beneath their macho image of themselves as action heroes. Only 'sissies' and 'arty-crafty' types indulge in such demeaning tasks.



We tried everything – cajoling, threats, house points, pleading, raising our voices, commands..... Nothing worked. Week by week, the bulletin boards took on a more bedraggled look as the pictures and charts recycled themselves into oblivion - tattered bits of paper that gradually faded and lost every trace of colour and line.

So the brain-storming began. What possible incentive could be offered that would overcome this seemingly insurmountable mental block of our young eagles? We cast about, made inquiries, searched the internet, prayed, talked to experts and then prayed a little more. To no avail. Our macho brigade grimly stuck to their stand.



Then a seemingly inconsequential incident occurred. We were all huddled in the coordinator's office, earnestly brainstorming, when in marched a class

captain, basketball firmly under one arm and a plea in his eye. “Ma’am,” our protagonist pleaded, “our teacher is absent - may we PLEASE be permitted a games period?”

Inspiration struck. With one accord we turned to each other and repeated the magic words, “Games period!!”

And so was born the ‘incentive’. For the class that wins the Bulletin board competition, a “Free Period” Coupon is awarded. It can be ‘encashed’ whenever they want – a dream come true. Freedom at their command. A piece of paper produced and the promise on it honoured. Collect 9 and you can even get a whole day off!

Finally we had found the prize worth fighting for!



The frenetic activity that now precedes the ‘day of judgment’ is worth watching. Creativity at its best! Boys earnestly drawing, colouring, cutting, pasting and decorating. It’s a sight for sore eyes! Not macho? Don’t be stupid. There’s a free period involved!

And what follows are boards resplendent with colour and vibrant with energy and creativity. Works of art beckoning the passer-by to stop and enjoy their beauty and immerse themselves in the joyous messages that each one carries – for, like everything in our school, there is a value based theme at the heart of all activities.



So pop into St John’s any time you feel like and enjoy the bulletin boards!

# A Satanic Son of a.....!

"I want a baby."

"OK. But only if it's a boy."

"You archetypal Indian male! Why do you want a boy? What's wrong with a girl? They are gentle, loyal, affectionate, kind, home loving...."



"And they get pregnant," was the rude interruption. "And then what are you going to do with the babies? Drown them? They'll be half breeds!"



"You have a point," I muttered thoughtfully.

And so we brought home our baby boy – a tiny bundle of fur. (Gotcha!)

How did we get him?

Tres simple – we headed for our neighbour's landing, where our local lady-dog had just whelped. After surveying the wee pups, we noticed one little one curled up pathetically, while the rest tore at their mother's teats, and taking pity on the vulnerable fellow, decided to give him a fighting chance at life by adopting him. It was only later – much later – that it dawned upon us that the reason why he was separate and (contentedly) sleeping was that he had already had his fill while the others had waited for him!!

In keeping with the correct order of events, we then proceeded to take our darling delight to the paediatrician (read Veterinarian) for a check-up. Along the way, the sole topic of



conversation (read Argument) was the name we would be bestowing on our bundle of joy – with no successful conclusion. And so we trooped in dispiritedly to present our happily snoozing charmer to the doc, who took one look at him and exclaimed, “So, what has this shaitan (it translates as “Satan/imp/mischievous one”) been up to?” And that was it. Lightning struck. We looked at each other, nodded and said, “Shaitan it is.”

Thus it was that our nameless wonder came home with a name.

And, boy, did he live upto to it!!

Let me illustrate.....

One summer’s day we were strolling around our orchard and decided to move outward, beyond the confines of our boundary wall. Lolloping alongside us was our young man, delightedly sniffing every bush along the way and exploring each stone as if things had taken a dramatic turn between then and the 5 mins ago when he had last checked them out. Strolling along thus, we arrived at the flat area near by, where the horses, sheep and cows graze peacefully, in idyllic splendour.

True to the natural instincts of one bred to nature, our young man decided to ‘decorate’ the beautiful landscape with a personal contribution of his own. So, in a manner befitting his species, he took up the ludicrous position that accompanies every such offering, while his long, pointed face adopted a look at once comical and blissful, with his eyes practically crossing and his tongue hanging out.



Well, no sooner had Mr Mischief got into a state of readiness, than we noticed a rather strange occurrence – three cows that happened to be grazing nearby suddenly started taking a rather unhealthy interest in the whole proceedings. They stopped grazing abruptly and closely scrutinized the ongoings of our hairy offspring...and no sooner had he adopted the pose described above, than they made a beeline for him, with an ever increasing velocity! Their combined intention was crystal clear....gore the son-of-a-gun while the opportunity offered itself so opportunely!



You can well imagine our state of combined alarm and complete perplexity at this unexpected turn of events – until we had a look at our ‘victim’s’ face. If ever there was a look that said,” Come on guys...don’t you have a sense of humour? So what if I nipped at your ankles each time I passed by? A dog’s got to do what a dog’s got to do. Nothing personal in it. Seriously? You’re going to gore a man when he’s down..er.um...otherwise engaged? Hey there..how about some fair play? Really? No sense of humour...at all? Sooo incensed? Hey! Aren’t cows supposed to be peace loving creatures? No? You sure about this?” and with a supreme effort, our villainous child hopped up in the nick of time and fled the unwanted advances of the fast approaching bovines!!

Another occasion.....

Now, one of the sources of entertainment for our furry lad, was a sock ball (quite literally a ball made out of socks stuffed into another sock!) that he would chase and recover. Often, the said missile would roll down the mountain, which meant that the intrepid adventurer would have to



wind his way down the mountainside to ‘fetch’ it. This was obviously not a great hit with him, but if he wanted to continue playing, he knew he had to do the needful. The wistful look in his eyes told me he was dreaming of a ball that recovered itself.

Well, it was precisely during one of these times when he was daydreaming a ‘what if...’, that a tiny puppy happened to pass by. In an instant the dreamy look was gone, to be replaced by a delighted



expression....a distraction had hove into his horizon. Before we could say “Jack Robinson”, our playful ‘pup’ had descended upon the hapless ball of fur and proceeded to jump around him, trying to entice him to play. The only problem was that the baby was way too overwhelmed by this three foot tall monster who evidently had no idea that his prepossessing size was in no way reassuring the little one and, to the contrary, was only serving to add to the mounting hysteria welling up in the tiny tot! Finally, it became too much for the smallie and he made a dive for freedom.



Unfortunately, in his hysterical state, he did not realize that he was heading for the mountain rim and before anyone could do anything to deter his distraught dash, our young one had launched himself headlong over the edge! Naturally, confusion reigned supreme for a few moments as we simultaneously attempted to calm our own over-excited canine while peering down the mountain side to see how the parachutist-without-a-parachute had fared! So you can well imagine our relief when we discovered that the puppy had only descended about 20 feet, was perfectly safe and was already crawling upwards to safety.

We watched the ascent of the minor with bated breath, anxiously following every footstep of his as he plodded his way up the steep incline. As he neared the top, our collective breaths were released in an explosive sigh of relief, and it was with complete delight that we saw his tiny paw stretch towards the rim as he began to haul himself up the last few inches. And that's when it happened.....inexplicably, even as junior pulled himself over the rim, he suddenly took flight and as we watched spell bound, he executed a flawless arc that would have earned any gymnast at even the toughest of competitions an immediate perfect score, and landed right back where he had started! We couldn't believe our eyes! Why on earth had Tiny decided to show his levitational abilities at just that moment?

Our eyes inevitably turned to the spot from where the dot had taken flight, seeking an explanation, and sure enough...we found it. For there, sitting on the very edge, his eyes glued in concentration on the heroically struggling figure, was our very own



cherished fluff ball. And what drew our combined stares, was the manner in which our hero was seated....his weight squarely on his haunches which were braced to support his entire body mass so as to allow his front paw freedom of movement. And the stance he had adopted would have put the finest Table Tennis player of the century to shame.....the hand/paw extended at an angle, the wrist limp yet ready to flick in any direction, and a tautness that spoke of a super-high state of readiness to spring into action at just the right moment..

The only problem here, was that our skilled player's readiness was reserved exclusively for the object of his affections. his dream-cum-true....his self-recovering ball!! I have never seen such an advanced state of concentration in even the keenest of my students! And no sooner would the poor mite make it to the top than our pro, with a mean, devilish look in his eye, would expertly flick him over the side again!!

I will not bore you with the details of how we dissuaded our young visionary to give up his dream. Suffice to say...it was a traumatic experience on all three sides!

# Bang it Goes!

Being designated the chaperone of 50 young men ranging from ages 16 to 18, who have been let loose upon an unsuspecting world after years of monastic living, is the stuff nightmares are made of. The dire dream takes on an added dimension of impending disaster, when the said mentor is a member of the opposite gender and is barely 5 years older than her wards!



If you haven't got my drift as yet, let me elaborate. To put it as succinctly as possible – I was asked by my school to be the teacher-in-charge of a contingent of 50 Class 12 students of an all-boys school, for an inter-school competition. And yes, I do happen to be a lady and I was only 5 years older than them! (What insanity prompted Bro. Paulo [name changed in the interest of the said gentleman's privacy] to appoint a 'girl' who did not have an iota of teaching experience, as a teacher in the Senior Secondary Wing is a mystery I have still to unravel. Good old Daniel's experience in the lion's den was no patch on my first day in school – but that's a story for another day.)



In the 'good old days' when I taught in Delhi, there happened to be an annual inter-school competition that was *the* most hotly contested of all the events in the city's calendar. The contest had a singularly interesting nom-de-plume. It went under the banner of "The Bang Club". Under its aegis, numerous

competitions were held – dramas, debates, singing, music, just-a-minute.....et al – and the institution that accumulated the maximum number of points was declared the winner – obviously!

Well, as I mentioned at the start, Bro Paulo decided, in his inexplicable wisdom, to name me as the leader of the rowdy 50. Now you don't have to be an Einstein to figure out that I was a singularly unsuitable choice. But I'm quite sure you also



are familiar with the ancient adage, "Fools step in where angels fear to tread". I will leave it to your discretion to decide which category I fell into.

Suffice to say – I was completely delighted by the assignment and decided to do the event justice by donning my most impressive attire – an Indian lady's sartorial ultimate – a sari!

Now the one advantage to having young men under one's charge, is that one does not have to fret about minor details like collecting them at one point, shepherding them about and generally worrying about their welfare. If anything – the case is quite the opposite! Your gallant young men are overly concerned about their teacher's safety and proceed to set such a ring of security around one that to break through it, would test the skills of even the most hardened and experienced Ninja.

It was precisely this code of conduct that resulted in my being assigned an "escort" whose sole responsibility was to get me to the venue in one whole piece. The duty of this young soldier designate was to meet me at the gate of the auditorium and whisk



me past security, to the place allotted to our school. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it?

Ah! That's where you are one hundred and ten percent wrong! What you have not taken into consideration is two very minor but vital factors.

One – my mature(?) age.



Two – the nature of my 'escort'. (Let it be said right at the outset, that Rajeev [his real name shall remain anonymous] is one of the finest young men I know. A more thorough gentleman I have yet to come across. That he has a sad propensity to turn a brilliant shade of red, that would make a rose pale in comparison, when

he is embarrassed, is most certainly not his fault. The good Lord made him that way and who is to question the wisdom of the Almighty?)

The telling of the tale will reveal the potential for disaster that lay lurking under these two seemingly innocuous details.

Suffice to say that all went according to plan. Excitement was running high as our school was leading the field by a mile and our winning was a 'given'. All that remained was for yours truly to put in an appearance.

And that's where everything began to go wrong!

Totally oblivious to what embarrassment lay ahead, I turned up at the gate (clad in my nine yards of armour) of the auditorium which my 'children' had instructed me to report to, and there – as expected - was my delightful, debonair young hero waiting to accompany me past the tight ring of security. Again – as expected – I was wished politely by my young man and together, we innocently proceeded into the jaws of complete and utter chaos!



Now, I do hope you have kept the two minor 'details' that I have mentioned earlier, in the forefront of your recollection. For this is where the insignificant became an insurmountable obstacle.

Barely had we proceeded 10 yards, when a yell that would have woken up even the deadest of the dead, brought us to a sudden, grinding halt. With bewilderment we turned to see who/what was hailing us so raucously. Even as we did so, to my total astonishment, I suddenly found my young hero being roughly taken aside and addressed in what (they thought) was obviously supposed to be a whisper. The simple reality is that



the so-called soft susurrations would have put the stentorian command of a general leading his troops into battle, to shame. Suffice to say – I could hear every word of the 'soft spoken' conversation! And it went something like this:

"Just what do you think you're doing?"

"What are you talking about?" – came the confused rejoinder from my companion.

"Do you take me for a fool?!"

“What are you talking about?” – came the second confused rejoinder from my companion.



“Do you think I was born yesterday?!”

“What are you talking about?” – came the third confused rejoinder from my by now thoroughly perplexed partner.

“Who do you think you are taking inside?” came the irate reply.

“Oh!” said my companion, as light dawned. “My teacher”, said he, in all innocence.

“I am giving you one last chance – just who do you think you are trying to take inside?”

By now, Rajeev was a carbon copy of the proverbial sailor who, when completely and hopelessly lost, is termed as “all at sea”. That he was clueless/rudderless/lost/“all at sea” was painfully obvious to even the most disinterested bystander. That he was gradually turning a most striking shade of red, was also patently clear to even the most obtuse of human beings. Confusion and embarrassment does that to Rajeev. That it is no fault of his, I have already given testimony to earlier. Who can question the mysterious ways of our Creator?



So Rajeev resorted to one last desperate appeal, that he couched in (what he thought – give the poor man some rope!) the most original of terms, “WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!” (Perhaps poor Rajeev thought decibel level equals originality of speech – who knows- like I said – give the poor man some rope!!)

“Trying to smuggle your girlfriend through, are you?”

Knock me down with a feather! Is THAT what they thought?

“Dress her up in a sari and pass her off as your teacher! Take us for fools, do you?!”



Have I mentioned (poor) Rajeev’s propensity to do a God-given imitation of a rosy rose when he is in an awkward situation? I have? Ok then – he was in, officially, the all-time most virulently awkward situation of his LIFE!! And the flower mentioned would have given every one of its legendary thorns – and petals – and perfume – and countless poems dedicated to it, for even the merest tinge of the shade that Rajeev was now flaunting.

Yet again my dearest hero fell back on his strongest weapon – albeit a trifle shortened and blunted and the worse for the rude, untimely wear it was unnecessarily being put through - “WHAT?????!!!”

This original turn of phrase was followed by the anguished cry of a soul tortured beyond belief – “You think she’s my GIRLFRIEND????!!!”

A confused, bewildered – at a loss for words – Rajeev is a sight that would melt even a mass murderer’s heart. I am no such hardened criminal. Neither were the forty-nine remaining Columbans on whose delicate ears had fallen the sorrowful cry of their mortally wounded comrade.

With one accord, forty and nine robust young men and one petite, (sari clad) damsel jumped headlong into the (no longer) whispered fray.

And all hell broke loose.

Do you recall Mark Antony declaring, “Let loose the hounds of war”? Well, it was not the hounds but great big, battle-hardened, ravening wolves (and one petite, sari clad, damsel – no I will NOT be compared to a horrible wolf!) that were unleashed.



“Are you calling our teacher HIS girlfriend??!”

Wait a minute – was I hearing this right? Shouldn’t it have read as “Are you calling our teacher his GIRLFRIEND?”????

But time and tide waits for no man – or (confused) woman – and before I could take up the matter of the indeterminate stresses in the phraseology, I found myself protectively surrounded by all fifty of my gallant warriors who somehow managed to keep me within their protective ring without once coming even within brushing distance of me, whilst simultaneously bearing down upon the hapless youngster who had dared to voice such a completely unacceptable perspective of the situation.



“You called her his GIRLFRIEND?”

Ah! Now the stresses were where they belonged. But I digress.....

“You blithering idiot (suffice to say that I do not believe in sullyng my readers’ ears with the actual vocabulary that was being utilized – even the much experienced Ancient Mariner would have turned the same shade as Rajeev was still proudly(?) displaying), can’t you SEE she’s our TEACHER?”

Now when one has fifty burly hoodlums (and one petite, sari clad, damsel carefully balanced in the midst of the eye of the storm) advancing threateningly upon one, even the bravest man is bound to quail. Let it be mentioned for the record – the ‘man’ in question was not ‘brave’ even by the wildest stretch of the imagination. Within a matter of seconds, the miraculous transformation from man to mouse, took place before our disbelieving eyes. Gone was the bully of a few moments ago. In his place, was a cringing, snivelling semblance of the human species, whispering (and this time it was an actual whisper – we had to strain with all our might to distinguish his words), “But.... I thought....”



“You THOUGHT?” came back the outraged cry from half a century (and one sari clad damsel) of irate vocal chords.

There followed the longest half-a-minute of painful, dead silence.

And then the hiatus was broken by the most ridiculous question of the evening, “Do I LOOK like his girlfriend? Do I LOOK.....?!”

No prizes for guessing who the speaker was.

No prizes for guessing what happened next.

You guessed? Absolutely right. The tension was suddenly totally dissipated by the roar of laughter that broke the shocked silence that had followed my incoherent query.

With one voice fifty – and one (don’t forget the man/mouse still cringing in the corner) – voices responded with the words, “Yes, you DO!!!”



Oh dear. Sometimes honesty is a distressing, undesirable virtue. Did they HAVE to choose that moment to display their Columban upbringing?

Let the record show that it was now not Rajeev but I who was awash in a blaze of colour.

Mustering whatever shreds of dignity I had remaining to me, I summoned up the one weapon in my otherwise toothless armoury, that not one of my boys could stand before.

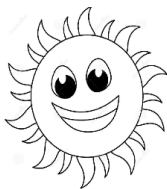
I looked lost.

Immediately, fifty young gentlemen rushed to the rescue. “We were only teasing, Ma’am. Of COURSE you look like our teacher. No, you DON’T look remotely like his girlfriend. PLEASE don’t look so upset. Honest .....”

It was all too much. First poor Rajeev’s distressed demeanour. Then 50 pairs of puppy-dog eyes....What does a damsel do?

She melts, of course!

Out came the sunshine. The smile peeped through. And fifty delighted faces broke into broad grins, immediately followed by the rude and familiar sounds of young men who are very comfortable with their (not so) senior counterpart,” Weeeeee – actually we did mean it, but.....!!!”



“Come on – it’s almost time for the results to be declared. Hurry up!”

And off we trotted companionably, all differences forgotten, leaving in our wake one very, very relieved young bully-never-to-be-again.

We won.

# Double Trouble!



She was born straight out of an Indian matrimonial advertisement. Petite, with white, flawless skin, paired with sparkling eyes and wild, curly hair, both dark as night. In perfect contrast to her ethereal complexion. Pert and cute with a smile to melt the sternest heart....the stuff dreams are made of.

Until one looked deeper into her eyes.

And did they spell trouble - with a **big T!**

Fierce and independent, they warned of a will that did not and would not ever pay adoring obeisance before the altar of a lord and master (read Husband). She had a mind of her own and no mother's son was going to tame her.

And that's how it has been. She has lived life on her own terms from the word go.

She was all of 1 year old when I married her Mamu (maternal uncle) and consequently acquired the mantle of 'Mami' to her. It was at our wedding itself that I witnessed with awe her conducting the choir from her father's arms. She was in her own world, supremely confident that the universe was her oyster and saw no incongruity in a tiny tot dictating the music to a bunch of adults. She waved her arms with perfect synchronicity, a beatific smile on her face, only to have it change to a fierce frown when she felt a note was out of place. All the while, the



merry twinkle in her eyes, spoke of mischief personified. It was love at first sight for me.

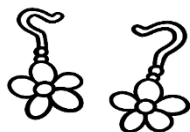


Have I mentioned her fierce attachments and loyalty? Family was a given. And then there were the familial canines! I recall her one fine morning, deep in thought as she travelled in our (in)famous Jonga, her arm around the neck of our dog (appropriately named Shaitan, which means “the devil”!). After more than an hour of fierce concentration, she announced, with the air of a prophet who had arrived at an epiphany, “So Mami’s niece would be my cousin by *marriage*, but Shaitan is my brother by *blood*”!!!

Needless to say, my husband and I gravely nodded with one accord.

They say it is imperative to understand the protagonist in order to enjoy the tale. So, having set the stage for our saga, let me proceed without delay.

As we all know, every Indian female child goes through a rite of passage.....the piercing of her ears. It is a time honoured tradition and usually proceeds seamlessly when one is just short of one’s 7<sup>th</sup> year. And so, we thought would be the case with our young heroine.



On the day of reckoning, off she set with her Masi (mother’s sister) to the jeweler’s, to have said auditory organs duly punctured. She hopped, skipped and jumped all the way, as was her wont, and merrily toodled into the hapless man’s store. Hapless you say? Patience dear reader. All will soon be revealed.

As they sauntered in, the jeweler readily came forward and expressed delight when informed about the task at hand.

Promising to complete it in a jiffy, he grabbed the gold wire, picked up our bairn, sat her on the counter, reached for her ear and jabbed the wire through.

And that's when all hell broke loose.

No one had informed our rug rat that the piercing of ears involves a modicum of discomfort. In her tiny brain, the said task was all accomplished with great elan and the wave of a magic wand. So you can well imagine her unmitigated horror when she realized that the magic was missing altogether....and there was more suffering to come! As you can well envision by now, said sprog was not one to take things lying down! (Actually, when I think of it, she did take it lying down, but in quite inverse measure to what the famous phrase usually implies.)



Before her poor Masi could say “Willie Wonka”, our young babe had hopped off the counter and flung herself down on the floor. Once in a suitably supine position, she proceeded to let loose the hounds of war. Even Mark Antony could not have conceived of what followed.

First came the blood curdling wail. (5 shops away, a customer lost his hearing.) Then came the thrashing of arms and feet. So fierce was the flailing that one tiny shoe was flung loose and went zooming across the room, narrowly missing the offending shopkeeper (and that was only because the braveheart was, at the time, cowering behind the counter in full ‘fraidy-cat mode’). The climax was the deep puce shade that the convulsing tot acquired. Such was her rage, that even Mars, the God of War, swiftly hopped off his throne and sought shelter behind the imposing structure, peeping out in

consternation at the carnage below that he was quite sure he had not ordered.

Between wails, the said Masi seized her opportunity and scornfully said, "Oh come on Mia (the name has been changed in the interest of anonymity. The lass is now a married woman), get up and get the job finished!"

Now one would think that such scathing words as these would dry up the flow and lead to a meek conclusion.

Au contraire, dear reader. Be not fooled. Our babe is made of sterner stuff. Without missing a beat, she let loose her second missile (read shoe) which this time around found a hapless



pedestrian who happened to be peeking in to witness for himself the 3<sup>rd</sup> World War raging within the confines of a 10 x 6 foot space! The last we saw of the said on-looker, was a pair of shoes rising upward, attached to a hurling body flung backwards, thanks to the force of the said projectile.

Swiftly changing tactics, Masi tried coaxing, moved to cajoling and finally resorted to full-fledged pleading, "PLEASE Mia. Let him pierce the other ear!"

But a mule is nothing compared to my niece's militant mutiny. Turning her face towards her hapless aunt, she let loose the final volley from her fully stocked arsenal.....a tear trickled down a woe begone countenance, followed by a hiccup.

Enough said. The battle was won. Without more ado, the routed aunt picked up her charge and began marching her back home.

With *one* ear pierced.

I will not sully your ears, dear reader, with the threats that ensued all the way back. Suffice to say that 'closely resembling a thundercloud' was putting it mildly when it came to the long suffering relative who had quite clearly reached the end of her long suffering tether.



On reaching their joint abode, the door was flung open, the offending minor rudely propelled into the room, closely followed by her fulminating relative. Into the thunderstruck silence came the climactic declaration, "I shall NEVER take this &@#\$\$%\* child out ever again, so help me God"!!!

As for Mia....righting herself with agile dexterity, she flung herself pathetically into her father's ever welcoming arms and declared in tones that paralleled her aunt's in direness, "She hurt me!"

And that's when yours truly ambled into the room. Taking in the awful silence and the dueling duo, my eye fell upon the earringless ear, and without missing a beat interestedly inquired.."Where's the other earring?"!!!

Hell hath no fury than a thwarted aunt. The silence gave way to a litany of complaints and out poured the heartbreaking story. Or that's what she thought. Unfortunately for the self-



proclaimed victim, the family she belongs to is not known for its sympathetic strain. Bring up or be one of 5 children and you quickly become inured to the most heart wrenching of tales. So instead of a balming, soothing clucking, said aunt found herself at the receiving end of a hail of laughter followed by a

series of interrogatives demanding details of the entertaining escapade!

Now when it comes to the youngsters in our family, for some unfathomable reason, my husband and I are the final court of appeal. Once all the intricacies of the episode had been fully gleaned, hashed over and enjoyed to the fullest, the head of the family (my dearly loved and respected father-in-law) turned to me and instructed, "Beta (daughter), get it done".

You can imagine my consternation!



But all's well that ends well. In complete counterpoint to the hell that had been let loose, our little one came along with me like a lamb, hopped up onto the counter herself and presented her unpierced ear to the terrified shopkeeper with perfect equanimity. It took quite a bit of assuring, but he was finally convinced to complete his task and reaching very, very tentatively

for the young lady's shell shaped organ, he gingerly proceeded to spike it, following which he stepped smartly backwards and adroitly placed the counter between himself and the mighty mouse. To his confusion, the terror of an hour before, thanked him prettily, about turned and trotted back home with me peacefully, where she proceeded to proudly present her ear to one and all!

I shall leave you, dear reader with a picture of the offended aunt looking suitably aghast at the compliments being showered on the chirpy heroine. She then looked at me and asked, "How did you do it?!"



But I think you will agree with me that one should never give away one's secrets. So I sauntered out of the room in silence and to this day no one is privy to the threat of a sound thrashing that was issued before we departed for our destination.

The fact that our little one is never quite sure what I am capable of, has its own advantages!!

# What Time is It?!

Have you ever tried to cross over from the office to the senior wing during the break? I'm talking about the assembly area. At that hour it is quite literally swarming with the Class Ones whose 'safe area' it is. They run wild without a care in the world, under the watchful eyes of the staff on duty and the equally scouring vigil of the eagles overhead!



But, if by mistake, one should try to make one's way across this space instead of taking the less-trafficked corridor route, one quickly comes to experience what a magnet undergoes when it is set in the midst of a bunch of iron filings! As if by magic, one finds oneself surrounded by a sea of little faces, wishing



one a cheerful good-morning and following up the greeting with a bow whose distinguished grace would put an Elizabethan courtier to shame, or else bending over in the age old gesture of respect that has characterized a student's respect for his teacher in our ancient country – the 'pranam' from a 'shishya' to his 'guru'.

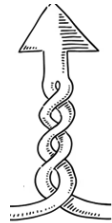
Many a person who has witnessed this, has expressed a measure of surprise. The reactions all coalesce to one common pre-conception - 'I thought St John's was a westernized school'.



In an age when globalization is fast bludgeoning traditions and so called 'archaic cultures' into summary extinction, I find it so refreshing to see such a truly gracious expression of love and respect flourishing in our

school. The fact that our boys have no qualms about displaying their affection through this old-world gesture, no matter where they come across one of their 'gurus', speaks of a timelessness and a continuity that are the hallmarks of a great institution – one that has not lost its roots but has managed to strike a graceful balance between the old ways and the new.

We need to teach our children to respect the culture of their own land. To blindly follow the west is to superimpose an alien construct upon a grand old edifice. To take the best of both worlds, however, is an axiomatic wisdom in itself and one that we would be wise to adhere to. For here, in St John's, we have seen the efficacy of adopting the new, only after examining its relevance, and of retaining the sanctity of the old, to ensure an unshakeable foundation built on the concrete of attitudinal modern thought and the mortar of ancient humility. Our children are living proof of how well this strategy has worked!



# The Day I Covered Myself with Glory...

My childhood is to be envied. How many children can boast of the dubious distinction of being taught the parody of every classic western song known to man by their ever-loving uncle, without a clue that there was actually an original piece with the same tune? And which one of these same young ones has accomplished this magnificent feat before the grand old pre-adolescent age of FIVE?



I don't see any raised hands. My condolences. Your childhood must have been desperately mundane.

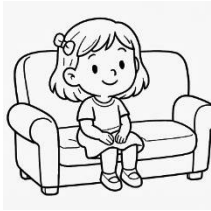


I still recall my mother's usually serene countenance dissolving into unmitigated horror when she entered the house one evening, after a hard day's work, and was greeted by the charming sight of her three cherubs ranged around the dining table, lustily singing, "In China They Do it with Chi\*\*\*\*s", while our Uncle conducted us, his tuneful choir!! The horror turned to terror when she spied the tape recorder placed precisely in the centre, recording this priceless moment in time.

How my Uncle is still alive today, is the stuff that miracles are made of.

Well...armed with this unique skill set, I sallied forth into the world of adults. (Have I mentioned that in our home, we were

brought up with the firm belief that ‘Children should be seen not heard.’ Not until they are capable of holding an intelligent conversation.) But I digress....



My debut into the exciting microcosm of Drawing Rooms came when some rather formal guests were visiting. I walked demurely in and settled myself on a chair. Back ramrod straight, legs crossed at the ankle, hands folded in my lap, eyes downcast...the archetypal princess of a royal household.

The conversations flowed around me and I delightedly eavesdropped. A sentence here. A dialogue there. Each one carefully analysed and stored away for future examination.

Suddenly my train of thought was broken by the guests requesting my mother to play the piano while they accompanied her in song. Ever obliging, she graciously moved to the said instrument and played the bars of a melody. I perked up. This song I knew! The guests too were delighted. It seems they shared my familiarity with the music and shortly therefore we launched into our renditions.



Barely a few bars into the music, I was struck by a realisation – they had the wrong lyrics! I abruptly ceased warbling and listened in growing displeasure to what I now deemed a desecration of a truly beautiful number. My ire grew with each verse sung, until I could bear it no more. Flinging forth my arms in a truly queenly gesture, I flapped them wildly (still retaining my queenlines) and begged everyone to cease and desist.



The music came to a crashing halt and I closed my eyes and bowed my head reverentially, to express my deep satisfaction at the ensuing, merciful silence. Seconds passed and then a male voice broke the blessed silence with the query, "What's wrong, little one?"



"What's wrong?!" I exclaimed agitatedly. "You ask what's wrong?! Did you hear yourselves? How could you desecrate something so beautiful?" My voice broke on the last question and I sank into my chair wearily. I was broken hearted. These utter philistines had ruined a

work of art. Poetry at its best.

You can imagine my consternation then, when yet again I was posed the same question. Oh horror! Did they really not know what they had done? I decided to enlighten them.

In a voice laced with pity and sadness, I informed them that the words they were singing were completely distorted. Did they not know that the song was NOT

"On top of old Smokey,

All covered with snow,

I lost my true lover

For courting too slow".

"Is that so? I could have sworn these were the words. I must have heard the song a hundred times. What words do you have?"

I drew a deep breath, counselled myself to patience and tunelessly warbled:

*"On top of spaghetti*

*All covered with cheese*

*I lost my poor meatball  
Cos somebody sneezed."*

As I took in my next breath to continue, I was nearly knocked off my feet by the roar of laughter that ensued. They pounded me on the back, shook my hand and complimented me on my incredible sense of humour. They told me they'd never been treated to such nonsensical verse and doubled over with mirth.



I watched them with bewilderment and swung my eyes towards my mother, only to catch her looking daggers at my uncle.

And that's when the proverbial penny dropped.

He had taught us the *PARODY*!!!



As I said earlier - How my Uncle is still alive today is what miracles are all about.

All I can say is that I covered myself with glory while my mother is being considered for sainthood.

# Cupboard Love!

Being the youngest and the only unmarried teacher of the feminine gender in an all boys' Senior Secondary School, automatically bestows upon one the title of 'femme fatale'. It matters not whether one looks like the local buzzard that drapes itself sleepily over the nearby moth eaten tree, or whether one closely resembles a divine angel descended from the heavens above. By sheer virtue of being a young lady, one becomes the designated Queen of the Walk.



And so it was with me, when I entered the hallowed portals of St Columba's School. From being a supremely ordinary mortal, I inexplicably found myself the cynosure of all eyes. Correction – all eyes 18 years of age and below, that happened to belong to the masculine species of humanity. In a matter of hours I found that I had no dearth of offers when it came to carrying my bag, I was greeted with regularity (and re-regularity) and the careful courteousness that surrounded me, left me in no doubt that I was a national treasure that the boys were not about to lose!

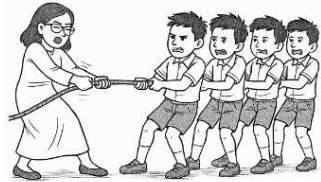
I had walked into paradise unannounced!

The downside of all this adulation, however, is that the boys do not necessarily take one seriously. It's all very well to be the stuff dreams are made of, but discipline in class is quite another matter. Instead of focusing on the sonorous sounds of



Shakespeare or the equally portentous 'Lord of the Flies', their only aim in life is to attract the attention of their new-found diva. Whether the attention is negative or positive is not the question. Attention is attention. Period.

And so it transpired. On the one hand there was yours truly doing her utmost to turn the young philistines before her into aficionados of the English language, and on the other hand, there were 45 young gentlemen(?) equally determined to give into every one of her charms but this! And so the tug-of-war went, with each day resulting in battle honours equally drawn.



Gradually, however, persistence prevailed and a slow but steady semblance of discipline began to descend upon the classroom. 45 pairs of eyes would gaze with deep devotion upon the object of their affections and do their level best to let a few fragments of knowledge and education pierce the psychedelic colours of their youthful imaginations that were running wild. With a supreme sense of triumph, I gazed upon the vanquished foe and thought about how I had proved myself right to my Principal. That my tall (and ridiculous) claims of "I'll manage them" were actually beginning to take on some vague manifestation of truth!



Until the peaceful bliss of the moment was torn asunder by the sounds of a squabble that had broken out. Two of the 'heroes' of my class were facing each other, ready to do battle. Apparently there was a

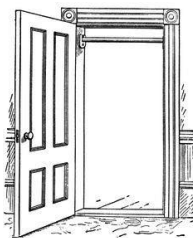
bitter rivalry on between the two, over the attentions of a young lady they both fancied and it had surfaced at the most unlikely of moments – and places.



Like any teacher worth her salt, I was certainly not going to accept this direct challenge to my already tenuous authority. So, I drew myself up to my regal height of five feet two and a half inches (the two and a half are very important) and pointed an imperious finger at the door. “OUT!” Have you ever noticed how monosyllables craft themselves into authority personified? The two culprits quietly crept out the door.

And there they stood for the next ten minutes – sentinels of the portal, trying hard to look like they were completely unaffected by the unwelcome attention they were being subjected to. Every few minutes I would check on their presence and find them firmly installed – one on either side of the classroom door.

Until, suddenly, I couldn’t! Imagine my surprise when I glanced in their direction, only to find that they had somehow achieved the impossible and managed to dematerialize! In the blink of an eye they had succeeded in doing what generations of schoolboys have wished was possible. They had vanished without a trace.





Highly perplexed, I hastened towards the door to unravel this mystery, when, to my horror, I found myself face-to-face with the one person in the world I did not want present at that moment – the Principal! Now that's not to say that Bro Paulo (name changed to protect said gentleman's privacy) is by any means a monster. Quite the contrary. He is one of the most charming, erudite people I know and is firmly ranked among my ten favourite people in all the world. But when one is struggling to ascertain the unknown whereabouts of two missing students, the Principal is not the person that comes to mind as being the one you want on the scene of the crime!

However, I had not come into contact with 45 criminals for more than a month, without some of their survival skills rubbing off on me. Adopting a perfectly insouciant expression, I continued towards the door – and my fate - as if nothing was amiss in my world. Affecting a look of unaffected pleasure, I politely (and innocently) greeted my superior and inquired after his health, fully expecting him to withdraw once he saw how impeccably mannered my class was (did I mention that they were all doing extremely creditable imitations of statues carved from pure granite – Bro Paulo has that effect upon his students).





So you can imagine my surprise when, instead of departing, he proceeded to lean casually against the door and return my inquiry! As if that weren't bad enough, he then inquired after each member of my family, turn by excruciating turn, and even proceeded to ask about the health of my pet canine!

Did he depart after that? Not on your life! Brother continued to steadily stand there while he surveyed the class in a leisurely manner and then courteously asked me about the progress of the boys as well!

You could have knocked me down with a feather! What on earth was prompting this unsolicited solicitude?! The poor man was obviously suffering from a bout of temporary dementia!

Ten whole minutes passed in this fashion. Bro Paulo moved from one topic to another calmly and unhurriedly, while I did an internal war dance of impatience and wished the man were any place but there! But having been brought up to never contradict one's seniors (or use physical violence – not that one could in any case – six feet versus five feet two and a half inches.....!) I patiently waited for the ordeal to come to an end.



And come to an end it finally did. Brother righted himself, left the door to its own devices, and gravely wished me a 'good day'. I doubt I have ever returned a greeting with such alacrity! I couldn't wait for the man to leave! And leave he did.

But not before doing something strange.

Right behind Brother, in the little cubbyhole in which he had been standing, stood a huge, vintage cupboard. As he turned to depart, Brother reached across, and gently tapped on the door and said what distinctly sounded like the words

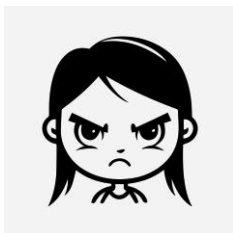


“You can come out now”. He then did his own little disappearing act – moving off with swift, ground covering strides that totally belied the slow motion happenings of the previous minutes!

And that’s when the miracle occurred.



Like the Phoenix rising from the proverbial ashes, the cupboard door slowly and infinitesimally inched open and out stepped two of the most woebegone creatures it has ever been my misfortune to see! Have I mentioned that this incident occurred in the month of May – the hottest month of the Indian summer? Who/what stepped out of that cupboard defies description. All one could see was two vaguely human forms made indistinguishable by the copious amounts of perspiration flowing off them in veritable rivulets, doubled over as they gasped for life-giving air! “Whoop, Whoop” they went, struggling for breath, whilst simultaneously mopping their dripping brows. Their faces had turned a fascinating shade of puce and as they painfully straightened up, it dawned on me that I had found my missing protagonists!



Now, under normal circumstances I am a veritable fount of compassion. But that day had tested me beyond endurance. The struggle to stay outwardly calm while dying a thousand deaths inside, and then finding that the answer to my prayers of

deliverance lay only six feet away, behind two wooden closed doors that they had disappeared behind like two jackrabbits heading down the nearest warren at the first sign of danger (read Bro Paulo), was a little too much for even my gentle nature (?!) to bear. Once again, drawing myself up to my full height of five feet two and a half inches, I caught both culprits by the nape of their necks and, displaying the strength given only to those driven to extremes of emotion, shook them as if they weighed a mere two pounds instead of the combined three hundred odd that they did in reality!

Oh my poor boys. What an ordeal they had suffered! The final ignominy was to be rattled like a rag doll by a diminutive lady not even half their size!! How much more humiliation can

a young stallion suffer? The last I saw of them for that day was two dots disappearing into the horizon!!



It happened generations ago but there are some stories that are both timeless in their telling and priceless in their recollection. This happens to be one such tale. Don't you agree?!

# It's That Time of the Year Again!

Tension, a strained silence and an unhappy hush in the air – it's examination fever! For those who have worked consistently through the year, it's time to revise and re-revise. For the 'playboys' – as the 'hinglish' speaking refer to them – it's a call to settle down and try to achieve the impossible by simultaneously slowing down time while fast forwarding their academics!



This is the sight that inevitably greets one on the first day of the Class 12 exams.

It is a tradition in our school for the Sr Sec teachers, the Co-ordinator and the Principal to be there before each exam – a gentle reminder to our boys that they are remembered and loved. A security blanket that envelopes them in its warmth and comfort and assures them that they still belong to St John's and they are not alone at this troubled hour.

And the reaction when they see us tells us we are doing something right. There is a palpable release of tension the moment they sight the vehicle we are arriving in. As we alight, the subject teacher promptly disappears into the mass of boys that surround her/him, each one with his own query! The rest stand in comfortable silence while the boys come up to greet them and then take up positions close by, subconsciously seeking



reassurance by being near the presence of those who hold them dear. The parents too, look infinitely relieved and suddenly the world seems a better place.

Then comes the dreaded moment – it's time to enter the portals of hell! But before they leave to meet their individual destinies, there is yet another tradition to be completed.



Out goes the cry, “St. John’s – to me!” and like well trained soldiers responding to the call of the trumpet, all the boys present collect immediately around their staff. What follows next is truly beautiful and profoundly moving. A hundred odd boys, standing casually on the sidewalk of a road in the Union Territory of Chandigarh, proceed to bow their heads as they say their school prayer “O God, who is Truth...” and follow it up with the familiar “Our Father”. There is not a trace of discomfort to be found, nor does even one of them seem aware of the fact that there is something marvelously strange about praying on the side of a busy road! They are also completely oblivious to the fact that they have brought traffic to a grinding halt and that they are the cynosure of all eyes! Instead, one can see a definable difference in their demeanour in a far more positive way – gone are the frenetic movements of worried, tense children. In their place stand calm, assured young men who know their God is with them and who walk with confidence into the examination hall.

On their way in, they seek the blessings of each of their teachers – a mark of respect and a silent thanks to their ‘gurus’ - yet another



tradition that never fails to bring joy to the doer and the receiver.

And so continues the story. Each time it's new and each time it's old. But the freshness and the love never fade. It's what brings them back to say 'hello'.

# The Golden Rule!

‘Twas the summer of 2013 and all was well with the world.....the school was thriving and the boys full of mischief. (If they weren’t, then something was terribly wrong!)

It happened to be the Sports season. The inter-house matches were being played with great zeal, with every point being challenged vociferously and conceded grudgingly. After all, even 1 point could be the deciding difference between the Champion House and the Runner-up.



It was in the midst of all this controlled chaos that the new Class 12 suddenly approached the Principal one day with an idea –‘Let’s hold an inter-house Kabaddi Championship’, they said. The Principal thought it over, consulted with her coordinators and finally accorded consent as she secretly quite liked the idea of including an ethnic sport into the curriculum.



Plans were made and executed with great rapidity, rules drawn up, the trophy designed and presented by the outgoing batch as their ‘gift’, and finally the great day dawned. All the Senior Secondary staff assembled on the playground to witness this historic moment.

The macho hormones were on full display as the teams swaggered into place, trading insults to the manner born, while the school PE Teacher vainly attempted to call all present, to order.



And so it went and all was well with the world, barring the fact that most of the vests were ripped off within the first few minutes thanks to the firm, bulldog grip of the opposition. But it's an all-boys' school so no one was particularly disturbed by the hairy chests on full display. The sight was accepted with perfect equanimity as befits a single gender institution.

That is, until disaster struck.

You see, it being the first kabbadi tournament ever played in the school, no one had thought every finer detail through. And ladies and gentleman, let me reiterate.....success lies in the details!

So what exactly did happen? Well...as the offender lunged to grab one of the defenders, he accidentally grasped the shorts of the opposing team member. What followed belongs to the infamous Tales of Woe. Before the poor lad could comprehend what was happening, to his absolute horror, his shorts abruptly and rapidly descended, leaving him exposed to the elements in nothing other than.... his solitary undergarment!

Now what would be your first reaction if you were to find yourself having performed an unintentional strip tease in the presence of all your teaching faculty, 90% of which happen to belong to the feminine gender? Wouldn't you immediately spin and check who had seen what, even while you were desperately hoisting the offending garment with a rapidity that left its descent a slow-motion event in comparison?!





Well, that's exactly what our young hero did. But to his utmost relief (may the good Lord forever bless the teachers for their adroit presence of mind) he found the staff in its entirety, bar NONE, minutely examining the branches of a nearby tree, whilst a few others were closely observing a hawk spiraling directly overhead!

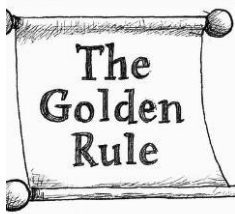
Not a face was turned in his direction and not a word spoken to indicate that anything untoward had taken place. It was a moment of suspended animation that would have been worthy of an Oscar nomination....the boy blushing furiously and gaping suspiciously, whilst the staff were the epitome of nonchalance, even going so far as to then turn to each other and comment upon the beauty of the tree/flight of the hawk with perfect seriousness, all the while carefully avoiding eye contact with the said hapless victim.

The rest of the boys? What do you expect? Of course they rose to the occasion. With perfect presence of mind they formed a phalanx around the poor harried one and smoothly moved him off the court. His replacement glided on confidently as if he'd been participating all along, the opposing team raised no objection, and the game continued as if nothing had ever happened.

The only small difference to be observed was that the defending team were slightly incapacitated as they were seen firmly holding their shorts up with one hand for the rest of the match.

What happened after I cannot claim to know with any certainty, but I have it on good authority that that poor lad

earned himself a brand-new nick name, which he answers to, even to this day!

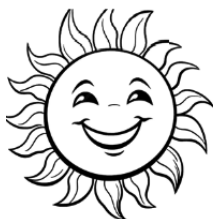


What I do, however, know with absolute certainty was that a new rule was incorporated with an alacrity that well outdid the speed of light. In capitals it read, "NO BOY WILL BE PERMITTED TO PARTICIPATE IN A KABBADI MATCH UNLESS HIS SHORTS ARE HELD UP WITH A NADA/TAPE'!!!!

# His Name Reflects the Sun

From the day he was born, it was startlingly evident that he was one-of-a-kind.

With a personality that shone (is it any wonder - his name is the name of the sun god), his turn of phrase often took one's breath away – because one was usually laughing so hard! I still recall his pointing at a passing flatbed truck and exclaiming, “Ooh.....’nanga’ (naked) truck”!!



He joined a playway at the tender age of two. Three short days later, he stepped off the bus and nonchalantly handed a piece of cotton wool to his father. It contained one of his teeth that he had knocked out when he fell off a decorative toadstool that he had determinedly climbed – only to slide off a few seconds later – headfirst!

Allow me the privilege of recounting the annual day show.



I will never know why a rabbit should be a virulent shade of pink, but who are we to question the wisdom and sagacity of a kindergarten teacher? So when the great day dawned, his parents proudly escorted their (virulently) pink rabbit/son to the hall, handed him over to his sagacious guru, and settled

comfortably into their appointed seats to witness the magic onstage.



The curtains opened to a fanfare roll of drums, to reveal a wonderland of farmyard animals. I strongly suspect the staff in charge of this event were either colour blind (did I mention the virulent pink rabbit costume?) or rainbow besotted, because what we witnessed put a psychedelic fairy tale to shame. Suffice to say, I wistfully regretted leaving my sunshades in the car.

But I digress.

The curtains slid open and the show began....the Farmyard Dance. The animals swung into action and did their best to follow the prompts of their mentor who was seated on a chair, her back to the audience. They dipped and bowed and hopped and swooped, much to the delight of their maters and paters ensconced in the auditorium.

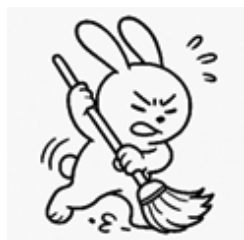
That is.....until our hero got bored.

Have I mentioned that the protagonist of this narrative is an extremely creative persona? It is also a disturbing law of nature that homo sapiens blessed with this singular trait, are incapable of performing mundane, repetitive chores. Now do keep in mind that the antics on stage had already been repeated ad infinitum, in the name of 'practice', prior to its showcasing on the said doomsday. So you, dear reader, can well imagine how fretful our imaginative imp already was



when he was unceremoniously marched onto that offending landscape.

Now what happens when a two-year-old bored terrorist is trapped in a strictly structured nightmare? Elementary, dear Watson – he strikes out, determined to make a difference!



Step one – change the step. So there was the entire class timidly responding to their leaders intimations, when suddenly one blushing (I refer to the hue of his outfit) bunny starts ‘sweeping’ the stage. These vigorous mime motions of his led to some startled critters eyeing him uncertainly because his assured actions have left them bewildered.....did this rose hued hare know better? Was their sacred mover and shaker (read ‘teacher’) in the wrong?

Be that as it may, such was the confidence that our magenta cottontail exuded, that a few fellow creatures switched abruptly from a swoop to a swish. Suddenly, to the excitement of the enthralled onlookers, there was an exhilarating dance-off happening! One set of performers were still determinedly emulating their beloved boss, whilst the remnants were, with equal and enviable persistence, quite literally following in the footsteps of their brand-new debutante director!



Now, dear reader, as if this wasn’t a disastrous enough scenario, our Braveheart chose that exact moment to hit yet another passé pause. He’d had enough of sweeping and so stopped what he was doing to look around for another

distraction. Whilst he was doing that, you can well imagine what the scenario was around him. His forlorn followers, having lost their intrepid leader, were milling around aimlessly, whilst the other faithful few, kept up with their pre-taught antics!

In the midst of all this chaos, our champion's searching gaze fell upon the biggest lad on the stage that he could find. His eyes lit up with unholy glee and, before anyone could stop him, he charged the hapless victim and, placing a hand on his chest, gave him a mighty push, followed by a bloodcurdling "ha ha" that would have been the envy of any wannabe villain.



It only took a nano second for the victim to miraculously transform from a harmless lilac pooch into a raging bull. Before you could say "Thundering fiddlesticks", a rose rabbit and an indigo hound were rolling around the stage knocking down everything and everyone that came in their way, so that the scene now closely resembled a bowling alley with the pins/peers flying in every direction!

Oh dear! What a mess! Bedlam on the stage and shrieking staff.

In strong counterpoint to this, was a hushed hall full of mesmerized guardians, not quite certain whether what they were witnessing was pre-ordained or a twist of fate.

Their perplexity was brought to a swift end when a Goliath appeared out of nowhere, grabbed the meddlesome mite and quite literally physically hauled him off the stage!

As for his parents? The curtain closes on 2 adults convulsed with laughter, helplessly leaning on each other and completely delighted that their shining star (did I mention that his name reflects the sun?) had saved the day by introducing a modicum of excitement into an otherwise stultifying performance!!!



# Guns 'n Roses



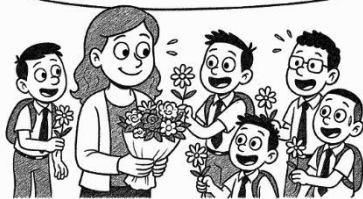
In the course of the numerous monologues that I have documented over the past, the consistent theme that has run through most, has been the acknowledged delight that a young lady experiences (though she will swear with her dying breath that such is not the case at all) when she is the object of the ardent attention of every schoolboy in the Senior Secondary wing by the simple virtue of being the youngest and the only unmarried member of the staff who also – fortuitously – belongs to the opposite gender. The drawback that accompanies this effortless accomplishment, however, often far outweighs the benefits and frequently leads to some truly convoluted situations that still leave one gasping for breath.

Such was the case one Teachers' Day....

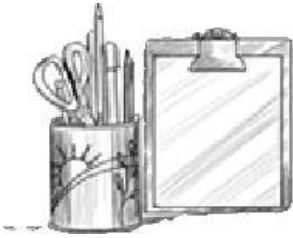
The hallowed halls of St. Columba's School, situated in the heart of heavily populated New Delhi, was the setting. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> of September – the day when the great nation of India

celebrates

HAPPY TEACHERS' DAY!



the contributions of its teachers, in keeping with the wishes of its equally renowned President of yore – Dr Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan - who expressed the desire that his birthday be celebrated as Teachers' Day in his memory. It also happened to be my first ever Day of Teachers.



One was dressed to the nines in the full nine yards of elegant sareehood, and right from the moment one had set foot in the school bus, one had been the recipient of numerous compliments as well as good old fashioned chocolates, flowers and sundry tiny gifts.

Completely as expected.

After alighting from the accepted mode of transport in those ancient of days (the delights of bus travel have become sadly vitiated over the years), the heroine of this story (I know it is I – I'm trying to be humble and distance myself!) tread lightly along the corridors and slipped into her classroom. There (again as expected), she was hailed with delight, serenaded, courted and cosseted and finally seated on her desk. Did you read 'on'? Well, one when is barely 5 feet three and a half inches tall in a setting where the average height of the gentlemen surrounding her adds to up at least half a foot more, one has to ensure that one is enthroned at a suitable height if one is to be able to survey one's surroundings and keep each errant schoolboy under the scanner of one's watchful eye (never underestimate the power of the back benches).





So there our heroine for the day was perched and the ceremonies began. The carefully planned speeches of eternal love, couched in the most respectful terminology one could possibly desire, were delivered with such soulful expressions that they would have left the romantic hero Lochinvar, looking like a piece of dead wood in comparison. These were followed by songs rendered with a passionate dischordance that tested one's tolerance to the limit and were only bearable because of the said soulful expressions (only a soulless zombie would break the heart of a love sick schoolboy by letting her strained smile slip and covering her ears to keep out the deafening sounds assaulting her auditory nerves). Each death defying delivery (I refer to the fact that one was hovering dangerously close to suicidal tendencies by the time each song was delivered) was, but naturally, followed by enthusiastic applause – never let it be said that we teachers do not have the art of hypocrisy perfected- much to the delight of each said singer.



Then came the time for the tokens of affection to be handed over.



In keeping with the tradition of our much touted school – the boys came forward one by one and, after either bowing deeply or smiling soulfully – handed over the flower/ chocolate/ token that denoted their undying love for the object of their affections. Each item was, in turn,

received with grave appreciation and the bearer of the gifts would depart with an ecstatic expression.



Until it was Harpreet's turn (all names are changed to ensure the privacy of individuals).

To begin with, the said Harpreet belonged to the group of homo sapiens that are casually classified as 'humungous'. As wide as he was tall, he constituted what in common parlance is known as "a walking mastodon" and God help the person who tried to mess with this ordinarily quiet soul.

And this was precisely the case when it was Harpreet's turn to walk up to me. Extricating himself from his desk (you try describing it any other way - I mean the poor man was quite literally jammed into his chair/desk), he lumbered up to me and positioned himself in such a way that his back was turned squarely to the class. Now when Mt Everest decides that no one is going to peek around its corner to see what is going on, no soul in his right mind will even dare to do so. And so it was. Harpreet's body language had declared that this was his private moment with his teacher and the whole class of 50 odd boys froze in various positions of activity. It was as if time had stood still. I could swear that one boy even turned into a life-sized statue, with a morsel of his tiffin halfway to his mouth.



Anyway – to proceed – the scene at this stage looked something like this:

Yours truly perched on the desk.

Harpreet facing me square on with his back firmly to the class.  
The remaining 50 odd students in suspended animation.  
And that's when the nightmare began.



In slow motion, the young giant standing before me, reached up and, to my absolute horror, unbuttoned the top button of his shirt! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so chose the in-between path of jaw touching the floor. Not that my state of discomfort made the least difference to our young maniac. Holding my attention with his steady, fixed gaze, he proceeded to undo the next plastic blob on his shirt and then – the next!

By this time I was looking around wildly for help, trying to signal to my frozen 50 that I was in dire need of rescuing. But have you noticed how when you are most in need of a chivalrous knight, the wretched man seems to be breakfasting in some distant land, completely oblivious to all the smoke signals exploding around his unconscious head? And so it was. My famous 50 did not so much as blink an eye! All my damsel-in-distress act seemed to be reaping was a distinct lack of even a glimmer of a response. The more helpless I looked – as one button succeeded the next in the inevitable descent of the doorknobs – the more they seemed to transform from ice sculptures frozen in time to granite carvings that would never ever, ever unfreeze. Such was the power of Harpreet's baleful stare.



And then came the next nightmare. In sloooooow motion, Harpreet put his hand inside his shirt!

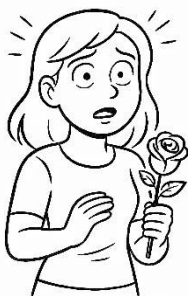


Now there are limits to one's patience and one's stress levels. So, in keeping with the theory that when one has reached the limits one must respond - I decided to react. I first shut my mouth (I do hope you recall that my lower jaw was making the acquaintance of the floor) and then re-

opened it wide and drew in a lungful of air in preparation to letting loose a most unfeminine yell. But just as I reached the peak of my indrawn breath, I happened to glance at Harpreet's hand and all the air was literally knocked out of me - for there in his huge hairy fist was - a diminutive rose!

I watched with fascination as the said flower was raised and with the most incredible gentleness imaginable, my young man placed the token of his deepest affection in my hand. And as I looked down at that slightly battered, worse-for-wear little plant, one part of my consciousness was recording the fact that the thorns were still intact on it and my eyes were drawn to his shirt to examine it for any drops of blood, while the other part was deeply humbled by the lengths to which my gentle giant had gone to present me with this deeply moving tribute.





Without another word Harpreet turned away and returned to his seat. Oblivious of the fact that his shirt was hanging open and that I had a rose in my hand where before there had been none, he proceeded to reseat himself as if nothing of any significance had taken place, after which he scowled at his peers and dared them to comment.

Not a soul commented.

# Fete the Founder!



The magician waves a wand, and miraculously, the sedate, calm, tranquil, serenely quiet confines of a school are transfigured into a blaze of colour, a whirlwind of activity and a mélange of conflicting sounds. A nightmare come to life? A rebellion in the making? Absolutely not!

This is St John's annual fete!

The day begins with the traditional assembly depicting the life of the Founder, Blessed Edmund Rice. The children sit calmly through it, participating in the prayers, listening keenly to the stories – the picture of discipline.

The scene shifts dramatically, however, the minute they get back to their classes and immediately begin setting up their stalls. Suddenly, the peace disappears as from all corners of the school ring out the cries of the young entrepreneurs, "Auction! Auction!" counterpointed by, "Ice-creams! Cool off with lovely iced lollies!", further offset by "Dance to the DJ! Choose your own song!"

In the middle of this delightful cacophony, the face-painting stall thrives quietly – its advertising done quite spectacularly by the Principal who wanders around with her face completely unrecognizable because it is



decorated with a colourful dragonfly or some equally exotic creature!

The “Ring the Bottle” stall, “Gifted Golfers”, “Race Around the Track”, “Lucky Dip” and other stalls are equally crowded. Lines of



young boys stand before each one, patiently awaiting their turn. The food court is abuzz with the hungry hordes refueling before launching themselves back into the fray. The air hums with the vibrant energy of the moment.

The stalls’ are works of art in themselves – beautifully decorated – each one designed to draw the attention of the passersby. Complimenting them are the young lads dressed in



the trendiest outfits, with their hair arranged in the latest styles, further accessorized with the ‘coolest’ bands, sunglasses, bags etc.

And wandering through the crowd are the ‘Bouncers’ – the Class Twelve’s, looking completely macho in their specially designed Tee Shirts with their names emblazoned across their backs. With calm, studied insouciance, they move among their juniors, fully conscious of the fact that they are the cynosure of all the admiring eyes that are following their every move, but with a studied indifference that comes from being one of the ‘chosen’ few who are the ‘law keepers’ for the moment!

As the day gradually comes to an end and the vitality levels dip, a comfortable calm re-descends upon the lawns and corridors of the school. The children can be seen sitting in

groups, quietly chatting, waiting for the grand finale – the much anticipated Lucky Draw! As each slip is drawn and the names announced, a collective shout-cum-sigh goes up. The winners whoop jubilantly while the others await the next draw – one final burst of energy before they depart for home. A happy, contented set of boys.



Edmund Rice

If you have not been a part of this yearly ritual, I truly pity you. For you have missed out on a rare opportunity to have a truckload of fun whilst doing a world of good. For the St John's annual fete is a celebration of the birth of its Founder, a truly spiritual, self-sacrificing, God-fearing man who gave up every iota of his fabulous wealth to dedicate his life to the education

and upliftment of those at the margins of society.

Therefore, in keeping with the vision of this holy man, the school dedicates the fete to him and every bit of the proceeds goes towards its outreach programmes.

And what a day it is! Creativity, opportunity, salesmanship and dogged determination at its best! Why? The answer is simple – the boys believe in the call and vision of the school. And, oh yes – did I forget to mention it? – the best class gets to go for a movie!

The fun never stops in St. John's!

# For Better or For Worse

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“Will you sing for my son’s wedding?”

“Sure, I will.”

“Oh – and while you’re at it – will you plan the wedding as well? I have no clue as to how to plan one.”



“Sure, I will.” (How do you deny Mita [name changed in the interests of protecting the person’s identity]? She is the most helpless, lovable bureaucrat it has ever been my privilege to meet). And that’s how it all began.

Now before we proceed to the wedding day itself, permit moi to give thee a wee bit of background:



You see, the pastor of the church in question was older than Father Time himself. Unlike old wine, however, he had most certainly not aged gracefully. Quite the opposite, in fact. So, basically, we were dealing with a frail old curmudgeon, whose folded arms, sulphurous scowl and furiously twitching moustache made a thundercloud look like a

bright ray of sunshine. And as far as ‘dictatorial’ went – well, the less said the better.

And so it was that as the great day dawned clear and sunny, the atmosphere in the church was anything but. The said venerable gentleman had already lost his temper twice over, had hurled some decorations across the church (Someone had

dared to place them on a small table near the altar), and had then taken up his position to perform the ceremony, but not without first glowering darkly at the choir, much to the said choir's consternation (we only later discovered that it was because his own singers had not been invited to do the honours).



Into this cheerful and encouraging scenario tripped our young, handsome groom, accompanied by his shy and lovely bride.

Now let's digress for a moment. Let's step into our young hero's size 12 shoes and take a peek at the world through his eyes. Have I mentioned that this young lad is lacking the paternal half of his parents (divorce is a sad, sad word) and



has been wordlessly watching his charming mother helplessly struggling to organize his nuptials? And that he is marrying an equally young lass who is 'relativeless' in the church because she is getting hitched much against her dearly beloved pater and mater's wishes and who also doesn't happen to have a clue as to what is expected of her because she, perchance,

belongs to an altogether different faith? To add to all his considerable woes - he finds himself now confronted with a doddering old fogey with a fulminous set of eyes? That the said eyes are magnified manifold times owing to a humungous pair of soda glassed spectacles, does nothing for our brave warrior's confidence.

The icing on the proverbial wedding cake, however, lies in the untold irony of the fact that it was the young man himself, who insisted on being married by this particular pastor!

Given the circumstances, wouldn't you be a tad nervous? Well – imagine the state of our dear protagonist.

And so it was that the ceremony began.



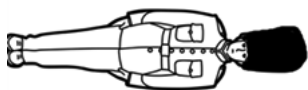
And we, the choir, (who fortuitously happened to be placed where we had an excellent view of the proceedings – a very crucial circumstance given that fate has decreed that I be the recorder, for posterity, of what transpired that day) rendered the first hymn for the occasion. And as our voices were raised in angelic tones, the bride and groom and all and sundry bowed their combined heads in a prayerful mood that befitted the occasion.

Not so our dearly beloved curmudgeon. Scarcely had our dulcet tones faded, than he – as if in deliberate counterpoint to our heavenly voices - started reading out the wedding service in brusque tones that were more reminiscent of someone trying to keep a funeral on an even keel, than that of a truly joyous occasion. One look at Arvind's (name changed in the interests of protecting the person's identity) face was enough to reveal the tension that the poor child was undergoing. To the keen observer (in all humility, I must confess that my observational skills would put Sherlock Holmes to shame. Aha! Now comprehension dawns - why Father Fate pronounced me the recorder!), the pulse beating in his throat was a dead giveaway. The man was clearly one teeny step away from a meltdown.



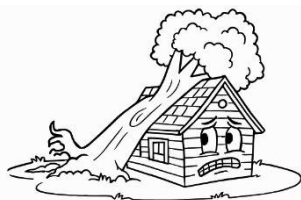
And that's when our doughty Doomsday clad in a cassock, played his winning card.

He put a hand to the vicinity of his heart - and rubbed his scrawny chest.



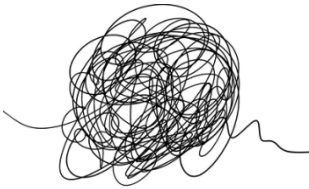
A small digression - Have you ever had the privilege of observing a guard from the legendary Coldstream Guards (the ones that protect Buckingham Palace) collapse? No? Believe me - it is a spectacle to behold. A digression within a digression (all in the pursuit of literary excellence, I assure you, dear reader): Ever beheld a majestic tree fall after being ruthlessly cut from the root? There you go! I see the light dawning. The ramrod straight back as it plummets earthwards thanks to the unstoppable force that the apple chewing genius named Newton, dubbed "gravity"?

And that's precisely what young Arvind did. Before one had time to even discern that something, earthshaking (literally) was about to happen (hey, even Sherlock Holmes had his moments of distraction - I was occupied, as was the rest of the congregation, watching the old codger for any signs of imminent heart failure whilst simultaneously tensing for action, ala Superwoman), our doomed groom took a nosedive. Ramrod straight. A true soldier, he did his lady love proud. He plummeted like a rock with a body brace - straight into the table that (fortunately) stood between him and Father Time's grandfather. Oh, how art the mighty fallen.



Now it was Mother (my feminine instincts are rebelling against too many male protagonists) Chaos' turn to reign supreme. As dramatic shrieks rent the air and people milled about in helpless confusion, I am proud to announce that the

entire choir (please do recall that yours truly happens to be a member of this caroling community) miraculously



transformed into the ambulance brigade. Without a word being exchanged, but by some form of unspoken consent, some of us immediately took up strategic positions behind the crusty cause of

all the confusion (he happened to have frozen with his hand still at cardiac massaging position), whilst three more raced to place a chair beneath the swooning beauty of a bride, seconds before she could join her companion in his ungainly position on the ground. (Did I mention that he had bounced off the [fortunately placed] table and come to rest on the cold stone floor? I didn't? How remiss of me. Well – he did.)

As for Arvind – a more professional approach you have yet to find. Within seconds, his belt lay unbuckled, his shirt unbuttoned (revealing a very manly chest), his tie removed and lashings of water



randomly thrown at his wax-pale face, whilst another volunteer vigorously fanned him with his own wedding invitation. And just when the holi water (pun intended. Bet you couldn't have resisted either, Mr Holier-than-thou. Oops, there I go again!) player was seriously beginning to consider the advantages of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation over the disadvantage of it not being the beautiful bride that he would have ministered to with (un)Christian alacrity, our horizontal hero let loose a manly groan, thus saving our conundrum confused chum from having to make a life-saving decision.

And that's when – as the saying goes – things fell into place.



So shaken was our Frosty-the-Foul-Mood that he immediately declared a ceasefire, adroitly lowered his hand from its heartfelt position and proceeded to conduct the rest of the service with the all the serenity and decorum of a true man of God, as if nothing untoward had occurred at all.

That the remaining ceremony took place with all the main protagonists surrounded by a team of chair wielding watchers, did nothing to detract from its beauty and there wasn't a dry eye in the entire church when the bride and groom finally limped down the aisle. The sound of a hundred held collective breaths being simultaneously released together, making for one gigantic hurricane sigh that swept through the confines of the room, only added to the poignancy of the moment.

Perhaps I should end this happy fairy tale with the words I whispered to the distraught damsel as she swayed on the verge of her own collapse – “Just think: you'll have a story well worth telling your grandchildren. How many people are that fortunate?!! The young lady in question had a delightful sense of humour. Her amused gurgle echoed through the shocked silence and served as the first step towards the restoration of normality at that unforgettable wedding.



# Whoops - It's the Wrong One



Traveling vertically up to the dizzying height of 8000 odd feet is definitely not my idea of entertainment. When reaching the very same destination entails going round and round the mulberry bush (read 'mountain/s'), then I am in a state of full-blown rebellion.

The fact that, whilst traveling, I consistently and faithfully bring the entire family to a grinding halt while I donate the makings of my last 5 meals rather generously to Mother Nature, does not earn me any brownie points either with my beloved ones or myself.

So why do I cave in every summer and suffer the indignity of lying like a sack of potatoes in the back seat of the car (the remainder of the entire family is crammed within the confines of the front – sardines in a tin isn't a patch on their plight), only to emerge periodically from my sad state of catatonia to emit wails that a banshee would pay a fortune to emulate?

The answer is simple. It's the orchard.

We have been singularly blessed as a family to have an apple orchard that is perched at the very top of a mountain where it is bathed in sunshine, and is surrounded by the most beautiful of pine forests. To spend the summer there is to be in Paradise.



And so I agree to travel through the 9 hells, just to get to that heavenly place.

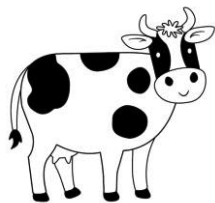


Now I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but have you considered the fact that Heaven must be an awfully quiet place – barring the harps? Well, I have, and this only reinforces my opinion of the orchard as being hallowed ground, for a quieter spot you will not find! The fact that there is also no TV to disturb the celestial silence with its raucous artificiality, only enhances the sense of being in another, rarified dimension.

The down side, however, of this prolonged (and here I must admit – sometimes painful) silence is that entertainment is at a high premium. So - human beings being human, it but naturally follows that curiosity about one's neighbours is at an all time high!

And so it was that one lovely summer's day we were seated on our verandah (which, very conveniently, is situated such that every single person who has to go up or down the mountain has to pass by!) watching the inhabitants of our little insular world enact their role upon our (mountain) stage, when, suddenly, the even tenor of our lives was broken by a shriek that rent the very air and ripped apart the fabric of the calm countryside.

With one accord, the whole hillside came to life! The Robin on the tree froze, but I noticed his beady eyes swiveling for all they were worth, trying to locate the source of the rare and wonderful sound. The cow which had been peacefully grazing but a few moments ago, was now doing an exceedingly creditable imitation of a Pointer in action (a pity her tail isn't fuzzy),



while the lizard that had been lazily sunning itself, metamorphosed into greased lightning and did a disappearing act down the nearest crack in its rock, before u-turning and then zooming back up to poke its nose curiously out of its bolt hole.

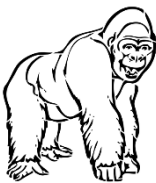


The reaction on our perch was no less dramatic. One has heard of – or at least read of the phrase – ‘galvanized into action’? Well, the activity on the verandah fell well within the framework of the above definition! Before one could say ‘Jack Robinson’, every single member of the family was leaning dangerously over the railing, striving hard to be the first to identify the source of the horrendous howl.

Whilst we were all straining our eyes and ears, (and even taking an occasional experimental sniff), we became aware of an exceedingly strange series of sounds that seemed to be increasing in volume as each second ticked by.



So starved is one for any kind of distraction in our heavenly abode in the hills, that the immediate response to this break in the monotony was for each one of us to lean even further out, in sheer defiance of the natural force of gravity. If anyone had chanced to glance up at us at that moment, I am quite sure they would have assumed that the jungle had come to stay and that there were 4 simians hanging from the porch!



Be that as it may, whilst we were each doing our own particular version of a monkey dangling from a branch, there appeared on the horizon a rather peculiar sight. At first glance it seemed as if a drunken gorilla was weaving its way up the mountain side. The figure was

As the figure loomed closer, however, it gradually became clearer that no such terrifying King Kong had descended on our territory, but what we were witnessing was one of the helpers from the neighbouring orchards, who was very obviously in a state of advanced inebriation. But what continued to pique our curiosity, was the constant depositing of a rather strangely coloured saliva onto terra firma.



So why have I now brought in this new character on my stage? Simple – the man in question had been to the local dentist!

Back up here for a minute – if there is no dentist on the scene, then where did one materialize from so abruptly?!

114 | **Laughter in the Rearview Mirror**

*And just who might that be?*

*Well let's see – what do you need to extract a tooth?*

*Anesthesia and a pair of pliers?*

*Don't forget the strong set of arms.*

*That too.*

*So?*

*Hmmmm – let me see.....*

*Come on slow coach. Who lives right next to us who fits the bill?*

*You mean.....?!!*

*Yup – got it in one – the local blacksmith!!*

*Do you really mean to tell me that that poor man had gone to get a tooth extracted from the local blacksmith??!!*

*No wonder he howled!*

*No! No! you've got it all backwards.....*

Excuse me Mr. Holmes, will you please butt out and leave me to tell my story?

So where was I? Oh yes – the peculiar person meandering towards us, totally sozzled (an inelegant word but appropriate nevertheless) and spitting blood (yes – that was the strange colour). But more than that, what caught our attention was the fact that he really did bear a striking resemblance to the said earlier Gorilla owing to the very simple fact that not one but BOTH his cheeks were swollen!





Now curiosity is oft hidden behind many a guise. And in the hills one quickly learns to adopt many pretenses or else one will stay uninformed and therefore unentertained. So – donning the hypocritical expressions of extremely concerned neighbours, we descended from our vantage point with amazing alacrity (lest he pass us by before we could surround him) to accost our strange apparition. Solicitousness oozed out of every pore as we enquired after his health.

The reply was an extremely garbled one that sounded vaguely like, “oone glut daa kaal hiya.”

Were we deterred in our quest for the truth? Not on your life! Here before us was a living mystery. What more could one ask for in the wilderness of silence? So off we set in hot pursuit of the puzzle. Further gentle, caring questions, however, only elicited the same gobbledygook, “oone glut daa kaal hiya.”

Now there is only so much that one can take of endless repetition. The façade of philanthropy was quickly eroding with each repetition and we were fast approaching the point of contemplating using brute force to extract the information (after all – he had already had one extraction. What difference would another one make?) when yet another neighbor appeared on the scene.

Not even Santa Claus could have met with the degree of affection and enthusiasm that the dearly beloved next-door did! Quicker than the eye could follow, we had pounced upon him and to our everlasting delight, he proved to be the fount of information that



we had been seeking. This is what he had to say:

Our incoherent oaf was in the shape he was in for two very simple reasons. The first was that he had got himself ‘stinking drunk’ (inelegant but supremely appropriate as I mentioned before) because he knew he had to get a tooth extracted and had prepared for the same by drinking copious quantities of alcohol in lieu of the anesthesia that does not exist in our story.

Now, (second reason) whilst this was a strategy to be definitely applauded, the down side of his devious devilishness was that he had failed to inform anyone as to which tooth needed to be extracted! To compound his colossal idiocy, in his state of drunken fuzziness, he pointed to the wrong one!

The blacksmith, in all innocence, therefore proceeded with the extraction, only to find that the tooth in question was not as easily extractable as he had anticipated. Undeterred, he set one foot elegantly against the patient’s chest, balanced himself, as he had learnt to do in his profession, and set to with a will. Much to his delight, his efforts paid dividends and he felt the recalcitrant sliver give ever so slightly. Encouraged by this progress, he paused to catch his breath, spit on his hands



and get a firmer grip on his implement. As he set to with a greater enthusiasm, however, to his surprise, he found his foot being dislodged and was further distracted by the sight of his patient frantically flapping his arms.

Frowning in a disapproving fashion at this unprofessional conduct on his patient’s part, he paused to glance at him enquiringly, only to find his foot being thrust aside unceremoniously, as a consequence of which he now found himself in the unbecoming position of having to flail his own

arms to keep his balance, and having failed to do so, landing up flat on his back in the most undignified position!

Now even a blacksmith has his self respect. Getting up, the said expert brushed himself off and descended upon his hapless victim with a ferocious frown. Quailing, the said hapless victim gestured feebly and attempted an explanation. “wong toof” he mumbled.

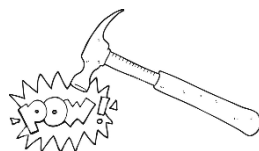
“What?”

“Wong toof” he tried again.

Comprehension dawned. “Wrong tooth? But it’s almost out!!”

“Oo somfing”.

“Oh. Ok.” And with perfect equanimity, the said blacksmith turned, picked up his hammer and proceeded to ***bang the wrong tooth back into place!!***



What followed after that was a simple extraction of the correct bad tooth (on the diametrically opposite side).

What we saw was a gorilla spitting blood and muttering, ““oone glut daa kaal hiya.” Which translates rather elegantly into, “Unhone galat daant nikaal diya (*He took out the wrong tooth*)”!

# Tall, Dark and Scarily Scarred!

Have you ever been married, whisked away to the other end of the globe and thrust into a bewildering world of cabins, cargoes and engines? No? Well, you should try it. And see how you feel when you find yourself suddenly on the high seas with not a shred of land in sight and your stomach is in free fall with a life of its own – cart wheeling and somersaulting to the manner born- totally oblivious to the fact that the rest of you is auditioning for the role of the dying duck (read ‘swan’) in the heart breaking ballet rather originally titled ‘Swan Lake’!



Well, that’s exactly what happened to yours truly. From the lovely, safe, secure and small world of St. Columba’s School, I found myself, literally overnight (that’s how long the journey took, dope!), in the bowels of a great big ship, trying desperately to figure out which way was up. Everywhere I looked, huge metal walls seemed to be looming threateningly and so tiny was our room (technically called a ‘cabin’) that two paces either way brought me nose-to-nose with the said affectionate separators. So much for my boys who thought I was honeymooning romantically in Italy in a beautiful town called Savona. Savona I was in alright, but what everyone had failed to tell me/us (read ‘my



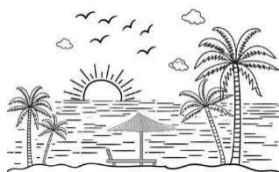
boys') was that it is a port and we would be whisked directly into the stomach of the Leviathan.

Anyways – to cut a long story short (I refuse to retell the tale of how I thought perfect sailing weather constituted a storm) – I soon settled down to my world of 8 x 8 feet and as time passed by I even began venturing outside it. These 'sallies' took me to the bridge, from whence I found I had a bird's-eye view of our surroundings. And it was there that I came in for my second heart attack.

Let me give you a little bit of background, before I proceed to my cardiac arrest:

Ships such as the ones I was sailing on belong to the international variety where the crew is a motley one, drawn from all parts of the world. In this case, the Officers were either of French or Indian extraction, but the crew belonged to the exotic island of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now when one hears the lovely, rolling sounds of "Trinidad and Tobago", visions of sandy beaches, umbrella topped mock tails and gorgeous sun-



tanned people come to mind. So you can imagine my shock (patience – we have arrived at the said moment you have been breathlessly waiting for) when I leaned over the railing to find my dearly beloved quite literally dwarfed by what looked like the surviving gang members of



the reigning criminal community of outer Brooklyn. Honest. The sheer size – height, width, breadth – et al – of each one of them belonged to the definitive word 'gigormous'! Not one of those

giants was below six feet tall!

Now let us assume for a moment that you are a newly-wed bride who chances to see her equally newly-wed groom in mortal danger. What would you do? Settle down quietly to your knitting or spring into action? The latter – right? Well, that’s exactly what I did! I quite literally let loose a yell – I like to think of it as a feminine cry – and waved my arms wildly in a shooing gesture that, I hoped, would bring the troops rallying to the rescue of my partner. Imagine my astonishment then, when, instead of any gallants rushing in gallantly, I found myself the cynosure of every single eye on board (including the passing whale lazily swimming by) and – what was by far worse – every eye had a distinctly disapproving look in it! It was then that the penny dropped (‘belated’ is my middle name, I am rather belatedly beginning to realize) and I realized that far from being the ‘mark’ in an attack, my darling husband was merely giving orders to his crew, who were gathered around him!



Suffice to say I tried to save the situation, and my dignity, (it is the most frayed asset I own) by smiling weakly, waving nonchalantly as if I had been merely trying to attract my spouse’s attention, and smartly disappearing back into the rabbit hole from which I had sallied forth.

The next day, having decided that discretion was the better of valour, I chose to walk the path of wisdom and, rather than turn up on the Bridge and be the object of everyone’s pity, opted to go on deck for a walk.

And that’s when I once again plunged into trouble.

No sooner had I set out on my walk along the main deck of the ship, when I caught a furtive movement out of the corner of my eye. Spinning to see who/what it was, I found myself observing one of the crew members who was engrossed in a chore of chipping the deck. I gazed at him long and hard and my eyes took in the enormous width of the shoulders, the mahogany colour of the skin and the way in which the huge hammer in his hand looked like a toy.

Then he looked up.



Now I know you are going to accuse me of gross exaggeration when you read what I am about to narrate, but I solemnly swear by all that's holy that it is the truth and nothing but the truth. For the face I saw was completely bald and shining, with midnight gleaming eyes and a scar that ran the length of one cheek. The absolute humdinger was the open overalls and – you got it – a gold chain glinting in the sun! I don't think I have ever been more frightened in my life!

Strictly speaking though, there's a measure of untruth about my last statement – the real fear truly gripped my soul when I turned around and found the man following me!! No matter where I went and how I dodged and turned, I could not shake him loose. Barnacles clinging to the hull of a ship aren't a patch on the tenacity of the wretched man. Even my shadow couldn't have done a better job of staying close! So – like an intrepid heroine – I was forced to take recourse to the only possible action open to me – I ran for all I was worth! I ran as if the devil was at my heels (which, in my opinion he was). I ran as if my life depended on it (which, in my humble opinion, it did). I ran as if there was no tomorrow



(which, in my twice humble opinion, there was every possibility). In other words – I ran!



And when I looked fleetingly over my shoulder, what did I see – the hell hound hot on my heels! God save us all. That's when I proceeded to perform my last rites in right earnest – albeit on the run – and commended my soul to the good Lord. I fervently begged forgiveness for every last sin I had committed – and even those I hadn't (I was leaving no angle uncovered) – and prayed to all the saints in heaven (and even a few I am quite sure did not belong to the hallowed halls). When Death is in earnest pursuit, one should leave no stone unturned when it comes to saving one's soul.

So there I was – running for my life with a big, black monster on my heels. Now, have you ever tried running with your head turned over your shoulder. No? Perhaps you should try it. I promise you it is a truly invigorating experience. To begin with, one inevitably comes into contact with every possible contactable item in front of one. Subsequent to the impact that follows, one discovers just how quickly the body can bounce off said items and continue as if nothing in the world had happened. It is only much later, when the adrenaline has stopped pumping, that one discovers how many colours of the rainbow can be reproduced by ones normally single-hued outer covering, more commonly known as 'skin'.





Be that as it may, I was charging headlong when my worst nightmare came true – I lost my footing and went flying forward. As my arms wind milled and I struggled valiantly to prevent myself falling overboard, I found, to my horror, that I was pirouetting in the most graceful manner possible (how come it happens at that moment and never one when one actually wants it to?) and heading right back to the one place in all the world that I did NOT want to be – towards my nemesis!

And that's when the impossible happened. Just as I closed my eyes and resigned myself to heading heavenwards (Why not? Hadn't I just cleansed my soul?), I felt the gentlest of hands close around my waist, and I found myself being set down on the deck with the kindest voice in the world saying, "Please don't worry ma'am - I'm here to take care of you."

That's right, folks. I had done it again. My nightmare had metamorphosed into the gentlest of giants who, on learning that it was my first time on a ship, had made it his personal mission to ensure that I did not get hurt or fall down! When am I going to learn?!

And so it was, that I learnt another (painful) lesson in humility. I learnt that people care and that prototypes are often terribly misleading perceptions. I learnt to enjoy the



company of my ship-mates and to revel in the security and affection they surrounded me with. In fact, I am delighted to narrate that, for once, my story has a happy ending. For, from then on, my guardian angel also became my best friend and

there wasn't a mall that we didn't race our carts down or a port  
that we didn't waltz our way out of!

The best part was – one look at my terrifying bouncer and -  
nobody dared protest!

# Thank you IX-D!!!

"We need you to come to our class tomorrow," were the blurted words that greeted me even as I opened the door to my office. Two anxious sets of eyes peered at me as I gazed at them quizzically and responded with the natural, "Why?"



"Oh, for no particular reason," was the artless reply, even as their eyes slid away and attempted to find something else to rest on – anything would do, so long as they didn't have to look into mine!

With a growing suspicion I asked, "What's going on?"

"Nothing Ma'am. Absolutely nothing at all," was the super quick reply, followed by the query, "You will come, won't you?"



How do you respond when you have 2 sets of hopeful eyes looking at you? For me, there was only one possible answer. "I would love to".

Sometimes you have to give in to the inevitable with good grace!

But the reaction to my words quickly dispelled the uneasiness behind my reply – the pure delight, followed by the question, "What time would suit you Ma'am?" left me smiling.

"Would the first period do?"

“Oh yes, Ma’am! Perfectly. See you then!” and off they ran, their body language triumphant and assured – mission accomplished!



Well the next day dawned and I got busy with the usual morning round of responsibilities, when there was a sudden knock at my door and Elizabeth peered around the door to announce, “The boys from 9D are here to escort you.” With a start I remembered my promise and promptly (and happily – I am always delighted to be able to leave the confines of my official space – I call it my ‘gilded cage’!) set off, with the Johnian gentlemen courteously gesturing with an old world charm, for me to precede them. And so I did until we arrived collectively at the door to 9D.

As I entered, I saw a host of cheerful, bright faces rising to greet me. What followed was pure joy - all the more delightful because it was completely unexpected. I don’t think there is a person alive on this planet who does not like to hear someone say something nice about them. Well – 9D said plenty! For a good 10 minutes I was surrounded with speeches, poems, cards, flowers, chocolates and even a portrait sketch of myself! It was a moment in time that I will always treasure – a memory to warm myself with when the world becomes a cold, insensitive place and I sit isolated in my ‘ivory tower’.

To appreciate others is a dying phenomenon. So busy are we with ourselves, that we rarely take the time to pause and let others know how dear they are to us. As I told 9D – “We all need encouragement. Today you did that for me. You just made my day”



**Thank you IX D!!**