THE FLYING SAUCER

AND OTHER STORIES

AUTHOR: SUSHANT SUPRIYE

TRANSLATOR: ANURADHA SEN

BlueRose ONE .com
Stories Matter
NewDelhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-81-6744-069-3

Cover design: Deepak Katheria
Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: August 2026

The Flying Saucer

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Anuradha Sen Profile

Anuradha Sen is a management graduate with rich experience across finance, training, and content development. She has worked with leading firms like DCM and Genpact, building strong corporate acumen. Transitioning to academia, she became a Communication Trainer, mentoring engineering students at JECRC College & University for English assessments and placement interviews.

Currently, she works as a freelance content writer and translator. Known for her clarity in communication and structured approach, she brings depth and discipline to every engagement.

A lifelong learner and avid reader, Anuradha also enjoys the companionship of her four cats and a dog.

Translator's Note

Sushant Supriye has a very interesting collection of stories in his repertoire. From stories bordering on the surreal (My Father's Ancestral Books of Origin, My Uncle's Incomplete Novel, The Flying Saucer) to realistic stories that punch you in the gut (How Can I Laugh, The Indian Kafka); from soft romanticism (Ganeshi's Tale, Macaw) to satirical stories (The Tale of The Tailed Sycophant), all tales are woven in a riveting manner that compel the reader's attention. His storytelling is direct, simple and hard-hitting– a combination which makes for an absorbing read. It was my honour to translate his stories into English, allowing for a wider readership.

Contents

104 Degrees 1

A Day Off 6

An Eccentric Man 10

Chandrakant 15

Destiny 23

My Father, His Ancestors and Their Books /
My Father and His Ancestral Books of Origins 27

A Different Kind of Story or Ganeshi's Tale 32

Helplessness 39

How Can I Laugh? 45

Ice 55

K.K 60

Macaw 66

My City 71

My Uncle's Incomplete Novel 77

No Entry For Non-Aryans 82

Something Stuck In The Mind 87

The Atheist 93

The Flying Saucer 97

The House 102

The Incident 107

The Indian Kafka 112
The Nest 118
The Re-Union 122
The Stench 128
The Tale Of The Tailed Sycophant 132
The Tenth Man 142
The Tiger 147
The World's Most Beautiful Ruined Painting 152
The Wound 157
They 162
Two By Two Is Five 166
What Was His Name? 178

104 Degrees

There is rioting in the city between Hindus and Muslims. I, Prashant Srivastava, am burning with fever. 104 degrees! Whatever I am about to tell you,will be unbelievable to you. Even the doctors don't believe it. Actually, whenever there is rioting in the city between Hindus and Muslims, I develop a high fever. I have had this unique condition since childhood.

THE SHOCK OF THE CHILDHOOD

As a young boy, I lost my best friend Altaf, in these riots in my neighborhood. I ran up a high fever for the first time perhaps because I witnessed his murder with my own eyes. Ever since then, if ever I heard any news of Hindu Muslim riots anywhere, I would get a fever of 104 degrees, which subsided only when the situation returned to normalcy.

IS LOVING A CRIME?

I always thought that we lived in a liberal, secular country, where every religion and every school of thought was allowed to prosper. Was I wrong in my thinking? I believed in humanity. Was I mistaken?

While in college, I fell deeply in love with a Muslim girl named Firoza. Both of us knew that we had a difficult road ahead, but it was our belief that living in the 21st century, our educated families would help us overcome these obstacles and show us the way.

PRASHANT SRIVASTAVA'S DREAM IS LOST

I first tried to bring my family around. But my father said, "You two won't be able to sustain this marriage. You are not unaware of the situation today." My mother said, "That girl will not be able to survive here long. Our festivals, our customs, all are different from theirs." My brothers said, "You are asking for trouble. You can see for yourself the conditions of this country. In these circumstances, your decision to marry a Muslim girl is not the right one."

I thought, at least, my sister would be on my side. But she sang the same tune. "If you do this brother, there will be fasting in Ramzaan in this house. We will be celebrating Eid. She will offer Namaaz five times a day. We will be eating only Halaal meat. You can forget about Holi and Diwali."

These comments soured my heart. I had thought that after my family agreed, I would try to win over Firoza's family. It was my dream that people of all religion would live together in unity. But my dream was shattered!

FIROZA'S ASPIRATIONS ALSO TRAMPLED OVER

I love Prashant with all my heart. He also loves me truly. My father is an IAS officer. My mother teaches in a college. I had hoped that I would get them both to agree to our marriage. But I was in for a rude shock! After the elections in 2014, the Prime Minister of the country changed. The cow brigade was all ready for lynching. The atmosphere in the country was worsening. Under these circumstances, when my father heard my love story he said, "Firoza, you can see the

environment in the country. God forbid, your marriage creates another situation like the Muzaffarnagar riots! I will not advise you to go ahead with this marriage." My mother said, "My girl, in view of the state of affairs these days, you marrying a Hindu boy would not be ideal. Don't do it." My brother was even more of a fanatic. The thought of our marriage enraged him.

I had entertained a dream that our two families would get together in harmony and create an example of unity and brotherhood. But my dream was trampled over!

COURT MARRIAGE

In spite of serious opposition from both sides, we stuck to our decision to get married. The news was spreading slowly. Rogues from both sides threatened to beat us. But we believed in the power of love! We enlisted police protection. With the help of our friend, we got married in court. Post our marriage, we started living in the Green Park area of our city. After completing my law degree, I had also done M.B.A and got a good job in the company, India Bulls. Firoza had also passed the NET exam and was appointed as a lecturer in a college in the city. The sad part was that both our families had broken off all relationship with us because of this marriage.

THE TROUBLE BEGINS

At first, everything was good. But after a month and a half, a local Hindu leader came to meet me. He started pressurizing me to get Firoza converted to Hinduism. I tried to explain to him that this was our personal matter and that we were

already married. But he refused to listen and threatened us as he left.

After a few days, a Muslim leader came to our house to pour out his poison words. He provoked Firoza by claiming that her husband was a Kaafir. Islaam would not allow that. Hence, she should either get me converted to Islaam or break off the marriage! When Firoza refused to listen, he threatened her too.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW?

Slowly, fanatics from both sides created an atmosphere of great tension in the locality. Every other day, there would be provocative speeches from either side. The self- proclaimed guardians of both religions started taking out rallies. There would be poisonous speeches and oratory.

Then the Hindu temples in the city found the heads of slaughtered cows and the mosques discovered pig meat! There was stoning and mobbing on religious occasions.

THE BLACK DAY

ON 26th January, our Republic Day, riots started on both sides in earnest. Today is the 27th. The rioters have reached our locality. A crowd of rioters from both sides have gathered in front of our house. They are throwing petrol bombs at each other and firing with country made rifles. Houses and shops are being set afire. The air resounds with slogans of 'Har Har Mahadev' and 'Allah ho Akbar'. There is terror everywhere.

Firoza has called the police. But the rioters are greater in number and the police is trying hard to reach us. Inside the house, I am burning up with a fever of 104 degrees. Firoza is trying to cool me down with cold compresses. I take her hand in mine. There are tears in her eyes. Just then, there is the noise of the front door being broken down by the beastly hooligans. If only, the police would arrive just now or the rioters would disperse miraculously or my fever would subside and never bother me again…..

A Day Off

After staying awake for many hours, the night had finally become tired and fallen asleep. Outside the window, baby rays of sunlight were springing up on the eastern horizon. Fresh morning air was blowing in through the window. I had woken up early today.

I looked beside me. Suni was stretched out lazily on the bed. Next to her, our five-year old son, Pulak, was also blissfully asleep. I glanced at the bedside watch. It was five-thirty in the morning. I was a bit surprised. Sumi was usually up by this time. I nudged her gently and asked lovingly, "Sweetheart, won't you get up? We have to send Pulak to school. It's getting late."

Perhaps she was in the midst of a nice dream. She grumbled a bit, opened her eyes and said with a smile, "I am not going to do any work today." That worried me. "Why? Are you not well?"

"No. I am perfectly alright," she replied with sleepy eyes.

"Then, what is the matter? Why won't you work today…?"

"Just like that! I will not do any work today," she stated, hovering on the brink of wakefulness. She turned on her other side.

This angered me! I had an important meeting at nine in the morning. I was about to utter a few harsh words, when the veil of my memory shimmered and lifted and I clearly

envisioned a long-lost memory from my childhood. So clear that it seemed to have happened just the day before. And I got myself under control. Grinning, I woke up Pulak. I made him drink a glass of water to help with his motions. His mother did that every day. Then I took him to the bathroom to shower and brush his teeth.

"Papa, why is Mummy not awake today? Please wake her up."

"Son, let Mummy sleep," I replied. "Papa will get his darling son ready for school today."

I bathed Pulak, dressed him in his school uniform and then heated some milk. Pouring the milk into a bowl, I added cornflakes and started to feed him.

"Papa, I am so happy that you are getting me ready. Yesss! My Papa is sending me to school today," Pulak chirped in an excited tone.

I went into the kitchen and hurriedly made cheese and tomato sandwiches for his packed lunch.

When I returned after getting my son on the school bus, Sumi was awake but still lazing around in bed.

"How is my love now?" I asked with a smile.

"I will not work today," Sumi said, stretching lazily.

"It's alright love. I got Pulak ready and sent him off to school. Shall I make some tea for you? What will you have for breakfast? Will bread and omelet do?"

Sumi looked at me with a pleasant surprise on her face, as if unable to believe me.

"When did you learn to make all this?"

"I have stayed in a hostel for many years. There are a lot of other things I can make."

"Tell me something. When I said I would not work today, why did you not get angry at me? I thought you would," Sumi asked.

"Darling, I will tell you an incident which happened at home when I was young. After you hear about it, you will understand."

"This took place when I was about five or six years old." I started. "One morning, my father got up to find mom still asleep next to him, cuddled up with me. Every day, my mother used to wake up at dawn, before everyone else. She would bathe and then offer water to the sacred Tulsi plant on the balcony. After praying to the rising sun, she would make tea for my father. Then she would wake me for school. But that day, the sun was already long up. Ma was still lying in bed. Father got worried and woke her gently to ask if she was unwell. While he was waking her up, I also got up.

"My mom said that she was alright, but she would not work that day. Father was surprised beyond limit. He asked mom why she said so. Ma replied that it was her day off. This annoyed my dad and he wanted to know why. I still remember my mother's answer. Mother explained, "You go to office six days a week. Then you get one day off. Our son goes to school for five days a week. Then he has two days

off. But I work seven days a week, thirty or thirty-one days in a month for 365 days in a year. So, I also need a day's leave now and then from my household chores."

Dad laughed and replied, "But you don't have an office job. You are a 'house-wife'. How can you demand a leave?"

With great determination, my mother replied, "This house is my office. Working here is my job. Even if I am a 'house-wife', don't I feel like having a day off? Don't I ever feel like resting? Can't I ever get a day off from my daily chores?"

My father was left speechless! He had never heard such a logic in his life. But mother's argument was sound. She was also human. Even though I was only five or six years old, I sympathized with her. That day, father tried to convince Ma a lot, but she could not be moved," I finished with a smile.

I had read somewhere that intelligent people learn from their experiences. Those who are wiser, learn from the experiences of others also.

When Sumi heard all this, she got up and kissed me and I cheerfully went to the kitchen to start preparing tea and breakfast for us.

An Eccentric Man

I have a friend –Sudhakar. In this age of twisted lines, he is like a straight line… Although many who know him call him 'eccentric'. Once I went to his place and found him writing. I was curious and when I asked him, he told me he was in the habit of writing in a diary. As we talked, he himself offered me the diary to read. I questioned the ethics of reading someone's personal journal, but he insisted. He said, "I am not giving it to you but to the writer inside you." He also added, "Once you have read it, you will also consider me eccentric". I laughed and said, "Leave that to my judgement."

I read the diary when I reached home. There were some strange things written in it. And one more thing. There was no mention of dates anywhere. The use of different colored pens proved that the entries were written on different days.

With his permission, I am presenting a few extracts from his diary.

PART 1

Last night, thieves came to my house. They must have thought I was very rich. They searched my mind and found it empty. "He is very poor. He doesn't even have dreams," they said to each other and expressing their sympathy to me, returned empty handed. Even the thieves who come to rob poor people are so unfortunate.

PART 2

Even though the sun shines, there is darkness all around. There is a black ulcer in the day's intestine. The directions are overcome with black storms. In this forest of humanity, predators roam freely. They smile and shake your hands. You cannot see the knives and daggers hidden beneath the smile. They pat you on the back to make you spineless. They call you their younger brother or their special friend. Then you start believing them and become closer. And then on some spring evening, after imbibing a few pegs, the wolves reveal their true nature. You rue that day a lot.

PART 3

Since this morning, my eyes are shedding bloody tears and I see the whole world in red. Above me is the swollen eyed, red sky. At my feet, is the bloody ground. The plants and the trees, the birds and the animals, the young and the old----all appear ensanguined. The pyre of humanity is burning strongly. The bitter, black smoke has entered my lungs. The streets abound with preying wolves, dressed as men and their red eyes make me shiver. All around is the sound of sirens and screams. The different laughing colors have all turned to red. It seems as if the blood of all the innocent people who are dying, from Gujrat to Palestine, from Afghanistan to Iraq and Syria, has entered my eyes. All other colors have left me.

PART 4

Today, I heard two trees having a conversation. They were criticizing us humans. One tree was saying to the other, "People are so ungrateful. They rest in our shade, eat our fruits but cut us down and burn us all the same."

PART 5

Something strange is happening to me these days. At night, before biting me, the mosquitoes and bed bugs have started asking me my religion. They want to know if I am a Hindu or a Muslim. Before blowing in my courtyard, the wind also wants to verify my caste. The sun rays, before warming my house, want to know my breed. The black storm clouds, before raining down in my garden, want to know which state I am from and what language do I speak? I am very perturbed these days. When I look in the mirror, my image turns its face away from me. Darkness binds my eyes with its cruel hands. I stand alone in the dead wind, under a barren sky, waiting for a space ship which never comes.

PART 6

It is such a strange thing. People have eyes but they cannot see the truth. They have ears but pretend to be deaf. They have brains but have lost the capacity to reason and think. They use their limbs only for beating and looting. They push the people in front of them and kick them down. They are pulling down those who are above them. There are no rules in this cut-throat competition of life. People can cheat and commit fouls because there is no referee, no umpire to blow

the whistle for foul play. Those who are merely foot notes are aspiring to become entitled, even if they lack the ability for it. The titles of the middle chapters of the book, want to head the front page. Nobody here is satisfied with what they have. Shouts want to become whispers, whereas the whispers want to be heard loudly. People are searching for mirrors to reflect their image in other people's faces.

PART 7

If the current situation continues, our language will one day, give us an ultimatum to leave us, if its mis-use continues. People are conning each other through the medium of language. People are using words to spin a web of lies to cheat others. They are brazenly using words and language to spread lies and scam others. Words are being used to turn lies into truth and truth into lies. If someday, our language gets offended by these low tricks of humans, what shall we do?

PART 8

Today is as worthless as turned milk. There is a horrible stench everywhere. Prayers have become powerless. There is a bad odor in the air. A reeking miasma hangs over the city. Even the sky is pouring down stinking rain. There is a rotting and burning smell in the air. Is this the smell of duplicity? Or the effluvium of wickedness? This choking malodor is so bad that the few remaining good souls in the world are struggling and drowning in it. This stink is emanating from cheating shopkeepers, greedy doctors and engineers and the masked middle class---all of them. All the

incense sticks, perfumes and room fresheners of the world will not be able to get rid of this smell because it is inside us. It is the malodorous smell of out ill intentions. It is the stench of deceit and craftiness. It is not just a smell. It is a complete life style. If you want to push away this odor, it sticks to your fingers. As if it is not a smell but the web of some poisonous spider. It is such an inauspicious, ill-omened stench that smelling it is a hellish experience, it is like dying a thousand deaths.

I am struggling to breathe in the fresh air. My lungs are filling with the foul smell of rotting humanity. People of the world, give me some fresh air! Or bury me alive. I no longer want to breathe in this reeking air.

Dear Readers,

Is Sudhakar really eccentric? I leave the decision to you.

Chandrakant

There are twenty people in my office. We are all afraid of each other. We also scare each other. But the story is not about those twenty people. This story is about Chandrakant.

Chandrakant was an erudite scholar of Sanskrit. At all times, seemly or unseemly, correct or incorrect shlokas would flow from his mouth like a man with mucus flowing from a runny nose. You would like to stop that runny nose, but that silly thing would continue to flow. He had a shloka memorized for every occasion, for every incident. He would eat and drink shlokas, slept on a bed of shlokas and wrapped himself with them. Shloka was his weapon, his shield. But what could he do about his incorrect pronunciation, which made a mess of his shlokas and their supposed meaning?

Chandrakant's second passion was quoting the poetic works of Dinkar and Maithili Sharan Gupta, every chance he got, like a croaking frog. Frogs may forget to croak but he never gave up an occasion to narrate the lines of Dinkar's and Maithili Sharan Gupta's poetry. It seemed as if he was the articulate photocopier of the poems of Dinkar and Gupta. He would cough in Dinkar and Gupta, sneeze in their lines, yawned in Dinkar and Gupta, stretch in Dinkar and Gupta. But what could he do about his confused memory, which mixed up the lines of these two poets and made them interchangeable?

Chandrakant was always followed by the suffix 'Ji'. He wanted everyone to call him 'Chandrakant Ji'. Call him 'Chandrakant ji' endearingly; address him as 'Chandrakant Ji' while yelling at him. He was 'Chandrakant Ji' when called respectfully or disrespectfully. His soul resided in the term 'Ji'. If you removed the "Ji' from his name, he became unadorned. "We have not ruled this country for hundreds of years just like that", was his proud quote. "We kill the minds of people," he boasted. His ideals were Chanakya and Machiavelli. He spent his entire time strategizing. How to create a division between two people, how to pull another man down….all this mischief was like a tonic to him. He would use shrewd strategy to achieve success. He would provoke A against B and B against A and C against both A and B. So much so, that once when I went to his house, his wife appealed to me, "Bhai sahab, please try to reason with him. He plays politics at home too. He always tries to turn the children against me."

If he found me reading a book in my spare time, he remarked, "Studying is no good. There are far more important things to do in life. Banging your head against a book is useless." This mindset of his was the reason that his kids failed many times in every class.

Once the boss got angry at him for all his scheming. In the cabin, he remained mute, but once he came out, he started shouting amidst people, "I will hit the bastard with my slippers. Who does he think he is?" we could not help smiling when we heard his rants. Our boss was a six foot tall,

well-built man, whereas Chandrakant was barely five feet and skinny.

Chandrakant was in the habit of chewing 'paan' all the time. Every morning, he would go to the paan shop and had many paans made with 120 number tobacco and he would chew the cud the entire day. He considered the entire world to be his personal spittoon and would glorify it by spitting his paan stains all over the place. If his paan stock ran out and there was no paan shop to be found, he would become restless. When he had a paan in his mouth and one in his pocket, his face would radiate self-confidence. But without a paan, his radiance would vanish. A listlessness would overcome him. His soul was in his paans, and the 120 number paan resided in his heart.

"I never bear the burden of a relationship that doesn't benefit me," Chandrakant would say. He was an expert at riding the waves of opportunism. The person he would curse openly before ten people, would be found later, laughing and drinking tea or coffee with him. When he needed to borrow money, he would not hesitate to ask the same person whom he had wronged before. On the other hand, if anyone helped him, he would curse that person behind his back and plot against him. He would often declare proudly about someone, "I will annoy him so much that his blood pressure will increase." To him, all relationships were disposable. He would use them and then throw them away in the dustbin of time.

Actually, Chandrakant's entire life was wrapped up in lies, deceit and scheming. If he was moving towards the east and

you asked him where he was going, he would claim to be going west. Sometimes, he didn't realize if he was talking to a driver or peon or to an educated person. He would then shake up the drivers and peons with the heat of his mispronounced and accented English. When in need, he would make a pitiful face and borrow money from people but later bluntly refuse to repay it. Not only that, he would threaten the person who had lent him the money.

Chandrakant had one more hobby---giving sermons. He had the unique ability to discourse on any topic for hours. He had the capacity to say nothing meaning full in hundreds and thousands of words. His sermons included extracts from Ramayana and Mahabharat. It is another matter that at times the characters in Ramayana would appear in Mahabharat and Mahabharat incidents would occur in the Ramayan epoch. He viewed everything equally. In his discourses, time and era drank from the same pool.

Sometimes, he would discourse on the topics of dignity and glory. He would worry about the deterioration and lapse of moral values. He would narrate a story from the puranas about honesty and truthfulness. But people knew him. Hence, they winked at each other and listened to the sermon with interest. Actually, once a female colleague overheard him talking to office peon about the sex life of another female co-worker. Upon being asked, he replied that he was discussing the sexual relations of the characters in D.H.Lawrence's book. Any talk of honesty and truth from somebody who spews such salacious gossip about his colleagues, their wives and daughters, is laughably

insincere. A female colleague, on hearing of gossip spread by him about her loose character, sued him for sexual harassment.

At times, he would go around the office, asking for donations. I am doing a 'Nag-Yagya'. All my enemies and all the snakes in my life will be destroyed. But he forgot that even after all attempts to avoid it, the great 'Janmejay' was killed by a snake.

Because of these actions of him, office colleagues started to say that if you encounter Chandrakant and a snake together, beware of Chandrakant, as he is more dangerous than a snake. But Chandrakant considered this an compliment. He would proudly say, "The person I bite, doesn't live long enough to ask for water.

Then there came a time, when rumors started that he was taking call girls to hotels to enjoy himself. Then it was heard that his wife had separated from him and taken the kids with her. It was learnt that he would force his wife to go to 'wife-swapping' parties. When she refused, he beat her. Like this his, family life was destroyed. He began to come to the office drunk.

And then, one day in the office, Chandrakant, who was under the influence of drinks, quarreled with K.K. They both berated each other. K.K's influence reached the top. There was a departmental enquiry and Chandrakant was suspended. Many people had grudges against him. They further stoked the fire. His wife sued him for domestic violence. Because of all this, he ended up getting fired.

After that, I didn't meet Chandrakant for many years. Although rumors and whispers about him were often heard. That he had become depressed. That he had tried to commit suicide by drinking phenyl. That he was under the influence of 'Rahu Mahadasha'. That he was doing the round of astrologers and selling off his clothes and utensils to get various astrological stone rings made.

Four or five years later, I was standing at the Ram Manohar Lohia bus stop. Suddenly somebody called me. I turned around to see a thin, skinny man. He had an untidy, long beard. His hair was messy. His cheeks were sunken. His eyes seemed to be embedded in his skull. I had to look closely to recognize him.

"Chandrakant, you?" I exclaimed! He was still chewing his pan. He took my hand and uttering nonsensical things, walked me to the Talkatora Gardens. It was evening. A saucer like full moon had risen above the trees. All of a sudden, he let go of my hands and started to point at the moon.

"Do you see that? What is it?" he said.

"It's the moon, what else?"

"Look at it carefully," he said.

I had seen a full moon many times.

"The moon is so beautiful," he said. I agreed with him and nodded my head.

"So, you agree that you are not the moon. The moon is the moon and you are you," he said. I was not able to understand.

"And because you are not the moon, you are not beautiful?" he pointed at me. What could I say? I looked at him in amazement.

"Look at the moon, at the moon. Which bastard says that there are spots on the moon?" his finger was pointed at the moon and there was a craziness in his eyes.

"Listen, Chandrakant.."

"Shut up! Be quiet! The moon was beautiful even in the days of Ramayana. It was beautiful even in the Mahabharat era. It is still beautiful now."

I left him at Talkatora Gardens in the moonlit night, murmuring to himself, and came out to the street. He was still singing praises of the moon to the trees, owls, bats and stray dogs. The fact was that he had lost his mind. But in spite of his craziness, he had not forgotten his self-love. He was searching for his own beauty in the brightness of the moon.

Life is quite bizarre. You think you are somebody. You think you are a genius. You think that after Chankya, you are the most well versed in politics and scheming. Machiavelli has been reborn in you. But look where destiny brings you. Time cuts down even the greatest of the great. Nobody can escape the erosion of time. And there is something even more powerful. That is the victim's curse. Those whom you torture needlessly, make them cry, whom you harm without any

purpose, beware of their curse. Be afraid of their grief. Chandrakant had been a victim of time. And he was swallowed by the curse of those whom he had needlessly harmed.

Destiny

The train blew a long whistle and picked up speed slowly. The platform was soon left behind. Long rows of slums could now be seen on either side. I stopped looking outside and turned my scrutiny inside. The person sitting opposite was reading a religious book. He was about forty or forty-five years old. There were thick glasses on his eyes. Sitting next to him was a ten or eleven years old boy, watching the view outside through the window. I took out the Friday literature weekly from my bag and was soon engrossed in reading the stories and poetry in it.

At the next station, I got down from the train to drink water. When I came back, I found the man sitting across me reading the palm of the son of the woman seated beside him. I sat down. The gentleman continued to inspect the boy's palm. Then he spoke to the woman, "His fate line is very strong. He will have a good destiny. He will earn fame, happiness, prosperity, everything in life." The woman was listening closely.

"What is his date of birth?" the gentleman asked.

"The first of April," she replied.

The train whistled again and started to move.

"His primary number is one. The ruling star for number one is the sun. Teach your son to worship the sun every morning when he gets up. I am going to write down a 'mantra' for

you. Whenever he is in trouble, he should recite it 108 times. The problems will vanish." The gentleman wrote down the mantra on a piece of paper and said, "The mantra is 'Om! Hing, Hing, Suryah Namah!' Your son should recite it regularly. Also, make him wear a golden ruby ring on a Sunday on his ring finger. Please ensure that the ruby touches his skin."

The interest of the people sitting near us and watching these proceedings was growing. Very soon, there was a queue of people wanting their palms read. Those who were sitting elsewhere on the coach also started to come forward. There were two kinds of people in the throng. While old people and women were regarding the gentleman with respect and belief, there was doubt in the eyes of the young.

"Surely, he is a charlatan! We have seen many such astrologers. Fooling simpletons and extracting money from them is their true motive," remarked a young man in the crowd. Some others agreed with him. But these remarks had no effect on the gentleman. He continued to read palms and give advice.

"You have had a hard life since childhood. Your health is not good. You worry a lot. Your mind is troubled," said the gentleman to an old fellow. The latter listened to him and agreed.

"On a monday, at dawn, you should dip a moon stone ring in raw cow's milk and while reciting "Om Chandrayah Namah' eleven times, put it on the pinkie finger of your right hand. Your anxiety and worries will disappear," advised the gentleman.

The women, the children, the elderly and even the youth present in the coach were now taking turns to have their palms read and listening to his advice with great satisfaction! He was giving mantras written on pieces of paper to some people and also explaining astrological facts. A man wearing golden framed glasses and a golden chain, tried to give him thousand rupees but the gentleman politely declined.

"This is my hobby, not my profession. I never charge for reading palms," said the gentleman.

I observed that most of the people in the coach were now getting impressed by his knowledge of palmistry and numerology. The doubters were now getting fewer.

"Your primary number is three. Therefore, the appropriate stone for you is the topaz. It comes in five colours. But you choose the yellow and get it set in a gold ring and start to wear it on a Thursday. And whenever you are troubled and anxious, just recite the mantra "Om Brahaspatiye Namah!' That will soothe you," the gentleman was advising a woman.

With a long whistle, the train slowed down, as it approached a station. The crowd began to disperse after saying goodbye to the gentleman. The passengers were busy collecting their luggage. The man patted the wrist of the boy sitting next to him and gestured to him to get up. Then he started to use sign language to explain something to the boy. The boy responded with an 'Ei, Ei' sound. I was watching him with surprise.

“He is my son. He was born deaf and dumb,” he said in sad tones.

The train had come to a halt with a jerk. We picked up our luggage and walked towards the exit.

“Did you ever get him examined?” I asked as we got down on the platform.

“Yes, I got him examined and tested a lot! But nobody can change what is written in one’s destiny!” he replied in a grieved voice.

Then he said goodbye, and grabbing his son’s hand, moved away. I watched him as he faded into the distance. Who knew what palmistry and astrology predicted about his own son?

My Father, His Ancestors and Their Books / My Father and His Ancestral Books of Origins

My father's soul resided in the cupboards filled with books in his study. The huge study had at least ten such cupboards. At least six of them belonged to either the British or the pre-British era. My father had inherited these strong wooden cupboards from his ancestors. The cupboards were filled with many old books and manuscripts. Some of these manuscripts were engraved on bronze leaves. My father would occasionally dust this inheritance and arrange them in an orderly fashion. He used to tell us that he had inherited some rare books from his ancestors. They even held the manuscripts of the Geeta and the Ramayana from the old and middle-ages. The other four cupboards held my father's own collection of books.

We were forbidden to touch these cupboards. However, often in my father's absence, I would secretly enter his study and stand at the threshold of this mysterious universe and descend into my own thoughts, as I stared at these books. Father told us that his great grandfather was a writer and poet of the old, ethnic Braj language, dating to the times of Babu Bharatendu Harishchandra ji. Once father showed me a dated book, with yellowing pages, titled 'Four Directions and Ten Stories'. On my asking, he claimed that this book had been written by his grandfather. The walls of the study

were adorned by the framed pictures of many impressive looking people. According to my father, they were our ancestors.

Our ancestors were landlords or zamindars. They were scholars and hunters. One wall of the study was decorated with the large pelt of a tiger. My father told us the story of the British Lord Governor, who once came to hunt in our forests and was attacked by a ferocious tiger. My father's great grandfather, at tremendous risk to his own life, faced the tiger and in spite of ending up hurt, tore apart the tiger's jaw single handedly. Much gratified and pleased by his display of bravery, the Lord Governor bestowed on him the title of "Ray Bahadur". The hide adorning the study wall belonged to the same historic tiger.

The six ancient cupboards handed down by our ancestors, held within them a strange and secret world. It seemed to me that whenever father opened the doors of these cupboards, he would enter the world of yore. Maybe then he could see his famed ancestors and talk to them. The portal for the ancestors to enter this world was also the books. Many a times, it appeared to me as if my father was talking to some invisible people as he turned the pages of the ancient books. Did our ancestors come to life in the world of books contained in the magical cupboards? I can't say anything for certain, but one thing was clear. My father's heart beat for those books and manuscripts. My father had created his own secret life within this mortal life.

Dubey ji was my father's dear friend. This friendship had developed by studying and growing up together, while

going through the ups and downs of this life. Sometimes, it seemed to me that maybe my father and Dubey ji had even gone through the same childhood illnesses together! Like my father, Dubey ji was also a connoisseur of good literature. He too was a Hindi professor in the local college, like my father. Often, he would visit with his young son, Palash. While they got lost in their talks, we siblings were responsible for looking after Palash. We kids would pass our time playing cricket, football or badminton on the front lawn.

By this time, I had reached the conclusion that these six cupboards and the old books in them, were a gateway for him to the world of our ancestors. A bridge, a doorway! The fragrance from these old books and their decrepit, yellow pages, filled father with energy. As long as this elixir existed, my father was invincible and immortal! As he rummaged among these old books and manuscripts, his eyes held a strange glow. His face would be illuminated by a divine light. I had read in many fairy tales, that the soul of the protagonist would be trapped in a parrot. As long as the parrot was safe, nothing could happen to those people. Similarly, I felt that my father's soul was safely ensconced in those ancient books and manuscripts, stored in those old cupboards.

Once, on the festival of Deepawali, Dubey ji and his son, Palash, loaded with sweets, came to visit us. Dubey ji and my father sat in the living room, talking. Palash was with us, lighting crackers and rockets, on our front lawn. We kids were enjoying ourselves a lot with the fireworks. I ignited a rocket in a bottle. It went up and burst into amazing

pyrotechnics. Palash copied me by putting another rocket in a bottle and lighting it up. But at the exact moment, the empty bottle tilted a little. Before we could straighten it, the rocket lifted up and went straight through the window of the study and burst there. We stood stunned! I ran inside towards the study. The wooden cupboards had caught fire! My father and Dubey ji were already on the scene. Surely, the rocket had taken flight from the tilted bottle, gone through the study window and burst against the cupboards! My father stood there, bewildered, while his precious books burned. Then, all of a sudden, my father seemed to come to his senses. He and Dubey ji ran to fill buckets of water to pour on the flames. But the fire kept on spreading. As if the god of Fire, himself, was enveloping the room with his terror!

I ran to the other room to dial 100 for the fire brigade. When I returned, the entire room was in flames. A thick, dark smoke engulfed the room, making visibility poor. The smoke entered my nose and eyes, causing me to blink and making my eyes water and it was difficult to breathe. I found Dubey ji outside the room. Upon my asking, he replied that my father was still inside, fighting a losing battle with the fire!

The fire brigades arrived soon after. It took half an hour to control the fire. By then, the entire room had been reduced to ashes. The ancient books and manuscripts were all gone. My eyes were desperately searching for my father. But he was nowhere to be seen.

From that day onwards, nobody ever saw my father again! Did he burn that day with the books and manuscripts? But

no remains were ever found. There was no proof of him having burned down. Nobody knew how or where he had vanished. Did the fire open a mysterious portal or doorway, through which my father disappeared into the ancient world of his ancestors, taking with him his rare books and manuscripts? Whatever happened, my father has been missing since that day. Surely, his soul resided in the ancient cupboards, with their rare books……

A Different Kind of Story or Ganeshi's Tale

How do I start this story? I can start it in the traditional style of "Once upon a time, there lived a person named Ganeshi…". Or I can start it with a few explosive statements written in italics. For example:

This story is situated at the boundary between sleep and wakefulness. This story is positioned at the juncture of the beginning and the end. When the daylight starts to wane and dusk approaches, the earth wants to say something and the sky wants to listen. That statement is Ganeshi's story.

Or at initiation, I can make a heady cocktail of sleep and dreams for the readers, which will intoxicate them. Such as:

Some stories are not stories. They are semi-legible alphabets. Indistinct sounds. Ganeshi is dreaming in his heavy sleep. In his dreams, there is a primitive forest. There is the pungent smell of rotting leaves in the air. Afar, there is a feminine voice singing a forgotten song. The voice is that of his wife! A flustered Ganeshi pursues that sound. He comes across some ruins. There is a yellow light inside. But as soon as Ganeshi reaches it, the light vanishes and the song stops. In the sea of this haunted darkness, Ganeshi tries his utmost to swim like a drowning man. Suddenly he awakens. Maybe these thoughts were imaginary and now he is in a dream. Surrounding him, is a dark fog. On the other side of that fog, he can hear his wife laughing…. "Catch me if you can!" or

perhaps, Ganeshi is dreaming in sections. Now the next part…the haunted ruins are sleeping in the cover of complete darkness. Ganeshi's heart is beating fast. Just then the heart-rending scream of a woman freezes his blood.

Or, I can start this story with a strange mixture of nostalgia and flashback, which will take the readers to the past. Like—there is a house in a village. A child lives there. He catches butterflies and fireflies. He collects the feathers of birds. Plays with puppies and kittens. Laughs at the rainbow. Hides in bales of straw. Bathes in the village well. Raises himself up on his toes to ring the temple bell. Rolls bicycle tyres. Plays with sticks and marbles. Throws pebbles in the village pond to create ripples. Goes to fish in the river that flows past his village. Climbs the trees to eat mangoes, guavas and blackberries. Flies kites with his playmates. See, he is now moving away with a long branch in one hand and a retrieved kite in the other. He is covered in dust but has a victorious smile. That back, which is vanishing in the distance, looks familiar. Robbing another kite, he soon fades away from sight. That is our protagonist—Ganeshi!

Or I can kick off my story like this. The following is a completely imaginary tale. This story's protagonist Ganeshi and all other characters are figments of the author's imagination. The situations that these characters find themselves in are also imaginary. The places where these events take place are also unreal. This story, its characters, places and events described, bear no resemblance to actual people, places or events. If such a similarity occurs, it is merely a co-incidence. In fact, this story is so imaginary, so

artificial that sometimes there it creates the impression of truth. This chimera is the soul of the story. This illusion makes it like our lives.

Or, I can set up the narrative like this--- on the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month of the twenty-fourth year of the twenty-first century A.D, the following events, concerning Ganeshi, unfold.

So, our Ganeshi is the village postman. He is around thirty-five years of age but still unmarried. He is balding around the middle of his head. There are some grey hairs at his temples. Some ancient laughter lines are engraved on his face like the dry craters in the planet Mars seen in the satellite images and which the scientists say held water once. Some people believe that Ganeshi was like that even in his childhood. Maybe he was born like that! Did he look like this in his past life too?

In fact, Ganeshi hails from this village only. After completing his class tenth, he was appointed a postman in this very village. His house situated at the edge of the village, stands amidst a grove of banana trees. His house looks as if it is ready to fly away at any moment. As if, his house is a beautiful imagination in the mind of the village.

So, people call him 'Dak-babu' or 'Chitthi babu' or 'Dakiya babu'. Ganeshi collects the village post every day from the post office of the neighboring township. Except for holidays and Sundays. He is responsible for distributing all kinds of posts, be they money orders, parcels registered letters or simply post cards.

With his pen over his ear, Ganeshi can be found reading aloud a letter to some villager or paying somebody for a money order and getting their thumbprint on the form. Drenched with perspiration, Ganeshi can be found drinking tumblers of water at somebody's door step. He can be found lounging on the platform surrounding the village banyan tree, with his cycle leaning against it. These are his daily chores. Ganeshi can be seen cycling away, tingling his bicycle bell and asking after everybody in the village.

All the cows and buffaloes in the village know Ganeshi. When they spot him, the eyes of the bulls seem to be wishing him a good day. The stray village dogs follow his bicycle, seemingly giving him a guard of honour.

For the villagers, Ganeshi is their link with the outside world. He is the messenger between them and their loved ones. He has his own place amongst the villagers. He has his own status. So what if Ganeshi is unmarried? In his imagination, he has created an image of his wife. He laughs and jokes around with that image. There is sulking and reconciling. There is enjoyable banter.

After he is finished with his letter distribution, he rests on the platform under the shade of the banyan tree. Passersby say hello to him. Sometimes Ganeshi waves, at times he is lost in his own thoughts. At times, he dreams with his eyes open, at other times he is lost in a fog of sleep.

So, our over imaginative Ganeshi is lost in his own thoughts. While the summer afternoon is burning all around him, inside his heart, there is a shower of rain, there is romance. In his dreams he is humming a song by Mukesh, 'Stop you

who is moving away, I am your travelling companion.' Now he is at home. His wife is massaging his feet. The tense knots in his body are relaxing.

"Why are you looking so sad today?" he asks his wife. Looking at her face, he realizes that even the full moon can be sad at times. Is there any turmoil in the sky of her thoughts?

"Come, let us go to a movie tonight," he says to her.

His wife brightens up like the sun. That brings a smile to Ganeshi's face.

The clue to walking on water is knowing where the stepping stones are, he thinks.

It is a stationery moment. Stretched from the earth to the sky. Expanding from the body to the mind. Speedless. Silent. Wordless.

Ganeshi throws a pebble into the pool of silence. He says, "Lena!" his wife replies, "Hmm." Ganeshi says, "You are mine". His wife replies, "I am yours." Ganeshi asks, "What is your name?". She answers, "Lena." Ganeshi says, "Kareena?". His wife answers, "Leena with a L". then she asks, "Tell me my name!" He answers, "Sweetheart!" His wife says, "Stop." Ganeshi says nothing but kisses her. She melts into his arms like the moonlight.

Ganeshi feels mischievous again. He tickles her body. Every part of her body starts to laugh. Her ample breasts start to dance. He takes her in his arms. Her body gives off an intoxicating smell like ripe mulberry. This time he sings aloud in Kishore Kumar style, "I saw a flower bud in my

dreams at night and then she became a garland around my neck."

Ganeshi wants the world to stop still. The most beautiful woman in the world is with him now. She is entwined in the hair on his chest. She is in the touch of his fingers. Her taste is in his lips. She flows in his veins and arteries. She is the brightest star shining in his sky. His wife is a deep, blue pool. He has drowned in that pool. There are flames in that pool. He is lost in the flames. There is a painting in front of him. He has entered that painting. His wife is the door to a hidden treasure. He is lost in that treasure. Like a first-time visitor to the caves of Ajanta and Ellora….amazed and speechless. He is intoxicated, even though he has not drunk anything. His life is so rosy in his dreams.

His wife is a green beacon in the deserted forest of his life. She is the dancing sunlight on the mountain peak. She is the aroma of ripe mangoes in the summer. She is a hymn that reaches the sky. She is a piano playing the seven notes. She is a thread dipped in steel and honey, tied to Ganeshi. She is a river of molten gold. She is a fresh blossom in the flower bed of Ganeshi's life. Ganeshi has now taken his wife to the mountains on his honeymoon. There is warm sunlight and the air is pure and virginal. His married life is his entire universe that he tries to measure from the fixed axis inside him, while his wife spreads her innocent smile around him. Ganeshi is on the search for the hidden fountain of their happiness.

Suddenly Ganeshi remembers that today he has forgotten to sort the mail at the post office. He leaves his wife there and

runs off to the post office. There is post for every house in the village but like always there is no letter for him…

And here, Ganeshi wakes up! He is lying upside down on the platform beneath the banyan tree. He feels that his life is stuck in time like a thorn. The day is half spent like a half-burned body. He feels aged like an old tree, whose every limb is hurting. He remembers his dream. He thinks that his fruit is rotting away before fully ripening. As if he has only reaped a handful of harvest from acres of land. He likens his life to an empty bee hive. His depressive loneliness drums inside his uninhabited heart and he struggles to get out of his life.

At last, he wraps a towel around his head and picks up his bicycle and speaking to the stray dogs, he proceeds on his way, thinking about the wife who is not in his life but exists; is not there, but pervades every aspect of his life.

(You must have noted that the beginning of the story stretches to the middle. Hence the middle of the story reaches till the end. The end of this story has not been written. That ending will come at some other time.)

Helplessness

When Jhunia reached there, the bungalow, wrapped in last night's humidity, was boiling in the heat. There was an acridity in the seven o' clock morning sun. That acridity was reminding her of the memsahib's bitter tone of voice. As soon as she opened the outer gate and entered the premises, the stern barking of the dog seemed to pour molten lead into her ears. Rubbing them with her fingers, she reached the bungalow's door. It had been opened before she could reach for the doorbell.

"You are coming late every day. This will not do." Memsahib's morning face without make up was as terrifying as her words.

"My kid was sick…" she visualized the helplessness in her voice wriggling like the severed tail of a lizard.

"A new excuse every time!" Memsahib seemed to throw out her powerless voice with a kick. It continued to tremble in the corner.

"All the dishes are dirty. The rooms have to be cleaned. Clothes have to be washed. Should we keep waiting for your highness to come and start the work? Hmmm…" memsahib's sharp tones pierced her ears.

She silently walked towards the kitchen. But she could feel memsahib's thorny gaze pricking her back. As if the killer

gaze would pierce her skin and tear her insides. Soon, she was battling the mound of dirty dishes.

"Listen, Jhunia." Memsahib's voice darted across the living room and then died in a corner. Surrounded by dirty dishes, she didn't pay attention to the voice.

"Are you deaf?"

"Yes Memsahib?"

"Be careful with the dishes. The crockery is very expensive. There should be no breakage. If you break anything, I will deduct that from your salary, understood?" Memsahib's voice felt like the yelp of an injured dog.

"Yes, Memsahib."

These were important people. They were sahibs. They could say anything. But if she retorted, they could fire her. They could deduct her salary…she thought. Didn't powerful people feel any kindness? Did they lack a heart? Did they never do any wrong?

Finished with the dishes, she picked up the broom to clean the rooms. She picked up a toy from the floor of the kid's room and put it down on the table. Immediately, a sharp, self-important voice penetrated her heart. "Why did you touch my toy, dirty dumbo? Moron!" This was Jojo, the spoiled eight-years old son of Memsahib. He was always either playing games on his mobile or watching cartoons on the television. Neither memsahib nor the sahib had any time for him, so they provided him with all the amenities. He went to an expensive international school in an air-

conditioned bus. Sometimes, if he was late, memsahib's driver would take him to school in their Mercedes.

Jhunia's son, Munna, did not study in Jojo's school. He went to a government school. Although, Munna walked to school, carrying his heavy satchel, his face blossomed like a flower. When he laughed, Jhunia's world would bloom—the birds would start chirping in the trees, a rainbow would appear in the sky, butterflies would flutter over the rows of flowers, the concrete jungle would become verdant. Munna was a wise kid, always ready to help his mother.

Broom in hand, she knocked on Sahib's door and entered. Sahib came home late in the night and always slept till late in the day. Most days of the month, he was away for work. Jhunia's instinct told her that he was not a good man. Once, when memsahib was away from home, sahib had winked at her and said, "Give me a massage. I will pay you." Jhunia found his voice beastly, not human. Sahib smelled of booze. There was lust in his eyes. She had refused and left the room. But she could not gather up the courage to report this incident to memsahib. What if she got fired? She had not even told her rickshaw puller husband. He loved her a lot. He would have been hurt by this incident, but in these expensive times, it was not possible to subsist on his income alone. Therefore, she was forced to work for these people.

She had finished sweeping with the broom and was now wiping the floors with a wet cloth.

"Hey, why are you wiping with such a wet cloth? What if someone slips?" memsahib's voice was always waiting to

pounce on her like a preying animal. For the slightest mistake, she would tear her to pieces.

Now there was a pile of dirty clothes facing her.

"The clothes are not being washed properly these days." This was sahib. He had entered the scene quietly. She wondered if she had acquiesced to his request that day, would he still be speaking like this? The very thought brought a bitter taste in her mouth.

"These people are always slacking off." Memsahib had an old enmity with her. "Even the dishes remain dirty. Work well or I will take it out of your salary." This was not merely a voice but a beastly paw of threat that wanted to rip her face.

A wave of revolt rose inside Jhunia. She wanted to rant and rave, she wanted to tell these sahibs that she worked honestly and properly. She was not a slacker. She wanted to claw at memsahib's face for these false allegations. But she remained quiet.

A mouse, escaping memsahib's gaze ran across the room. But Jhunia caught sight of it. For a moment, she entertained the vision of that mouse biting memsahib's finger at night. Memsahib could not deduct the mouse's salary nor could she scold it or fire it from the job. This thought cheered her up. We have to find joy in the smallest things in life- she thought.

"Listen, I am off to the market. Complete your work properly, understood?" memsahib threw a grenade at her. "Listen, take care." These last words were for the sahib.

As soon as memsahib left, sahib planted himself firmly in the living room, on the pretext of reading the newspaper. She was sweeping the other side of the room. She felt his dirty gaze observing the maneuvers of her half-bent body. Bashfully, she tried to finish her work quickly. There were still a few rooms left to sweep in this big house.

Just then, there was the sound of the door-bell. Sahib went to the door. It was the cook, Meena. Sahib started to leer at her too. Meena avoided him and entered the kitchen. He also followed her to the kitchen door.

"Listen! You cook well. Make me something tasty fast." His lustful voice echoed off the dishes in the kitchen. He seemed to be drooling. His red eyes were roaming over her body. She had taken off her dupatta before cooking. Sahib's tawdry actions were making her uncomfortable. Sahib kept on staring at Meena's body for some time. Then he resumed his seat in the living room and switched on the T.V to watch half naked girls singing and dancing on some channel.

The door-bell rang again. Sahib eagerly went to the door. This time, it was the fourteen-years old daughter of the laundry man, Munni. She had come to collect clothes to be ironed. But sahib had started his lascivious actions again.

"What a dirt bag this man is. Doesn't even spare a little girl," she thought. "Such a monster should be remanded in police custody." But he was a big, important man, she knew. He was moneyed. He had influence. Such people paid off to escape the law.

After completing the living room, she went towards the other rooms. She found him following her.

"Listen, Jhunia! If you are ever in need of money, take it from me." Sahib tried to soften his tone. But there was lechery in his eyes. She knew that the butcher was sweetening the bait. He was trying to bribe her. She didn't reply and continued to sweep the room. "I have asked you earlier. Give me a massage sometimes and I will make you happy."

He was interrupted by the door-bell again. He sweared out loud, as he was forced to go to the door. Jhunia let out a breath of relief. On one hand, there was memsahib, always barking like a mad dog and on the other hand, there was this prurient man, ready to cross all limits. What a bother!

As she completed her work and started to leave, she found him staring at her again from the living room door. She bashfully tightened her sari's pallu over her body and came out of the house. She knew that sahib had been drinking in the morning today, because she had smelled booze on him as she passed him by. She walked away with quick steps. But she felt his lewd gaze stuck on her back. She was filled with revulsion.

"Listen, come early in the evening and take your salary from me." His salacious voice seemed to wrap itself around her. She felt that this was not a house but the bottom of a dark well. As if there were cockroaches crawling all over her body. She felt like running far, far away from here and never coming back. But then she remembered her sick daughter, her expensive medicines and the empty food containers in her kitchen…

How Can I Laugh?

How can I laugh? My best friend for the past fourteen years, my dog Jacky, is dead. My sons have left me and gone far away. I am being betrayed by the people I trusted. The pigeon who lived on my balcony and whom I fed daily, has been killed by the stray cat in the neighborhood. The witness to my loneliness, the tail-less lizard on the walls of my room, has been electrocuted. And it has been raining heavily for the last few days. The Yamuna river in my hometown has crossed the danger level. The fear of flood is hovering over the entire city. My doctor tells me, "You should mix with people. You should visit them. You should laugh out loud and be happy." ***But how can I laugh?***

When there is not the fear of flood, then the country is drought ridden, or there is a tsunami or earthquake. Or else, the municipal taps in the city go dry for many days or there is a blackout for ten hours or more every day. Or else there is the inflation—prices of vegetables, pulses, oil, cooking gas, petrol, kerosene—all are beyond the reach of the common man. Returning from the college, I stay alone in my room for a long time, staring at the darkness. If I switch on the television, the news fills me with depression. There is the news of dozens of pilgrims dying due to a stampede at pilgrimage sites, or the news of slums and tenements being bulldozed out of existence or farmers committing suicide under the burden of heavy loans or formidable prisoners escaping from police custody while being brought to court

or Hindi speaking people being targeted and beaten in non-Hindi speaking states. Sometimes, there is the news of a pressure cooker or stove or gas cylinder exploding or a school bus breaking through a bridge and falling into the river or two trains colliding because of the driver falling asleep or else an airplane accident and dozens or hundreds of people dying due to these accidents. Somewhere there would be the opponents of the reservation policy threating violence or the pro-reservation people uprooting train tracks or blocking national highways. When these things don't happen, terrorists are exploding bombs or there are riots between two religious groups.

Desolation from this news sometimes makes me go and stand at my balcony, only to witness both dogs and beggars scrounging for food in the garbage heap in front of the empty house opposite me. There was nobody looking after the living but dead people's statues adorned intersections and were decorated with garlands. All this made me feel like there was a heavy stone on my heart. This was the second decade of the twenty-first century where the rich in the country were luxuriating in wealth while the laboring class was dying of hunger.

My neighbor, K.D.Singh, worked in an MNC, in a very high position. He got lakhs of rupees in salary every month. He owned three or four luxury cars and SUVs. Every other day, there would be parties at his place, which lasted till late at night. Rivers of alcohol flowed at his house. His kids were growing up drinking chilled beer instead of water. On the other hand, there was the neighborhood laundry-man who

lived in one room. His wife was always ill. Lack of proper nutrition had dried up her breast milk, which lead to her new born baby's premature death in infancy. His two other kids with runny noses never got proper meals and didn't go to school.

My other neighbor, Sanjeev Pratap, visited his place only for a few hours. People said that he lived elsewhere with his first wife. His second wife and the child he had with her lived next to me. He was living a double life with elan! His old landlord had many times given him the notice to vacate but Pratap had great influence not only with the neighborhood hooligans but also with the area's police. Because of his contacts, he was neither paying the rent nor vacating the house but was in the process of taking it over permanently.

I was appointed to teach those boys and girls in the college who found my teachings humorous. These kids came to the college in big cars merely to while away the time. Their parents were industrialists, businessmen or politicians who gave huge donations to the college. Many members of the college's managing committee were in their pockets. During exams, they cheated with impunity, yet their names appeared in the merit list. The ideal for these kids was not Mahatma Gandhi, but shirtless actors like Salman Khan or Shahrookh Khan, who advertised Lux soap, nude and surrounded in pools with half naked starlets. Girls didn't idolize Mother Teresa but actors like Sunny Leone or Mallika Sherawat or Rakhi Savant, who were known for bold and hot scenes in movies.

This was the time when people gifted expensive foreign liquor to bribe people to get their incomplete work done. People were using all means, legal and illegal, in a lust to gather more money. Wealth and position were valued in society, not talent and intelligence. Those who dared to tell the truth were either fired or were given favourite cronies as their superiors. Crimes against the down trodden and minority were becoming common.

I gave my utmost to my job in the college, teaching with dedication and commitment, but my work was never praised. On the contrary, it was always under a microscopic inspection to find imaginary faults. The principal of my college wanted that apart from my college duty, I should fulfill some duties at his home too—like buying his groceries and sweets with my own money or paying the school fees of his children. He also laboured under the mis-conception that he was a talented poet and story-teller. He wanted me to write a book in homage to his great personality and his written works. He was also fond of foreign liquor but I never touched alcohol. Every evening, drinking professors would throng to his place. Amidst the consumption of mutton and alcohol, conspiracies were created there to place thorns in the paths of other honest professors. Because I was not ready to become a member of this liquor drinking clique, because I would not write books singing false praises, because I would not spend my hard-earned money to buy gifts for him, all my other talents were meaning less to him. In his eyes, I was a useless fellow, a mis-fit who had migrated from a past century. My biggest fault was that I was not a sycophant. The art of flattery and false adulation was not in

my blood. Nobody could slap my back and make me spineless. And in the India of twenty-first century this was a severe shortcoming, an obstacle in the path to success.

My friend's son, Kislay, had been teaching Hindi at several colleges of Delhi University on an ad-hoc basis. Although he was a first class M.A in Hindi and language sciences and had a P.hd in Hindi, he didn't have the qualification which was necessary for a permanent posting—he was not a sycophant of some academic big-wig, he didn't have 'contacts', he could not be a yes-man and lacked the ability to wag his extinct tail for some asses in high positions, nor was he able to buy expensive gifts for those who came to conduct interviews. This was the time when clever abbots were sitting in positions where they prevented real talent from coming to the fore. Those who did real work and showed real results were not being praised or promoted. People were getting recognition only on the basis of religion and caste. Not only were we suffering in the Olympics in hockey but being jealous of a capable man and suppressing him, was becoming our National Game. If this game were to be included in Olympics, we would surely win the gold medal!

Doctors advise me, "Don't be so sad. You should laugh more often. Whenever you feel lonely and depressed, go out. Go to parties. Mix with others. Make friends. ***But how can I laugh?***

My best friend in college and now my colleague, Shukla, in a bid to become the department head, was now undermining me. He was instigating othesr the principal, teachers and students against me. I had stood with him during every

adversity but today, in his selfish need, he had become my enemy.

One creature in the world who loved me a lot was my dog, Jacky. He and I went back the last fourteen years. He loved me more than himself. He loved me selflessly. He had never betrayed me. His love was not insincere or for show. He meant more to me than my family. A few days ago, after a short illness, he left me forever. Now I was completely alone

My wife had left me many years ago. Her job and her career at an international NGO were more important to her. Her family stood in the way of her ambitions. Therefore, she had left me and her children years ago. I had raised my two kids single-handedly. But perhaps, there was something lacking in my care. Even though they were my sons, they had settled in America and Australia. They were busy with their own lives and wives and kids. An object called 'Father' did not register on their radar any longer.

When I was twenty-six years old, my mother had passed away after an accidental fall from the stairs. I had newly joined my job. Mother wanted to marry me off soon, so that she could raise her grandchildren. But her wishes were not fulfilled. She had suffered a serious injury on her head. She lay in a coma for four days. It had rained continuously for those days. The doctors were keeping her alive on a ventilator. Mother was supposed to live longer. She had a lot to live for. But that could not happen. She passed away, leaving me all alone. The person you loved, the ones you cared for, they all left you alone….either they would die or they would fall prey to a mis-understanding that would

grow instead of diminishing. All relations were based on selfishness. Those from whom you had expectations were the very ones who betrayed you. Most relations were short timed ones, which ended as soon as the mutual benefit expired. They were all part of the heartless and opportunistic human experience.

The boys' hostel in the college was a den of indiscipline and inequity. When the hostel warden, Tiwariji, could not control the students, he was relieved of his post. No other lecturer came forward to don this crown of thorns. When the principal expressed his desire to put me in charge, I accepted. I did my utmost to end the indiscipline in the hostel. But the disruptive elements not only had the support of different groups of lecturers but also had political support. Some outside parties also had influence there. A sudden raid in the hospital led to the confiscation of a cache of swords and country made pistols. When I tried to instigate action against the offending students, the principal told me to let the matter slide.

Amidst this environment, a new student became a victim of ragging. He was tortured so much that he tried to end his life by hanging himself from the ceiling fan in his room. Luckily, he was saved in time. Again, when I tried to take action against the offenders, I was advised by the principal to drop the matter as the concerned boys were influential. Protesting against this, I resigned from the post of warden.

This was the time when a righteous man faced plenty of obstacles in his path, whereas the wrong-doers had complete freedom. The situation was that women were being raped by

their protectors- the police itself, inside the police stations. Powerful mafia dons conducted their business and ran their empires from the confines of the prison, over their mobile phones. There was adulteration in food items. Black marketeers and iniquitous people were having a hay day.

In the metro cities, well- built young men were working as gigolos. They were providing sexual pleasure to spoiled rich girls in exchange for money. In 'Wife-swapping' parties, not only the car keys, but wives were also being exchanged for a night. Couples enjoyed such parties without any moral inhibitions. Children of such parents were openly driving drunk and crushing common pedestrians in their paths. People left behind the injured on the side of roads and drove away, without stopping to help. Witnesses were being bought in courts. People intoxicated with money and mis-using their positions were being honorably discharged. Those whose faces should be painted black were actually rosy cheeked. Those who should be wearing hand-cuffs were holding the keys to wealth and glory. Such people were deforesting our jungles and polluting our rivers. Under the guise of constructing huge dams, they were displacing hundreds of people. They were poisoning the air, water and the soil. Those who were undeserving of respect from all angles were busy disrobing the truly respectable. Religious fanatics were beating the downtrodden and minorities. Under the guise of cow and patriotism, a religious manifesto was being silently encouraged. There was tension at the borders and winds of war were blowing. In Manipur, there was aggression between the 'kukis' and 'maiteyi' communities.

People left for their jobs in the morning but not all returned home. Some were victims of road accidents while others were being killed. Some were being taken away by the police, never to be seen again. One day, an intelligent student from my class, Erom Singh from Manipur, vanished. No one knew his whereabouts. Some said that the police had taken him. At first, the police denied their involvement in the matter. Later, under pressure, they admitted that they had raided a house of north-eastern people and nabbed a gang of extremists. They further claimed that a dangerous terrorist called Erom Singh was killed in the returning fire. The police claimed to have recovered a Chinese revolver and some hand grenades from that raid.

But his friends from college and we teachers knew that that was wrong. Erom Singh was killed in a false encounter. He could not be a terrorist. He was a skilled member of Delhi University hockey team and played in inter-university games. In the next world cup, his selection in the junior hockey team was considered a done thing. He had been offered the job of a ticket collector by Indian Railways. He was loved by all of us. His father, who came from Manipur, refused to accept that his son was a terrorist. "He was not like that," the man said and started to sob heart wrenchingly. A jolly young man, full of life, was suddenly snatched from us, under a terrible conspiracy.

Once, I was going somewhere on a bus. I had a window seat. Suddenly, a tiny mouse fell on the road from a nearby three-wheeler. It was about mid-day. The poor creature lay stunned in the middle of the busy road. There were other

vehicles coming from behind. It tried to get up and run for the road divider. Maybe he would have saved himself from the oncoming vehicles, but a crow suddenly swooped down on it and carried it away in its claws. A life ended just like that, as I watched.

At a memorial arranged in the college for Erom Singh, I suddenly started to feel unwell. I began to tremble and there was the rush of a hundred trains inside my mind. Erom Singh was not a terrorist. He was a critique of the central government but he was not an anti-nationalist. But an entire administration had set out to paint him as a terrorist. People were scared of acid rain and of holes in the ozone layer. But I was afraid of being ignored and of the pain of separation. People were scared of cancer and aids and of death, but I feared the moments when something inside me died, even though I lived on.

These days, I have strange dreams, in which I visualize serpents coiled around our nation's flag and termites eating away at the statue of Mahatma Gandhi and a tear in the picture of Mother Teresa, while monsters donning western dresses dance around in a cemetery. Often, in my dreams, I see a beggar in rags, with countless wounds on his body, coughing and groaning and sobbing incessantly. Then the figure of that beggar morphs into my nation's map. Now you tell me, ***how can I laugh?***

Ice

There is a loneliness inside father. It dazzles in the morning sun. Shines in the moonlight. Gets drenched in the rain. Shrinks in the winters. Wails in grief. A loneliness resides inside my father.

But he doesn't stay alone with his solitude. He talks a lot with it. Often whispers in its ears. Sometimes hums a forgotten tune to it. But when he is with us, he turns icy. Sometimes he becomes wooden, while sitting on a wooden chair. His eyes stuck into empty space. Surely, he must be talking to his loneliness. I feel like throwing a stone in the calm waters of his isolation.

"Father!"

The stone sinks in the water with a gulp. No waves or bubbles arise. I wish that fish would swim in the lake of his solitariness.

"Father, the meteorological department is predicting heavy rainfall this year."

Father's isolated lake is completely frozen. All the fish in it have died years ago. He is sitting in his wooden chair like a log of wood himself. Lost in the emptiness inside him. There is only loneliness there. None of us can reach it. Cannot reach him. He is not here, in spite of being amongst us.

He was not like this from the beginning. He was very cheery. Full of life. There was a rainbow in his life's sky. My elder

brother was alive then. Mother had not yet passed away from the shock of his murder. My middle brother had not killed his murderers to avenge him. He was not in prison on a life sentence. My sister's marriage had not broken up and she had not yet returned home for good.

In those days, the entire sky was ours. Bonfires warmed us. It was fun to eat roasted peanuts. We enjoyed getting soaked in the rain. Returning from office, my eldest brother sang Kishore Kumar songs. My middle brother would drum on the wooden table to accompany him. I would dance with happiness and my sister would capture those precious moments on camera. Father would laugh gayly. Mother would bring piping hot pakoras from the kitchen. Along with 'Duncans' 'Double Diamond' tea. Father was very fond of tea. He used to buy various kinds of exotic teas himself. After tea, he and my eldest brother would sit down to play chess. My middle brother, my sister and I would play cards. Mother put on her spectacles and pick up the latest edition of 'Kalyan'. What days those were!

"Father have some tea." My sister has brought tea.

The lake of his desolation has frozen solid with ice. The kind of hard, cold ice that freezes your very bones. No waves arise in that lake. Nor do tides come. There are no ripples.

"Father, didi has brought tea."

If only I could drill a hole through this ice.

In the beginning, he had tried hard not to turn into wood. He had fought against this freezing, albeit weakly. He had somehow gathered himself to console mother. "I will free

our second son." Then his shoes were worn thin, doing the rounds of lawyers and the court house. The tender threads of hope began to break. My middle brother got sentenced. The elder one was gone. A pall of melancholia engulfed our home. Father had turned into stone. Mother became bed ridden.

Sometimes, father would become restless and struggle to emerge from this vacuum. He would sit beside my mother's bed and say, "Listen. The youngest is still here. Everything will be alright." But deep inside him, he realized that nothing would ever be right again. My mother's desperate eyes also knew the truth.

And then one evening, my sister returned home for ever. Her in-laws had turned her out. She had not been able to give them an heir even after five years of marriage.

The day my middle brother got sentenced, my mother closed her eyes forever. Father did not cry. He was numb. Something inside him froze. That night, there was heavy rainfall, with a hailstorm. A black cat had cried ceaselessly in the verandah. I had tried to shoo it away a few times, but it always returned. There was a blackout and my mother's dead face looked scary in the candle light. Our shadows were dancing like ghosts on the walls. I would light the candles again and again but the breeze from the open doors and windows would blow them out. A drenched bat had entered the room was circling around, beating its head against the walls. An owl hooted on a tree outside. My sister was sobbing at my mother's bedside. My eyes too, were red from crying. But there was not a single tear in my father's

eyes. There was a deserted ruin inside them, wherein blew a storm of loneliness.

We had cremated mother in the morning. By then, everything inside my father was frozen.

The tea was cold by now.

"Father…"

If there was a deposit of the slime of grief at the bottom of his lonely lake, I would have cleaned it up. I would have extracted the club of pain from it. But there was ice in that lake. Cold and solid. Even deadlier than Antarctica.

Father, had I been a scientist, I would have created a time machine. Then we could all have gone five years back and turned the course of time. Then my elder brother would be alive, my middle brother not imprisoned, my sister with her in-laws and my mother alive. And father would have laughed and cried like a normal person. There would not be the lake of solitude and there would be no ice to freeze it.

Many other things happened in the meantime. My uncle took this opportunity to grab our ancestral home and lands in the village. We had to take loans for our father's treatment. I had to leave my studies to join up as a clerk somewhere.

I have so much to tell my father. But he can't hear me now. Even though he is physically near, he is far, far away. He lives with us but isn't really there.

"Father, let us go inside. It is dark now."

My sister has switched on the patio lights. The darkness has moved away a little. But it is lying in wait for the light to be switched off, so that it can jump and grab us.

My father is rooted down. He has become a part of that wooden chair. His eyes are stuck in the darkness. Surely, he must be talking to his loneliness. I look into his eyes. There is rigid ice as far as I can see. Even the icy relation between India and Pakistan thaw a bit sometimes. I want to ask---- when will the ice in my father's eyes thaw? Can you tell me?

K.K

I got down at the Shivaji stadium bus stop, wiped the sweat off my forehead and took a sigh of relief. I had left the house with the intent of buying some books from Cannaught Place. It was the first Saturday of the month and there was money in my pockets. I crossed the street and walked towards 'Book Worm'. It was evening and the shops filled with various goods were bright and well-lit. A group of well-dressed and stylish college girls walked by. Some street side Romeos were also hovering around them. Just like ants near sugar.

Just then, somebody called out my name from behind . I looked back and saw K.K wearing spectacles and standing in the crowd, waving at me. I was astonished. K.K here?

My last encounter with K.K was three years ago, in Mumbai, when we were both translators for Container Corporation of India. Then I got a better job in Delhi and moved here. Since then, I had not met K.K, although I would get some news about him from mutual friends. I had heard that he was fired from his job at the Container Corporation and was now trying to become a script writer in the Mumbai film industry.

"How are you, Prashant? You haven't changed a bit," he said to me as we shook hands. His hands were wet with perspiration.

"But you have changed a lot. You are thinner than before and when did you start to grow a beard?" I asked.

"Change is the law of nature. And we don't come out of the womb with a razor in hand," he said with a dry laugh. "Come, let's sit somewhere."

We started to walk towards Bhartiya Coffee House.

"So, what are you doing these days, K.K?"

"I am sitting idle. Just dawdling. Can't get a decent job anywhere." His dry laugh was back.

I remembered that K.K was well known for leaving jobs. Before joining the Container Corporation, he worked as a lecturer at DAV college in Pathankot. Before that, he used to teach in a Delhi school. And before that, he was a constable with the Bihar police. I couldn't remember what he was before that but his habit of picking fights and interfering in other people's business, ensured that he didn't get along with others. He didn't last anywhere for long. Either he would get into a fight and resign or he was let go.

"What happened to your script writing?" I asked.

"That place is filled with bastards. Nobody values talent. One needs a godfather to succeed there. Only then you can get a break." He made a bitter face.

"Did you not try for the State Service Commission exam again?"

"They are all thieves! Money talks everywhere. Or a referral. People envy a talented man," he said, biting his nails with his teeth.

I was reminded of the Container Corporation days. There he was known as 'Aborted I.A.S'. He had wasted four years of

his life trying to succeed in the I.A.S exams. But in spite of all his efforts and four trials, he would either fail in the main exams or be cut off at the interview stage. He had then fallen into depression. His family wanted him to go to a psychiatrist but he refused. He had always been stubborn. In this condition, he would sometimes gather a few people at the office and start to rant and rave. "You all are like dogs and cats! Dogs and cats. But I was not born to rot here. You wait and watch. I will rise to the top. To the very top. My time will come. You watch"

Over time, the people in the office had started to avoid him. They never said anything to his face but talked behind his back. "He has lost his marbles!" K.K would also pick fights with somebody or the other. He would talk offensively with his female colleagues too. He would borrow money and never pay it back. When asked to return the money, he would swear at the lender. Sometimes it ended in fisticuffs. He would grab the collar of someone or take off his belt or shoes to fight. Several jokes about him started doing the rounds of the office. One such joke was: one day K.K crossed paths with a tomcat. The latter went home and said to his wife, "Darling! K.K. crossed my path early in the morning. God knows if I will be able to catch a mouse today or not!" Even the people in the other branches of the office sympathized with us. "How do you tolerate somebody like K.K?"

When I got the job in Delhi, K.K got suspended at the same time. He had thrown a chair at his boss Mr. Chaddha, in a fit of rage.

The coffee house was crowded. We managed to get a seat in the corner and sat down.

"So, what have you been doing in the meantime?" I asked as I ordered coffee."

"I did a lot and did nothing at all." That dry laugh was again.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I was given a contract by DD Mumbai to make a documentary on the new education policy. I took out a bank loan and started working on it. But it never got completed and I lost all the money. I did a lot of other things too." He looked at the 'No Smoking' sign and lit a cigarette. Taking a long drag, he said, "I am going through a rough patch. Saturn is not in my favour. I cannot finish anything I start."

I talked about myself till the coffees arrived.

As we finished the coffee and the bill arrived, K.K got into an argument with waiter. "How come the coffee is so expensive here? Do you rob your customers? I will take you to the consumer court, you understand?"

Hearing his raised voice, some other waiters also grouped around us. The situation started to deteriorate.

Once, at Ghatkopar, in Mumbai, he had got into a fight with a bus conductor. That man had also called his fellow conductors and drivers to his side. K.K would have been beaten that day, had I not intervened and got him out. On one more occasion, I had saved his hide. We had gone to Chaupati beach and he gave the bhelpuri seller a fifty-rupees note and asked for two bhelpuris. After we got the bhelpuris,

he alleged that he had given the seller a hundred-rupees note and asked for change. As the situation heated up, I had extricated him.

Now, once again, I had to intervene. I somehow smoothed things over and paying the bill, we left the coffee house. On the way, he saw another 'No Smoking' sign and lit a cigarette. This was an old habit of his. He always parked his scooter at a "No Parking' sign.

I changed the topic of conversation and asked him, "K.K, why don't you get married? Maybe the girl's destiny will change your luck too."

"Yes, there are one or two offers of marriage. But the women are all house-wifey kinds. I also think that first I should land a nice job. A good girl will follow later."

I looked at the greying hair at his temples and smiled to myself. We bought a few books from the book shop, 'Bookworm', in the Inner Circle of Connaught Place and started back to the Shivaji Stadium bus stop.

"What is next for you?" I asked as we walked.

He was quiet for a while and his answer was something that amounted to this—the world was going to hell. The third world war was looming. America was spreading economic colonialization, the markets were entering our houses, the beauty competitions were an insult to women, the future of Indian hockey was dim and he would have to do something to rectify all these situations.

As we reached Shivaji Stadium, I got a direct bus home.

“Alright, K.K, we will meet again. You will be in Delhi for some time?” I said as I climbed onto the bus.

“I have a favour to ask,” he clutched my hand and asked, “Do you have five hundred or a thousand bucks? I will return it.”

My mind went back to the Container Corporation days. Before I could decide anything, the overcrowded bus began to move. I stood on the footstep and looked at him. He stood at the bus stop, staring into empty space. His silhouette became fainter in the crowd. Just like a blot on a picture postcard. Then the bus turned and he vanished from sight.

Some time after this incident, I had to go overseas due to my work. Once there, I became so engrossed in my work that I didn’t have time for any acquaintances back home.

Three years later, it had been just a few days to my return home, when I spotted a picture in the morning paper and was stunned.

“What happened? Do you know him?” my wife asked.

“Oh yes! He is K.K. We were colleagues once.” I was still in shock.

Just below the picture in the newspaper, there was a bold caption.

‘The state’s education minister, Mr. Krishna Kant, launching a book on the ‘New Education Policy’.

Macaw

Dear Shekhar,

Whenever your memories overwhelm me, I start writing letters to you. But letters can't do those things that require your presence with me. I have found those macaw-coloured gloves of yours which you had left at my place last time. This week, I took a guest to visit the zoological gardens. There I saw these multi-coloured parrots called 'Macaws'. You had told me once that you loved these birds. I also like these outlandish birds. It was very cold the day we visited the zoo and I was wearing your macaw-coloured gloves. I remembered you a lot that day. I think I should buy a pair of these macaw birds. That will be an excuse to keep your memories fresh. Whenever I miss you, I keep these gloves with me. Your scent then seems to permeate all around me.

Yours, Neha.

Dearest,

Ever since you have left, you have intoxicated my mind and my thoughts. The lingering effects of your love don't ever leave me. Do you remember, that night last winter, when we had turned on the hot air blower and were all sitting down on the double bed, the blankets pulled up to our waists? We were playing cards. Our friends were also there. Some of them had pulled up the chairs. Some were sitting close by on the stools. Under the blanket, your legs were playing footsie

with mine? Your eyes were drinking me in. That night, as everyone was leaving, you made up the excuse of a headache to stay behind with me. For me that scented night had become sweet as honey, soft and satisfying as cream. Lost inside each other, we had travelled afar, hand in hand. There were a million blossoms inside us. We witnessed a million sunrises. Our climax had the warmth of a sunny afternoon, the fragrance of an inflorescent night. Whenever we met after that, we wrote our love story in a new language, a new script! I want to thank you for that heavenly spontaneous love. Thanks for that happily satisfying experience.

Yours, Neha.

Dear Shekhar,

This winter, in the month of November, I went to Nainital with a female colleague of mine. It was a full moon night. We stayed at the same hotel where we had spent the night together in the month of October in the year 2000. I travelled the same roads which we had roamed together, hand in hand. I boated on the same lakes where we had done boat rides together and remembered you fervently. While rambling down the Mall road, I even bought a love story written by a foreign author. Do you know what the title of the book was? 'Macaw'! this time also your macaw-coloured gloves were with me, engulfing me in your aromatic memory. Dear, there is so much allurement in love!

Yours, Neha.

Dearest,

Spring bloomed in my bosom as soon as I received your letter! My heart danced. Colourful blossoms sprang up all around me. A rainbow appeared in the sky. Vibrant butterflies fluttered in my heart. The petrichor of the wet earth was your body's scent. I know you are not ready for any commitments. But it is difficult to control my heart. It becomes distressed without you. O my Adonis, the moments spent with you are precious to me. I store them safely in my mind.

Yours, Neha

Dear Shekhar,

I hope you are well. Last night, I had a dream. I dreamt that I was your life partner. I know you are averse to commitments. But if our love pulls at your heart in the same way, then what is the harm in thinking about it? But if you are still not ready for it, we can give our relationship a bit more time. Please consider. At least you too will want your own family sometime.

Yours, Neha

Dear Shekhar,

I cannot believe that my dream has turned into a nightmare! Till yesterday, you were so close to me that I could hold you in my arms. Today, you seem far enough away that even your image looks faded. Has the structure of our four-year old connection fallen into ruins? We are now like those parallel railway tracks that never meet. You are not ready to formalize our relationship. Even my love is not enough to

convince you. And I am not prepared to continue this nameless association. Anyway, your thoughts remain with me.

Neha.

Dear Shekhar,

Received your letter after a few months. It was quite formal and estranged. I felt as if I had lost my ever-familiar love. Was our alliance so weak that the strings came apart so quickly? Our years old love faded so fast? Do you know, I had purchased a pair of Macaw birds. Everything was alright in the beginning. Buy after a few weeks, one of them somehow died. The other bird stopped eating. It looked so sad that I could not help myself. I freed it and let it go.

Neha

Dearest,

Thank you for giving me the best four years of my life. We will always be together in my memories. I pray that you lead a happy and fulfilling life. If you remain sad, some streaks of grief will emanate in me too. Please forgive me for any wrongs I may have done. If you are ever reminded of me, please talk. Stay connected with my life. If you have suffered from our break-up, I will never be able to forgive myself.

Neha

Today, I had opened this old trunk after many years, as I was searching for something. In there, I found these letters from

Neha. Why did I keep them safe for so long? Outside, dusk is starting to set in. The horn of a nearby factory is whooping like a sad symphony. A drab darkness is entering through the window and settling in the room. Now, when my family is forcing me to marry, would it be alright to safeguard these letters? But I am unable to lose my pleasant past. Also lying in the trunk is the novel 'Macaw', which Neha had given me to read years ago and I had forgotten to return it. I fold her letters inside that novel and place it at the bottom of the trunk. Nearby, I can hear stray dogs barking and fighting. I will be unable to sleep tonight. Perhaps, there will be a gathering of memories in my thoughts tonight to hold a vigil through the darkness.

My City

(Dedicated to those who have to leave their own town, their own state and even their own country)

"See, we have arrived at your city," exclaimed my wife, winding down the windows. The car was passing through the out skirts of the city.

Rahul piped in from the back seat, "Papa, did you grow up here?"

"Yes son," I replied, rolling own my windows too. The air smelled of the return of a long lost but familiar memory. We were passing the town bell. Ahead would lie the school, then the police station and then the bazaar…

I had come here a few years earlier. At the time of my father's death. Alone. I intended to bring my mother back with me.

This was the city of my birth. Where I grew up, where I studied.

"Papa, did you study in this school?"

"Yes, son."

The car was passing the school.

"Were you a naughty kid or a serious one?" Rahul wanted to know.

"Surinder?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Nafeez?"

"Present Ma'am."

"Suman?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Michael?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Manish?"

"Yes Sir! Sorry, Yes Madam!"

The car ran along the GT road. The ages old Banyan trees that had stood on both sides of the road have now been cut down. In their place, stood new mansions and shops. The area was now unrecognizable.

The car stops in front of the last house of a dead-end lane. This is where I was born, where I grew up. The memories associated with this house are treasured in my mind.

Flying kites and snacking on peanuts on the roof, basking in the warmth of the winter sunlight. Drinking cold 'Rooh-Afza' and playing chess in the cool rooms with siblings, during summer vacations. Father would return home after office and teach us to play a new game called 'Bagatelle.' Mother and father offering prayers to Laxmi and Ganesh on Diwali evening, while we siblings burst fire crackers. Our pet dog, Jacky, scared of the noise, would hide under the bed. We siblings playing with sticks and marbles in the lane…..

“Papa, why can’t we come here every year?” Rahul wants to know, as he gets down from the car. My wife and I look at each other. Then I turn my eyes away.

This time, I have come to sell the house. As long as mother was alive. I respected her wishes. Now, she is no more. My brother lives abroad, in a far corner of another country. It is the opinion of all of us brothers and sisters that the house should be sold now. Does selling a house end the memories connected to it? Does selling a house destroy the moments spent there?

Now we are inside the house. A picture of my father decorates the bedroom wall. It is encrusted with dust and adorned with a garland of dried flowers. I remove the dried garland and take down the picture. I clean it up with my handkerchief. Father is smiling in the picture. He looks so alive, as if he will speak up, “Mannu, what is up? Why are you looking so serious?”

“Papa, why didn’t Grandpa live with us?” Rahul pipes up, standing beside me. And my mind starts envisioning the scenes from a few years earlier.

Father’s dead body is lying in the courtyard. Mother is sitting beside it, sobbing. My sister sits next to her in support. There are just a few more people there. Father’s eyes are shut. There are some clear lines of pain etched on his face. He had a heart attack the night before. He was gone by the time he was taken to the hospital.

Father had settled here forty years ago. He had fallen in love with area and the town. He liked the language, the culture

and the people of this place. But the townspeople never considered him one of them. Everywhere, in his office, in the neighborhood, in the society, he was made to feel that he was not the 'Son-of-the soil' but an outsider! He was a second-class citizen. And along with him, we were too! Because we were darker skinned, flat nosed and spoke a different language. The people here were sharp nosed and fair skinned. They spoke in a different tongue. Their customs also differed from ours. They were the true sons of the soil, while we were outsiders.

You live somewhere for forty years, you pick up their language, their customs, their culture. You start liking those people and that terrain. You want to become one of them. You wish to expand like the sky, deepen like the sea, flow like the winding mountainous river. But since you are considered an 'outsider', you are not allowed to expand beyond the palm of your hand, deepen beyond the length of finger or flow beyond a tear. Your back grows prickly thorns, where you can find only dead butterflies and scorched springs! You find yourself in fiery waters, inhabited by serpentine merchants.

Then, for the first time, there were riots against us 'outsiders'. And inside and outside us, raged many Kashmirs, Gujrats, Bosnias and Palestines. It was time to decide whether we would accept life as second class citizens and be sacrificed in the riots or should we go elsewhere to search for our portion of the sky, sun and air? We siblings chose to move away, but father decided to remain behind with mother. We tried our best to convince him to move.

“Father, what is left here? Come with us.” We, brothers and sisters had long lost the charm of this place. Apart from one or two exceptions, those with whom we had played and studied now lusted after our blood. What is the logic in remaining where your own neighbor is filled with blood lust?

But Father didn’t agree.

“I have given many invaluable years of my life to this place. This is my battle ground. I have spent my life amongst these people. I love the ground here, I love the air, the water and the soil. Whatever the people here think of me, I wish to live and die here. Children, if you want to go away, then go. I won’t stop you. But let me and your mother remain here.” Those were my father’s words.

Father, you did good for so many here. Many used you as a step to climb up to success. To many people here, you were the bridge between them and their goals. Yet, hardly anyone came to shoulder your coffin. You lived here for forty years!

You regarded them as your own. You participated in their joys and sorrows. But none came for your last journey. To these people, you forever remained an ‘outsider’. Just a second-class citizen.

The sale of the house is complete. Rahul is deeply saddened. In some remote corner of my mind, so am I. A relationship has been lost, a link broken. Please forgive me, mother and father. Forgive me, my city!

The goods have been loaded into the moving van. I am taking my father's entire library with me. They were my father's soul.

Before leaving, I cast my eyes over the entire house, while trying to convince myself not to cry.

The moving van leaves, followed by our car. We are outside the lane now.

"Papa, shall we never come here again?" Rahul asks in a sad voice.

As we were leaving, our old neighbor had walked up, leaning on his cane. "Are you leaving son? Selling the house was a good decision. Anyway, this is your own city. Keep visiting from time to time."

My Uncle's Incomplete Novel

My uncle was renowned in the field of Hindi literature. He had written dozens of stories and poetry collections as well as novels. His critical novels had broken down many well - established beliefs. He had won many awards for his literary works. His work was studied by students in schools and colleges. Doctoral candidates at universities did research on his books. In short, he was a shining star in the sky of Hindi literature.

My uncle lived in the Greater Kailash area of Delhi. After my aunt's sudden death, he found himself lonely in that big house. Apart from the house maid Susheela bai, he had nobody else. She used to come in the morning and leave in the evening.

After my aunt's death, when I met my uncle, he had a proposition for me. He was familiar with my inclination towards literature. I read and wrote a little , myself. I was forty years of age and had dedicated my life to literature. That's the reason I had not married. At that time, my uncle needed somebody who would help him with his literary efforts in his old age and keep his legacy alive. That is why he proposed that if I came to stay with him and helped him with his work, he would not only give me a monthly stipend but also leave me this house in his will. He didn't have any children anyway. I could not turn down his proposal. Actually, I had always been fond of him. And I admired him

as a litterateur. And I liked his house. So, I accepted his proposal and one Sunday, I shifted to his place with all my belongings.

I took over my responsibilities as soon as I moved there. I dusted his entire library and organized his books. Every day, after the morning breakfast and evening meal, he would write for an hour or two. I started looking after him. I saw to it that he received nutritious food. I left no stone unturned to make his life easy and smooth. I began to help him with his literary correspondence and his dealings with his publishers. I assisted him on his evening walks in the lawn. Thus, my eighty-years old uncle's life began to run on a smooth track once again. He too started to like me a lot. He would say to me, "Prashant, if you had not come, I don't know what my life would have been like." I would smilingly accept his love.

It had now been a year since I came to stay with him. In the interim, he had got one poetry collection and two story-collections published. He loved sitting on the lawns, in his armchair, on winter afternoons and read a book. During those times, I ensured that his phone calls were answered and he continued to get his favourite Nescafe light coffee.

And then, that day arrived. One Sunday afternoon, when I went to the lawn to call him for lunch, I was shocked. He had died while reclining in his armchair. Later, the doctor said that he had had a heart attack. It was my responsibility to complete his last rites and I did it well. His funeral was attended by dozens of literary persons in the city. Newspapers and news channels declared his death to be an

irredeemable blow to Hindi literature. I followed all the customs and rites on his death. When I was through with all that, I centered my attention to his library. His library, which extended in a big hall in his house, held hundreds of priceless books of Hindi and English Literature. There were so many books that it was not possible to hold onto them for a lifetime. Now that he was dead, I thought about donating them to the University library, so that literature lovers could enjoy them. Thus, one Sunday, I arranged for the books to be transferred to the university library.

Before his sudden death, my uncle was working on a new novel. He had already written nine chapters. I found the handwritten manuscript of his novel in his study. During our conversations, he had revealed that the tenth chapter would be the last one in his novel. But he passed away before he could complete that. I thought about reading the novel. If that tenth chapter could be completed, his novel could be published. I had a desire to complete his outstanding work.

The nine handwritten chapters of his manuscript were all present in five of his diaries. At the end of the ninth chapter, he had written the heading 'Tenth Chapter' on a fresh page and underlined it. But there was nothing after that either in the manuscript or in his diaries. These diaries were on his study table. Coincidentally, I became busy with some other things after this and could not peruse the manuscript for ten or fifteen days. After that, I once again went to his study. Turning over the pages of his last diary, when I reached the final page headed 'Tenth Chapter', I was stunned. There, written in my uncle's hand, was a fresh line, "Son, write this

tenth chapter and complete my novel soon and get it published." The blood drained from my body. I definitely remembered that this line was not there previously. Then who wrote this line after his death? Apart from the maid, Sushila Bai, no outsider ever entered this room. But Sushila Bai was illiterate. Also, it would be a difficult task to copy his handwriting so exactly. I was unable to solve this mystery. Although. I did not believe in ghosts, when I told my acquaintances about this incident, they suggested that this could be the work of his dis-satisfied soul that was still hovering around the house.

Anyway, I locked his study. Friends suggested that I should perform some rituals and offer prayers to cleanse the house and bring peace to the departed soul of my uncle. Therefore, I contacted the priest at the local temple and had him come over to perform the rites. The day after, I unlocked his study. With shaking hands, I picked up his diary and opened it to the page headed 'Tenth Chapter.' I was again shocked. Written there, in his handwriting, were the lines, "Son, you are not taking this task seriously. You are the one who will complete the tenth chapter. Be quick! Finish the last chapter and get this novel published."

I was at a loss to comprehend this unnatural phenomenon. Whatever my heart was suggesting, my brain refused to accept. For the first time, I was scared. Was it really a ghostly affair?

Whatever it was, I read the novel from first to last thoroughly and got an idea how to complete the last chapter and conclude the novel. I thought that if my uncle were alive, he

would have liked this ending. After that, I finished the last chapter in a few days. I contacted one of his publishers and signed a contract to publish the novel. Within three months, the book was published.

I took copies of the published work to his study. I again opened his diary to the 'Tenth Chapter'. I was again stunned! There, written in his beautiful hand, below the last words, were the lines, "Son, I am obliged that you completed this last work. Good bye!"

I don't know what all that was. I don't know if there are ghosts. But after that day, I never found a new line written in that diary.

No Entry For Non-Aryans

Pandit Onkar Nath was a profound scholar of Sanskrit. Everyone conceded his great knowledge. He had gained this erudition through his ethical upbringing. One more thing that he had inherited from his upbringing was pride for his lineage and arrogance about his caste and his ancient clan. The hubris of being from a high caste was in his blood. He believed that the sacred, Vedic blood of his ancestors flowed in his veins too. He had no time for Gandhi or Ambedkar. The entry to his house was adorned by a name plate which said 'No Entry for Non-Aryans'.

Many of you will question this. How is this possible in this day and age? But so it was. This was the time in the twenty-first century, when even after seventy decades of independence, in Orissa's Kendrapada district, in the small town of Kerdagada, stood a Jaggannath temple, where people from the lower class like the Dalits, were prohibited to enter. When the Dalits finally gained entry after great agitation, the higher-ups in the temple declared it 'impure' and performed a special ritual to purify it again. This was the same time of the twentieth century, when a Dalit family's women were raped and the entire family killed in Khairlanji in the state of Maharashtra, while the administration stood helpless.

This was the time when characters like Pandit Onkar Nath existed in our midst and their doors were adorned by the

sign, “No Entry for Non-Aryans”. But Panditji knew that casteism was against the law. Anyone who read this nameplate would ask him, “What is this, Panditji?”

Now, one more thing that Panditji had inherited was shrewdness. He would reply, “Arey, who told you that by Non-Aryans, I am referring to a particular community? This refers to people who lack core moral values and don’t have a cultural upbringing. I have prohibited the entry of uncultured people.” But people knew the truth.

Onkar Nath’s son, Shankar, was just like his father. Centuries of high-class arrogance and the nonsense of untouchability were deeply instilled in both father and son. Education had been unable to defeat that thought process.

Pandit Onkar Nath and his son, Shankar, were not the type to use their hands for heavy, menial work. They didn’t know how to use a hammer or a spanner, an emery paper or a trowel or a shovel. They could memorize ‘Shlokas’ but could not wield a broom to clean the house. They could perform purification rituals by reading ‘Shlokas’ from Vedas, the Geeta, the Ramchartramanas or the Puranas, but they looked down upon those who performed these menial tasks for them and considered them to be of lower caste.

In some aspects, Shankar was a modern boy. He was fond of motor bikes. In spite of his father’s disagreement, he eventually bought a motorbike. Despite his father’s protests, he would ride this bike very fast. He was addicted to speed.

At last, what Panditji had always feared about, did happen. One day, Shankar and his bike were involved in a terrible

accident. Shankar was badly injured. He was taken to the hospital and admitted in the ICU. He had lost a lot of blood and his condition was serious.

When Panditji came to know about it, he was distressed. It was his only son. He ran to the hospital. The doctors told him that his son needed blood. The problem was that Shankar's blood type was o-negative and this type was not available in the hospital. Panditji and his relatives offered to donate their blood but their blood was of a different group, so it couldn't be given to Shankar. As time passed, Shankar's situation was deteriorating fast. The doctors clearly told them to arrange o-negative blood from somewhere. Else, it would be difficult to save his life.

Panditji was anxiously pacing the halls outside the ICU. His relatives were busy calling all blood banks for o-negative blood, but were unsuccessful. Panditji was at his wit's end. He had money. He could buy blood. But this rare blood type was simply not available.

He wanted to slap the doctor--- the man was surely lying! Shankar was his son, his blood, so why couldn't he, Pandit Onkar Nath, give blood to his own son? Meanwhile as time passed, his son's condition worsened. As he was losing all hope for his son, something occurred that made Panditji extremely angry. There was a janitor named Hari Ram who was sweeping the ward. He took pity on Panditji on humanitarian grounds. He offered to donate his blood to Shankar. When the doctors tested his blood, they found it was indeed o- negative.

But even in this hopeless situation, Panditji became irate. Who does this janitor think he is? Will the son of Pandit Onkar Nath now get the blood of a janitor? Does that man know his place? Panditji's blood was boiling with rage. The relatives somehow placated him and calmed him down. They said, "Think calmly. This is the only way to save your son."

Pandit Onkar Nath was now in a great dilemma. According to him, on one side was his high caste and ancient clan and the sacred blood of his ancestors flowing through his son's arteries and veins. On the other side was the lowly janitor with who knows what type of blood flowing through his body! How could he let this lowly blood mix with the high-grade blood of his son?

But there was no other course of action. At last, almost unwillingly, for the sake of his son's life, he agreed to let that janitor, Hari Ram, donate blood to his son. The doctors arranged everything quickly and soon Shankar was getting the blood.

As Hari Ram's blood entered Shankar's, Panditji was in a very bad shape. He seemed to be shrinking, while that low status Hari Ram's height was growing, he was expanding and becoming monstrous and that monster was about to swallow Panditji.

But Hari Ram's o-negative blood showed results. Shankar started to improve and soon the doctors declared him to be out of danger. Panditji's relatives cheered but he himself could not decide whether to be happy or to mourn. His son's

life was saved but the moral values he had lived by till that day, were dying fast.

Then a thought occurred to Panditji. He refused to remain obligated to anyone, least of all, a low-class janitor like Hari Ram. He tried to pay him 2000 bucks for his service. But when the money was proffered to Hari Ram, he started to laugh. He only said this, “I don’t sell blood. How can you put a value to a humanitarian deed?”

Pandit Onkar Nath felt he had shrunk to the size of a dwarf.

Shankar was released from the hospital after a few days and Panditji brought him home. The first thing he did on his return was to remove the nameplate on which was clearly written, “No Entry for non-Aryans”

Something Stuck In The Mind

ONE

Even though it is sad and difficult, I always begin from the end. From his end. An end with only the long, dark night ahead.

Rioters had put a tyre around his neck and burnt him alive. Because he was wearing a turban. Because he had a beard. Because he would visit a Gurudwara to offer prayers. Because his name was Gurbaksh Singh.

Gurbaksh Singh was my teacher. It was the year 1984. The entire country was in turmoil. Punjab was burning. The heat of those flames was being felt by Delhi and the rest of the country. There was the sound of gun fire and explosions in the air. The smell of gunpowder prevailed. There echoed the sirens of ambulances and police gypsies. Saffron and yellow turbans loomed on the horizon. The poisonous slogans of the terrorists resounded everywhere. There were killings. The Golden Temple in Amritsar reverberated with the rattling of tanks. There was the sound of marching boots in the atmosphere. And all around was the flowing blood of the common man.

Gurbaksh Singh taught me history. He loved me. He lived with his family in Tilak Nagar. He used to call me "puttar' (son). I liked his accent on some words. He was a good man. He never hit the kids. He had nothing to do with bullets and

bomb explosions. I was young then. People used to say that the atmosphere all around was very bad. That's why our schools remained closed. Later on, when the schools re-opened, he didn't return to teach us. I never saw him again. I missed him a lot. Shastriji started to teach us history. He had a 'tilak' on his forehead and a 'shikha' at the back of his head. While teaching us, he would curse Auranghzeb and beat us with a thin stick for our wrong doings. At such times, I would remember Gurbaksh Singh sir a lot. How was I to know that while teaching us history, he would become history himself. Later on, somebody told me that the rioters had forcibly cut of his beard, put a tyre around his neck and burnt him alive. The day I learnt of this, I returned home and cried a lot. My mother tells me that I was in shock for many days. I had high fever and lay in bed, muttering to myself. After Gurbaksh Singh, no other teacher addressed me lovingly as 'puttar'. My ears longed to hear that address for the rest of my life.

I will write a story named 'Puttar'. There will be my school in the story, I will be there along with Gurbaksh Singh. 1983 will be there. 1985 too. But not the cursed year of 1984. There will be Punjab in that story. Delhi too. But there will be no gun smoke in the air. No firing bullets and bomb explosions. No noise of ambulances and police sirens. No poisonous sloganeering or killings. No racket of tanks and marching boots. And lastly, no flowing of human blood.

TWO

Even though this is also tragic, once again, I will have to start from the end. From all their untimely deaths. From a night without end.

Agitators had entered their house and butchered them mercilessly. And then, they had burned down the house. Because the men in that house had beards. Wore kurta-pajamas. Had netted white skull caps on their heads. And the women wore black burqas. Because they offered Namaz. They went to the masjid to pray. Because their names were Nafiz, Akram, Zeba and Heena.

Nafiz was my best friend. We had grown up, playing together. We were in the same class at school. Later, we took admission in the same college. We played with marbles and wooden sticks and flew kites together. We were naughty together at school. And were punished together. Nafiz's father was an Urdu professor at the university. His mother was a school teacher. Nafiz and his family lived in Jamia Nagar. My father was a Hindi professor at the university. We would often visit each other's house.

In February, 2002, Nafiz had gone with his entire family to visit his grandfather in Ahmedabad. Suddenly, Gujrat was engulfed in "Godhra'. After that the entire city of Gujrat was afire with the flames of the riots. Nafiz and his family had not been able to return to Delhi. Later on, it came to light that the savage rioters had entered his grandfather's house and cut down each one of them. And then set fire to the house.

Now, I have no friend like Nafiz. Nobody's mother now feeds me 'seviyaan kheer' or lovingly calls me beta. Now, nobody's face looks fatherly. I am no more the 'bhaijaan' of any sister. Acquaintances say that this incident had shaken me badly. Encounters take place now in Jamia Nagar, where Nafiz and his family lived. Bullets fly. Bodies are downed. And the lava of anger flows…

I will write a story named 'Bhaijaan'. In the story, my friend Nafiz will be there. His Ammi and Abbu will be in it. His sister will be there. As well as me. 2001 will be there. 2003 too. But no 2002. Naroda Patiya will not be there. Nor the rioters. There will be no innocent bodies and no encounters in Jamia Nagar. The lava of anger will not flow. In my story, nobody will call black burqa clad ladies and white pajama kurta donned people 'Pakistanis'. In that story, this country will be theirs too.

THREE

Even though this story is also heart breaking, compassionate and it is not easy to narrate. But this time too, I will have to begin from the end. From their end. An end which has darkness ahead.

Her name was Jamuna. And her father was Ramswaroop. She was brown skinned but when she laughed, it seemed like the tinkling of anklets. She was not only my fellow student but also a good friend. She was an ace student at college. She was in love with another one of my fellow students, Harish. They were made for each other. But Jamuna was from a societal class which had been forced

down, tortured and was downtrodden for centuries. On the other hand, Harish belonged to the social elite, with power and standing in the area. Obviously, Harish's family was against their match. One day, Harish told me that he and Jamuna were getting married, in spite of the threats from Harish's family. After all, both were adults. I was happy but apprehensive too. I wanted them both to get police protection.

Despite the opposition from family members and society, Harish and Jamuna got married in court. I was also present at their marriage as both a friend and a witness. I was happy that their garden was about to blossom with spring time. But even before the colourful flowers could bloom, the garden was blighted. Under pressure from his family and his society, the barbaric 'maha panchayat' of that area, declared the marriage unlawful. And issued a decree for their killing. Both of them ran from place to place, trying to hide. And one cursed day, on the inner pages of an English daily, Harish and Jamuna became the news about 'Honor-Killing'. Harish's family shot them both. I lost a good friend of mine. After this incident, although I was alive, something inside me had died.

I will write a story named 'Friend'. In that story will be Jamuna. Harish too. But not his family. No barbaric 'maha panchayat'. Their wedding day will be mentioned but not their killing day. People will be there but not the rubbish of society. It will be set in the twenty-first century, but without the mindset of the mid-centuries. Brutal community decrees will not be there. There will be no ulcers in time's intestine.

There will be no unseemly scar on the face of the day. We will not be the inheritors of a maudlin breed.

If only, the true incidents of life had a happy ending. Then, it would be so much easier to start from the end. Then every end would have a new beginning. A bright beginning.

The Atheist

It was a Friday evening. The setting sun was playing hide and seek with the clouds. I exited my office and walked towards the Aakashvani bus stop. There was a larger crowd than usual at the bus stop. There were some familiar faces in that throng of people. I exchanged nods and greetings with them. By then, several buses had arrived, panting and heaving.

The buses vomited some of their load, took in some more of the crowd and left. I was waiting for the bus that would take me home, while the thought revolved around my mind that it had been quite a while since I had written a story. Just then, there was a small uproar nearby. I glanced over to see that an eagle had fallen from the sky. A snake was entangled with it. They were engrossed in a wrestling match. People from the bus stop ran towards them. The traffic almost came to a halt. People were peeping out of their bus and car windows to watch this unique event. Those in a hurry started tooting their horns. Soon, the traffic resumed bypassing the grappling duo. A crowd had formed around the warring pair, which I, too, joined.

Sometimes the eagle seemed to be winning, at other times, the snake. It was a question of life and death. And people talked.

"It is not an eagle. It's a hawk. It will kill the snake."

"Oh no! It is an eagle. But the snake is not an ordinary one. It is a black cobra. Can't you see its hood? It will surely defeat the eagle."

Soon, the sympathies of the group were divided between the two parties. Some in favour of the eagle. Some were leaning towards the snake. Bookies too joined the rabble.

"Let us bet a hundred for the snake. It will win!"

"Ok done! The eagle will overcome the snake."

An old lady in the crowd chimed in. "Somebody should separate the two or they both will die!"

Someone else replied," Ma'am, if we try to do that, they will bite us both." A voice piped in, "You are a coward." The answer came, "And you are so heroic! Show us your masculinity."

As the snake started gaining advantage, there came a chant from a sadhu in the crowd, "Bam, bam, Bhole! May the Cobra God win!"

When the eagle had the upper hand, a shout was heard from the crowd, "This is Garud, the ride of God Varun. It will defeat the snake."

At last, the eagle got a firm grip on the snake's hood. Pecking the snake with its sharp beak and claws, it left the snake half dead. It was about to fly off with the snake when the sadhu threw a rock at him. In the confusion, the eagle left the snake there and flew away.

The bookies were busy collecting money from the people. Those in the crowd who had favored the eagle had

victorious smiles, while those in favor of the snake looked defeated. Perhaps a frustrated person in the crowd threw a stone and shattered a bus window. Alarm broke out instantly. People began to run amok.

All this craziness brought two policemen running. At their appearance, the gamblers vanished. The crowd began to disperse. It could not be determined who threw the stone at the bus window. Someone picked up the half dead snake and tossed it on the adjoining pavement.

My bus had arrived. Fighting the mob, I got in and the bus drove away.

Two days later, on Monday, when I left my office in the evening and arrived at the bus stop, I was stunned by the scene there. On the pavement spot where a bystander had thrown the half dead snake on Friday, now stood a small temple. It was a permanent structure, with white tiles on the outer walls. A Shivaling was situated inside the temple, along with a framed and garlanded picture of 'Nag Devta' or Cobra God. The same Sadhu, who had flung a rock at the eagle on Friday, now sat inside the temple, performing rituals. A few ladies stood waiting outside, with jars of milk to offer at the Shivaling. Other devotees, in ochre robes, were also present. Next to the temple, there was a stall offering flowers and garlands, while another one sold sweet offerings for the God. A freshly painted sign board declared that the foundation stone of the temple had been laid down by Municipal Corporator, Mr. ABC, on Saturday.

I asked an ochre robed devotee, "Brother, what is all this?"

"You don't know? This Sadhu is a famous Mahatma from Benaras. Two nights ago, he had a dream that there was a Shivaling was buried here. And that this was the abode of the 'Nag Devta'. If you worship here, your wishes will come true!"

I could not resist. "What the hell are you talking about? I was here on Friday evening. An eagle had killed a snake. The snake was thrown here on the pavement. This Sadhu was also here, tossing stones at the eagle…"

Before I could say more, the ochre clad devotee, shaking with anger, exclaimed "What an atheist you are!"

I did not think it wise to argue further with that devotee. You can lead a blind person, but how can you show the way to someone who can see everything? I got on my bus and came home.

"Hi there, the neighborhood ladies are talking about a new temple near Akashvani bus stop. A renowned Mahatma from Benaras has come there to pray. It is being said that if you offer prayers over there, all your dreams come true. As you know, Mr. Sharma's promotion had been held up for quite some time. Today, in the morning, Mrs. Sharma offered prayers there and wished for his promotion and by afternoon, he had got it. Our Tunnu's board exams are starting from tomorrow. So, I am thinking of going there to pray. Will you come with me?" said my wife.

I laughed and replied, "Why don't you go alone? I have a story to write. I will offer my prayers to God at home."

The Flying Saucer

The story begins when he was ten years old and had gone to spend the summer vacations at his uncle's government flat on Mandir Marg. Since he slept a lot in the afternoon, his uncle allowed him to roam around in the vicinity of the flat till midnight or one o' clock. One night he had gone as far as the 'ridge' forest, behind the Birla Temple. Actually, he had been bold since childhood. He could not be scared by ghost stories. He would often set out on his own on less travelled and deserted pathways.

That night too, he was doing the same when he had spotted the flying saucer---shining in the full moon's light, ten times bigger than the Birla Temple, grand and imposing! The strange thing was that it made no noise while flying, on the contrary, the silence of the night deepened. The crickets had stopped singing and for the first time, he was able to count his heart beats. The sky seemed to be weighed down by the stars and time had stood still. It floated in the air for some time, before vanishing and leaving him fascinated. He went there again the next night, but did not see it. He remained undaunted and started to go to the ridge every night to search for it, without bothering about the snakes and scorpions and the monkeys. He was drawn to the place by some primeval force and at last, spotted it again on the next full night. It was as huge and magnificent as before and there was a silent speed about its arrival. It hovered silently for

some time and then flew away, leaving him thrilled with excitement!

After seeing the flying saucer on a few full moon nights, he told his uncle and aunt about it, over dinner one night. But they refused to believe him. His aunt was even a little worried about his mental balance. His uncle asked, "Are you reading more comics this time?" His aunt said that roaming around in the forest at night led to being haunted by ghosts and witches. This made his uncle laugh and the matter was dropped there only. But he didn't stop going to the ridge in search of the UFO.

Next time, he took Ramua, the six years old son of the local laundry man, with him. This time they both saw the flying saucer. They both waved and shouted and ran towards it. Ramua wanted to know what the huge, shiny thing was. Just then, a door opened on the saucer, leaving them both open-mouthed with astonishment. Then, some strange creatures emerged from the door and stood on the balcony of the flying object. Although he exclaimed 'Oh God!", he wasn't the slightest bit afraid. He waved at them and they also waved back with their arm like extensions. Time stood still and he thought that his view would never change. He was as happy as a child lying on the grass and watching the clouds in the sky. But Ramua got scared and began to tremble. He held Ramua's hand and tried to console him and the kid stopped shaking.

In the moonlit night, he stared at the aliens carefully for the first time and saw that they were all black---blacker than the night, so black that it defied blackness itself. That made him

very happy because he himself was dark-skinned, whereas his siblings were all fair. Maybe that was why his grandma didn't love him as much. His dark skin made him feel inferior at times. But that day, the sight of the dark-skinned aliens flying the UFO was a great consolation. Nobody amongst them was fair-skinned. Those aliens became a source of inspiration for him. He understood that doing great work was not just the legacy of the fair-skinned people. He also understood that being fair was not enough. What really mattered was the ability of the person. He realized that even dark-skinned people can be talented. That is why these dark aliens could make and fly a UFO. All these thoughts boosted his morale.

But right at that time, Ramua started to cry and within a fraction of a second, the saucer vanished, leaving him regretful that he could not make that moment last forever. Ramua was crying and as he was older than the boy, he comforted him and they returned home.

The next day, he gathered up the courage to speak to his uncle again in detail about the flying saucer. But this time his uncle was really worried. He insisted that he must have dreamt the whole thing. But he knew that it was not a dream. He stuck to his narrative and told his uncle that the flying saucer was only visible on full moon nights. Although he could not explain why this was so. His uncle said that there was no such thing like a flying saucer and he must have witnessed a helicopter or an airplane. But he knew that the flying saucer was not a dream but a reality.

On the next full moon night, he again talked to his uncle and the latter went along with him that night to clear the doubts. But this was not a misunderstanding but a reality because this time, he saw the flying saucer in all its magnificent brilliance. Exhilaration sent shivers down his body and he felt as if the entire world had stopped to stare at this amazing sight. He tried to show it to his uncle but the latter could not see anything, even though Ramua, who was again with them, could see it too. He was astonished at the phenomenon that something which was so clearly visible to the children could not be seen by an adult. But then his uncle scolded him, saying that there was no such thing as the flying saucer anywhere. They all returned home. But on the next full moon night, his uncle and aunt, along with Ramua's father, went with them to the ridge to investigate, but on this occasion also, the flying saucer was not visible to the grown-ups, although it was clearly visible to the kids.

When he grew up, he found the solution to this puzzle himself. It was that children are symbols of truth. They are pure and immaculate. They are innocent and stay away from fraud and deception. Their world is completely simple and transparent. On the other hand, grown-ups were hypocritical, opportunistic, false and deceptive. Their world is artificial and masked. He came to the conclusion that the flying saucer was visible only to true and innocent children. His theory was confirmed when he returned to his uncle's place five-six years later and tried to search for the flying saucer again on a full moon night but could not see it. He realized that he had grown up and lost the innocence of his childhood.

When we became friends in college, he narrated the whole thing to me. But I didn't laugh at him or pull his leg. I looked in his eyes and saw the truth. Therefore, one full moon night, I went to the ridge, to that same spot, with my elder sister, her husband, their five years old son and my friend. His story was confirmed when my five years old nephew saw the flying saucer and started to laugh and wave at it, although we adults saw nothing. We knew it was there because young kids didn't lie and the flying saucer was a fact.

But if you are in doubts about my story and believe it to be untrue and a figment of my imagination, then don't believe a thing I said. You just take your kid to the ridge behind Birla Mandir, on a full moon night. There, your kid will tell you himself, "Papa, see this huge round object!" Then you will wish that you could be a kid once again and see the flying saucer on a full moon night-- ten times bigger than the Birla temple, grand and imposing and hiding a whole secret world within itself.

The House

"Shaabji! This house been vacant for quite some years. Why did you buy it? Don't you know that it is haunted?" the Gurkha guard asked me, as he unloaded my luggage from the rickshaw.

I smiled in reply. After my retirement, when I had decided to purchase the house in this neighborhood, my neighbors had also said the same thing.

"Sir, this place is haunted. You are making a mistake in buying this ghostly house." But I had never believed in ghosts. I had spent my entire life in this city. I loved it. My wife had passed away a few years ago from a heart attack. I hardly realized when my kids had grown wings and flown from the coop. I was getting this house for cheap and thought to spend the dusk of my life here.

I unlocked the big iron door and stepped inside. The overgrown grass on the lawn was like a miniature forest. Pigeons and bats had made their home in this last house of the closed lane. The Gurkha had picked up two lads from somewhere. They both looked apprehensive at the thought of cleaning this house. But their greed for money made them clean up the place in a few hours and make it livable. In the meantime, I got acquainted with the Sharma family living next door and they invited me to lunch. As I was feeling tired, I gratefully accepted. I bathed and went there. The Sharma couple were very affable. As we were eating, they

narrated an awesome incident about the previous couple who lived there.

Earlier, my house was occupied by the Devgan family. They were business people. They had an import export business. Somebody killed the head of the house in his office, over a business rivalry. This shock made his widow lose her mental balance. Their young daughter was jilted by her lover and hanged herself from the ceiling fan in her bedroom. Only the son and daughter-in-law were left. They believed the house to be cursed and got rid of it by selling it at a very low price. The person who bought this house later sold it to the man I had purchased it from.

Being my well-wishers, the Sharma couple advised me not to live there. They suggested that I sell it at the earliest and buy another house somewhere. They too, thought that the house was haunted and cursed. At night, they could hear people conversing and somebody crying in the empty house. Nothing good happened to the people living there, they said. I smiled and heard them out. Then I declared that I would like to stay in the house for some time and discover its mysteries myself. After all, what was in the house that everybody called it haunted? I personally had no faith in things like omens and curses.

I started living there. As a matter of fact, I woke up a few times on hearing strangers conversing nearby. But when I picked up my torch and went to the next room, I would find it empty. Only silence welcomed me there. At first, I thought it was my imagination, a product of my old and tired brain. Maybe I was dreaming about all the things people had told

me about the house. But these voices had been heard by many people in the lane. Maybe there was something to it after all! Later, I was often woken up by these whispered conversations. Sometimes, I could hear a heart-rending sobbing. But even after hunting throughout the house, I discovered nothing. From my childhood, I had not believed in ghosts. They are the imaginings of fearful people. Were my beliefs to be challenged at this late stage of my life?

One night, I was woken up at two o clock. There were whispers emanating from the room next door, interspersed by sobbing. This time I got down from my bed softly and without turning on the lights or the torch. I put my eyes to the keyhole on the door to that room. But all I could see was darkness. But the conversations and sobbing continued. This time, I tried to listen to the whispers by putting my ear to the keyhole. What a surprise! They were talking about me!

"…we were orphaned for so many years after the last family left. When we heard somebody had bought this house again, we had hoped that joy would again return to this house. The house would be filled with hustle and bustle and merriment. But alas! This man has come to live here alone. On top of it, he is old. Anything can happen to him at any time. God knows when good times will return here. When shall we be happy again?"

The more I listened, the more surprised I was. You will not believe me. The walls of the house were talking! Was that even possible? That night, I stayed put, listening in on them for a long time. Not just that night but many more nights to come. And my doubts that the walls talked were vanishing.

The house was talking! I had heard the phrase that even walls had ears but I learned for the first time that they also had mouths to talk with!

Ten or fifteen days later, I got a letter from my son that he had been transferred to this city. He was going to live here with his wife and son. My joy knew no bounds!

And then the day arrived! I welcomed my son, my daughter-in-law and grandson with open arms. There was no shortage of space. It was a two storied house. They occupied the first floor. But my son had also heard the rumours about this house. He was a bit concerned. "Dad, my kid is young. Then there is your daughter-in-law. If there is some truth to these rumors, please tell us. We will rent another house. We will stay here only if it is safe." I reassured him, "It is perfectly safe to stay here. I have been living here for so many months. Has anything untoward happened to me?"

Soon, the house was filled with the laughter of my grandson. One night, I was again woken up by the whisperings in the next room. I put my ear to the keyhole again. The voices were now joyous, instead of tearful. The walls were ecstatic that a young man and a young woman and a kid were now living here. Somebody was humming a joyful tune in soft but very clear tones.

Dear readers! We now live in an age where the sensitivities of the flesh and blood humans are dead. Their souls too have died. But brick and mortar walls are delicate. It is as if they now have souls. These houses don't exist in a vacuum, but are intertwined with lives of the people who live within these walls. They laugh and cry with us. They laugh at a

baby's joyful gurgling squeals. The coughing of fever riddled old people make them ill too. Men can be stone hearted but these stone walls no longer wish to remain so. They wish to be fluttering, humming, joyous and excited. They want to become homes. Radiance and gaiety had returned to my house. It was now a home.

The Incident

I had gone to Kurukshetra to meet my brother. That is where the incident happened. Although it was not a big incident. It was not an assassination attempt on a political figure. Nor had any minister or parliamentarian's bodyguards been killed. There had been no terrorist attack anywhere. No natural disasters either. It was a small incident. In the nation's history, it would be considered insignificant. You will opine that such cases happen every other day in the streets of our country, in every town and city. Such cases don't become the cause for a nation's worry or mourning. The country's flag does not fly at half-mast for such incidents. No mourning tunes play on the national television or radio. Such happenings are not mentioned in history or sociology books. Even ethical treatises are mum about such incidents. These are quite ordinary, forgetful incidents because they occur to the common man.

I reached Kurukshetra to meet my brother. I got off the train at around 8pm. My brother is a professor at the Kurukshetra University. When I reached his abode in the university premises, a big lock on his front door awaited me. On questioning the neighbor, I learned that my brother had gone to I.I.T Rourkee for some seminar. Now I was in a quandary. Later many people said to me, "Bro, if you had called your brother before starting this journey, then you would have learnt that he was out of station. Then neither

would you have gone there, nor would this incident have occurred."

It was nine at night. I stopped at a diner outside the university premises for dinner. After eating, I had a cup of tea. By now, it was nine-thirty. Kurukshetra is a small town. It is not like Delhi. Here the night darkens around nine. Darkness has a unique characteristic. Even familiar faces seem strange in the dark. By ten o'clock, a ghostly desolation had descended everywhere. Later many people told me, "You should have stayed at a neighbor's place near your brother's house. Nowadays, if you wander around in a strange city at night, such things are bound to happen."

After a long wait, at nearly 10.30pm, I spied an autorickshaw on the road. Seated inside were two lads of eighteen or twenty. One was the driver and the other probably his friend or acquaintance. Now, it is not possible to judge anyone by their face. I asked, "Will you take me to the station?" They replied, "Please sit, sir."

It was a half hour journey. I had come here a few times during daytime. But nights are different. At night, even your own city starts to look strange. When those two boys started driving through unknown roads, I felt a bit suspicious. But before I could react, the incident happened. Later some people said to me, "Oh, brother! Those boys took you on a merry ride through strange streets and you didn't even realize! The railway station is far from where this untoward incident took place. How did you reach there?"

Actually, you all stay lost in your everyday life. Whenever you read about such incidents in the newspapers or watch

reports of such occurrences on television, you do so with the satisfaction of knowing that it is happening to someone else. You just count them as statistics. You are under the mistaken reassurance that such things will not happen to you. But suddenly when some case like this happens to you too, you are not prepared for it. You are stunned! The two boys turned into a lonely lane, stopped and jumped out. I don't know from where they took out a long rod. Later, when police Sub-Inspector Zorawar Singh brought that rod to me for identification, I saw it was an iron rod, rusted but hard and solid. I too jumped out of the auto. They were two against one. I ran. They ran after me, shouting, "Give us your money or we will hurt you." Later some said to me, "Good man, if you had given them the money this would not have happened.

Those two were eighteen or twenty years old. I was thirty-eight. They caught up to me after twenty or twenty-five meters. We started wrangling on the ground. In the struggle, my vest and shirt were torn. At last, one guy got hold of me from behind. And the second one hit me on the face with that rod. To save myself, I raised my left hand and the entire weight of the rod fell on the space between my wrist and my elbow! There was a clear, audible sound of a breaking bone. I stumbled. The next hard blow fell in the middle of my head. A scary dark tunnel opened up before my eyes. Waves of pain engulfed me. Maybe there followed more hits from the rod. And I sank in the dark ocean like a tired, drowning swimmer.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself covered in blood. There were deep lacerations on my scalp. Somehow, I staggered up, even in this condition, and wobbled away for four or five hundred meters. I knocked on the door of the first house. Nobody came. I don't remember how many doors I knocked on. A few did open their doors, but seeing my condition, shut it just as quickly, fearing to get involved in a police case. This was the same ghastly night when the shameful 'Nirbhaya' case happened and blighted our entire society. The last house at the end of the lane opened its door on my knocking. Somebody took pity on me. They took me inside and gave me a glass of water. Then they called the police. The police admitted me in the emergency ward of a government hospital. There were eight or ten stiches at two places on my scalp. My left hand was broken and they plastered it. An F.I.R was lodged with the police. They took my statement. The two boys had taken off with six or seven thousand rupees, my wrist watch, my mobile, even my shoes. Next day, I called home. By evening, my family had arrived. All those who came to meet me in the hospital had some advice to offer.

One said, "Fate can't be averted. Let us thank God that your life was spared. Be more careful next time." Another said, "If only you had done this….."Yet another said, "If only that had happened…."

_ if only I had called my brother before leaving

_if only there was no poverty and unemployment in our country

_if only I had not stopped those guys in the auto

_if only the childhood and youth of thousands of children and young in our country was not spent in struggling for their daily bread

_if only I had given up my valuables without any struggle

_if only our Hindi films did not have the deadly cocktail of sex and violence.

People praised the quick actions of the police. One boy was caught. Part of the money was recovered. It was hoped that the first boy would give up the name of his mate during interrogation. “Don’t be scared. We will catch the other criminal soon, said Sub-Inspector Zorawar Singh, rolling his moustache. “You are our witness. Be ready to appear in court. It is a case of mugging and aggravated assault. We will punish these people for sure,” said Zorawar Singh as he made me sign lots of paper.

But I am not too excited. I don’t know why but I feel that if not these two guys, there would have been someone else. If not Kurukshetra, then somewhere else. If not me, then perhaps you. What would result in the apprehension of those two criminals? As long as our society has reasons that make criminals out of eighteen and twenty year olds, criminals will be created and crimes will happen! Don’t you think so too?

The Indian Kafka

It is just me, my room, the walls, the ceiling, the damp, the suffocation, the silence and my endless solitude. Yes, my solitude, which often nips at me like a wounded dog. But it at least acknowledges my existence. It is my only friend and enemy now.

Locked inside my own self, I go and stand at the open window. The only witness to my restlessness. Outside, the evening is about to die like an AIDS patient. The wind is silent. The arrogant trees in the park outside are standing quietly. The two vile old men, who sit on the park bench and argue daily, are also quiet. Under the bench lies quietly, the stray dog who fights with his own tail every day. A funereal sadness is dripping from the sky and spreading itself on the bosom of the road. And the road is squirming to shed its silent skin.

From the yard next door, Miss Lily's fluttering laugh freezes in the silent environs. Just then, a stranger's drunken voice roars like a wolf. Miss Lily's smile seems to melt.

I suddenly feel as if I want to retch out of boredom, but nothing like that happens. I break away from the window and re-establish my connection with my bed. I feel like humming, but can't even recall a nursery rhyme. Habitually, my fingers move to my old wrist watch to wind it up, but it is fully wound up. The hands then start to scratch my two-week old beard. The beard is tough and prickly. I take out

my pack of cigarettes from my pocket. The lighter too. I light up one and I smolder with it. It is inhaling me with every drag. And I am feeling alive with every puff. Something starts to burn inside me and provides a momentary relief. Tomorrow, I have to give a new story to Gupta. I have to write a new feature for the newspaper but ideas elude me. The threads of my thoughts are entangled badly. Moments fire up in the dusk then die down again. Your memories emerge with the ash falling down from the cigarette---- where are you, Neha?

"Bro, why does your face look like the defeated hero of an art movie? Why don't you shave?"

Neha and I had just emerged from the N.M.Palace theatre after watching the movie, 'Qyamat se Qyamat tak'. It was a cold evening. We got down from the three-wheeler at the University gates and walked towards the girls' hostel. We were discussing the movie. Just then Neha said, "Tomorrow, you Romeo, will shave your beard, understood?"

"Beards make a person look intellectual."

"Beards make a person look like an ape. Darwin's ape…".

The cigarette had almost burned down to the stub and was burning my fingers. There are plenty of unwashed dishes on the table and I squash it out in one of them. One more dark and restless night will grab me now. To escape from that, I make a last-ditch effort by turning on the radio.

"This is Aakashvani. Now you will hear the news from Clare Nath…."

Irritated, I switch off the radio. Huh, the news! That is sure to make my blood pressure go up. The same horrible stories. I sometimes wonder how newspapers filled with these trash stories sell so fast in the morning? Neha also disliked them.

"So, what have you decided to do in the future?" we are roaming around in the Botanical gardens. I was silent for a while but time was moving rapidly. Then I had replied, "Maybe I will join some newspaper."

"A newspaper?" her face seemed strange. Many emotions played on it. Some unspoken words echoed in the air. "Why do you talk like the defeated protagonist of an art movie? Why don't you sit for some competitive exams?" The wind was also protesting in silence.

The web of thoughts engulfs me like an octopus. But I brush them aside. However, I can't brush aside my helplessness and powerlessness. And my endless loneliness. Fed up, I light one more cigarette. To avoid these crazy times, I inspect my room. A tail-less lizard is running on the walls as if to measure them. Naïve! It will soon tire and hide in some corner of the room.

I take a long drag. And hold the smoke inside me. It is fun to burn my insides. But I have a fit of coughing! It hurts badly. But the cigarette continues to smoke me. And I go on living it. My cigarette and I are like brothers. The pins poking in my chest and the pain make me realize I am still alive. Cursed to stay alive on the conditions of others. All of a sudden, I realize that I have not laughed roaringly for many years. But I am unable to apologize to myself. A drooping smile appears and sticks to my face. I wipe it away and look

outside the window. The bright evening has given way to dusk. The last ray of the sun has gone out with a painful sigh. One more sweaty night has emerged from the colorless skies and entered my greyish room. The same room where it is just me and the walls, the ceiling, the damp, the suffocation, the silence and my endless solitude.

Sadness surrounds me like a flag flying at half-mast. The second cigarette is also about to leave me. I don't know what feature I will submit to Gupta tomorrow. Nothing comes to mind. There is just a dead silence inside me. It seems as if I will lose this job too.

Outside, an unfortunate sandpiper is loudly screaming, trying to break down the tumour of silence. The noise has started to leak its pus. Afar, some scowling factory's horn is resounding like a sad symphony. The bang of Miss Lily's door closing remains frozen in the silence for a while. Then a drunk voice brutishly descends the stairs and is lost in the darkness. The stray dog in the park cries out suddenly. The sad tunes from Miss Lily's piano are heard from time to time. Railing against the unpropitious times, both outside and inside, I bang my fists in the air. Throwing the cigarette butt out of the window, I return to sit on my bed. I feel lost like a featherless bird. I don't know why but today you are in my memories, Neha!

"Why don't you fill up the forms for the IAS exams?" Neha asks for the third time, while sipping coffee in the canteen.

"Neha, the IAS is not for me," I had to tell her at last.

"Father is searching for an IAS groom for me."

The beastly night starts falling outside. I am lying on my bed like a fused bulb. I don't feel like going to eat at the diner. Restlessly, I light another cigarette. I think of getting up and switching on the light bulb. Then it occurs to me that light in the room is going to make no difference. The darkness that is spread inside me like a cancer will still be the same. God knows till when…

All that smoking is drying up my mouth, but I still go on…drag after drag, as if I am taking some kind of revenge on myself. Oh Neha, where did you go after leaving such deep scars on my memory?

A long time ago, I had seen an art movie. The female star of the movie goes through some shocking experience in childhood and loses her mental balance. The rich parents leave her at her grandma's place in the village. The girl grows up to be beautiful and the hero of the movie falls in love with her at first sight. And then one day, he is able to cure her by the strength of his true love. But once she regains her mental balance, she forgets her previous life as well as her lover and returns to her parents. The lover is unable to accept this truth and loses his mental balance…..

My throat is drying up. I rub out the cigarette. I want to cry, but I have not cried for centuries. The ocean of my tears dried up ages ago. Winds of solitude blow heavily inside the ruins of my body. I am agonized by my loneliness.

I harden my heart and get up. Then I switch on the light in the room. My eyes blink in the suddenbrightness. A bat has lost his way inside my room and is beating its head against the wall in failed attempts to find a way out. I somehow

show it the way outside through the window and then shut it tight.

On the table lies a letter from my family which has come after a long time. I read it once again. My father is not well. Mother's gout has not improved. Worrying about my sister, Sumi's marriage, are eating away at him. He has not received a pension for three months. He has written---of what use is a son if he can't support his family in need?

I close my eyes and with a deep sigh, close the letter. All directions seem to be wrong. A crazy rooster is crowing outside at this time of the night. I can't think of a single idea about the feature that I have to give Gupta tomorrow. Maybe I will lose this job as well. I think of talking to the darkness. Make it listen to all my grievances. I feel as if my sun has been eclipsed at full noon. As if the milk in my life's bottle has curdled. As if, my entire life is incomplete. I am nothing but a mis-fit. I am like the scum deposited on still waters. I am not a man anymore---just an insignificant insect.

The Nest

"It is all too much! I can take no more now. I am now leaving you!" boiling with rage, I tried to beat him by giving up the last card in my deck. But Suresh seemed unaffected by any of these words. He snuggled in the blanket, with his face turned away.

Just now, there had been so much anger and tension between us. A lot of curse words had floated around. I had shaken hands with a white man at the party and this had angered Suresh. How was I to know that the man, while talking, would take my hand in his, with such artistry and then kiss it? I had not invited him to do so. After all, at such parties, people begin to feel free after a few drinks. That man kissing my hand, made Suraj feel insecure. I had scolded him for his behavior. What more was I supposed to do? Should I have created a scene over such a small issue?

It has been quite a few years since we got married, but lately Suraj has become unduly possessive of me. 'Don't meet him. Don't talk to that person. To be honest, even I had not liked the way the white man had kissed my hand. Later on, when he had invited me to the dance floor, I had denied his wishes firmly. I could see that Suresh's ears were turning bright red with anger. The moment we exited the party, Suresh came down on me heavily. "You were enjoying a lot of kissing and all." This made me angry too and the dispute escalated.

Suresh himself is always on Facebook or twitter, chatting inanely with strange ladies. He even visits porn sites. And he is trying to teach me a lesson on being a good mannered, virtuous and faithful wife? Huh! What was my mistake? What unforgivable sin had I committed? While talking with civility, if someone suddenly decides to kiss my hand, is it my fault?

"You should not wear low cut blouses. Your cleavage shows."

"You should tie your sari well up on your waist. Else your belly button is visible."

"Don't encourage men with an inviting glance. All these lecherous men drool on you."

I was sick of these daily allegations by Suresh. That's why when the fight escalated, I felt it was all getting out of hand. Enough is enough! I won't live with this man any longer. But where will I go? My parents are no longer alive. I didn't want to become a burden on my brothers. I can stay with Pooja for some time. She too is a divorcee. She stays alone and works at an NGO. I am also educated. I should get a job soon enough. I used to work before my marriage.

I took out my suitcase and started to put my clothes in it. When I went outside to get some clothes which were drying on my balcony, I saw a pigeon's nest in an empty flower pot. The two baby pigeons were cooing a lot when their mother brought them food. The mother pigeon was taking turns to feed her two babies.

This sight made me think of my babies. Tired after school, they were sleeping soundly in the next room. If I leave, what will happen to my two kids? Will Suresh be able to manage both of them on his own? Will he be able to raise them well? How will my sweethearts cope with-out me? How selfish and cruel had I become? How could I destroy my nest and leave them alone? But what should I do about my husband?

To be real, none of us are ideal and complete. We all have positive and negative qualities. If I think carefully, I will find that Suresh is not so bad after all. Whatever you say, we still do love each other! We like each other a lot. If there are some things lacking in him, there are also some failings I have. Even now, Suresh cares for me a lot. When I fall sick, he looks after me with care. He takes me to the best doctors. Gives me my medicines timely. Massages my head, my hands and my legs. Makes tea and breakfast for all of us. Gets the kids ready for school all by himself. What big deal is it if he got angered by the white man kissing my hand? I, too, had overreacted with annoyance. He is otherwise so loving and affectionate. He had presented me with a beautiful diamond set on our anniversary. He had postponed the purchase of his lap top due to this. Oh God! What was I about to do in anger? I was going to destroy my well grown nest. I didn't give a thought to my kids' future.

I softly pull the blanket over Suresh. Just then he turns and reaches for my hand.

"Sorry Neha! I over reacted in anger. But you know how much I love you dear."

"I, too, love you dear." Saying this, we kiss each other and our anger vanishes. I can hear the kids tossing and turning in the net room. My wholesome nest is still intact. Dear God, may everybody's nest remain prosperous.

The Re-Union

Who I am is not important. What I am about to tell you is. One more thing. This is not a fictional story but a real one. The absolute truth. A documentation of our unruly times. Children, weak-hearted women and sensitive men should not read it, because if on reading it, your throat clams up with grief or your eyes fill with sadness, I won't be responsible at all.

It was a cold evening in December. Six of us had congregated at the 'Volga' restaurant in Cannaught Place to celebrate Brijesh's promotion. Brijesh, also known as Bunty, was my younger brother. He had been promoted to the Managing Director's post at India Bulls. It was a joyous occasion. Apart from my wife Sarla and Brijesh's wife Neha, present there were his colleagues, Mr. and Mrs. Srinivasan. An old Sikh waiter approached us with tired steps and handed us the menu. I noticed that Brijesh was looking hard at the waiter, as if trying to recognize him. Suddenly, he got up from the chair and went over to the waiter and asked, "Sardarji, is it you?"

The old Sikh was scrutinizing Brijesh's face. Time stood still. Suddenly the waiter asked, "Are you Bunty?". The veil lifted from the stores of memory. Recognition dawned like the sun piercing through clouds.

"Pairi Pona, Sardarji," said Brijesh as he touched the man's feet.

"Come son, come," replied the man as he hugged Brijesh.

We were amazed. What kind of union was this? Who was the old man? These were the questions on everyone's mind. Anyway, the old man took our food order and left. As soon as he was gone, Mr. Srinivasan asked Brijesh, "Who is the old man? How do you know him?" I guessed that this was the same old man whose story Brijesh had narrated many times to many people. I had heard this true story from him in many languages, amidst many people.

"It happened in 1983. I was sixteen or seventeen years old. I had newly started growing facial hair. We used to live in Amritsar. Terrorism was at its peak in Punjab those days. Daily, dozens were getting killed. Bombings, explosions and curfews had become common place. The public were afraid and the administration was impotent. Punjab was burning and the leaders of the country were busy playing politics over the dead bodies."

"One day, my father and I were travelling to from Amritsar to Gurdaspur on a bus. It was the wedding of his friend's son. Ma was against us travelling. ''Listen! My left eye has been fluttering since morning. Is it really necessary for you to go?" she said. "Bunty's mom, why are you talking like an ignorant person? Don't you worry. Nothing will happen to us. We will return by tomorrow evening," reassured my father.

"This was the time when outsiders were scared of coming to Punjab. It was the time when the front pages of the daily newspapers were filled with the account of the dozens killed every day. It was the time when even the leaders felt unsafe

even in the presence of their commando body guards. This was the time when the common man's life had no value and he had been left to the mercy of the Gods. That was the time when the people's trust in God was eroding."

"Our bus left Amritsar bus station at one in the afternoon. Father had got a seat upfront, while I was in the back with an aged Sikh."

"Around five in the evening, when we were nearing Gurdaspur, our bus was waved to a stop at an isolated spot by five or six sturdy young men. All of them wore ochre turbans. They had long, flowing beards and some were covered in blankets. Upon entering the bus, they took their guns, pistols and revolvers. Holding a gun to the driver's head, they took the bus off the beaten track, through a mud lane, towards a village. They stopped the bus at a remote spot.

"All Hindus get down from the bus," roared a fierce looking man. Hindus and Sikhs were being segregated. There was chaos in the bus. The ladies started crying as did the young kids. Some young men tried to jump own from the bus and run way but were shot down with bullets. I was frightened. My father, sitting upfront, turned to look at me. I can never forget the helplessness in his eyes. I was terrified to my core. Still, he tried to pat me on my shoulder as a reassuring gesture."

"Had they been one or two people, I could have gathered up the courage to do something. But there were five or six of them. Well-built. And they carried arms. Just then, one of those youth tried to drag down my father. I got up to stop

them. But two young men grabbed a hold on me from behind. They started to drag me down along with my father. Boots and fists rained down on us. I felt my final moments had arrived."

"Just then the elderly Sikh next to me got up and hugged me tightly. 'This is my son. He is a Sikh not a Hindu. Please spare him." He begged.

"The armed youth left me and started beating the old Sikh. They cursed him and started asking the important questions. 'If he is a Sikh, where is his turban? where is his Patka? You are lying'

"But that Sardar clung to me. He kept on repeating, 'Vahe Guru ki Saun, Guru Nanak ji ki kasam. He is not a Hindu, he is as Sikh. Please save him.'.

"But against all odds, the Sardar clung to me. He was continually been attacked with the buts of their guns, with their boots and their fists. In the melee, the old man's clothes were torn, his turban fell down. His long, wavy hair spread over his face. But he did not let go of me. He kept on saying,' Wahe Guru di Saun, Guru Nanak ji ki kasam, he is my son. He is not a Hindu, he is a Sikh. Please spare his life."

"That man was a messenger from God. He was an angel sent by Him. He risked his own life to spare mine. Mr. Srinivasan, that God's messenger is this same old Sikh waiter. I am alive today because of him," saying this, Brijesh went quiet.

"And what happened to your father," Srinivasan could not help himself asking. My eyes teared up. Brijesh took a long gulp from the glass of water on the table.

"I could not save him. The terrorists shot him down. But later on, I felt that my father did not die for the first time on that day. Neither was that his last time to die. He was killed by the Nazis in their gas chambers! Rioters had killed him during the country's partition. He was killed during the genocide in Delhi, Gujrat and Bosnia. He had died at all those places where innocent people had been killed because he belonged to a particular religion or sect or a tribe." Brajesh's voice was tearful.

The old Sikh brought us our dinner.

"Sardar ji, since when are you here?" Brijesh asked him.

"What should I say, son? A few months after that incident in 1983, the terrorists came to our village. They killed many there too! During that time, my son got a job in Delhi, so I came along with him." Sardarji's voice was choking with emotions

"So, you live with your son now," Brijesh wanted to know.

As soon as he heard this, the old man broke down completely and started sobbing. He was trembling from time to time. We stared at him, stunned! Brijesh got up fast and held the old man to support him.

"What should I tell you son? My father was killed in the 1947 riots. My son was swallowed up in 1984. The rioters chopped off his long stresses, put a tyre around his neck and burned him alive."

The old Sikh's tears were flowing non- stop. Brijesh, hugging him, was also crying. He reassured the old man, "Papaji, you don't have to worry now. This son of yours is still alive and

he has come to you now. You are not alone any more. You will come with me."

All our eyes were wet.

Watching them meeting like that, I felt as if a river was finally meeting the sea. As if long lost father and son were uniting. It was the union of two innocent souls.

On a news channel being broadcast on the Television in the restaurant, it was being said that there was great debate in both houses of the Parliament on the Nanavati report.

The old man and Brijesh were wiping each other's tears.

The Stench

Train journeys have their own romance. In any compartment, you can experience the microcosm of India. The Babu Moshay from 'Aamar Shonar Bangla' to the 'Balle-Balle' Sardarji; from the Tamilian saying 'Vanakkam' to the Gujrati Seth asking 'Kemcho',---you get to meet everybody in the coach. You interact with different types of people. You have unique experiences.

Something similar happened to me last winter. I, along with an acquaintance, Vimal, were travelling by Rajdhani Express, from Delhi to Raipur, for some work. Across from us, there sat a gentleman in a French cut beard, travelling with his wife and three-year old child. We greeted each other and had the customary talk about the weather. At his request, we gave him our lower berths and moved to the two upper ones.

I was turning the newspaper pages. Just then, I happened to glance at the man. He was sniffing the air again and again and then he would screw up his face in disapproval. It was pretty clear from his actions that he was smelling a bad odour. From time to time, he would wave his right hand in front of his nose, as if blowing away the air. Vimal had also witnessed this entire thing. At last, he could not help himself. He asked the man, "what happened, Sir?"

"There is a stench coming from somewhere," he replied in aggrieved tones.

Vimal looked at me questionably. I, too, could not understand. I have never in my life made the claim that my nose is as sharp as that of a dog. But Vimal and I were not smelling anything bad. That is why we found his behaviour to be odd. I started to read the newspaper again. Vimal also picked up a page.

After about five or six minutes, I looked down again. That gentleman looked quite anxious now. He was looking around secretively, as if he would take a revolutionary step, once he had located the source of the stench. At last, he said something to his wife. The wife took out a 'room-freshener' from her bag and sprayed it everywhere. I winked at Vimal. He smiled back. A Sardarji occupying the corner berth was also witnessing this with great astonishment.

Now at last, this tortured man will have some peace, I thought. But after a little while, I saw that the gentleman was up to his old tricks again. Then he whispered something in his wife's ears. Annoyed the wife stood up and addressed us, "Whose shoe is this? It is smelling a lot!"

The shoe was Vimal's. He started to rant in an excited voice, "There are five or six pairs of shoes here. How can you say that the stink is emanating from that one? Anyways, both my shoes and socks are new and clean."

At that point, his wife started to say, "Bhai Sahib, please don't mind. Actually, he is averse to all kinds of fetor. He starts to retch. I would request you to put your shoes in a polythene bag, please. We will be much obliged."

Vimal was annoyed and confused. So, I took over the matter. "You see, none of us are getting any kind of stench. But since you are insisting, we will do so."

With great reluctance, Vimal got down from his berth and did as he was told. I thought that would be the end of the matter, but at while later, that man got up again and addressed me. "Bhai Sahib, I can still smell something bad down there? Can we please re-exchange our berths? I want to go back to my upper berth."

I could no longer hold myself back. I said, "Are you travelling by train for the first time? Bhai Sahib, you are not sitting in the living room of your house. There are quite a few smells during a journey. If you get the seat next to the toilet, you get the stink. When the train passes an alcohol making factory, then you smell that odour. While travelling, we should become habituated to all kinds of fetors." Vimal also added softly, "if a human has the nose of a dog, that can cause problems."

Perhaps the man did not hear Vimal. He continued to be stubborn and ask for his upper berth. I did not deem it wise to continue this altercation. So, I got down and he climbed up to the upper berth.

A while later, as his wife was getting something from her purse, she screamed and fell back. Everybody stared at her.

"What happened?" her husband asked from the upper berth.

"There is a dead lizard in my bag," she replied.

Vimal winked at me! I couldn't help smiling.

Looking abashed, the man got down from his berth.

"Bhai Sahib, the mystery of the stench is now solved," the Sardarji said teasingly. The gentleman became even more embarrassed. Anyway, he tossed the dead lizard out of the window. Then he emptied the bag of its contents and took it to the door and shook it out. We all felt relieved. At last, our troubles were over, I presumed.

Dinner had arrived from the pantry car. We all ate and made small talk. Then we started to make preparations for bed. I happened to look at the gentleman. The anxious lines were back on his face. He was again sniffing the air. "I am still smelling a stinking odour," he said, breaking his silence.

"Oh God!" I exclaimed.

At that point, Vimal took charge. "Bhai Sahib, please listen to my words carefully. Tell us, what age do we live in? What times are these? What kind of people are we?"

"What do you mean?" the man was unable to understand

"See, we are all living in putrid times. This age is fetid. The people stink. Our leaders are corrupt and stinking. Our movie stars are in cahoots with the under-world, they are full of stench. Our bureaucrats take bribes and stink. The shopkeepers sell impure goods, they, too, stink. You and I, we lie, we steal the rights of others, do immoral and unethical things, we are full of bad odour. When the entire age is fetid, the times are putrid, the society stinks, we- the people are stenchful--- as such, if you are still smelling something bad, it is only natural. After all, this coach is occupied by smelly people."

The Tale Of The Tailed Sycophant

Today I am going to tell you a world-famous story of a tail. This is not the story about any ordinary, common man. This is the story of the MR.X.

Nobody knows the real name of Mr. X. He was possessed with unique talents since childhood. He was the master of sycophancy, flattery, brown nosing and bootlicking. The surprising thing was that his father was an extremely honest and dutiful school teacher, who considered sycophancy a sin. In spite of being born into such an honest family, Mr. X didn't give up. He didn't inherit the art of brown nosing, it was not in his genes. He was genetically lacking this unique characteristic. But he didn't let this simple fact deter him in any way. Continually learning from his environment and from the society, he became such a great sycophant that people named him Mr. Toady. From that point of view, he could be called a self-made man.

Mr.X was an expert at wagging the extinct tail inherited from our ancestors. His talent in elevating the art of sycophancy from a mere road side trick to the art of a maestro, cannot be dismissed. In the first session of the All India Sycophancy Conference, his speech proved to be a milestone. His utterances like, 'All the Toady's of the world unite' or 'There is no tale without the TAIL' became popular catchphrases. His book "How to be a successful Toady' became the

national bestseller. Many editions of this book were published and it was translated into many languages and sold millions of copies.

But all this came later. How it all started is nothing less than a miracle. One night Mr. X went to sleep. On waking up in the morning, he discovered that he had grown a tail. This news spread amongst the sycophants like a wagging tail. Thousands of people gathered to witness this miracle of nature and special blessing from the Gods. People were heard to say that he must surely have done some special tail-wagging in his previous birth to be granted such a boon from the God of Boot Licking. Soon enough, Mr. X became famous. Along with fame, came respect and wealth. Mr. X's days changed for the better.

There is no other illustration in history of a man growing a tail. Hence, being one of a kind gave him fame at both the National and International levels. His famous tail began to be considered a national treasure. He was decorated with many awards. From the summit of the Red Fort, the Prime Minister, in his address to the nation, declared to award him with the title of 'Dum Vibhushan'. The opposition leaders could hardly be left behind. In the national session of their party, they bestowed on him the honorary title of 'Dum Kesari'. From the premises of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, even the President of India awarded His Excellency, Mr. Toady, the highest award of the nation, 'Dum Ratna'. The entire air resounded with the cries of "May Dum Ratna, Mr. Toady, live forever, may he live long."

The fame of Mr. X's tail spread far and wide with each passing day. His tail was insured by the government for crores of rupees. The brave commandos of the National Security Guard were entrusted with the security of his tail. UNICEF made him their goodwill ambassador. Mr. X's tail began to be considered the eighth wonder of the world. Meeting Mr. X became a routine part of the visit of foreign dignitaries to India.

Amongst all this hula ballo, there were a few people who whispered that his tail was a punishment from God or a symbol of God's fury. But these people were only a handful. They were labelled traitors or foreign agents.

Once Mr.X hurt his tail. The entire nation descended into shock. The people were left stunned and grief-stricken. Some considered it a conspiracy by the opposition. In temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques, special prayers were chanted and Namaz was offered for the well-being of the tail. Havans and Yajnas were conducted at many places. Thousands of people remained glued to the television or radio to hear the latest news about the tail. Worry was shared on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. As soon as news of the tail's well-being was announced, happiness spread among the populace. Sweets were distributed and there were fireworks. Even the fireworks on Diwali paled in comparison to the display that day.

The Limca Book of Records had already made a note of the tail of Mr. X. Now the Guiness Book of Records also followed. Soon, Mr.X became an ideal for the entire nation, a respected model and example to be followed. The whole

nation started wagging their long lost, extinct tails collectively. The tail-less were considered mis-fits. Tail wagging and sycophancy began to be considered the benchmarks for societal success. In fact, tail wagging became our national sport. If that sport were ever to be included in the Olympics, we would surely win the gold! Sycophancy became the norm in the fields of Industry, Business, Academia and Sports. He, who could not wag his defunct ancestral tail, lost out in the race to success. The world belonged to the boot lickers, flatterers, sycophants, fawners and the obsequious! Somebody licked their boss's boots to be in the latter's good books, another did it for a promotion. Some did it to destroy their peers, some to climb the steps of power. In the contest to be successful, people were being lickspittles and opportunistic , crowning the donkey to dethrone the king! Tail wagers ran offices and businesses. Tail wagers ran the government of the country. People wagged their tails with such force that they were becoming hunchbacks.

Once upon a time, Mr. X used to my colleague. He worked in my office. At that time, he had not been established in the hearts of the common man as their dearest boot licker. Occasionally, he would wag his tail before me because he needed me to complete some of his work. I had good relations with my boss. As such, he would often flatter me. Times changed. My boss got transferred. A new one came in his place. By then, Mr.X needed me no longer. He soon stopped recognizing me or even looking at me. I was hurt by his behaviour. But when I mentioned this to a few of my co-workers, they laughed at me and said, "You are a tail less

person. What Mr.X did to you is the true art of obsequiousness!"

As I was saying, this was the world of sycophancy. The entire nation was a fan of Mr. X's tail. The sycophants and boot lickers of the world were full of themselves, flaunting their special skills. In the midst of such an environment, the government decided to issue fragrant postage stamps of 5, 10 and15 rupees, honoring Mr.X's tail, displaying it in different postures. Also issued were special coins, embossed with the pleasing visage of that tail. Even currency notes were circulated by the Reserve Bank of India, featuring the glorious tail. His sycophants even constructed the biggest temple on earth in his honour, wherein a tail sized idol of Mr. X was put up, in the presence of thousands of devotees. Every morning and evening, prayers and aartis began in the temple and soon enough, the collections there exceeded that in the famous Tirupati temple itself! The toady's students wrote hymns and prayers in his honour. All the great poets, writers, artists, musicians and painters in the world dipped their toes in this latest frenzy. The entire nation became 'TAILSOME'. Now, every other person was a boot-licker! Mr. X's famous tail became a part of the school curriculum. 'IN-TAIL-ECT', not intellect, was the watch word! Questions in the examinations took something of this form:

Q1. Describe how Mr.X first learnt to wag his Tail?

Q2. What are the benefits of tail wagging? List with examples.

Q3. Name the people who wrote the hymns and prayers for Mr. X. Quote some lines from those books.

Q4. Mr. X is a self-made man. Explain with examples.

Q5. Mr. X has elevated the art of sycophancy from a street level performance to a fine art! Write an essay on the subject.

To honor his esteemed tail, universities in the country established special research trusts, where the enrolled students were awarded doctoral degrees like PHD or M-Phil. Many scholars even studied further to get a D-Litt in the subject. Scholarships were awarded at graduate and post-graduate levels, if students chose to study "Mr.X and his tail" as a separate subject.

To safe guard the rights of sycophants and tail waggers, the government constituted a special 'National Tail Commission'. To give it legal stature, a bill called 'All India Tail Wagging Rights Act' was introduced in the parliament and was easily passed by the count of tail wagging. In the joint session of the parliament, the resolve to strengthen 'Tail Wagging Rights' was reiterated. All the political parties were united in this resolution. A few respected film makers made movies on the topic of tail wagging, which were later awarded with the 'Dum Saheb Phalke award. The types of boot licking shown in these movies became very popular with the audience. The contribution of these movies in finessing this art form and taking it to grass roots level was highly commendable. Mr. X himself acted in a few of these films as the protagonist.

The market was flooded with books, CDs and cassettes glorifying Mr. X and his 'tailsome' personality. Anthems and devotional songs exalting the tail were everywhere.

"O Lord! Grant us the powers of the Tail,

Let us conquer our tails before others we hail!"

A parallel economy came into being which was based entirely on Mr. X and his Tail.

Inspired by the Tail, doctors and scientists started deep research on how to regrow the appendage that was lost millions of years ago. Many tag lines and catchphrases, such as "Be Proud to Say you are Tailed" gained popularity. Tail based adverts like, "How come his tail is faster than yours?" or "Try this Herbal Powder to ensure a faster wagging tail" started appearing in the media.

The entire nation now ran on Tail Wagging! To accomplish their purpose, people were ready to become door mats and slippers. But as soon as their work was done, they would discard the benefactor. Every civilization and society has its peak moment. This time, the tail wagers were on the ascendant!

In the current, 'Tailful' environment, Mr. X's smile was like the spring blossoms and his sadness left the trees leafless and withered! His cough was the onset of a storm and his sneeze was the equivalent of an earthquake. His tears flooded the rivers, his laughter made the peacocks dance and his anger was like thunder and lightning! Wherever he went on his way, wagging his great tail, oases would open up and when he withdrew that great tail of his, the place would be a desert.

The government even suggested to the Nobel Committee that it would be an honor to the committee itself to award

Mr.X the Nobel Prize, in view of his contribution in elevating the art of tail wagging.

Inspired by Mr. X, tail wagging was now becoming a cottage industry. The 'Tail Revolution' was occurring in every household. Humans were discovering newer ways to wag their non-existent tails. It had been proved that we were the leaders in the entire world in the art of boot licking- a proud moment for our country, indeed!

Once, Mr.X was invited by the most prestigious school in the city as the Chief Guest on its Annual Day. The students there stared longingly at his great tail. Mr. X gave a great speech that day.

"Dear Children, the path of tail wagging is a difficult one. But if you have the seeds of sycophancy, toadyism and obsequiousness in you, then no one can stop you from becoming a tail wagger. Take my example. My father was a simple and honest school teacher, who considered sycophancy and tail wagging a sin. I was born into such a horrible family. But I didn't lose my resolve even in the most adverse of circumstances. I had the urge to be a boot licker. I stayed on this honorable path with everything I had. I went against my father's old fashioned romanticism and chose the path of tail wagging. Although this did anger my father. But I didn't worry about my relationship with my father, as I proceeded on this honorable path. My father was bitten by the bug of 'Outdated Idealism'. He could never overcome that. Hence, I forged my own way. I wagged my tail day and night and exploited every weakness of others. You too

should become opportunistic, wag your tails and be famous!"

The kids were overwhelmed by his speech. Everything was going right till this moment, when suddenly the unthinkable occurred! The moment Mr.X left the school auditorium after his speech, the mishap took place. It all happened in the wink of an eye! Some people blame his opponents for this. They say that those stood against Mr.X actually paid the class X students to perpetrate this horrible act. Although those who opposed him deny this accusation, claiming that they had nothing at all to do with all this. Whatever the truth maybe, what was doomed to be, took place.

What took place was this. As soon as he left the auditorium, some class x boys took hold of the Great Tail and tugged at it hard. And the world famous 'Tail' actually broke away from Mr. X'xs body and came away into the hands of the kids. Everyone stood stunned! Oh My God, what did happen just now? And then it turned out that for the past so many years, Mr. X had been moving around with a special rubberized tail and was fooling the world. And then…..the entire nation was in an uproar! The shock led many people to commit suicide. There was rioting and looting. The entire country was shaken. And this was bound to happen. Whenever a great tail falls down, the earth quakes!!

Mr. X's opponents were quick to point out that they already knew that this entire episode of Mr. X's tail was a hoax from the start. In all this chaos, the important words of a person who had spoken on a televised interview were hardly

remembered. "All sycophants and boot lickers have a tail. But it remains invisible. Unseen. The actual appearance of Mr.X's tail was just a visual projection of the invisible tail!"

The Tenth Man

On that cold night, we were all sitting around the fire on the patio, telling stories. It was midnight. Whenever we stopped speaking, the silence and darkness of the night seemed to deepen.

"Tonight, I am the tenth and last person to tell a story. All those who told stories here, narrated spooky stories related to ghosts. But not one story made me feel scared. The kind of fear that gives you goose bumps. The kind that makes you break out in a cold sweat. That makes you shiver. That makes you numb with dread. It is not that I am fearless. Ages ago, I experienced something that had scared me to my very soul. Tonight, I will relate that incident to you," the grey-haired old person started like that. He was a tall man with a deep voice. His sturdiness at that age made it clear how strong he must have been in his youth. He was wearing a blue denim jacket and blue jeans.

"I was twenty-six years old then," started the old man. "I was working as a lecturer in D.A.V college in Delhi. That year, during the summer vacations, in the first week of June, two of my unmarried colleagues and I decided to travel to the Gushaini area of Himachal Pradesh. On the appointed day, we boarded a taxi and left Delhi at 6am in the morning and passing by Chandigarh, Bilaspur and Mandi, reached the Himalayan guest house at Gushaini at eight, where we had booked ourselves for the next four days."

"We spent the next two days in the wonderful lap of nature. Surrounded by hills and thick forests, Gushaini was a scenic little village.

The 'Tirthan' river flowed in the valley, where fishing in the cold waters was an experience in itself. We also trekked in the hills and the forests. From the beginning, I have been interested in literature and had a leaning towards reading and writing. I had brought a few interesting books with me. It was an amazing experience to lie on a hammock in the warm sunlight and read my favorite authors. "

"After two days, my colleagues decided that they would spend the next few days in Manali. As I was enjoying myself here only, I stayed back and bid them good bye. After dinner, I went to my room. For the last few days, a story had been bubbling around in my mind. That night, since I had plenty of time, I decided to write that story."

"It was around ten at night. Silence permeated through that small hilly village. Sometimes a dog's bark would pierce that silence then it would deepen again. I reached the table and chair in the corner of my room. I extracted a few sheets and my ball point pen from my bag, so I could write down the story I had in mind. Just then, the television in the corner of the room switched on by itself. I turned it off with the remote. I pulled the chair and sat down and was about to write, when the T.V turned on again. I was a bit surprised. What is this malfunctioning, I thought to myself as I turned it off again with the remote. But a few seconds later, the T.V turned on again. This made me angry. Irritated, I left my chair and reached the television set. I switched off the TV

and pulled the plug out from the socket. Relieved, I sat down again and began to mull over the story in my mind. But after just a few moments, the T.V was on again! Now I won't lie to you. This time, I was a bit nervous. What was happening? Was this room haunted? Was it spooked?"

"Before I could do anything else, my own room started being displayed on the screen. There I was on the screen, seated at my desk! I was a bit afraid by now. At this time of the night, there was nobody in the room, apart from me. During those times, nobody in India had heard about CCTV technology nor was it available in the country. So, how was my entire room being displayed on the TV screen? I was at a loss to understand."

"I myself was visible on the screen, sitting at the desk. Was it indeed me or my clone or a doppelganger? I am saying this because just then, my TV persona looked at me and gave me a shrewd smile. I trembled in my insides. Whoever it was on the screen, it was definitely not me. Then who was my counterpart?"

"All of a sudden, my TV counterpart again looked at me with a demented smile and grabbing the pen, attempted to write something. I was stunned when I found my hand rising of its own will, taking the pen and beginning to write something of its own will. It was as if my screen double was trying to control me!"

"The blood drained out of my face. I had goose bumps. There was cold sweat on my forehead. I was rooted to my chair out of fear! Just then, my doppelganger on the TV looked at me and broke into a deranged laughter. I, too, found myself

laughing against my will. By then, I had realized that I needed to save myself from the clutches of this evil power. Gathering up all my will power, I took the paper weight and flung it at the TV screen. As the screen shattered, I ran out of the room helter-skelter."

"I had held on to the keys of my colleagues' room. Running and falling, I entered one of their rooms and fell on the bed. Covering myself up with the blanket, I started reciting the sacred 'Hanuman Chalisa' and fell into a fitful sleep."

"The next day, I woke up at eight. It was sunny outside and the birds were chirping in the trees. But last night's events were imprinted in my mind. I went straight to the owner of the guest house and narrated the entire incident. But he refused to believe me."

"This can't be true. I am sure you had a nightmare," he said.

"I am telling the truth. It really happened as I am telling you," I replied.

"The reason I am saying this is because your room's TV has been out of order since last week. When the last guest was checking out, he had complained about it. I had forgotten, so I did not get it serviced. Secondly, due to some technical issues, there has been no television broadcast on this area since 6p.m yesterday. So, how could your TV turn on last night and you viewed such strange things?" the guest house owner asked me.

"His answer left me stunned. After all, what did I see on the TV screen last night? It was surely not a ghost, this much was true. Was it some evil counterpart of my own self? Or was it

an illusion of my own making? A result of my own restless and troubled mind? Or had a portal opened in time and space, through which some evil scenes were being transmitted from some parallel universe?"

"One more thing. If you ever visit me, you will not find a television set in my house. It is not easy to live without a television in this day and age but after the scary incident ages ago, I am unable to watch the T.V. I understood what fear was that night." Saying this, the old man got up and started walking away. We watched him fade into the distance, stunned and speechless.

The Tiger

PART 1

That day, they both had been working late at the office because of a meeting. After the meeting, all their colleagues left the office, but she remained behind, talking to Suraj. Her working women's hostel was quite close. Suraj often dropped her there on his bike.

Just then, there was a blackout. And from very close, just from where Suraj was sitting, there was the loud roar of a tiger. She screamed out, scared out of her wits. But the lights came on immediately. Suraj was sitting there. And there was no tiger around. Had she imagined that roar?

"What happened, Nishi?" Suraj had asked.

"What was that sound?" there was fear in her voice.

"What sound?" Suraj had looked at her, puzzled.

"There was the roar of a tiger, right where you were sitting"

Suraj had shrugged, as if he understood nothing.

She was sure that it was the roar of a tiger. She had observed tigers from up close at the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. She was familiar with their roaring. How could there be the sound of a tiger's roar in the office, she had thought.

Even after that evening, she had heard the roaring of a tiger several times and on each of those occasions, she was with

Suraj. One time, she was walking down an office corridor with him. Suddenly, the lights had gone out and the distinctive roaring of a tiger, right where Suraj was standing, had scared the hell out of her. When the lights had come back on, she had found herself trembling with terror. But there was no tiger next to her. There was only a confounded Suraj standing there. She had asked Suraj about the roaring again. He had said something indistinctly that implied that she had imagined it all. However, by now, she was becoming convinced that Suraj had something to do with the roaring she often heard. The sound was terrifying enough to raise her goose- pimples and she had heard it two or three times by now.

Nishi was now scared of the dark, especially when she was with Suraj. She had started carrying a powerful torch light in her purse. Actually, she had started falling for Suraj. He also liked her. But somehow, this issue with the tiger had cropped up between them. Was she right in suspecting Suraj or was it all a part of her hallucination? Was she now hearing imaginary sounds? To answer her own doubts, she had gathered up her courage and done an experiment on herself a few times. Whenever she used to be alone in the evening, she would find an excuse to switch off the lights in the room. Each time, she heard a tiger's roar emanating beside Suraj. Her suspicions were now confirmed. She would clarify this mystery with Suraj the next day, she had decided.

PART 2

It is 2.30am in the morning. A young woman sleeping in the room is disturbed by some noise. The lights in the room are

off but she senses someone moving around the room. And then she hears the tremendous roar of a tiger. She shrieks in horror. The she hears someone running and jumping out of the open window. She gets up, turns on the light and peers out of the window. Afar, she sees the vague outlines of a man sprinting away.

Now, there are some questions that arise from this incident.

A. Is this the same woman who was present in the previous story?
B. Is this the same young man who was connected with the tiger?

The answers are:

A. Yes, this is the same woman who was present in the previous story. At ten in the morning, she has an appointment with an ear specialist at a hospital. The doctor examines her thoroughly, performs a few tests and is able to confirm that both her ears are absolutely fine.
B. Yes, this is the same man who was connected with the tiger issue. He knows that he starts roaring in the dark. Actually, that young man, a.k.a Suraj is in love with Nishi and does not want to lose her.

   Last night, he had gone to Nishi's working women's hostel to discuss and reason with her about this very problem. But he was scared by her yelling in the darkness and had run away. Next day, he gathers up the courage to visit a psychiatrist. After asking many questions and conducting some tests, the doctor tells him that there is a tiger residing inside him. Which

means that he suffers from 'split-personality' or 'multiple personality disorder'. A human during daytime and a tiger in the dark….

Young Suraj still works in the same office as Nishi. Now he daily takes two pills prescribed by the psychiatrist. They both have discussed this issue frankly. At present, they only remain together during daytime. They avoid being near each other at nights. Even though their love for each other has only deepened. Recently, they have spent some intimate hours together during day time.

This story can end in many ways.

A. Many of his colleagues learn about his disorder. At last, his manager, under pressure from his co-workers, is forced to remove him on the grounds of him being a 'freak'. He goes away and the young woman, Nishi, soon forgets him and gets on with her life.
B. They get married. But every night, they separate as darkness comes and sleep in different rooms.
C. The pills prescribed by the psychiatrist have an adverse effect on him and his condition worsens. Eventually, he ends up in a mental hospital and the woman divorces him and leaves.
D. The young man becomes a disciple of Buddhism, so that the violent man inside him dies and Nishi remains unharmed.

E. The treatment of the psychiatrist works and Suraj becomes completely normal and ends up living happily ever after with Nishi.

Dear readers, please choose whichever ending you like for this story.

The World's Most Beautiful Ruined Painting

The rag-picker kids who first saw it, thought it was a big object. Upon looking closely, they realized there was something special about it, after all. When they removed the dirt and the entwined leaves and creepers from it, they came to know that it was a big, ruined painting. The rag-picking kids left it behind because it was of no use to them. Even the stray dogs sniffed it and left. But the eyes of a neighborhood painter passing by, happened to fall on it. He spread the news through phone and texts to his painter friends. Soon, most of the painters living nearby came to look at it. Those painters who cleaned it up even more and took it to the house of the neighborhood painter, discovered that even in its ruined state, the painting looked beautiful. As if, being in the garbage heap had not destroyed much of its charm. Although, that huge painting had been ruined at some places, its overall beauty stayed intact.

Even without a thorough cleaning, the painter's name was visible in the corner. But the name could not be deciphered clearly, as the painting had started to decay from that very point. All the painters gathered in the neighborhood painter's living room were busy making conjectures about the mysterious painter's name and how it came to be destroyed and ended up in a garbage dump. They, themselves, were professionals and made good paintings.

But they could not imagine painting something as good as that ruined one. They were all fascinated by allure of that ruined painting.

All of them spent the entire evening in the living room of the neighborhood painter, gazing at the painting and discussing about it. The host had a solution which he used to remove further dirt from the painting and clean it up more. And then, the beauty of that painting became even more obvious. All the painters were amazed and some remarked, "Even in this state, it is more alluring than Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa". Some compared it to Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' and declared the ruined painting to be better. The neighborhood painter found this more fascinating than Van Gogh's 'The Last Supper'. Suffice it to say that this ruined painting left them all speechless and wonder-struck.

After cleaning it a bit more, they felt a glow emanating from that painting. The painters started to mend the frame and soon, the refurbished frame added more allure to it.

As they were having tea, they discussed what to do with this magnificent painting. Some suggested that it be donated to a gallery, so that it took take its place amongst other such paintings. But the neighborhood painter was not in favour of letting it go. At last, it was decided that it would be placed at the art exhibition taking place next week at the city's famous art gallery, so that art lovers could enjoy it and be overwhelmed by its beauty. When the meeting ended and other painters left for home, the neighborhood painter kept on gazing at this unique painting in the living room of his house from different angles and felt overjoyed. When he

went to bed at night, all his dreams were about this painting. Even though it was winter, his dreams were of the spring, with colourful flowers blossoming, butterflies fluttering around and the echo of the cuckoo bird. Multiple rainbows bloomed in the painter's dream sky.

At last, the day dawned when this strange painting had to be placed at the exhibition. Once more, all the painters gathered at our neighborhood painter's house. This time the crowd was much larger because the other painters had invited their own painter friends, who in turn had invited their own acquaintances. At last, this ruined painting was taken in a procession to the city's famous art gallery, where it was installed ceremoniously with other paintings. That ruined painted brought a splendor to the atmosphere. People were being pulled towards it. The painting became a topic of conversation amongst the viewers in the gallery. Many tried to find the name of the painter but were disappointed. Many rich art lovers offered lakhs of rupees to buy the painting but the neighborhood painter refused to sell it.

That ruined painting was so strange and life like that many people were found trying to enter through the door painted on it and became objects of ridicule. A bee which had somehow entered the gallery, and mistaking the flowers on the painting to be real, tried to sit on one and made a fool of itself. A kid came with a glass and considering the water flowing from a tap in the painting to be real, unsuccessfully tried to fill his glass. The ultimate mis-direction was when an old man tried to move aside the drape painted on a wall in the painting, and became the object of laughter.

On the last day of the exhibition, there again arose the dilemma of what to do with the painting. Some again suggested that it should be donated to the biggest art gallery in the country's capital, so that it could continue to enthrall art lovers. But as before, our neighborhood painter, asserting his ownership rights, refused to do that. After a tumultuous debate lasting for four hours, a unanimous opinion was formed that this painting could not be the work of any human. At the end of that discussion, it was proposed that this was an extraordinary painting, more likely to be a divine work. In that session, it was decided that the most beautiful ruined painting in the world should, hence, be immersed in the waters of the sacred Ganges river. It was decided that this painting was a part of nature and it would be better if it became one with nature again.

The next day, all the painters, art lovers and common people, formed a procession and ceremoniously took the painting to the Ganges river. The crowd of people were chanting slogans of "Long Live the world's most beautiful painting." The excitement of the throng was palpable.

In honor of that unique and divine painting, many prayers were offered at various temples. Special 'ardaas' was held in the gurudwara and 'kadha prasad' distributed. 5678cvSpecial prayer sessions were held in churches and the maulvis asked for special blessings for the painting in the mosques. In this way, the rare painting became a symbol of unity and brotherhood in these difficult times.

At last, our neighborhood painter, along with several of his painter friends, boarded a large boat, with the painting. In

the middle of the river, they tied a heavy stone to the painting, so that after immersion, it would not float up again and flow to some other river side, but remain on the river bed itself.

And in this way, the world's most beautiful ruined painting was immersed in the river.

It has been many years since this incident took place, but even today, in the minds of art lovers, this incident is as clear as the lightning that brightens a dark stormy night. As it happens, there grew many folklores and legends around this painting. Every year, on the river side of the Ganges, at the spot where the immersion took place, an art exhibition cum fair is organized. Famous painters come from afar to exhibit their work. This place has become a pilgrimage for all art lovers. Whenever a child praises an art work in the crowd, many hands point to the immersion spot, where years ago, the world's most beautiful, ruined painting was offered up to the river. When steamers and boats pass that spot on the Ganges river, the sailors point out that spot to the passengers and say, "Look there! Yes, there! This is the place where the most unique work of nature was sent back to nature itself. Where the most beautiful ruined painting of the world was immersed in the sacred river…."

The Wound

My younger brother, Kislay, was my favourite. Since childhood, I had loved him a lot. He was five years younger than me, but we always played together. We got along well. When he was in the nursery section of our school, he would often come and sit in my class room during lunch break. If he was ever bullied by another student, that boy had to bear the brunt of my anger. I was strong, well-built and athletic, good at sports, while my younger brother was skinny but did well at academics. We siblings were proud of each other.

Although my younger brother was intelligent, there was a gap in his 'brain-line'. At least that is what Dad used to say. My father was very interested in books on astrology and palm-reading. He predicted that there would occur a big incident in Kislay's life, which would test his mental balance and stability. This augury from my father often left me worried. Then I would try to look after my brother even harder.

We lived in Amritsar. My father was a history professor at the university there. The horrifying decade of the eighties had started. Khalistani terrorism was at its peak in Punjab. Terrorists were on a random killing spree. Gurudwaras were being mis used to hide ammunition. The police were also being targeted. Since the local police was unable to cope with the rising wave of terrorism, many battalions of the Central Reserve Police Force had been deployed in Punjab. It was a

difficult time for Hindus in Punjab. Pakistan trained terrorists were abetting the rift between Hindus and Sikhs by dragging Hindus from bus stations and trains and killing them. A curfew had been imposed in the entire state of Punjab between the hours of six in the evening to six in the morning. Meanwhile, in June 1984, in Punjab, during a massive anti-terrorism campaign called 'Operation Bluestar', the extremist Sikh leader, Jarnail Bhindarwala, who was the leader of the Khalistani terrorism, had been killed. There was outrage amongst the Sikhs. Then, in October 1984, the nation's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. As a revenge, hundreds of innocent Sikhs were killed in Delhi and all over the country. Such was the poisonous environment in which Kislay and I were growing up in Punjab.

I had completed my studies a few years ago and was then working as a lecturer in D.A.V College in Ludhiana. Younger brother, Kislay, was doing his M.Sc in Bio-Technology at the university in Amritsar.

In spite of Operation Bluestar, which had taken place a few years back, newly formed splinter groups were unifying in spreading terror and killing people in Punjab. There was tension between the Hindus and Sikhs.

It was under such difficult circumstances that my brother, Kislay, fell head over heels in love with a Jat Sikh girl. She was his classmate, Simran Sandhu, and she, too, loved him. Her father was an officer of the Indian Revenue Service. Using his influence, he had got himself posted at lucrative places and earned a lot of black money. They owned several

mansions in a posh neighborhood in the city and even in the eighties' decade, owned a fleet of foreign luxury cars.

When my younger brother confessed his affair to me, I was filled with anxious dread. The atmosphere was really grave. The rivers of Punjab were afire. I knew for certain that Simran's father would never agree to a match between her and my brother. By then, both Simran and my brother had completed their masters and enrolled at the 'Imtek' institute to peruse their doctorates. My brother asked for my help in formalizing their marriage.

I was greatly apprehensive. When our father learned about this, he too became worried. After a lot of consultation, on everyone's advice, Kislay and I asked Simran's father for an appointment at his home. Love and Hatred are difficult to hide. By then, they were also aware of this affair. Simran's brother had even threatened Kislay.

This was the time when Hindus were fleeing Punjab due to the terrorist's killing spree. On the other hand, due to riots against Sikhs in other parts of the country, they too, were running back to Punjab. This flight by both the Hindus and Sikhs was making the environs hostile.

My meeting with Mr. Sandhu was explosive. He flatly refused to let his Jat Sikh daughter marry a Hindu. I pleaded that they were in love and for the sake of their happiness, they should be allowed to marry. But he was blinded by rage and hatred. Infuriated, he even insulted us. In order to humiliate us further, he announced that he would never let his daughter marry 'Biharis'. My father was originally from Bihar and had settled in Punjab many years ago. We were

from an educated, cultured family. But Mr. Sandhu believed that all Biharis were poor brothers. They had no dignity as they were from a poor and backward state. Many Punjabi friends of my father also tried to reason with Mr. Sandhu, but he and his son stood their ground. It is difficult to change or enlarge the vision of narrow minded and short-sighted people.

When my brother and Simran continued to meet despite all the opposition, Simran's brother threatened to abduct our younger sister. The toxicity in the surroundings had now spread from societal to personal levels. Simran was being scolded and beaten at home on a regular basis. Her brother's thugs also assaulted Kislay and injured him. I wanted them both to elope to Delhi and get married in the court. But both of us brothers were worried about our younger sister. Considering the threat from Simran's brother, Kislay, stepped back from this relationship but he fell prey to great depression. Meanwhile, Simran, tired of the daily beatings and the constant bickering, poisoned herself on the fifteenth of August and died. When my brother heard the news, he had a nervous break- down. My father and I became engrossed in the fight to revive him. We took care of him whole heartedly. With medicines and mental support, we were able to restore him to his previous self. Fully recovered, Kislay completed his doctorate. Later, he got a scholarship to do his post-doctoral research at a university in Florida, USA. Eventually, he was appointed a lecturer in the same university. A few years down the lane, he married a white woman there. They have two lovely kids now.

Once when he came to India with his family, I looked at his palm. His 'Brain Line' was now almost joined. Yet during our conversations, I could detect a tragic undertone nagging at his heart.

When anybody discusses the terrorism days in Punjab now, I am reminded of the disastrous incident that happened to my brother. And the memory of Simran's suicide still makes my eyes wet. Has my brother been able to forget the tragic death of Simran? Will he ever be able to overcome this calamitous event? On the surface, it seemed as if he was leading a normal life with his wife and kids in America. But do his wounds reopen every year on the fifteenth of August? Even if wounds heal and the scab is torn away, it always leaves behind a scar -- as a life-long reminder.

They

There are four of them in the railway coach, whereas I am alone. They are hefty and I am weak. They are tall and well built, but I am of average height. Maybe I entered the wrong coach in a hurry. Something inside me is sending out warning signals that I shouldn't be in this compartment with them. There have been riots in many places all over the country. Although our region is still free from the riots, nobody can predict what happens and when. For the next hour I should be careful about them. Till I can get down at my station.

I glance at them with averted eyes. Two of them have long beards. All four are wearing green kurta-pajamas and white skull caps. Why are they glaring at me? Is there something wrong? Do they have dangerous intentions? There is a scent of fear in the air. Even though I don't want to smell the fear, somehow it is entering my nostrils and sending danger signals to my brain, which is making me anxious. The shadow of an untoward incident falls on me and restlessness stirs inside me.

Terrorists have been involved in many bombings in the country, resulting in the death of dozens of people. This has caused riots in many places. After incidents of stoning, arson and looting, curfew has been imposed at many places. I am usually at peace but today peace seems to have become

extinct. Rare and unattainable. Doubts are tearing down my insides like blood thirsty beasts.

Once again, my eyes meet theirs. The eyes set in their untanned faces are looking at me. They are so different from us. We worship the sun god, whereas they are in awe of the moon. We write from left to right but they do just the opposite, writing from right to left. Our religious sites are in this country, while theirs are in a different country. Their eyes, their noses, the structure of their faces, their body structure and the color of their skin—are all different from ours.

Why are they staring at me? Are these four terrorists? Are they hiding AK47s and bombs in their bags? Even though it is cold, I start sweating. I can feel tremors in my body. My eyes seem to be filled with hot peppers. My throat is dry with thirst. My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. Even if I wish to scream, no sound will come out of my throat. My under arms are sweaty. The three sacred rivers, Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, seem to be flowing from my head. Did I not take my blood pressure medicine? Why are the veins in my head so tight? Why is there darkness before my eyes? Am I swooning? Why is it difficult to breathe? Who has placed a heavy stone on my heart?

Why is the bearded fellow coming towards me- will he put a knife through me? Oh God! There isn't even a policeman in this compartment! I will definitely not survive today! I will be a victim of their bullets and bombs---a bite for their knives—a framed picture on the walls of my house-----I will become the culmination of my past and present. So this was

how I was supposed to die, at the hands of terrorists---at the apex of my life---in an empty railway coach---without any reason---I am not of a dying age---what will happen to my wife and kids—no, no----stop---don't approach me----I don't want to die yet----I appeal to your God---please spare me! Are these bees humming in my head?

"Brother, are you alright? You are perspiring even in this cold. You are also trembling. It seems as if you need a doctor. Don't be scared. Everything will be alright. We are with you. Allah will make thing right." That man was knocking on the edge of my consciousness.

He seems to be good man. Now his face seems to be changing into that of Abdul Hameed, the hero of the 1965 Indo-Pak war. No, no it seems to be changing in to the face of our former president, A.P.J Abdul Kalam.

Now he seems to look familiar like the famous gazal singer, Gulam Ali---- now he seems to be singing in Gulam Ali's voice,

'These are lies, they have been spread by people'

Oh, my headache---this darkness---

The train has stopped--- perhaps the station has come--these four are now supporting me down from the train----now they are taking me somewhere---now I am in a hospital---they have taken thee phone number from me and called my wife Sumi. No, no---I was wrong. They are nice people, humanity is still alive!

"His blood pressure had shot up. Ma'am, you should thank these people that they brought him here on time. Medication

has now brought down the pressure a little. You can take him home now. He must rest a lot," the doctor is instructing Sumi.

I am much better now. My wife and those four people are now bringing me out from the hospital. We are now sitting in a cab.

"Brother, I am obliged to you four. How can I express my thanks? It is because of you that he is alive today," my wife is saying with tears of gratefulness in her eyes.

"Don't talk like that sister. We did what we could for a fellow human. This what Allah wanted."

I am feeling ashamed. These four, they left everything to help me. We are all children of the same God! we are the two eyes of the same person. We are citizens of the same country. Both our blood and sweat are the same. They are not aliens, they are one of us.

"Khuda Haafiz, brother. God be with you! Take care of yourself."

"Khuda Haafiz."

The cab has started to move. As they walk away, their backs seem very familiar. As if it is the back of my father. As if it is the back of my brother. I feel as if I have known them for a long time.

The cab is moving towards my house. The stars are twinkling in the sky. The late rising moon is also up and shining brightly, lightening my way. And Sumi is caressing my hair and saying, "They were angels not humans!"

Two By Two Is Five

What times are these when the wolves have captured all the torches and we are standing vulnerable.

It was as if a huge rock was rolling down the mountain and heading straight for them. As if a monstrous tsunami wave was rising towards them. Prakash's father, Pratap was feeling just like that at the moment.

"In light of all the evidence and testimonies of the witnesses, the accusations against the defendant, Prakash, have been proved to be true. The crime committed by the defendant Prakash, is heinous. This court, hereby, finds him guilty. The defendant Prakash's abominable crime has made the entire humanity remorseful. In the opinion of this court, this crime falls under the 'Rarest of rare' category. Hence the court, under Indian Penal Code 302, orders defendant Prakash, son of Kunwar Pratap, to be hanged by neck until he is dead." Supreme court Judge, Justice Ram Murti's somber tones resounded in the silent courtroom. Prakash's father, Pratap felt his voice fall in the courtroom like the lightening falls on a tall tree standing upright in a field.

Years ago, after many prayers and fertility treatments, Kunwar Pratap's wife, Janki Devi, gave birth to a boy. "At last, we have the heir to continue our family's legacy," he had proudly announced as he held the baby. Kunwar Pratap Rai hailed from a family of zamindars. His father, Kunwar Akhilesh Rai had been bestowed the title of Rai Sahib by the

British. Dozens of villagers in the area were his subjects. He was the owner of numerous wells, ponds, temples and hundreds of acres of land. Elephants were tied at his gate and Arabian horses tied in his stables. Everybody was scared of his gun totting and bamboo stick holding security men. Kunwar Pratap Rai had inherited all this fortune. Although, legally, the zamindari system had been abolished during his father's time, the arrogancy still remained.

Kunwar Pratap named his son Prakash.

Kunwar Prakash Rai

When Prakash was in Class Nineth, he had had a fight with a classmate and had brought his father's revolver and aimed it at the heart of the offending classmate.

"Why did you do such a thing?" Pratap had asked after using his influence to settle the matter peacefully.

"Papa, he was comparing himself to me. To the son of Kunwar Pratap Rai. That son of a teacher!" Prakash replied with anger and horror.

When Prakash was in Class tenth, his father bought him a Hero Honda motorcycle. Prakash was thrilled. Within a year or two, he had created his own bikers' gang that included the sons of powerful people in the area. Teasing the town girls and terrorizing them, was the main job of this gang. Prakash and his friends would sometimes tease a girl and whirl away on their bikes, sometimes they would pull out her scarf and run away. At times, in order to feel high, these bad boys would even indulge in chain snatching of some unsuspecting ladies. Thus, step by step, Prakash entered the

world of crime. If they crossed the limit and the matter reached the police station, the influential fathers of these boys would use their resources to keep the matter quiet.

On entering college, Prakash became a loose cannon. Kunwar Pratap Rai had used his considerable wealth to buy shopping malls, multiplexes and hotels in the city. He remained busy with his business. Sometimes father and son would not meet for days. Some days, Kunwar Pratap Singh would come home late in his Mercedes, sometimes Prakash would be out till late, spending time in parties or discotheques.

Meanwhile, the foundation had been laid for a new kind of India. With the influx of foreign capital, there were shining malls everywhere. Mutiplexes. MNCs. Call centers. There were well dressed mannequins in the display windows of shops. Mirrored elevators. The markets were resplendent. Buying up the entire market and filling up their mansions with the goods, were the newly moneyed shoppers. The hunger to become successful millionaires by any means necessary, was gnawing away at the people. At one end was the rising sensex. On the other end, stood the huts and slums of the hungry and semi naked farmers and labourers. Their difficulties were larger than life. They could not source two square meals. Their kids died of malnutrition. There was no place in the New India for them.

Prakash was the true son of this New India. He had the latest mobile phone, laptop, I pod, I-pad, palm top, I-pods and numerous other gizmos. He wore suits by Reid and Taylor. His shirts were Van Heusen or Zodiac. Bennetton and Levy's

jeans were worn by him. He had Ray-Ban sunglasses. He had woodland shoes and drove a Toyota Land Cruiser SUV. He possessed all these materialistic things but lacked a conscience. He had no ideals or values. No sensitivities and no humanity. This was the age when satellite channels were dishing out obscenity in the guise of 'Reality Shows'. The sordid game of destroying the ethical values of past generations was being played. In the race to increase their TRP, every night, an ancient culture and heritage was being choked to death.

The Youth Festival was being held, in those days, in the Mahatma Gandhi college auditorium. That evening, poetry recitation was on. As Chief Guest, famous poet, dramatist and social worker, Akbar Hashmi, was present on the stage. Everyone was familiar with his broad minded and secularist views. Fundamentalist forces were gathering to oppose him. Later, mafia goons had taken his life. But that day, he shone on the stage as a beacon of shining views. He was not a single person but an institution in himself.

"The days now resemble the shells spread out on a lonely island and nights are like the victims of Ebola Virus"

"Some mirrors are defective, hence the image of times past appears distorted."

The poetry recital was at its peak. Good poets were being praised.

"What times are these when the wolves have captured the torches and humanity stands vulnerable."

"What times are these, when the afternoons are filled with darkness and there is a disturbing cacophony inside us,

When from Ayodhya to Bamiyan, from Iraq to Afganisthan, dwarves are casting long shadows."

Just then, sloganeering was heard outside the auditorium. Very soon, under the leadership of Prakash, fifteen or twenty rogue elements entered the auditorium. They held hockey sticks, rods and bicycle chains. They were opposing the decision to make Akbar Hashmi the chief guest. Soon enough, they embarked on vandalism and beatings. This started a stampede. Many students received blows to the skull. There were broken arms and wrists. Some students spirited Akbar Hashmi out through the back door.

But even after this episode, Prakash and his friends remained untouched. The college admin let them go with a warning. It is the curse of this modern India that the masters of these hooligans hold important positions in the government. Anti-social elements were secure. Truth tellers were being killed. The books of writers who narrated the truth were banned. Writers and artists who listened to their conscience, were being extradited.

Soon, Prakash became the chief college goon. This time, the tactics and methods used by Prakash and his friends for ragging the bunch of new freshers were so harsh that even the ragging methods shown in the movie. 'Gulal', failed in comparison. The ragging was such that many students left the college out of fear, pain and indignity. One fresher even tried to commit suicide due to psychological pressure caused

by the ragging. Even the college teachers kept quiet out of fear.

"We all have families. We dare not confront these hooligans. After all, their influence is unlimited."

Some parents tried to lodge a formal complaint against the ruffians. Little did they know that the managing committee members were in the pockets of Pratap and other influential parents. Obviously, these complaints were settled and no action was taken.

In the meantime, his father Kunwar Pratap Rai, had become the Commissioner of the Municipal Corporation. His stature had increased as well as his influence.

This was the time when Prakash developed a crush on a girl, Nisha, studying at the university. Who says that hooligans do not have the right to fall for a girl? But as a rule, it is unheard of that a girl from a decent family will ever entertain a ruffian like him. This enraged Prakash. Anger was his family's tool. It was said that once, while hunting, his great grandfather's dog was killed by a leopard. The latter was so enraged by this atrocity that within a week, he had killed about a hundred leopards. Surely, that man had contributed to the extinction of leopards in India. The anger of Prakash's grandfather was also legendary. There was the famous story of how, when he had just set out for the court, a crow had pooped on his head. This infuriated him so much that he took out his rifle and became thirsty for the blood of all crows in the world. It is said that he had taken an oath to free the world of crows. Old people said that within a week he had killed all the crows in the neighborhood. It was said that

there was not a single crow family who had not lost a member to his revenge. Many crow families had lost three generations to his outrage. None knew the truth but such is the power of folk lore. Prakash's father, Kunwar Pratap's anger was also well known. As a child, a monkey had snatched a banana from his hands. He had vowed to drive all monkeys from his locality. When he grew up, he had loosened many black faced 'langoor' monkeys in the area, who had driven away all the other monkeys.

Such was the family that Prakash hailed from. Thus, when he was rejected by Nisha, he was infuriated. But nobody had imagined that this anger would take such a horrible turn. One day, when Prakash tried to flirt with her, she had slapped him hard. Prakash was outraged. That evening when Nisha was on her way to the market, Prakash came with his biker gang and threw acid on her face. Thankfully, his aim was off the mark. Nisha had shielded her face with her hands and leaned back. Hence her face was saved but her hands bore the brunt of the acid attack. Bystanders took the injured girl to the hospital.

This was a serious matter. But Kunwar Pratap Rai immediately sent his son away to his maternal grandparents. He readied many false witnesses who swore that Prakash had left the city two days earlier.

Kunwar Pratap Rai had position, influence and wealth. Thus, Prakash was saved once more. His father warned him to stay away from further mischief. Prakash tried to maintain a low profile for the next few months. But who can subdue the burning embers of a wanton youth? A few months later,

Prakash and his friends, along with their girlfriends, went to 'Sariska' animal reserve under the guise of looking at tigers. But once there, they killed two black bucks, illegally. An investigative journalist in the city learned of this incident. Black bucks were an endangered species. The matter began to gain traction. But what were the boys' father there for? They used their sway at every level to settle the matter.

But all this was just the trailor. The actual 'horror movie' was still to come.

One night, Prakash was on his way home, after partying with his friends till late. He was driving his Toyota Land cruiser and he was drunk. Passers-by later said that under intoxication, he drove his land cruiser over some poor laborers sleeping on the pavement. Six or seven of them died on the spot. Prakash drove away from the scene. The rest of them lay there on the pavement, injured and helpless. Later, a few more passed away in the hospital. The police arrested Prakash. But after spending a few days in prison, he was out on bail. Kunwar Pratap Rai had wealth and influence. He believed that everyone had a price. But the value of every one differed. You just had to know the right price. He opened his purse strings to buy witnesses. He already had a team of good lawyers, who proved in court that Prakash was not driving the car at the time of the incident. He was riding shot gun. It was his driver who was driving. Prakash was saved once more. If a poor man or two died due to the rash driving of a rich man's son, what did it matter? After all, what value did a poor laborer's life have in independent India? They were the lowest of the low.

Prakash was saved but he was not likely to change. Soon enough, he became friendly with some criminal elements, who were killers for hire. He bought an AK 47 rifle from them. But a few days later, some members of this gang were arrested by the police. During interrogation, they ratted on Prakash and bragged about how they had sold him an AK 47 rifle. Under the arms act, the police arrested him. The country was under the threat of terrorism. It was illegal to own a Kalashnikov rifle. This time, people thought that Prakash would not be acquitted. But once again, his father turned the scales. After all, Prakash was his own blood. He believed that people made mistakes in their youth. Hence, he engaged the services of the most eminent criminal lawyer in the country, Mr Shyam Vanjani. As a result, Prakash was released after spending a few months in prison. Shyam Vanjani and his team used the loopholes in the law and turned around the events such that Prakash was proved innocent. This news was headlined in the newspapers. TV channels went into a rush to organize talk shows on this subject. Some of them invited Prakash on Prime Time to lay down his take on the matter. This was telecast live. Also present on this panel, were his father and his lawyer, Shyam Vanjani and some crime experts. Some channels also called upon retired senior police officers to sit on the panel. This issue was exploited by the channels for a long time. Some claimed to air exclusive interviews with him. Very soon, Prakash became a celebrity. And in the process, the TV channels increased their TRP as well. Taking advantage of the matter, his father engaged the services of a college professor to ghost write a book on Prakash's time in prison.

The professor was paid handsomely but the book was published in Prakash's name. This book was to be titled. "An Innocent Man's Prison Diaries' and sub titled "How I was illegally detained and tortured for months." This book was published by the famed Languine publishers. Very soon, this book became the National Best seller. It was also translated into other languages. Within a few months, thousands of copies of the book were sold. Prakash got a big amount as royalty. A famous movie director in Mumbai bought the rights for this book from Prakash and his father for a sum of one crore. Prakash was living the dream!

A few months later, Kunwar Pratap married Prakash off to a girl from a rich and high standing family. He got a lot of dowry, which included a Mercedes car. Kunwar Pratap Rai thought that marriage would put Prakash on the right track. He wanted Prakash to start helping him in his business.

But Kunwar Pratap Rai was wrong in this thinking. Within a few months of his marriage, this incident happened.

"One can't have the same dish every night. A man needs some variety," Prakash said to a gang member one day.

Actually, Prakash had embraced a life of crime. He had tasted blood. And all humanity in him was long lost. The river of righteousness in him had dried up long ago. Just the dry bed of wrong doings was left now.

Prakash started on the hunt to satisfy his lust. His eyes fell on the sixteen years old daughter of the security guard at his family home. One day, he kidnapped her in a car with blacked out windows and took her to an empty flat. There,

he raped her while his friends stood guard outside. He made a pornographic MMS of this entire incident to upload later on the internet. Then he strangled her to death. The girl kept praying to spare her life but Prakash was beyond all humanity. Later on, to hide his crime, he hacked her body into pieces and burnt them in the oven at his father's hotel.

"…this court, under Indian Penal Code 302, orders the defendant, Kunwar Prakash Rai, son of Kunwar Pratap Rai, to be hanged by his neck till death." The heavy tones of senior judge, Justice Ram Murti, were echoing in the court.

Just as water droplets sprinkled on a hot pan evaporate, Kunwar Pratap Rai felt his entire existence vanishing with this decision of the court. His head was spinning and there was a darkness in front of his eyes. But a long-lost memory came to life amidst this darkness….

A seven years old Prakash returns home from school, crying. There is a palm print on his cheek.

"What happened son? Why are you sobbing? Did somebody hit you?"

"Yes, the teacher!"

"Why?"

"I said two times two is five. But the teacher said I was wrong."

"Then?"

"I said, I am the son of Kunwar Pratap Rai. If I say two by two is five, then it is so. Then the teacher slapped me. Papa, even after hearing your name, he slapped me!"

Two days later, that teacher was let go.

As darkness fell, sitting in the court room, Kunwar Pratap Rai thought… the beginning itself was wrong. If the foundation is wrong, the entire building can collapse at any time. If only that day, he had told his son that the teacher was right…that whatever anybody says, two by two can never be five, then he wouldn't be sitting here today…

(The foundation that was laid for the new India proved to be a hotbed in which thrived corrupt, opportunistic frauds and two-faced people. Many such people who said that two by two equals five were strutting around proudly!)

What Was His Name?

It was the last straw. As such, all the teaching faculty in the college went on a strike, under the leadership of Prof. Saroj Kumar. Protests and demonstrations started.

For twenty-five years, Prof. Saroj Kumar had been a Hindi lecturer in a government college in the small town of Kishan Garh, which was in a poor and backward area of the country. He was also the Secretary of the Teachers Union in the college. For the last eight months, two dozen of the ad-hoc teaching faculty, working for the last eight years in the college, had not received their salaries. They all had families-parents, wives and kids. In the absence of a regular salary, it was becoming difficult to put food on their tables. All joy had gone from their lives. Now, only the dun color of misery remained.

In spite of living in the age of a virulent social media and cable tv spreading obscenity and idiocy in our midst, Prof. Suraj Kumar was one of those rare people who believed in the importance of an educator's role in establishing a good and fair-minded society. He had stringently opposed the influence of rogue elements in both the teacher's and student's unions. Many a times, he had single handedly challenged eve-teasers in the college campus. In the process, he had himself been injured several times. But he never left the path of the righteous. It was his belief that a teacher should set an example for his students to follow. He was a

unique advocate of moral and humanitarian values in an increasingly mean and selfish world. He espoused raising a voice against the wrongs of the world. His ideals were the great revolutionaries of the Independence movement, such as Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhagat Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai.

Many of the college lecturers had been working without pay for the last few months. Amidst such a scenario, when news came that a mathematics faculty, Mr. Sharad, had committed suicide in desperation, all the teachers' pent-up rage and fury burst into flames.

The afflicted teachers called on Prof. Saroj Kumar for help. The latter gathered all the faculty and raised the flag of protest against the college administration. The management was given a month's notice to make the ad hoc faculty permanent and pay their pending salaries. But in modern, independent India, who listens to teachers? Nobody bothers if they live or die in anonymity.

Thus, the entire college teaching faculty went on a strike. But the college administration did not wake up. That was the limit! Enraged, the faculty decided to organize a sit in protest in front of the DM's office.

On the appointed day, the professors and lecturers took out a rally. Shouting slogans, they arrived at the DM's office. Prof. Saroj and four other faculty members met with the DM. They submitted a memorandum of their demands – all the ad hoc faculty be made permanent and the unpaid salaries be paid. Late Prof. Sharad's family be given compensation and his wife be given a government job. Salaries be paid timely in future, etc. The teachers wanted immediate

assurances but the DM expressed his inability to do so. They were asked to stop their strike and rejoin their duties unconditionally. Only then, the DM would forward their demands to the government.

The teachers refused to do so. This became a point of obstruction in the proceedings. Both the parties stood firm and the sit-in continued in front of the DM's office. To deal with this tense situation, the government arranged for police protection. To control sixty or seventy teachers, there were three or four hundred policemen. Additional police forces were also in readiness. The S.S.P himself took charge.

When the DM left his office at 5 pm, the protestors surrounded his white Ambassador car.

What happened after that has several versions according to witnesses. Some said that the angry protestors pushed the DM, upon which the S.S.P, Mr. K.P.Singh ordered a lathi charged to disperse the teachers bent on causing further disturbances. But some eye witnesses said that the DM was not shoved or molested at all. As per them, an excited teacher threw his shoe at the DM, which caused his spectacles to fall and break. This enraged the DM and he ordered the lathi charge himself!

Although most people present there rubbished both these statements. According to them, when the DM, Mr. Shyam Narayan exited his office, the protestors surrounded him and started shouting their rallying cries. Till then, the entire process was peaceful. The DM was trying his best to talk them down, when the tyre of a nearby passing car burst with a loud, explosive bang. Some over- eager policemen took this

to mean that the teachers had attacked the DM and without any such command, they took it on themselves to start bludgeoning the protestors. Some even said that one or two policemen fired blanks to scare them. Manoj Tiwari, the paan stall owner outside the DM office, also supported this statement.

"Sir, as I was layering a 120 number betel leaf for a customer, there was a loud blast. I got scared and dropped the paan. It was then that I saw the teachers being beaten and two or three policemen firing in the sir. I hid under my chair! How would the bullet know that I am not a teacher?", said Manoj Tiwari as he related the entire sequence of events later to the media.

Whatever may have been the truth, the spot outside the DM office was soon converted to a battle field. The DM left in his car under police protection, but the teachers continued to be beaten!

Later, some witnesses, under conditions of anonymity, told the news media that they had themselves heard the S.S.P order his policemen, "Break their bastards' bones! How dare they agitate?". However, this narration could not be confirmed through other sources.

The DM's office was near Gandhi Chowk. The statue of Mahatama Gandhi presiding over that chowk stood a silent witness to this blood thirsty drama!

The police baton charge was breaking the teachers' bones, splitting open their skulls, as they fell. Prof. Saroj Kumar saw his colleagues dropping down one after the other, as he

himself tried to evade the heavy clubs. His eyes burned with tears of outrage! Even as his tears fell, the irony of his situation made him laugh. This was Independent India, where a just demand for their jobs and salaries, led to them being clubbed and beaten! Where hooligans roamed free, the corrupt thrived and the terrorists were beyond the reach of the police. But teachers were being bludgeoned for demanding their rights. What an unfair and corrupt country it was!

Truncheons were raining down on innocent backs. Prof. Suraj Kumar was getting seriously injured in trying to save his colleagues. Just then, constable Ramkhelavan's cudgel, after cutting through a sea of teachers, found its way to Prof. Suraj Kumar's head!

Ramkhelavan regularly nurtured and oiled his wooden truncheon with great care. They both had a silent language of their own. Neither of them understood the intricacies of Prof. Saroj Kumar's Hindi language or the finesse of Hindi literature! The evil rod gave no warning. In less than a fraction of a second, it broke through the outer scalp and rearranged the grey matter inside. Constable Ramkhelavan had been rotting at his constable's grade for sixteen tears and all his frustration became ensconced in his rod which wreaked havoc on the professor's skull.

When the truncheon fell on the professor's head at the speed of ten meters per second, there was no special memory which overcame the professor. He did not remember the lines of his favourite song, "My darling love, my dear life.." He did remember the actor Vinod Khanna singing that song.

He did not remember the slap his father gave him for stealing a pen from his pocket. He did not recall his voluptuous college sweetheart Ritambhara. He had no memory of his wife Sushila, who, once slim, had now gained a lot of weight. He did not even remember his software engineer son who was now settled in the USA with his wife. He did not recollect the lines from his favourite poems like 'Muktibodh' or 'Brahmrakshash' or 'Andhere Mein'. He did not call to mind the statement given by his own student, "Whenever somebody stands up for their rights, the system answers with clubs and bullets."

Actually, the professor did not get the chance to recall anything. The well - oiled truncheon of Ramkhelavan did not give him any time to remember. The rays of his thoughts died immediately. There was a burst of light in his mind. Then everything went dark and quiet. Waves of molten pain broke inside him and consumed the essence of his life. Witnesses claimed that the blow from Constable Ramkhelavan's rod was so hard that the professor went down immediately and never got up again.

The time was just before sunset, when even dwarves cast long shadows. Over the wireless, the S.S.P was telling the Director General of Police how he had to use force to control the violent crowd. How the police exercised restraint under difficult circumstances. The situation was now under control.

The sun set in a while and was replaced by the groaning sliver of the moon in great pain. On a nearby tree, a cat had caught an unfortunate pigeon. The feathers of the pigeon

were scattered under that tree. Scared birds flew around the tree, twittering with fear at the sight of the cat. The injured teachers, wailing in pain ,were loaded in a van and taken to the hospital. The body of Prof. Saroj Kumar was thrown inside. A constable, pointing towards it, asked a teacher, "What was his name?"

"Lala Lajpat Rai," answered the teacher with eyes burning like embers.

As per the latest news, even the students of the college had joined the protest in support of their teachers. The combined protests of the teachers and students was now gaining momentum. But most of the people of the city were still unaware of the death of Prof. Suraj Kumar. The news on the radio and television channels was all about the latest cricket match between India and the West Indies and other political affairs. No mention was made of this incident.

Some people read about the lathi charge and the death of a college professor in the middle pages of a Hindi daily the next day. But the name of the professor was not deemed important enough to be mentioned by the reporter. Those people were overheard asking each other, "A college professor was killed in the police lathi charge yesterday. What was his name?"