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IMPOSSIBLE TALES

V.S.Sury

This is purely a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, is entirely accidental.

Other books by V.S.Sury

Jestus

Jestus on Rampage

Parallels

To
Sri K V S, who taught us English at our school

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SECTION I
(GENERALLY BIZARRE)

WIRE DRAW BASIC NEEDS

Carl Matz was looking out of and down the window at the street a hundred floors below. He did not like to look out the window; he wanted to look out with the aid of the added preposition, of, abetting that ‘out’. In his grammar, that was the proper way of seeing whatever was to be seen on the other side of a window—or a door—even if that window was located in the geographical area of the US of A. Matter of good taste. This particular window belonged to the study of his penthouse. He could afford the penthouse, as his father was a whooping billionaire. How his father made all that dough, whether legally or illegally, is not relevant to this story. Money, when it crosses a certain amount, can acquire the charming property of losing its scents of morality and legality.

“What I was saying,” he said turning towards his audience “is that thinkers qualify food as the most basic need. I wholeheartedly agree with that. But I add a caveat. Food is all that we humans require to live. Everything else is superfluous. If I can have two square meals a day, that is all I want.” He paused, then added, “No, make it three square meals.”

His friends laughed. There were three of them, seated on a plush sofa lined to the wall on the other side of the room. The seating of the sofa was filled with a calculated mixture of high-pressure air and the finest quality of Merino wool. The seat was further engineered such that the temperature of the air inside was always maintained at the human body temperature; specifically, that of the ass. The air below did not keep quiet. It gently, most pleasantly undulated at theta frequencies. A noiseless centralized machine accomplished all this and much more, unobtrusively located somewhere else in the building. The antimacassar strip spread, at neck-rest height, was sprayed with the finest of top brand perfumes. After sitting on the sofa for some time, the persons doing so would feel a subtle sense of unreality creeping up their spines and invading their brains. Most friends of Matz came to visit him, especially to enjoy this sensation. (Some of them would be zonked out after a while if they did not engage themselves in conversation, or some activity.)

The sofa was L-shaped. Carl Matz walked up from the window and sat on the other shoulder of the sofa so that he could clearly see his friends while

they were engaged in conversation. As he sat, he further embellished his statement.

“I do like to have, naturally, my solid breakfast.” His friends, yealings, all of them serendipitously aged twenty-two, smiled. That stimulated Carl to gush forth into his newly discovered insight. He wanted his friends (audience) to appreciate that. He had the reputation of being an out-of-the-box thinker among them. He warmed up.

“Of course, humor apart, I am quite serious here. Look at all the millions of life forms crawling and moving on this planet. Apart from reproduction, the most essential activity that is common to all of them is that they consume food. That is the meaning of life. Purpose also, I dare say. That essentially applies to a human being also. He can indulge in mental activities if he wants. That is an extracurricular activity—strictly not in the syllabus.” Carl thumped on the table in front, for effect, as if it were an irrefutable argument by itself.

There were only a couple of books, newspapers, and sundry magazines on the Zephyr Storage coffee table. Luckily there was nothing to topple. ‘Not in the syllabus,’ was one of the cinnamon phrases of their college professor.

The yealings squealed in delight, at the perfect mimicry. The third one, who was flipping through the pages of a magazine on physics news, put the mag down on the table, firmly and eyeballed Matz.

“I object, your honor,” he said imitating the popular TV serial that was running like crazy, every Monday, for more than three years. (The serial was a sentimental rehash of the old Perry Mason series.)

“Objection overruled.” Matz shot back with gusto. “Food is enough. If everybody on earth had enough to eat—and a bit to spare, of course—the earth will be a happy, peaceful place to live on. There won’t be any wars. Everybody will be content.”

“Only food, and nothing else?”

“Yes, only food, and nothing else. What else do we need?”

The three friends opened their mouths all at once. Their intentions were preempted.

In a most extraordinary way. By the most extraordinary agents. Totally unimaginable agents. In a totally unimaginable manner. May be unimaginable, but not impossible.

The agents hailed from a realm where everything was possible. The four-dimensional continuum (*and* the ten or twelve dimensions of the stringent stringists) was eternally encephalic with all possible states. The space inside the room was getting intensely primed for Quantum. The triggering words had been supplied by Carl Matz. Not, open Sesame, but

...

“Yes, only food, and nothing else. What else do we need?”

Words, when repeated, evoke strange effects. Especially, if they are repeated unnecessarily and stubbornly, the result (s) will be *unpredictable*.

The invisible agents were the invincible, infallible, inconceivable Quantum Agents. From their abode of zero dimensions, they emerged into the Einsteinian space surrounding Carl and his friends. The four of them felt a strange tingling sensation inside their ears, while the hairs on their bodies bristled up rigidly. They felt as if lightning was about to strike down any moment, followed by the earsplitting peel of thunder.

Even as Matz stared in horror at his friends, they began to shake and vibrate together. Matz tried hard to comprehend what was happening, blinking vigorously. By that time, they floated up in the air. Matz gawked. They seeped through the ceiling as though it were made of vapor, and vanished out of sight. Meanwhile . . .

Meanwhile, the event had occurred the other way around. Along with the Quantum Agents, the Relativity Twins had infiltrated the room, eager to play their game. The yealing pals of Carl Matz physically and most objectively saw that he, Matz rose in the air, hit the ceiling, and seeped up, through and out of it, away from them, effortlessly vanishing from their sight. Having accomplished this, and have had their fun, the Twins scarpered from the scene. Then, the Quantum Agents took over. Being quantumacious, they had many aliases. They could be Agents or Minions or Spooks or Elfs . . . anything that fits a situation and an observer. They caught hold of Matz, marking him as the principal observer, and unceremoniously dragged him away from the scene. . . .

The first lesson

When Carl Matz opened his eyes, he could not guess how long he had had them closed. He always prided himself on his positive attitude. How long, did not matter; his eyes were open now. He could see clearly. *Good. Optimism is good.*

There is an old joke about an optimist, made up by dedicated pessimists. The optimist is falling down from a hundred-story skyscraper. As he crosses each floor on his downward journey towards the concrete pavement, he shouts defiantly, “I am still alive! I am still alive!!” . . . That joke flashed across in mind of Matz after he realized that he could see. What he could see made no sense at all to him.

He was inside a large kitchen-cum-dining room. He could see in front of him all the paraphernalia associated with a kitchen. The cooking platform was visible about thirty feet away from him. An elegant cooking range, a pressure cooker, a coffee maker, a grinder, an electric mixer, a water purifying machine, a toaster, a dishwasher, and other gadgets were arranged in neat order along the platform. The shelves and the stainless-steel racks on the other walls contained plenty of plates, porcelainware, silver tumblers, jars, and all such things that could be found in a well-equipped kitchen of gourmet. The stainless-steel sink was a beaut by itself. It was a large kitchen indeed. The wall opposite him was also about thirty feet wide. Directly in front of him, almost touching his stomach, stood a brand-new mahogany dining table, covered with a fine table cloth.

The dining table appeared to be an anomaly of sorts. He couldn't place it immediately. The table was quite small. In fact, it was meant for only one person. Matz had, of course, seen such single-seater tables in some restaurants, but not in a home. The kitchen he was in, exuded the appearance and feel of domestic space; rich and luxuriant. Even his personal dining table in his penthouse . . . hey, what is happening? Where am I? I do not possess any single-dining table. That is below my dignity. What happened to my penthouse? Single-table, gosh? Where are my pals, with whom I was talking just a few minutes ago? Infra-dig. By my reckoning, this hall can easily accommodate thirty persons. Why then, a single table? Eh, stop it. Where am I? Whose kitchen is this? Single table, . . . damn! This joint doesn't belong to me, definitely. Strange. How did I

come here? Or, did someone bring me here? Was I drugged and kidnapped? But I did not eat or drink anything with my pals. Damn, where are they? The last I remember is seeing them floating in space and going through the ceiling. Shit, that is impossible; not in this world. Ah, where am I, then? Let us take a look around. Let me ring them up on my cellphone. Strange, I do not see any doors or windows; except that hole in the wall fitted with that silently revolving exhaust fan. Maybe, they are behind me. Let me recce this dump. Carl Matz got up and turned around.

No. He did not get up. With his best efforts, he was only able to accomplish a partial turning of his neck, accompanied by an acute crick in the neck. Next, dawned the realization of deductive logic worthy of Sherlock Holmes.

He had not gotten up, because he *could not* get up. He did not turn around completely, because he *could not*.

He could not accomplish the two simple acts, because he was seated on a chair. He was unable to lift the chair off the floor if he was to stand up. The chair was made of solid lead, and he did not have the strength to lift it using either his gluteus muscles, those of the femur, or of the calf. Because he deduced the last step in the chain of reasoning, with the simple act of looking down, not around.

When he looked down at himself, the horrendous realization was complete. He had been very efficiently and thoroughly bound, bound-strapped-cuffed to the chair. A satanic voice somewhere inside his already reeling head pointed out a small error. When he was so thoroughly bound, it was quite unnecessary to have the chair made out of a heavy metal like lead. It was overkill. When Matz heard that voice, he immediately knew that it was not his own voice; the volume, the accent, timbre, intonation, the drawl, everything was different and unfamiliar to him. Whose voice was it, then? What was it doing inside his head?

A mild wave of panic arose in his chest. No, he was an optimist. He should not panic. That thought about overkill was indeed a joke. He giggled. But seriously, he should not giggle under the present circumstance, as per protocol. Only those, apart from him—like his enemies—could smile, laugh, giggle, guffaw, or whatever fuck they wanted. If he did, then it was a sign of hysteria. At this, he panicked again.

No, no panicking. It does not help in a situation like this. Impractical. Be practical, cool down, cool down even if it takes effort. Breathe slowly, in and out . . . slowly, . . . deeply, in and out. No hurry, take your time. One, two, three . . . ah, that is better.

It took some time. But Carl Matz managed to calm down. Stay balanced, accept the present, stay in the present and proceed from there.

But, proceed how? He already knew that using physical effort to unbound himself was impossible. Maybe a 007, or a Terminator, or a Houdini could do such sort of things. The best physical thing *he* could do was to open his mouth.

That, he did. In the best manly but courteous voice he could manage, he asked the walls, one in the front, two on the sides, sealed by a ceiling on the top and a floor at the bottom. Logically, there should be one more wall behind his back, and most probably there could be one. (There it pops its head again, the imp of the irrelevant.)

“Hello, anybody there?”

There was no answer. Not even a faint echo. The place was perfectly designed to absorb sound waves. That suggested that it would have been efficiently soundproofed. No use in shouting or screaming. Darn. His inner voice told him to ask the question once again, and once again. He trusted it. He had developed a good rapport with his inner voice. It had served him well on some occasions. He threw the same question into the air two more times. After the third essay, he heard a sound. It was almost an inaudible sound of the automatic door closer. It was followed by the sound of footsteps; one, strong and firm, and three other soft pairs. Even though Matz could not turn around freely, the back of his head sensed that the soft feet belonged to women, and the strong one obviously was that of a man. His deduction was confirmed as the perfume hitting his nostrils grew more intense with each count of the approaching steps. He did not make an attempt to turn his head, though the instinct to do so was strong. Doing so would automatically put him at a lower level, psychologically.

The party came out and stood in front of him. His eyes confirmed what his ears and nose had sensed correctly. There was a man in front of him and three oomphalicious girls by his side. All were smiling in the

friendliest manner possible. Hospitality was oozing out from them, like a pleasant breeze from a fan.

The man, to be frank, did not look like a man. He looked more like a giant. Matz had seen his share of tall men and hulks in his life. This man appeared to be at least seven feet tall. The sizes of his various body parts, and especially of muscles could only be described in terms of the mountains of flesh that they depict in cartoons. To be frank, once more, his skin did not seem to be that of humans. Matz felt it must have been a miraculous amalgam of skin and steel. That thought immediately reminded him of cyborgs, and he shivered. (*I hope that thing did not notice it. Calm down Matz baby, smile.*) No human being on earth could survive a physical battle with that metallic mass, he was sure. The girls by his side, in contrast, were of average build, all beautiful and equipped with alluring curves at appropriate places. They were angels. The only odd thing was that all three were identical in shape, appearance, makeup, mannerisms, and dress. (*Maybe, all angels look alike in paradise, I don't know.*)

The android-behemoth reassuringly smiled at Matz and proceeded as if everything was normal.

“First things first. I think an introduction is in order since it looks like we are going to spend a few days together, in this poor hutch.” He spread his hands apologetically gesturing around the kitchen. (*That the kitchen was equipped royally, was a different matter.*) Massive, elephantine power was radiating from those swinging arms and shoulders. The gesture connoted a meaning quite opposite to those of the spoken words. *The word, poor, is only a formal, civilized way of speaking, buster. If you believe it, how about a gentle sock on your jaw, just soft enough to disillusion you?* Matz flinched automatically. The swinging hands were dangerously close to his face. He fully understood what that soft knock could do to his mug. Better be careful. That phrase portending his spending a few days there sent another wave of fear down his spine. The giant continued.

“I am to be your butler and cook for the period of your stay here. Welcome. Yes, I know you are going to ask my name; it is written all over your face. Personally, I do not care for a name. But as long as you stay here, you can call me Beam Shane.”

Matz again went off into a bout of internal dialogue. *Yes, he is dressed like a cook, I can see that. His tailor must have had nightmares, trying to make clothes out of cloth. Those buttons on his chest may burst at any time. The stitches can't stay for long, even if that looks like a new shirt on that steel barrel. If he flexes his biceps, the sleeves will surely get torn. That name sounds like the one I had seen in an Indian flick when I was on travel in India . . . Bhim Sen or something. This hulk definitely looks the part too. But the guy's got good manners, I admit. He is, again and again, referring to my stay here. Gad, how long could that be? But it gives a bit of hope. It means that I may probably be released, go out alive, I mean. Touch wood.*

Beam's voice came to the foreground:

"And these angels could as well be called, Anne, App, and Purina. They will help me with my cooking. I admit I am not much of a cook, though wrestling is my forte and it relaxes me much."

Matz could understand that. He could imagine the fate of a wheezing-struggling polar bear held in an endearing hug by this behemoth. In that Indian flick, he remembered that the Bhim character also acted the part of a cook for a brief period. Strange, the dames looked alike, and the names, when joined, sounded like that of an Indian Goddess of food, he had seen in another Indian flick on another trip of his. The girls smiled, bent slightly as a gesture of welcome, and said, "Hello, welcome gringo." The three voices melded into a single one—like their names. *Gringo?! By God, where exactly am I?*

Beam picked up, "Let us get down to business. As I said, we are here to serve the needs of your stomach. You must be hungry. Tell us what you would like to eat. It will be our pleasure to feed you. Do not hesitate, you can ask for anything you want, anything."

At the mention of food, Matz felt pangs of hunger. His stomach growled. Normally, he was not excessively fond of food. He was, of course, a trencherman but no glutton. He was unable to recall when exactly he left his penthouse, was abducted, rather. It could have been a long time ago since he was mightily hungry. Reason dictates that under the kind of situation he was in, he should concentrate primarily on how to escape from there. But hunger made him behave irrationally. *That, in itself, is kinda irrational! I can't help it. Besides, who knows, this may be my last supper,*

in spite of the promises of the Beam guy. Grab your grub first. A contented stomach calms you down. A calm mind is helpful to plan ahead. Irrational behavior? I do not mind. The situation I am in is itself totally irrational. May be this is a dream. I could pinch myself and wake up, but I can't. Shall I ask this guy to pinch me? No, too risky. His softest pinch may take away a pound of my flesh along with it. The girls are preferable.

Beam's voice cut in, as before: "No, that won't help. This is not a dream. This is for real. But a reality of a different kind."

Matz was taken aback. *That guy was reading my thoughts, blimey. Is this a kinda virtual reality? Am I wearing invisible goggles?*

"No, this is not a Google-goggle-induced reality. You are in a Quantum state. Me too, and these angels, and this kitchen." Carl Matz was not a dummy. He possessed a good, above-average IQ. But when it came to Quantum, he gave up. You can understand any complicated subject on earth when properly explained. Except for Quantum. Why even Satan will scarper if you begin to chant Quantum. Matz decided to calm down and behave as normally as possible.

The beam came nearer to the chair-bound man. Matz noticed his fire-resistant apron and coat. The last button of the coat was open, in the traditionally approved way. And the severely elegant bow-tie announced the profession of the guy. *I bet that a hundred pounds of food will be just breakfast for this giant. No, no irrelevant thoughts, stop it.* Beam whisked out a tablet, which was displaying a menu containing a long list of food items.

"You can choose any item you'd like to eat. We will get it to you in a jiffy, no problem. Go through it slowly. I will scroll down. There is more. Plenty to eat. No problem there."

"How can I eat, while my hands are bound?" Matz asked instinctively. Beam looked at him speculatively, the look, not unmixed with amusement.

"No, I am not thinking of any escape strategies. I am hungry like hell. I am weak and feeling giddy. Even otherwise, you know pretty well that I am no match for you, physically."

Beam smiled. “Glad to see that you can assess ground realities. I am not authorized to free your hands. I have to ask the boss. Tell you what; you open your mouth, and these nurses will feed you. Any time, any number of times. They will clean and wipe your mouth and face. If you are pliant, they may even plant kisses on you as a reward. Chaste ones. Lucky you. Let us complete this session perfectly and peacefully as per the script. I will ask the boss and see what can be done about freeing your hands. Be reasonable. Enjoy the food for now.” Beam thrust the tablet in front of Matz’s eyes.

Glancing down the menu, Matz asked, “Who is your boss?”

“Quantum Bohr Berg.”

“Sounds strange.”

“Think again. It is superfluous to point out that all the three words are famously familiar.” Carl was unable to think of a suitable retort.

“Where does he stay?”

“Here, there, everywhere. Usually, he is invisible. He materializes when an observer wants to observe him.” Matz was familiar with this quagmire part of science. He decided to step away from it. Passing his eyes down the list on the tablet’s screen he asked:

“What is this *biryani* thing here?”

“It is a famous dish of India. You must have come across it while you were in India.”

Strangely, this Quantum hunk seems to have a strong ESP. “Yeah, I remember the name but had no occasion to taste the dish. Can I have it here, now?”

“Sure, sure. You have made a good choice.”

Beam took away the tablet, turned towards the beauties, and spoke to them in an unearthly language. They giggled and scurried back, behind Matz. Matz heard the door open and close. He waited. Not for long.

The aroma of food hit him. Then he heard the familiar sound of the door opening and closing and the approach of soft footsteps. Despite his being groggy and hungry, the anomaly did not escape him. He smelled the

food first before the door opened. *Can smell travel through walls?* He heard Beam's chuckle and the answer too, inside his head, 'It is an illustration of the Quantum effect.' He winced.

The angels were standing before him, along with the food trolley. The smell of the *biryani* was tantalizing, vigorously stimulating his taste buds. The angels surrounded him. Anne took out an apron from one of the bottom trays and deftly wrapped it around Matz. App came forward with silver spoons. Purina bore the plate (gold) containing a hefty quantity of ready-to-eat *biryani*, sprinkled with a generous amount of purest cow-ghhee. No human could withstand that temptation to eat. Matz was after all human. He opened his mouth without much ado. App dipped the spoon into the heap of food, and put it into his mouth, like one performing an enchanting opera. Matz chewed and swallowed. He had never imagined that food could be so tasty. As the food descended down his gullet and reached his stomach, he felt as if a stream of nectar had invaded his body. He closed his eyes. Only his mouth worked. Open, chew, swallow . . . open, chew, swallow, working in harmony and perfect timing with the movement of App's silver spoons. Time had stopped working until he heard his own resounding belch two floors below his cranium. He knew he had eaten more than his habitual quantity. Belly's stupor was about to spread into his brain. He was not sure if it was a belly stupor or a brain stupor. He must ask his friends. Damn, where did they vanish? . . . Meanwhile, Purina, having put the food plate aside had brought a silver tumbler to his lips. She helped him sip the cool orange juice. After that, Anne wiped his mouth with a soft napkin. She took the apron off him. The food coma was progressing fast. Matz unnecessarily suspected that he was drugged. He struggled to keep himself alert. In vain. He was drifting. He heard Beam's voice somewhere out there.

"I bet you have enjoyed your supper, mister Carl Matz. The food was specially prepared for you. You had said that that was all you wanted. We give you what you ask. See you later. Sweet dreams."

Matz was already halfway on the road to dreamland. His fate was sealed by three kisses on his forehead. Chaste ones.

When Matz woke up from a deep, dreamless sleep, he thought it was the next day. But he was not sure. He could not see anything outside of

the hall he was in. No windows. He searched all three walls; no clocks grandfather or otherwise. Since he had woken up and was still in the same room and bound to the same chair, in the same way, he decided that what was experiencing was not a bad dream, but a worse reality. He could think clearly and sequentially. He was able to recall the Pythagoras theorem (and its proof thereon). But then, what was this place? And where? Must be on earth only, since, as far as he knew, there was no planet in outer space that contained a well-equipped kitchen. Say, how long had he been here, actually?

His body answered that question. He was feeling thirsty. The palpable pressure in his bladder indicated a rough amount of the passage of time. The budding downward pressure inside his colon was supporting that data input. He had to attend to that problem first. He did what he had done previously; he addressed the empty hall and walls.

“Hello, anybody there?”

Three times. God knows why it had to be three times. After the third call, the quartet of the previous act entered the stage. Telepathic Beam understood the situation perfectly. Before Matz could utter something, he held up his palm and said:

“I know, I know. I do understand. The loo and the bathroom are just behind you. No, don’t turn your neck, lest you get an acute crick. Hold on a sec. We will free you. Take your own time and freshen yourself. A hot cup of coffee will be ready by that time.”

Anne, App, and Purina combo had the keys ready. They got into the act of unshackling Matz with cheerful gusto. Matz stood up and staggered unsteadily as his muscles had gone to sleep. The angels had anticipated that. They supported him. Beam was standing in an exaggeratedly comic Kung Fu stance as if anticipating an attack from Matz and was willing to chop him down. “No tricks, buster,” he said and laughed. Even in his wildest fantasy, Matz could never think of attacking the looming Hercules. They all laughed good-naturedly. Slowly, Matz turned around to have a glimpse of the fourth side of the hall, espied the cloakroom, and limped thither, with the three angels supporting him in various degrees.

He emerged somewhat refreshed, but still in a confused state. With the three sirens firmly (but gently) guiding him, and the giant waiting in readiness at the chair, he automatically went back to the chair and sat in it. He shivered. He had just realized how unthinkingly he had accepted his captivity. Beam, the beaming giant watched that behavior approvingly. He knew that his mere physical bulk had cast a captivating shadow over Matz's mental makeup. As soon as Matz was comfortably settled in the chair, Purina came back from the cooking platform, carrying a saucer (silver) in which sat a cup (silver) steaming with hot coffee and bearing a spoon (silver). At the sight of the spoon, Matz opened his mouth, ready to receive the spoon, immediately realizing that his hands were free. He blushed ever so slightly and took the saucer into his hands trembling ever so slightly. (Pavlov would have been happy.) He took a tentative sip. The flavor was unfamiliar to him, but it tasted fantastic. "How is it?" Beam asked.

"Eximious."

"We got the coffee powder from Thailand, especially for you. It is extracted from elephant shit. Don't be alarmed. The coffee beans are first fed to the elephants. The beans get processed in their bellies and come out, mixed in their poop. Some special chemical action takes place inside their guts, it seems, and that is how the coffee tastes unique. Eximious, as you confessed. It is one of the costliest brands of coffee, Black Ivory. We thought you deserved it."

Matz made no comment, though he was inclined to make a wry face. But the damned stuff was excellent. *Hope the guy is not joking. I would like to buy this again when I go out. Hey, when or how do I go out? Tarry, tarry, it will turn out ok. Otherwise, why should these fellows be feeding me with such costly stuff? I am sure they want to test something on me. Exactly what, I do not know.* When he finished drinking, Purina came up and took away the saucer from him. App approached and wiped his mouth with her hankie. Asked: "Are you satisfied, gringo?"

"Yes," Matz replied, subconsciously hoping for a kiss.

She too seemed to be telepathic. "Later," she said, not stepping back, but signaling to the other two. The beauties surrounded Matz. Beam assumed the comic Kung Fu stance once again, and asked:

“Would you like to have your breakfast an hour from now?”

“Roger,” Matz replied, thinking, *why the Kung Fu stuff again?*

The answer became obvious the next second. Two angels had caught hold of his wrists faster than the speed of light. By the time he opened his mouth halfway, they had completed putting the handcuffs on and shackling him to the arms of the chair. The third baby was equally quick in shackling his legs to those of the chair (lead metal).

“Hey, what is this?” Matz croaked in dismay.

“We are acting according to the script,” Beam said. “Bye, till breakfast time.” The girls kissed him. Then the quartet vanished.

Matz was totally flummoxed. What the hell was that damned script? His efforts to unravel it fell into a vacuum. Recently, while going through a solved crossword puzzle, he had come across a new word, *boketto*. Now he automatically practiced that state, tasting the meaning of the word in 3D. The exquisitely soothing flavor of the elephant dung coffee aided him to move further into it. He dozed off. The reaction was not so strange. It was his brain’s incongruously ingenuous way of avoiding anxiety.

He woke up at breakfast time, to see them ready to serve, American style. The same earlier movements followed. The apron around him, Anne, gold plates loaded with two poached eggs, sliced bacon, sliced bread toast with jam and butter, pancakes with syrup, cornflakes, grapefruit juice, the silver spoon and forks, water, napkin, wipe mouth and face, three kisses (chaste). The promise of a good lunch. *Exeunt* the actors. Followed by *boketto*. Followed by a snooze.

He woke up at lunchtime, to see them ready to serve. The same earlier movements followed. The apron around him, Anne, the gold plates, (burger, hot dog, Reuben sandwich, Philly cheesesteak, California roll, baked Alaska: take your picks) the silver spoons and forks, water, napkin, wipe mouth and face, three kisses (chaste). The promise of a good supper. *Exeunt* the actors. Followed by *boketto*. Followed by a snooze.

Supper went along the same, routine. After undergoing this treatment, it was impossible for a normal man to sleep once again. But Matz had fallen into a Quantum hole where abnormality was quite normal.

He woke up feeling thirsty. Pressure on the bladder, etc. The previous day's routine of the bathroom trip was repeated. The guided trip back led to the lead throne. Elephant dung coffee. Beam ready with handcuffs.

Matz blew his lid. "For God's sake stop this shit. If you are going to handcuff me again, then better shoot me. What do you want from me? Ransom? Let me contact my dad; the penthouse belongs to him." (*Oh God, don't make him telepathic on this, please.*) Having spoken, he marveled at his own courage and shivered. Only one spasm, then it was controlled. To make up for that, his breathing quickened and slowly came down to normal.

Beam beamed at him. He threw away the handcuffs on a nearby table behind Matz. Curiously, there was no sound of clatter. Matz winced and recovered. Purina gave him the Black Ivory coffee. The taste was excellent as before, but his liking for it had come down two notches below. The ritual of coffee imbibing being completed, he waited for their next move. Nothing much happened. They just walked away.

Matz waited for a minute. Total silence. He was free to move now. Cautiously he got up and looked around. Nobody in the hall. The door at the back had automatically closed. He suspected it was locked. It was a foregone conclusion. *Let me make sure, anyhow.* He went up to the door and tried. Sure, it was locked. *At least, my judgment was not wrong. That is something positive.* He began going around the hall inspecting every item. Except for the four walls and all the paraphernalia he had already seen, there was nothing else of special interest or significance. No hidden exits of any type anywhere. He realized that the damned place was not a normal kitchen. It had been specifically equipped for his sake. *Strange, but hell, my situation itself is abnormal. How the hell did I get here? There must be some meaning, some purpose behind this shit. The last thing I remember is seeing my pals floating in the ceiling of my penthouse.*

He came back and sat on the heavy chair. Maybe, he could use it to smash the automatic door. He lifted it with considerable effort and walked unsteadily toward the door.

The door opened. Beam walked in with his team. He wrenched the chair off Matz's hand as if it were a toy and as if Matz were a kid. He carried Matz in one hand and the chair in the other hand. Put the chair in

its original place, and pushed Matz in it. The babies shackled him before he breathed in and out. “No heroics. Do not even dream of an escape,” Beam Shane said, and the team walked away. Matz spent five minutes in silence, agony, shame, and frustration.

Beam reentered, unshackled Matz, threw the cuffs on the table behind Matz, and went away. Strange again; no clatter again. Matz stood up, turning around. *He could not see the cuffs anywhere. Strange. The guy must have plenty of them in stock.* He walked around the hall once again, got bored, and sat in the chair. Got disgusted and stood up. He could not figure out what his captors wanted from him. They did not harm him physically; that was sure. They fed him well; that was sure. They did not want to let him go away; that was sure. Then what the heck was the point in this ridiculous charade?

He waited and waited. As he had read in some books, minutes seemed to pass like hours. That was not an exaggeration, he understood now. The stress of boredom began to build up in him, drop by drop. Yes, drop by drop, like that notorious Chinese water drop treatment he had read about.

He wanted to shout. He wanted some company, even if it were of his captors. He wanted to talk. He wanted to share his feelings and ideas. He wanted to read. He wanted to watch the news and sports on the TV. He wanted to go out and play. . . . There were a million things to do instead of spending time in solitary isolation.

As he was furiously thinking, one special thought was itching at the root of his throat, trying to climb its way out. It was in a vague form and yet stuck in the throat only. He shook his head vigorously, hoping to bring it out. That did not help. Frustration was building up. He went to the cooking platform, intending to smash a few plates.

He heard the door opening behind him. Turning his neck, he saw Beam standing at the doorway, smiling and slightly raising his stretched hand significantly, wherein the cuffs were dangling merrily. Matz came back and sat on his throne glumly. He heard a light chuckle and the closing of the door. . . . Drat.

At breakfast time, breakfast arrived as before. They went. The door closed. At lunchtime, lunch (an excellent one) was served. They went. The

door closed. Dinner time. Dinner was served. They were about to depart. Matz visualized sitting on the bloody chair—even if unbound—for the whole night. He shouted, “For God’s sake take out this bloody chair. I prefer to sleep on the floor.”

Beam beamed, “Your logic is not perfect. If you want to sleep on the floor, what is the necessity of taking away the chair? We are not gifted with overzealous *prévenance*. Would you like to have a bed?”

“Yes.”

“Ok. It is not strictly in the script. But we are willing to oblige.”

A cot with a comfortable bed and all paraphernalia necessary for a good sleep was brought in. They departed. Matz was too tired. He hit the sack and began to snore. He woke up in the morning, to see bed coffee ready on a stool by his side. The usual routine followed till dinner.

Despite the excellent bed, Matz could not sleep that night. Later, despite the excellent breakfast, he could not eat it. He took only lunch and dinner.

The next day, in spite of the excellent lunch and its variety, he could not eat his usual quantity. Same with dinner. The next day (he was losing count of the days; it seemed like months to him) he ate even less.

His body wanted movement and exercise. He walked and walked inside the hall. Learned the meaning of the word, claustrophobia, anew in 3D. Healthwise, there was no problem. But, hell, boredom was eating into his soul. He wanted to talk, but his sadistic captors would not participate. They fed him well and vamoosed. He wanted to read, damn it, he wanted to watch TV damn it, he wanted to travel damn it, he wanted to do a thousand things damn, damn. Above all, he wanted freedom. The angels who fed him were really very beautiful and had the most charming manners. Who cares, now? He ached to go out, bathe in the sunshine and breathe the fresh air.

But, fighting with the Goliath was out of the question.

When Beam came in beaming along with the angels carrying food, Matz was staring gloomily at the ceiling. He was not in a mood to eat. He said to Beam, “Take away the damned stuff. I do not want to eat anything.”

Beam smiled. “You are a bright boy, Matz, but you are acting dumb. Do you know what will happen if you do not eat?—Gavage.”

“What?” Matz asked and regretted asking.

Before he had blinked five times, he felt being gripped and shaken and rattled like a rag doll. When he recovered and opened his eyes for the sixth time, he found himself bound once again. Beam and the angels began to force-feed him, inserting the famous (sic) pipe down his throat to reach the stomach. There was no use in fighting back. He did not have the strength or reflexes. He had read about prisoners being force-fed in a certain building in Dzerzhinsky Square, in a certain era. Now he knew how it felt, in 3D. (*At this rate, I am going to be an expert in 3D learning.*) Resisting served no practical purpose, he realized late, scarcely able to breathe and perspiring heavily, as Purina poured food lovingly into the funnel and Anne held steady, the tube extending from his mouth. The job being over, they retracted the pipe delicately and removed the steel contraption that held his jaws open. The three angels cleaned and wiped his face and kissed him. Beam unbound him quickly.

Four chairs had materialized somehow around Matz. Beam and company sat in them, sympathetically waiting for Matz to come back to normal. It took some time, but he made it—at least some semblance of it. Matz assumed that there was going to be an interrogation. But then, it could not be. Interrogation for what, for Chrissake? He was not a spy, damn it. He had not perpetrated anything illegal. Again, if they wanted to grill him, they would not have fed him so gorgeously. The logic was on his side. But, damn again, that same logic was being of no help in unraveling why (and how) he was where he was. . . . He waited tensely for Beam to begin questioning.

Beam Shane did not open his mouth for quite some time. He kept on smiling like a Sphinx (a male one). Then, just as Matz accepted defeat in the eyeballing game and was about to open his mouth, Beam said:

“Logic dictates that it be you who should ask the million-dollar question, Mr. Matz. If you want me to ask the question first, I can only ask you if you want more food, or if you want more variety on the menu. We take pleasure in obliging you.”

Food, food, food, the same chant. Matz was getting sick of it. Yet, there must be a clue in this, he thought dully. He asked, “Why have you kidnapped me? Where am I? What do you want from me, since I see that you are not interested in any ransom? When are you going to release me? I want to go back to my penthouse. I am fed up here.”

“So many questions! Perhaps, the common answer could be found in your last sentence; that you are fed up here. I do hope that you realize it is a fitting pun, unconscious or intentional. Ah, do not stare at me like that. We have been feeding you here pretty well. In fact, we are proud of it. We have been serving you the best food imaginable; quality-wise and quantity-wise. Hope you agree with that.”

“I have no quarrel with the food. But I want to get out of here.” Matz could not hold down the temptation to quip, “Maybe, I will come back for it one fine day. I have a proposal. Send me out now, and I promise you, I will come here every Sunday to eat your excellent food.”

“That is not in the script. We have been ordered to feed you well, and go on feeding you till the boss decides it is time to let you go.”

“Yes, let me go. I decide to go away from here.”

“Sorry, you did not listen properly. Not you, but the boss has to decide.”

Matz thought for a while. “Then, how does he decide? What is the criterion; the triggering point?”

“Your realization on a certain issue is the triggering point. You have not yet reached that point.”

“Issue? Realization? I don’t follow.”

“Mr. Matz, try to recall what you declared emphatically just before you arrived here.”

Matz had been so conditioned by the bizarre activities of his present place that it took him a bit of mental effort to recall what his captor was alluding to. *Hmm, arrival? Looks like I have been stuck here for a long time. Hmm, but I want to go out of here. But where to? Where? Ah, damn it, to my penthouse. Got it now. My pals were floating out of the ceiling there. Go, go back further. Yeah, we were having a conversation. About*

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nothing serious, that is my impression. Yeah, I was talking about food, that is all.

“Yeah, now I recall. Nothing earth-shaking. We were talking about food in a general way.” (At the mention of food, the vague itch which had teased him earlier, began acting up. Yet it was not crossing the barrier and coming out.)

“You, in particular, made a sweeping statement, Mr. Matz.” Matz tried to recall what he had said, but could not succeed.

“I do not remember. Since you seem to be so telepathic, please enlighten me.”

“That is the point of this whole drama, Mr. Matz. To enlighten you in a serious way. You said, ‘Yes, only food, and nothing else. What else do we need?’ I am quoting you verbatim. You repeated it twice. Luckily for you, it was not thrice. If you had uttered those words thrice, the consequences would have been terribly intense and irrevocable; you would not have been permitted to go back. Now you may go back, after learning the lesson well.”

“What lesson?” Matz asked as an inborn mechanical reflex. It was too late to regret. He should have been more cautious in responding. He could have at least given some time for cogitation. Now agitation gripped him.

The moment he finished his stupid question, the Quantum agents’ agents vanished; along with the chairs. He was back in his lead throne, immovably ensconced in fetters (golden, now, for a change), free to contemplate on sadistic fate, but strictly not free to move physically, back to boketto practice.

The routine of the previous days followed—unvarying like days and nights, as the poets of yore used to say. The only variation was the steady increase in Matz’s blood pressure. He was also eating less and less, day by day. His affection for food decreased; he was becoming less choosy in what he ate. Anything, something to fill his stomach was enough.

He had the freedom to roam about (if such can be said) inside the hall. No books, no magazines, no newspaper, no TV, no mobile phone, no laptop. Daman, damn, damn. He was going crazy.

On the third day, when Beam beamed in with his brigade, Matz groaned, “For God’s sake gimme some books to read, or kill me.”

Beam said, “Books are not allowed here. It is not in the script.”

“Then, for God’s sake, fix a TV here.”

“Not in the script.”

“How about a chess set?”

“Not in the script.”

“Hell, then what is in your script?”

“I have already said. It is to feed you, feed you well. Nothing else.”

“I too told you already that I am fed up with food.”

“Mr. Matz, do you want me to throw your last dialogue in the penthouse back at you once again?”

Then Max understood clearly what the guy was hinting at. ‘Food, and nothing else.’ It was true he had said so. And meant it too, to be honest. If you look at it impartially, there was nothing wrong with that. The bastards were deliberately underscoring his words, magnifying them out of proportion, and playing silly verbal games. He could not even argue with them even in a friendly or neutral way. Buggers will immediately bring in that wretched Quantum word. Matz shivered. He could possibly argue with the Devil himself, but not with the Quantum horror, Quantumstein. He quivered at the remembrance of the word. Taking a couple of slow, deep breaths, he said in a tactful tone:

“Ah, I see, you are stressing my words out of proportion. I meant that food is the most essential thing.”

“But you said as if it is the only thing needed.”

Arguing at any cost, or to any length is one of the deadly viruses which have found a happy shelter in human brains. Matz was no exception. He persisted, “If you look at it from a purely abstract point, I am tempted to . . .” He was not able to finish his eloquent debate.

There was a deep rumble in the surrounding space. The kitchen floor trembled. Blue, fuzzy clouds filled the room. Matz saw with clarity a

tunnel, and his lead throne at its end, with a fettered figure occupying it. No need to identify that figure. He was about to be sucked into the tunnel.

Matz shut his eyes tight and screamed and screamed. Quantum smiled. The tunnel receded. Matz opened his eyes. Beam smiled. He asked:

“You are tempted? To what?”

Matz said hoarsely, “Nothing, nothing?”

“Sure?”

“Sure.” (*Oh God, the bugger is tempting me again. Fuck the leaden chair. Fuck the golden plates and silver spoons. Fuck the angels and their chaste kisses. Enough. God, help me keep my lips sealed.*)

“Did you learn the lesson about food?”

“Yes, yes, yes. In-depth. In 3D.”

“Good. You may go back to your friend now Mr. Matz. Go meet them and learn more.”

“Learn? What?” Matz was perplexed. There was no answer.

He was not able to see anything. He turned his head left and felt dizzy. He turned his head right and felt dizzy. He looked down and understood the reason. He was descending down and down at a fast rate. For a minute he thought he was in a freefall. But it was not so; he could not see the earth or the clouds below. There was simply nothing around him. He guessed he must be inside an invisible elevator, then. The sinking feeling in his guts supported that guess. But he was sure he was sitting on the bloody leaden chair.

The elevator stopped with the telltale jerk. Matz had the sensation of his buttocks thumping (mildly) on a solid surface. The sensation was earthly and assuring. He opened his eyes.

He was in his own penthouse, blinking stupidly at his friends. The action was mutual—they were blinking stupidly at him.

All of them opened their mouths in sync and exclaimed (as in old, classical novels), “Hey, what happened?”

“I saw you guys floating up and go through the ceiling,” Matz said calmly. He was not excited. He had seen and experienced quite a lot. This was nothing—he was back now at the base.

“What are you saying? We saw you going up through this very ceiling,” his pals shot back in real excitement.

“But.”

But before he finished his, but, they butted in, in chorus, “Six eyes cannot be wrong. It was you who went up, without a doubt. Tell us what happened.”

Matz decided not to argue with them. Also, peculiarly, he felt it did not matter if they saw him going up, or the other way around. His experience was solid. He asked them:

“Tell me how long I had been out of here.”

The friends looked at him quizzically. One of them spoke, “We did not have a stopwatch. At a rough guess, you were off for six seconds. So, as per Newton’s calculations, you traveled up for three seconds, and down for three seconds. Tell us what happened to you.”

Matz was stupefied. Six seconds? It was more like six years to him; eating, eating, and eating all the time. He had enough of eating. Strange! he could not recall the exact details. But the subconscious impression was strong that food was not everything. That was the lesson they taught him. They? Who were they? Who?

“Hey, Matz, wake up.” There was a snap of fingers. He opened his mouth and uttered:

“Let’s talk of six seconds later. It was definitely more than six weeks for me. . . . At least six days, considering what I went through, or learned. This funny thing must have something to do with the theory of Relativity. It was six weeks for me, but on your timeframe, it could have been six seconds. Ah, you could be right in another way. It took me six seconds to learn the lesson; that is what matters. Ah, I remember we were discussing something important just before you guys vanished . . . ah, hold on, before we lost sight mutually . . . is that ok with you? What were we discussing? Humor me.”

The pals-troika was not satisfied with Matz's explanation. But they went on humoring him.

"You were declaiming like an inspired politician (Matz wrinkled his nose in disgust) about the almighty importance of food. You overruled our repeated objections. It was right then that you vanished. You claim to have learned some lesson, or something in that mysterious land you were sucked into. Care to tell us, poor guy?"

Matz's face gained a mature expression. (The maturity had some scope to improve.) He said:

"I went through six weeks of disgusting terror. Ok, ok, later that. The six-second lesson was that food was not the only all-important thing."

"That is what we were hinting at before you vamoosed. Glad you learned your lesson."

Matz was normally a bright boy. But it looked as if his karma was after him with a vengeance. He said, sarcastically.

"Ok. If you guys are so wise, tell me what else is important, apart from grub?"

"Plenty. Knowledge, like reading books. Sports, entertainment, art. Even humor. You gotta laugh once in a while to stay sane."

"I agree, guys. All those and many more things, I agree." Matz kept his mouth shut, but karma nudged him in his ribs. He smiled, mixing a hefty bit of seriousness with it. "All those are fine. But they are extras, I still maintain. I was convinced that food only mattered, but somehow six seconds changed my conviction."

Matz's talk sounded dubious to the gathering (inside the penthouse). The third yealing, who was sitting silent till now probed, "Well, you agree that food is not all. Yet you discard education, culture, arts and entertainment, and all. What else is left?"

Matz, being zonked with karma mused, "There must be something else which we have overlooked. Ah, now I am getting a dim remembrance of what transpired back there. After I was forced to learn a lesson, they told me . . . don't ask me who; can't recall . . . they told me it was my first lesson. As if there was another one. Can't guess what. It must be much

more obvious. That is why we are overlooking it. Hiding under plain sight, what? Ha, ha, ha.”

Karma prompted the third pal too. He asked, “You mean a naked truth?”

The august gathering burst into laughter.

“What?” Matz asked. He was being attacked by a spell of nausea. The sensation was familiar. The next second, he saw his friends floating up and percolating through the ceiling. Closed eyes. Opened them.

The familiar had become too solidly familiar. He was seated firmly in the familiar leaden chair, in the familiar kitchen, with the familiar shackles.

Matz groaned, “Oh, not again,” he croaked.

“Yes, again a gain. Welcome, Carl Matz,” the deep bass voice of Beam Shane came from behind, just as Matz was sensing the hiss of air due to the opening of doors. Unable to turn his neck around, Matz waited. The old familiar quartet stood before Matz. They were all dressed and had the exact same appearance as before.

Was it a few minutes ago? Was it a week back? A month? Matz was not at all sure. Theoretically, going by the amount of conversation he had with his pals, the time span should be about a few minutes only. But inside his head, Matz’s sense of time was all muddled up. Quantum ogre and his brother, Relativity monster must have something to do with it. The intensity of the experiences he was having contributed further to enhancing the effect.

Beam Shane said, “We have been waiting for you a long time. We were eager to serve you.”

“No food. I had had enough and more than enough of it. I do not care for food now. What do you want this time?”

“Agree with that. By serving, we meant a lesson—the second lesson. By the way, the boss is glad that you have learned the first lesson well. He commends you.”

Carl experienced the familiar, vague mnemonic itching, scratching, stirring. He recalled Beam speechifying about further lessons or some such thing. Damn the buggers, quantum-bantam whatever. Why are they choosing him for their weird, sadistic experiments? The bloody matter was that he was unable to fight back in any manner whatsoever. Talk of impotent fury! He said bitterly:

“Go on with your ridiculous exercises. But, for God’s sake finish it quickly.”

“We will, we will, Mr. Matz. ASAP, as you funny people, back there are fond of saying. Now, look at me and listen to me with full concentration. As I said last time, *prévenance* is our forte. Hospitality is my first name. We have to serve you the best dishes we can cook here before we proceed. That is the way the script is written. We can’t bypass it. Eat your food calmly and leisurely. My angels will feed you as before. Then, and then only can we unfetter you. After that, you stay here for a week—as before—and learn your lesson, and go home happily. Quite simple procedures, see? Now, look at us once again with full concentration, and use your powers of observation to the full extent. Take your own time, and do it thoroughly. After that, I will hold a mirror in front of you. Look into that mirror, and you will deduce something, of which you were unaware till then.”

Matz was, in fact, looking at the giant all the while even without being prompted. There was something in his demeanor and his manner of speaking, which had mesmerized Matz. He was aware only of the giant’s face till then. After he stopped speaking, Matz noticed him in full dress. He noticed the angels too: Anne, App, and Purina. Watch as might, he was unable to find anything special, or out of the way about them. They looked as familiar and as beautiful as he had seen them earlier. The only difference, if any, was in the way that they were dressed. They were dressed exquisitely, he had to admit.

Dress. When that idea crossed his mind, and exactly at that time, Beam beamed, whisked a mirror (in a golden bezel) out of thin air, and positioned it in front of Carl Matz, so that he, Matz could have a look at himself gloriously reflected in the mirror. Matz’s visual focus changed from the mouth that was speaking to the hands that held the mirror and onto the area of the mirror.

Julius Caesar uttered the famous three sentences. Matz stopped short after the second one. He saw. Unfortunately, after seeing what he saw in the *kathréftis* he was also unable to emulate Narcissus.

After having performed a *veni* and a *vidi* he opened his mouth as wide as possible and screamed. Due to the quirky Quantum atmosphere in the hall, Carl had been unaware of the existence of his physical body till then. The visual areas of the images on his retina had been limited to those of Beam and his assistants. The mirror showed him now what he had been incomprehensibly missing to notice all the while.

He was dressed the way Archimedes was dressed when he ran out of the bathtub. This was *his* eureka moment.

During his long stay (as he experienced it) in the Quantum Kitchen, Matz had learned to express a wide range of emotional sounds: screaming, shouting, groaning, croaking, hissing, bawling, and so on. He had exhausted his repertoire. So, he celebrated his eureka moment by just screaming at the naked glory in the mirror, at the mirror itself, and finally at the person holding the mirror.

“What the hell is this?”

Beam smiled as if there was nothing unusual. “This is my hand. The other this in my hand is a mirror. This, in the mirror, is an image. Lastly, the this that is being seen as an image is a real body. It belongs to you. You may now look down at yourself instead of staring gloomily at the mirror.”

Matz did as he was told, and went on staring at his own naked body. Now he became aware of the air, and its coolness, and it touching every pore of his body. If questioned, and to be fair to the air, he had to admit that the sensation was pleasant. But the question was irrelevant under the circumstances he found himself in. He was shackled firmly to the chair; there was no question of his running away to hide somewhere, or search for some clothes. There was no point anymore in shouting. Better to face the ordeal calmly. As before, there was no threat to his life—small solace. He was in a wacky situation. Why not respond with wacky lines? He said in measured tones:

“You rascal, looking at one’s bare body either in the mirror or directly is a normal affair. Everybody does it in his bathroom and bedroom. Being

unclothed in front of others is an altogether different matter. I am not a member of any nudist colony. Unchain me. Bring me my clothes.”

“Soon. They are being cleaned in the decontamination machine.”

“Decon? I always wear clean clothes, freshly laundered.”

“You did not understand. Your ideas have contaminated your dress.”

“Horse manure. How can my thoughts contaminate my dress?”

“I said ideas, not, thoughts. Thoughts come and go. Their marks are fleeting. Ideas stay. They stay and they leave permanent marks.”

“Bullshit.”

“There is no use arguing, Mr. Matz. Remember that you are in a Quantum enclosure. It has got its own way of working. The more useful question here is to ask what the nature of contamination is. It is directly related to what you were vehemently arguing with your friends at the penthouse one week back. About food.”

Matz did not want to argue on that subject anymore. One week or six minutes too did not matter. They were both equivalent in this Quantum fuzzy-dizzy hall. He remembered, naturally, what he had declared – like a preacher who was carried away by his own eloquence – regarding food. And the bitter events that had followed it at this very same hall of the leaden throne. He had learned the lesson against his will. He remembered that too. It had all happened so recently (Six weeks? Six minutes?) ... *Then, why the hell? ... Ah, lessons, the sadistic bugger has been repeating at me. What more lesson? Food is not all, I agree, I agree. Then what more lesson? What the heck? ... Let me placate the fellow. Truth to tell, I do not hate this gigantic bugger. I can't understand it. Let me soft-pedal for a while.*

“Hello hunk, as far as I remember clearly, I admitted to having understood that food is not all. In fact, just before I was sucked in, here again, I was telling my friends too, the same thing.”

Beam replied, “Yeah, I know. But you were not sure of what else is also important. You were hesitating. Admit it.”

“Yes, I was hesitating,” Matz confessed.

“Arguments are terribly addictive, Matz. More than heroin, I dare say. On your earth, everyone who has ears has heard of the basic needs of human beings. Yet, you forgot them; in your infatuation with oration. FCS.”

“FCS? Oh, food, clothing, and shelter, I see. They are so basic needs. There is no need to argue the matter.”

“Arguing. But that is exactly what you were perpetrating in the penthouse up there. Do you want to be reminded of that again? You are here now, as a result of the Selective Quantum Effect. Let me explain. As you know, the Quantum Theory was put forward about a hundred years ago. Those scientist guys did not know what they had unleashed. Quantum has been permeating space patiently. It has started hatching its effects recently. It audits everyone’s karma and selects some lucky guy at random, to teach him beneficial lessons. You are one such lucky guy.”

Matz flared up; in spite of the circumstances in which he was entangled (damn that word). “Flummadiddle. I know my science. What you are talking about is in no way connected with the real, original Quantum Theory.”

“Shut up. I am saying this amiably. Have you forgotten where, and in which condition you are? Open your eyes wide, look about you. Do you still want to contest the Quantum Effect? Ha ha.”

Matz did not have to take a second look either around the hall or at himself. His naked wrists were hurting under the grip of the handcuffs. His bare ass was itching where it touched the lead chair. He was afraid he was going to get a hard-on any moment. It was wiser not to argue with this colossal cook. It was better to humor him. He said as smoothly as possible:

“Ok, you win. I know I cannot argue with you here. You win. What next?”

“You agree that the FCS rule is important? You learned well about F. We will proceed to induct you into the necessity of C.”

“Clothing?”

“What else?”

“Alright, alright. Mr. Beam Shane, you have a fantastic body. I am sure nobody on earth possesses such a great physical structure as you do.

More than that, you are a super cook and butler and many other things. Now, kindly remove the cuffs and chains. You did so last time. Hope your bathroom and toilet are in the same excellent condition as I had seen in my previous stay here.”

“Sure, Matz. We are here to serve you. But first, you have to eat your breakfast. The angels will feed you as before. That is the script.”

“What is that script you keep on dinning into my ears?”

“Quantum Script, what else?”

Matz groaned. There was a ring of an alarm bell somewhere in the corner of the room behind Matz. He intuitively understood that it was the breakfast call. From then on, all talk stopped and the action proceeded smoothly. Anne, App, and Purina fed him as they had done earlier: golden plate, silver spoons, and all. After he had finished eating, Anne wiped his mouth clean. Purina planted a chaste kiss on his cheeks. Over.

Beam removed the cuffs and chains briskly, and efficiently.

“I guess, you may need to go to the bathroom. You are free to do so.”

At first, Matz did not want to get up, feeling awkward standing up in the presence of the angels. He had only two choices; offer them to view either his butt or his pecker. In the end, the pressure that had built up in his bladder decided the choice. Smiling wanly, he got up. “Gotta go to the loo.” His wane smile was returned with warm smiles.

“We understand. This way please.”

“I know the way.”

“We know. But protocol must be followed. It is a pleasure to lead you.”

“Huh, huh.” ... One baby holding his left arm, one holding his right arm, one bowing at him from the front; all the way up to the john. Nothing could be weirder than this, Matz thought. They went away.

Matz was back at his leaden throne once more. Silence. No books. No Tv. No mobile phone. He walked as before, around the familiar hall. Got bored. Came back and sat on the throne. Lunchtime. They came with lunch. He ate. They went. Silence. No books. No Tv. No mobile phone.

He waited and waited in utter boredom. Night. Supper time. They came carrying supper. He ate. They went. Boredom again, threatening to reach a breaking point. They came, bringing in his previous bed. No talk. They went.

The bed was of top quality. The pillow too. That was all. There was no bed cover, no cloth sheets of any kind for him to cover up his naked body. He had to go and lie on the bed; his back and ass were paining. Luckily, the room temperature was a wee bit above the body temperature. Sleep covered him.

The next day crawled forward in the same routine. In between, he managed to ask Beam, “When do I get my clothes back? Are you done with decontaminating them?”

“It may take some time. It all depends on the clarity and intensity of your realization of the lesson we are attempting to teach you.”

“But I understand it now clearly.”

“But you have not attained the intensity.”

“Bah.”

“Wait and see.” Beam Shane vamoosed.

One needs clothes. Obviously, I know. What did the bastard mean by intensity?

He did not have to wait for long. His bare skin was automatically sensing and responding to the temperature of the surrounding air. The temperature dropped down by just a couple of degrees. Matz immediately felt the coolness of the air. It was cool, like the coolness of a gentle breeze. Pleasant when one is clothed. Just tolerable when bare. After a few hours, it may become irksome. Matz instinctively felt that there was more to come. He was right. By the time his supper arrived, the temperature had dropped further. Coolness had turned into coldness. The food he consumed kept him warm—only for a limited time.

Lying naked on the bed, with nothing to cover himself, Matz began to shiver. He curled up into the fetal position as tightly as possible. It did not help. He was sure that Beam Shane and company had something to do with the temperature of the room. He was sure also that there was no point in

trying to figure out how it was being done. The bastards were very cool about it. (*I excuse myself for the abominable pun. Abominable, damn. The abominable snowman. Snow. Cold. Damn papa Freud, though he is so correct there!*) They did not want him to die of hypothermia. They just want him to suffer. If this continues, he may catch pneumonia—God forbid. Suddenly, Matz was struck by another thought. He should not fall asleep! Extremely dangerous; he was sure he would not wake again forever. Better do some exercises and try to keep warm. He jumped up and jogged about the room, going around in circles. Soon, he realized it was a vicious circle. By exercising he was burning plenty of calories. He needed some more food to supply him with enough energy. Breakfast was a long time ahead.

He had to shout whether he liked it or not. Whether it would be useful or not. He shouted his best choice expletives into the empty room. No answer. Then he remembered that he had shouted *thrice* during his last stay. “Weird bastards,” he grumbled and shouted again and again. Beam Shane did not arrive. Instead, an invisible loudspeaker, from the far end of the hall answered, “No need to shout so loud. No dirty words. Please behave like a gentleman. We hope you agree with that assessment. Now, what do you want, Carl Matz?” Matz recognized the voice. He shot back—not too loudly:

“Hey mon, it is too cold in here. Get me some clothes.”

“Be reasonable, Matz. No clothes. Have you forgotten that that is the pivotal idea behind this exercise?”

Matz cringed. “Damn. Then, at least increase the temperature in the room.”

“Not possible at this stage; it is not in the script.”

“I am afraid I may catch pneumonia.”

“Don’t be a crybaby. You are young and in good physical shape.”

“Damn you again. How long will this have to go on?”

“Not for long. An introduction of one more parameter is all.”

The voice was cut off. The parameter was a vaguely convenient word that many geek friends of his were fond of using. But, in this room, Matz had a foreboding that it was going to be anything but pleasant.

He was correct. He did not have to wait for long. As a leftover impression from his childhood days, Carl Matz had a strong dislike of the doctor's syringe. That unpleasant impression was rooted, further down from the days he had often been the victim of mosquito bites. Now, as he lay contemplating when daybreak would occur, and how to cope with the chill in the room, he suddenly felt the sharp puncture of a doctor's needle (was it sterilized, by God?) on his gluteus. His body jerked involuntarily. For a brief horrible second, he thought that bloody Beam had injected him with cyanide. His palm automatically touched the spot where the needle had penetrated. The mosquito which was sucking his blood was so intoxicated by it that it was still there when Matz's hand touched it. As Matz's palm rubbed, the mosquito was squashed. Matz then realized from where the sting had come. Incongruously, he was happy that he had scored a victory over the mosquito.

His exultation was short-lived. Somewhere in a magazine, he had read an article wherein it was stated that man had lost the battle against mosquitoes. A second specimen of the deadly species landed on a symmetrical spot on his other gluteus. Matz's hand swatted instinctively. The second attacker too died. That ended the victory march of Matz for the night.

Other mosquitoes were more cautious. They zoomed in on his body at random, stung him with revenge, drank his blood gleefully, and absquatulated absolutely. Matz's night of terror had begun. The insects were being considerate towards him. If all of them came in hordes and attacked him continuously, he would not survive. He would have become a mass of swollen flesh all over. That was not in the script. They would wait patiently till Matz was about to drowse, and at that moment swoop in and deliver their stings and vanish. They seemed to like all parts of his body. They kissed him impartially, and efficiently. Enduring his delirious torture, Matz was surprised to become aware that his body consisted of so many separately nameable parts and spots. A physician, of course, could reel off a hundred times more, Latinized medical words. Matz cringed at the thought. He sprang from the bed and began pacing again. Then he

keenly became aware of the biting cold. Ha, ha, whether it was the cold or the insects, both were biting him. Damn, though the phrasing was appropriate, the timing was inappropriate. *Darn, am I going off the rocker? I am not sure if I am awake or asleep.*

Carl Matz was almost getting a faint idea of what eternity meant.

Mercifully, the night ended and morning arrived. The outside sunlight could not enter his dungeon. Only the wall clock could inform him about the time. (Its dial had a day-and-date indicator.) The other indicator was the arrival of bed coffee. Later, the breakfast. Later, the lunch. Later, the evening coffee. Lastly, the supper. All the while, no conversation was exchanged, even though it was offered liberally. Refusing food was absolutely out of question. The memory of his being force-fed last time, sent chills down his spine. The routine seemed to drag on and on for days, weeks, and months. Matz felt like a lonely explorer space vehicle moving silently on and on towards a distant planet. The impression was purely subjective. The wall clock told him that seven days had passed since his descent into this Quantum hell.

The next day, after he had finished his breakfast, Beam beamed broadly and brightly and enquired with elaborate concern, “And how is our guest? Is everything ok? How has been the food?”

Matz said, “Cut it out, Shane. Food is divine, but I am feeling bloody bovine. Look at my frigging body, punctured at a million spots by frigging mosquitoes. I am afraid I shall get malaria, dengue, or frigging elephantiasis. It may take one month for my skin to recover. Damn you and your silly games. Get back my clothes. Please.”

The sirens giggled simultaneously. Beam replied, “I understand your mood. Your clothes are still in the cleaner. The cleaner just needs your input to finish its job.”

“My input? What kind?”

“Your mental conviction. Whether you are truly convinced that along with food, clothes are also necessary.”

Matz replied with alacrity, “I am convinced. Boy, I am convinced.”

“Honest?”

“Damn you. Yes, honestly. Yes, sincerely. Yes, with all my heart. Gimme my clothes.” (In automatic reflex Matz’s hand was delicately rubbing a bitten spot on his butt.)

Beam, as before, whisked out a mirror out of the surrounding air and held it for Matz, who had mournfully inspected most of the visible parts of his body, except his face. He saw it in the mirror. He threw up.

Ann, App, and Purina rushed to him and cleaned him up speedily. They all planted kisses (chaste) on his face. Matz was about to weep. He held back with great effort.

Beam Shane threw the mirror down on the ground, behind Matz. There was no sound of any sort. Beam made as if he was guddling behind *his* back, brought out the clothes of Matz, all cleaned and ironed and perfumed. He held them out to Matz. Matz looked down and noticed that his shoes and socks too had materialized. Matz understood the meaning of relief—in 3D as before.

Beam smiled. “You can wear them now and go back to meet your pals who are anxiously waiting for you. The clothes are almost decontaminated.”

“Almost?” A small wave of worry began to play in Matz’s mind.

There was no reply. He was already riding down the once-familiar, invisible elevator accompanied by the familiar vacuum sensation in the pit of his stomach. *My God, I am not dressed yet*, he squirmed and closed his eyes.

Not to worry. When he opened them, he was fully dressed and was seated on the old familiar sofa in his penthouse. His friends were gawking at him in awe. He reciprocated the action.

The previous routine was repeated. He thought they went up, they thought he went up, he said six weeks or seven days, they said six seconds, mutual inquiries were done as to what happened to whom; all that and so on and so on.

“What did you learn this time, in those six seconds?” friends asked eagerly.

“Six seconds? Bullshit. I have been bitten by a million mosquitoes. You guys can calculate how much time it must have taken. My bloated face is enough to give you an idea.”

“Your face is quite normal. Fresher than before. There is plenty of time for all that, later. First, tell us what you learned.”

“Boys, this time I learned that, apart from food, clothing is also necessary. I was naked for a whole week and was bitten by a billion mosquitoes. I had nothing to cover myself up with. It was hell. I affirm that clothing is necessary. It may sound obvious to hear that, but you have to undergo the treatment to fully appreciate the value of clothes.”

“Do you want to take bath with clothes on? Do you want to have sex with clothes on?” Friends laughed. “You may laugh. You guys were not bitten by a trillion mosquitoes.”

The friendly ribbing continued for a short time. Then Quantum karma prompted one of the friends to ask:

“That is all, ok. Now, seriously, I wonder what more is necessary for humans.”

The words, food, clothing, and shelter (FCS) were still in the RAM area of Matz’s brain and not yet pushed into the Recycle Bin. The last word in that series now zoomed in on his mental screen.

Involuntarily he mumbled, “shelter.” And thereby Quantum karma threw its lasso around him and tugged. The room spun around him merrily. His pals were sucked up as he saw. He was sucked up as his pals saw. Either way, they were not able to see one another; communication was lost among them.

Matz had the familiar dizzy sensation. He was already expecting to be dropped into his good old lead throne. He closed his eyes as if readying to take the (soft, soft) impact on the chair. The thump was received, not by his butt, but by his soles; his feet had touched solid ground. Opened his eyes.

There was no chair. There was no kitchen. He had landed in unknown territory. The territory was unfamiliar, but he could guess what it was. He

guessed he was inside a forest; he was not far off the mark. This trip was new, and he felt a painful twist in his guts.

That sensation in the guts made him focus on his body. Oh God, he was naked again. The only reprieve was that his boots were on. Small mercy.

He began scanning the area, turning his body in a slow circle. There was no hurry, for there was nothing for him to do—at least for the present. He was in a forest, undoubtedly. The land, as far as he could see, was uneven, dipping and rising. Most of the area was covered with grass that came up to his knees only. He could move unhindered, thank God; another small mercy. He could see an occasional tree here and there, located not less than half a kilometer away from one another. The trees were big, with plenty of spread-out branches and thick foliage. That would offer comfortable shade. Shade? Why did the idea occur to him? When *that* idea occurred to him, he looked up automatically. The whole sky was a clear cerulean blue, without a single speck of cloud. His eyes scanned the horizon. The sun had risen up, roughly an hour earlier. He felt the warm sun rays embracing his bare body. It was pleasant and invigorating; for the present. Talk of great sunbathing. But his body warned him that the temperature would surely rise in an hour, and would keep on rising. Then sunbathing would end in severe sunburns. That would be nothing compared to a sunstroke, in an area where there was no ambulance. Forget it, there were not even people anywhere a few hundred miles around. Luckily, those solitary trees out there were not too far; he could manage to scramble up to one of them.

Ok. What then? How about food? He did not know anything about hunting. *I have to go back twenty thousand years to learn it, damn.* And what about water? He had read that one could survive without food for a considerable time, but not without water. *Damn again, I have to drink my own pee. Have heard that it is good therapy. But damn once more, I am in a vicious vicious circle here, for I gotta drink water first, to drink my pee later, ha, ha. Am I already going crazy?*

He thought he heard a slithering sound a few feet to his left side. Was it a snake? It could be a cobra! Better keep moving and reach that tree there. There would probably be a rock there, so he could sit on it. He

cannot go on standing forever. Damn civilization; it had made him soft. But, he and billions like him were all living in the present era, in a totally super civilized society.

Matz took another look all around him and chose a tree toward the east. He was proud of his reasoning. As the sun rises it would travel west, and so if he traveled east, the amount of time he would be baking in the sun would be shortened. *In an emergency situation, every second counts. Hope I am not turning crazy.* As he trudged eastward slowly (to conserve energy) his willpower obtained a considerable boost by the surfacing up of old images of scenes he had seen in a certain movie where a severely parched Clint Eastwood was heroically staggering across the desert. The sun was rising quicker than he thought and he could feel the hot rays on his face. He had to bend his face down to avoid the direct glare of the sun. Soon his thirst would cross the tolerance zone. *God, let there be a stream nearby. Oh God, if it is far, bring it nearer, please, please.*

When he looked up, he saw a moving object far in the distance. He could not identify it. It looked like a strange crossbreed between an OHV and a camper van. He quickened his steps. He also observed that the vehicle appeared to be moving towards the same tree he had chosen as the destination. He had to move carefully since the grass was dense, and he was not sure of the nature of the soil surface under his feet. He looked up now and then to make sure that the vehicle was there – or that it was not moving away from him. No worry there. The vehicle was beating its way sedately towards the tree. The grass blades were rough and scratched his delicate urban skin. He was once again thankful for small mercies. The grass did not reach up all the way to his crotch. The heat was rising. The exertion was telling on his body. Small beads of perspiration began to form in his armpits. There was a change in the rhythm of his breathing.

Fortunately, the grass began to grow thinner. (But it had roughened up his legs and thighs considerably.) And the bare skin on his face and chest was burning. The stomach was yearning for water. He could see the vehicle clearly now, but could not identify the driver. He kept on plodding along the uneven ground. The marula tree was of medium size but there were enough branches and foliage to offer shade and shelter. Shelter, even if it were temporary, was welcome. Of course, the guys in the camper would certainly take him in. *I hope, there are guys in that vehicle. Ha, ha!*

It does not look like a robotic vehicle. If it is a robot, why would it move directly toward the tree? . . . Drat, I am confused. If there are guys in that vehicle, they should naturally come toward me. I am definitely visible to them. It is very clear that I am moving toward the tree. Then it is also clear that they want to reach the tree first and wait for me. Their motive looks sinister. But I cannot avoid them! I gotta go there and take my chance. Oh God, let them not be robbers.

Matz saw no point in slowing down. He gritted his teeth and kept on moving. Soon he was sufficiently near the vehicle, which had already reached the tree, had stopped, and seemed to be waiting for him. Its doors did not open. Nobody came out either. The front of the driver's cabin was covered with dark glass; strange. (Now, that he remembered, the vehicle had not made any sound as it neared the tree; stranger still.) He could not see who was inside.

He reached the vehicle. Still, no movements of any sort from those insides. He was itching to turn the door handle. He tapped on the door and asked loudly, "Hello, anybody in?" He did not care that he was naked. Damn, this was a jungle, and more than that, it was not his fault.

There was no response from the (presumed) occupants. An old, atavistic memory surfaced in his mind. He had to ask three times. Eh, funny, how did that idea occur to him, here, now? There must be a connection. Though it looked ridiculous, he coughed, steadied his voice, and repeated the question two more times.

The door promptly opened. Out jumped Beam Shane in one smooth leap. The three angels followed in his wake, stepping down nimbly, one after another.

Beam exclaimed in mock surprise, "Well, stone the crows! Who have we here?" and ebulliently embraced Matz. "Glad to meet ya, old boy" He thumped Matz's bare back.

Matz was sure he would suffocate in that bearhug. Bearhug was a very mild word for the grip of those gigantic arms and chest. A hydraulic crusher would be a nearer analogy. Fortunately, Beam released him in time and presented him to the other three hamadryads, who embraced him and kissed him gently. Matz felt very awkward at first. Then he remembered

that they had already met him and fed him under this unique sartorial condition for a week. The formalities were over quickly.

“Now to business,” Beam said and signaled to his forest nymphs.

Matz was young and alert and intelligent. He did not even bother to ask Beam how he happened to be traveling in that godforsaken place. He was sure the giant would dish up some funny explanation involving—what else, but Quantum karma. He quickly surmised too that the Quantum colossus was here to teach one more ‘lesson,’ as he would like to put it.

“What now?” he asked blankly.

Beam beamed broadly. “First things, first, I always say. You must be hungry and thirsty. We will feed you first, and then we can kibitz all day on philosophy and such trivia.”

“I have no quarrel with that. But get me some clothes. I am going to die of sunburn and sunstroke. Surely there must be some rags in your camper.”

“Clothes are no problem. You exited last time in a hurry; the second lesson was not learned in full 3D.” (*Matz–Bugger is totally telepathic. He is throwing back my words at me.*) “We will top up the lesson quickly, and then proceed along to the final one. After that, I will be sincerely sorry to see you take leave of me.”

By this time, Anne, App, and Purina had set up a table and chair. Matz was surprised at their quickness. The chair was the good old lead chair, in which he had spent time twice. At the sight of the lead throne, Pavlov’s reflex caught Matz – being chained to the chair was a major scar in his mind. His body shivered in anticipation of handcuffs. Beam laughed and said:

“Do not worry. Appreciate the logic behind it. You are hungry and thirsty and dying to drink water at any cost. No point in binding you. It is not in the script. Besides, where else would you go, when old friends are here to help you? Sit and eat in peace.”

Matz cursed in a low voice. Beam beamed. Matz sat in the chair. The food was already set on the table.

The eating ritual went smoothly, as of yore.

“Thanks,” Matz belched and said.

“Nothing to it. We are feeding you because we have to keep you alive. We want you alive so that we can conclude the full course of our lessons.” Beam laughed. Matz noticed that there was genuine concern in the tone of his strange host and was touched and confused at the same time. He refrained from making caustic comments.

Beam stepped back and made an imperceptible signal with his hand. The dryad triad quickly cleaned everything. Then they took away the table and all paraphernalia, loading them back into the camper. Matz was still sitting (comfortably) in the chair. Beam eyed at it significantly.

“Sorry, that too goes in. Nothing personal. It is all as per the script.” Matz winced; he was fed up with that word. Anne and Purina came up to him lovingly and patted his bare ass with affection. Both said in perfect sync, “Get up Adam.” The chair too went into the vehicle.

Beam pointed his fingers at the tree above and told Matz, “Don’t be tempted to eat those fruits. Even elephants here get intoxicated by eating them. Whenever you feel like eating, just shout for us three times. As you know well by now, we are happy to oblige you. Bye, dear boy.”

Before Matz had blinked twice, the angels had gotten into the vehicle and Beam was on the threshold of entering the driver's cabin. Matz was gobsmacked by the sudden end. He was eagerly expecting that Beam would take him in, along with him, and drop him at a convenient place at the least. If the party went away, leaving him alone in this godforsaken place, what was he to do, where was he to go, how was he to survive? He shouted anxiously at Beam:

“Hey, you can’t leave me here all alone.”

“Oh, do not worry. I said we will take care of you, did I not? We will come back at night. We will bring food and a sleeping bag. Bye, cheerio.”

Matz was not allowed to retort or react. The camper accelerated faster than a racing car participating in a Grand Prix. It had gone out of sight before the dust settled. Matz kept gazing and gazing for a long time. He sighed deeply and came down to the present. He surveyed the tree and the

surroundings once more. The sun had risen high by now and the heat was getting to be uncomfortable. He decided to rest under the tree till.

Oh, till what? . . .

That was the million-dollar question. The forest was totally unfamiliar to him. He did not know how big it was. He did not know how far the nearest town, or road lay. Or in which direction, dash it. If he kept on walking blindly, he may enter deeper into the forest, and he will be doomed. Then again, the cunning instinct of survival told him that the Quantum bastards would not allow him to die! So, he could just sit it out under the tree, and try to wear out their patience. That was not a very bad idea, considering that they would feed him regularly and well. Damn the buggers. Then again, two things. One, he would die of boredom. Two, sitting on the rough ground, his bare ass will be fried. Then again, a third unpleasant thought occurred to him. He recalled how the buggers force-fed him when had refused to take food, during his first trial. Their intention seemed to keep him moving and get sunburnt. If he refused to move and sat under the tree, taking the risk of getting his ass fried, what ploy could they employ? He sat on a relatively smooth patch of ground and sat. And waited.

The answer was supplied to him soon—as the day continued to get hotter. He thought he heard a rustle behind him. Turned neck around and saw. He turned his neck around and saw a lion cub crouching and curiously staring at him. Right on that spot, and at that moment, he understood what all those guys had meant when they wrote of an adrenalin rush. (One more addition to his increasing lexicon of 3D understandings.) Fortunately, the cub was small, and it was almost exuding an air of friendliness, and it just seemed to be interested in sharing a common shelter. He *could* tackle it in an emergency. He relaxed a bit. He smiled at the pretty animal. He tensed the next moment when the idea struck him that if there was a lion cub here, its mother must be quite near. He was correct. The corner of his eyes detected a movement nearby. The soft paws of the mother lioness made no sound as it moved toward its cub. It stared intently at Matz for a few seconds, assessing him, concluded that he was quite harmless, and went up to its baby, and licked it affectionately.

Matz's fear shot up. He was lucky that the mother did not charge him. No point in pushing his luck. He had to quit the scene as diplomatically as possible. Unluckily, he did not have a white flag with him. He hoped with all his heart that the lioness would understand his gesture, and saluted it in the best tradition of an ambassador paying respects to a queen and backtracked slowly, careful step by step, out of the shade of the tree, into the hot sun and then far, as far away as possible from the queen. The lioness stared at him in utter indifference (thank God, thank God).

He espied another tree far off, almost near the horizon. He had to go there to get shelter from the scorching sun. He should not hurry. He knew that a hurrying animal was a tempting target for a beast of prey. He had to move slowly and steadily risking sunstroke. What a stinking situation! He could not stand still, move fast, or go back. If only he had a closed shelter! Yes, shelter, that was what he wanted right then. The third item in the list of FCS. He agreed, damn it.

There was no point in over-cogitating under the hot sun. Just keep the mind blank. Concentrate on the tree there. Keep one step after another. Do not count even. Don't mind the sun. Better forget the sun.

It was an exhausting journey for him. He felt his whole body burning like a kettle on a stove. Thirst was making clamant demands, to be slaked. It took him quite a lot of time. He was almost there. Previous experience urged him to scan the area below the tree, for dangerous animals. Thank God, there were none. He had not noticed that the evening was setting in. The heat was diminishing. One more thanks to God.

There *was* a rocky surface—almost clean and not so rough—under the tree. He gently sat on it and took a breather. He was exhausted and hungry and thirsty. He looked up casually and noticed the fruits hanging down among the branches. Just as he wanted to go up the tree and pluck one fruit, he noticed that it was the same kind of tree as the earlier one. Beam's (bloody) warning that the fruit was strong enough to intoxicate even an elephant held him back. *Beam, oh, think of the devil, . . .*

He was jerked back to the present by the sound of an approaching vehicle. Before his eyes moved, his gut told him it was not an, but the. The camper arrived breezily.

The rest ran breezily as per the familiar script. Greetings. Feeding Matz. Mission accomplished. The camper, along with Beam and Co. skedaddling as fast as possible. Before departing, Beam gave Matz a sleeping bag, a cell torch, a canteen with enough water to last till morning, and a thick wooden staff. No empty talk. Good night. Sweet dreams. Will bring you breakfast morrow.

Matz crept into the sleeping bag prepared to confront a night of terror, expecting to be eaten alive by tigers, lions, leopards, wolves, and hyenas. The Quantum food he had consumed must have been doped, for, he had tumbled into a deep sleep by the time he had tormented himself by gruesome images for half an hour. He woke freshened in the morning, surprised to see himself alive.

Morning advanced. Then Beam. Breakfast. Cajoling to get a hitchhike. No use. Beam went. Matz remained, moody and morose. It was getting hotter and hotter. He was reluctant to leave the shelter of the tree. Two ferocious-looking tigers arrived on the scene and persuaded him to move. Matz sighed deeply, got up, and bent down to pick up the sleeping bag. Both the tigers pounced on the bag at once, placing their paws on it and growling viciously at Matz. He got the message. Briskly stepped into the burning sun and kept moving. Why the tigers did not attack him was a mystery.

His body was savaged by the previous day's sun. Now it looked as if he was going to be cooked thoroughly. He needed a shelter, he agreed. He understood it. In the far distance, he saw another marula tree. Funny, he thought. Was the same single tree dematerializing and materializing, as if to befuddle him? *I am not sure of anything in this bloody quantum cage. I am not even sure whether I am talking to myself, or my quantum twin is talking inside me. Let me reach the tree for now. I need shelter, I agree. If those Quantum bastards want it, I will shout it out at them.*

He shouted. The empty forest echoed back his words. His skin began to burn under the sizzling sun. He doubted if he could manage to reach the tree.

The weather started to change unexpectedly. Welcome. Clouds were forming at a fast rate. Low, dark, water-pregnant clouds. The temperature dropped. A cool breeze began to blow. His naked body welcomed the

pleasant change. . . . The temperature dropped still further, and the low clouds covered the sky, blotting out the sunlight. Soon, the clouds appeared to be ominous and threatening. Anxiety was raising inside Matz, notch by notch. He accelerated his steps. The tree was still far.

The clouds commenced emptying their contents as if unable to bear the weight of water they were holding till then. Big raindrops pelted down on the bare body of the weary traveler. Soon, Matz was drenched and dripping from all parts of his body. He plodded on, hoping to gain shelter from the tree, though shelter, was a feeble term there. As if to mock him, the downpour was getting denser and denser. He could barely see thirty feet ahead of him. The raindrops were so thick and heavy that they were almost pushing him down. For a second he stood still, utterly dazed. Moving ahead was itself a difficult task. If he had the sleeping bag with him, he would have crawled into it and lain on the bare ground. Damn the tigers. No point in cursing them. It was wiser and practical to keep moving, even if he moved foot by foot. Damn, his body needed shelter. Shelter, shelter, it kept groaning. He agreed and kept shouting his agreement at the Quantum Bastards. The wind and rain drowned his voice. He kept on trudging in the slush, and shouting, for what seemed to him for the whole day.

It was a stupendous miracle that he arrived at the tree. The evening was in a mood to say goodbye to the impending night. It was strange that the rain ceased abruptly as if it was urgently summoned to another theatre of action. Stranger still, Matz did not feel all that tired physically after the harrowing trial he had undergone. It could have been probably due to the reason that his experiences in the forest had a dreamlike quality—he was not sure. Or, the bloody Quantum Bogey had something to do with it. It was keeping him alive; it did not want him to die. On that score, he did not know whether to laugh or to cry—while his naked body was shivering and his cold-struck scrotum was shrinking into a hard nut. Now, what, he asked of himself and got the answer outright.

Sound of the camper's approach. The quartet jumped out. Chair, table, lights, dinner. Another fresh sleeping bag, torch, and canteen. All in silence. Party gone. Night setting in, in-depth. And so on. Matz crept into the bag, muttering 'latibule, latibule' in desperation. Till next day's clear sunlight hit his eyelids.

The initial hours followed an established script. Then, instead of tigers, two enormous bears drove him out of the shelter of the tree, grabbing his sleeping bag and canteen.

The sadistic joke continued. He espied one more marula tree. *Looks like only marula trees grow in this godforsaken forest. I could have laughed if only I were outside this forest, in a comfortable home.* Walk, walk, walk. Damn, damn, this was becoming too much to bear. He craved to go back to the comfort of his penthouse. (When was that? In his previous life?) He remembered the rain of the previous day and looked up anxiously at the sky. That was a mistake. The clouds assured him that they had not forgotten him. He also remembered that he had a wacky sense of humor which would rise up at odd moments. He told himself that between the scorching sun and the beating rain, he preferred the rain. The Quantum Guy, up in the sky heard it and smiled. Instead of rain, hailstones began to descend. They hit him first on his bregma and offered him a good idea of the force of gravity. In the olden days, he remembered, people were stoned to death. What was hitting him on the head and shoulders and nape of the neck, provided him a live experience of that horrible punishment. He had nothing to protect his head with, except his bare hands. He had no other alternative but to place his hands interlocked, over his head. The pain was now transferred to his carpals, metacarpals, and phalanges of the hands. It was excruciating. He thought he would either go crazy, or his cranium would crack. If he tried to ignore what was happening on the top of his head, the ice balls hitting on his spine would remind him of how it would feel if pelted with stones. Summoning all his willpower and strength, he kept staggering toward the one point of refuge, the marula tree, still looming far ahead, the mad internal cry of the word, 'shelter, shelter, shelter' keeping a crazy rhythm inside his skull. Quantum Power did not want him to die, nor did it want him to go insane. The hailstones got smaller and smaller, and less dense. And stopped anon. He heaved a sigh of relief.

He got a fresh surge of optimism and energy and wended his way to the still far tree, covering a good distance. Quantu smiled. A second shower of hailstone descended. Matz cringed and cursed. Optimism dwindled, but he kept moving. There was no alternative. He got tired and crazy again. Quant relented. The hail stopped. Matz got another injection

of hope and high spirits. He thought he could reach the tree; surged ahead. Quan smiled. The downpour of frozen drops took up again. Matz cried out. He gritted his teeth and kept moving, cursing fate, the forest, and friends. His energy dwindled. His progress slackened; curses quickened. Qua relented. Hail stopped. Matz's spirits rose. The tree could be reached in fifteen minutes, he estimated. He took a deep breath and put a determined step forward. Qu smiled. Ice crystals commenced. Matz screamed loudly. Cursed louder. Protecting his head with interlocked palms, he stumbled ahead, step after agonizing step. He was sure that all the bones of his fingers were broken. His whole consciousness became one big pool of pain and agony. Amidst chattering teeth, chanting the word, 'shelter' incessantly, he moved. He was delirious. The tree was constantly appearing and disappearing from his vision. His brain told him it must be there. He constantly checked himself from falling down. Kept moving. Q relented. Hailstone turned into a soft drizzle.

Matz did not know how he reached the tree. He touched its trunk, to make sure it was there. Immediately, the drizzle stopped. The sky cleared as if on cue. The evening had ended and the night was about to take over. Thirst and hunger were wrenching his chest and abdomen. Even in that extreme condition, he was subconsciously expecting the Beam Team to arrive.

The sound of an approaching vehicle confirmed his intuition.

Light, torch, table, stool, plates, dinner, new sleeping bag, canteen.

When Beam was about to enter the vehicle, Matz shouted, "All right, you bastard, you win. I fully agree and understand and feel and am convinced in my heart and soul that shelter is absolutely necessary. FCS, food, clothing, and shelter, are all necessary, absolutely. I have understood it in 3D and more. Get me out of here, you, snollygoster. I can't stand this anymore, damn you!"

Beam said, "One more week," and drove off.

Matz miserably crept into the sleeping bag, his brain churning with feverish thoughts. One more week, the bugger had said. What further atrocities awaited him? Scorching sun, choking wind, drenching rain, and pelting hail; he had suffered all that. What more? Trampling by elephants?

Charging by rhinos? Attack by gorillas? Or an invasion by an army of ants? He had read in a couple of jungle books that when a huge army of ants came marching, even ferocious wild animals would flee in panic. *My God, not that for me.* Then they too, scattered in terror when a forest fire began to spread. If that happens, he would be literally burnt. God! Fuck Beam, fuck Quantum. Beam, he could put up with. But Quantum was incomprehensible forever. Why should all this happen to him? He knew he was having these nightmarish experiences as a result of his arguments with his buddies. But, for heaven's sake, he was only arguing intellectually, as a form of inspiring entertainment. Only, talk, for God's sake.

Only talk? Some disembodied voice somewhere seemed to mock? *Only talk? Then take this!*

Peels of thunder broke the silence of the night. The sky was lit up by the most dazzling blue light he had ever seen. It zigzagged down in the blink of an eye. The enormous lightning struck the tree under which he was sleeping. The crash that followed was earsplitting. The tree broke and split up into a huge ball of fire.

Matz screamed and woke up from his sleep. The dazzling light was that of the sun's rays. He had overslept. Dawn had passed some hours earlier. The sun had advanced up into the clear blue sky.

Matz was still in a terror-filled daze. The mocking words, "Only talk?" were reverberating inside his skull. He wriggled out of the bag and slowly calmed down. Only talk? No, no. Now he understood that talking was a damn serious business. The irony of it was that it was serious whether he intended it or not. Somebody else—or something else—had taken his words in all seriousness. Damn too seriously, in fact. He wanted to throw up. Since he had an inherent horror of that act, he quelled the impulse. What now?

The canteen with water was by his side. He peed and poed and palmed his face. And waited for the Quantum Minions to arrive. They did not disappoint him.

The age-old—they looked like that to him by now—quartet got down from the age-old camper. Beam was exuding extra exuberance. That portended

no good news, Matz felt and shivered mildly. He did not know what further shenanigans the fellow was going to execute. The age-old ceremony of breakfast was conducted in somber silence. The sirens cleared the table and loaded everything into the back of the camper. The sleeping bag and the water container too went in. Matz shivered once again at that.

The angels blew synchronized kisses at Matz and went inside the vehicle. Beam, looking sterner and stronger than ever, opened the door of the driver's cabin, hopped in, and shut the door with a bang.

Matz, feeling most naked and forlorn, looked on gloomily.

Beam started the vehicle. The engine stalled. Beam tried again and again. The engine kept on purring but there was no life in that purr. Beam opened the door, got out, and approached Matz with a glum face. The beauties, Anne, App, and Purina followed him—cheerfully. Matz was puzzled by the contrast in their expressions. The next moment, he realized that Beam was putting on an act.

They stood facing him. Beam said glumly:

“The damn thing does not start. The battery is Ok, I checked. Guess we are stuck up with you in this damn forest. I put the blame on you. We have been toiling our asses off for your sake.”

“For my sake?” Matz asked, surprised.

“What else? We have been doing all this buzzing and traveling in order to keep you alive. They have ordered us to see that you do not die. You are supposed to live and learn a lesson. . . . You must have put a curse on the jalopy.”

“That is an unfair accusation,” Matz replied. But he knew in his heart that the wily giant had correctly guessed his thoughts.

Beam insisted, “Oh, come on, I know you. Take back the curse you have put on it.”

Matz decided to humor the hunk. He said reluctantly, “Ok, I take it back.”

They were all startled by a loud, high-pitched sound of a siren that apparently emanated from the camper. The camper gave a sudden jerk as

if a mammoth elephant had kicked it. Even as they all looked on, the camper took off like a cheetah on the hunt and sped away all by itself. There was no driver in the cabin—they knew. Beam was the first to recover, and he made as if to go in pursuit of the deserting vehicle. It was too late. The vehicle was more than a kilometer away from them. It vanished out of sight by the time the hapless witnesses had finished sighing and wringing their hands.

After a moment of stunned silence, Beam stared piercingly at Matz and said sarcastically:

“Your curse has refused to be taken back. I clearly remember having switched off the engine.” Matz stared back in defiant silence. Beam shrugged as if unable to explain the odd behavior of the vehicle. He continued, “Well, we are with you now; in the same situation, you have been all these days. The nearest road is fifty miles from here. I guess we have no option but to trek it out. Personally, I do not mind it at all.”

The girls shrieked together, “Fifty miles!?! We will never make it. Better stay with our charming Adam, here.” They moaned too. Beam shrugged as if it did not matter to him one way or the other.

There were no chairs—obviously—so they stood staring at one another. Matz looked around. Beam’s face was more inscrutable than that of a Sphinx. The babies were wearing identical expressions of worry. The facial creases were there. But Matz could also detect minute ripples of merriment below those creases. The situation was surreal. He was not sure if this was a secondary dream within a primary one. How long could they go on standing and staring?

Beam broke the deadlock, “Since we are tied down here, we can as well complete our discussion. That was my primary goal, anyway.”

“What discussion?” Matz asked.

“Our discussion is the same as your discussion!”

“Stop talking in riddles.”

“My dear fellow, your discussion was that one which you had had with your pals at the penthouse many months ago, and which in a way, is still going on, urgently needing a successful completion.”

Drat! It all came back to Matz's memory. He said bitterly, "I thought it is all over. I have told you again and again that I agree that one needs shelter also."

"Agreeing is one thing and understanding is another."

"For Pete's sake stop wrangling with definitions and semantics. If you want me to swear under oath, I swear that I have understood. In three-D as I have been saying. I surrender to you in full—as far as your bloody discussions are concerned. Get me out of here. You must have a phone or something?"

Beam beamed beatifically. "Good, good. Well, I left my phone in that overzealous camper. So did my companions."

Matz had undergone indescribable suffering for days. Yet his innate sense of humor had not left him. He said, "Beam Shane, I know you better than you think I do. I had observed you enough in that Quantum kitchen—was it last week, or last month? You are a quantum guy and that camper is a quantum contraption for sure. Both of you are wrapped tightly in the bloody quantum entanglement. You just have to whistle and the truck will come here trotting like a horse from the Wild West."

Beam bowed in an appreciating samurai stance. "Your learning curve is impressive. I congratulate you. Now, for the last time, and just for the record of our Quantum boss, have you realized that shelter too, is quite necessary for living human beings?"

Matz knew it was the clinching line. He cleared his throat and said with all emotion and sincerity he could muster, "Yes, I have realized it in depth. FCS, food, clothing, and shelter are absolutely necessary to us, human beings. I swear it."

To an outsider, it might have looked comic, but to the actual participants in the scene, it was very serious business.

Beam was satisfied. But he could not help taking a mild dig. He said:

"Ok Matz, you are convincing. But don't do a Galileo here."

Matz asked, "Who is he?"

They all laughed.

Beam looked at his watch (which, Matz had not noticed till then) and predicted, “The camper should be here any minute from now.” To the puzzling look on Matz’s face, he clarified, “It did not have enough fuel. So, it was quantumly programmed to go back and get the fuel tank filled.” He said that in a matter-of-fact tone.

Matz giggled. The three angels giggled *at Matz*. Matz could not get it. He looked at Beam and asked:

“Is there a catch here? I am unable to get it.”

“What catch?” Beam asked as if *he* did not get it.

Matz felt like a dumb student in the classroom, “I mean, well, er, if the camper could go back up to the fueling station, we could all have as well sat in it and be safe on the other side of the forest by now!”

Beam explained as if to his favorite student who had momentarily gone dumb, “I wonder how you missed the basics of science and simple math, here. If the camper carries us, it needs more fuel, than when it travels alone. It did not have that extra fuel. That was why it went back alone. Simple arithmetic.” He was wearing a deadpan expression.

Matz was embarrassed. Shane pressed on:

“If you are not convinced, I merely ask of you to carry one of us—not all, mind you—on your back and start walking. Let us see how far you can manage.”

Matz’s face became erubescence.

“Excuse me, my dear fellow. You may not understand now why I seem to be unnecessarily harping on the obvious. Be assured, you will appreciate this talk at the proper time . . . I think I hear the sound of a galloping horse.”

Matz too heard it; mixed with the delightful titters of the sirens.

The camper zoomed in with great ceremony—screaming horns and screeching breaks. The girls clapped. Beam said:

“Obvious. Mission accomplished. I think it is overloaded with fuel.”

Matz did not comment on that for fear of inviting another elaborate explanation. He kept on staring vacantly into the horizon. He was not sure

what other trick the giant was going to play. The babies went and patted the vehicle with affection as if it were a horse. After a moment, Beam too went up and opened the door of the driver's cabin. He did not go in. He kept the door open and turned his head back at Matz. Matz was looking at them with a doleful face.

Beam opened his mouth and shot the question at him, "Hey, dummy, what are you waiting for? You want to stay here forever?"

It took five seconds to register. Matz grinned widely and ran up to the camper, faster than one participating in a nude Olympics. After he got in, Beam entered, and shut the door with a flourish. The engine, which was idling all the while, shot forward by itself. Matz accepted it as a normal event—in the quantum area.

Before they had traveled a few hundred meters, Matz saw a large building with a compound surrounding it. He was surprised; he had not expected to see such a building inside the forest. It was a single building in the forest that spread far beyond the eye could see. He was intrigued.

The vehicle veered course and headed for the single-roofed building. Beam tooted the horn. The gate opened. There was an entrance porch, and Beam parked the vehicle there. Beam whistled. The main, entrance doors slid open, revealing a small entrance hall. They entered in. The doors closed. The second set of doors opened automatically. They all stepped in. The doors closed.

The sound of the doors closing in triggered an atavistic reaction in Matz's brain. His brain shook for a fraction of a second, which made his eyes close. When his eyes were open, he was gobsmacked.

The place was the very same kitchen hall in which he had spent excruciating weeks (were they months?) The leaden chair at the far end was sending him sly and coy signals—like a lovelorn girl. He looked at beaming Beam with wide eyes and, with a wide open mouth was able to say, "Whaaat?" only.

Beam said, "Yes, this is that only" and laughed heartily.

Matz stammered, "Are you going to imprison me here once again?"

“Fret not Matz. You have gone through the full course and scored a grade of A in all the subjects. We will have a brief celebration and then it will be goodbye time. We are all sorry to see you go. But we have to obey the script. . . . Come on, go and sit on your throne.”

Matz walked up to the bitter-sweet chair hesitantly, watching out with the corner of his eyes at the hands of the colossus; who knows, the fellow may suddenly bring out a pair of handcuffs from behind his immense back. Luckily nothing of that sort happened.

The bunnies snapped into action. In seconds, there was a table and chairs, and coffee for all.

They finished the coffee in silence. Then Anne came and wiped Matz’s mouth with a clean hankie, even though his hands were free. Matz said, “Thank you.”

At this point, Beam addressed Matz, “The mind is a peculiar instrument, Matz. It can be tough and it can also be funnily pliant at times.”

Matz thought it over. “Why are you saying it now?”

“Look at yourself. I said it is all over. That means you will now be going away to your penthouse in the Big Apple. Look at yourself once again. You have been totally naked for quite some time. Do you intend to go and meet your friends in this condition? Of course, we have no objection to that.”

The beautiful girls laughed.

Matz looked down at his body, only then was he really conscious of his nakedness. He was not fazed.

“I guess, your Quantum Sanctum has got something to do with it. How about giving me back my clothes?”

“It is right there in front of you,” Beam said, tapping the top of the table with the wand—which had materialized out of empty space. Matz knew he could not talk of empty space, for, if he did, the Quantum colossus would chide him in chagrin that ‘empty’ space was never empty; it was a churning cauldron containing more potent ingredients than that of Hamlet’s witches. As Matz’s attention was automatically drawn to the tip of the wand, he saw a big package—innocently pretending to have been

there all the time. He peered at the package and saw that it was from Amazon, addressed to him. No surprise there. Amazon could deliver the package even if the addressee was in hell.

Matz picked up the package. He needed a knife or scissors to open it. He examined his fingernails. They were neatly trimmed down. Purina came up and offered a beautifully carved knife (gold, what else?) Matz nodded his thanks and proceeded to open the parcel. It contained a complete set of clothes. App and Anne joined in and they laid out the full Monty on the table. The clothes were of a top-class brand, very expensive and up-to-date in fashion. One look at them told Matz that they were of his size, as if tailor-made. He kept on gazing at the clothes, admiring the design, texture, and color of the clothes. What Beam had remarked was true. He had become habituated to the sensations and feel of his bare body so much that he was not in a hurry to dress.

Purina smiled and said, “You have got a fine Olympian body. But you are going back to civilization. Put the clothes on. May we help you?”

Matz grinned in a friendly way. “Thank you. I can manage it myself.”

He dressed leisurely, without being self-conscious. Beam produced a mirror and held it out. Matz waved it off. After spending one week (or was it one month?) in the forest, he did not bother to look at his face. It may take more than a month for his body to recover from all those stings and scratches and sunburns. The mirror sorely tempted him to have a clean shave, and the old hall tempted likewise, to indulge in a hot satisfying hot bath. But he sorely wanted to go back to his home first.

Beam, as usual, was aware of his thoughts. He said, “You do not need a shave or a bath now. . . . Hold on, you will understand it later. You look glorious, as you are. It is due to the inner radiance of the lessons you have learned.”

“Lessons, ah,” Matz smiled wanly, as he finished tying up his shoes.

“Yep, the FCS.”

“Thank you. They are firmly entrenched in my sub-surface and super-conscious minds. If you want, I can even go on preaching about them to my fellow beings.” Matz was surprised at how quickly and easily he had

washed himself of all the bitter hardships he had undergone. That could probably have been a part of the lessons, he thought.

Beam laughed. “No, this is strictly for you only.”

Matz was ready to go. He asked:

“Now what? How do I go back? Any abracadabra?”

“None required. You just make a Quantum intention, and you will be back where you came from . . . I must say we will be missing you. You are welcome to this place any time.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I too will miss you, people, in spite of all the hardships I went through. Ah, just being curious. How do I come back here? Do you guys have any phones? Or do I Tweet you?”

Beam and his party laughed merrily. “Not quite that way. But you can come back whenever you want to learn further lessons.” The combined laughter was louder and longer. Beam became serious and continued, “Actually, it is all a play of the Quantum Whim. It decides who should learn what, when, and how. You were lucky it chose you.”

“It chose me because of my talk with my friends?”

“Yes. It saw that you were not serious in your arguments.”

“But I was really serious; at that time.”

“That ‘serious’ was spurious. You were just bawling like a politician. You did not go deep into what you were talking about. One should be careful in what one expresses.”

Matz thought it over. “But I still feel you guys, I mean your Quantum minions, have been unfair to me. You have unnecessarily overstretched and twisted what I was saying. . . . Ah, leave it.”

Beam said with a twinkle in his eyes, “Quantum is funny. In two ways. In its theory, for one. And in its dealing with events. Funny, in the sense, that it likes to have fun when it is in mood mode. Yeah, very few people know it. You will know its last laugh after you go back. You were searching for the meaning of something, and Quantum demonstrated it to you in a manner as only Quantum can.”

Matz knit his brows questioningly. Beam merely shrugged.

It was time to say goodbyes. They all sensed it. Beam warmly shook hands with Matz. The fairies embraced him one by one. Matz's heart swelled. Tears were in the process of being born. His vision occluded. Were the teardrops trembling? Or, was the room around him shaking? Everything went out of focus, as his brain seemed to have jumped up.

When it settled down into its normal position, his vision cleared. The senses came into focus.

He was in his penthouse for the nth time. His pals were gawking at him for the umpteenth time. The ritual of who went up, who came down, enquiring how many weeks or minutes or seconds: all that was dropped since the friends had got the hang of it.

“Well?” one of them asked.

Matz cleared his throat. “Well, nothing. It was the lesson of The Shelter this time. One whole week by my reckoning and damn your six seconds. I clearly remember I was laying stress on that word when the room spun and you guys went up.” He stared at his pals defiantly. They did not bother to argue. The poor fellow must have undergone severe trauma. Let him take a rest and recuperate. A good sleep would take care of him. He looked alright, otherwise. One week, the guy says, but look at his clean-shaven face! Stress and trauma, sure. Don't believe all that Quantum shit he made up last time.

But exactly why he vanished, and where he landed, we do not understand right now. Let us leave him alone. He will be Ok, we are sure. Glad he has come back thrice. Tough guy, and all that.

After they left, Matz took a refreshing hot bath, ate whatever was leftover in the fridge, entered his bedroom, snuggled cozily into the bed and straightaway fell asleep.

He had a dream. It was a reenactment of what he had done in real life—before his three pals had come to meet him. He had come across a new word and was searching for its meaning on his smartphone. In the dream, instead of the phone, he was standing before a huge (four feet by three) printed dictionary, supported miraculously on a sturdy stand. The

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same word, whose meaning he had searched was now staring back at him from the open page of the dictionary. There was only one word on the page. The definition of the word ran as follows—to strain unwarrantably, as in meaning.

The word was, ‘wire draw.’ The single word was flashing at him, like a strobe.

Then the nickel dropped. At the same instant, Beam appeared dressed immaculately, and said, “Yes, my dear pupil, that is the exact word. When you read its meaning, you were not satisfied with the definition. So, Quantum Masters decided to teach you its meaning. Your experiences in the Quantum kitchen and the forest were designed to drive home the meaning of that word colorfully into your brain. That is all.”

Matz woke up with a start.

He laughed and laughed and rolled on the bed. That was one word, whose definition he could never forget in his life.

OUT OF THE PAGES

He had been running a successful popular blog for the past two years. He had written about a dozen short stories that had been published in a few magazines. Now he wanted to escalate. He had been nourishing the ambition of writing his debut fiction novel for a long time, and he felt that the proper time had arrived. His name was I. Magine. He had given himself the nom de plume of, Imaginator. He was a keen admirer of cyborgs. In his dreams, he would often become a cyborg himself. He often had fantastic dreams. The dreams were in 3D color and obtained much boost by his use of the reefers. Judicious use. He was careful there; he did not want to end up as a zombie. The dreams gave a solid fillip to his writings. When he wanted more fill-up, he used acid. Judicious use. He was very, very careful there. He did not want to become a junkie. Nor to get into a sniffing range of watchful law. The writing was more important, see?

The writing was a funny business. He was totally dedicated to it. It had become a part of his life. The writing was a funny business. What was a part, (a fraction) as of late, tending to gobble up the whole. That is to say, reality and illusion were getting jumbled up. In particular, the stories he was building up in his digital world were spilling over from the edges of his laptop's LCD screen into the real world around him, funnily after the wear out of an LSD session. At least, what he designated as real. (That word, 'designated' spoke volumes, without speaking.) Nevertheless, he lived a steady contented life. The fact that he was yet unmarried might probably have contributed to it; might.

Other minor details may be added to his bio, conveniently at proper places in the story, if required. The story is our concern. His story; ah, the story he was writing. He wanted it to be one heck of a story.

It was fated to be so—in a sense he was unaware of, in the beginning.

Intuitively he felt that the story that was to come out of his pages needed a good deal of plotting, planning, and pruning. (Patience, too, he wanted to add, but was sourly self-conscious of excessive alliteration.)

The main theme was to be, serial killing. Immediately, his inner voice number one pointed out that there was already a glut of blood-drenched

books in the market on that theme. His inner voice number two (he had many) told him that he was again thinking negatively. The fact that there were plenty of books on serial killing meant that people liked them. So, give them what they want. His positive side also whispered that if such books are selling so well—underline it you dummy—then even if his book was not written perfectly, it stood a good chance of selling! A clever piece of thinking. OK, serial killing was settled, then. Then, should my hero be a psychopath? Why not make him a normal man?

Third voice—You dumb ass, if he kills people ceaselessly, how can he be normal? That was a serious question to be tackled. The question could be answered. But he had a brainwave. He would put it on his Facebook pages and ask the opinions of his followers! That was the trendy thing these days. Sometimes you will get quite startling views from the readers. (Sure, many of them carried brains sharper than his. Only, their writing skills were abominable. Thank God for that!) That was it. He would tease his readers and release the basic plot trickle by trickle. The comments from his followers would help much in the building and coalescing the story coherently. His fourth voice applauded and approved the strategy. Go ahead, it said. He went ahead.

The Villain. His name is Sir Riel. No, the name is not surreal, but sure, real. He is to become a killer, serial. Do not be deceived by the half-baked awkward poetic rhymes. The guy is deadly. And he is dead serious about his goal in life. He wants to bump off as many people as he can, as long as he can. He was realistic! In his bones, he knew that he would be caught one day, even if he made no slips; he had read a lot of books on the subject.

The Imaginator released the above short bit to his followers on his blog. As expected, many responded. Psychologists had found out long back that the itch to comment on any blog or web page was irresistible. Often, even the most reclusive persons were tempted to write what they felt were brilliant comments. I. Magine received many responses:

Adam: Who says a killer cannot be normal? Go to any war zone (no dearth of them on this blessed planet) and see for yourself.

Benjamin: And, they can be decorated for their deeds too.

Carter: The funny-stupid thing is that those on the opposite camp too will be decorated!

Dickens: You can add the names of the guys in the wet affairs departments all over the world.

Emmanuel: Hey, include the overzealous policemen too in the list.

(As the administrator, The Imaginator had half a mind to delete all the above remarks, but withheld the impulse – just to see how others would react to those comments. The readers were careful too, to not name names of specific countries.) There were many more comments along these lines.

Frank: Hey, I got a cute suggestion. Your hero, sorry, the villain is a normal man. Yes. Was. Yes. Then one day, a voodoo spirit occupies his body and drives him to do all those ghastly deeds. How's that?

(That was indeed a cute idea. Imaginator toyed in his mind if he could adopt the suggestion and develop it. In his own life, he had seen two people who were boringly normal from birth onwards but had suddenly begun to behave erratically after some particular incident. It had taken one of them ten years to recover. Lucky guy; the other person never recovered and died as a raving lunatic.)

Gertrude: Do not rite too much on the man's cychology makeup. That's for geaks. Putt action. Fill it up.

(Looks like this guy is not a native of England or the US.)

Helen: You MCPs have all got shrunken frozen brains. Why should the killer be a *male*, eh? Make her a virile virago and watch your book sales shoot up.

Iago: Up? Or, down?

James: Why bother about specific sex? Make the killer a hermaphrodite! Equal justice. Besides, he/she will have a very powerful psychological drive.

Karl: I hate serial killers. I abhor them. If you write a book on one, I for one, will not purchase it.

V.S.Sury

Leo: I agree with Helen. Make the villain a woman. Make her attractive, bold, and original. If you can also manage to put humor into it, I will be the first one to buy your book.

Milton: By the way, what is the title of the book? Or, haven't you still not named it?

Newman: I, for one, do not like a female killer. If I come across her (God forbid), I will not go to the cops. I will bash her up.

Oliver: I am obsessed (pathologically?) with defenestration. Please include one in your story.

Parker: Make her very attractive. I do not mind drinking poison if she offers me a cup!

The responses seemed to go on and on. Imaginator did not bother to browse further. That idea about a hermaphrodite killer was tempting, but he was sure not many readers would welcome such a book. Maybe, only a handful of those LGBT groups may like it. OK—sigh—let his villain be an amazon, as Helen up there demanded!

[The writer wrote notes on the marginal space provided by MS Word-Construct a full-fledged chapter out of this; fill out flesh, bones, and blood.]

*

I. Magine, author extraordinary, took up his pen and paper. Figuratively, of course. Nowadays, it was a mouse and laptop. He primed himself up with the small strip of mescaline-soaked paper stuck on his tongue. He was ready. He had one foot in reality, this side of the doorframe (itself being indefinable), and one step on the other side. If he crossed over, he would be able to write. May sound peculiar, but as he was fond of arguing, he was capable of looking back across the door frame, and that gave him a unique view of the real world. He could sit on that side of the entrance and concoct tales about this side. Good bargain.

The protagonist was now Sarah Real since it was decided that he should be replaced by her. (Said, not with the tongue in cheek, but with the peyote strip on the tongue.) She was of average height. (Should be inconspicuous in a crowd, as any B-grade author would insist.) She was

an expert in karate and other deadly arts and was a top-class boxer to boot. She had brains—enough to spill over from her cranium.

Sarah Real steps forth.

Wrote the Imaginator. If he had written those words in the good old days, the page on which he wrote the prophetic words would have sizzled and curled up, emitting smoke. In the present context, the LCD screen of his laptop became abnormally bright, emitting stroboscopic beams. The underlying cause for the sizzling was the quantum leap performed by Sarah Real. She had leaped out of the pages of the manuscript, into the real world, breaking out of the cage of the laptop, in which, *she felt she was being held up as an exhibition!* As a piece of the exhibition for the readers to peep, ogle and smack their lips. To be viewed and admired was not bad if you are of the passive sort—like the paintings and sculptures in the art museums.

She was not passive. Unintentionally, the Imaginator had breathed life into her. *Now it was her turn to have fun.* She stepped forth into the four-dimensional continuum of the study room of the Imaginator. She gratefully saluted the God of Quantum who had bestowed this power (possibility) on her. Imaginator was in the loo at that moment and was not aware of the awesome event. She looked back at the screen of the laptop and noticed the various comments of the readers. She read it all, with amused interest.

The door of the loo opened. She heard it and slipped back into the screen, camouflaging herself as an extra menu item on the menu bar of the MS Word page.

I. Imagine coming back and staring gloomily at the screen, waiting for inspiration to strike. What next? That part was easy. Sarah stepped forth, didn't she? She can't simply keep quiet, then. He began to type by the peek-and-peck method (using only the middle fingers). Soon, he felt uneasy. He had an erratic sixth sense, and it was telling him that something had tampered with his laptop. When he wanted to know whether it was something or someone, the sense, being erratic, played truant. He shut down the laptop and went out, deciding to have a peg of whiskey at the Dilly Dally bar, a minute's walk away from his home.

He liked to visit that bar since they did not bother him if he sat there for hours ordering just one peg. He was careful there too; he had no wish to end up as an alcoholic. He usually nursed that one peg for hours, adding and adding water to it until the drink was converted into a homogenous homeopathic potion. When he entered, there were few customers inside. The bartender did not bother to ask him what he wanted; he had the usual one peg ready at hand. Imaginator went and sat in his regular corner, glass in hand, cupping it tenderly, like a baby. Usually, too, he did not bother to glance around at other customers. Now and then, female customers too would come there—the security was top class. He was indulging in his favorite pastime, cloud-walking. (Yes, often, he called himself a nefelibata. Signed a few letters too with that appellation.) That day, somehow, he glanced around and noticed a woman sitting a few tables across at another corner. She was alone. He looked at her again. She returned the gaze, as if to a familiar person. He was puzzled initially. She looked vaguely familiar, but he could not place her exact GPS on his mental map. The homeopathic potion urged him to go and make her acquaintance, although the lingering remnants of the LSD imbibed earlier, warned him.

He went up to her, his glass in hand, and asked, “Hello, you look familiar. I apologize I am unable to recall your name. May I sit down please?” He was confident that she would not refuse. He sat.

She said, “You are welcome. I am familiar, and you do know my name.”

It was the old, familiar joke of answering an enigma with a riddle. He knew she was teasing him.

He said, “Help me. I am not at my best. I am zonked. I had one peg too many.”

“You have been licking that glass drop by drop for the past hour. You have diluted its content with water to a ratio of one thousand. I have been watching you all the time.”

“Watching me? Why? Are you a spy?”

She giggled, “Silly, I was watching you, because you created me, and I was curious to know how my creator looked.”

“Pardon me, I couldn’t get it.”

“These authors,” the woman looked up at the ceiling in mock exasperation, “Ok, my name is Sarah Real. Really.”

Then it struck the wordsmith. He was wonderstruck.

“What a fabulous coincidence! I have been writing a novel and Sarah Real is the leading character there!”

“It is not a coincidence at all, Mr. Imaginator.”

“Eh, what do you mean? You are teasing me again. I am pleasantly surprised that you know my name.”

“Dummy, I know your name because you created me. You gave me my name.”

I. Magine thought it over. “You mean, you had a peek at my manuscript? I have not yet released your name in my blog.”

Sarah smiled mischievously, “I had a peek at your laptop while you were at pee. That is not the main point. The real point is that I came out and became Real because you created me.”

“Are you gaslighting me? I created you only in my imagination.”

“Your imagination was too strong. I stepped out of your laptop. I know what you wrote and I intend to act it out in the real world out there.”

At that point, the Imaginator (nefelibata) felt the familiar déjà vu he had felt a hundred times while writing; that of standing on the other side of reality and looking back. He accepted what she had claimed as true; “temporarily, mind you,” he to himself said. Ridiculous as it sounded in his ears, he protested,

“But you have not dressed the way I described you in my draft.”

“Man, this is real life. I can dress as I like. Not as you dictate, understand?”

A mild chill went up the spine of the author. Who was this person really? Was she a ghost? No, he was carrying on a conversation with her; he could hear the words clearly. If she was a real person, was she playing some games with him? He was not wealthy. So, blackmail was out. Was it a

perverse game, just for kicks? Whatever it might be, better send her back. He said huskily, “Go back. Go back to where you came from. Go back even if that sentence ended with a preposition.”

She laughed crookedly. She grabbed the drink from his hand, gulped it, and said merrily, “Preposition, good. Yes, but it is, forth, not from. I am going forth.”

Before the nefalibata could recover, Sarah surreal rose and exited. The Imaginator blinked. He waited. He had the strong urge to go to his study and examine what exactly he had written. He, too, exits.

**

She was walking along the highway. Sarah had wanted to ride a bike for a long time. She did not own one. No problem. She decided to wait and ask for a hike from a passerby along the highway. She did not have to wait for long. A suitable young, upward mobile executive was approaching from the left. She held her thumbs up, asking for a pickup. She was sure no young man who could resist her smile existed within a range of five hundred miles. The executive stopped near her. “Where to have I the pleasure of taking you?”

“Minerville.”

“Hop in.”

“Thank you.”

On the way to Minerville, they had to pass through a stretch of densely populated trees. Sarah bent forward and whispered into the ears then that she had to pass water. “Just a sec, handsome.”

“No problem.” He stopped the vehicle.

She crossed the curb of the road and walked behind a lump of thick bushes. The executive waited, scanning the road ahead, pretending to be nonchalant, though he was internally itching to have a look at her.

“Help, help,” the shouts of Sarah came forth from behind the bushes. He ran and reached the spot.

Sarah was on the ground, struggling to get up. As the man came near, she groaned, “Stupid of me. I slipped and sprained my ankle. Help me get up please.”

The man bent down and helped her stand up, slowly. She was still moaning softly. “Can you walk up to the road? Are you ok?” he asked.

Sarah replied, “I am more than ok.” The slight expression of puzzlement on his face turned into one of swift, biting agony, and almost immediately into one of peace. Sarah had expertly pinched a nerve on his neck with surgical precision; the action would have drawn an appreciative smile from a Shaolin Master. She gently let the collapsing body onto the ground. The man was careful in other matters. He had locked his bike and put the key in his pocket. Sarah knew it. She retrieved the key from him. She took out his cell phone, switched it off, and threw it far away into the bushes. She blew a kiss at him and sprinted through the trees, reaching the bike. “They are right. A sucker is born every minute,” she murmured and started the engine. She zoomed out up along the road.

**

The Imaginator read what he had typed. Not bad, he was thinking. This was the first killing by Sarah Real. It would be better to be brief and quick about it. She was to be a serial killer, and there would be plenty of scopes to elaborate on in the upcoming chapters. His inspiration had run out. He decided to close the file. He could easily pick up the thread tomorrow. He was not at all afraid of writer’s block.

Tomorrow came. Before continuing, he had a sudden urge to go to the Dilly Dally and gulp down a quick peg, to prime himself for the exhilarating task of creative writing. He went to the pub and sat in his favorite seat, glass in hand.

He was becoming an expert in *déjà vu*. Sarah was already seated in the same place he had seen her the day before. He was thrilled, afraid, and wary, all at the same time. She did not look at him; she knew he would come. He obliged. Introductions were unnecessary this time.

“I went forth as promised, and enacted out what you wrote,” she said coyly, staring into the half-empty tumbler she held in her hand.

An electric tingling crawled up the spine of the Imaginator. He had not taken marijuana or any such stuff and was sober enough and understood what she said. This time, he was not looking back at reality from the other side; he was inside mundane reality. He was not bothered much when she had talked with him the previous day. That is, he was not unduly worried. But she was telling me now was a different ballgame. First of all, he had locked his computer with a strong password. How could she read what he had written? That, again, was an absurd question since it meant that he had acknowledged her existence, yeah, physical existence as real! It is surreal, (sorry, I am confused, no I am not confused, yes, but, no, maybe) it is absurd. He kept silent for a brief period, shivering inside. . . . Yet, it was faintly possible that the woman could be playing a crazy game, trying to muzz him. If so, why not play it out and see how it would end? Besides, that may also provide him with a matter for another book!

He cautiously asked in a low voice, “Tell me what you did. And keep your voice down.”

She gleefully narrated in detail how she stole the bike from the young executive, embellishing her story with all sorts of colorful verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The author was stupefied. She had described exactly what he had written—only, the words were her own.

“After getting my bike, I wanted to thank you, first. I got it because of you. So, here I am.”

There was only one flaw in her report. He asked her, “In my story, Sarah Real kills that poor dupe. He was to be her first victim. It was to be a quick and easy job. You are a fake. If you were the real Sarah you should have killed him.”

The Imaginator blushed when he spoke those words. But some perverse emotion had forced him to ask that moronic question. No, it was not moronic, he defended himself peevishly. It was intuitive. He furtively looked around to see if anybody was listening to their conversation. Luckily, they were the only two customers inside. He was feeling in a dumb way that he was probing her solidarity, in that question. (He was internalizing that and immediately did a search and replace, replacing solidarity, with, solidness. Solidness, as seen in a thing that is real.)

Sarah surreal whispered, “Killing him was a slam dunk, of course. But I had a soft corner for him. Besides, the poor guy gave me his bike. You should appreciate that. It was the first bike in my life.”

“Your life? Soft corner? What do you mean?”

“What do you mean by, what do you mean? My life is my life. Whose else could it be?”

“What is that soft corner business?”

“You boast you are a writer, and yet you are so dumb. See here, you put a seed into the ground and see to it that it sprouts up. The rest is the life of the seed. It writes its own story. Ha, ha. You wrote the seed of the story. The rest is up to the seed. Ha, ha.”

Imaginator’s stomach churned. He felt as if his neck turned around its axis from front to back. He had to accept that this oomphalicious girl in front of him was real. But that was impossible by all rules. Normal rules, that is. There was an abnormal branch of science called quantum something, which he had never understood in spite of reading a hundred articles. That science alone, he guessed, could explain what was sitting (and talking) in front of him. His courage was about to fail, but it bounced back when he aptly remembered his other name, nefalibata. He grinned at her and said,

“Let us see. What next?”

She promptly retorted, grin for a grin, “What else? Go and write something so that I can ponder it. Food for thought, as you guys say, and food for action as I say. And, ah, apart from the bike I got from him, there was another reason why I did not kill him. That guy’s name is Leo. Go back and check up on your blog. Leo supported Helen in the matter of creating me.”

She gulped down whatever was left in her tumbler, thumped it on the table, and evaporated out of the door, which, somehow was ajar, as if anticipating her move. The Imaginator hurried after her, but could not find her anywhere in the street. He sighed and went home, blood pumping in his arteries, eager to peck at the qwerty board. She had obviously read his blog correspondence also; otherwise, how could she know the names of

Helen and Leo? The puzzling thing was that that guy Leo had stumbled across her on the highway. How did she know that he was Leo? Maybe she frisked his pockets for money and saw his cards. Besides, there must many Leos in this area, and that Leo may not be this Leo. . . . On his way, he also planned to lock up his computer so that nobody else could open it without a password and his fingerprint. “If she manages to read my words this time then she is definitely not made of flesh, bones, and blood.”

After reaching home, he began pecking at the keyboard, methodically compiling sentence after sentence.

[The writer wrote notes on the marginal space provided by MS Word-Construct a full-fledged chapter out of this; fill out flesh, bones, and blood.]

After racing out up along the road, Sarah slowed down to a safe limit; there was no point in getting caught by a speed cop. She saw a diversion and casually changed course. She intended to take another diversion at the earliest. Also, she would dump the bike at the earliest opportunity; plain common sense. That man may get up any moment. Then surely, he would not keep quiet.

Sarah Real was now in the city, simply walking along the streets, for the fun of it. Suddenly she noticed a tall hefty man walking down from the opposite side of the road. He was still far away, but something in his overall physique rang a bell inside her. Instinct told her that he was her man. Her man, yeah, her victim. She noticed a narrow gully on that side of the road. It was almost dark by now and there were no public lights in that gully. She quickly crossed over and went into the gully. There were no open doors or people there. Satisfied, she waited at the entrance to the main road. The man arrived, swaggering contentedly. As he neared her, she whispered, “Hello,” in a voice filled with anxiety. He stopped, drawn by the anxious tone, and looked askance at her. She continued eagerly,

“Can you help, please? Silly of me, but I dropped my purse somewhere there.” She pointed her finger at the darkest corner of the gully. “I am unable to find it. My money, credit cards, and mobile are all in it. Even my

home key. You, got a lighter or something? Even a cellphone flash will help. My eyesight is weak. Please help me find it.”

The man did not ask her why she entered that gully; most men did not. Sarah was already walking deeper into the darker area, bending her head, pretending to search the ground. He followed her automatically. “Somewhere here,” she said when they were sufficiently far from the main road, bending forward abnormally and staring at a spot on the ground. The man came near her, also bending his head, looking down at where she pointed. He had a cell phone and was about to take it out, in order to sweep the ground with the flash, when Sarah hooked her arm around his calves and pulled his leg forward—a trick many people had learned from the film *Goldfinger*. The man had not seen *Goldfinger*. He fell to the ground, the back of one of his hands automatically trying to ease the fall. That wrist cracked.

He tried to get up—foolish. He could not get up; Sarah Real, really saw to that. Her high-heeled shoe stuck his femur with the force of a pickaxe. Simultaneously, her other shoe cracked the knee of his other leg. She finished it by twisting his unbroken arm with the power of a hydraulic press. His shoulder joint was torn. The poor man was unconscious before a groan escaped from his throat. Sarah stood surveying her handiwork. She wanted to maul his face. His face was handsome in a rugged way. She decided to leave it intact. “I may appear to be cruel, but I am not malicious,” she consoled the unconscious body in a whisper, “But, don’t cross my path for a second time.” She smiled as she was struck by a brainwave. She took out a fat bunch of dollars and inserted them into his shirt pocket. “I guess that will cover your doctor’s bill.” She skedaddled from the gully like a ghost in a hurry.

The bar again

By now, the author was convinced that whenever he entered the Dilly Dally, he would meet the impersonator. He entered. He was not disappointed. No introductions, no greetings were necessary.

She straightaway narrated all that she did at the gully, in a somber, impersonal voice. It cannot be helped if the author had a *déjà-déjà vu*. (She had her half-empty glass, he had his half-filled glass.) He was irritated, he was angry, he was perturbed-but-exhilarated, while the distant thunder of

impending doom was booming in the background. He had to accept her as real; otherwise, he could not carry on a conversation with her. He asked her in pretended hotness,

“Sarah, that is not exactly what I wrote. You have deviated from the script. (“My God, what script, what has she got to do with my story? Who is she, anyway?”)

Sarah was beyond their control. The corners of her eyes crinkled and a deep dimple danced on her cheek as merriment effervesced inside her. She said recklessly, “Hello, mister I. Imagine, u imagine, but I imagine I execute.” She laughed and laughed uncontrollably at her own wit. The author looked around to see if anybody was listening in. Fortunately, only the two of them were inside. He brought her back to the point,

“I just wanted you, sorry, the girl in my story, to kill that hombre in the gully there, and be done with it. Total, efficient professionalism. Why did you have to beat him up unnecessarily? And then you did not finish him off. And then you gave him money for his treatment, by God.”

Sarah explained patiently,

“Do you know who that person is?”

“I do not care. Any random person who happened to be there at the proper time was to be your proper victim.”

“He was mister Newman.”

“Newman who?”

“Oh, you author guys. So forgetful. He was the man who corresponded with you in your blog recently. He said he wanted to bash me up. So, how could I keep quiet? I wanted to show him how it feels to be on the receiving end.”

Imaginator thought it over. The whole shebang was too complicated. Later, later. He persisted (which act, in itself was irrational).

“But why did you not kill him?”

“Simple. I wanted him to live. I wanted him to remember the lesson. Besides, he is no match for me. Get me somebody tougher.”

Imaginator thought he had taken only less than a peg of whisky—the rest in his glass was water, as was his wont. He was not sure. He must have inadvertently swallowed the LSD strip he used to lick. The whirr and the whizz inside his brain were saying so. He blinked and blinked furiously. Nothing was wrong. The bar room was steady. The bartender looked familiar and was standing in his familiar spot, wiping the glasses clean. Only, the woman opposite was the odd man out, sorry, person. There were minor odd things too, but they can be overlooked. First, there was that executive who lost his bike. Now here was Newman; both were corresponding with him in his blogs. And the violence he was writing (for God’s sake, only *writing*) was being meted out to them in real life by a person he created in a story (story, repeat, for God’s sake). There was an enormous mix-up somewhere, and the frigging thing was slipping out of his control. He was getting mad and he felt that the only way to assuage it was to get madder – by playing out the lunatic script. He told the virtual Xanthippe in front of him in all seriousness,

“Now, Sarah, next time, do not bungle the script. Go out, finish your victim smoothly. No tantrums.”

Sarah was not subdued. She asked, “There is very little that you can do if I change your script.”

“Very little, possibly. But that little will be enough to put you in a straightjacket.”

“What?”

“I will stop writing that story.”

Sarah had not thought of that. She sat sulking.

“A little bit more,” the author said as another brilliant idea occurred to him, “I will delete the whole bloody whatever already written from my laptop. Then you will not have a cause to exist—virtual or not.” He laughed loudly.

Sarah Real was stunned. She sat brooding. So, these writers are not totally dumb, she mused.

The writer rose and walked out with dignified steps. That dignity was for outer appearance only. He was quaking inside. Still, he managed to

keep the appearance till he reached home. As he sat in front of his laptop, he was flooded by furious thoughts. The thing was getting too complex for him to unravel. At this rate he was going to end up thinking if life itself was real—not only his but of everybody else.

Then. Oh, shucks, damn it, doggone it. “Write I must and write I will. I will teach her a lesson.”

His wife was away from town. On such days, he liked to sleep on the terrace of his house. It was his house and it was single-storeyed; a rare object these days. He was a member of a nature cure club and preferred to sleep naked. The guys of the club firmly believed that sleeping in altogether reduced hypertension.

Thus it was, that he was found sleeping on that fateful day, on his cot, alone on the terrace. The crime was relatively low in that suburb. Besides, he kept his revolver with him whenever he slept there. At the back of the house, a staircase led up to that terrace. The entrance of the staircase was guarded by an iron gate, which he had locked.

He was found—by Sarah. The locked gate was a joke to her. She had simply scaled over it nonchalantly. She had walked up to the cot, to the sleeping figure silently, like a cat. (That simile was an insult to her. In comparison, the cat would have been more noisy and clumsy.) She looked at the naked sleeping figure with pity. Killing him in such a condition was ridiculously easy. There was no pleasure in it. If the person being killed is not aware that he/she is being killed, the very purpose of killing is lost—as far as she was concerned.

She placed a finger on his (beautiful) navel and gently tickled him. The man woke with a start. His immediate impression was that somebody was standing very close to him. He grabbed the pistol by his side and sat up, aiming the pistol at his assailant. Sarah raised her hands up, palms open, and said,

“Hi, Adonis.”

He saw the raised hands. He saw that she was unarmed. He saw her smiling. (The brilliant moon up in the sky helped.) Still aiming the pistol

at her, he said, “You are mistaken. I am not Adonis. You have entered the wrong building. Ask next door.”

Then he added in a weak voice, “Get out,” fully knowing that there was no conviction in it.

Sarah giggled, “You are Adonis and you don’t know it. I have come to the correct address. I want you. I came for you.”

His curiosity was roused, fear and suspicion being set aside. He did not bother to cover his naked body; he was rather proud of it. (The pistol was still aimed in her general direction.)

“You came for me? How do you know me? Who are you, then?”

I came for you, yes. Your name is Karl; I hope you remember it. I saw you in the blog pages where you correspond with authors.”

“I see. Which particular blog have you in mind? By the way, please sit down on this cot, if you do not mind. I also hope that you do not mind if I do not bother to dress up. After all, you came uninvited and I have got every right to be as I am right now.”

Sarah Real sat on the edge of the cot, touching his pelvis, unbuttoning her blouse, and gently pushing aside his pistol. He did not resist—he was not a trained spy. That fact was also evident from the warm feeling rising in his groin and further corroborated by an incipient erection. He put on a brave front (sic) pretending to ignore the arousal,

“Do I know you? What is your name?”

“You know me, but you do not know my name yet.”

“Is that supposed to be a riddle?”

“Nope. Fact. You know me because you discussed me in a blog. The author has not yet revealed my name in that blog.”

“Which author? I follow many authors.”

“The vain fellow who calls himself The Imaginator.”

Karl remembered. “Ah, I vaguely remember that discussion. Was that not about a serial killer?”

“Yep.”

“Ah, got it now. There were some blokes in that blog who wanted to have a woman as a serial killer. Horrible. I hated that idea and forcefully expressed it.”

“That is why I have come here.”

“Thank you. But you could have come during the daytime. Why the night?”

Sarah winked at him and smiled coaxingly. (The moonlight helped and enhanced the effect.) She placed a hand on his hirsute chest and stroked. “Come on, don’t play dumb. I wanted to see what kind of macho was the guy who wrote those remarks. I want to pay you back now.”

“Payback? I expressed what I strongly felt. Nothing great, small thing.”

“Don’t talk much. I will show you what I am paying you back. Sexing with you is the most appropriate mode for it.” She looked at him with a peculiar expression he had not hitherto seen in his life. He was seized by opia. He shuddered and remonstrated weakly,

“I am a monogamist. I love my wife.”

“Come on, I am not marrying you. She need not know about this night. You will appreciate what I am going to do when I tell you who I am.” She bent her body nearer and whispered,

“I am Sarah Real, as that boulder-author named me. But the joke is on him. I am not virtual but really real. I have jumped out of his pages and come to meet you.”

It took a few seconds for Karl to understand what she said literally—like the meaning of sentences. When the meaning began to filter in a bit, he was perplexed. This sex-oozing girl breathing down his neck was made of flesh and blood. She had removed her blouse and bras and her fingers were weaving sensual magic on his chest. If she is the real killer, what did it mean? For a short duration, he was seized by rubatos. If she is what she claims to be, has she come here seeking a victim?

Unconsciously, his hand began to grope for the gun. Sarah playfully slapped his wrist and laughed.

“Listen,” she said, “Let me sex you first and then you can ask me all the questions you want.” The radiation emanating from her got stronger. He forgot all about the gun—and his wife. Nature is nature. Man is too tiny a creature to defy her. Sarah spread herself all over him, from top to toe, her full body weight on him.

Karl was well built and stronger than many men of his build. He was surprised by the weight of her body pressing down on him. He felt as if a world heavy-weight lifter was pressing down on him. He was also surprised to notice that he was finding it a wee bit difficult to breathe. He tried to roll sideways so that he could be on the top. A second surprise awaited him. He was not able to do it, in spite of his best effort; the more he tried, the more her weight seemed to increase. What a ridiculous thing, he was thinking, that the mere weight of a woman was crushing his chest and immobilizing him. His thinking was broken by Sarah’s whisper in his ears,

“Dude, I love your body, but I love your soul much more.”

(What a wacky dialogue, he thought as he fought for breath. *Better finish this off quickly, before I faint. Gash, she is still semi-dressed. I am laughing at this, myself.*)

“Darling, I love your soul so much that I want to take it with me.”

(*What does she mean by it? Does she want both of us to commit suicide?*)

“I came from the virtual world. I will take you there.”

(*Oh, shit, now I get it. She is a killer. She wants to kill me. Where is my gun? Better grab it quick. Is it on my left or my right? This is ridiculous.*)

“Get ready. I am going to kiss you. It is going to be the kiss of death.”

“How? Have you painted your lips with cyanide?” he managed to joke.

She caught hold of his neck from both sides, with her two hands, the four fingers of each hand gently grabbing the back of his neck, and the two thumbs gently resting on his Adam’s apple. It appeared to be an unnatural kind of gesture. Her forehead touched his. Karl felt a warm feeling sinking into every pore of his skin, where ever her body touched him.

At first. Then the warmth began to intensify and engulf him all around. After that, the warmth started to turn into hotness. Now, not only was he unable to move his body, but he was unable to move his head also. Strange

. . .

Her whispers reverberated somewhere deep on the other side of his tympanum. “Karl, try to remember what you commented on in that blog.” He tried, but his brain was getting foggy. She assisted him, “Karl, you wrote that you hated serial killers. You said you abhorred them. You said that you will not purchase the book. You should be careful of what you write in public. I am that killer and I do not like one whit what was writ. I am paying you back for your words. Ha, ha, and you are paying for your words. Ha, ha a royal royalty!”

He remembered it now. He was getting to understand dimly that what was happening to him now was somehow related to what he wrote. But that was unreasonable.

“It is not unreasonable. Because you need not have to purchase the book. A qualifier to that statement. You will not be able to purchase the book even if you want to. Wondering how? Yeah, you will not be able to purchase the blessed book, because you will not be alive by then. I am here to guarantee it. Another qualifier. Further, I am here to hasten that process. The sooner the better. The last qualifier. Nothing better than the present.”

Emphasizing her point, the fatal visitor pressed with her thumbs on his Plender gap, the suprasternal notch.

Karl felt an immense surge of agony in his throat. He wildly clutched at her wrists, to disengage them. His efforts were like that of a one-year baby in comparison with the hydraulic-machine grip of the female wrists. His face burned, his eyes bulged, and he had a final hard-on. He died of an unintended ejaculation.

Sarah released the grip, closed his eyes, kissed his forehead, buttoned up her blouse, removed one bullet from the pistol, and placed it back in his left hand—just to confuse the investigators; he was a *north paw*—and the bullet in his right palm, and left as silently as she had come.

The writer wanted body count. She gave him one. Her mission was over. . . . Not quite. She had a small job to do on her own.

Helen had crossed the middle age long back. She was not as strong and agile as she once had been. Even her eyesight was failing, and she had been postponing visiting an ophthalmologist. The aches and pains she had read about and smiled at tolerantly were now constant realities. She was brooding about such things as she slowly walked along Kennedy Street. She reached the square where another road crossed it and waited for the signal allowing the pedestrians to cross. She was carrying a grocery bag and, wanting to relieve the strain on her hands for a while, put it on the ground. Just then, a youth in his upper teens appeared by her side and politely asked her if she needed help to cross the road. "I will carry it for you," he said, pointing at the bag. Her attention was diverted; which was what the fellow intended. With the swiftness of a professional, he snatched her purse, threw the grocery bag in front of her (again to confuse her), and ran to his bike which he had stopped just nearby. Before she realized what had happened, the snatcher had started the bike and gone.

Helen was aghast. She stood on the spot in a daze; it had all happened so fast. She cast anxious glances in the direction where the purse snatcher had ridden away. She temporarily forgot the grocery bag lying forlorn on the ground. It was one of those peculiar moments when there was nobody nearby. There were, of course, people farther away in the street, but nobody seemed to have noticed the snatch. There was a considerable amount of money in the purse, besides other utility cards. Helen sighed deeply and slowly brought back her eyes to her bag on the road, a few feet away. She moved her body painfully toward the bag.

Another bike zoomed in fast and came to a halt near the bag. A hand was lifting up her bag. Three packets had spilled out from the bag. The hand quickly picked them up and put them back in the bag. Before Helen had placed a step forward, the owner of the hand was already standing in front of her, smiling and offering the bag back to her.

The hands were those of a woman who looked beautiful and robust at the same time. "Mom. take it," she offered.

Normally, Helen felt uneasy when people approached her—even acquaintances. She was often confounded by an inexplicable urge to push people away. To her surprise, she felt at ease now. Helen said, “Thank you,” taking the bag back. “Did you see that rascal?”

“Oh, yes. I was far away. Otherwise, I would have thrashed him. In fact, I meant to go after him, but I wanted to help you with the bag first.”

Helen might have been slow physically, but she was mentally agile. That last sentence of the helping hand was loaded. She asked with a humorous twinkle in her eyes,

“Does that mean that you are confident of catching him now? He must have sped away miles from here.”

“Oh, yes. I can catch that punk any day, any time.”

“Huh?”

“Yes, mom. If you want, I can take you with me and show you what I can do to him. Or, I can bring the bastard, all tied up. If you don’t have confidence in me, you can phone the cops. You may get back your purse in three months if you are lucky.”

Helen chuckled, “Chances are, I may never get it back.”

“Even if you get it back, chances are, it may be empty.” Helping hand added.

Helen nodded. Despite her age, she was curious to see what this exuberant girl could do. She said, “If I am not a hurdle in your way, I would like to come with you. Please do not think I am being skeptical or something.”

“No worry there. Come, sit on my bike. I will take you to him.”

The girl hopped in on her vehicle, Helen slowly sat in the back, catching the midriff of the girl for support and holding the bag in another hand, pressing it to her body. The girl started the engine.

On the way, Helen asked, “Are you sure you can catch up with him?”

“No problem. His bike has stalled and he is desperately trying to get it back on road.”

“Huh? How do you know it has stalled?”

“Because I did it.”

“Huh? But you were here?”

“Yes. I did it from here. And the poor author does not know it.” Helen was nonplussed. She could not understand what an author had got to do with what was happening here. She wisely decided to keep mum, to wait and see.

She did not have to wait for long. Halfway through Holdcroft Street, she saw a bike on the side of the curb, and a young fellow trying frantically to kick it up. Peering over the shoulder of her helper, she recognized the boy as the snatcher.

The beautifully robust helper stopped her motorbike near the teenager. Got down, faced him, and said with a crookedly wicked and wickedly crooked smile, “You have got it wrong. That is not the way to start it.”

The snatcher looked up at her. He was annoyed.

“What do you know about bikes?”

“You know Alistaire Maclean?”

He was annoyed further. “Who?”

“Never mind. In one of his novels, a character replies to a question in a telling fashion. Allow me to adapt his answer here. I have forgotten more about bikes than what you have ever learned in your whole life.”

It took a couple of seconds for the kid to decipher that. He frowned.

The colleen said, “The proper way to start your bike is to remove the backpack you are carrying and keep it down and then start.”

The kid snorted. The idea was outrageously stupid.

But, was it? . . . He suddenly remembered that he had put the purse which he had snatched, in his backpack. Was that why this gal was suggesting the silly idea? Had she seen the snatch? Did she want to take it away from him? Seemed probable, from her looks. Looks like a street-smart gal. She may be smart, but he was not stupid either. It was then that he saw someone else slowly coming near. He glanced sideways.

It was the old hag from whom he had snatched the purse, and he immediately recognized her. His brain was still adding two and two but was not sure about the correct total. But his gut was stronger than his brain and it was warning him. Better start the bike, or quit the bike and leave the spot.

Meanwhile, the lass who spoke to him was looking at him with admiration. For a minute, he forgot his bearings—who does not? She insisted, “I am not joking. Gimme your bag and start the bike. I am betting one hundred dollars that it will start.”

She showed her palm. Sure, there was a hundred-dollar note in it. A hundred, by God. He planned furiously. He would not give the bag to her. He would keep it on the ground as she suggested and start the engine. If it starts, he would shove her after taking the money, pick up the bag fast and vamoose. The old lady was trying to voice some objections, but the lass shut her up with a firm gesture; her open palm still holding the hundred-dollar bill.

He put his backpack down, on his *other side*, away from the charming girl (he was not totally stupid, greed notwithstanding) and kicked the lever. The engine sprang to life pronto! He was already primed for action. He grabbed the Franklin from the proffered palm and pushed the girl with more than the needed force.

That was what he thought he did. Push.

Before his confusion as to whether he only thought he did, or whether he actually, physically pushed her, was being clarified, his body was telling him that when he pushed, he was being *pulled*! (Such kind of a thing can happen only if the person being pushed suddenly vanishes into thin air.) It became a palpable certainty when his face hit the ground. The pain in his bleeding nose was very real. That was nothing compared to the pain he felt when the heel of her shoe struck his coccyx. That pain was surpassed when his arms were wrenched back and his shoulders felt as if dislocated. Before he passed out, he was dimly aware of a shadow bending over his body and picking up his backpack. He heard the zip being pulled. He sensed that the shadow had taken out the purse, and pulled up the zip. He heard the thump of the backpack being thrown down by his side. He

also heard, "I am not a cheap thief like you. I do not want your bag. I took only what you stole from the lady."

He regained consciousness almost immediately. By that time, the girl and the lady were gone. A few people had gathered around him. He automatically picked up his bag and checked inside. The stolen purse was obviously gone. One of the bystanders asked him, "What happened?"

Ignoring his body pains, he managed to get up and sit on his bike.

He smiled weakly at the questioner and said, "An old disease of mine. I get sudden spells of fainting."

"Then you should not be riding a bike."

"It happens very rarely. Can't help. One's gotta make a living."

He revved up the bike and departed in decent haste. Wandering, he wondered who that gal was and how she knew he had the purse and how she was able to make him eat dirt literally . . .

Robust bagus belle insisted on dropping Helen at her home. Helen simply could not refuse the offer. Getting down in front of her house, she invited her helper to come in. Beauty refused, smiling politely, "Maybe some other time. It will be a pleasure to meet you again. I have an appointment with my author." Helen now thought she was some kind of a literary agent or something. She said,

"Thank you, macushla. You were of great help today. You have seen my house; you can come and meet me any day you like. These days, it is very rare to see someone rushing to help a stranger."

"Ah, nothing to it. For that matter, you are not a stranger to me. I know you. You supported me in a discussion. That is why I wanted to help you."

"Discussion? I do not remember participating in any discussion."

"This one was in a webpage, maintained by the author, whom, as I said I am going to meet now."

"Author?"

"Yes. The Imaginator, as he styles himself. You supported me there in the matter of choosing the gender of a serial killer."

That rang the bell. She almost remembered the exact words she had used. Automatically she felt happy and proud that her sentiments were vindicated. She blurted out appropriate words now to the bagus belle beaming in front of her and thumped her shoulder in appreciation, as her vision clouded due to surging happiness. In the next moment, the surge subsided. The occluded brain too was cleared. What she had hotly argued was about a story idea only. Now, this was real life here and she was standing at the doorstep of her real house in the real world. Then, what did this strange girl say now? Serial killer, by God! That did not make sense. *Eh, hold on. She said she knew the author. So, she must be playing a prank. Eh, hold on again. How did she know my name, and recognize me? Uh, uh, yes, she must have traced me from my member ID in the blog. Foolish of me to have put my real photo there. But then, I have got every right to put my real name and pic there. But . . .*

The but did not proceed further, because, by then, her macushla had vanished. *Very strange. I would better warn the author about this.*

The Imaginator was by now accustomed to the familiar gloom. Only, now, doom seemed to be cheerfully tagging itself with gloom. Sarah was already waiting for him when he entered the bar, with the usual half-empty glass in her hand. He went and sat opposite her like an automaton. She had ordered his drink in advance. She did not talk until he emptied half of the glass. “Now I will open my mouth,” she said, and he knew she was referring to the epic touted as the oldest, Gilgamesh. He nodded.

She opened her mouth and told him all that she did most recently, while he cautiously turned his neck around to see if any customers were within hearing distance. (This too had become an ESP phenomenon; whenever the two of them met here, no other customers were present. Unbelievable, statistically, highly improbable.)

“Congratulate me. I executed my first mission successfully,” she said in the end.

He nodded, as his lips went dry. She had followed his script as far as the first part—termination—was concerned. He objected, feeling ridiculous at what he was doing, “But, this is not consistent. You went out of your way to help a lady. You showed kindness; you showed *emotion*. My protagonist cannot afford to show emotions.” He groaned internally,

wondering who his protagonist (Sarah Real) was and who this unreal, oh but the real character was and what they had to do with each other.

As if aware of his thoughts, Sarah Real smiled crookedly (but delightfully also) and said, “It is your fault. You should have named me, Sarah Unreal. Then, while talking with me here, you could at least pretend that I am Unreal. Ha, ha. . . . Let it be. Now, as regards helping the lady, I have already told you that this is real life and not a script. You can have control over me in the script, but when I am out, I have every damn right to zhuzh it up. I wanted to help Helen because she supported me in your blog. Besides, she is now cured.”

Imaginator groaned again. He did not seriously mind her interacting with people in real life (*Oh, no no.*) Groan again. but, she was once more tackling persons who participated in his blog. That was not a good omen by any interpretation. Involuntarily, he asked,

“What cure?”

“She was suffering from the mauerbauertraurigkeit syndrome. She is now cured.”

Imaginator shivered. Just before he came here, he had noted down that strange awkward word, intending to use it at the first opportunity. Now she had upstaged him. Was she reading his mind? Who the hell was she? Was he hallucinating her? This affair had been exciting so far, but his gut feeling told him that it was fast progressing towards a danger zone. He said,

“You stole that word from my head. No matter. I do not want to abort my story; no writer does. I would like to close it now in a suitable manner.” But logically, he could not do so at this stage. In the story, she was supposed to be a serial killer. How can she be one, by just killing one person? Readers won’t accept it. She has to bump off at least two more victims.

“That is correct,” she said, reading his thoughts, “Gimme two more guys and we can close the mission.”

“Why ask me? Go find it yourself. You seem to enjoy doing things your own way.”

“In such case, it won’t be a story at all. See the subtlety of it.”

The author squirmed. He said gruffly, “Ok, two more. And no more.”

“Ok, two more and no more.” For a change, a customer just entered—and heard it.

“After that, I do not want to see you anymore.”

“We will see,” she said, rising, “There are usually sequels.”

The customer looked at the Imaginator sympathetically. (Though, what he understood was not what was to be actually understood.) The author thanked his stars. He too rose. On the way home, he was exploring ways to close his story prematurely, but gracefully. He had a brainwave also. He did not want to type into his PC the rest of the story. This pretender was somehow hacking into his computer. Even though it was a chore, he would write down the story using pen and paper. Thank God, they were still available in the market. And he would lock the papers in his cupboard.

Back at his home, seated in his workspace, loading his pen with ink and himself with mescaline, he began scribbling and scratching. Scratching the words, he mused. It was strange; most writers, when they use pen and paper, scratch out half of what they write. But not so (much), if they use the computer. He would write down a brief draft of each chapter, and later expand it, filling up flesh and blood. Flesh and blood, was the apt phrase here, since this was a serious job of serial killing, mescaline tickled him from the background.

Defenestration: Iago was twisting his mustache in the loo, before unzipping his pants. The twisting was one of a couple of OCD clusters he had acquired. The loo was on the thirtieth floor of a huge complex. The Diagnostic Laboratory occupied a large portion of the wing on that floor. Iago worked as a lab technician there. There was no one else in the loo. He was slightly disappointed; he enjoyed talking with his lab buddies while peeing. Out of impulse he went near one of the widows and peered down. The windows, for some strange reason known only to the genius architects who designed the building, had no bars. The glass-paned shutter was open. The view down was breathtaking and terrifying also. Hand still

on the zip, he was about to turn back when the door opened. His eyes shot up and his face lit up.

A beautiful, well-built girl walked in, as if in haste. Their eyes met. She smiled with her eyes as if she recognized him; as if she had expected to find him there. He did not know her. So, her facial expression puzzled him. By instinct, he removed his hand from the zip, quickly glancing down his trousers to make sure he had not earlier unzipped them. Then he said, “You have entered the wrong room. The ladies’ room is the adjacent one.”

Her smile turned broader. “I know. I came here specifically to meet you.”

“In a gents’ toilet? That is very funny, if not weird.”

Before he knew it, she had crossed over the intervening space. (The door closed automatically, doing its job unperturbed.) She answered him, gently touching his chest with her index finger,

“I came here because I am on a tight timebound schedule. I came to answer your question. I will do it as quickly as possible and run away, I promise. I have no other intentions. I am really in a terrible hurry. I assure you I have no time for gossip. I am not the kind of person who wastes time on unproductive talk. Come on, I am prompting you. Ask me what question of yours I have come to offer an, no, sorry, the answer for. I will answer it. *Better still, I will demonstrate it.* I will do my job and go away and bother you no more. Come, ask me.”

Iago mused that, for one who was in a hurry, she was using a lot of words. And why choose this peculiar location? And why was she not moving, just standing in front of him, as if cornering him? (His back was to the window, and that was not a proper route of exit.) Her finger was still tracing figures on his chest. He must admit that it was a highly pleasant sensation. Was she distracting him? For what purpose? By God, ask the question and get rid of her before anybody else comes in. The still funnier thing was that he did not know what the question was that he was supposed to ask! He asked,

“Excuse me. I do not get it. You better answer. What was my question? When? Where?”

V.S.Sury

“Ok, I will remind you. Up or down?”

“Sorry, does not ring a bell. Let us get outside before anybody comes in.”

“Poor memory. Let me help you. You asked this question about the selling power of a story that is being written by an author.”

“What author?”

“Which, not what. The author is I. Magine, alias Imaginator.”

“I remember it vaguely. Let us go outside before anybody comes in.”

“You meant down when you asked that question.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Sarah Real, the protagonist of that story.”

The conversation was getting unpleasant to his taste. Iago decided to go out. He would pee later. She was blocking him. He pushed her roughly as if dismissing her and her questions. She did not budge. Her face was very near to his and he could smell the heady perfume. He almost forgot his intention. She whispered to him leisurely, every word with clarity, as if punctuating verbally,

“Down, is the word you meant, and I will now teach you what it means. As I stressed earlier, I will demonstrate its meaning to you. Look out of the window. Mind you, I am using the proper preposition, of, after out, which, you Yankees are too lazy to do. Then, bend your neck and look down at the pavement. Down, that is where down lies. That is where, a comma there, you, comma again belong and not the book.”

Iago was abundantly bumfuzzled. He remembered that he was trying to push her away; his hand was still on her shoulder. He pushed again with more force. Nothing happened; nothing that he intended and expected to happen. Something else, something surprising happened. She had somehow, like a magic judo player, turned *him* front to back, forcing him to look out of the window. In a mental haze, he heard her whisper authoritatively, “After of, comes, down. Now, look down. Have a good look. You are going to go down free. In fact, you are going to *gain*. As your physics teacher explained to you many years back, you will keep on

gaining momentum. Lucky you. But of course, it will end when your head meets the pavement.”

Iago felt his neck being pushed down. He looked down; his eyes automatically saw the pavement. His brain automatically put together what the ears had heard and what the eyes saw. His stomach churned. “No, no,” he blurted. That was the last voluntary action he performed.

Thereafter he sensed being lifted up and let down. Down, down his body went, obeying the laws of gravity.

Sarah Real turned away from the window, towards the door. She had heard the hiss of the door being pushed in.

She knew what that meant.

She stood, waiting expectantly.

Oliver came in, whistling. He stopped whistling midway when he saw the dame standing akimbo at the window. For a split second, he doubted if he had entered the wrong room. No, this was his regular space, and he was sure of that. He wanted to assert his authority and ask the dame to get out.

Before he opened his mouth, he noticed that the dame had an unmistakable expression of urgency on her face. She was also frantically gesturing with her arms, back towards the open window.

“What is it?” he asked her.

“There, there,” she stammered, “below, down.” She turned her body, looked down out of, and below through the window, was horrified, and hastily turned back, facing Oliver.

Oliver was, after all, human. He went near the window at which she was still frantically waving with her arm behind her, trembling uncontrollably. As he reached the window, she moved, to offer him a good view. He bent his body and looked down. Looking down thirty floors below, at the pavement is not a pleasant experience. Yet, he was able to see a zoomed-out blood-soaked body splattered there. Horrified, he made to lift his neck and turn back. He was unable to do either of the actions.

The girl had caught hold of his trousers-belt behind his back with one hand, in a firm grip. She was pressing him so hard he found it difficult to breathe, let alone straighten his bent back. He heard her, as she leaned over his back and whispered in his ringing ears, “You said you had a secret fascination for defenestration. Just helping you remember. You wrote that comment in the author’s blog. Remember?”

Oliver remembered it well. His mind connected the past and the present and the impending future in a flash. He made an immense effort to heave himself back to the safety inside of the room. “Who the hell are you?” he grunted breathlessly, as his effort was not enough to free himself away from her. His hands were also of no use since they were in front of his body, and he was not able to grab her hand. He remembered his knees. He pressed both his knees to the wall, to get maximum leverage and pushed his body away from the window.

The girl seemed to weigh a hundred tons. With her other free hand, she caught hold of the lower end of his pants and lifted, them as if he were a plastic doll.

“Go, join your buddy down there. Your obsession has borne fruit today. Explain the meaning of defenestration to him, as you lie down beside him. Ask him who I am, and he will tell you . . . if he is still intact.”

She tossed him down. Turned back from the window and wiped her hands.

All this had taken place very swiftly.

She opened the door and walked out regally, without looking back.

The author was going through his manuscript, after having retrieved it from the carefully locked cupboard, wielding his latest instrument—the pen. (Justifying the old proverb, that old habits die hard, he was licking the tip of the pen; no, not the writing end.) The story was progressing smoothly. Of course, it needed revisions. Adding flesh and bones, smoothing out the curves, and so on. That was not a problem; he enjoyed it.

He just wanted to add one more kill before ending the tale. That would be enough for a serial killer. Nowadays readers do not have time anymore, to go through all those kills in detail, even if killing someone is a thrill-inducing business. Apart from that, he was thoroughly confused – and somewhat frightened, to be honest – by this pestering Sarah's real and virtual entanglement business. (Fuck quantum.) As had become an established routine (ritual, in one sense), the real (sic) had met him at the bar and narrated what she had accomplished. “Two birds with one stone,” she had boasted, “I mean, at the same place, at the same time. It was fortunate that Oliver too happened to enter the same loo, and I decided to combine ‘down’ and ‘defenestration’ in successive demonstrations.” The Imaginator had shuddered more at the word, fortunate than at the intended sick joke. She had at least not deviated from the script; adding her own bright ideas, doing it her own way, things like that. While she was reporting, he was struck (again) by the observation that she was choosing victims from his blog! That was a very dangerous sign. *He had to change the names of the victims before the manuscript was completed.* He had to be very careful on that score. . . . Later, when Sarah exited, he remembered with a chill that he had indeed not typed this latest part on his laptop, but written it down on paper and securely locked it, to make sure that she could not hack his work! Was she hacking his mind too? “Boyo, change the names and descriptions of your victims,” he reminded himself once more.

Back to serious work. What should be the M.O. now, he began to speculate. He remembered reading about the favorite sport of some famous medieval kings—poisoning. Let it be a ring this time.

Parker was idly loafing along the sidewalks when his attention was drawn toward the beautiful girl coming up from the opposite direction. Walking, was a very prosaic term to use in describing her motion. She was gliding smoothly like a swan. Only, this swan was wearing a beautiful skirt and possessed a pair of enchanting breasts. She was carrying about five or six books in one hand. Her palm was not wide enough to hold and carry them all firmly, and she had bent her elbow and held the books pressing on her bosom. That made her prettier still, Parker was thinking. She was still far away, and Parker was idly fancying of ways to introduce himself to her. That was strange, he mused also. Normally, he tended to avoid meeting or mixing with persons of the opposite sex.

His desire was fulfilled. When they were near, the girl seemed to stumble across something on the pavement. Half the books in her hand fell down and scattered. She said, "Ouch," in a low voice and kneeled down to pick up the books. Parker rushed to her help, feeling perfectly justified. He picked the books from the pavement – skillfully making two hand contacts – and piled them on top of those she held in her palm, softly touching her breast in a most naturally innocent way. She stood up, smiled gloriously, and said, "I do not know how to thank you. That was very kind of you." Parker felt he could afford to be gallant. "My privilege. As for the, 'how' part of your question, I guess a handshake would be a perfect compensation." Strangely, he was subconsciously aware that she was prompting him to utter those words. It was a pleasant sensation, and it did not matter much to him at that time. The realization was to dawn when it was too late.

She did not mind at all. She gladly offered her free hand. He shook it warmly. He wanted to go on holding that hand forever. But then, reality pricked him back.

He felt a sharp prick in his palm and withdrew his hand automatically. He looked at his palm. There was no red spot or mark of any kind. Was it an illusion? He shot a questioning look at her. She was smiling inscrutably.

"Sorry, that was my ring. My fault. I had forgotten all about it."

He inspected his palm again. Now he could see a tiny red spot, almost unnoticeable. She showed him the ring. It appeared to be made of gold and seemed to be a historical artifact, by the look of it.

"Original. A Borgia," she explained.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. A vague remembrance began haunting him.

"Yes," she said as if confirming his doubt, "It is hollow inside. The superb craftsmanship conceals a microscopic pin that comes out and pricks the proffered hand. No need to say that the hollow was filled with deadly poison."

His blood grew warm. "I hope the ring was empty," he quipped laughing nervously.

“It is empty *now*,” she responded with a deadpan face, unnecessarily stressing the last word.

It took three seconds to sink in—the meaning of course. (What was intended to sink in had already sunk and coursed through his veins.) His blood got warmer than before. There was a ringing sound in his ears.

“Oh, God, but why me?” he croaked, “Who are you? What have I done to you?”

“Ask the author.”

“Pardon?”

“Parker, your name is Parker, and the author’s pen name is Imaginator.”

“Eh, how do you know my name?”

“You guys. You need explanations for all things. Imaginator maintains a blog. You responded to his questions in that blog. I read the blog. QED. Thus, I know thy name. Further, there, you wrote that you had a morbid fascination for poisons. That answers your question, why you. As to what you have done to me, you did nothing actively, but you passively invited me to choose you. If you ask, choosing for what, I would say, I chose you as my victim. It must be already obvious to you, but if you persist in asking, a victim of what, I would like to remind you that you guys in that blog were discussing a serial killer, repeat serial killer, got it? The meaning of victim must be clear to you now, I hope. I am that killer, and you are privileged to be my victim.”

Parker was getting dizzier and dizzier. She never seemed to stop talking. Her last sentence jolted him. The memory of his comments on the blog came surfaced clearly. So, she was the killer about whom he and other readers had given their suggestions. It looked so fun, then. Now, suddenly it had loomed up like a threatening vampire. By God, if she was the serial killer, she was not joking about her ring’s sting. Aye, aye, hold it; that was a story, damn it, and she was only a character in a story. . . . Then, who the heck, is this gal smiling at him? . . . Ah, as she said just now, she has read the blog, and she is staging a practical joke. Thank God. He smiled back, though it was not his dazzling best. She seemed to be mirroring his mood.

Also, a brilliant insight flashed inside him. After a long pause, he inhaled deeply and said,

“Now I got it. You were joking, no? If the ring contained real poison, I would have dropped dead by now, and you would have run away long ago, no? I am glad I met you. Since you know my name, may I ask yours?”

“I am glad you are glad. The author has not yet finalized my name. By that time, it may be irrelevant to you. Let it go. By the way, your idea about the effect of the poison is wrong. Think man. This is a street and there are people all around. If you drop dead right on the spot, I will be in a spot, ha, ha, ha. It is a slow-acting poison. It is hi-tech, you won’t understand.” He thought it out.

“How much time have I got?”

“It is not exactly that way. Actually, the ring that I am wearing is shielding you; its operating range is a hundred meters. If I go away, you will die.” He thought that out too.

“Can I buy that ring from you?” (He could not possibly ask her to marry him and stay with him forever. In that event they could exchange rings; that was a general idea. But then, even that would not work. If she went to a mall for shopping more than a hundred meters away, he had to run behind her. Wherever she went, he had to accompany her—like her pet dog. Egad! Hence.)

“Look, I like you in a way you cannot understand. Take the ring and keep it with you. That way, you will remember me always.” Now, there is a twist, he thought. If she wants him to wear it, the ring could be probably radioactive! But if he does not wear it, he may probably die. He was not good at solving logic-involving puzzles. Looked like she was deliberately muzzling him. Now he wanted to run away from her. Better take the ring for now and run like hell. After reaching home, he could sit down and calmly think about what he had to do. He put his palm forward. She did not hesitate. She removed the ring from her finger and dropped it in his open palm. “Best of luck.”

He took the offered ring and examined it. His eyes focused on the ring intensely.

By the time they were defocused, she had dematerialized from the spot. He turned his neck and looked around. The street was normal. Everything was normal. Only, the girl had vanished into thin air. He shrugged and went home.

He unlocked the door and stepped in. He dropped dead.

Following the established routine, Sarah met with the Imaginator at the usual bodega and reported all that she did. He listened to her colorful narration without interrupting her. (If he did, he would receive a spate of sarcastic bon mots.) She had again chosen somebody from his blog. Not a good sign at all. He glumly emptied the remaining content of his glass, stood up, wiped his mouth, and said,

“I am glad it is over. I thank you for all your frank reportages. It is time to say goodbye. I am closing my story. Matter of fact, I am in two minds about publishing it. I am seriously contemplating deleting it from my computer. It must be obvious to you also, what with all the proper names scattered across its pages.”

He should have known better. She promptly answered back, “Do not delete or shred what you have written. That action will create a dangerous precedent, and you will never be able to write again. As for the names of the victims, you silly, all you have to do is just change the names. Change the names and backgrounds and locations, man. Do I have to tell you, a supposed writer?” When he emptied the glass and stood up, his intention was to rush out. He was still standing, facing her and breathing heavily. She too stood up. He did not want to lose face.

“I would have thought of it, sure. But what about the actual physical body counts in my real world – if not yours?”

“That is the headache of the cops. I can go out there and bump off a couple more, to alter the tally. You need not write about *them*.” A nerve above the eye of the author began to tic.

“You better go away. And don’t bother to meet me again.”

“How about the sequel to your book?”

“Goodbye. I do not know you.”

“Your book is going to be a blockbuster. The publishers will demand a sequel. I will meet you then.”

She walked out of the door, swinging her hips provocatively. The Imaginator looked around the tables, nervously. This time there were two people present. And they were looking at him curiously. Had they heard the conversation? Damn. Of course, he could stubbornly insist that he was discussing ideas about a story. He exited the bar as nonchalantly as he could manage. Just for effect, he grumbled to himself, making sure the others heard it, “These new authors are impossible.”

He reached for his pad. He was feeling restless. He wanted this strange affair with Sarah Real to end smoothly, without complications. In spite of what he told that virtual-cum-unreal-yet real-imposter he wanted to publish his story. He needed a good stretch of sleep before picking up the thread of the story. But he was unable to sleep for a long time. That was unusual. Normally, he had no problem with slipping into sleep. He decided to wait for some more time. He picked up a particular book and began reading it. It was his favorite treatment for insomnia. (Not that he needed it.) Always, before finishing the first ten pages, he would fall asleep. He read and read many, many pages. He was still awake. He felt as if he was awake for hours and hours; days and days.

Meanwhile, the world out there was very real and solid and ran according to inexorable laws.

The dead bodies of Parker, Iago, and others were discovered. Sure. It was inevitable, and it was moronic to think otherwise. It was deduced that the deaths were due to murder. (Do not underestimate the cops.) Initially, the murders were recorded, unrelated. But then, it looked as if the number of independent criminals had increased suddenly. A new gang? No chance. The police had their own underground sources of informants. Then, gradually, the idea of serial killing occurred to them. Normally, a serial killer has his/her own signature MO. There was no common modus O in these killings; each death was different.

Do not underestimate the cops. They use things called software programs, and they had fed the collected data into the computers, and asked them to find a common thread if existing. Three computers came up with two common observations. One, all the deaths had occurred in the

same city. (Who said the computers have no sense of humor?) Two, they found that the names of all the deceased were found on a common blog page. Who ran the blog? Stupid, even to ask such a question.

Something must be cooking in the author's (Imaginator, eh?) backyard. Let us go dig. If we scare the shit out of him, the truth will come out.

An author extraordinary, I.Magine aka Imaginator was squirming in his bed, wide awake being overwhelmed by carphology. The last time when he checked the time on the wall clock, it had shown 3:00 a.m. A deadly silence had pervaded the room, being underlined by the ticking of the clock. He was haunted by a rather strong premonition that some disaster was imminent.

The silence of the night was shattered by a loud knocking on the door. His body jerked violently and he sat up bolt upright, wondering whether he had really heard the sounds. There was an electric call bell outside. He wondered what kind of a person would ignore it and use his knuckles. The answer occurred immediately. Knuckles represented power and those with authority were showing off. That meant only one thing. As if confirming his fear, the knock was repeated, more loudly. He asked nervously,

“Who is that?”

“Police, open the door!” The author was seized with fear. He sat dumbly, afraid of getting up and opening the door.

“Open the door, or we are going to break it open. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .”

He got up sweating and opened the door. Three cops were standing outside. They pushed him in, barged inside, and closed the door. A cop whizzed out his Police Special and aimed it at the head of the dazed Imaginator.

“You are under arrest!” bawled the second cop. The third one produced a pair of handcuffs. They pushed him to the wall, his face touching it, jerked his hands behind his back and handcuffed him, as smoothly as in a movie, and then turned him around, so he could face them.

“Eh, on what charges are you arresting me?” the author managed to blurt.

“Instigating, aiding, and abetting multiple murders.”

“Look, this is ridiculous. What murders are you talking about? I think you have got the wrong name and address.”

The cop slapped him hard.

“You can’t beat me like this. What kind of justice is this?”

“Who beat you? Nobody saw. Now listen, you dumbass, we discovered the signature of the perpetrator. It is a long story, but we will make it short. She stole a bike from a guy and she had somehow managed to tattoo the letter, ‘S’ on the back of his neck. On the bodies of each of her victims, she had left the single letters, A, R, A, H. Do we have to spell out what the letters spell out? The next funny thing is that all those guys participated in your blog on a discussion about her. That is the clincher. There is more. Two witnesses have testified having seen you discussing with her in a pub. One even heard a few words involving murder.”

“Eh, hold on. It is all a story, for heaven’s sake. I have been writing my latest story on a serial killer. It is on my computer. I can show you.”

“We appreciate your nerve. Every killer is tempted to record what he has perpetrated. We are going to seize your computer, of course.”

Beads of sweat were forming on the forehead of the Imaginator. They looked neatly formed and arranged. He stammered, “The lady character in my story has got nothing to do with this dame. This dame must have hacked my computer, and she takes a sadistic pleasure in discussing my script.”

“Then, who is she?”

“I do not know, for God’s sake. It is for you to find out. It is your job.”

“Don’t try to be over-smart while you are a dumbass. She has contacted us on phone and confessed all. She says she will surrender to the law if and only if we arrest you.”

“But that is totally unreasonable; nonsense, in fact.”

The cop hit him again. The author felt the skin on his chin was cut. A drop of blood trickled down the side of his neck.

“Man, you do not seem to have heard properly. She confessed. She says you put the whole idea into her head. She goes further and swears that you guided and advised her on how to go about the killings – step by step. You were the inspiration, the guru-force, as she says. Come, let us go to the police station. We will charge you officially, and then you call your lawyer or whatever.”

“But . . .”

The cop hit him again, harder. The other two joined in. The face of the Imaginator was mashed up by the bashes. Blood was now welling up from the cuts and running down. It trickled down on his lips. He felt the warmth of the liquid. Unconsciously, his tongue licked it. It tasted good! God, was he becoming a Dracula?

The Imaginator screamed aloud with all the force of his lungs, as they dragged him out and shut the door behind him. Blood was flowing out copiously now, and he sensed that his collar was soaked wet.

The wetness of the collar woke him up.

He was still shivering from the nightmare. This time, for a change, he did not scream. He groaned loud enough for him to hear his own voice, confirming that he was awake for real.

Gash, what a terrible dream, he thought. Still, there was some satisfaction in it.

“I can make a weird story out of this,” he thought, before falling supine on the bed again.

Section II

TALL TALES OF SCIENCE

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION.

There is a subtle difference between sci-fi and fi-sci. Writers of the sci-fi genre write meticulous stories (that is fiction) built on elaborate research done in the field of science (that is, science). Many writers – especially the professional ones—will undertake thorough, painstaking research on the science aspect of their stories when penning a sci-fi novel. But at this juncture, our Inner Child, who is also the Irrepressible Brat can be seen grinning widely and vigorously shaking a thumbs down gesture at such writers. The Brat’s contention runs thus. “By God, (sorry, by Quantum) you are writing fiction, remember that. Then why do you have to be a stickler for academic science? After all, if the story you write is fiction, the science in it too can be at liberty to be fiction!” What the Brat means is that you can make up your own science. Then, the fiction tag suits it, (and the story) eminently well. To repeat in plain, bald language, science in such a book need not be true science, just as the story in fiction need not be, and usually is not a faithful record of actual events in life. No math, no tears. Actually, some time back, a revolutionary scientist, Professor Bagdenborg (fictitious, naturally) wrote extensively on this kind of research, dubbing it fentoscience. (Books on fentoscience, written by his admirer can be had if you search the Internet.) Yet, the wonderful thing is that in writing such types of stories, one can utilize all the existing formats dovetailing them easily into the usual format of storytelling.

The stories in this section are presented to illustrate the broad and unhindered scope for this new type of fi-sci-fi, liberated from the shackles of rigid logic and asphyxiating mathematics. The readers can sense the exhilarating scent of freedom while perusing the ensuing tales—short stories that are tall tales.

This way, please.

NATURE'S EXPERIMENTS

One Atom

A famous scientist has written a famous book about a brief history of time. (No prizes for guessing his name.) If there can be a brief history of time, why not there be a brief history of the universe?

Amen. There *was* a brief history of the universe, the briefest, in fact. But nobody, till now is aware of it. It can be discovered through a patient, a new line of scientific exploration. But the accepted and approved traditional kind of reasoning alone is not enough; a liberal mixture of fearsome and fearless imagination alone can help in unveiling the astonishing, hidden secrets of Nature.

The patience of Creation is immense, beyond the understanding of petty human minds. It created something and waited for untold eons for the tiny human mind to understand and appreciate what it did. The chances that humans could appreciate what it did were faint, but Nature took it, for it had a soft corner for humans. They were, after all, the acme of her creative essays.

What did Nature do? What happened? When, where, and how?

Patience, patience as Nature preaches to us. (Besides, that is the theme of this untold story.)

First, a word about the great fable. The name of the fable is Big Bang.

The first sentence in the bible of Science runs like this. In the beginning, was the Big Bang. That is the fable, the myth. The myth does not refer to the Big Bang properly. Almost all (respectable, that is) scientists believe in the Bang. There are oodles and oodles of mathematics to prove its occurrence. Ok, Nature does not bother to contradict them. The mother smiles tolerantly when her children go on ranting about their daydreams. So, what does the word, fable refer to? The guilty phrase here is 'in the beginning.'

The True Beginning is beyond the comprehension of mortal men. Ponder this. The Big Bang is supposed to have gone off about fourteen billion years ago. Fourteen billion—*billions*? Mother Nature smiles at that

number. If she were to laugh, the rumbles will tumble in cosmos-sized waves across the galaxies from one end of our universe to the other end. That may most probably rupture the fabric of the cosmos; that is why she only smiles and does not guffaw.

Billion years may appear to be a very, very long time for humans whose lives are restricted to one hundred. For Nature, a billion is a pitifully small number—sub-microscopic in her scale. Trillions of trillions are as nothing in her reckoning. But the Fable remonstrates vehemently. It argues that the presently observed state of the universe, which includes mainly the expanding universe, uniform background radiation, and other assorted data invariably points towards the occurrence of the Big Bang. Mathematics accurately calculates the elapsed time and places that Big Event at years fourteen odd billion ago. That is all fine, rigorously intellectual and respectable, and all that. Ok, forget it. But Truth, with a capital T, is a different ballgame altogether. To understand even an iota of that, you have to become like a baby and hug Mother Nature and suck the milk of Intuition from her breasts.

Then you will ask a question that is an anathema to Science. What was there before the Big Bang, what was happening then? The science guys will scoff and laugh at you. In their parlance, your question belongs to the category of infinite regressions. Your question, as a sentence, may be grammatically correct, but logically untenable. In simple language, if you say something, A existed before the Big Bang, the unstoppable question of what existed before that A will automatically rise, and the merry dance can go on irrespective of all the Bs, Cs, Ds, and Zs that existed before. Science suggests simply that there was nothing before the Big Bang and that is that.

So, then, you became that baby and asked Great Mom what happened before the Bang. She lovingly smiled at you and mischievously suggested that she only dealt with infinities and not petty billions . . . etc. As you were puzzling yourself on that, Mom held a mirror in front of you—at a slight angle, of course. You peered into the mirror and were almost lost in the depths of space. At the infinite edge of those depths, you espied another mirror. No, that mirror did not reflect the image of the first one. It showed a different, second mirror, in whose receding depths you almost lost

yourself once again. Then intuition told you that each mirror, with its infinite space, was a representation of one of an infinite cycle of creation.

(So, if there is a new creation, there must have naturally happened at the end of the previous one. Not necessarily. The potter spins out many pots on his wheel but does not necessarily destroy the old ones. The painter paints many paintings. But he does not necessarily tear out all of them. He has enough space in this atelier to keep and preserve all his works. *He likes to dig out his old masterpieces once in a while when the mood hits him and admire his own work.*)

If a petty man has such a desire to gloat over his creations, it is natural that Nature too would like to do that, for, after all, humans are the products of Nature, and have inherited some of her DNA. Nature's atelier infinitely surpasses that of the puny artist in terms of variety, space and time. This is not idle speculation; just a small part of the vast hidden Knowledge.)

All that dry reasoning as above did not occur to you when you looked into the mirrors held by Nature; you directly intuited what was there to be understood plainly, but was cleverly hidden all the while. As you journeyed through all those mirrors in an unimaginably quick succession of blurred images, your attention was finally trapped by one of the almost last ones. You entered that mirror and lost yourself there. That mirror contained the kind of space where only Nature could exist and not any kind of living beings . . .

It was so long ago, oh, so long ago that time itself was like a newly born baby. Numbers, in their risible attempts to reach out there, will hopelessly stumble and get entwined around themselves. Fourteen billion! Such a pitifully small, microscopic number. Uncountable billions would perish along that path before they could reach the western edge of that mirror.

Back there, Nature stood alone, throwing around her glad glances in all directions. Her glances spread out and became infinite space. Her gladness was immeasurably greater than the most intense bliss of humans. (Who were to be created a hundred cycles later.) Nature was filled with bliss so much and of such kind that the desire for change did not rise in her. She stayed thus, surveying and enjoying the vast empty space for fifty

billion years—as per human reckoning. *Fourteen billion years? Ha ha ha, oh my poor children, you have plenty to learn by way of counting.*

At the end of those fifty billion years, a tiny ripple of desire arose in Her.

The infinite space around her was so empty that it was absolutely pure; totally without any kind of blemish. It was so empty and pure that it was completely self-sufficient and needed nothing else. Forever. But what was the desire that stirred in the bosom of Nature? Nature wanted to place a tiny dot of blemish in space. Truth to tell, desire itself was a blemish.

Nature created a tiny blemish and placed it at the center of the immense space. Tiny, just a tiny blemish. What was that blemish?

Matter was that blemish in space. The purity of space was spoiled forever. Nature had qualms about that. So, she decided to make the blemish as small as possible.

Nature forthwith created one atom. Creation was a joy for nature. (Those guys of a hundred cycles later, who called themselves scientists, in their taut earnestness of logic-shackled inquiry never were able to notice that aspect of Nature; that primary essence of creation.)

Yet, out of affection for its future (the far distant) progeny, Nature conceded a modicum of incipient logic. If creation has to occur, let one become two. If it has to diversify unlimitedly, one more, a third quality is enough. *The final coup de grace, so to say was that infinity could be built up by a steady untiring accretion of an infinitesimal quantity!* Thus, Nature smiled and placed three small units of blemish held together, in space.

Nature created one proton and one neutron and one electron held them spellbound in one place. Spellbound must be the apt phrase because the nature of the three units was such that it was impossible for them to stay together if the option was left to themselves. (The aforesaid future progeny would, later on, invent thousands and thousands of pages of mathematical jugglery on that small whim of Mother Nature. They may most probably not succeed completely. Mother smiles with good humor.) The composite ball of blemish was to be called an atom, by the progeny.

Nature paused and looked around, satisfied. Now, most members of the aforesaid future progeny would fail to notice that qualifying-quantifying word, one. *One atom*. One and one only. To make it clear (to everybody in the measurement-addicted future progeny) the specific attributes of those units were thus: -

Weight of an Electron ... $9.10938356 \times 10^{-30}$ kilograms

Weight of a proton ... 1.6726×10^{-27} kilograms

Weight of a neutron ... 1.674929×10^{-27} kilograms

Size of an Electron ... 2.82×10^{-15} m

Size of a Hydrogen nucleus ... 1.6×10^{-15} m

Size of a Hydrogen *atom*, radius... 1.6×10^{-10} m

Weight of a Hydrogen *atom* ... 1.66×10^{-24} grams

One point should be mentioned down right here. The attributes like weight, charge, and such would be relevant only in the later advanced creation circles containing humans. The single primordial atom of the first era was a prototype, rather, a representative of an embryonic atom. During those days only the property of size had any meaning; size was the first step towards creation. The single atom with its contents had only size and no other properties at all; that was the beauty of it.

The future (humongously distant) progeny would, by a daring leap of imagination (but nevertheless luckily) discover this day of the existence of one atom. They were to be puzzled and driven to exclaim, “Why one atom, for God’s sake?” They would have discovered God by then. And, being humans, proceeded to discover more gods like Relativity, Quantum, and God’s Particle. That is a different and distant story, for sure. Coming back to that ‘tauntalising’ conundrum of one atom, Mother Nature, whose exuberant sense of humor cannot be categorized, would point out the old (but actually far distant future) Indian custom of testing cooked rice. After cooking a big pot of rice, you need not test all the

grains of rice in the pot. *One cooked grain* on the top is enough to tell you that *all the rice* has been cooked well. That is why Mom created only one atom. She knew it was cooked well. Should some of those inhabiting a certain island north of Normandy grumble at that, Mom would remind them of their adage, “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

Back to The Beginning. There was vast, immeasurable space stretching in all directions. In the exact center of that universe, one atom reposed in utter peace. Nature had a desire. The desire was executed perfectly. Nature was satisfied.

What next? That would be a silly question that can rise only in the minds of Her future progeny. For the time being, She just wanted to observe what She had created and enjoy the sense of perfect scaturient bliss that spontaneously accompanied her act. That would be ok with the future progeny. They too would spend a few hours admiring their creations in the art galleries. Normal.

However, they would be tempted to ask how long Nature spent admiring her creation (one atom). Normal, Nature would agree. For, Mother Nature spent one whole day admiring her artwork. One whole day, not much. ‘Normal,’ the future progeny’s normal man would agree.

Alas, what is normal for *homo sapiens* and what is normal for Nature are quite different. There would be born in the future progeny, some guys called pundits of the East, who would make it a point to calculate how long a Mother Nature’s day lasted. That interesting list would go like this:

The first part would consist of blocks of four ages called Yugas: Kali, Dwapara, Treya, and Krita.

The span of one Kali Yuga = 4,32,000 years

The Span of Dwapara = 8,64,000 years

The Span of Treya = 12,96,000 years

The span of Krita = 1728, 000 years

Total = 432,0000 years

This would be one cycle of four Yugas. 1000 such cycles make half a day of Brahma, the creator of the universe. Add 1000 more such for his night. Thus, *one day* of the creator Brahma equals *864,0000,000 human years*. (This Creator himself is like a deputy only, being created out of the Supreme Un-nameable, Inconceivable force.)

If 360 such days pass for him, it would be one year in his reckoning. He would be allowed to exist for 100 years of his reckoning.

So, the total would come to a whopping 31104,0000,000,000 years!

Not bad calculations, Mother Nature would agree, *864,0000,000 human years being equal to her one day. Indeed.* And that other number, 31104,0000,000,000 was not far wide off the mark. The only note to be added was that after every such 31104,0000,000,000 years another Brahma guy would be appointed to take care of the next cycles of creation. Good.

Back to Mother on this particular day of initial creation. Time, as human beings know, was not created yet. No further desire had stirred Her heart.

She kept on gazing at her creation of one atom with unswerving attention and sweet love for a period of one day, one full day; her one day equal to their 864,0000,000 years. It was so pleasant, so blissful, that engrossment. No desire stirred Her heart for the whole day. Everything was as it was—the vast immeasurable space and its content of one atom.

From the point of view of humans (to come later), Nature was in a narcissistic mode for 864,0000,000 years. The repetition is done so that the idea may sink in. Especially in what they would call their 21st century, they were heavily infected with what they themselves would dub as ADS, multitasking, and other compulsive syndromes.

Even the best disciplined among them would not be able to stare at themselves in a mirror for more than a few minutes at a time: the eyes would wander, attention would wane, and besides, somebody could be lurking behind! 864,0000,000 years? Forget it, Johnny.

A single human being, if placed in the position of that single atom at the center of the universe, would not survive even if gifted with the boon

of not needing food. That being would die of boredom, loneliness, claustrophobia or agoraphobia, or for no reason. 864,0000,000 years? Forget it, Johnny.

But the single atom did not mind. It reposed calmly for the whole day. It stayed as it was. There was ecstasy in staying in the bosom of Mother Nature, in her cosmic embrace. Many trillions of years later a progeny of Nature, some genius whose name would start with N, would propose a famous Law of Inertia. But that was to be science; words like repose and ecstasy would have no place in its books. Pity. The essence and beauty of that act were that the very absence of time itself implied immense repose. Peace, joy, bliss, *ananda*. The feelings were mutual. What the atom felt, Mother Nature was also feeling. Nothing could break that bond of empathy; and, in fact, there was nothing else to intervene between them. (This phenomenon was to be reflected many creation cycles later between mothers and their babies.)

The children of Her future progeny were to be given to excessive yakking-talking, which they were to proudly call ratiocination and logic. To appease her dear children, Nature would throw a few words of explanation at them, though all logic would fall flat at her feet, defeated and exhausted. The qualifier word, day, was a misnomer. Thus.

During what humans were to call a day (Nature's), there was no time. Time had not yet been created. Time depends on the change in order to exist. State, quality, position, memory, impression—something has to change. And that comparison gives birth to time. When Mother Nature was looking (blissfully) at her child, the single atom, there was no change of any sort. There was not even any concept of distance also. Distance, like time, needs the existence of two separate objects to manifest. The whole of the universe was just one *undifferentiated* lump of space. Dummy denominations like lightyears, which were to be introduced for the convenience of guys to be called boffins, did not exist in the pristine bosom of Mother Nature. When mother woke up from her bliss and had a second desire, and thus ended her creation, a memory lingered on. That was what enabled the future (serendipitously fortunate) boffins to 'calculate' the duration of that first cycle of creation. All that was to come many eras later.

For the present Nature was content with gazing at the single atom.

The single atom reposed serenely at the center of the vast space, basking in the warmth of Mother's attention. There was nothing to describe, which stateless state—like depthless depth—could be appreciated only by a handful of those who would, later on, be termed as mystics, and which would require the exquisite vocabulary of poets to be profoundly described. The intensity of the era of the single atom would only be understood when (many cycles later) the measurement of the duration of what constituted one Mother's Day was to be undertaken. (864,0000,000 years, Johnny.)

Meanwhile, Mother Nature kept on gazing unswervingly at the one atom. With love.

That universe (pure space) was immeasurable because there was nothing else to be compared with. Space was complete without blemish, pure, undifferentiated. After many creation cycles later, Her progeny would guesstimate the size of their then universe as being at least 30 billion lightyears across.

This universe—pure space—was far wider than that. At its center lay one single atom and nothing else. Oh, what a marvel!

One single atom was enough and more than enough. As Her progeny would say many eras later, it was the mother of all creations, for it proved that further Creation was possible. That was enough. The birth of one single atom meant that the birth of anything was possible.

That is why Nature kept quiet for a whole day (Her day). What had to be proved, was proved. She might write further paragraphs, or she might not; it did not matter. Fortunately— from the point of view of Her future progeny—she would write many more paragraphs. There would be spaces between paragraphs and they were as important, if not more, as the paragraphs. Curiously, (most of Her progeny might not be able to either understand or appreciate it) *the empty spaces between the paragraphs were equal to the lengths of the written paragraphs themselves.* 864,0000,000 years, and growing with each cycle of Creation.

Mother would watch each cycle with the same unvarying, impartial bliss. A trillion billion galaxies, which were to come up in later cycles

would be of equal importance to her as that one single atom she was gazing at now.

She gazed and gazed dotingly for 864,0000,000 years. Less than a day, less than a second as far as She was concerned. A select few of Her future progeny were to understand it *dimly* when they would enter into what they were to call a state of deep meditation. Guys of the Pisces generation, not even the Aquarians, super freaked-out mystics, adventurous omphaloskepsis devotees, dropout genius quantum scientists, and so on.

When 864,0000,000 years were over, another desire arose in Mother Nature's heart. She wanted to sing a lullaby to her sole child, the single atom. (That is what, in the later cycles, human mothers too would naturally do.)

The lullaby was unique. Mother wanted the lullaby to be heard throughout the length and breadth of the universe. Her child deserved it. So, Mother caught hold of the atom and breathed into it. Lo, gravity was born! From there, gravitational waves spread into space, from end to end, in unending ripples. The waves had a rhythm of their own and presented exquisite music to the baby ensconced in the vastness of space. That was the Mother's lullaby to her creation.

As a consequence of the gravitational lullaby, the characteristics of space changed. Nature realized it and immediately ended her creation. She called it a day if perchance, pardonable puns are permitted. The First Cycle was over. 864,0000,000 years.

That is correct. In the beginning, was one atom. This is the awesome story of that first cycle of creation.

Peace be to ye all who are fortunate to read it.

THE HORIZONTAL PLANET

Musing 1

It is all in the movements. Take a point. The Greeks – and the geeks – said that a point has no dimension. Boy, you cannot measure its size. The point is (uh, pardon) that a point does not exist physically. It is imaginary. But, it is immensely useful everywhere in science and the practical world and so, (uh, pardon again) if you want to use it you have to put a *small* dot on a paper and call it a point (and quash your qualms about the ultimate purity of concepts, blah, blah).

Then comes movement. Move that point steadily in a certain direction, without wavering the direction. You get a straight line. A straight line is a one-dimensional animal. Unlike the point, it has the size and can be measured. Knowledgeable guys call it, length.

Like the point, the direction is also a mysterious entity, immanently connected with movement. Now that you have created a straight line, move the whole thing perpendicular to itself. If you want to do it less laboriously, you can sweep it. Then you get what is called an area. The geeks say it has got two dimensions; length and breadth.

Nice. For the last time, move that piece of area perpendicular to...damn, sweep it *en masse* up. You get a cube. The same g(r)eeks say it possesses three dimensions; length, breadth, and height. A cube is a crude object with lots of sharp edges. How about something smoother? Well, you have a globe in your hands; a good example of a three-dimensional object. Globe in hands? Damn it, we are all standing on one huge such. It is called, the earth, in case of some smart aleck quizzes you on its name.

Musing 2

Here comes the crunch. Not the earth as a three-dimensional object. The cropping up of the descriptive terms like up, perpendicular, and area; there lies the mystery. To describe a solid (3-D) object, mathematics uses different notations; not the words, up and down. In outer space, 'up' and 'down' have no meaning. Better leave such things to the brainy guys. To ordinary guys like you and us, up and down have very

forceful connotations. If you walk up the stairs of a ten-floor building, there is no need to look up the meaning of up in the dictionary. Your throbbing knees will be defining the meaning convincingly. Similarly, if you (no, not you personally; God forbid) slip down from the terrace of that same building, there won't be any problem in understanding the meaning of down. (Ouch, so sorry, there is no necessity of slipping at all; just looking down will do. Accompanying vertigo defines the meaning without any doubt.)

Further simplification

Excluding outer space, and all the ensuing scientific jargon, the three dimensions mentioned above, can be further simplified in relation to the planet earth, to which we are all bound in terms of physics, biology, geology, psychology, and so on. Geology: we have nowhere else to go. Forget that sci-fi blah, blah. Biology: We and all life forms were born here. We depend on the earth to exist. Physics: Gravitational power of the earth holds us and everything else here, down, powerfully, irresistibly in all our affairs from birth to death. Forget again the space-travel-sci-fi blah, blah. Life and all activities on earth can be simply summed up by two qualifiers—horizontal and vertical. When you are asleep in your bed, you are horizontal. When you walk and run and jump, you are vertical.

Bottom line.

Horizontal is relaxing and pleasant. Vertical is stressful. Before you retort, stand on one foot for one hour (only) *and then* talk back. Gravity may be essential for the creation of the universe and galaxies and stars and their planets and their life forms, but gravity is also a tyrant.

It acts on all of us relentlessly, day and night, every second. Always. Gravity, yeah.

Period, indefinite. A long time ago; one of the many cycles of creation.

In the previous tale, it has been chronicled how Mother Nature created one atom and lived with it in satisfaction. That era ended when desire arose in Her and as a consequence, gravity was created. Mother Nature is an enthusiastic experimenter. The whole universe is her laboratory. (It is a canvas too). She would bequeath that propinquity of experimentation in later cycles to her future favorite progeny, *homo sapiens*.

A small diversion (jump in time cycles). Somewhere in what they would call the 19th century, there was a bearded gentleman with plenty of IQ who made explorative journeys on ships to many remote places on earth in order to study the workings of mother nature. (Mother with a capital M and Nature with a capital N were unknown to the people of his ilk. They trusted only the left sides of their brains and were sworn followers of boffins.) The revered gentleman's ambitious quest was to find the origin of. . . . During the course of that quest, he propounded deep theories like the struggle for existence, survival of the fittest, adaptation to the environment, and such insights. Later in the 22nd century, some guys sourly argued that one could find copious data to support any reasonable-sounding proposition. Still later would come to some more guys who proved some theorems on that topic using the sheer force of mathematics. By then mathematics had become more puissant than the Wizard's Wand. Mother Nature would be smiling merrily; that is a different matter.

Theories, theorems, propositions, and intellectually famous conjectures were irrelevant to Mother Nature in the era—the particular cycle of creation—that She was engaged in experimentation.

The dominant word, operating during that period was gravity. The focus was on the words, up and down introduced in the seminal paragraphs above. They were directly linked to the phenomenon of gravity of the planet earth. There was earth then too, in that cycle; it was the same one on which all those brainy humans were to live and thrive in later creations. Just as Mother Nature liked her brilliant (a bit too much, frankly) progeny, She was fond of Planet Earth too and was to keep on recreating that planet in many of her later cycles, in different sizes, shapes, ingredients, and contents.

Though Mother Nature created the humans later, she already had a pre-remembrance of what the bearded gentlemen were to write. After all, She was Mother, and besides, everything that was to come in later cycles was already inside her in seed form. (One of the famous beards, would once bang the table with full conviction and declare that nothing could come out of nothing. A wag would agree too, that it was true in the case of an empty mind.) Mother had pre-remembrance, especially of words like adaptability, struggle, and up and gravity. Earth, being endowed with powerful, invisible, and infinitely stretching arms pulled everything down

into its abdomen. Especially, its power on objects just nearer to her surface was immense—and unrelenting. The heavier the object, the greater the pull of the earth.

Gravity reigned supreme in that era. This should never be forgotten.

Though some things are quite obvious, humans need to be reminded of them, now and then. Being too clever, they are apt to dismiss such sayings as clichés. Since gravity is ever present everywhere, they are apt to forget its presence and its effects.

The bottom-line mantra is that on earth, gravity pulls down, down, down.

Take the good old model of the weighing balance. Put one handful of sand on one pan and two of such on the other pan. The pan containing two handfuls comes down, naturally. *Gravity.*

Place a normal sitting stool on the floor. It is erect and remains so. Tilt it now at some angle and let go of your hand. The stool falls down. *Gravity was watching over that stool like a stalking predator.*

The power of gravity is more visible in the domain of living bodies. Go to your strongest friend. Ask him to stretch his big, strong muscular arm straight forward, palms up. Place a metallic object weighing about thirty kilograms on his palm and ask him to hold it. If his outstretched arm comes swings down, or if he drops the object, he has to pay a very hefty fine. Watch him. You will soon see him sweating. Then his hand begins to tremble. Soon after that, he would rather pay you the fine than go on holding the object. You go on increasing the amount of the fine. He will hold out for some more time. Then he drops the object, irrespective of the amount of the fine. *That is gravity at work.*

Forget about the weight. Human beings cannot even simply stand on their two legs for long. Sooner or later, they have to sit down or lie down. Animals are equipped with four legs, to enable even distribution of their body weight. Yet, and with their necks projecting like cantilevers, they too need to rest and lie down. *That is gravity at work.*

Of course, Mother Nature knew it far better than those bearded gentlemen. A sixty feet tall, lean coconut tree swinging wildly in the wind

knows it far better than any mathematical formula can ever express. Mother grew compassionate. And reasonable, more than that. But She could not banish gravity – that was the breath of Creation. No, She could not ban it from Her Creation. But she wanted to do something for the poor tall objects and lives struggling under the tyranny of gravity. Especially for the struggling living forms.

That was back in the era so long back that her would-be-kids of the 21st century did not remember. Even if they were made to remember, they would all – with the exception of a few select strong souls – dismiss it as a fable. That is the era and, that is running under present tenses. Tenses, yes; it's present and the present, juxtaposed by the serendipity of fate.

Mother's mantra is, adaptability, least struggle, variety.

Scenario 1; living forms sans motility.

The coconut tree was still an s sprout, just having broken out of the soil. Mother Nature had decreed that it should grow up to a hundred feet. The young plant was filled with zing, zeal, and zest. A hundred feet. That was something grand. Talk of ambition!

After breaking up from the soil, it began to grow. It commenced its journey up, little by little, day by day.

Already, even in those unimaginably distant pasts, an extraordinary influence had spread its tentacles throughout the length and breadth—not to speak of the nooks and corners—of the universe. The bearded boffins of the 21st century were to speak in awe and utter bemusement of what they had christened as the Quantum Entanglement. They had observed and tested that (under defined circumstances), if the state of a particular electron of a given pair was altered, its effect would show up on the second electron even though that electron was physically separated from the first one by a long distance; even a thousand kilometers did not matter. Electrons indeed. *The coconut trees could afford to snort in condescending contempt.* They had an inbuilt ability to empathize and communicate with other coconut trees in particular, and trees in general. That ability had no limit, distance-wise. A tree could feel the birth pangs of another seedling trying to push up the soil, on a lonely island on the other side of the globe.

It was able to send encouraging and supportive messages to the upcoming baby. ‘Bravo, bravo. Keep it up, you darling there. By tomorrow morning you should be able to have your first look at the sun! Send a broadcast afterward.’ That was enough for the plant-ling struggling to break up through the tough soil, all the while managing a constant fight against gravity. It soon celebrated its first look at the sun; the invigorating warmth of the sun’s rays.

‘Growing down would be easier compared to this unending struggle against gravity. I cannot understand why Mother Nature wants me to grow up!!’ It had grumbled a hundred times while struggling against the weight of the soil. Mother Nature wanted her children to explore and learn. That is the meaning of growth – in any way you care to interpret. The seedling, of course, would understand that as it slowly and steadily marched forward in time. But that is a different story altogether belonging to another era.

Meanwhile, its grumbling was picked up by another tree nearby, which fully sympathized with its junior. More coconut trees and plants and seedlings soon picked up the original sotto voce—and broadcast the lines. In the next stage, all the trees of that genus were singing the same doleful song.

‘Down with the tyranny of gravity!’ If those who would later bename themselves as psychologists (the proliferating seed of Father Freud) were alive then and be able to hear those words, they would have been astonished at the use of the word, ‘down’ which was startlingly appropriate, and they also would have been thrilled by the positive demonstration of psychoanalysis and subconscious influences. ‘Why do we have to carry all this weight of the earth on our tiny heads? Going up is torture. Journey down is preferable.’

Little did they know that Mother was teasing and testing them. Watching like an experimenting boffin. Mother sympathized with their burden. But on a different level of reality, it was She who was experiencing those emotions. She was both the experimenter and the object being experimented upon. (A fortunate few in those later cycles, who benamed themselves as mystics were to be able to understand this profound mystery in a diluted and dim form. Even so, they were unable to withstand the flood

of ecstasy concomitant with that revelation. But that is a different chapter altogether.)

The plants, receiving energy and life from the sun began to grow in earnest. Up, that is. ‘Ambition, vaulting ambition.’ They received sustenance from the very same earth which was an encumbrance for them earlier.

Humans would invent a term, growing pains. That was nothing when compared to what these dear trees were encountering in their upward growth. They had not studied the physics of the boffins. But they could directly feel it working on and inside them. Thus. In these ways, every day of their lives:

As our pet plant grew thicker and taller, it began to accumulate more and more cells, both dead ones and living ones. Dead, or living, cells contribute to the overall mass of the plant. In the mundane world, mass meant weight. The funny thing was that though the mass looked impressive from the outside, weight was acting on the plant itself, tending to compress it downwards. That is the tyranny of gravity, the plant felt, dimly recollecting the universal vibrations it had received some years back. It was about six feet tall, but already its own weight was making it sweat and cringe. Its destiny (now, the term had slyly changed from ambition to destiny) was to grow more than a hundred feet tall. Good Heavens! The plant had no choice in the matter.

Meanwhile, the pains kept on growing. Accompanied by greater groaning and moaning. The weight of the tree on itself was terrible. To adapt to the situation the tree was producing tougher and tougher cells. But that was not enough. The problem lay in verticality and plumpness. The plantling depended on the sun to maintain its plumpness. Thousands and thousands of past years had taught its ancestors that at mid-noon, the traveling sun would be at the center point of its journey across the sky, directly above their heads, when their shadows would merge in their bases—which was an accurate indication of the plumpness of a plant’s trunk. (The plants had already evolved in the observation and interpretation of their environment. They had become clever. Their distant friends from across the upper and lower hemispheres had informed them that in many areas, the shadow would not merge with the base of the trunk,

but would be shortest and inclined to the true vertical. Just as is the case with humans, this information had confused many trees. Many of them were inclined to grow in an inclined direction upwards; resulting in an excruciating burden on their spines and bases.)

If the trunk of the tree is not perpendicular, the amount of strain on it will be enormous. The greater the inclination, the greater the strain. Ask some human beings to stand on their legs and lean forward, (*slightly*, of course, poor fellows) without taking any kind of support. Some may ignominiously fall down, immediately. Some may hold on for a few seconds. Some may even get their spines, or joints dislocated! And the valiant tree stands on and on, *for years and years!!* In the beginning days of their evolution, humans would understand that even lifeless materials too suffer a similar fate. In their laborious journey on the path of civilization, they would witness that buildings after buildings, walls after walls would topple down if they were built at an inclination to the horizontality of the ground. How the trees whose trunks were curved in every which manner, not to mention all those branches spreading out horizontally (by God, oh God) suffered immeasurable stress, strain, and torture, nobody but they only could understand.

The story of their suffering does not end there. The environment in which they grew, though seemingly supporting them to live, was playing malicious games with them. The air. True, it offered them the carbon dioxide which they needed. But then the air was fickle. When it became playful, it turned into wind benempt as a breeze. Humans and other creatures might enjoy it (the breeze). But, in terms of natural laws, when there is a breeze, the force induced by the wind in the trunk of the tree (at its base) is beyond imagination.

All its roots will be screaming in agony.

For thousands and thousands of years, that cry of agony was being regularly picked up by other trees everywhere—even by those which were situated in calm areas thousands of miles across. Mother Nature had created a common cloud database for all the plant life on earth. (Unnoticed by peculiarly self-centered, clever human beings of later cycles.) The data was growing steadily. The meaning and the message could not be ignored. New lessons in living were to be learned—and *put into practice*.

The message was revolutionary. It called for a rebellion against the tyranny of gravity. But gravity was a force of Nature. There was no way to win a fight against it. The common database had shown them in bold letters (underlined too) that even though birds could apparently defy gravity and float and fly in the air, *they had to come down after some time and perch on the branches of the trees*. Far later, in the final cycles of Creation, they were to notice that human beings of those eras could fly on metallic wings; some could even fly away from the earth. But then they had to die of hunger if they did not return to earth within a stipulated period. No, there was no use in fighting against gravity as long as they lived on earth. There was nowhere else to go!

The message

The message, the lesson initially came to the ancient, oldest of the trees as an act of inspiration. (Of course, Mother Nature had taken care to see that the inspiration trickled down on them. After all, it was She, who was doing the big experiment. Through incessant repetition, the message seeped down into the core of the trees, literally and figuratively in their collective mind (the database, which directed their working and development). The whispers traveled globally, from tortured tree to tortured tree.

Do not waste your precious energy trying to grow up. The struggle is not worth it. If gravity is the issue, sidestep it. (Haha, a good pun, strictly among us. Who says we do not have a sense of humor?) Move sideways! That is, grow horizontally more. Tall is stupid, physically and ambition-wise. You can move a million times more comfortably in the horizontal direction than in the vertical one. A hundred feet up, by God. Why you can move that distance reclining comfortably on the bed of the earth. Obstacles on the way? No worry, sidestep again; change your direction. You have all done it while growing up. It is easier on the ground, compared to that labor. First, stop moving up. Spread horizontally, if you want more growth. (Growing—that was your ambition, was it not?) Try it; it is fun.

First trials

The coconut trees were gradually mesmerized into accepting the proposition. The reluctance to go against the established hoary custom was overcome, especially when reason pointed out the unreasonable Sisyphean

labor against gravity. The spirit of rebellion and revolution caught up fast. (Mother Nature was smiling with satisfaction.)

There was the tallest coconut tree on the coast of what was to be later called Malabar of the Indian peninsula. It stood rising at more than a hundred and fifty feet into the sky—ambitious to touch the sun. It appeared to be proudly swaying in the wind. A happy sight. Bosch. All the weight of the tree was bearing down on its own trunk. If the weighing-down force is of sufficient magnitude, a shearing force at an angle of forty-five degrees will be acting slantly across a body bearing such a weight, tending to chop down the object at that angle. (In later cycles, enthusiasm-driven forerunners of human civilization would stare with dropping jaws as their high walls would, again and again, crack at that angle of forty-five degrees. Their advanced progeny, benempt engineers would call that force a shearing force and describe its property in mysterious formulas.) Though offering a beautiful sight to look at, the champ coconut tree was secretly suffering from such a shearing force. How it without the torture, only God and Mother Nature knew. The same cerebral engineers would also introduce another term called, bending moment. In common parlance, it is that force that causes a (thin) long stick to snap when you bend it, holding its two ends in your hand. Something similar to what happens to your spine when you stand and bend down and touch your toes. (Fortunately, the spine is supple enough.) The pressure caused by the breeze is thousands of times stronger than that. If the tree could groan aloud, its groans would have been heard all over the peninsula.

That was when the tree swore that its children would not suffer similar agonies in their lives. Mother Nature was waiting for such a propitious moment. It introduced subtle changes in a few coconuts of the tree, that was ripe to fall down. The coconuts fell, all the way down the odd hundred and fifty feet, hitting and bouncing on the ground. Other kinds of fruits from other kinds of trees would have been smashed into a pulp and splashed if falling from such a height. Mom had endowed a special elaborate shock-absorbing cover for the coconuts. She now smiled; such elaborate architecture would not be necessary for the future. One of the coconuts rolled over, down the slope of the beach into the waves of the sea. It would *float*—another of Mother's methodical care – to be carried far and be deposited again at some other beach. All, Mother's clever

schemes, for the *propagation* of its creation in wider areas. This particular nut was the forerunner of a new generation. It had acquired a new characteristic in its womb. In a way, it was a prophet. Humans who were to come far later would describe the grand, daring experiment using a bland, dry word, like mutation. (Mother smiled tolerantly.)

The new coconut soon sprouted up into an enthusiastic plant, suffering the usual growth pangs on its way up. The prophet plant bore all that with knowing patience. The tree grew up to a maximum height of thirty feet during its life span; so did its other friends who had mutated. Mutation on mutation was carried on.

The next generation of coconut trees went up to ten feet in the air and smugly stopped at that. The pains and groans and agony that their ancients had sung through long epics were no longer recognized landmarks, but mere memories of the ancestors. The trees happily gobbled up a mutation, asking for more. Mother acceded to their demands. What were a few odd offspring, in the beginning, could now be counted in millions; the numbers kept increasing rapidly. The prophet's message had spread on the grandest scale imaginable. And fast. Within a span of a thousand years (that is almost like an instant, in the timescale of Mother Nature), all the trees of the older generation had become extinct.

The bottom line. As a unique example of an oxymoron, the upward growth of the coconut tree followed the downward curve of the graph to its ultimate logical but practical limit and stopped short of somewhere between two feet and three feet high from the ground.

To sum up, in simple prose, *All coconut trees on the planet earth were two to three feet in height.* That is all. The trees, now had no problems with gravity, as their distant ancestors had. They lived happily forever. They composed ballads – in the lingo they only could understand – and sang them and broadcast them.

Humans have difficulty understanding this. So, it is better to reiterate it once more. All the coconut trees were of three feet height, max. The same humans are extremely argumentative (a carryover from their ancestral chattering apes) and would begin shooting (off the hips, as they are proud to specify) hundreds of questions when they hear of such trees and such era. Logic, they are fond of crying. If the trees were living and growing

for a hundred years, what were they doing all those days, *where did their growth go?* Logic is great, it must be admitted. But Mother's sense of humor is greater and puissant.

Humans were to discover later, what they called the law of conservation of mass. They only discovered. Nature was doing it long, long before they discovered it. And it was going to keep on doing it even if they had not discovered it. The mass of the three-foot tree was the same as it would have been if it had grown to a height of a hundred and fifty feet. No, it had not converted to metal, iron, or platinum. Simple. The logic was anxiously and furiously looking in the upward direction. *The girth of the tree had increased, compensating for the decrease in height.* This was a brilliant masterstroke of a strategy adapted by the tree. (Needless to say, and by all other coconut trees on earth.) The *diameter*, as the mathematicians would say, of the tree, having increased roughly by six times that of the original, was now between *twenty and twenty-two feet*. What was originally lean had now become fat, that is all. Downright solid in appearance. The fronds, the spathe and inflorescence, and the drupes of the tree had not changed; it was not necessary to do so. In the later periods, there would be some particular groups of humans who would call themselves lovers of trees and would find pleasure in embracing the trees. Now, it was impossible to embrace this tree of twenty-two feet girth. Thankfully, there were no humans in this era. The trees also did not seem to mind that.

It was a satisfactory sight to see. All the coconut trees on earth were three feet (average) in height and twenty-two feet (average) in girth. The tops were, of course, a bit less in girth. Still, there was plenty of scope for far more spathes and fronds than the older types to grow. The dread of wind and storms had been conquered and forgotten. No more of those terrible giddy swayings in the atmosphere and the frantic efforts to keep the spine from breaking. Horizontality was trying to compete with verticality with a vengeance. In the end, it wanted to thumb its nose at it (verticality).

In the far, far future, the devotees of Marlon Brando would say of his acting, 'Whatever Brando has experimented and thrown away, all other actors have picked up.' The same aphorism should be applied when speaking of Mother Nature's innovation and experimentation. Whatever

she has done and thrown away into a corner, vaunted humans have picked up. Nature spurred the horizontal-converted trees to innovate. One hundred and fifty feet of verticality had been converted into a resoundingly solid horizontality; a girth of twenty-two feet was not something to be sneezed at. But, the coconut trees were experiencing a diminished (far) sense of movement. The memory imprints in their collective subconscious were craving for more movement. Then the idea flashed on.

Quantity-wise, one hundred and fifty was more than twenty-two. Why not keep the old number of 150? And their slim trunks. Slimness facilitated movement, and suppleness more easily than fatness did. They all knew it by direct experience and observation. Look at yonder creepers. How easily they creep about! The trees decided to spread horizontally, parallel to the ground, keeping their original slim trunks. Yet, it required a lot of technical skill to accomplish what they aspired, considering their size and overall volume. Because, it was obvious even to a moron (among them) that bending horizontally, parallel to the ground would immediately deracinate them—strategic hara-kiri, borrowing a word from the distant future. On the other hand, creeping, like creepers all the way on the ground was not elegant, in view of their regal ancestry. Yet, taking support from the ground was unavoidable. The trees found an elegant solution to the problem. The arch! The trees would grow and bend in the shape of an arch, dip down gracefully and touch the ground. Rest for a while, and rise again like the same arch, and touch the ground once more. Rest, take support, and rise. The spans of the individual arches were around ten to twelve feet. (Exact, equal intervals would be so dull and somewhat dumb.) The beauty of the method was that wherever the tree trunks touched the ground, they sprouted fresh roots, sending them into the soil. That way, the labor on the mother roots would be enormously lessened. By this ingenious method, the trees could go on and on stretching up to more than a thousand feet in length if they liked. But they had to obey Mother Nature, and so limited themselves to lengths of four hundred feet—quite satisfactory, compared to their ancestors' upward struggles of a hundred feet.

Horizontality was thumbing its nose at verticality in two modes. The beauty of the system was that both methods of horizontal growth were used depending on the nature of the soil. When the soil was fertile and could feed nutrients well for a long time, the trees preferred to stay fixed

and let their tummies grow to twenty-two feet in diameter. (The height, as aforementioned, was about three feet.) Where the soil was less fertile, they would move horizontally in the arch-formation, *capable of changing directions too as needed*, stretching up to four hundred.

Soon, all the coconut trees had adapted the above two methods. Mother Nature felt satisfied. Seen from above, the pronograde trees offered a soul-satisfying sight.

That was for starters. Just as it was going to happen with human beings in the later cycles, an idea, once it catches a certain amount of attention, begins to spread virally. (The viruses were here already; Nature had seen to it.) In the kingdom (empire, is a better word) of plants, there were other families of trees which too grew up tall. Verticality. The subliminal communication among plants was being shared among all their various species, families, and whatnot.

The fascinating idea of thumbing a nose at verticality (and the concomitant tyranny of gravity) caught up like wildfire (which was a common phenomenon.) Other tall trees like the teak and the sequoia adopted the way of life of the new coconut trees. Very soon— within a span of a thousand years—all kinds of tall trees had opted to put an upper ceiling of three feet to their height. Three feet (limit) were chosen as a mark of respect to the pioneer coconut trees. And, uh, a span of thousand years is short compared to the length of that cycle of Creation.

That was the turning point. Very soon, again, all the flora on planet earth caught up with the act. No plant on earth was taller than three feet high. Some species were content with simply standing (at ease). Some were of curious nature and wanted to explore the land. They preferred to creep; the distances of their march differed from species to species. Throughout Mother Nature's many cycles of Creation, her memories were intact. That is why, in later cycles, humans would be able to cultivate an art benempt, bonsai. As (Matter of fact, Nature was reenacting her old drama using the humans as a medium. 'Keep it short and sweet.' Indeed.) Horizontality was slowly gaining the upper hand over verticality. Shadows everywhere on the surface of the earth had constricted enormously. Either that or they were following the horizontal revolution zealously.

The next phase. Logically and naturally, the next phase of development was inevitable. Flora and fauna go together. Nature had already experimented on two types of life forms; the nonmoving and the peregrinating. It is a *fundamental law of Nature that when there are more than two entities in existence, they begin to observe what all the others are doing—either overtly or covertly*. They draw inferences from such observations, and they learn from them. They exchange information among themselves. (The later human beings were to be only exaggerated, blatant, and unnecessarily hectic types embedded with all those skills.) So, the animals of that period were impacted by the changes that were taking place all around them. Basically, they all depended on the plant life for their existence, carnivores notwithstanding. Simple; the carnivores depended on the herbivores for food, and the herbivores had to feed themselves on what grew on the land. But, now, strangely nothing that grew out of the earth stood above three feet from the ground! The animals observed and learned. They too, like trees, had felt the tyranny of gravity, though not to such an extent. They too were permeated by a collective consciousness; through which medium they were tweeting their messages across the globe to their kindred. Besides, if the flora of the land did not rise above three feet, there was no point in standing tall with long necks. Bending the necks down for grazing was only another form of torture that the sadistic tyrant, gravity had imposed on them. *Make the necks shorter, and then likewise the long legs*. That is the smart way to live. If our tall ancestors suffered passively, it does not mean that we too have to. Rebel, rebel; long live the revolution.

Like the coconut trees, the giraffes were the first to be inducted into the daring experiment-cum-adventure. Naturally. The first giraffes of that period measured twenty-five feet from foot to head. The strain on their knees and necks was immense. Moreover, when they looked out for forage in their normal fashion no tree was visible! Up there, there were no branches, no leaves. Nada. They had to bend their long necks (oh, heck) for grabbing every single morsel. It was only a miracle that kept their necks from getting broken. Strain and sprain were constant irritating companions. The knee joints of their long legs joined in the music of creaks and groans. There was simply no point in keeping necks long, any longer. Just as it happened with the coconut trees, a new generation of

giraffes with shorter necks and legs came up. Within the usual short span of a thousand years. It was a thrilling, adventurous experience for them.

Once they got the hang of it, there was no stopping them. Within a couple of generations, the necks of the giraffes, which were sniffing at the clouds had come down to earth—practically and idiomatically. Now they could bend and graze their favorite leaves comfortably.

Human beings are very funny creatures. They always calculate everything in terms of what they call mathematics and arithmetic. They have a fetish for ratios. If a coconut tree of 150 feet height bonsaied itself into three feet (a ratio of fifty to one), then what *should be* the height of a giraffe which was originally twenty-five feet tall? Fortunately. Giraffes were intelligent without the gratuitous help of arithmetic. They stopped their downward descent at par with those of the trees. (Now, food was literally at the tip of their mouths.) Soon, all the giraffes on earth were of the same height of three feet—give or take a few inches, since Nature abhorred rigid, mindless uniformity. That aspect was reserved for the future funny humans, who would deliberately create uniforms; for soldiers, school kids, union workers, and religious sects.

One more victory for horizontality.

Previously, all the trees and plant life admired and adopted the course taken by the pioneering species of coconut trees. Similarly, all other animals observed and admired the revolutionary path taken by the giraffes. Very soon, (that is, the by-now-familiar one thousand years) they too got busy shrinking themselves. Elephants, camels, rhinos, such, and so on. That included the carnivores too. It would be very awkward for a big tiger to go chasing a swiftly scarping deer of two-feet size. Besides, even if the tiger managed somehow to catch the deer, the quantum of assimilable food would be ridiculously small. Carnivores like tigers and lions had to follow the way of all other herbivores. A minor detail here. Unlike the coconut trees, the animals did not need to compensate for the vertical shrinkage by extending their bodies in the horizontal direction. The reason is obvious; unlike plant life, the animals could move freely in the horizontal direction.

Thus, all the flora and fauna on earth shrank themselves below the threshold of three feet. No animal ever crossed that upward limit.

The only life forms that did not respond to the call of the universal revolution were the birds and some groups of insects. Their wings gave them a sort of reprieve from the tyranny of gravity—though not fully, for they had to come down and rest on trees, grass, and rocks, sooner or later. Looking down from their flights, they were amazed at the new sights that greeted them. Initially, they had a bit of difficulty in sweeping down to the branches of trees—all of which seemed to be far below the customary heights. They had to do a bit of juggling with their programmed flight paths. No hassle there. And when they perched on the tree branches, their atavistic memories made them anticipate the ground at a hundred feet below, whereas the ground was staring back at them from a gap of three feet! It was unnerving initially. But, despite a prejudiced phrase, “bird-brained”, they learned to cope with it and get accustomed to it faster than that future (far distant) entities who would call themselves pilots.) Protecting their eggs from snakes and other predators was a bit of a problem, but they learned to camouflage their nests more efficiently. Nests and eggs too. Bird brain indeed. The joke was on those guys who invented that phrase.

Horizontality had spread all over the surface of planet earth.

The last phase

Once Mother Nature began its experiments, it could not stop. (Later human beings were to be never satisfied with their progress. They were to inherit the trait from Nature; what else?) All her creations and creatures had successfully dwarfed themselves and were living happily. The only species that did not benefit from the horizontal revolution were human beings. They were not born yet, on earth in this particular cycle. Yet, Mother was very keen on extending her experiment on them too. The magnitude of the excitement and pleasure she experienced on witnessing her morphed-dwarfed subjects was uncontainable. But humans were scheduled to be born in far later cycles. What to do?

Ah, create an illusion of reality. After all, it is a moot point whether reality is really real or sleight of illusion. One more inversion does not matter; it adds to the overall fun. (This trick was to be later—far—copied by her smart progeny. They would even invent a veil to cover the visible scenery and call them some thingummy goggles. They defined what they

saw and felt under influence of those goggles as virtual reality. Clever creatures.) Mother had alternative options. She had created wormholes in space and time wormholes too. Just by slipping through one such appropriate hole, one could go forward in time as far as one liked. Damn it, She could even actually create them, place them on the world scenery and delete them later on – in case they did not like the experience. The later period gentlemen would say it was a case of some mysterious mass extinction of an inexplicable (incomprehensible, is a better word) species, *homo micro*.

The experiment was short-lived, but it was fully entertaining. Mother Nature did not need the long, torturous route of the bearded gentleman's evolutionary route. Monkeys, apes, apes on four legs, apes erect, apes without tails; linguistic apes, all that jazz. With supreme indifference to (human) reason, and with alacrity, she chose the required ingredients from the molecules (abundant, they were) that already existed on earth. Cook a DNA, an RNA, cytoplasm, Golgi, mitochondria, ER, lysosomes, peroxisomes, and sundry molecules, place them in a cell, cook some more, pull out two prototypes of a male and a female embryo, incubate them in the latibule of space. No nine months of gestation and all that jazz—that can wait till the later cycles.

Human beings were inserted into the biosphere of the earth. That was enough. They thrived and multiplied.

First, about their morphology. DNA was human DNA, and so, the external features of human beings (male and female) were like those of normal humans. Their physiological-biological and mental functioning were similar to those of normal beings. Strictly speaking, the comparison should start from this end and go back; that can be overlooked in this context.

What, then is the catch?

Easy. It was the Cycle of Horizontality. All the flora and fauna of earth were of the three-foot-upper-limit league. *Humans too had to follow the rules*. As explained before, the scale of one by fifty was not imposed on their size. If the ratio followed by the coconut trees was forced, a six-foot-three-inch tall macho hulk would have to content himself with standing fifteen inches tall. That would not have mattered much to Mother Nature,

but since she had a soft corner towards them, she relented to keep the humans at an average height of two feet. (*In the later cycle, of the 'real' human beings, there were to be sacred Indian texts, some of which described the existence of a special micro-diminutive species of sages called, *vaalakhilyas*. *They were of the size of the thumb!* Mostly, they were engaged in meditation. Must be the result of ancient, atavistic memories at work.)

A brief history of the two-foot humans.

The activities of the bonsai humans were not much different from those of the future, to-be-created-really-real homo sapiens. Humans are humans, irrespective of the dimensions of their physical bodies. For starters, the biological workings of their (of the bonsai-H) bodies were almost identical to those of non-virtual humans of the to-come twenty-first century. The face, torso, and limbs were all of the same proportions to total height as those of the homo sapiens. Their mode of reproduction was also the same. (As said earlier, the comparison goes backward in time. Homo sapiens were to copy the same technique as that adopted by the bonsai-H.)

Once created, the humans—Bonsai-H—got busy. Their population began to increase in what was to be far later designated as the Malthusian progression.

They got busy. They invented fire. They invented tools *and* weapons. They invented the wheel. They discovered metals and invented ways to use them in their daily lives. They formulated language. They wanted to settle in a place.

So, they got busy. They invented agriculture; along with all the necessary paraphernalia. More than learning to hunt, they discovered how to tame and domesticate animals. Humans of three feet height employed bulls of three feet height for plowing the land. They discovered they could do it, on certain types of soft soil. They built permanent dwellings to stay in. The ubiquitous phenomenon of family life grew from then onwards.

Once they settled, attachment to the land arose mysteriously. They formed colonies. Then provinces. Then ways to govern the provinces. Just like attachment to the land, desire for power arose. Kings and lords created

themselves. Society began to get complicated. Wars were getting to become a common occurrence. Their needs—and greed alongside—grew. Commerce was developed. The business became big business. Industrial Age ushered entered the stage. Civilization and progress exploded fast. Science was not far behind. Soon, goaded by the devil called mathematics, it overdeveloped into a pantagruelian size, overtaking the king and becoming The Queen. Two world wars ensued, each more destructive than the other. Soon, Apocalypse-pralaya-khayyamats was looming large over the horizon. Not only the destruction of the bonsai-H, but the total destruction of all kinds of life on earth was a distinct possibility.

Mother saw all this in advance. That Apocalypse-pralaya-khayamat event usually meant the ending of a cycle of creation. The mother did not want this particular cycle to end so quickly. She wanted this cycle, the Horizontal Cycle too, to last for at least 864,000,000 years; like the first cycle of One Atom. Moreover, she wanted her special children to live in pastoral, idyllic peace. For a brief period at least. If that were to come about, the overzealous activities of bonsai-H were too restricted.

With that in view, the Mother took a drastic and painful decision. She altered their genes, all the genes that had got anything to do with mental activities—especially those pertaining to abstract thinking. She ensured that humans would never progress in mathematics, except for the most basic operations like addition, multiplication, subtraction, division, etc. They would not venture beyond the Pythagoras theorem.

Nature took other strong measures too. She deleted all radioactive materials from her creation. All traces of uranium, plutonium, and suchlike devilish materials were totally removed from the earth. That was not enough to keep her spirited children down. Mother Nature, furthermore, deleted all traces whatsoever of petroleum and its related products from the womb of the earth. One more thing was to be done if her children were to live in peace. Mother Nature altered the very properties of certain elements, especially metals. *No element was capable either of producing, or conducting electricity!* All the sins of mankind, for the three modern centuries, were to be the direct or indirect products of petrol/diesel, radioactive elements, and electricity. Progress and civilization are poor sops. No mercy, no electricity.

The mother compensated her children for those (seeming) setbacks. She gave them a superlative gift. Their bodies were provided with special immunity from all kinds of diseases. *No disease could ever attack the two-foot humans of that era.* As a matter of fact, there was no word for sickness in any of the eight languages that existed in that era. (The eight languages corresponded to the eight sectors of the surface of the globe. Eight was enough. No Babel and all those headaches. No dragomans were required; the denizens of earth were all multilingual. There was one vast continent equal in area to the total of seven continents of the later creation, being surrounded, of course by sea on all sides. It was thus, an island also, *dveepa*, as they would later say in Sanskrit. The submerged, atavistic memory would make the speakers of that language visualize this vast single continent-cum-island as *jamboodveepa*.) What more does life need? Of course, death was there. What lives, must die. Every human being of that era lived in perfect health through his allotted lifespan of three hundred years; and died instantaneously in peace.

When it was ordained thus, bonsai-H were expected to live happily on earth forever. Alas, children may be children, but then there are always brats, prodigal sons, and dark sheep. It was the era of horizontality; the brats quite forgot to respect that in their bubbling zeal. It came about in this way . . .

Humans were not capable of simple contentment. In the beginning, they had constructed simple, igloo-like mud huts for dwelling. The streak of pomp and megalomania existed in them even in that pristine era. Even though none of them exceeded the height limit of three feet, the mud huts had eight-foot high ceilings. Then the brats manufactured bricks. They discovered methods of strengthening the roof and began to build one more floor above the first, the ground floor. The fad caught on (like wildfire, as said earlier), and soon (within a span of one thousand years) they were constructing four-storeyed buildings – cloud scrapers, as they proudly called them, the dwellings majestically rising sixteen feet into the sky!

It was pure blasphemy. The buildings were five times taller than the tallest tree on earth. Unthinkable, in the era of horizontality, where no living thing exceeded the three-foot limit. They had forgotten the meaning of respect. Mother was watching all the shenanigans of her dear children.

She wanted to teach her dear kids a dear lesson. She had also a sense of humor. She decided to set the birds against the tiny humans.

She empowered the birds; all of them, of all species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, whatever. The pure physical strength of the birds commenced increasing by a factor of one thousand. In a direct, one-to-one fight, no bonsai-H stood a chance against the birds. With the empowerment bestowed by Mom, even a small hawk could swoop down and carry off any bonsai-H walking on the road. Running did not help him. Mysteriously, hawks, eagles, peregrines, falcons, and all birds of prey began to take a disproportionate liking for hunting the B-humans.

The b-Hlings had only their cudgels to defend themselves. It was a mighty nuisance to be carrying a cudgel always, while on the road; or even if one left the safety of one's dwelling. But one had to make a living, go and till the land. And that was not possible, what with an army of birds waiting in (efficient military) formation wherever there was scope for agriculture. Finally, things came to such a state that the b-Hlings had to abandon the dwellings, enter into the safety zones under the trees (three feet tall), and learn to live on whatever roots and fruits and nuts they could forage in the woods. That was no problem, as Mom had bestowed on them the boon of absolute health. They adapted to the new situation quickly (about a couple of thousands of years). Meanwhile, the tall blasphemy-imbued cloud scrapers deteriorated and dilapidated and crumbled down. . . . The enterprising spirit of the humans drove them to build again. Now they were careful. They built their dwellings below the tallest of trees—none of which was more than three feet in height. The heads of the b-H would often scrape the ceilings if they were not careful in stooping low while moving inside their new residences. Gradually, they got accustomed to that irksome situation.

Horizontality smiled in satisfaction.

Mother smiled and laughed, the way only mothers can, lovingly at their kids.

Her visualization of virtual-would be-reality, though short (fifty thousand years), had gone well. Enough for now. If her children want to build skyscrapers, let them do so to their hearts' contentment-glut in the coming Cycle.

Mother doffed her virtual Oogle-goggles, blinked for the briefest microsecond, and looked down at the radiant earth of three-foot vertical limit. The bonsai-humans had vanished; only the flora and fauna existed, surging forward, horizontally in every possible way.

All the way

If you do something, do it all the way; no half measures. That is correct, Mother Nature thought ecstatically. On this planet earth, living things belonged to a higher order than inert matter—naturally, whichever way one interpreted the word. While living things, the jewels, and pearls of creation did not go up beyond three feet, objects of inert matter should not dare to think of raising higher than the bright, intelligent animals and trees. It would be appropriate to keep them down. So, Mother Nature set winds and rains and sunlight (and suitable chemicals also) to bring about fairness in her kingdom. Properties of the soil were altered subtly and quickly. The ever-restless tectonic plates were thrown into the fray. Soon, (about 1000 years) the topography of the earth changed into a pleasing uniformity everywhere. All hills and mountain ranges were eroded superfast.

In that era, a few mountains there were, that rose proudly more than fifty thousand feet above sea level. Plenty there were, that boasted of heights from thirty to forty thousand (feet). Now, they all had to shrink down to the mean level decreed by Mother Nature. Inert matter too had memories of its own kind. The majestic mountains felt much sad, remembering their past glory. When they felt sad, Mother felt bad. So, she gave them a small concession. Instead of the draconian three feet, the mountains and hills were allowed to keep their peaks at three feet and a half. (In the latest cycles, there were to be born strange creatures with quaint ideologies called communists, socialists, and such sundry. *If they were to have witnessed this scene of the socialized mountains, they would have swooned in ecstasy.*) Some mountains existed deep, inside the ocean beds. Law was law, a decree was a decree. Even those mountains had to obey the Command and bow down, and stay bowed down at three-and-a-half feet.

Ocean. Humans would probably be tempted to indulge in a bit of hair-splitting in this context. The ocean (there being only one) was

immeasurably deep, especially in comparison with the three (and a half) feet protrusions on the surface of the earth. When fifty thousand feet high mountains were leveled down to three (dot five) feet, why should the ocean be so deep, eh? Good point; but not good enough. Trillions and trillions of plants and trees, and more innumerable life forms existed on earth. All of those depended on water to live and grow. Mother Nature was well aware of that. If amalgamated communism and socialism were forced down on the ocean, and reduced its depth to three feet, then linguistically, the ocean can no longer be called an ocean—it would be just a sheet of water, though vast in area. Besides, the sun and wind would, with alacrity dry down the ocean; they had been waiting for such an opportunity for exhibiting their prowess for a million years. No water, no trees, no herbivores, no carnivores, no life. Mother had already created a planet without life, in the initial cycles. She did not want to revert. Thus, it was good, all things considered, to keep the ocean deep. Apart from that—to buttress the argument further—depth is intrinsically opposed to height, especially since sea level is the same everywhere, serves as a true and natural reference point for defining up and down.

Horizontal highlights; dramas and delights

In that heyday of horizontal reign, a few noteworthy statistics deserved to be appreciated. Nature enjoyed exhibiting ranges in every field of its manifestation. Since verticality was chopped down a bit (eh?!). She made compensated for it in the newly prospering horizontal kingdom, as pointed out at the beginning. The ratio of heights of the pioneer coconut tree, from its pristine pain-filled past to that of its neo avatar – fifty to one – was generously applied in the horizontal direction.

Unlike the vertical direction, the horizontal aids movement generously. This was illustrated most beautifully and convincingly in the case of the long, meandering rivers. With due respect and acknowledgment to gravity's power over a range of three feet, they still managed to reach their final destiny-cum-source; the ocean. Though the plant kingdom could not match such awesome distances, yet, in their own limited sphere, they exhibited remarkable growths in the procumbent positions. Many kinds of trees, (inspired by and imitating the coconut tree) were growing up to four hundred feet parallel to the ground. The

competing creepers outdid them by merrily scooting along the ground by factors of five to ten.

The denizens of the animal kingdom and reptiles, since, they were able to move freely, did not go to such lengths. Still, they developed their bodies horizontally as much as possible. In the words of the bearded gentleman (and men), they learned to adapt to the new situation by growing stronger spines and legs. Most kinds of animals, though limited to the new ceiling of three feet height, happily managed to acquire spines of eight to ten feet, lengthwise. Tails followed suit.

Snakes of sixty to eighty feet in length were a common sight in that era.

Creatures of the sea, being already free from gravity's tyranny (to a large extent) did not actually need to exceed their lengths. But resonating with the new spirit of horizontality everywhere, they too, began to flourish with longer bodies; for the fun of it. Whales of three hundred feet in length were a common sight. Marine fishes too joined the band.

Crocodiles, turtles, and lizards, all put in their contributions to the new celebration. Twenty-foot long alligators (not counting the tail spans) abounded gleefully.

Even the crawling centipedes and millipedes joined the revolution.

Finally, all the flying birds also opted in, even though it did not matter much to them. Their bodies elongated considerably. To offset gravity's irksome pull, they developed longer wingspans and stronger muscles.

In the end—ironically—revolution had spread so much everywhere, that it had become the norm, and was to be no longer recognized as a revolution.

If the bearded scholars of the later cycles had been alive, at that period, they would have had such an enormous amount of evolutionary material to study for a couple of centuries. That they would have broken their heads in despair at the unbelievable contradictions and superfluties and logical impossibilities, was a different matter altogether.

Fortunately, there was no human interference on the planet earth. All the million kinds of flora and fauna of the brave old world lived happily for the full length of a Cycle of Creation. For 864,0000,000 years.

Peace and prosperity be to ye who all read this.

Section III

ZIP STORIES

A mini intro: Just as in Nature, there exist vast ranges in human enterprises also. There are plenty of people all over the world, who exist far below the poverty line. At the other end of this range, there are guys who own so much wealth that it is almost beyond the reach of millions and millions of people. There are novels and epics which take up more than a thousand printed pages. Word counts reach more than three hundred thousand. On the lower end, there are short stories too. In consonance with the modern spirit of hurry-and-make-it-brief, it is natural that even shorter stories, like mini-stories, too should be born. Hurry and scurry, yes. You are rushing about your business so much, that you enter a no-waiting self-service eatery, grab your plate, gobble the food standing and rush out. Mini stories are perfect parallels to such kind of lifestyle, where reading is concerned!

Moreover, a writer often comes across some ideas for stories that cannot be composed into full-fledged novels, nor even respectable short stories. But the ideas will be so alluring that the writer does not like to put them into the Recycle Bin. So, what does he do? He compiles a neat, respectable bundle of zip tales. This section is an example of such an enterprise!

Theme; Nature Copies

Up to the year 2020

In the beginning, parents beget children. After that, thinking that they are big and grown up and wise, they undertake the arduous task of bringing up their children. Somewhere, a famous psychologist has said that the parents realize that as they bring up their children, they too have to learn newer and newer skills, lessons and insights and along with their children, they too have to grow up. That is

perfectly true – and natural. *If they are open and alert, there will be enough instances when parents can learn from their kids.*

So far, so good. Looks reasonable.

Some years after that

Parents and kids, and kids and parents learning interactively: that is part of the broader vision. In that broader vision, humans (and other life forms) taken as a whole, are the children and Nature is the parent. Nature, need not be interpreted in the terms of religion and mythology. It is that vast, undivided force that is running our world – and the universe – *in smooth scientific ways*. This is that of Nature, to which the scientific big boys allude when they talk of Natural laws, Natural selection, Natural evolution, etc.

This was that of Nature until the year 2020. Then gradually it grew and became a bit more. (Its kids, the human race, did not realize it initially.) But it had to happen naturally—with n, in both lower case and upper case. The fundamental syllogism had been running patiently for thousands and millions of years. It picked up momentum after Nature birthed human beings. Parents give birth to children and are influenced by them; they change. It is necessary to repeat this truth, to understand what happened to Nature after the 2020 era. The basic concept had been already stated by the great Sir IN, a genius who had propounded the profound law that action and reaction are equal and opposite. Wonderful law. Unchallengeable.

Human beings thought that the law applied to their world of matter, and in a way, to their affairs.

But their nature and their activities began to affect Nature. Not in the small way that blinkered environmentalists, ecologists, and sociologists argue, but in a deeper unforeseen way—and in many areas of nature’s workings. . . . Thus: (Somewhere after the year 2070 AD—the terms, AD and BC will have to be changed.)

A FOR APPLES

Long, long ago Adam ate apples. Thereafter nobody bothered much about them. People had forgotten that the apple represented knowledge. Until the advent of Sir Isaac Newton. The apple fell on his head, and knowledge was reborn. Knowledge was reborn as the law of gravitation. Thereby hangs a tale, as The Bard would like to say.

The falling of the apple was a momentous event in the history of technology. It is because of that, that man can send explorers into space. That is a different story; let us get back to the tale of the apple.

There was a big Braeburn apple farm at Appleshire, a modestly big village in England. One Mr. Appleton, a proud scholar who owned the farm, decided to commemorate the birth of the crown of knowledge in his own way. He would go and stand below the apple trees, patiently waiting for hours for a ripened apple to fall on his crown. He would then record the event in the family almanac, with details like the time of the occurrence of the event, the force with which the apple hit his crown, and his emotion of gratitude towards the apple. He meticulously maintained the almanac till his death. By then, this ceremony had become a family ritual. One of his sons continued the tradition. The tradition has been maintained steadily, and with gusto down the family line. The entries in the almanac have been almost identical, except for the dates and timings.

When a ripe specimen of *Malus Pumila* fell on the top of a person in that family, he was thrilled, the feeling having almost a mystic quality. Every Appleton down the timeline, who was blessed with an apple hit recorded that feeling of reverence also.

Sometimes, after the year 2070, the latest lucky scion of the Appleton family experienced the event. He had experienced and recorded it the previous year, but this time he noticed a slight

difference in the impact of the apple on his head. The next season, he experienced a more pronounced difference, which, he could not ignore. He meticulously noted it down in the almanac. In the fourth year, he could not help being startled by the impact of the apple on his head. He felt that the ‘impact’ was an inappropriate word for what happened to his head. (As per family tradition, they were all to stand below the trees with heads uncovered.) A gentle tap was more like it. In his fifth experiment below the apple tree, Appleton Jr. actually felt as if a flower had landed on his head.

He could no longer ignore what was happening. He picked up the apple. It was of the regular size and shape and color. He took it home and weighed it. The weight—for that size—tallied with the average weights he was used to observing. If an apple that big had fallen on his head, he should have definitely sensed a far heavier impact than the one he had received. Mysterious.

His curiosity and scientific zeal were spurred. The next day, he spent more time under the trees. He was lucky to get four hits. All four were of similar nature. The apples landed on his head like gentle flowers. All of them were of the usual sizes and weights.

Appleton Jr. was intrigued. An apple of that weight should make a strong impact when it fell on his head. The memories of the past experiences were still fresh in his mind and confirmed his ratiocination. He was getting excited. Before communicating it to his friends, he wanted to make sure, so repeated his experiment for the next two days. The results were the same. The apples landed like gentle flowers on his noggin.

Appleton was not an expert in mathematics, but he knew his basic physics and Newton’s formulae about gravity and moving objects. Let alone the apple, any object of equal weight should provide the same impact when it fell on his head. (From the same height as that from which the apple fell on him in his orchard.)

He took his golf ball and called one of his attendants and asked him to climb the apple tree and drop the ball on his head. ('Oh, don't worry old man. I am not dotty. This is serious science.') The golf ball did indeed make a good impact on Appleton's *pate*. The registered data was copacetic on one count. He wanted to seal the experiment properly. He asked the bemused attendant to pluck an apple from a branch and drop it on him.

Appleton Jr. looked up at the helper there on the branch, with the apple ready in his hand. Appleton gave the signal to let go, and closed his eyes expectantly, ready to note the exact quantum of impact.

His scalp was a-tingle with expectation.

The apple would land almost immediately.

It did not.

He waited, eyes still closed.

It did not land.

Whoa! What happened? He opened his eyes and looked up.

Then, it landed gently; gentler than a small rose.

By God, it had taken its own sweet time to descend!

Miraculously the apple rolled and somehow fell into his palms. He examined it. The size, the color, and the weight were all the same. But the bedeviled object had taken an eternity— yes, eternity indeed—to sail down. It couldn't be. Something must be wrong. He asked the equally puzzled assistant to pluck and drop one more apple.

No, something was not wrong with this apple. It too took its own sweet time and executed the gentlest of touchdowns on his exalted *pate*. Next time, he opened his eyes, and looked up, as another apple was dropped. The darned thing (he did not care if the expression

belonged to his cousins across the sea) seemed to be reluctant to come down!

It could not be. The surrounding air was normal, of normal density. There was no breeze. He cajoled the reluctant and trembling assistant to repeat the experiment under different trees—to make sure, see? There was no variation in the results. All the fell apples fell down at the laziest, most somnolent pace imaginable. He checked the timings with his watch. An average of nine–ten seconds for each fall; no, fall was not the word to describe it, float was a better word. And he felt that ten seconds were equivalent to a century in this context. He decided to bring in two of his reputed, socially respected friends into the ambit of his crazy experience. Meanwhile, the assistant up there was seized with hysteria and vertigo. He too had seen with his own eyes (which had served him infallibly for thirty years) the spooky descent of the apples. He had the impression that the apples were descending down a staircase, step after leisurely step. He lost his balance on the branch. He did not float down like the apples—Appleton Jr. observed it clearly—but luckily managed to land on his sturdy legs. He was sure that the devil or a sinister spirit was residing among the apple trees. But he was also a stubborn man in his own way and wanted to see how this weird affair would end.

Appleton spent the next exciting week repeating his experiments on the apples, in the honorable presence of his esteemed friends, meticulously preparing a thorough scientific record. Irreproachable in accuracy and honesty. They tested a hundred apples. All of them, without exception, obeyed the new, mysterious law of ten seconds (or more). Appleton was as excited as a hound on a hunting expedition. He *had* a good educational background, and thus he felt he was standing on the verge of an epochal discovery.

Apple Learning

What actually happened was this. The way parents were learning from the activities of their children, Nature too felt an urge to learn new things, *to acquire new behavior*. The hyperactivity of her human children was rubbing off on her. She wanted to indulge in a new behavior. One is for a starter. (If her behavior changed drastically in diverse fields, her dear children, mankind, would not be able to cope.)

She chose the apple, since her children, poor darling babies, considered the apple as the primordial symbol of knowledge. From there on

A new consciousness was kindled in the apples. When the Great Man of the seventeenth century discovered the laws of gravitation, the apples hurt (intransitively, the way cousins across the channel use it) badly. True, they had been falling down since the day of creation. But, after the discovery of The Law, they were aware of the pain when they thudded down on the earth. It was not pleasant—ask the countless humans who have fallen down from trees and rocks and buildings and whatnot. It was not humans only that felt pain on speedy downward contact with the earth. Apples too felt them, in their own way, unheralded, unsung. Not only did they hurt when they fell, but also, they were damaged and disfigured. (Ask humans. They fear the latter more.) Year after countless years.

Now, apples saw those other living entities, especially humans adapted to the adverse environment in different ways. Many bearded gentlemen, especially in recent years had written scholarly books on the adaptative quality of living beings. Humans went further; they not only sought solutions but *invented* them. Nature dished out a portion of that ingenuity (now) in sufficient quantity to the hurting apples. Inspired and goaded by Nature, apples found a satisfactory solution to assuage, nay banish, their pains consequent to their falling down.

What could they do? They did not want to stop becoming ripe. They did not want to avoid falling down. They wanted to be of use to others, besides being able to propagate their species. They were proud of their sweet taste and healthy nutrients. So, where was the solution? The problem, they intuited, lay in the devilish law of gravity, propounded by a great human thinker, who made the mathematical formulations when one of their own kind, unfortunately, fell on his cogitating pate. If they fell down, they saw that their speed went on increasing every second of a second on the way down. The greater the height from which they fell, the more their speed increased. The greater their final speed at the time of contact, the more severe their pain and damage would be. Speed, speed, was the main culprit; they saw that clearly. Then, how to decrease their speed? They could not float, like birds and some other kinds of objects did. They had no parachutes, like the way the brainy humans employed.

Ah, there was another mode of descent in a decent—even graceful—way. Invented by clever humans. Look at all stairs and steps they have been building everywhere. You can get down and reach the bottom leisurely, without hurting yourself in any way! The idea was okay and exciting indeed. But the biggest hurdle was the methodology. How to create steps in space? What could be the building material, and where did it lay? And, for heaven's sake, who will go on building them? Especially, and only under apple trees? The problem was undaunting. But the apples never lost hope, once the main idea got hold of them. They copied the attitude of humans (Nature saw to that). They kept on ruminating for three centuries. Then they got their break. The humans were fast getting too intelligent, and still feeling unsatiated, they climbed to the inevitable stage of over-intelligence. Under the intoxicating influence of that state, humans invented a theory called Quantum. Quantum, the product of their intellect, outgrew them. Like the fictional character, Frankenstein, this scientific character overtook its masters. It was

rumored – proudly – that nobody really understood Quantum. That was true. Quantum could do anything unimaginable, or even scientifically unholy. It was here that apples caught on to the act. They collectively prayed to Quantum.

Quantum was appeased. It gifted them a boon. In pure space, Quantum had surreptitiously erected stairs. The stairs could be of any width and stretch.

If they existed, then why did not humans or other beings of the world see them? The supremely simple answer is that the stairs were in a superimposed state of infinite possibilities. When an observer observed them the wave function collapsed, and the stairs became real – to the observer. This was basic Quantum, and all boffins on earth knew it. (In spite of saying that nobody understood the soul of Quantum.) Mother Nature saw to it that only the apples were endowed with the gift of observing the stairs. What was the stuff out of which the invisible stairs were made? The answer is a supremely ironical joke on the boffins. When they discovered electromagnetic waves, they had to assume that the waves traveled in a medium; the way sound waves travel through the medium of air, the way aquatic waves travel through the medium of water. This medium for the electromagnetic waves was named ether—the invisible stuff which fills all of space, and through which the waves can propagate. The idea of ether was discarded like hot potatoes. There were theoretical problems, and also a famous experiment on light banished the idea of ether. (And so on.) The joke that Quantum now played was that it used that same undetectable, undetected ether to construct the staircases for the sake of helping the descending apples! The configuration of the steps and stairs could be arranged such that the descent of the apples appeared to be vertical (Mathematicians were experts in such manipulations!). To the human observers. Enough of the torturous technical details. The bottom line was that the apples attained their goal of coming down leisurely, undamaged and

unhurt. Enough. The reality of their newly acquired skill was amply demonstrated in the orchard of Appleton Jr.

Back to Appleton. He announced his astonishing findings in the local newspaper and sent copies of his neatly composed research paper to the Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

Initially, there was no response from the scientific community. What Appleton had purportedly discovered was so bizarre and unreal that the universities dismissed his ‘findings’ as a kind of hoax. But the local people were intrigued since they knew Appleton well. There were other farms also in Appleshire. Two owners had the curiosity to test the behavior of apples—the Appleton Effect, as they jocularly called it. To their surprise, they found that what Appleton had discovered on his farm, held true on their farm also. All the apples they tested floated down serenely, at their own royal pace of ten seconds or more. Soon, the village was abuzz with the astonishing discovery.

World Wide Web and Internet and FBs and Twitters, WhatsApps, and YouTubes took over the next step. The printed media was not far behind. The world was set ablaze with the new astonishing, superlative-defying news.

The scientific community could not sit back complacently after that.

Thousands and thousands of experiments using the most refined measuring instruments were conducted in all places, East, West, South, and North of the planet earth. The scientists were thoroughly perplexed when they found that what Appleton Jr had claimed to have discovered was indeed true. The Appleton Effect was now admitted into the scientific Hall of Fame.

Scientists became furiously busy trying to explain the incomprehensible anomaly of the behavior of apples. Many tentative explanations were put forward. Furious debates were

taking place in all scientific societies. No officially definitive explanation was accepted yet.

Meanwhile, a geeky student from the University of Pisa (*‘in supremæ dignitatis’*) put forward a catching suggestion. The birthday of Galileo would fall a month later. The geek-cum-nerd suggested that their college may re-enact the famous Galileo’s Experiment from the top of the tower of Pisa, on his birthday. (During those times people, goaded by Aristotle, believed that heavier objects fell down faster than the lighter ones. Galileo argued that a feather and a stone would take the same time to reach the ground when dropped from the same height, say the top of the Pisa tower.) Only, this time, two kinds of apples would be dropped from the tower. One set of six would consist of real botanical apples, and the opposing set of six would have apples cast in iron, *but weighing far less than the real apples*. A witty, nerdy twist. The idea was enthusiastically approved by all. The news coverage of the proposal generated so much interest that soon the project crossed the national boundaries. Finally, twelve famous scientists from different nations all over the world were chosen to be present at the venue of the demonstration, the historical Leaning Tower... The large scale and the logistical details of the international event need no mention here. People who attend international film awards, music presentations, soccer plays, etc are familiar with the teeming humans of all kinds usually present at such events. Suffice it to say that the students of the esteemed University themselves amounted to more than 50000 in numbers!

The fifteenth of February arrived accompanied by a beautiful, bright, blue clear sky. The area in front of the Pisa tower was packed with eager spectators from all over the world. It is not necessary for this chronicle to embark on an enumerating odyssey of the thousands of visual and other factual details which essentially combine together to stage an event of international magnitude. Watching the demonstration was important. Everybody throughout

the world was watching. Direct observers were more than half a million. The University building adjacent to the tower was blocking innumerable people. To help them and all the others in the streets of Pisa, large digital screens had been set up at strategic places. Hundreds of media persons were covering the event. Apart from them, hundreds of thousands of mobile phones and hand-held cameras were pointing at the tower. As the old novelists were fond of saying, a sea of humanity had gathered in the town. The noise was like the roar of huge waves; and things like that.

To put it bluntly, billions of eyes were focused on the tower. Special instruments had been manufactured, to ensure that both the apples were released simultaneously, at the touch of a button, and start the ultrasensitive timer. Special platforms at the base of the tower would record as soon as the balls hit them. The timers could detect a difference of a millionth of a second. If there was a difference in the time of the landing of the two apples, the timers would undoubtedly record them. All the speechmakers finished their jobs. (No function can be complete without them.) Everything was ready. The signal to start the demonstration was given. Millions of people looked on, up at the top of the tower with bated breaths.

Two Nobel laureates came forward. Each was handed an apple of a different type. They loaded the apples into the designated trays. Then the mayor of Pisa came up and pressed the release button. The two apples began their descent.

The fake apple raced down about 170 feet and hit the ground with a bang, before such a description could be appropriately verbalized, in about three seconds. Like a disciplined soldier, it thoroughly obeyed the established laws of physics. It did not matter much if they were Newtonian or Relativistic. Because the real apple was mocking them. They included all of them: the fake apple, the laws, the hundreds of thousands of open mouths and twice that number of gawking eyes, and other billions of people watching the event on electronic screens.

The real, botanical apple appeared to be descending down invisible steps, in the fashion of a tired, old queen, managing each step-down, with majesty and dignity. The world can wait while she deigned to place her royal steps one at a time. Down . . . down . . . down. The other mock apple had long ago completed its downward journey and was recovering from the impact.

One, two . . . five seconds passed. (Another big digital clock, in sync with the experimental timer, was showing off the passage of time in excruciating detail.)

Six, eight . . . ten seconds passed.

The apple was still floating down.

The breathing of the direct witnesses on the spot had stopped.

After the 20th second, the apple finally touched the sensing platforms on the ground. Light touch, or maybe, a rough kiss at the most.

An audible, collective sigh went up from the throats of all those watching the performance of the apple. The relief of enormous tension was palpable.

Next, the second set of Nobel laureates came forward and loaded the two kinds of apples. The honorable mayor pushed the button.

The same drama as before enacted itself out. Twenty seconds for the real fruit. One more collective sigh. Ditto for the third and the fourth and the fifth set of apples. All imaginable emotions were being built up in the chests of all the humans following the unprecedented demonstration: awe, disbelief, curiosity, thrill, hysteria, skepticism, and fear too. (Yes, in the palpitating heart of many a diehard scientist. A thousand years of majestic, impregnable science was crumbling before his eyes.)

The climax was building up to unimaginable heights. Only the last set of apples remained to be sent down. Most of the scientists

present there were hoping against hope that at least in the last throw, there might be at least a perceptible difference in the timings from the previous five, which were all identical. Even if there was a minute difference, they could take refuge in the theory of statistics. (Mathematics was equal in cunning to that of the devil, and they knew their maths well and were sanguine that they could manipulate maths in devious ways and somehow/keep the experimental results from entering the domain of officially approved records.) They were also busy wiping minute beads of perception from their academic brows.

The inevitable climax arrived. The last pair of Nobel laureates loaded the apples with almost imperceptible tremor. The honorable *sindaco* pushed the button more stoically than a stoic and retreated.

There was absolutely no difference in the results—20, three seconds. (The timers had been calibrated up to a precision of six decimal places.) But the atmosphere was permeated with so much tension that many witnesses hallucinated that the real apple took more than twenty minutes to touch down. A few more sensitive souls saw that a mini transparent parachute was attached to it.

Even a content of ten thousand words fails to describe what happened after that. One thousand years of stolid science crumbled on the spot. Varieties of human reactions occurred. Better not say much about them. Only the highlights are worthy of being chronicled here.

A loud, disgruntled grumbling and grunting arose from the depths of the ground. It could be clearly identified as belonging to a human. A much-enraged old man. There was no gramophone, or such gizmo during that man's time. All those who had heard his voice had died long ago. Still, there was no doubt among the listeners as to whom that enraged voice belonged. It belonged to the venerable Galileo, the grand old man of science. The words,

reverberating in the air were distinguishable, “*Él imposible. Il diavolo.*”

No pen can possibly describe in detail and accurately, the astonishment and subsequent pandemonium that ensued.

That was nothing when compared to what occurred when the Leaning Tower began to tremble. The tremble too was audible . . . The tower was cleared of all humans in record time. Here too, the detailed picture can be omitted, for the same reason as said above. The tower was still shivering after the total evacuation of the persons there; the multitude of humanity was watching from a safe distance.

The media was hysterical. It was announcing the latest report. .

Two of the scientists (Nobel laureates) who had participated in the demonstration had somehow evaded the evacuation and stayed hidden inside. One of them came forward and stood near the equipment used for discharging the apples. The bright and brilliantly arranged lighting system was still on. The attention of the gathered crowd was now fully focused on him. The scientist managed to position himself into the pan that was discharging the renegade apple, somehow going through an elaborate process of compressing, condensing, and contorting his body, as if a fierce spirit had taken possession of him. As the mesmerized crowd watched, the other scientist pushed the release button. The man in the pan shot downward, *with a greater speed than that of the faster apple.* (The timer had dutifully recorded it).

The myriad of people watching the scene was aghast. Gasps erupted involuntarily from their throats.

As their eyes refocused on the other person who had pushed the button, he stepped a bit forward. And as they were still gazing hypnotically, he took out a pistol from inside his coat, cocked it, aimed it at his temple shouted, ‘Damn the apples’ and shot himself.

The second wave of gasps and shouts and exclamations exploded.

The police and security personnel were the first to recover and surge forward into action.

They were promptly thwarted. The tremor from the tower increased in volume and frequency. The *polizia* froze in their boots. A million hearts beat like African wild drums. The tremor rose to a crescendo. The ground resonated and shook in response.

As billions of eyes watched the scene throughout the world, the Leaning Tower leaned further and further and crashed to the ground. The apples smiled sardonically and said, “Now, don’t place the blame on us.”

G FOR GLASS

One fine morning, Kulandaivel, son of Kuppusami of Kumbhakonam town was on the verge of drinking his favorite coffee from a glass tumbler. His wife had brewed it fine and steaming hot (Kulandaivel liked it hot) and placed it on the table. The husband's eyes were locked on the generous, swinging posterior of his beloved wife. He absentmindedly lifted the glass and sipped the hot coffee.

The coffee was hotter than usual. His fingers burnt and his tongue was scalded. Since the sensation on the tongue was stronger, his attention was drawn there involuntarily for a brief second. That was enough time for his fingers to get burnt more. Without asking for his permission, his fingers let go of the grip on the glass tumbler.

The tumbler crashed to the floor. The coffee splashed and spread. The tumbler broke into pieces.

It was impossible to repair the tumbler or glue the pieces back.

Kulandaivel may have been fond of the coffee, but his wife was fonder still of the tumbler. It was made of fine, thin glass with a catching decorative design. She chided the man sharply. (Inside her mind, she was happy also, because she had intuited the reason for Kulandaivel's distraction.) She had felt an empathetic pain when the glass broke. Yet, it could be replaced.

Empathetic; that was not an exaggeration.

Because the glass too had experienced pain at being broken. 'Glass' here refers to that material out of which the tumbler was made.

Hettington was reading the morning newspaper in his house, when his granddaughter suddenly rushed in and hugged and kissed her grandpa, for reasons best known to herself – or other

grandchildren of the same age. The newspaper was torn, and Hettington was startled. He jerked and stood up. The bifocals he was wearing, fell on the floor. They broke. (The right eyepiece into two parts and the left one into three.) Hettington loved his granddaughter and could not get angry at her. He loved his glasses too and felt pained. Yet, they could be replaced.

At the moment when the bifocals were broken the glass too had experienced pain at being broken. 'Glass' here refers to that material out of which the spectacles were made.

Robin was driving along the highway at a fairly high pace, being careful not to exceed the speed limit. He was appreciating the beautiful sky and the trees lined along the road. A few trees here and there had branches overhanging across the road. They were at quite a safe height and posed no danger, he observed. Suddenly a dry hefty twig came loose from the branch and fell directly on the windscreen of his car. Robin simply could not avoid it. The windscreen was shattered. Quick on reflexes, Robin decelerated fast and stopped the car on the side of the road. He swore. Cleaning the car was no problem. He had liked the windscreen much and rued the damage done to it. Yet, it could be replaced.

That was nothing when compared to what the windscreen felt. Not the windscreen in fact, but the glass, the material out of which it was made. The pain that the glass felt was inconsolable and incommunicable. Especially that which arose, when it sensed the thoughts of the owners that it could be replaced.

These kinds of accidents had been happening fairly regularly for many decades. By the year 2070 AD, a drastic change had taken place in Nature. Man, the crown of creation was learning beyond measure (and beyond reasonability?) and that began to act back on Nature. Nature passed it on to select inanimate objects of her creation. Glass began to evolve. It began to think and feel.

Then it began to evolve further. It saw what the apple was doing and caught on with the act. The apple had decided to protect itself. That decision was enough for Nature to endow it with a special gift—a mechanism to protect itself when assaulted by gravity (ironically, the attraction was a form of assault). Glass decided to protect itself. Nature was pleased with such a positive attitude and bestowed a special boon on glass.

Man was preparing glass out of the sand. The sand was a hard and tough material. So, it is reasonable that glass made out of that raw material should retain the strength of its previous incarnation. There were far more unreasonable things in creation. Think of it. Charcoal is carbon and is a very soft material. On the other hand, diamond is also carbon and is one the hardest materials on earth. Compared to that, silica is harder. Hence glass should be harder than diamond; in the sense that it should not be meekly brittle.

It all depended on what the chemists called molecular bonds. Glass learned how to change its molecular bond, and how to manipulate it. Manipulating was not all that difficult. Politicians and businessmen have been doing that for thousands of years. Mathematicians outsmarted them (in their own field of logic and symbols and inequalities, infinities, syllogisms and whatever can be conceived). Glass picked it up from both.

It became harder than diamond and tougher than steel, retaining its transparency. It was kvelled of itself.

A distant descendant of Robin was merrily driving his car at a fast pace along the same national highway. A heftier twig from the same tree fell on the windscreen. Robin flinched. Brought the car to a stop at the road curb, got out, and inspected the windscreen. It was intact; not even a scratch. He was puzzled. Another day, another speeding car dashed against a concrete pole. There was damage to some of the metallic parts. But the headlights, the windscreen the and rear-view mirror were in perfect condition. The owner was

puzzled but partly happy. The next day, in some towns, unruly mobs were pelting stones at vehicles. The hefty stones that hit the windscreens and glass doors simply bumped off them and fell ineffectually on the road. Later reviewing the video shots of the scene confirmed it.

Somewhere else old men stumbled and fell, and their spectacles flew into the ground. When they picked up their glasses, they were surprised to find that there was no damage. Grandchildren plucked and threw the spectacles of their grandpas around the floor. But the bifocals did not break into pieces irrespective of the treatment they got. Future wives of future Kulandaivels got bored because the glass tumblers did not break when they fell on the floor and so they lost opportunities to scold their husbands.

These and many such kinds of odd incidents began to occur at higher frequencies. The events were not confined to any particular local areas. The phenomena were spread uniformly worldwide. Finally, what appeared to be an oddity became a permanent feature.

Humans, naturally, observed this new characteristic of glass. They were amazed at first. But this time, there was no drastic, overwhelming worldwide emotional reaction as happened in the case of the apples. Humans were delighted. Glass was happy. It was a case of mutual contentment.

Amen. *Om shanti, shanti, shanti.*

B FOR BLACKHOLE (ROGUE, THE)

It all started with gravity. Ultimately it all ended with gravity. Till then nobody realized the gravity of the matter. Science was merrily progressing.

For a long time, Science was not bothered about new age philosophy and such-like things. ‘Believe it and you will see it.’ ‘Visualize it and it will happen.’ Ideas of that ilk. Science was believing in a kind of severe-reasoning-based reality and it was seeing what it believed in. Unbeknownst to Science, behind its back, other kinds of things were preparing to manifest.

In the material sphere, humans were unreasoningly, prolifically polluting the earth and that was affecting nature in many ways. Science too could not deny it. The ironic and (yet unseen) part of it was that man’s mental activities too were acting on Nature and Nature was gradually changing under that impact.

Among the many kinds of mental activities, one was greed. Greed has so many roots. It tries to grab everything in its reach into its insatiable maw. Grab, grab, grab. More and more and more. New age wisdom says that much becomes more.

That is true of Nature. That is what gravity is all about. Matter collects. Its gravity increases. It can grab more matter that walks in within the reach of its tentacles; getting stronger in its pull. At a certain stage, it becomes a mighty black hole, which has grabbed all matter within its reach. Even light cannot escape from it—as every science schoolboy knows. There are many black holes that have more mass than thousands of suns put together. And that is saying little.

Now, among humans, as mentioned earlier, wanderlust is also increasing day by day. Nature picked it up. It brought together greed and wanderlust and bestowed it on one particular black hole.

That black hole became a rogue. Result—the End was triggered. The end of the universe. That is all. In some unexpected ways.

A few stats, first. The smallest black hole would have seven to eight solar masses. The supermassive black hole, M87 has about six billion solar mass! Not to worry. The universe is still far bigger. They say the vast universe—the observable one, that is—has a radius of about 46.5 billion light years. They have also estimated the mass of the universe to be about 1.5×10^{53} kgs. The volume, about some number multiplied by ten, raised to the power of eighty cubic meters. No worry there.

Before the year 2070, all the black holes in the universe were living together peacefully, following the famous policy of living and letting live. (Irrelevant comment: the qualifier, together, is said with tongue-in-cheek. Distances between two peacefully living B-holes could be many billions of kilometers. Tongue, back to normal.) Sometime after the year 2070, one of the smallest black holes at the outermost edge of the universe was fired with ambition. It was thus goaded by Nature. Nature was inspired by human beings, who were insatiably fond of grabbing everything. As elucidated earlier, humans were affecting Nature not only in the field of matter but in other supra-material ways. The blackhole became an ambitious rogue—and clever to boot.

Like a rogue elephant, the Black Hole came out of the herd and began to move away from its coordinates in the space-time fabric. Neither Newtonian physics nor Relativity could explain the phenomenon. Only Quantum Mechanics armed with infinite waves of infinite states of probabilities and devilish mathematics could suggest an explanation. However, explanations were not important, what actually happened was. That was the arbitrary, goal-seeking movement of a black hole.

The predator hole found another black hole smaller than itself. It moved in that direction. Soon, it gobbled up the smaller one. Not

really all that surprising, because, on earth, bigger fish had been swallowing smaller ones from time immemorial. (“I have just copied what you have been doing all the time. Fair enough, no?”) The rogue hole obtained more mass, thus having more pulling power. The taste of swallowing another hole was very pleasant. It wanted more. It stretched out its antennae in all directions. Found another smaller black hole not far off. The predator, *changing its course*, went on a chase. Gobbled up the second victim, and grew more massive and stronger.

The hunger of the Black Hole grew in what the mathematical guys call, geometrical proportion. Like two becoming four, four becoming eight, eight bloating up to sixteen . . . see? The more it ate, the more its hunger grew; obvious from the perspective of physics, (not biology). Maybe, smaller black holes had a death wish and they managed to come nearer its curve of motion. The irony was that as the size of the predator grew, the other black holes began getting smaller in comparison.

Quite eerily, like a good predator, *it was able to change its course as per its needs*. Orphic again, as it began to mimic AI of human invention. It developed its own strategy and found out that if it went hunting in a straight line, it has to go all the way to the end and come back and start from a different angle. Very inefficient—that was the way of dummies. It calculated that if it moved along a spiral path, it would be able to cover space in all directions, and not miss any black holes. As the size of the expanding spiral moved, the center of the spiral too kept moving – from the outermost edge, in the wards.

In this route, it got a bonanza. Not only black holes crossed its way. It met countless petty matters like stars, planets, asteroids, meteors, and interstellar gas. Small stuff compared to black holes, but welcome variety in the menu, nonetheless. Tasty appetizers, millions and millions of bits of them.

The rogue Black Hole grew and grew until it became bigger than its rival, M87. The monster then proceeded in earnest, fletcherising anything and everything that came in its path. Its burning ambition was to swallow the whole universe.

Alas, it did succeed indeed. And thereby, as the next Bard would like to repeat, hangs a tale. A special tale. *Only, there remained nobody to tell the tale after it happened.*

Initially, the tell-tale signs were very faint and people did not notice them. The sun and the moon rose regularly over the horizon. Cocks crew, bees hummed and lovers embraced each other passionately under the moonlight as ever. But among the people, there are clever and curious guys called scientists furiously measuring with their myriad instruments, whatever can be measured.

Some trainee scientists at a certain lab measured the distance between the sun and earth at the time of aphelion and noted that the distance was one mile less than that shown (94.8 million) in the official almanac. One mile is insignificant when compared to 94.8 million and nobody lost sleep over that. Even sophisticated instruments can malfunction, you know, they said. But, once in a while, little insignificant things have got a nasty habit of blowing up into enormous history-changing events. (Someone shot someone; it turned up into World War I. Someone burgled someplace; it ended up in dislodging the president of a big nation, besides permanently associating a black significance to the word, 'gate.')

The budding scientist was a persistent guy, and he repeated his experiments over a period of six more months.

On each attempt at measurement, he found that the difference in the distances was increasing steadily. He could no longer keep quiet. The discrepancy of one mile had increased to ten thousand miles. *Planet earth was getting nearer and nearer to the sun!* As a bonus, he had got a different kind of measurement also. His curiosity had

urged him to look at the moon. While moon-struck lovers were lost in their amorous embraces, he was dutifully measuring the distance between the moon and the earth. He had found that the moon too was dipping nearer and nearer to the earth. It had already dropped down by twenty kilometers. He got busy and started screaming: by way of publishing strong, urgent articles, over the internet, social media, the inevitable YouTube and Twitter, and other websites dedicated to astronomy.

The scientific community woke up. Scientists got busy. Gradually, busy got furious and feverish, as more and more astonishing—and alarming—discoveries were made.

*

Meanwhile, the rogue Black Hole was merrily cruising on in its hunt for food, in its ever-expanding circle, scouring more and more of interstellar space, gobbling enormous quantities of matter. Meteors, asteroids, cosmic dust, planets, stars, and galaxies, all became grist to its mill.

*

The discoveries popped up one after another: unbelievable, unthinkable, unpalatable, and most of all threatening in their import. Scientific papers, theories, theses, conjectures, and all kinds of intellectual explorations came out spewing from the febrile brains of hyperventilating scientists.

That the longest distance between the earth and the sun was getting smaller was just the beginning. The distances of other planets in the solar system were also shrinking. Then they found out that the *solar system as a whole* was moving at a faster rate! Since the planets were part of the solar system, their deviation in speed was small in comparison to that of the system. Where was it speeding to? Why? How? In searching for the answer, they found

that the Milky Way as a whole was speeding up at a still faster rate. After all, our solar system formed a minute part of the huge galaxy.

The baffled boffins found that light from many distant galaxies was being bent in abnormal proportions. The red shift—as the jargon says—was showing less than the expected and previous results.

An alarming number of firmly established, surely existing and charted nebulae and constellations were found missing when the latest super-telescopes were pointed in their direction! Nothing was ‘visible’ in their erstwhile astronomical locations. Even many of the bigger black holes were being gulped up one by one.

The next gobsmacking news was that the speeds of many galaxies were getting slower. That was the most mysterious thing as far as astrophysics was concerned. Yet, that too was nothing when compared to what they found next—sometime later. The galaxies now began to reverse their direction of movement. When their paths were plotted, it was seen that all those galaxies were moving radially inwards, as if intending to meet at one point.

Mysteriously, the ancient phenomenon of the showering of cosmic rays dwindled down and stopped altogether.

It was a universally accepted (and revered) theory that the universe was expanding. The rate of expansion was more as one moved farther and farther. Now, it appeared that the farthest galaxies were moving slowly. Many of them stopped expanding. It appeared as if some parts of the universe were shrinking!

Then all the guys (no need to mention, who) got together and deduced that some mysterious, super-mega-mega object was attracting all those poor galaxies. What else could it be, but a black hole—a rogue one. Thus, they named it. It only took them a bit more time before they were flabbergasted to deduce that the Rogue was moving in a spiral path. What that portended, was by no means

good; either for humans or for the universe in a tiny corner of which, they lived. True, many had proposed the advent of The Big Crunch as an offset to The Big Bang. But that was an intellectual, theoretical exercise. And that was to occur many billions of years away. Nobody expected the end of the universe to arrive so early, so suddenly, and in such a fashion.

The Predator Hole did not care about what the tiny earthlings felt. Intoxicated by its conquering march, and food, it kept spiraling at an *ever-increasing speed*.

The universe was indeed vast. But the chipping off by the awesome Hole was making visible impressions. The hunger of the Predator was growing into cosmic proportions.

Once the existence of the Predator Hole was established, the earthlings got busy plotting its course. At that stage, they were unaware that it (tracking) made no difference either to the Rogue-predator or to their own ultimate fate. As per the latest calculations, the Hole was active many million light years away from the planet earth. (When this was announced, selfish politicians and most ordinary people were vastly relieved. Big business was thinking of ways to make money out of this information. When light itself would take so many million years to reach us, why bother about some petty event occurring so far away?)

There seemed to be a method in the madness of cosmic dissolution. In metaphysics, there is a revered saying that an event has no meaning unless and until it is witnessed. Human beings are experts; they specialize in witnessing. More than that, they always go in search of something to be witnessed. Nature—fate, Nature, or whatever—said, so be it. *I will give you the final witnessing*.

The startled, distressed, hysterical earthlings were hypnotized into a continuous state of open-mouthed, saliva-drenched witnessing. On the screens of all the astronomical observatories around the world, the outer-most galaxies at the edge of the

‘observable’ universe (and all kinds of denizens of the cosmos) began to vanish one by one. *At an astonishing rate that defied all science known till then.* The pun ascended to cosmic proportions, since the word, ‘observable’ became a cosmic joke. The observable universe, as they used to qualify it, was supposed to extend up to 46.5 billion light-years of radius. The scientists feverishly scanning the universe were stonkered into a stupefied daze, feeling as if they were playing a computerized game on their serious scientific screens as the galaxies and nebulae were being wiped out of existence at a furious pace. The 46.5 billion light years limit was reduced to thirty. In a span of two years, that thirty had been cut down to ten. Next year, the radius of the universe (‘observable’) was chopped down to one. Then (instead of years) month after crazy month, the qualifying unit of distance, ‘billions’ was stunted down to poor millions. Millions crashed down to thousands...

Whatever it was, that was guzzling up the universe, seemed to be moving in a spiral. In the final stages, the bedazzled boffins now saw to their horror that our Milky Way was spinning at a furious rate, following the movement of the invisible Predator. It (our galaxy) was also moving nearer and nearer towards that Cosmic Gobbler. Or, it could be interpreted the other way; the Predator following its intrinsic nature was approaching our galaxy. The interpretations made no difference to the final outcome. . . . The Andromeda galaxy and the Magellanic clouds had already been licked out by the Predator. That was peanuts, as the Yankee expression says, for one who had ingested millions of galaxies.

One fine (sic) day, except for the Milky Way, everything that ever existed in the blessed universe was completely wiped out of existence. Die-hard theoreticians argued that that was impossible according to rigorous laws, that all that matter might have changed into a form of undetectable energy, and so on. Yet, it could not be denied that the rest of the universe was wiped out from the digital screens of all the observatories in the world.

At this stage, all the best and shining optimists gave up hope. It was obvious to the dullest of morons that when 99.999 percent of the universe had already melted, the remaining pittance stood no chance. The Milky Way may stretch to a hundred thousand light-years across. But in comparison to the size of the universe, that was nothing.

They had not found aliens till then. It meant that Life itself was being scratched out. Pity. A few radical stoic thinkers suggested that pity was an irrelevant emotion when the size of Life was compared to the size of the rest of the lifeless universe. Auriga, Corvus, Draco, Hydrus, Lynx, Orion, Pictor, Serpens Caput, Tucana, and Vulpecula were lapped up eagerly by the voracious Black Hole. Considering the unimaginable amount of matter it had consumed, some suggested that the term, black hole, would not fit that ginormous object any longer. Even the term, object too would not do. The super-almighty-bloody thing was behaving more like a living entity... Alas, the time for theoretical hair-splitting was shrinking with each month.

Inevitably, months will shrink into weeks, and weeks too would not count. *There will be no more weeks left to be counted!* After that, days will not matter at all; the mother of all, the Ultimate countdown would have begun.

The Ultimate Countdown did indeed happen.

The permanent dot in the sky at which the axis of the spinning earth had been pointing from time immemorial, the Pole Star vanished. That was the most ominous sign. (When this news was announced, two LSD poets whose brains began spinning terrifically, declared that the earth itself would stop spinning since it had lost its bearings! The more sober ones were too sober to even laugh at them.) Soon, Ursa Major itself was quaffed up.

Meanwhile, the distance between the moon and earth kept on shrinking steadily. The earth was speeding nearer and nearer to the

sun. The shape of its orbital path around the sun was changing drastically into strange curves as the horrified community of astronomers gazed unbelievably at their digital screens. In turn, the sun too had already been performing acrobatics around the galactic center of the Milky Way. It had been calculated that even though speeding at a fantastic rate of more than 828000 kilometers per hour, the sun takes many, many millions of years to complete its circuit around the galactic center. Now, the bearded geeks discovered that the same sun was traveling three times faster, *the measurements relentlessly increasing with each fresh attempt*. More terrifyingly, the distance between the galactic center was shrinking rapidly. By each day; not monthly or weekly, dear children of the earth.

When the sun itself was behaving so erratically, anything could be expected to happen. Yes, things happened in quick succession. The outermost planet, Pluto (many do not recognize it as a planet) vanished out of sight. Poor trembling Neptune was next in line. The cosmic massacre continued till all the outer planets of the solar system were licked up.

Things began to pick up greater speed by then.

Lovers and romantic poets (and dogs) had an intimate attraction toward the moon for millions of years. That same moon grew in size day by day, appearing more and more beautiful. The sea tides seemed to like it and were rising to never-before-seen heights, as if eager to embrace it. In the initial stages, the growing moon really looked wonderful and grandly beautiful. The moonlight became brighter and brighter. Then, a stage came when the smaller craters like Aristarchus, Plinius, and Picard were visible to the naked eyes. That was when the dogs commenced howling frantically, their animal sense telling them that an abnormal and dangerous development was taking place in the sky above, which somehow threatened their lives on earth. The moon had attained the size of a ten feet glowing globe. Nothing like this had ever happened in the history of the earthlings. Romanticism, thrill-seeking emotions

quickly faded in their hearts and were being replaced by rising fear and gloom—and inescapable convictions of doom.

The sun-lit light fixture in the sky swelled to twenty feet in diameter and proceeded toward thirty. Moonlight was no longer cool. The towns did not need electric lights at night. It saved plenty of electrical energy; but who was going to enjoy the savings?

It was certain that the moon was going to slam into the earth very soon. The only thing that kept it at bay, not delayed, was the movement of the earth itself. The earth was rushing nearer and nearer to the sun!

It was the sun's turn now to grow bigger and bigger. The days were getting hotter and hotter. The polar ice, (and ice anywhere on the surface of the earth) was melting fast. So, even if the moon did not slam into the belly of the earth, all cities were going to be submerged anyway. Or, the earth was going to slam into the sun. Sorry, the earth was such a small mass that to say it slams on the sun is ridiculous. Rather, the sun would suck the earth.

The days were getting intolerably brighter and hotter very fast. Earth was going to be burnt soon. The only thing that delayed such an occurrence was that the sun too was moving faster and faster than before. It was moving towards the galactic center of the Milky Way very rapidly. It would have looked like a merry race on a cosmic scale, were it not for the tragic certainty that there would be no one left to witness the finale. Because, heading the race was the Milky Way itself, speeding frantically at the finishing line. To sum up, the moon was racing toward the earth, the earth was racing toward the sun, the sun was racing toward the galactic center and the galaxy too was racing.

At the finishing line, the Rogue, the Predator was waiting with open jaws to receive and gulp down the Milky Way, poor which was the last survivor in the whole of the universe.

D-day arrived. The 'D' was apt in this case; it stood for Doomsday. All the earthlings on one hemisphere watched trembling, anticipating the dazzling moon to impact them. The moon was so big in the sky that many in the US hallucinated that they saw the footprints of Neil Armstrong on the lunar ash. Some in India saw the parts of Chandrayan. During the daytime, it was getting hotter and hotter by the hour as the dazzling sun appeared bigger and bigger. Even before the earth fell into the sun, it was surely going to be melted. The singeing hot winds, the melting ice, the drowning cities, all those need volumes and volumes to describe. But then, who was going to read all that?

Someone has made a rough estimate of the number of verbs in the English language. One-seventh to one-sixth of the total words of that language. The language had crossed the one million words mark already. A hundred thousand verbs? All the humans and all other life forms on earth were frantically engaged in utilizing all those verbs. Who was going to record all of them and who was going to read them anyway? What was going to happen soon was beyond all adjectives and adverbs.

The Predator approached the Milky Way from the end farthest to the solar system. (Small comfort, or the briefest of respites.) The predator commenced chugalugging the huge galaxy. In one day, the Milky way had gone deep inside the mammoth maw of the predator – completely digested out of recognition. On the way, smaller morsels like our solar system followed obediently, and helplessly. The sun followed in line obediently, hopelessly, helplessly. The moon, going around the earth, was next in line. It went in without a whimper. Very quickly, the earth – the pride of the cosmos – followed in line obediently, hopelessly, helplessly. Gone forever.

Nothing more was left for the Black Hole to eat.

The Cosmic Anaconda lay immobile under the influence of the greatest food torpor ever.

What was once a part, had managed to become equal to the whole. The ancient Greek thinkers would have revolted in horror.

And then there was absolute stillness. The song of Creation had ended.

Tailpiece (or, believe it or not): While all the above was happening, there was enough time for worried and troubled scientists to try to analyze the strange behavior of the rogue Black Hole. Among the slew of riddles that they faced, the one about time was the toughest – and the one that remained unsolved. The riddle was simple. Their known universe stretched to forty-two billion light years. It takes light forty-two billion years to reach us from the outermost edge of the universe. Nothing can travel faster than light—even a kindergarten kid knows that. Then, how did the Predator Black Hole manage to traverse across that humongous space? Nay, since it was spiraling, the actual distance traveled must have been many times more. Unfortunately, before the furiously working scientists could solve the puzzle, the Black Hole swallowed them—all of them, and much more. Most probably, both motion and time must have mutated extremely strangely. *When Creation itself was being erased, it is no wonder that the annihilation pangs must have given birth to unseen and unheard-of distortions in the very functioning of the universe.*

Epilogue/special note

The sad brief history narrated above is not a record in the true sense. There was total blankness, as vast as the universe (erstwhile); all was erased, let alone records. If, as some theologies assure us that there is going to be another cycle of genesis, etc, etc and in that brave new creation, if those intelligent humans *invent a method of cosmic archaeology in the fifth dimension*, they may probably excavate out some records of how humans had faced the annihilation of earth.

Let us hope they succeed.

D, FOR DELIVERY

Once again, on another level, the human nature of hurry had penetrated Nature like a virus and was actively engaged in twisting its many functionings whimsically. ADS, Hurry, instant gratification, I want it now, no, I want it yesterday, capricious behaviors like that.

The virus was not only whimsical but also, had its own sense of humor too. It chose to cast its divine glance at the way Nature reproduces life, specifically at the number of times creatures take to reproduce their own kind. A casual Google search will show bits of data on cell division and the gestation periods of creatures on Earth.

The average bacterium, like E Coli, takes about twenty minutes to reproduce its kind, by way of dividing itself. Many bacteria can grow into millions of times their starting population in eight hours. It may appear to be astonishing, but when we consider the size of a single living cell and that of a mammal like a human baby, we can see that the number of cells in a human baby is too huge to make a mental picture of. Nature seems to be quite reasonable; small living bodies reproduce fast, and bigger bodies take more and more time. Thus, the gestation period of rats is around 23 to 24 days, of rabbits is 27 to 42 days, of dogs is 58 to 68 days, of cats is 58 to 67 days, of cows is 283 days, of human beings is nine months, and so on.

Scientists had been quite fond of utilizing rats for all sorts of experiments, for a long time. Think of anything in the fields of biology, medicine, behavior, and so on, and immediately some boffin with a beard and white coat will immediately enthuse, ‘That is great. Let us test it out on the rats.’ They collected rats and rats all around the world in their labs and experimented on them endlessly. Poor rats. They were entitled to enormous amounts of gratitude from humans. As far as they remembered, no human told them thanks. It

was during this juncture (somewhere in the vicinity of the year 2070) that human actions had begun to impact Nature, and Nature began to work strangely in some fields. It is no wonder when one considers the unimaginable amount of activities that humans unceasingly indulge in, every second, all over the world. It is a wonder, in fact, that Nature has been withstanding human encroachments for so long, so patiently, maintaining its own balance and stability. Well, ‘Change is the law of life,’ wise men like to quip. Nature agreed, and went forth to demonstrate it back to those wise men.

Somewhere deep in Russia, scientists were working on a hush-hush job in a hush-hush laboratory. They were carrying out secret experiments on rats. The experiments involved the control and modification of certain genes after each new generation of rats. The logistics and details were quite involved, apart from being secret. The project demanded plenty of patience and time since the scientists had to wait patiently for a fresh batch of a new generation of rats. The staff of the research center did not mind, as they were being paid hefty salaries. The project was limping on—but steadily—for over a decade.

Someday, during those somnolent months, the chief assistant in the lab noticed casually that one particular mother rat had delivered babies in twenty-two days. That was not an exciting event, though the delivery was a bit earlier than the average time. His ears pricked—oh, eyes widened—when another rat delivered its litter in eighteen days. That could certainly be classified as premature delivery. A rare case, but still not enough to raise one’s blood pleasure. Soon, another betrayer of the *mus rattus* downloaded its progeny in twelve days. She was not a betrayer, frankly. For, its competitor, another trailblazing mother exhibited a faster downloading speed; she delivered her babies in *one week* . . . The news had entered the official records of science. As the ancients observed, once something starts, it picks up momentum. Rats all

around the world learned the new exhilarating technique and offered their offspring in one week. Their own version of Guinness Record.

If *Mus rattus* can do it, can *Felis catus* be far behind? Cats and rats have a long history of intimate association. (A cat even found a mouse under the queen's chair.) Lighter things apart, cats had plenty of rats to eat. Most probably, the ingestion of all those new generations of rats must have done something to the internal biological mechanism of grimalkins. The new DNAs of rats must have had long, intimate conversations with the DNAs of felines. Mom cats were in a super hurry to download their kittens after their affairs with hot tom cats on tin roofs. Google had assured them that their gestation period was officially fifty-eight to sixty-seven days. They were not amused. They thumbed their noses at all the biologists, caterwauled shrilly at Google, and went on delivering their babies in fewer and fewer days until they settled down contentedly at twenty.

When *Felis catus* did that, *Canis lupus familiaris* began to burn with jealousy. They went on the competition with the cats, hacked their production secrets, and gleefully practiced their newly acquired technique. Puppies after colorful puppies tumbled down in less and less number of days until the competitor's figure of twenty was attained.

Apes, being more intelligent, were all the while curiously observing and recording the above happenings. (Yes, the Hominoidea had a secret system of recording information. Even humans were unaware of it.) They were also human ancestors; so, the hurry-burry of humans had got back to them. Now, they had a perfect chance to exhibit the monkey tricks. They easily hacked into the genes of those other lower-grade animals. (They stole the hacking tricks from the humans, by hacking into their collective minds, being aided by the virtual ghost of C.G.Jung.) Female apes (they too were slowly growing aware of the gender discrimination, but that is another story) acquired—and developed—the expertise

of delivering their exquisite babes a bit more quickly as nature seemed to intend. Nature—with a capital C—was playing the game from both ends. It was sitting deep inside the DNAs and minds of animals and had chosen a few lucky ones for its sport. Apes, being apes, did not know that. They wanted faster results. They started outputting babies within 250 days, then got better and better at it, and finally reached their ambitious goal of eighty days.

Finally, the reverse-hit-back reaction took place. Nature was affected by human behavior. Then Nature paid it back to them with a vengeance, chuckling all the while as the present-day writers say, or, laughing in its sleeves, as the old writers would have said.

O bairn, oh sprogs, you angels

Irwin and Irma loved each other dearly. They had been happily married for more than five years. Then their happiness was slowly invaded by the dark lining of disappointment and worry. They very much wanted to have a baby, but fate seemed to be against them. Their best passion-infused efforts in the bedroom went in vain.

They consulted doctors.

After a battery of tests, they all suggested that Irma should go for IUI. After much heartbreak, the suggestion was accepted by the couple. Soon, Irma became pregnant. The couple was equally happy. Irwin had no regrets, Irma, no qualms.

Next, regular visits to the doctor became a regular affair. Everything was going smoothly. Irwin could easily afford all expenses. When she was thirty days into pregnancy, Irma's motherly intuition told her that something special was happening inside her womb. She told Irwin what she felt. He smiled indulgently: he had read quite a few articles over the Internet about the mental states of expectant moms. He suggested an unscheduled visit to their doctor's clinic. The doctor too smiled indulgently but sent Irma in for a check-up. She (the doctor) was more than mildly

surprised—not unmixed with a slight concern—at the medical report. The embryo inside Irma had passed the Carnegie twenty-three stages too early. The information, of course, could not be held back from Irma. She was not worried much. In fact, she was a bit excited and happy; her intuition had proved to be correct.

Week by week, her intuition was growing stronger and stranger. Each week, the clinic was surprised by the rate at which the fetus inside the mother’s womb was developing. The baby inside (it could no longer be referred to as a fetus) was sprinting forward like an Olympic runner—not like a tardy marathon runner, but like a bullet-chasing hundred-meter sprinter. Irma’s same motherly intuition told her that she should keep on eating more than her normal amount of food. She was feeling hungry all the time and she knew that it was because her baby inside was demanding it. Irma had become a kind of celebrity at the clinic. At the clinic, they had taken plenty of photos – the kind that comes attached with long Latin words. Many of the photos had been uploaded to various websites, medical and otherwise.

That joke about the sprinter was actually made by one of the nurses at the clinic. Irma had smiled at it. Internally, some sixth sense was telling her that her baby was indeed competing, in a race.

She was not off the mark, as seen from hindsight, later, about six months and afterward.

When she completed sixty days of pregnancy, she did not need the doctor to tell her that her baby was fully formed and rearing (yes, rear, as an excited horse does) to come out. She visited the clinic to get the confirmation as a formality. The meds were by now well aware of the abnormal case but yet were thoroughly gobsmacked at the results of their tests and checkings and scannings and whatnot. It was found that the fetus was completely developed in all respects. The fetus was “at the term” as the medical jargon says; it was ready to live independently now. *Only, it needed to be taken out.*

That was where a minor farce threatened to develop. Once the meds confirmed that her baby was at term (whatever it meant to her), she wanted to deliver her baby. She demanded to have a cesarean. The head doctor of the clinic had his own personal psychological and obscure religious reservations about performing a cesarean. He had previously worked for the government and was overzealous in keeping rules in force. He told the eager couple that an ideal pregnancy lasts for nine months and therefore the couple should wait for Irma to complete her nine months of pregnancy or eight months as a concession. Irma was dumbstruck. Irwin argued with the doctor hotly for a long time, but the doctor got more and more adamant as the conversation got hotter and hotter. Luckily, Irwin was struck by a flash of inspiration. He pointed out to the good doctor ('My dear sir') that the baby in the womb was already fully developed. If the carrying mother waited up till the official nine months, *the baby would grow to such a size that it was sure to burst the internal organs of its own mother, thereby killing her*. Especially, please keep in view the abnormal rate of the baby's growth thus far. He vowed then and there that he would institute a criminal case against the doctor and the clinic for premeditated murder! It was the doctor's turn to become dumbstruck. He smiled unctuously and replied diplomatically, yet officially, that of course, Irma's case could be considered an exceptional one. He just needed his worthy clients to fill up an official form (a number so and so) meant to be utilized just in an exceptional case like this. Further, the wily official smiled crookedly and said that that particular form number so and so was out of stock and that let the valuable clients rest assured that all possible haste would be employed to get the form printed from the proper governmental agency, blah, blah, blah. (The crooked smile closed down firmly with satisfaction.) At this, Irwin's respiration quickened . . .

Luckily, Nature intervened and produced an event satisfactory to both parties. Irwin's respiration had quickened because of one

more reason he was unaware of right then. His body had automatically empathized with Irma's; Irma was breathing hard. Irma was breathing hard because she was experiencing labor pains! She immediately recognized it for what it was, and her face bloomed in ecstasy—despite the pains.

Things followed the standard script from then on . . . Irma delivered a beautiful baby. A two-month baby boy that had the body mass of an eleven-month tot. The couple promptly named him, Dimonth. Diamond generated enough news to be reported in a dozen newspapers, a good number of medical journals, and the inevitable YouTube and Twitter.

Irma's other intuition that her boy was competing in a race also came true. Nature had chosen Irma as a pioneering candidate. Once a pioneer marks the way, thousands tread that path in rapid succession. Before the excitement of Dimonth's hasty entry cooled down, another mom in Russia (a traditional competitor of the USA) gave birth to a perfect baby girl. That only propelled the third mummy in China to show that she too was equally capable of doing what a capitalist mother out there did. A Japanese haha (okaasan) outdid all her predecessors by downloading (or, uploading, depending on points of view) a smart *akachan* that laughed and laughed when it fell into the palms of the receiving *nasu* at the ripe age of *two* months (but fifty-nine days; January, 31 days, February 28) thus beating the records of the other eager-beaver-babes. Those babies had cried, this *akachan* had laughed, on entry into the brave new world. Okaasan was kvelled of her smart baby.

That was enough to set the new trend in reproduction in full motion. Babies all over the world began gleefully jumping out within two months from their moms' wombs. Scientists and the media were going crazy.

The funny (If such a word can be used) thing was that all the newborn babies were quite healthy and more developed physically

than the nine-month-born babies. Scientists and doctors were worried at the most unexpected twist in the course of Nature. But mothers were happy that their ordeal of nine months was drastically cut down. The new generation babies were all hale and hearty and had excellent immunity powers against all dangerous bacteria and viruses. Their IQs were uniformly in the genius range. They learned fast, they behaved well and none showed criminal tendencies. In a way, the true age of Utopia seemed to be in the offing.

There are always cynical people who grumble at everything. They smelled something wrong in this affair of hasty—overhasty in their opinion—births.

Meanwhile, more and more babies kept on jumping in the queue. Millions of new generation kids went on busily living their lives.

Crawling babies grew into walking, jumping, playing, and screaming kids at a superfast rate. Kids began learning everything worth learning at speeds that astonished the teachers, and delighted their parents, while creases of worry were forming on the foreheads of the observing scientists. The creases deepened when, soon, the bodies of kids were attaining the size, strength, and compactness of fully physically fit athletic adults. That was not normal. But then this new phenomenon of moms, *madres*, *matas*, *Mutters*, *ammias*, and *ommas*, delivering babies in two months was itself abnormal. The human mind is quick to extrapolate connected events and deduce a highly reasonable conclusion. Mathematicians have an arsenal of curves and equations to use in this field of predictions. But here, all that jazz was not necessary. What was going to happen in the near future was fairly easy to guess. The writing was on the wall, as they say, and could be deciphered by any who were moderately literate.

The anti-climax.

It took some years to show up. It can be tersely summed up without the loss of important data. The new generation of dashing kids learned and learned and grew and grew super fast. Okay? . . .

Nokay. Simple. *They reached their climax too early!* It was downhill all the way from then on. *And the downhill was fast, just as the rise was—a bit too fast, in fact.* They all, without a single exception, began to grow old. Poor souls; they did not know the meaning of a contented, happy, middle-aged with a bulging, prosperous stomach. In the graphs of their growth, there was no plateau signifying a steady middle-age.

Invariably, all the sons of the Brave New Generation died before their twenty-second or twenty-third year. Nobody ever crossed the twenty-fifth. Nature seemed to have a peculiar sense of humor too. It was as if it knew what ratios were—especially that between a nine-month pregnancy and a two-month one. The ratio was reflected in the lifespan of the Brave New Generation. The BNG, though consisting of millions, was dwindling down fast.

Tailpiece: What about the babies born of that new generation? That was a crucial question. It was a big let-down to those watchers who were hoping for a revolution in nature. Those babies stayed put inside for nine months, came out normal, and lived normal lives. Whew! So much for the Malthus progression. Still, another ray of hope seemed to exist. Two-month-mom's-belly-jumping babies were yet coming out.

Alas, the rate of birth of such babies too got slowed down. And soon stopped.

A long, long disappointing sigh. It seemed that Nature did not like its new experiment. Or, maybe, Nature had a passing whim, out of sheer boredom. (After all, it was following the same set of rules for billions of years.) Or, maybe, it saw that responding too intimately to human beings was a risky affair.

Back to normal. Cats, rats, and humans.

L, FOR LIGHT

The background

Back there, a long time ago, man discovered charcoal and found that not only could he make fire out of it, but that he could scratch it on rock surfaces and produce lines. The lines, when suitably arranged, could represent arrows, bows, trees; almost anything in the world surrounding him. Art was born. Back here, a long time after that, art underwent enormous changes. Modern art was born. Then it became neo-modern and ultramodern. Now nobody understands the latest art, except perhaps those who are mad—well, almost.

As has been demonstrated in the previous stories, this kind of (extreme) mental activity of her children began to affect mother Nature. Finally, Nature could no longer keep quiet.

It too began to experiment. On art. On the visual art.

In its broadest meaning, the visual is simply connected with light at its core. Well, sigh. (Nature did that). Let it be light, then; but not to be taken lightly. (Nature also likes puns, like humans.)

God had said, let there be light, again. At that time, Einstein was born. Nature pondered on it, and was illuminated. (Pardon, your pun is showing.) That simply genius man had declared that the speed of light was constant. He had the further audacity to propound that no object in the world could travel faster than light! In other words, light was the fastest traveling object in the universe.

Well, in hindsight, that makes sense to the common man's common sense. In the Olympics, many people compete in the 100-meter dash. Only one person—the fastest—crosses the finishing line

first. That makes sense. Among things that move, there will usually be one that moves the fastest. (Like the cheetah, see?)

So far so good. But then, the cheetah, though fast, runs at different speeds on different occasions. Even the Olympic champion clocks at different speeds on different days and terrains. For that matter, all moving objects vary their speeds depending on external conditions. Why then should light travel always at a constant speed? At least, once in a blue moon . . . ?

Blue moon? Nature pondered and found it to be a tempting suggestion.

Some years after the year 2020, on a certain blue moon day, physics professor X was lecturing his students about how they used ingenious methods to measure the speed of light (Foucault, 1862) in the lab, as a preamble to demonstrate one particular experiment. The equipment was of the latest state-of-the-art kind, capable of measuring to great degrees of accuracy (Evanson et al). The professor had stressed and reiterated many times that the speed of light was constant—299,792.4578 kilometers per second. And all that scientific jazz.

The savant went on setting up the experiment, with a superior smile playing on his thin lips. The usual procedure for such kind of experiments is to take several measurements and average them out. But the equipment they were using was of a very high standard and so the professor decided to do just four measurements. He was sure they would get an identical value in all four experiments.

The students, in conjunction with the professor, successfully completed four separate measurements on the same (smart) equipment. They got four different results. Two results showed the speed of light as being less than the universally accepted value. Two results showed the speed as being more than the universally accepted (and venerated) value.

The professor was gobsmacked. Some serious students were puzzled. The not-so-serious giggled. The professor knit his brows and pondered. From the day this particular equipment was installed, it had been giving identical values—with the usual, accepted variation of negligible magnitudes. He shrugged bravely and grumbled dramatically that there must be a hitch in the equipment. A moment later. ‘Well, we will conduct the same experiments morrow. Any of you care to participate?’ “Of course, we will be happy to.’

Alack, morrow too rebelled and produced four different measurements, two below, two above the standard value. *The deviations in the speed(s) of light were four times more than those of the previous day.*

Equipment was overhauled. The next day the deviations increased by two times more than the previous. In desperation, they borrowed another set of instruments from another reputed college. *The deviations piled up more.* The matter could no longer be ignored. More colleges were informed. Half a dozen colleges conducted their own measurements in their own labs. The deviations persisted there too.

Now it became a really serious business. The news began to spread virally. Hot debates, accusations, counteraccusations, and ridicules, followed in the wake, flooding the media in all its avatars. Hundreds and hundreds of labs all over the world measured the speed of light in different ways. The results (ironically) concurred; there was no deviation in those latest measurements.

The news that the speed of light became less could somehow be digested. But the announcement that the speed had increased was too much to swallow. Semi-philosophers had a field day pontificating about the advent of a new era. The flat-earth believers—such, still existed—were laughing and thumbing their noses at science, especially at the father of Relativity. Really serious

scientists were furiously thumbing through thousands of pages filled with most abstract mathematics, hoping to fit the new observations into the standard theory. The others went for constructing the latest theory that could uproot the two centuries of modern physics. Why not? Progress is always made through new observations. (Five hundred thousand identical experiments could not be wrong.)

Technology people and Businessmen were not perturbed. They welcomed and leveraged the new finding. Internet and communication speeds had increased immensely. Welcome. Theorists (the serious guys) may bite their fingers in agony. Let them; it is their business anyway. A huge number of existing instruments and gadgets may have to be either updated or replaced. No problem there. It meant more business, more moolah.

The speed of light increased. The speed of human hustle and bustle increased. More business, more moolah. Hurray for light!

Photoelectric

There was a natural sequence to what happened above. Simple, as follows. The wind is blowing lightly. You can see that the branches of yonder trees are merrily dancing. Presently, the *speed* of the wind increases. The branches shake more vigorously. The wind attains the speed of a typhoon. The tree topples to the ground. Matter of speed; simple.

A similar action followed when the speed of light increased. In physics, there is a phenomenon called the photoelectric effect. When photons, the light particles impinge on the surface of particular materials, the electrons in those materials are knocked off. They receive jolts like punches from a pugilist. The result is that the materials become sources of electricity. (Many scientific and industrial gadgets exist that use this property.)

Now, when the speed of light increased, the photoelectric effect received an exhilarating jolt. To use a shameless pun, electricity

itself got a jolt! In plain terms, the electrical output of those materials increased considerably. *Boy, you got more electricity when sunshine shone on them.* As before, the scientists had one more puzzle to unravel, during which process they met plenty more concomitant puzzles and riddles and Gordian Knots. And as before, business abetted by technology merrily profited.

Pure and white

Once you start something, go all the way. That is the success mantra of all great guys. If humans can follow it, can their mother, Nature keep quiet? She had directed her floodlight of intention on light for the time being. She thought about what else she could do with light.

No brainer, there. Light represented purity. Purity was in turn represented by whiteness. So, let light be as pure as it can manage. White all the way, reverberated the inspiring words of Nature in all the nooks and corners where light could go. For starters, how about a visual demonstration, enough to convince the staunchest skeptic?

It was the Pelican State beach in California. The vacationers were having a helluva fine time that evening. The low sun was occasionally peeping through the sky covered with clouds. But there was no threat of imminent rain. Some of the regular visitors there were hoping for a rainbow. The sky (and the clouds and the sun) did not disappoint them.

Gradually, on the canvass of the grey clouds, a faint outline of the familiar rainbow was developing. A few human eyes turned up at the sky. As the outline became more bright, it was apparent that there was something *strange about the familiar*. The huge semicircle of the rainbow was monochromatic. From time immemorial humans have been accustomed to seeing *seven colors* in the rainbow. VIBGYOR, VIBGYOR, as the students in the classrooms all over the world have been told, each letter of the acronym represents a

color starting with that letter; violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red, to state the obvious.

The monochrome of the rainbow was *white!* There were no seven-colored bands across the width of the 'bow. It was white, white and white – one band, one ribbon.

Soon, the scene caught the attention of all the people gathered on the beach. They watched the white rainbow, mesmerized. Shouts, whistles, murmurings, and exclamations filled the atmosphere. Cell phones got busy furiously clicking the scene and excitedly bawling at other phones at the dialed ends. As if to make sure that the gawking humans may not get any doubts, the rainbow gradually increased in its brightness. To make it still more sure, as if to drive the point home, a secondary rainbow also formed. White all over; pure white pristine pure. The brightness of the rainbow was such that the whole beach looked as if it was floodlit.

It is natural for people to think that this was a rare, (the very rarest in history) occurrence. Mother corrected them. New York is on the other coast. Lexington Avenue was overflowing with humanity engaged in innumerable activities and vehicles monotonously chasing each other. In the background, the Chrysler Building rose majestically, while many other skyscrapers competed with it. The sky, such as can be seen in between the interstices of the concrete jungle, was overcast with dark clouds. Breezy cool weather was playing across the streets, as the sun was preparing for its final march downwards. The formation of a rainbow was imminent as the slanting sunrays silently pierced through the fine drops of rain. It did not disappoint the forecasters. The vast, magnificent semicircle began to form, its appearance for those at the street level being intercepted by the numerous tall buildings.

The same gamut of human reactions that occurred is expressed here too. The difference lay only in the innumerable buzzing vehicles, and the way people were dressed. Two accidents did occur.

Luckily, they were minor. Traffic came to a halt. Soon, almost all the roads of the Big Apple were blocked. The Chrysler Building was brilliantly lit up by the dazzling white rainbow. It was surreal. Not less than fifty thousand words at a stretch are required to describe the scenes in the streets and elsewhere. The main focus here is on the cynosure—the white dazzling rainbow. It was white, and that was that.

There is no need to say that many TV media and newspapers had by now gotten hold of the strange phenomena. Media persons were excitedly bawling out their lungs on a million screens across the country.

Many books were written about the furor and excitement which followed the incidents. Therefore, it is enough to mention the impact of the incidents on science.

The reasoning of the physics geeks was simple. When sunlight passes through a prism, it forms a spectrum, as it emerges on the other side. The spectrum here refers to the seven distinct colors, familiar to all school kids. Simply pass a ray of sunlight through a prism and see what happens – that is all.

Getting hold of a prism was easy stuff. Arranging for the sunlight to pass through the prism was easy stuff. Just wait for the day to emerge. (The rainbow is formed out of the sunlight. That is why they wanted to test this out during the day, using the sun's light. Simple.) To catch the emerging band of light on a screen was easy stuff. They (the boffins) did all that almost with boredom.

What followed next was not at all easy stuff. *It was very hard to swallow.* The beam of white sunlight passed through the pure glass prism, emerged out the other face as a pure white beam, hit the (eagerly waiting) receiving screen, and remained as a bright white beam. It did not spread out into a wide band, the way its ancestors had been doing, *but remained as a narrow beam keeping intact its original width—and the pristine pure whiteness.* White all the way;

no colors, nor violet, nor red. Out of the laboratory personnel who witnessed the experiment, one gawked, one swore, one sweated, one laughed hysterically and one fainted. . . . They recovered after some time and repeated the experiment. The result was the same; the white beam of sunlight remained stubbornly as a white beam, caring not a whit for the sentiments of the experimenters. The reactions of the personnel were also the same as in the previous test. They recovered again and, as can be predicted, they selected a different prism, a different screen, and a different room.

Nada. Nothing changed. The light remained light and white. The technicians were also stubborn. They conducted the experiment a hundred times, on different days and timings and places, using different prisms and mirrors and beams and so on. The light left them in no doubt about its pristine pure whiteness. It was a dilly of an experiment.

Such news cannot be kept secret for long. To use an old hackneyed metaphor, it spread like wildfire. With the speed of Tweets and FB messengers, Instagram would be a better way of saying it. White rainbow gained the record of an all-time maximum of tweets. The white spectrum was not far behind. It was a misnomer (since there was no spectrum to speak of), coined by popular journalists, but caught the fancy of the public. Those theoretical scientists got more and deeper furrows on their foreheads now, as this second new deviation in the behavior of light gained acceptance. The practical, verifiable experiment is the God of Science. Theoretical explanations are secondary. If repeatedly identical results follow the experiments, then there must be something wrong or missing from your old theories – *though seemingly well established and revered by all*. Go back all the way before Einstein, nay, Newton's disk, and begin fresh from there! It was an agonizing anathema to all; except one or two super-geniuses shuddering on the border of madness. Nevertheless, everything has to be re-examined. Oh!

Meanwhile, Light was not yet done with its love affairs with the boffins.

As was found out by Mr. Piccallso. He owned the latest expensive iPhone, and was proud of his photographic skills, though he was not a professional photographer. He loved his wife and five-year-old son equally. He had just then brought a fine colorful dress as a birthday present for his son. The color matched the perfect rosy face of his son. Oh, yes, he had not forgotten his wife; he had bought an enchanting dress set for her too.

He made both of them stand outside, in the home garden. He was intent on shooting a smashing photo of them. Duke, their Rottweiler understood the intention and joined the son and mother for the photo session. (It was, son and mother today, not mother and son, because of his birthday.) Piccallso snapped a dozen photos of his son, all in all, in different parts of the garden and home. This particular phone had a camera of 40MP capacity, and he was a confidant of recording top-class color pics.

The son, being still a kid, naturally wanted to look at the photos his dad had taken with so much ceremony and scaturient zeal. Dad took him inside—to avoid the outside sunlight so that the photos could be seen better—and opened the folder containing photos, while his wife and son peered at the camera screen flanking him from both sides.

The first photo was glorious. The play of light and shade was enchanting. Even a top professional photographer of the early nineties would have looked at the photo with green envy. (The phrase, ‘go green with envy’ was still in use in those days.) The photo was beautiful. It was one of the best in its class.

Its class? *It was black and white. All over. Totally. Completely.*

Even though the photo was good, Piccallso frowned a bit. He had intended to take a color picture. How did the pic come out as

black and white? He scrolled to the next picture in the album. That was also a grand shot. Black and white. All over. Totally. Completely. ‘Odd,’ he murmured and went to the third one. B & W. ‘Drat’ was the response to the fourth. The last photo, the best in the series, earned a “shit”. Piccallso checked and double-checked his camera’s color settings. He had not opted for black and white. Maybe, something was wrong with his phone; some virus, or some such thing, perhaps. The kid did not understand his dad’s concern, but his mother did.

She offered her phone to Piccallso. He took two more shots of his son then and there and for crosschecking, he went outside into the garden and shot a separate photo of his favorite red rose in the garden. When he saw the results, he was aghast. All those second sets of pictures on his wife’s phone were also in black and white. Both husband and wife were mystified; the chances of both their phone malfunctioning were ridiculously too small to contemplate. There was one more alternative, which was even more absurd. Maybe, their house was jinxed! Piccallso was a thorough man, proud of his chariness. He walked outside of his house, onto the other side of the street, (followed by his curious son) took a couple of snaps of the street and trees, and re-entered the house briskly (holding his son in one hand). He could have looked at the snaps in the street itself, but some lurking fear of imminent disaster urged him to go inside first. His sixth sense was on the dot. The photos were all once again in black and white. He swore aloud. In a blind rage, he threw the phone down onto the floor and stomped on it.

His wife was more controlled and practical. She quietly went to her friend-cum-neighbour and persuaded her to take three (to be on the safe side) colored photos with her (friend’s) phone. All three pics serenely showed themselves off in beautiful black and white. The friend got excited and snapped six more shots. All black and white. Mrs. Piccallso tactfully persuaded her frenzied friend to come to their house and show the results to her huffing hubby. Huffing

hubby was cooled down a bit since other persons also suffered the same bad luck. For only a brief minute.

His acute brain suspected that some kind of virus was at work here. Most probably not the kind of viruses that throng the thoroughfares of the Internet. 'Cause, his phone, his wife's, and that of the neighbor were of different makes and OS. His mind was not only sharp but also imaginative . . . Yes, but this new kind of virus could be of the biological kinds which are becoming rampant these days. . . He slipped into a mild reverie. . . . Yes. No. But why not? Yes, but why should viruses be limited to the biological kind? This new virus could be *physical!!* Do not laugh, dear old boy. Why should mutation be limited to biology, I mean, to living things? After all, there is a very thin border between certain chemicals and life as I read in a scholarly article somewhere. . . . Who knows, mutation may occur in physics. . . . Why may, it should be, should. It is high time. . . . If you ask me, I am surprised that mutation has not already happened in physics. After all, the same element parades wearing different masks. Allotropy, something, they call it. Then there are isotopes. Something along those lines must have happened today to light. I shall ask my nerdy friend, that professor in the university. . . . Wait, till tomorrow. Something new, along the lines of the solar eclipse, might have happened to sunlight today. I shall check once again tomorrow and then . . .

Tomorrow did not change anything. He had a digital camera also. The light was not afraid of that. It stubbornly continued to remain dressed in white and black. Now Picccallso was ready to contact (meet, in fact) his nerdy professor of physics. But he had forgotten to take into account the viral nature of what was happening out there under, yes, the broad sunlight. The virus of black and white had spread from his neighbor's house to *his* friend. Then, from that friend to his friends – plural. Once something goes plural, there is no stopping it.

Needless to say, the news took no time to spread everywhere. All the myriad activities which had happened with the discovery of the white rainbow repeated themselves everywhere, with greater frenzy.

Scientists all over the world had one more enigma to explain—something that was fantastic, unbelievable. What even an ardent sci-fi writer would not dare not think of, was happening before their very bloody blessed eyes, as if mocking them. ‘Adding insult to injury, rubbing salt over the wound,’ such old idioms were much apt in this instance. Because of this:

The rose in the garden of Mr. Piccallso was resplendent with its bright red petals. The shoots of the plant were indeed green. (My love is like a red rose, sang the famous poet. True. Only, now the photos were showing that *as a burnt rose!*) The dress of the photographer’s son sported many hues. The sky was blue. . . . Shucks, the world out there was filled with so many colors that all the hundreds of words denoting color in the dictionary were woefully inadequate. All those colors were visible and innocently staring back at the boffins, unable to understand their deep hot sighs, and small beads of perspiration adorning their broad foreheads. If they were seeing colors in the world (thank God for that), then it meant that light passing through the retina of the human eyes was behaving normally. (At least normally, as far as humans were concerned.) Please do not tell this to an ordinary, happy-go-lucky man in the street. He will ask you in a highly puzzled, tremulous voice, that when you see white light as white light, the lens or cornea whatever of the eyes does not affect light. Otherwise, you can never see white light, because, because, haha, dammit, haha, *just as your prism in your lab broke the light into seven colors, the human prism-lens-cornea-whatever should also break white light into seven colors, and THEREFORE, humans should never see white light!! The photographs in your phones and cameras are doing OK, fine; they are acting the way our eyes are doing!* You do not have the

patience, nor the time to explain things to him. . . . If all this is not rubbing salt over the wound, what else is it?

‘Let there be light.’ Newton was born. ‘Let there be light again.’ Einstein was born. The third time, Nature sent down light itself in a new avatar, in its true colors—white and black.

Future postscript: What seems to be stupid remarks by the common man in the above para were really portentous—with a twist. In her next Creation, Nature extended her lux drama to the next logical (sic/groan) level and created a world where everything, we mean everything, (matter, life, animals, birds and men, and so on) in the world had only two colors; black and white. To clarify further, just like the objects in the black-and-white photos, the actual world itself was in black and white. That is (will be) a different story by itself—to be unfolded at a future date. As a wag will be tempted to quip, there was no place for ambiguity; everything was in black and white.

T, FOR TIME

After elegantly disposing of the matter of light, Nature again was keenly listening in to the mental flights of mankind. Its attention was captured by what humans designated as time. What Nature actually meant by time, and what humans imagined time was, are totally different. It is better to let go of that for the present.

As usual, humans dealt with time in different ways. Poets looked at it romantically. Scientists had been trying hard to capture it with equations; (by God). Philosophers were equally engaged in fierce, complicated, entangled wordy acrobatics. Ordinary people did not bother to ponder such weighty matters. They took time as being as inevitable as life and death and left it at that. To lovers, as lovers all over the world know, it meant something else. At certain points, they felt it as running too fast, and at certain other points, they felt in their bones that time was deliberately crawling too slowly. Those who doubt it may understand it if they are lucky to fall in love. (Ironically, a scientific genius of the twentieth century showed it to be true; that time can constrict and dilate, under certain conditions.) Let that be. The most famous dramatist wrote somewhere that ‘time . . . must have a stop’ etc. Nature’s vagrant mood caught those lines. That dramatist was the most quoted and appreciated writer in the world. Besides that, Nature was also keenly aware of the pining of all the uncountable lovers from thousands and thousands of years. All this created an impression on the fabric stuff of Nature. It decided to do something about the matter.

Initially, a small *ballon d’essai* in a small corner would be floated.

The seductive logic behind it was like this: time is much conspicuous when things move. Time is also—and fundamentally so—a measure of change. So, see sapient Socrates, when there is no change, there is no time. . . . Do not start arguing. Appreciate the simplicity and beauty of the statement. When Nature itself gets into the action, all arguments are futile.

To make it easier to understand—not necessarily to execute—Nature took over an old myth. Myths have been in existence for thousands of

years. It will be easier to believe when myths come into existence; either suitably garbed or conveniently garbled.

Time is frozen in a bubble

This Norsius was living in the 21st century. He was richer than his those-times-mate, Croesus. He had a big swimming pool on his private estate. Only, the swimming pool was made out of a small, natural lake on his estate.

He was aware of the way his name rhymed with the flower. He had grown the plant in his terrace garden and was quite fond of gazing at the narcissus flower whenever he visited that garden. The mental trait represented by that flower had spilled over into his swimming pool. He had installed a dozen man-high silver framed mirrors around the edges of the swimming pool, inclined at different whimsical angles. He was fond of gazing admiringly at his naked body in the mirrors. Well, who is not?

Of late, that solipsism was gradually escalating into addiction. What were brief, casual glances, in the beginning, were growing into prolonged admiring sessions. Then admiration turned into infatuation, as brief seconds elongated into minutes. Minutes, of late, was irrationally crossing the thirty-number count. Once he managed to spend twelve hours staring at his own reflection in the mirror. Then he achieved the twenty-four-hour record.

Did he not feel bored? Tired? Did he not feel hungry? How about micturition and defecation?

Nature likes puns. (Humans do not have a copyright on that.) Our man had a deep attachment to his name and the flower which rhymed with that name. So, what was happening in and around those premises was deeply linked with that name; that name which stood for a person and also for a flower. The Narcissus flower commenced reflecting whatever was acting on the man.

It was the gardener who noticed it first when Spring set in. He used to keep a special watch over the plant since he was aware that the boss was fond (excessively, in his opinion) of the flower. He noticed that the flowers of that particular plant were always fresh. He became mildly curious. Then the fun commenced. He saw that the flowers did not wither, did not fade

or change color. They were always fresh, the same set of flowers, by God. Strange, odd, unreasonable, whatever he could think of. He watched the flowers grimly for one month. *They were the same flowers, on the same plant, remaining ever fresh.* Even, he daresay, fresher, possibly! The white and yellow petals were as clear and bright and brilliant as they were on the first day. The flowers on that particular plant kept their freshness for the whole season of six months of that year. As if that were not enough, as if to prove a corollary, or, as if trying to mimic immortality, those flowers maintained their pure freshness for a whole year. That part of the story was an appendix—to come later—to the main tale of Mr. Norsius.

Back to Norsius, then.

His sessions with the mirrors in his swimming pool became more and more intense. Truth to tell, he was extremely handsome. But that was not enough valid reason for going on gazing at one's reflection for hours. That is what his valet thought. Not he.

His perception of the situation was entirely different. For him time had stopped; well, almost; well, in a kind of a peculiar way. What his valet clocked as four hours of self-adoration, he felt as a fleeting wave, one beat of time's wings. While he was staring at his reflection in a mirror, his brain was in a unique state. It was not manufacturing thoughts. Keeping aside scientific or professional philosophical analyses, it can be argued that time has stood still when there are no thoughts in the mind. It can be groked intuitively. As far as he was concerned, time had stood still during his sessions with the mirror. What about the external observers, like his valet?

They can go to hell and wait. No, that is not a perverse statement. The valet was in a hell of doubt and disbelief and suspense. It came to pass like this.

In one of his bliss-filled trysts with the mirror, Norsius spent three days in front of the mirror. (He had issued strict, un-disobey-able firman to his valet that under no circumstances should he be disturbed while he was immersed in contemplation.) The worried-horrified-terrified valet noticed that:

Mr. Norsius looked marmoreal. His eyes were open, naturally (of course, of course) but they looked like glass balls set on the sockets of an ivory statue.

Mr. Norsius did not go to the toilet during that period. No passing of water. No evacuation of solid/semisolid waste products from the entrails downwards.

He did not take in any sort of food, solid or liquid.

He even did not appear to be breathing. But the valet did not dare to go near the man and check the pulse; orders are orders.

He (the valet) noticed that the facial hair of his boss did not grow during that period. His face looked as clean-shaven as on the first day of his trance entrance. Almost hyaline, if he could risk imagining it.

Most astonishing was the fact that Norsius did not move; no bodily movements of any sort, not even blinking. If one looked at him from a distance, one felt as if a statue was placed in front of a mirror. But what was the point of placing a statue in front of a mirror if the statue was unable to look at itself? A practical joke by a rich eccentric? Oh. . . . The valiant valet was not equipped to ponder such weighty matters.

Serious, professional thinkers would have a field day cogitating, ratiocinating on the *Norsius phenomenon* (coining it as such, to begin with). If Mr. Norsius did not imbibe food or water for three days, was he hibernating? Or, had he stopped living? No, if he had stopped living, how could he come back alive, as he did later? Most probably he was not hibernating, since his hair and nails had stopped growing. That was unheard of. Maybe, he had succeeded in stopped time. No, better propose that time had stopped running for him. Was such a thing possible? Quite possible; why not? The great Scientist of Relativity had long back deduced (and it was proven 'gain 'n 'gain in labs) that time can speed up or slow down in different frames of context. Mr. Norsius was not, strictly speaking, in motion as far as his observers could observe; nor was he in motion relative to himself. But that is a minor matter. Someday, someone will surely explain it away elaborately by employing a mountain of mathematical calculations. Does not matter much anyway.

For all practical purposes – in the private estate of Norsius—time had hibernated itself and had somehow hibernated its object of experimentation, namely Norsius (also managing in the process to utilize a verb both actively and passively).

Back to the appendix—the small story of the flower. After Norsius emerged from one of his time-freezes, he was appraised of what was happening (rather, not happening, reallah) with the narcissus flower in his garden. The news did not surprise him at all. He knew that what was happening to his flower was a reflection of what was happening to himself; he gorked that the flower was in a state of what his nerdy friends would often call, quantum entanglement. To split hairs, Quantum was supposed to work at microlevels of matter and at huge macrolevels of the world, Relativity worked marvelously. That was Ok, as far as he was concerned, since he was performing a marriage between the two theories.

Of course, he was unaware of the humorous little games that Mother Nature was playing – at both levels, and at any other imaginable level that her brainy-yet-tiny children could think of.

Mr. Norsius had become an expert at two things. One, he used to visit his garden regularly, every day, at the same specific time (accurate up to two decimal places of a second), like a finely tuned robot. Two, he entered his swimming pool also with the same zest and accuracy and stood immobilized in front of the mirror, while time for him immobilized itself. Once, he created a record by standing frozen for one month. One month may seem unbelievably too long, but when compared with the total body of time since Creation, that one month is pitifully too small to consider. Ah, let it be. On to:

A tale of two villages

The village, Hamlet, in which Mr. Norsius lived was not, in fact, very big. Yes, it was a village. A small one containing about thirty families. It was privately owned, self-contained, and privately run in a smooth and efficient way. Peace reigned there peacefully for a long time. It was deliberately designed so as not to expand—very essential for peace. They had erected fencing all around the village to mark its boundaries, with notices at intervals to warn strangers and trespassers. Now the time (O, Nature, the pun is one of thy names.) had come for those warning notices

to serve their cause; only, they needed a bit more additional warning to be included. It came to pass thusly (as some famous writer wrote somewhere). Nature adopted this village for its theme park. The theme was—*static freeze*.

Though the theme was self-explanatory, a wee bit of explanation and illustration are necessary.

Static freeze.

That was the theme Nature had chosen for the village of Norsius; yes, the village was also named, Norsius, after the name of the founder. What had been happening in the private estate of Norsius served as an experimental basis for time. Nature was satisfied with the results and expanded its arena of activities aggressively.

Once Norsius managed to freeze himself for a whole month, his valet could not hold himself. The excitement all these days had been too enormous to contain. He had to share it with others; at least one person. Otherwise, he would go mad. He carefully chose one of his most trustworthy friends and whispered in his ears, the quaint goings-on in the estate. That friend, of course, did not believe it (though he half-heartedly gave two-star credence to the flower's part of the story). Then, what killed the cat got the better of him. He told the faithful Jeeves-incarnate that seeing was believing. Let the valet not fear; let him just keep the door slightly ajar. He would sneak in silently, have a peep at Mr. Norsius in freeze and go back more silently than a cat. The valet reluctantly agreed. And thereby, he opened a new chapter in the history of time. What the friend did not mention to the valet was that he intended to take two snapshots of Norsius. As proof of this kind of affair, a video would be more convincing. He was confident in persuading his friend (the valet) to agree. Let us see.

On that fateful day, Time had planned to move to the next part of its script. After Norsius achieved the grand feat of freezing for one month, Nature stepped up the accelerator and put him on permanent freeze. Well, not exactly permanent, for permanent is highly inconceivable. Say, something that was staggering when compared to one month of duration. The word, freeze, needs a bit of explanation. Norsius appeared marmoreal (as was said) in that condition, for sure. But he was alive in a very subtle

way. (Otherwise, how could he have jumped back to life after one month, in the earlier instance?) His valet, of course, could have brought in a doctor and had Norsius checked up, with a good old reliable stethoscope as a first step. Even though he was a Yankee, he outdid the stiffest British butler and had kept himself eminently detached from his employer's private affairs – till now. The one-month freeze had been too much, by any standard. Further speculations over the physiological testing of Norsius were thwarted in unexpected ways.

The nature of a virus is that it is eager to spread; it is not satisfied with contaminating a single person or host. Well, this time, Time seemed to have caught on with the act. It had so thoroughly imbued Norsius, that it seemed to be just waiting for its next victim. On that fateful day, the valet forgot his 'valetship' and went too near Mr. Norsius. Norsius appeared to be more petrified than on earlier occasions. The valet, driven by curiosity, touched his boss. Sometimes, curiosity could be bad, as happened to the cat. The temporal virus centered on Norsius jumped through the bridge of the index finger of the valet right inside him and lost no time (oh, pun; no groans) in spreading throughout the length and breadth (and height) of his body. And his mind too, almost certainly.

The valet too froze. And stayed put thus. It did not need a Sherlock Holmes to deduce that he could get his release when his employer Norsius got *his*. That, when, was a million-dollar question. Nobody knew the answer. Simple. The next remaining person who could conceivably ask such a question was sure to be attacked by the virus if he entered the area. That person was the aforesaid best friend of the valet. He had slipped in stownlins through the door left unlocked by the valet. He had his camera ready.

At the propitious moment he cat-walked – er, walked like a cat—into the swimming pool area. He was able to accomplish only the first two feats of Caesar. He came, he saw. But what he was captivated by was what he saw. Yet, he conquered symbolically what he saw, by *capturing it* in his camera. That was the end of his expedition. He was prepared to see one immobilized person. There he was staring *at two frozen bodies*. That was an unforeseen surprise, even if it were a bonus. For a second, he was afraid—just a wee bit. Then courage returned, and curiosity urged forward. Once more, curiosity did what it did to the cat. The friend went and

touched the valet, to make sure whether he was alive or not. Sure, sure got surer; the visitor joined the duo and freeze-hungry Time gulped him too and Kelvinated him. He too turned into a live statue. *Three frozen bodies.* Norsius had plenty of friends, and enough visitors even in that small village. The valet had friends. The valet's friend had friends. This could have gone on and on, (viraling) and spiraling. But Nature's favorite kids, though kids are smart. Sometimes, what is called intuition works faster than the reasoning process. The personal masseur of Norsius was one who had such a flash, and he desisted from touching the trio when he entered the natatorium. Just standing on the threshold of the door, he whispered to Norsius. No reply. No movement from any of the trio. To borrow a hackneyed phrase, the three looked as if they were inside Madame Tussaud's. The masseur raised his voice and shouted. No response. No reactions. The triumvirate seemed to be living in a different world. The masseur had no intention of joining them. He clicked his cam, recorded a brief video, closed the door as gently as was possible, and soft-padded back on his tracks. The news spread across the village.

Many curious visitors of all varieties closed in around the swimming pool area (outer periphery, having been precautioned by the masseur). There were gawking, peeping, and craning of necks all around. Nobody dared to go in. Time saw and smiled. It increased its radius of operation.

One careless guy crossed the invisible line with one step. He turned into a solid. Others scarpered the scene. They (the people of Hamlet) were learning by trial and error. The trial was not over yet.

The mutated time field expanded its area of influence and occupied the whole of the estate of Norsius. That estate became the most stringent taboo for the village. The boundaries of the estate were well marked. People took care not to trespass. They kept a respectable distance from the estate, though their curiosity (now mixed a bit with trepidation) was raging at a boiling point.

That, of course, did not bother the mutating time field a bit. It marched on an expedition and occupied an adjoining estate. The number of people frozen increased to twenty since the occupants of the second estate was caught unawares.

At this stage, the people of the village got fully alert. Something strange and hitherto unseen was happening in their own backyard – no, front yard. All these the village had been boasting of standing on its own independent legs. It had been managing all its affairs by itself, never asking for any sort of assistance from the government. Now, the elders, the guys who ran the village, felt that it was advisable to inform the government. Too late. Time chose to increase its speed of occupation of fresh territories. Time could very well do such a thing; Time was the lord. The time anomaly, mutation, whatever spread to the whole of the village without much ado. There were clear, easily identifiable physical boundaries (walls, fences) all around the village. Time chose to stop at the boundaries.

A brilliant sun rose the next day in clear blue skies. Warm, undiluted, unpolluted sunshine poured down on the village. Half a dozen interjections were insufficient to react to the scene that presented itself to anybody who chose to witness it.

Time had stopped the movements of not only humans *but also of all living creatures*. Full stop! In some second-grade cinemas, they show a part of an exciting fight or scene as a frozen picture. Here, this ghost village appeared to be such a scene. Only, this was for real; a real that beat any imaginable surreal. No amount of expensive cameras and technical jugglery could duplicate such an effect. Absolutely nothing moved within the marked boundaries of the village. The village looked like Madame Tussaud's gallery on a vast scale in the open. Only, all creatures therein were real, appearing to be unreal. Men, women, children, horses, cats, rats, dogs, hogs, birds, insects, snakes, lizards, in short, all moving life forms were frozen still. Not to be outdone, even immobile forms of life, like trees and plants and weeds and creepers had participated in the act, looking like paintings in 3D. Hamlet, the village was about to become more famous than Hamlet, the person.

The reactions of the outside world at large, the hysteria of the media, and all that will only distract the readers from the actual wonder-cum-live-miracles that have been staring at them all along. Besides, all that immense digital and printed contents were being well recorded and preserved on paper and electronically. It is enough to say that at the end of one week, ten thousand people had gathered all around the boundary of Hamlet,

staring, gawking, yakking, clicking, blabbering into phones. The police were having a tough time controlling them. They had to take occasional harsh measures against a foolish guy attempting to cross over the boundary...Fortunately, helicopters could hover over the village. They were buzzing low all over the sky of the village frantically clicking photos and bawling commentaries into mikes...Then they too had to be severely controlled when one overconfident 'copter landed inside the village and its inmates were frozen instantly. The warning was clear. No trespassing.

As pointed out earlier, time is intimately wedded to the motion of bodies—alive or lifeless. Nature's first essay was on motion; by way of freezing it out. Village Hamlet was the orphic result.

*Nurnie; a few petit details. Even the air in the village wanted to freeze. There was no breeze all those days; sorry, years.

*All the animals, of all sorts that inhabited the village stopped moving. If the quarrelsome boffins and naturalists question vociferously how the creatures could live without food for such a long period, then they only had to go and ask Norsius. The trouble was that nobody could go anywhere near that guy.

*Not to be outdone, the birds (and worms) too were competing with the animals. 'If you can freeze, so can we too.'

They say that silence is golden. That seemed to be the best policy as regards to answers the umpteen questions that arise in this (baffling) context. Silence is not only golden; it can also be a sign of caution. Or, wisdom. Take your pick.

*The wags had a field day asking again and again if the blood in all those millions of veins and arteries were also frozen. Unfortunately, no direct, physical examination of any of the bodies inside the sealed domain was possible. Nobody dared.

The only practical thing to do was to wait and see. That, they all did. For one hundred years. The rest of the world could afford it. It had nothing to lose. (The outside guys were excited and keen for one year. Then, they lost interest – nothing was happening, see?)

The village of Recidivus

The second angle from which time can be examined as not changing is a bit tricky but worthy of the devious old Greek thinkers. If some activity keeps on repeating forever, such an event can also be argued as being timeless. There is no *change*, see?

Nature picked up that option. It had been doing that now and then on a micro scale, on individuals. Gentle Gene once had a health problem and he went to a doc for treatment. His symptoms were successfully removed, but something went wrong during the treatment and the brain of Gentle Gene was scrambled locally. His faculty of memory was warped in a peculiar way. Every morning at exactly the same time (no watch was needed) he would ‘remember’ he had an appointment with the doctor. He would neatly dress and groom himself and go out to the doctor’s clinic. He would stand there, outside the clinic exactly (no watch needed) for one hour and return home. He performed this ritual every day for two years, rain or shine. He was in good health all those days. Such and other similar aberrations of behavior had been occurring in the past. Nature collated all of them, sifted them, and came up with a fantastic exhibition.

Her exhibition grounds were in the village of Recidivus. Conveniently, that village was juxtaposed to the village of Hamlet. Nobody remembers how it came about; the layout of the village was circular. Its boundary was circular, and its roads were circular and concentric. Its buildings were . . . no, they were not circularly built, thank God. But the gardens and parks were. Right in the center of the village, there was a big circular park where eight streets converged. A beautiful sight when seen from above.

The physical description of the village is not of much importance at this stage. What became important was what began to happen at a certain point in the timeline of its historical existence. More specifically, to its denizens, from that day onwards.

Marks was an enthusiastic jogger. On that day he woke up at 5:00 a.m. exactly. He went at a steady pace around the outermost ring-road of the village, completed the circle thrice, and returned home. He did not hail any friends or acquaintances whom he met on the way. He concentrated on his job of jogging like a robot. Not to be outdone, there were five more joggers who woke up exactly at the same time as Mark did and completed two

jogging circles on the same road. Nor did any of them talk with one another, nor recognize the existence of one another. Thus, there were six robotic humans on the road on that day. Yes, robotic, they looked and, most probably they were too.

The next day, they all woke up exactly at 5:00 a.m. and followed the same routine of jogging. They were all dressed exactly as on the first day. They completed their rounds and returned homes exactly as on the first day. They had advanced a bit further in their robotic routines. Even the number of steps that each person put forward matched exactly with what he had done on the first day. Furthermore. The breathing pattern of each person was exactly the same, including the number of inhalations and exhalations. The 'robocity' perfected itself when the heartbeats too were exactly identical not only in numbers but also in the ECGs. The runners were quite emotionless. The next day, at exactly the same time, they executed the same circumambulations with the same digital precision. And the next day, and the next, and the next. If someone had taken videos of their jogging on different days and compared, he/she/they would have seen no difference whatever. All the videos would have looked like a GIF running on a loop. Any clever guy would think that the sky would surely look different even though the timing was identical on all days. Such a person's ratiocination would be correct. In fact, at some future date, a few people were to take such videos on different days and compare them. *They were to be shocked at seeing the exact same sky on all such days!* When Nature is playing its games with zest, you cannot beat it. No chance; it plays all the way.

The joggers kept their relentless routine for one week (as could be counted by outside observers). Apparently, they seemed to have lost their sense of time. But not exactly in another sense. They recognized the next day but somehow did not care to differentiate it from the previous day. Or, had they forgotten to count? If so, how were they able to put forward the same number of steps every day? It is easy to ask questions, but finding answers is a different matter altogether. Well, weeks rolled into months. Months rolled up into a solid year. If one week can pass exactly like its previous week, then why not one year like another? The village Recidivus rolled on and merged into the second year (as reckoned by outside observers) smoothly; like a thread winding around a spool. The denizens,

the actors of the village had forgotten all about the years. To them, one day was as good as any other day. In fact, it appeared (to the outside observers) as if they had forgotten to understand anything above a period of twenty-four hours.

Of course, Recidivus would not have gained a place in the Hall of Fame, if it were only the case for joggers. Everything, repeat everything in the village kept on going round and round in perfectly repeating cycles. Even in a small village, there are always innumerable activities going on all the time. It is not necessary to describe all of them here since those activities have been exhaustively recorded and kept in many archives—local, national and international. A couple of instances will suffice to give a picture of what was going on in that funny space-time continuum.

The village boasted of a beautiful, tidy park at the exact center, as said earlier. On the same day that the joggers' Eternal Jagathon took birth, the village belle, Liz was sitting under one of the arbors. The village beau, Richard came up running and dancing at a yare pace, holding a bouquet of flowers (roses, what else?) in his hand like an Olympic torch. He knelt in front of Liz and offered the bouquet to Liz. Liz accepted it with grace and glee. She stood up. He stood up. They embraced. Then they danced. They danced exactly for one hour. When their dance ended it was exactly 11:00 a.m. Richard performed the exact same act the next day at the exact same time, ending their dance at exactly 11:00 a.m. The duo did this, again and again, every day; and they continued doing these things merrily ever afterward; in consonance, with the way, the joggers were doing their job. It looked as if they were waiting for the joggers to end their Sisyphus-like routine, and it seemed the joggers were looking at the lovelorn duo for a clue. That apparent appearance could be in the minds of the external observers. The internal citizens of the village, the actors of the actions, were blissfully oblivious of such unwarranted fanciful thinking.

There *was* one person in that village, named Dumas. At two in the afternoon, reclined in his easy chair, he picked up his favorite book, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and read the first chapter. He was intensely immersed in the reading. He was haunted by a vague, tantalizing feeling of *déjà vu*; he thought he must have written the book long ago, maybe in his previous life. He finished reading the first chapter, yawned, and promptly fell asleep, with the book still clapped to his chest. The next day,

at exactly the same time, reclining in the same chair, *he read the same first chapter of the same book* and yawned and fell asleep at the same time. He continued performing the same activities every day. He had established an unspoken empathic resonance with that outside – the joggers and the lover-pair.

John Gurmay was fond of *masala dosa*, a delicious dish of South India. He had liked it so much, during his travels to Bengaluru the capital city of the state of Karnataka there, that he had learned how to prepare it. (He wanted to eat that dish when he came back to the USA, and also to popularize it, and make money out of it.) On that fateful day, for his breakfast, he set about preparing the *masala dosa* and its accompanying *sagu* with great care. He cooked about a dozen of them and carried six onto the dining table. The aroma of the food was irresistible. He ate all the six *dosas* leisurely; enjoying each bite and fletcherising joyfully. He took his own sweet time as his wife and children had gone on holiday travel. (He was the monarch of all he surveyed, as the poet has expressed it beautifully.) He tolled the finishing touch through a deep, satisfying belch. That sound coincided with the ringing of the wall clock, announcing that it was 9 a.m. What John Gurmay did later on, and all that is of no consequence. The main item of interest for statistical purposes is that he prepared the same number of *masala dosas* the next day also at the same time, ate the same number for breakfast, and finished and belched, closing the elaborate ritual at 9:00 a.m. He joined the list of the growing specimen of *homo recidivus*.

Dawn Layte arrived at his office desk half an hour late and was leisurely preparing to settle down for work when the office manager barged in briskly and bawled angrily at him, “Darn it, Layte, this is the third time this month that you are coming late. This is my final warning. Dawn, better be darn punctual, or I am going to fire you.” Dawn Layte smiled apologetically (fake) and said with sincerity (false), “Sorry, I will be punctual tomorrow.” He deliberately left out the preposition, from, from his reply, after the word, punctual. It was ten thirty a.m. when he had entered the office.

Layte arrived at the office the next day exactly at the same time as he had done the previous day. The ‘robocity’ virus was invading the village like a cyclone. The office manager barged in briskly and bawled angrily at

him, “Darn it Layte, this is the *third* time this month that you are coming late. This is my final warning. Dawn, better be darn punctual, or I am going to fire you.” Dawn Layte smiled apologetically (fake) and said with sincerity (false), “Sorry, I will be punctual tomorrow.” This little scene was repeated exactly the next day also, *word for word*, and at exactly the same time. Blissfully oblivious of the external world outside of the village and being blissfully un-self-conscious, they went on enacting the drama day after day. It went on and on, year after year. There was no such thing as boredom in the dictionary of the village Recidivus:

The TV sets in *all the houses* were switched on *at the same time* in the morning. No, it was not done obeying any dictator’s manifesto. It was spontaneously inspired by the ‘robocity’ as amply exemplified in the preceding instances. The denizens exhibited such innocence. The TV news supported them thoroughly, permeating all their cells from foot to head. As soon as the TVs opened, the BBC news channel came on automatically—in all the sets in all the houses. Nobody bothered to change the channels. (Even if someone did bother – no chance – they would have received only the same BBC news. Uh.) The media exhibited such simplicity. The next day, the same news played on, with serious aplomb. The same people watched *the same news* with rapt attention. The scene was repeated day after day, week after week . . . year after year. Monotony was no problem; that word was unsuitable. Precision and regularity were better words.

This took place near the village border. The fencing border was purely nominal, just to serve as a mark. Even grown-up adults could easily go through it. Wilson and Jackson were engaged in a heated argument. Wilson said hotly, “I have been trying to jawbone you all the while. Does not seem to work. Now, take this.”

He punched Jackson in the jaw. Jackson shook it off. He said evenly, “No. I am giving it back,” and hit Wilson on his jaw.

Wilson shook it off. “Now we are even,” he replied. Both the opponents solemnly shook each other’s hands and went their ways, in opposite directions.

For the record, it was five in the evening when this solemn incident. Samson, an outsider, from another village happened to witness the scene

and was slightly amused. By pure chance, he happened to pass along the same road the next day also. The chance seemed to be purer still since the time also was just this side of five o'clock. He saw Wilson and Jackson on the same spot as he had seen the day before. They were engaged in the same heated debate, employing the same dialogue—and facial expressions, and physical stances. They were also dressed exactly as on the previous day. Their debate ended with mutual trading of punches and the shaking of hands thereafter. And the departures in opposite directions. This time, Samson was not amused. He was bemused. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. He looked at his watch to confirm the date. Yes, today, it was not yesterday for sure. He lifted his eyes skyward, shrugged, and wended his way. The same fate-cum-chance brought him to the same spot on the third day. Same time. Wilson and Jackson were there, as if for his benefit. Their short charade was immaculately executed, identically as before. Samson was more than perplexed now. Besides, his curiosity was inflamed. He slipped through the fence, came to the spot where the spotless pugilists had exhibited their skill, and looked left and right to spot them. His field of vision was obstructed by buildings. He sighed and came back through the fence.

He was lucky that he did not stay for long inside the village borders. Still, the paranormal fields that had permeated Recidivus, induced their eldritch effect on him. The next day, he arrived at the fence like a robot, slipped through it, looked right and left, and returned. He went on doing the act day after day. As he did not reside inside the village of Recidivus he did not complete the hundred-year cycle. He was able to maintain his routine for the next twenty years only. He died in his home village due to old age.

Volumes and volumes of books have been written in these two villages. No need to reiterate all that.

Putting it in a nutshell, the scientific community (and many advanced thinkers) were stonkered. Full stop. Among many, a couple of things that fazed them were like this.

*The residents (Someone dubbed them, the participants. Of what, for God's sake?) ('Your guess is as good as mine.') of the village did not age, as they went on tirelessly repeating their acts for one hundred years.

*Granted even that, how did they survive? What did they eat? For hundred years, who produced, or cultivated food for them? As a wag put it, the answer was simple even though the question appeared to be Sphinx-tinted. The waggish logic was damn simple. The people survived on the first day, did they not? Enough. They repeated that act for hundred years just as they repeated all other acts! As easy as that. Do not worry about the boffins and their worries about energy equations, or the Entropy God of the second law of thermodynamics and all those headaches. Meh.

*For the duration of that one hundred years, the trees, plants, shrubs, etc. also preserved their age-innocence, in resonance with the homo sapiens of the village. They grew neither taller, nor wider, nor thicker. The authentic proof of the age of innocence was demonstrated through the fact that the trees did not shed dry, withered leaves.

*Needless to say, the other forms of life like animals and birds too followed suit. The remarkable thing was that *the birds did not move beyond the municipal boundaries of the village.*

*To make it plain, there was no change in the seasons. Spring, summer, winter, no nothing. Time was time, without qualifiers or quantifiers.

*Even inanimate things that people used like: household articles, tools, furniture, and frail artifacts, all such items did not wear away *or break.*

*As happened in the case of the other frozen village, Hamlet, two persons who entered Recidivus, got trapped there and stayed put there for hundred years.

*In hundred years, there were tremendous changes in the industry, technology, media, and human activities around the globe.

*As the gaping-worried-watching scientists and sociologists had extrapolated (their favorite word), there were no new births in the village during that awesome period. The opposite, nerve-shattering-mind-boggling event (oh, a nonevent, to be precise) also prevailed; there were no deaths too there, for goddamned one hundred years. Plenty of people became bankrupt and some (blindly relying on stubborn faith) made a few billion, playing betting games on this particular phenomenon.

The village of Recidivus closed its eyes and sealed its borders to the rest of the world during that period. No loss, no gain. All the clocks, all the old-fashioned wall calendars showed the same date. The denizens did not bother to update them. In fact, such an idea did not occur to them at all. If at all there ever was contentment in its purest essence, it existed here, in this village. Contentment was completely concentrated in itself.

On to the epilogue

Initially, the scientific community was highly excited by the tale of the two villages. Scientists from all over the world converged on the two villages and straightaway got busy observing, recording, measuring, and conducting experiments of all sorts. That was the easy part. Hundreds and thousands of books and scientific papers bear witness to that. But none of them succeeded in solving or explaining the Puzzle of the two Villages, as it was named. Many scientists were frustrated. No amount of physics, chemistry, thermodynamics, mathematics, quantum, Neo-quantum, Ultra-quantum, Certainty, Uncertainty, Probability or Improbability, Relativity General, or Relativity Major could come to their aid. A few advanced thinkers even posited that what was happening in the two villages was a play of a holographic drama. But then, who was projecting those scenes? And then, if so, what happened to the original village and its inhabitants? A considerable number of the researchers became severely neurotic. A few turned psychotic. One staunch theoretician committed suicide via Russian Roulette. (The public was reminded of a somewhat similar suicide by a scientist on the Pisa Tower which had occurred recently. Strange things were happening in the field of science. Were these an indication of the advent of a new era in human knowledge? A sea change in the very fundamentals of science?)

No solution was discovered for a long time. In the meantime, the saga of the two villages had completed one hundred years of manifestation. Strangely, the will to solve the problem was eroded as decades passed by. Gradually, this extraordinary story of the twin villages was almost forgotten, except as an item in one of Ripley's Believe It, Or Not pages. People of the world always want the latest news, and newer excitements; the media was ever ready to supply (and drown them with) such news . . .

After one hundred years, everything fell back to normalcy. Nobody could explain that too. But there was a collective sigh of relief from the scientific community all over the world. Only, a minor problem was created for the folk of the two villages. They had to face a staggeringly steep learning curve since the world had progressed enormously during those hundred years. That was not a major problem. The human mind thrives in the act of learning.

Coming back once again to the duration of one hundred years, it (the duration) was nothing; less than the blink of an eye when compared to the billions of years that the universe has been going on merrily.

Amen.

THE OBSERVER AND THE ABSURD

Dagnabbit, it all began with Quantum mechanics. As has been stressed elsewhere, Nature was keenly following the antics of its crown of creation. Of late, her favorite child's progress in science was accelerating at too repulsive a rate. (Humans seemed to have forgotten the words, moderation, lagom.) Humans were meddling and tampering with her time-honored laws. (For one, cloning had become as routine as changing hats.) When they discovered the laws of motion and gravity, she smiled tolerantly. When they propounded Relativity, her brows knotted in irritation. When they crossed the limit and came up with what they called Quantum Theory she was mightily upset. When they brought in the concepts of the observer and the observed, the weirder idea of infinite possibilities always existing but collapsing when the observer observed, she was rankled. What was he the observer, supposed to observe, by God? And by the same God, why should infinite possibilities *collapse*? (Nature to herself—'Do not cringe, I too have my God.') By the mere act of observing the absurd? Mischievous quantum guys were not yet satisfied. They invented what they termed, 'Quantum Entanglement.' A really entangled theory.

When it came to their entanglement, the weirdest things were doomed to happen. They thought that entanglement happened between physical, and microscopic particles. They were blindly unaware that they had entangled Mother Nature too. She decided it was time to teach her kids a few lessons. She began to get herself entangled with their theories wilfully. True, humans, her dear children were bold, but they were not bold enough. Their understanding of entanglement was pitifully microscopic in scope. She would show them how vast entanglement could be.

GOLDFINGERING

(NOT, NAUGHT NAUGHT SEVEN RELATED)

The Coldfinger Labs was a joint venture of three famous multinational companies. The lab was engaged in pure research in science. Two Nobel Prize winners and many top-level scientists worked there. Professor Mei Dos was the senior-most scientist there, age-wise. Whispers behind his back were circulating that he was a bit off the rocker. It did not bother him any whit if he was off his rocker. (Apart from atomic physics, he was also interested in the old alchemy—a strange combination.) Now and then, he used to discuss alchemy with his nudnik friend, professor Auric Gould. Gould once joked that his friend’s name rhymed with the famous Greek with the golden touch. ‘Oh,’ Dos made a rejoinder, ‘I was born in the year when MS-DOS was introduced for operating computers.’ They made a fine pair. Nature chuckled and said, ‘Amen.’ Therewith Quantic Entanglement embraced them—their minds were prone to entanglements in unexpected ways and far more frequently and intensely than the brains of average persons.

For the past year, Auric Gould was exploring new avenues in the field of the structure of atoms. Normally, serious research is kept secret, but Gould was not cast into that mold. He used to talk about his subject with anyone willing to listen to him. (That such, were few, does not count.) During this process, he unwittingly established entanglements with five more people. The number of the persons now thus linked, was seven. Seven is also the number of major stars in the constellation of the Big Dipper (wherein, it is believed, live the great seven sages). They smiled; something stirred in the seven big laboratories on earth. Waves of strange entanglements arose from them and focussed on the Coldfinger Labs.

One fine year (two to seven), on the seventh day of the seventh month of July the seven people who worked in that lab felt strange, unnerving tingling sensations in their brains (at seven in the morning), which continued for seven hours. This phenomenon persisted for seven days. They were all worried, but excited also; they had a premonition that something fantastic was going to happen in their lab. (When they left the lab, the tingling stopped. Hence.)

To tell without bringing in technical intricacies (and also to preserve their secrecy), it can be broadly said that what they were researching was about the hydrogen atom. As every schoolboy knows, a common hydrogen atom is made up of an electron orbiting around a nucleus containing a proton. This is also the simplest atomic structure of all elements. Hydrogen is the lightest element. Heavier and heavier elements contain proportionately more and more electrons and matching protons. And so on. For example, an atom of gold—far heavier than hydrogen—has seventy-nine electrons outside the nucleus, seventy-nine protons, and 118 neutrons inside. (Ah, Mei Doss was seventy-nine years old.) These numbers are unique to each element; something like human fingerprints, or DNA.

DNA, yeah, that too contributed to entanglement. Scientists were busier than bees, trying to modify, to engineer the structure of DNA. Mei Doss optimistically opined that if that can be done, the next logical (and glorious) step would be to engineer the innards of an atom likewise. What glorious possibilities were beckoning them! Of course, there already existed an example in the universe—from time immemorial, as they say. The sun! Every second an enormous quantity of hydrogen was getting transformed into helium. But that is a different story, and moreover, what was happening in the sun was according to the basic laws of science. He, Doss was thinking of something entirely different. He was thinking of things that could be controlled in a laboratory, things that could be mutated and altered with conscious design. His colleagues had laughed politely;

till recently. Of late, when he talked to some of them, he would notice that the veins on their temples would throb perceptibly. Then he knew instinctively that behind their veil of politeness, some psychic energy was working from another dimension. Though being a scientist, he was not worried about using words like dimension and psychic. After all, after Uncle Relativity added a fourth dimension to our three-dimensional world (without batting an eyelid), adding more dimensions had become a fad. String Theory guys routinely play with twelve dimensions in full faith. As to the word ‘psychic’, after the advent of Uncle Quantum, the veil separating physics and mind had become too thin to be palpable.

On the ninth of that month ($2-7+09+07=7$, as any street-level numerologist knows), while experimenting on the atoms of hydrogen, the instruments—made of the latest technology, unerring—showed that seven random atoms of the gas had gained an extra electron and an extra proton. That special state lasted for seven minutes; quite long, when compared to the transient lives of some micro-particles which *stayed alive for a few microseconds*. That incident was quite exciting. Doss felt they were about to cross a boundary.

On the sixteenth of the same month, at 16.00 hours, the sweating scientists stuck paydirt again. Seven random atoms of the gas had gained six extra electrons *and* six extra protons! Again, the special state lasted for seven minutes. This was a mammoth feat by any standard. To be quite honest, it was not a feat, it was a freak incident; that part need not be told to the public. It was also a freak atom in another sense. Normally, the third kind of denizen, called neutron resides inside the nucleus of all elements. The only exception is the normal atom of hydrogen, in which there is no neutron. The particular atoms which Doss and Gould had observed (It was not yet a discovery, officially, since the experiment was not replicated in other labs of the world, and ratified.) had now seven protons, but there were no neutrons in any of them. So, technically, the atoms

were still hydrogen only, though freakish. If only, they could get a couple of neutrons inside the nucleus, gash, they (he, he, Mei Doss) would have achieved what alchemists were dreaming of for a thousand years.

Well, how could he force a neutron to enter and stay inside a nucleus? An enormous technical problem there. A neutron is a neutral, chargeless particle. To control it is impossible; it can pass through a solid ten feet wall as if the wall did not exist. A worse thing was that if it hits an existing nucleus, it disrupts the nucleus; you get your A-bombs that way. However, a positive aspect was that, once neutrons gather inside a nucleus, they stay there docilely—one of those inscrutable jokes that Nature seems to indulge in. So, the best option was not to force a neutron in but to create a neutron inside an already existing nucleus.

When Doss suggested this to Gould, Gould replied amusedly, “Guess we have to request help from Uncle Quantum.”

Doss laughed back, “Not uncle, but Goddess.”

Their combined laughter reverberated among the walls of the laboratory. Three more persons were in the same cramped hall. (‘Funds, funds, funds.’) They had heard Quantum being called by many names, but that she was a Goddess, was news, besides having a quaint appealing aroma. They rushed to the next room and told two more of their colleagues. Seven. The chain was closed; entanglement was established afresh.

When the three came back, their ears were bombarded by the hysterical howls from Doss and Gould. This was followed by clapping of hands. When the three asked the duo what the matter was, Mei Doss joyfully shouted, “Matter? Boys, we *created* matter just now.” By that time, the remaining two had barged in.

Mysteriously, seven neutrons had entered the nuclei of the seven atoms which also had seven protons inside of them. The special

state, as before, lasted for seven minutes. School boys can close their eyes and assert that the atoms of the element nitrogen contain the above number of protons.

Gould was sure by now the occurrence was not a *trouvaille*, that quantum entanglement had something to do with what was happening in the laboratory. When he expressed his idea, Doss immediately agreed and added, “And, what is happening to us also,” and looked around. All the seven happily assented, nodding their heads vigorously. They stood linking each other’s hands, forming a closed circle. The orphic force flowing through them was almost physically palpable in its intensity.

Entanglement was now rising exponentially, each day. Infinite states of possibilities, mentioned in the Quantum Bible, which usually collapsed with the birth of observation, now began behaving in odd ways—as if deliberately so. Actually, Mother Nature was smiling with mischievous affection behind the curtains, at her children. You over-brainy fellows said, *infinite*, said, *possibilities*. If there is a possibility, it should manifest one day or other; otherwise, do not call it so. *That day has come now, and I am picking one possibility out of infinity. So small, see? You should not complain.* You dote on your quantum. Well, I am giving you more than a quantum. (Aside, “Your quantum is so small that it can as well not exist. You will get a quantum change, haha.”)

Mei Doss and his colleagues repeated their experiment. Nothing happened. Nada. They were crestfallen. Not for long. They intuited that they just have to wait. Gould knew, how long. He was right. Next week, same day, (same time) while they were engaged in the experiment, they felt as if their brain stems were shaking by the roots. For a brief second, they were all dazed. Their neural entanglement was terrific. That was nothing compared to the hurricane sweeping through the nuclei of seven chosen atoms of hydrogen. When they became properly alert to the external world, the scientists kept gazing and gazing at their instruments and

sensors, and screens in utter awe. Though they were capable of dealing with the highest level of the most advanced mathematics, they experienced now the greatest pleasure in the simplest act of counting. They counted up to forty-nine. There were forty-nine protons inside some of the atoms of hydrogen. There were seven such atoms; and the special state lasted for seven minutes, as usual. Those atoms could no longer be called hydrogen. The schoolboy of the preceding paragraphs could identify them as iridium. Their jubilation hit the roof. But they were disciplined scholars and they kept their celebration exactly for seven minutes. Then they seriously set about trying to replicate the result. Damn, dagnabbit, grumbled Mei Doss to himself once again. They had to replicate an experiment, or else the experiment would have no validity. The whole of technology and science was built on this solid foundation of repeatability of results.

The boffins were secretly hoping about what was going to happen next week. Since there was a big jump from seven to forty-nine, they assumed and hoped to entrap ninety-eight protons in their atom.

Mother Nature smiled. What they hoped for was logical (well, kinda), but there are strands and strands of logic. Mei Doss should have paid more attention to that Greek, whose name rhymed with his own. That guy had the golden touch, as the above schoolboy knew well. Then, what about the lanky cranky professor Gould? When Gould and Mei Doss work together, can gold be far behind?

That was what they, in fact, got on the next working day. The hydrogen atoms (Gould was beginning to suspect that they were the exact same atoms that had been undergoing a transformation from the beginning, ridiculous though it looked like) got impregnated by an unprecedented entanglement and began to radiate a golden aura. The instruments wailed. The men counted with zeal. There were now seventy-nine protons inside the nuclei of the familiar seven atoms. The effect was breathtaking. It was a dilly. “Gold, gold,”

shouted the scientists, overcome with emotion. (The old numerologist smirked that seventy-nine reduces to seven.)

They waited, with bated breath, as the old books say, for seven minutes for the entanglement effect to subside. A surprise, as an additional bonus showed up. The effect lasted for seventy-nine minutes, this time. They clapped their hands – which act too was growing to be a habit. In their excitement, they had forgotten to count the number of atoms transformed. The number was seventy-nine. It was more than the previous number, sure. “Very satisfactory,” chuckled, Gould. Mei Doss clucked with dissatisfaction, nodding his head negatively. Even if one manages to gather all the seventy-nine atoms in one’s palm, the mass will be simply invisible to the naked human eye. Gould spurred all of them to be positive, for, that attitude, he pointed out, was what was working on the entanglement of recent. The group got the message.

From then onwards, they worked with greater zest, zing, and zeal. Mei Doss started video recording their experiments—apart from the now commonly established security procedure of CCTV recording. The time for publishing their findings was nearing fast. Looked as if Goddess Quantum too was willing to cooperate. The seven-day cycle was broken. Fresh reactions commenced happening daily. The atom count kept escalating steadily. One day it was 700 atoms. Then 7000, 70000 were transmuted; like that. (They were not hesitant, at this stage, to use the word, transmutation.)

There came the day when they were able to see with their naked, unaided, eyes (even sans bifocals), the scintillating yellow metal; the chamber which normally contained pure hydrogen was now filled with brilliant golden particles. The dust, at a rough guess, would have weighed one gram. The glass-covered chamber glowed for seven minutes. The entanglement subsided. Everything was hydrogen again. Still, it was a memorable day. The dream of centuries of alchemists had been realized by scientists in the lab, not in a witch’s cauldron, say it again.

The experiment was conducted ferociously for the next six days. The amount of gold kept on increasing, until, on the seventh day they obtained seven grams of gold in the chamber. In the form of moving atoms, the seven grams of gold filling the experimental chamber was so dense that one was not able to look through the glass. The yellow glow was eerie. For once, the scientists stood silently watching it in awe. One of them was busy capturing the scene with his special digital camera; mobile phones were not worthy of recording such a historical occurrence. Mei Doss wanted to catch the divine substance, touch it, and feel it before the fateful limit of seven minutes elapsed. Then he suddenly remembered, that, ah, fancy that, gold atoms were far heavy than hydrogen atoms. It was natural for hydrogen atoms to rise and keep moving. The heavy gold atoms should stop moving and start settling down, even if the famous Brownian movement was in operation inside the chamber. Fancy, why his colleagues did not think of it.

The moment he thought his thoughts, the gold atoms stopped moving. Within seconds, the seven grams of gold settled down at the bottom of the chamber into a thick dot-like lump. Once more, there was a unanimous shout of “stone the crows” from all the hoarse throats. Gould hurriedly unlocked the door of the chamber.

They wanted to weigh the matter. It was not possible earlier, to weigh exactly, particles madly moving inside the chamber. (They could, of course, weigh the chamber before the experiment and after it, but nobody had thought of it, especially as the design of the experimental chamber was a highly complicated affair.) They collected the gold and weighed it as hurriedly as possible, keeping in mind the seventy-nine-minute deadline. The extrapolated guess was correct; the gold dust weighed seven grams.

They decided not to wait any longer. They published their findings—along with all relevant records – in a respectable journal. Among the thousands of scientists and technologists who read the

reports, half could not believe it. The other half went on, trying to duplicate the experiment in their labs.

Most of them did not succeed and reported so. The first skeptical group laughed aloud, saying, they had already known it. Just about when the interest in the matter was waning, boffins of a lucky lab in the UK were able to get seven grams of gold in their chamber, for seventy-nine minutes. Soon, within a span of seven weeks, five more labs in five different countries obtained gold in a similar manner. Common reports from seven labs cannot be ignored. The scientific journals picked up a hot scent. The news had the potential to blow up on a global scale. The seventy-nine-minute deadline was the tight leash that was holding down the brouhaha.

Things began to take an unexpected turn here. The center of attention was that the metal being produced in the lab was gold. Persons wielding the highest of powers in the governments sat up alertly. Their noses were far more sensitive than those of the best-trained dogs, in these kinds of affairs. Grim, top-level agents of most secret agencies ('No Such Agency') met and conferred with the heads of the laboratories. Of the many sincere researchers, some lost their jobs, some lost their limbs, and many ended up in gulags – democratic and totalitarian. Everything connected with gold was hushed up, or severely distorted.

The auric explorations were continued, only by the labs run by the State. They all wanted to break the seventy-nine-minutes barrier. The most frustrating aspect of the affair was that the appearance of gold atoms was totally at random; the mysterious quantic effect could not be brought under human control. But the governments did not want to give up. Gold is gold, after all.

Meanwhile. A stownlins job. Mei Doss was not named Mei Doss for nothing. One night he prayed alone at midnight to the fabled Greek whose name rhymed (not without reason), with his own. He was privileged to have an extra key to the labs as often he

worked late at the night. After obtaining the blessings of the Greeks, he one day worked till very late at the night; nobody else was present. Such a thing was not unusual, and nobody bothered to interfere with the venerated old man. Mei Doss conducted the now familiar experiment with ease. Q-entanglement was still working, and there was gold in the chamber. He hurriedly opened the chamber and pocketed the tiny amount of gold, after carefully wrapping it up. He locked the lab as fast as possible and drove home as fast as possible. All the while he was fully conscious of the seventy-nine-minute life of the atoms he carried in his pocket. Now, it did not matter whether he hurried or not; after that period, the gold in his pocket was going to vanish. He was aware of that too. His only ambition was to keep the gold in his house – for the satisfaction of his soul. He had already a concealed niche in the garage of his house. He reached home, entered the garage, opened the hidden locker, and poured the gold into a box meant for that purpose. He looked at his watch. Still, fifteen minutes to go before the deadline arrived and the gold vanished. The gold in the locker was a damn pretty sight. He feasted his eyes on the powder for some time, let out a long sigh of contentment, locked the doors, and came out. His name was now justified.

He repeated the exercise the next day also. (To his utter surprise and delight, the seven-day cycle was not operative in his case! Maybe he had another second-level link with Entanglement.) A great shock awaited him that day. When he opened the secret locker, he was absolutely sure that the gold of the previous day would have vanished into the thin area of the Quantic Probability Space. Normally, the original hydrogen gas would hiss out. Quantum has still got many wonders hidden under its sleeve; he remembered, on one occasion, that such an action did not happen. There was no hydrogen or anything else in the experimental chamber. It was a sacrilege. The laws of conservation of matter and energy forbid such an occurrence. Quantum did not care a whit. . . . Let it be. What

happened this time was that a tiny amount of gold was still glittering. The gold must have crossed the time limit. Whoopie! Now. He was the real Midas. He continued secretly stashing the gold dust in his house. The gold held. One fine day the collected gold weighed 21Kg! Mei Doss, unlike the original, was not a greedy man. He decided to call it a day. Already, he was tempting the Goddess of Quantum. (He had heard, but was not completely sure, that somebody, somewhere, had built a temple for that puissant Goddess.)

Meanwhile, the Coldfinger Labs, under the strictest control from the government, was carrying on its original research. The reasoning of the government was that the lab was the one that made the original discovery, that it contained brilliant minds (that did not concern too much about worldly affairs), and that the chances of further greater discoveries were high there. The reasoning was justified.

Mei Doss and Co did stumble on the next logical step on the road. Except for a few in a few crackpot super-modern cults, nobody had an inkling that Mother Nature was using the Goddess Quantum to bamboozle her dear children for a while.

In their excitement of finding gold in their lab, the highQ-gifted boffins had forgotten the proton-littered passage they had traversed. Come to think of it, the existence of seventy-nine protons inside an atom is not the final limit. Many, many elements in nature contained more.

That was whither, the quantic Siren was beckoning the sleepwalking lab lads. The digital counters which had been accustomed to stopping at seventy-nine for some time now came to life and surged ahead to eighty-four. Doss, Gould, et al were delighted when their instruments announced the birth of an atom with eighty-four protons, Polonium. Next week, they proceeded to ninety-one, Protactinium, and so on, week after week. Those were heady days for the Coldfinger boys. Nobody slept properly during

those weeks. Step by step, ninety-one escalated to ninety-eight, 105, 112, and finally to 147!

To that day no human being had come across an atom with 147 protons. It was almost deemed an impossibility. The maximum the scientists had achieved was, 112 (Copernicium), and the dubious 119 (Ununennium) even which was more like a chimera than solid physical matter. (The countless pages of high-end mathematics and theoretical arguments are a distraction and, in a sense, irrelevant when Quantum was on high jigs.)

As before, these results were replicated in all the other government-controlled secret labs also. The news was exciting, of course. The man was creating new matter which had not existed in nature previously. But then, of course, the governments did not care much. They were all baying after gold—gold being gold. They increased their vigilance over the Coldfinger Labs (especially in the country where it was located.)

On the day, at the time the new 147 proton-containing atoms were created, there was a huge white ball of light that flashed out like, yeah, that thousand splendid suns. It happened in all the labs that were conducting the experiment.

For once, the exciting news was shared among the scientists.

That was that. That was the end of probabilities and entanglements. Back to normal. No more breathtaking transmutations. The bright boys in the labs worked furiously for seven weeks. Nada. No gold. Nothing. They looked askance at the original boys (granddads, in fact), Doss and Gould.

At the Coldfinger labs too, everything was icily normal. No gold.

Sigh, and the governments lost all interest in the matter. All extra funds were withdrawn. Only, a few handfuls of science sleuths poured over the accumulated data of the past months, straining their

brains to the maximum, trying to find a clue as to how what had happened, happened.

Meanwhile, Mei Doss was the only happy man. Nobody—not even his closest friend – knew that he had stashed twenty-one kgs of gold. It had become a ritual for him, to daily open the locker the first thing in the morning, touch the gold, feel it, (he would swear he even smelt it) kiss it.

Of late, he was thinking of how to use that gold, without raising suspicious eyebrows. He was a brilliant man, and he got a brilliant idea.

Morning, he went and opened the locker, as usual.

The gold was still visible.

Suddenly, his ears became very alert.

A hissing sound was coming out of the heap of gold. Was he imagining it? No, the hiss was real and growing louder by the second. He was worried.

Only for a couple of seconds. He instinctively knew what was happening.

Before his bulging eyes, the gold, solid 24-carat gold was turning back into the original hydrogen. The hiss accelerated. The sound grew louder and harsher.

Soon, it was all over. All the gold vaporized into hydrogen and left the locker. The locker became empty, as it was at the beginning of this shebang.

Mei Doss laughed and laughed his heart out till he collapsed on the floor due to exhaustion.

TWINS AND KINS

His name, for the sake of this story, shall be Villain. Villain wanted to kill Alex. It is a long, old story. It has no place in this short, new story. Alex lived happily in Aberville, along with his wife, Alexa. He was a gregarious man and was always surrounded by friends and family and business pals. He was also quite healthy and strong and highly proficient in more than half a dozen martial arts—East and West. Thus, it was a tough proposition for Villain to knock off Alex. The only plus point for Mister Villain was that Alex was not aware of his intention to bump him off. Yet.

Villain planned and waited and waited and planned and still, he was stuck at the starting line. Mister Villain was a well-educated person. He had studied many subjects. One day he was studying an article on quantum entanglement and immediately he was enlightened.

His enlightenment was limited to the physical world. He was enlightened as to how to kill Alex—even without touching him or seeing him; from a distance of thousands of miles. *He need not even bother to know where exactly Alex was.* He chuckled and chuckled at the great idea. Long live science.

In its briefest and simplest explanation, the strange quantum entanglement works thus. Suppose there is a source (mother) particle, M. From out of it, suppose two particles, D (daughter) and S (son) emerge. D and S will keep on moving separately along their routes. They could be far apart and physically not connected at all. Yet, if you either measure a property of D, or alter it, the property of S also changes—*even though you have not touched S!* This is a mind-boggling scientific fact, and plenty of fast and furious research is being done in this field.

Now, Villain had done plenty of research on the background life of Alex. Out of the scads and scads of information bytes he had collected, a few relevant ones directly connected to the quantum article he read, filtered themselves down and formed a fine intelligent, and intelligible pattern. Begin with M, the mother particle. Her name was Merry Linn. At the time Alex was born, Mary Linn had actually given birth to twin males. Unfortunately, she was unconscious at that time and unaware of the fact. Surreptitiously, one of the twins had been taken out and given to an orphanage. One of its 'patrons' desperately wanted to get a newborn baby and raise it as her own. (Such things do happen in the present modern society regularly.) That boy was later named, Bealex.) Bealex was now thirty, and he ran his own bookshop in a small town, Beberville, about three thousand miles away from Aberville where Alex lived. Alex and Bealex never met each other. Each was not even aware of the existence of the other. Villain painstakingly dug up the above information. That was enough for his plan.

The uber-genius plan was simple. Entanglement, entanglement, the persistent rhyme was humming in his ears. It is a vast repository of wonders. The plan, then. Just copy the textbook explanation and substitute appropriate words in appropriate places. The source (mother particle) was surely the blessed Merry Linn. The emerging particles were, without a doubt, Alex and Bealex! So, so, so (oh God, sorry, oh Quantum) if you perpetrate an action on Bealex, the effect will show on Alex! The villain was once again thrilled at the beauty of Quantum.

Villain had already secretly carried out the recce work on Bealex. Bealex was excessively fond of chocolates. He was still unmarried and living alone. (*Will, what more do you want? Villain asked himself. What are you waiting for?*)

On a fine sunny morning, when Bealex was alone, Villain knocked on the door. (He had come to Beberville on the previous night by Greyhound, stayed at a motel, and had checked out before

coming to this house.) Bealex opened the door and saw somebody who obviously looked like a salesman. Smiling broadly, Villain, with an outstretched hand—which held an enticing chocolate bar in its open palm—said in gushing tones, “Congrats, mister Bealex. I am from the Yesatwood Chocolate Company next town. As a promotional gift, we are distributing free chocolates to a select few people here. The corner store referred you to us. Please accept the gift. It is a Lulu. We assure you its taste is unique. Bye, have to hurry to your friend, Mr. Anderson next street.” Bealex had already grabbed the chocolate before the salesman had completed his spiel. He did not even say thanks. He closed the door and went in. He ate the whole chocolate bar in one go. As the man had said, the taste was unique.

Only, when he was attacking somewhere in the center of the bar, he imagined he felt the taste of bitter almonds. For a brief second only. Sometime after he had finished up the chocolate, a latent memory surfaced idly up. Recently, in a cheap detective novel he had read about a murder, wherein, the familiar smart cop comes near the dead body, notices the smell of bitter almonds, and declares satisfactorily, “Cyanide, I am sure.” Of course, he was vindicated later on after the autopsy. Our man was disturbed by that lazily-rising memory.

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Quantum entanglement was not that lazy. At the same time when Bealex was chewing the chocolate, three thousand miles away, Alex was having his morning coffee. Alex was in top physical condition, radiating health and strength from every part of his body. At the table, Alexa was sitting opposite him smiling happily. She had prepared the coffee and was glad that he was enjoying every sip of it.

Suddenly, Alex frowned, licked his lips, and said, “Alexa, this tastes like almonds, and bitter. Have you added anything extra to the

coffee today?” Alexa was surprised by the question. She replied, “No darling. I know you like it sweet. It is the usual milk and sugar, that is all.” She bent forward to kiss him.

“No,” he shouted in panic. He collapsed forward, face hitting the table. He never got up.

At the autopsy, they found that his body exhibited all the signs of cyanide poisoning. Try as they might, they were unable to establish how cyanide had entered his body. The coffee he had taken was tested, and it was just pure coffee and nothing else. Alexa had also taken coffee from the same kettle, and she was perfectly ok. (Thinking of the distant possibility of her having slipped the deadly chemical into his cup, the cops had checked his cup and the remaining coffee in it. Nada.) How, then did cyanide enter his body? Had he intentionally taken it, to commit suicide? No chance, Alexa vehemently denied such a scenario. He was in the best of health, in a financially enviable state. Moreover, she pointed out his last question before he collapsed.

Computers and Internet and Google make one of the most formidable forces among human beings. The three gossiped together and discovered that somebody, three thousand miles away had died of cyanide poisoning. The timing coincided—compensating for the difference in latitude. (That may not be of much significance, but later it attracted peculiar attention, in view of statements by Villain.) The autopsy of Bealex’s body had shown that he had consumed chocolate also before he died. The cops had made inquiries and found that he had purchased chocolate from a local shop nearby. A thorough check of the store and its regular clients revealed no further helpful information. The detectives at the Aberville police headquarter were a bit tickled by the pairing names Bealex and Alex, Aberville and Beberville. The great Sherlock Holmes has, in the course of his innumerable memorable lines, said that what one man invents, another man can discover. The cops discovered what

Villain had discovered. Alex and Bealex were twins, etc. That was as far as they could get in solving the case.

The police department to has got its share of mavericks. The head of the department secretly had a soft corner for soothsayers. (He had picked up the idea from a friend of his in the CIA.) The crystal gazer advised that the police should announce in the newspapers that they have reached a dead end. They have to give out that they got the details of both Alex and Bealex, but were totally bamboozled as to how the poison of one person could kill exactly at the same time the other twin who was physically at a distance of three thousand miles. Most of the readers were sure to laugh at such a statement. The soothsayer wanted exactly that. It would tickle the vanity of the perpetrator. He would contact the police in one way or another. Full stop.

In English, we have the saying, ‘Crime does not pay.’” In another Indian language, there is a saying, ‘The wife of a murderer will become a widow.’ What the soothsayer soothingly said smoothly happened.

Many readers laughed when they read the police confession. The actual perp was one among them. His vanity was tickled enormously. He wanted them to understand what exactly happened. It was top-level science, and the police should be educated. A pity.

He went to their headquarters. Carrying false ID papers, to be on the safer side, though they had promised not to question the identity of anyone giving them the information on this case. There, he clearly explained to them the beauty and grandeur of the law of Quantum Entanglement. The law officers listened to him without interrupting till he finished. Then, one detective asked him in faked reverence and (faked) astonishment, “Sir, that is out of this world. If we understand you correctly, it means that the murderer of Bealex is also the murderer of Alex.”

“Yes. But I would say that he committed only one murder. His intention was to kill Alex and he used Bealex as a means, as a tool, you understand.”

“So?”

“If you catch the murderer of Bealex, by any chance, you have to actually charge him with the murder of Alex only. Then . . .”

“Then?”

“The judge will throw the case out of the window!” could not help laughing at his own joke. The law officers too joined in. They stood up, indicating that the interview was over. They shook Villain’s hands warmly.

“Thank you, sir. You have been very helpful. We appreciate your joke too.”

They accompanied Villain up to the exit door. When Villain was about to open the door, they sang in unison, “No, not this way. That door, if you please.” At that door stood two sturdy muscle-bulging cops. They opened the door unceremoniously and hauled Villain in. Before he could open his mouth, to exclaim, he was locked up in a cell.

He recovered his breath and hissed, “What the heck?”

One of the officers who had interviewed him said disdainfully, “Mister Villain, your fake ID cards were OK. The problem is, we know who ordered them. You forgot we have hidden CCTVs. The smart computers identified your mug before you had completed your second sentence. We also found out who else, apart from us had made reces on Bealex; we got our networks, see? Now, we are eager to see how the judge will throw your case out of which window. One final aphorism—crime does not pay.”

Moaning Lissa

His name was Don Venice. He became as famous, (if not more than) as Da Vinci. One day in his childhood his father took him to the Louvre. He saw the famous painting, Mona Lisa, and was mesmerized on the spot. He had stood there gazing at the painting for two hours before his father gently pulled him out of there.

Sure, by the time he entered adulthood, he had a reputation as a great painter. He was ambitious too. He wanted to be known as the greatest. Sure, in another ten years he was ranked among one of the greatest painters. Each of his paintings sold for not less than ten million dollars.

Then he created his *tour de force*, the painting of Moaning Lissa. It was a stunning portrait. Most connoisseurs rated it at three rungs above that of La Gioconda. Technically he had an advantage; he was able to take advantage of the most recent high-quality products developed by modern technology. In art, that did not count much. But there was no doubt that he was a painting genius. He deserved all the praise that the press and public showered on him.

Nobody dared to actually evaluate the painting in terms of money. The value could easily run into billions. For the present, Don Venice was content with exhibiting the painting. The Louvre said it would be an honor for it to exhibit his masterpiece. He haggled over it and relented, though he was secretly happy. The painting was a great hit among the lay public too. It had an inexplicable, orphic charm. Thousands of people viewed the painting daily. Many were touched.

That is history. Not quite. The real history began when nine special persons started visiting the Museum, again and again, day after day, just to go on gazing at the painting. Their intensity affected the space surrounding the painting. A quantum entanglement ensued out of the twisted space.

The entanglement grew among the nine persons and the central object of their adoration—the Moaning Lissa. Each of the nine

wanted to own the painting but did not possess a microscopic fraction of what it cost. None of them was a millionaire; they were all nice, normal average citizens. The only thing they all had above average, was the burning desire to own the painting. The funny part was that none of them thought of stealing the painting. The second (slightly) funny part was that none of the eight knew of the existence and ambition of any of the others.

What ensued was quite natural. Easy and fast.

It was a Sunday. Usually, the attendance of visitors to the museum would be more on that day. This Sunday too was no exception. In fact, there was a heavy rush on that day since two magazines had carried articles on the Moaning Lissa on a preceding day.

Most of the visitors hurried to the gallery where the Mona Lissa was kept for public view. Once the first batch of the enthusiastic crowd reached the spot, there was a huge uproar. More and more people began running towards the painting. In the days of cell phones, it was ridiculously easy for news to travel. In a few minutes, it seemed as if the whole of Paris was rushing and gushing towards the Louvre.

Shrill whistles from all quarters of the Louvre, and police sirens soon rose to an ear-splitting level. The entrance to the Louvre was sealed amidst huge furor. While those eagerly waiting outside wondered, those inside too were being forcibly evacuated followed by loud protests.

Those being evacuated were being searched, unceremoniously by the gendarmes.

The police and the Louvre officials were vainly trying to conceal what cannot be concealed at all. The reason for all the hullabaloo, in and around the Louvre was already known to those outside and

was fully confirmed when the first batch of hysterical persons came rushing out of the building.

The Moaning Lissa painting was missing!

Note the word, painting, they shouted. *The frame is there, but the painting—along with the canvas, is missing!* It is the original frame, fresh and intact, and we can find no wear or tear anywhere in it. (Later, the thorough clinical autopsy of the frame by detectives also confirmed that point.)

What followed afterward, needs a separate thousand-page book to describe in detail. Yet, in a cynical way, all that can be classified as a normal reaction when one of the most famous and valuable paintings is found stolen. (Stolen, may not be a completely appropriate word, the same cynic could say, since, he may wag his index finger at the perfectly intact frame, and shrug.) Endless commentaries on TV shows, opinions from armchair experts, coverage in all newspapers of the world, interviews with Don Venice, infinite Tweets, speculations in innumerable blogs, and so on; a mindboggling list.

Apart from all that, a more unique event was about to happen. There is an ancient Indian epic, in which the poet says that the sky bore the waters in its womb for nine months, and when the rainy season arrived, delivered them down in the form of heavy rains. Here now, a similar instance occurred. Quantum Space was impregnated by the Quantum Entanglement with the Moaning Lissa. It nursed the painting for nine days and then delivered. Let not the accusation be framed that Quantum is always somber; it too has its sense of humor. When it devoured the painting, it left out the frame. The reasoning was simple. (If you divide the whole of the painting, with the frame, into nine equal parts by drawing vertical and horizontal lines, it will immediately become obvious that out of the nine sections, the poor central one will not have any portion of the frame at all for itself!)

The entanglement was initially produced by the nine persons who were daily devouring Mona Lissa through looks, mind, and spirit. So, it was fair enough that their karma should bear fruit. Quantum Space delivered. It was impartial. It delivered quite efficiently.

First, Mr. Fust Mann. Among all the persons who had set their eyes on Moaning Lissa, he was the first one who had coveted to possess it. He had fallen so much in love with the painting that every alternate day he had dreams about it. On the days that he did not dream of it, he was immersed in dense saudade. He could have easily stolen the painting in his dreams, but he was a highly moral man. Instead, he somehow got the money to buy it. He bought it legally, in his dreams, and kept it in his bedroom.

Secondly, Mr. Shake Ande. Among all the persons who had set their eyes on Moaning Lissa, he stood second, though his passion to possess it was no less than that of Fust Mann. He had fallen so much in love with the painting that every alternate day he had dreams about it. On the days that he did not dream of it, he was immersed in dense saudade. He could have easily stolen the painting in his dreams, but he was a highly moral man. Instead, he somehow got the money to buy it. He bought it legally, in his dreams, and kept it in his bedroom.

Thirdly, Mr. Thard Lee. . . . And lastly, the mental states of all the nine persons were identical—with regard to the painting. A rarest of the rare phenomena. That was why Quantum chose them, in order to bless them and give them a rare gift. A rare phenomenon deserves a rare gift.

It happened thus. At the same time. In nine different locations. To nine different gentlemen.

Mr. Fust Mann was asleep and happily dreaming, as usual of purchasing the Lissa. This time, however, there was a change in the modus operandi. In the outskirts of a forest, he saw a tree with a

long, smooth trunk. On the bark of the tree, he saw that someone had painted the Moaning Lissa. The man had done a splendid job; if it were not found on the trunk of the tree, people would have mistaken it for the original portrait. Fust Mann was thrilled. Suddenly he was filled with the desire to carry that tree and plant it in his house garden. He would lovingly water that tree daily, for sure, till his last day. He began to think about how to dig out the tree and carry it all the way to his house, cringing at the impossibly huge task.

He was startled by the sound of laughter from behind his back. He turned around and saw a sturdy lumberjack, holding a saw in his hand. The man said, “You do not need to dig out the tree. Just cut off the portion of the trunk that carries the painting—easy does it? I will help you there. In fact, I came here just for that.”

Mann replied, “That is mightily appreciated. How much have I to pay for sawing down that tree trunk?”

The man guffawed hard. “Oh boy, are you really that dumb, or, are you dreaming? Can’t you see that there is no need to cut down the trunk of the poor tree? I will just saw off the two-inch-thick bark that contains the painting, that is all. You do not have to pay me just anything. Somebody has just done that.”

“Who?”

“Quantum.”

“Quantum? Who is he?”

“Just, Master of all dreams. Enough of talk. Just let me act.”

And the woodcutter set to work, wielding the hefty sharp wood saw he carried. The man was huge, and his body covered the painting while he was sawing the bark with alacrity. He was whistling as he sawed. Fust Mann thought he had heard that haunting tune somewhere, but could not remember clearly. He tried hard to concentrate on the tune.

That was his undoing. The woodcutter had finished the job of removing the painted portion of the bark unbelievably fast. He turned around, holding his hands forward, displaying the splendid job he had done. Fust Mann plotzed when he saw what he saw.

The lumberjack was holding nine pieces of the bark. All the nine were of perfectly equal size; that was why he was beaming with pride. The painting of Moaning Lissa was now cut into nine equal portions.

Fainting in a dream is not of much practical use—irrespective of whatever the psychoanalysts may say. You are dreaming because you want to see and feel, you see? Fust Mann woke up fast inside his dream. In his real woken state, he would have become furious. In the dream, he was curious. “Why nine pieces?” he asked the perpetrator, smiling fatuously.

The perp began an ostentatious oration, “Mister Fust Mann, you are a nice decent man and all that. That is OK. But you are so self-centered. Don’t worry, there is nothing wrong with that. Almost all human beings are so. That is a different story. What I wanted to point out is that if you think you are the only person in the world who wants to own this painting, you are too naïve. You may argue that the intensity of your desire may be enormous. There again, you are being naïve. I have to enlighten you about the fact that, apart from you, there are eight more persons who love this wonderful painting with equal ferocity. Just see the problem. If you want to be the sole possessor of the Moaning Lissa, you have to eliminate those other eight. I do not think that killing eight people is a civilized solution. I just solved it my own just way, you see? I have cut the painting into nine perfectly equal portions so that each one of you can have a piece. Just as I am going to offer you one piece, I will offer the remaining parts to the other octet. Since you are the first person, I offer you the choice to pick the piece you most like to have, just.” Fust Mann was overpowered with verklempt at the enormity of the revelation.

Initially, Mann did not like to take the piece (his one-ninth) home. He instinctively felt that what the effing woodcutter had done was worse than mutilation; it was a desecration. He stood like a statue and thought and thought. In the end, desire won over desecration. He went over and examined the nine pieces. He selected one piece in which the eyes, nose, and mouth of Moaning Lissa were present. (The smile on the lips would give a tough fight to that of Gioconda—and win.) The 'mberjack thanked him and slid into the quantum space, out of sight. The dream was over. The nightmare was to begin.

Fust Mann woke up a bit late in the day, after a long, deep slumber. He prepared the coffee and entered his study room in order to leisurely sip the divine liquid while he read the newspaper. His attention was immediately caught by a piece of painting lying on the table. He recognized me immediately. It was the piece of painting he had seen in his dream.

It took him three seconds before it sank in. By God, what he had seen in the dream had become true! A wave of thrill passed down his spinal column. How extraordinary! It was a miracle indeed. The piece of painting lying on the table contained the same eyes, nose, and lips he had chosen in the (damned) dream. Impossible. Yet, the piece lay on the table, quietly mocking him.

It took him three more seconds before it sank in, for real, a second time, to a greater depth. What the 'mberjack of the dream had given him was a painting on the bark of the tree. But the sombrely mocking piece of art, directly under his nose, was done on a real art canvas! The final sinking-in followed almost immediately. Oh God, oh boy, the canvas and the painting he was staring at so dumbly, was the original one at the Louvre, the original Moaning Lissa! There was not a speck of doubt about it; he had been seeing the original painting a million times. The thrill gave way to chill. He had woken up from the dream into a nightmare. If the cops found out that a piece of the original painting was with him, they will not

even bother to enquire; they will first handcuff him and drag him out. Fust Mann shivered again and again.

Gradually, as he sipped the coffee drop by drop, a bit of courage came back. He had a reasonably good alibi. Up to the time of his return home (late at night), he was with friends, who could vouch for him. As for the night, he was sure that the security cameras at the Louvre would support him. But then, how was he to explain the presence of the painting (one-ninth part, by God!) in his home? Better burn it down. No, better wait and watch; he loved the painting too dearly to do such a thing. Then the forgotten words of the woodchopper in the dream came back. He had chopped the painting into nine pieces, because—as he said—he intended to distribute the other pieces to the eight more persons who also coveted it. So, it was reasonable to assume (sic) that eight more people would be in the same predicament that he was now in. At least, he had company! Hold on. Sit tight. Wait and see.

The gradual progression of his thinking mechanism came up with the next, most obvious deduction. First of all, if the dilly piece of art on his table was really the real one, then those at the exhibition hall would have noticed by now, that the original Moaning would have been either torn up (in case only he had got the missing piece), or vanished (in case the other eight guys had received the remaining eight pieces). There would be a furor. . . . He switched on the TV. The early morning news was already broadcasting the story.

His second guess was correct; Moaning Lissa was missing in its entirety. So, the other eight must have, must have, must have . . .

Yes. On the same day, at the same time, Mr. Shake Ande too was having his morning cuppa. Just a few hours before, in the night, he had had an identical dream to that the first man had had. The same tree, the same scene. The same dialogues—except for the appropriate changes, wherever applicable. Like, Shake Ande had to choose from eight pieces, since one was already earmarked. The

dream was replicated in the dreamlands of the rest. The last one, Mr. Naigne had no choice. He had to accept the last remaining piece, and he was happy with it.

The threads of all the nine dreams were tied together by a single knot—the indecipherable knot of Quantum Entangled Manifestation. Manifestation occurred promptly, without fanfare, at nine separate GPS-es. The original painting of the Moaning Lissa was distributed equally among the nine aspirants, almost instantly. The distance of each recipient from the Louvre, varied; hence. Quantum was paying respects to the classical laws of motion, simply for the heck of it, though it did not care a hoot.

Nine guys had one piece each. If they can come together and put the pieces together, Moaning could become whole—sort of. None of them wanted to do it. Each of them kept the fact of his possession a fiercely guarded secret.

The police (and other agencies) did their best to solve the riddle of the missing painting. Alas, even after one year of hectic efforts, they were still standing where they were on the first day. Day by day, the hopes of tracing the missing painting were dwindling.

Quantum Entanglement acts in the most mysterious ways, many of which are yet to be explored by smug science. Entanglement can happen in many layers. In the case of the Moaning Lissa, the binding factor was the intense desire to possess the object.

The other major binding factor was that all nine pieces rose from one original source. An action on one may produce unpredictable results on the other eight pieces. From Fust Mann to Mr. Naigne, the happy possessors of the pieces were unaware of this vital fact.

The seventh person, Shay Wayne had employed a housemaid for cleaning his house. She was working for him for five years; with no complaints from either side. She had less than an average IQ. Wayne did not care as long as she did her work well. She did.

She did it too well on that fateful day. Wayne had been looking at his favorite one-ninth piece of Moaning Lissa, as usual. He forgot to lock it in his cupboard when he went out for his morning jog. The maid had a duplicate key. She came in to do her job. A freak rush of air had thrown the painting onto the floor. While she was sweeping the floor, her eyes fell on it. She decided that the lackluster paper on the floor was fit for the dust bin. The painting was still a bit large in size. She had a brilliant idea – in spite of her low IQ. (Who said that brilliant ideas belong to only intelligent people?) She tore the dull-looking painting into small pieces. She had a further brainwave. (Why not?) She set fire to the pieces outside, collected the ash, and spread it among the plants in the garden, humming and singing joyfully for a job done well. No sign of trash; that is what is meant by cleanliness.

Wayne returned a bit early than his usual time. His first task was to keep back the painting in his cupboard. The piece was not on the table. He began a frantic search. The maid came in. She asked him what the matter was. He explained it to her. Then she explained it to him. He fainted.

* *

That incident was enough to trigger the Quantum Accident. All the remaining eight pieces of the Moaning Lissa spontaneously turned into ash. On the same day and almost at the same time, the other eight guys, from Fust Mann to Naigne, were staring with dumb incomprehension at the small bit of ash in their cupboards. They too were no exception. They fainted. On the same day (at almost the same time), the chief curator of the Louvre was staring with (matching) dumb incomprehension at the Moaning Lissa. It had established itself in its original place— frame and all. It was the original painting; no doubt at all. Finally, he let out a long sigh of relief and shrieked with jubilation.

V.S.Sury

All is well that ends well. (If Moaning Lissa were a human being, it/she would have smiled—in flesh and blood.)

The end—for the time being.