

Fantastic

40

Reetwika Banerjee

The logo for All About Books Global (ASBG) features the lowercase letters 'a', 's', 'b', and 'g' in a bold, sans-serif font. Above the 'a' and 's' are three horizontal wavy lines, and above the 'b' and 'g' are two horizontal wavy lines, suggesting a stylized book or a globe.

All About Books Global

Copyright © 2014 Reetwika Banerjee
All rights reserved.

Publisher

All About Books Global
16A, Priyo Nath Mullick Road
Kolkata 700025, INDIA.

Digital Composing, Layout & Printing

Jnanalok Infotech Private Limited
252/B/10, G.L.T. Road,
Kolkata – 700036, INDIA.

Cover Design

Tisha Mukherjee

First Published: May 2014

ISBN: 978-81-925690-8-6

Price: 240.00 INR

Printed on recycled paper. No trees were cut for the production of this book. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher and author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. The views, theories, postulates and recommendations expressed in this book are entirely those of the author. The publisher is not in any way responsible for the views, theories, postulates and recommendations expressed in this book. All legal actions related to this publication are subject to the jurisdictions of the courts of Kolkata, India.

Dedication

*In loving memory of a great soul
Late Lakshmi Gopal Bandyopadhyay
who luckily was my grandpa...my 'Dadai'.*

Acknowledgement

I heartily acknowledge all those great people who proved me wrong even when I was right and proved themselves wrongly right based on some false alibis and influential support bought against monetary power, seniority or worldly experience.

I could not have completed writing this book without the mental pressure, struggle and dilemmas created by these prodigious minds. Thanks a ton to let me touch my dream to be an internationally published author so early.

“I found Fantastic 40 as a unique book on Micro Stories. Each Micro Story is a macro attempt to touch our vibes through its “Micro” strides. Fantastic 40 has fantastic stories which are refreshing and rejuvenating.”

- Dr. R. Raman

(Director, Symbiosis Centre for Information Technology)

Foreword

Storytelling and writing had always been a traditional culture across the world since ages. India too was not an exception. From novels to colloquial, short stories to morals India has practiced all arts of storytelling in many of its regional languages. However with time, our life gained so much of speed that we slowly started looking more into the shorter literary creations which gave rise to a new genre of writing, namely flash novels. It became immensely popular in some of the fastest growing cities of the world. Though in India, it is yet to hit its zenith.

Initially I thought of keeping the tagline of this book as “A collection of short stories”. But later I made up my mind to tag it as “A collection of micro stories”. The rationale being, most of my stories are even shorter than a typical short story; ideally to let my readers complete a full story in a single breath. In today’s hurried world, do we really have enough time to relax and enjoy a full length novel? Well that is highly debatable. However keeping the fast pace of our promising nation, I tried to take a small stride towards creating a paradigm shift of the contemporary literary styles. Hope my readers enjoy it. I will highly look forward to their feedbacks and reviews.

Happy reading!

Contents

A Night in Solitude	11
Clumsy Old Lady	15
One Rainy Day	18
Friends call me 'Bubu'	21
Met Her On Board	23
The Cursed Well	25
Need for General Quota	29
My Lost Note	33
Totally Owled	36
Ice Tea	39
Hacking into a 'Green' World	42
Intelligent Buying	45
Titli's Mom	47
'Non-Virgin' Mama	50
Come Back Soon	53
Koolget Mint	56
A Sweet Revenge	59
Regular Problem of Regular Lunch	62
Standing Ovation	64
Mama's Struggle with the Chicks	67

A Feel Good	69
Cross Link	73
PIS-ing Whole Night	75
Even In Baby Show	77
Green Washing	81
Delivered Successfully	84
New Reebok Shoes	87
On an Emergency	90
Girls, Look Out !	92
Handicap	95
The Lone Passenger	98
Still Waiting...	101
Jai Baba Lokenath	103
Slightly Bent	107
Height of Coincidence	110
Met Him By Chance	112
Tsimasham	114
The Dic Boy	121
With M. K. Gandhi on 15th August, 1947	124
Last Time with My Boyfriend	127

A Night in Solitude

Dooars, located in north-eastern India, are foothills of the mighty Himalayas. 'Dooar' in many of the native languages means 'gateway'; being named so as the region forms a gateway to Bhutan from India.

It was three at noon when I crossed the Dooars forest check post. Decided to trek up through the lonely woods... Who imagined, this casual exploration would end me up in such an atrocious stance!

I stressed myself to make way through the hill forest, without realizing the looming danger ahead! The hilltop was clearly visible, looking straight up from its base. Even I could perceive a few blurry heads at the tip as their dim voices echoed through the silent woods, giving me a perfect feel of exploration. Dressed in collared-tee, cargo, sports shoes and leather-hat with a sleek handcam capturing diverse forest dimensions, added an impeccable touch, more psychologically than in veracity.

Tired climbing few incessant hours uphill on foot, I thought of giving some rest to my limbs. While reclining on one of the soggy rocks; just gave a relaxed glance at my watch, "My goodness! It's already seven! And I'm still not sure how much to trek more." The sun had set in the west. As I intended to speedup, the narrow lane I was following since base-hill bowed thinner and gradually disappeared in the woods. The darkening greens all round seemed like a murky serpent swaying to swallow me up. There wasn't a single life around, except the lashing greens. Those blurry heads and their dim voices at the hilltop too faded in the growing obscurity. Soon realized the lethal fact, I was lost! Somehow managed to find the manager's card at the hotel I checked in the morning. The worse was waiting - there was no network! My legs were paining more than a labour one. Had the last draught of water from my bottle, took a deep breath and tried introspecting on the timid options left with me - one to trek down the same path, which was quite improbable in the dark; second to find a reasonably safe shade to spend the night and make a move next morning. Or the third may be...

Suddenly among the silence of the forest, I heard a paddy sound behind. Looked back with a forlorn hope; there was a peculiar movement among the bushes; curiously waited for a moment, raised my brows to figure out what's happening. As I intended to step forward, to my deadly bolt from the blue, could find some black-and-yellow spots and a pair of gleaming eyes behind the hedges. "A leo..pa..rd !!" Its eyes were fixed on my camera; got to see its lustrous reflection on the lens. Till I firmly realized its presence, it jumped out of the bush. The yellow slim-fit was too close to put my senses up. One last thought hit me before I lost myself to the spotted carnivore - "I don't need to chalk

out the third option anymore. It was Nat-Geo's favourite wildlife show-time now!"

I could feel a blatant pain throughout my body as I tried moving my feet. There was such a soggy smell around. Probably, it was the mushy odour which pierced the nostrils to thrust my senses back. I was with no clue to guess what happened with me past night. It took several minutes, even to recollect my last apprehended sagacity. The moment I twigged, my consciousness shivered again. "How am I alive? Where's the leopard? I was still taking breaths (tried some faster ones with folded hands in front of my mouth to check that I wasn't dreaming). Could rapidly realize, the sodden place where I was laying wasn't where I dropped my consciousness. That was somewhere in the woods... But this is a dark shade, damped with chilly water seeping through the rocks. "Where am I?", wondered silently. There was darkness everywhere around me, except a thin ray of light at the right corner. Somehow I tried to drag my tired body towards it. Unpredictably it was the morning sun's fresh glare. As I peeped out, the yellow beauty had already given birth to a beautiful baby. Its cuddling touch, was wooing the new born cub. Oh a scene to cherish ever!

It was like a bizarre nightmare! Spending a breathless night with a leopard at her den amidst the abysmal forest of Doors – hardly any explorer could make it happen! Slowly I could comprehend...it was perhaps after I lost my senses to her last night, she rubbed me to her den, protecting me from the probable nocturnal attacks with her gracious presence.

Heard long before, a pregnant leopard never harms anyone. Was I a living example of the adage? Couldn't find a definite answer even today!

Clumsy Old Lady

Last night I was returning from Serampore in the last local train. There was ample crowd inside with a few hawkers struggling to make out the best of their day. I was sitting next to a clumsy old lady, seemingly close to seventies. She was dozing since when I boarded the train.

I had two more stations to go, when a hawker approached the sitting crowd with his products. He was selling ayurvedic digestive pills, of which only five packs were left with him. He offered an open discount for the remaining ones and four of the daily passengers went for it. He was waiting for his fifth customer. To my utter surprise, the old lady by my side extended her trembling hands asking for the last pack. God knows when she woke up! And the hawker gave it to her at a much discounted rate, to which he could have easily nodded 'no'.

The lady got down at Konnagar station, holding the pack close to her heart. I was wondering at the whole episode. Why did the hawker give her at so low price

which he could have simply averted? Second, why did she (who does not seem to be affluent at all) preferred to buy something which she may not require? Most importantly, why was she carrying the pack so tightly? My doubts were probably getting reflected on my face. One of the passengers sitting at the opposite bench narrated me her tragic story.

Bishnu was her only son who used to sell similar digestive pills in local trains. Being a born dumb, he could not live out loud like the other hawkers. Except a handful of daily passengers, nobody gave a look to him or his items. Every day he returned frustrated in the last local and shed his silent tears. Meantime he also tried his hands in one of the cottage industries but could not sustain with the deceptive owner. One day this lady found her son struggling in a crowded train, extremely trying to make his items visible. He even personally requested the passengers to take at least one. Hardly anyone even bothered to notice. She stood quiet at her son's silent struggles. This was his daily life. Hardly could she do anything but to encourage him! Utterly upset, one night he threw himself out from the running train – his last local. The lady kept waiting the whole night... which never ended. Unable to bear the shock, she lost her nerves. Even today, daily she travels in this last local and whenever she finds someone selling digestive pills, she seems to buy with whatever she has. Someone from the crowd added, she has a huge stack of such packs at her home, none of which she even attempts to open. It probably gives the feel of her lost son, mentally satisfying her to respect his vain efforts.

I got all my answers. Barely could I forget this journey ever. While on board, we come across so many hawkers selling variety of items. May not be so

poignant like Bishnu's, but all must have their own stories! Do we at all care to think it over?

One Rainy Day

We never met alone – every time we were escorted by something or the other. Yes ‘something’like clumsy crowd, chilly morning, car horns, an unknown hurry and so on. Last time it was rain. Rather a damn rainy day. And it washed off all seven colours from my life.

Newtown is quite a happening place. I was waiting to catch the morning bus, just when heard a scream! The girl at the opposite end stared silently with curiosity. Didn't know why, but it seemed as if the scream scared her of something which insisted to gaze at me. Bound by my habit, didn't lose the opportunity to gaze back. A simple, though not as it's expressed, couple of gazes started penning a fresh crush story.

Five weeks passed in between. By then I had already gathered some handsome number of information about this girl at the stop. Her name was Clara, a twelfth standard student at St. Thomas Convent School, staying near Point Street square. Every day she used to board a private car which probably took her to her destination. She boarded the car from the noisy

Broad-gate stop, where I waited... previously for my bus and now for her. She too seemed to relish the same. In fact, she threw me some ostensibly genuine smiles against my rosy winks. But I never understood why she needed to board the car from Broad-gate stop and not her residence! That one rainy day cleared all the clouds of doubt!

Newtown is one of the dry places from the north. Predictably, there was no rain since the last few months. Strangely, some unseasoned heavy rains ushered over Newtown that morning. In fact the rain started since last midnight, convoyed by tremendous thunderstorms. I was waiting with my eagerness to pitch some chit-chats with Clara that rainy day in a truly cinematic way... just like the way a hero approaches his beloved. Hopefully my silent prayers reached the Almighty – “Oh God! Please make this rainy morning a memorable one for me.” Who could believe my prayer to come true so awfully? What happened next was really an incident not to be forgotten by me anyhow.

Like any other day, Clara was waiting at the other side of the road. Due to water clogging, the vehicles were made to surpass the stop at just the opposite end through my side. That compelled all the other-end travellers to board the buses from my end. And Clara too was not out of the equation. That was the biggest opportunity for me.

It was an immense airy day for me. Clara was standing just by my side, sharing the same bus-stop shade, with so many packed heads in between. Anyhow I tried to pitch in a light conversation with her, in a carefully careless note. Just when I found my dad, waving his hands at me, from inside his car. “Oh no! What is he doing here?” It spoiled my entire mood and

opportunity to talk to Clara. I had no choice than to wave him back with an arid smile. Suddenly a sweet aroma filled my nostrils. I was softly brushed by Clara as she made her way out from the crowd, straight to the car on the road.

And that ended my would-be colourful story in a grey sulk. That car which picked Clara up every day from the other side of the road was none else but my dad's! It was actually Clara whom he was waving at and not me.

One rainy day changed the entire layout of my life. My dad's car geared off with Clara in front of my eyes... and I still continued waiting for my bus, struggling with the crowd.

Friends call me 'Bubu'

"Is she a new ELTP?" – Avijit asked in his typical style to Tamay. "Seems" – Tamay tried to keep the reply as brief as possible and murmured "Oh! Not, again."

Avijit knew Tamay since they joined Satyam's Entry Level Training program (ELTP) in 2006. God knows what made him to find an eternal friend in Tamay, which conversely was not at all. Tamay was a guy of quick wits and that was probably one of the reasons why friends referred him as the '*ultimate bamboo master*'. After enjoying a short training session at Hyderabad, they relocated to Bangalore on a new project. Every new day, Avijit's eyes gleamed at every new girl joining their Bangalore campus. Previously it seemed a bit awkward to Tamay, but later he felt more annoyed than awkward. And now he enjoys Avijit's freaks more than annoyance.

Red Bull had given a stall at their office canteen on the Kairali celebration week. They were freely distributing Red Bull cans to all the associates. Tamay was a drink fanatic who at once made his way to the

stall as he heard about it. Avijit too followed him soon after he got the news of two beautiful ladies at the stall. Avijit had a typical way of introducing himself to unknown girls. These Red Bull ones too were not left out of equation. Taking out one from their back pack, Avijit extended his hands for a shake, saying in reply to her morning wish – “Hi, I am Avijit. Friends call me Bubu.” That poor girl had no choice than to smile back with a handshake on his extra friendly gesture. Suddenly Avijit pulled Tamay’s right hand and said, “Meet my friend Tames. He is a damn fan of Red Bull. I was not ready to come. He forced me here to give him company.” Tamay did not like his name being called in American style but Avijit continued doing so to showcase his American accent especially in front of young girls. That was too lofty an instigation for Tamay, to restrain his ‘bambooning’ nature in front of the Red Bull girl. He was waiting for a precise opportunity since long to enduringly impede Avijit from repeating it in future. Tamay chuckled silently and turned to the Red Bull girl saying, “In fact he loves the American way so much. You can call me Tamay or Tames, and him Bubu or ‘....’ Oops!”

Met Her On Board

I was flying from London to Delhi via Dubai, when I met her on board after ten years. Never thought, it would be ever possible. In those days, she used to wear rose red dresses, as if the color was just made for her. My eyes gleamed at her brightness in such outfits. I was fixed to find her in a black gown today – black was one of those colors she hated the most. “It signifies sorrow and I hate to be unhappy”, I could still remember her words. My breaths stopped finding her in such a changed look. Looking at the glum persona, who would believe her to be so lively in her youth! Meeting a close heart in such a formal environment was truly embarrassing for both of us. It had been years we didn’t meet since that day. It was her wedding. In front of a pauper’s eyes, she got married to an Arabic billionaire...Could do nothing than to wish her good lucks.

She was in my left row, carefully turning over the pages of a magazine. Her unexpected ‘Hi’ opened our book of social conversation. We started like strangers – “How are you?”, “How is your family?”, “How is your

marital life going on?" etc. She floated her eyes across the clouds, hardly paying any ears to my questions. Replying to some of them too briefly, she made me clear on her point – it's far better to be silent than to ask such silly questions!

As the Captain declared to descend in Dubai in another ten minutes, the airhostesses embarked on their usual preparatory landing activities. She was travelling with her friends (I suppose). As one of them shifted to the window seat, she pointed me to occupy the vacated one. Had to appreciate her guts! As I moved on to her neighboring seat, she whispered into my ears, "Please don't mind. I have no time left to waste. Need to get down in Dubai and you will fly far away. Perhaps, would never meet again. I am waiting to hear my long unanswered query. Won't you tell me the truth today?" Reading my affirmative nod she inquired, "Are all our past days gone forever or is there anything that still remains?" I could only say, "All the stars stay hidden behind the daylight."

They got down in Dubai. I flew alone.

**Inspired from one of Tagore's poems "Hathat Dekha"*

The Cursed Well

(All depictions, rituals, events and characters mentioned in this story are imaginary. Any resemblance with the past or present is purely co-incidental)

Some nine hundred years ago there broke out a severe drought in Jamgarh; a small tropical village along the east borders of Indian sub-continent. At then, it was the solitary Hindu empire in the entire region and the reign went on through centuries, leaving space for the family heirs of Jamgarh rule. At the top of the village hillock, there is an ancient black-stoned fort. Not much popular, but quite a historic one. Local people say, during the early centuries, the fort was erected by the Suryas (the descendants of the Sun dynasty) for royal marriage purposes. Later after the Muslims invaded the fort, all the precious riches were plundered and the fort was restructured into a mausoleum cum mosque. Some of the remnants of the Hindu rule and their kingly touches are still into existence inside the citadel. In today's deserted Jamgarh lands, there is a deserted strange community that still resides inside the fort. One of the traditional customs of the fort has continued even

to the present. When the fort's clock tower bangs the evening bell sharp at 6.30pm, the fort's main entrance is closed by the gatekeeper. Once closed, none of the residents can go in or come out from the fort. The reason behind such a tradition dates back to the eleventh century drought in Jamgarh.

It's said, the last Hindu king who ruled the Jamgarh fort was too notorious for his slyness. Once it happened during the early eleventh century, a stern drought broke out in Jamgarh so much so that there was not even a single drop of drinking water available in the entire village; except those couple of gallons left in the royal water store at the inner fort (The inner fort comprised of the queen's palace and the royal marriage hall). Lot many people were dieing, greens started turning flaccid... The king's court decided to dig a well inside the fort. Work was leveraged as decided. Employing one thousand people simultaneously, a huge well with a depth of hundred feet was dug in a week. Days passed, still not even a single drop of water could be seen inside the well. The king called for another meeting. One of the royal pandits advised the majesty to devote a 'Maha Grahi' puja (A special kind of Hindu ritual involving lots of devotional sacrifices and tremendous ardours) committed to Lord Shiva. The well would soon find water in it if the king can satisfy Lord Shiva and eventually Goddess Ganga (the Hindus worship the river Ganges as Goddess Ganga). The entire puja went for around six days but of no actual fruits. Water appeared in the well on the ninth day, but with a black layer of dumped natural toxins. It was still unsuitable to be utilized for drinking or irrigation purposes.

The lives inside the inner fort had no option than to wait for their downturn. The entire Jamgarh village was miserly served from the residual litres in the royal

water house. The water there crept the store floor when the much bothered royal court sat for an ultimate hearing. The oldest Raj Guru (the head priest of the Hindu kings) of the Jamgarh rule suggested a horrific sacrifice from the king to save the rest of the fort lives. Surprisingly he gained the entire crowd support within minutes. Little hesitated, the king approached his second queen for a royal help.

Your mind must be running fast to reckon the verdict. I can bet, think as much brutal you can, but the verdict would surely be far beyond that.

Raj Guru decreed at the court to sacrifice two those young virgins from the village whose hearts were as pure as God's own, body as fresh as a budding flower and both of the same origin. If such a sacrifice could be made before the fort gate closure in the afternoon, it was obvious to have clear and pure water in the well, overnight. His explanation went like this – since the Jamgarh kings had not done any 'Surya Namaskar' (a typical Hindu ritual devoted to the Sun) since ages, Lord must have felt dissatisfied with the kings. And hence, He dried all waters from Jamgarh. In Raj Guru's reasoning, being the descendants of the Suryas (the Sun) dynasty, the kings required to satisfy Lord Surya for the well being of his clan and Jamgarh kingdom. Evidently it might save the Jamgarh village from the apparent clouds of misfortune.

All the cited hallow criteria left no option to the twin daughters of the queen's chief maid – Pari and Jari – who had to forcibly sacrifice their tender lives intending to save the dieing Jamgarh. Their mother failed to bear the jolt; In front of her eyes, both the sisters were utterly tortured in the name of holy sacrifice; rather slaughtered to death in sooth. Before

their ultimate 'holy sacrifice', they were made to climb four hundred and sixty five sun-hot stony steps up to the royal garden with their mouth filled with the black toxic water from the well, six times at a stretch. The entire sacred episode took place on an emblematic tropical sunny day. Two young girls of hardly seventeen were virtually lifeless when they were viciously dumped into the well from the royal garden, well above hundred feet from the water level. Their mother could not bear her young and juvenile daughters' wild slay in front of a huge crazy crowd. She too jumped into the well, cursing the entire Jamgarh to be fated with the same disaster.

That marked the 'holy sacrifice' come to a horrific completion. The entire standstill Jamgarh crowd paced back slowly, praying to Lord Surya blindly with the hope of fresh water drops in the well. Next morning, a peculiar incident made the twin's sacrifice immortal. The black toxic layer disappeared overnight, leaving a dazzling pool of fresh water inside the well.

Even today after nine centuries, as the local people say the twin's mother never forgives anyone who steps once into the fort, even the distant visitors. Whosoever enters the fort falls prey to her curses. Many old folks believe, some evil spirits are still residing inside the fort, just where the well is. If the fort gate remains open after sunset, they descend to the Jamgarh village downhill and cause havoc. So, the gateman at the entrance closes it sharp at 6.30 pm even today. Many foreigners came to excavate the hidden riches inside the inner bastion. But all were driven the same way to this cursed well. None of their bodies could be yet traced out. Jamgarh's cursed well story remains probably the biggest mystery of the modern century.

Need for General Quota

Thrill.... Excitement.... Ecstasy.... Appear similar? Well that may be in Thesaurus, but in reality there's a hell lot of difference among them! Want to have a feel of the disparity? For that you first need to know about the trio – Shivaram, Gunjan and Manav.

Shivaram was a boy from a typical conservative Brahmin family at the outskirts of a metropolis. Since childhood he was so ecstatic about his studies, he could hardly find any time for his family members. His steady paces and bright results supported his poor concept of time management. The pitiable old father was the only earning head with two more kids and a wife.

Gunjan was the second daughter of the head clerk at GPO. All through her student life, she always maintained a lower average profile – both in terms of expectations and marks. But her excitement to join some professional institution was noteworthy.

Manav was the only pampered child of a millionaire business giant. Since his childhood, he was so wildly crazy about gadgets-gizmos-widgits, that most of the

companies materialized the opportunity as an electronic test case before their final launch of the device. Together he also madly enjoyed the thrills of late night bike races along the solitary high roads. Like the hundreds of girlfriends, studies too had always been a passing affair for Manav.

Clearing their graduations in the same year, Shivaram, Gunjan and Manav appeared for one of the toughest competitive exams of the age. It's CAT. Not the kitten giving one, but the MBA producing one! Rest apart this trio fortunately or unfortunately got selected in the same college – the finest of its type.

Shivaram was struggling hard to gather money for depositing the admission fees. His father put his service at stake to borrow the amount from his firm's owner. Gunjan could manage an education loan from the Home Bank for the purpose. Some four lakhs was not a huge amount for Manav to ask from his parents. He deposited the sum from his pocket money account itself.

The first day in college – Induction, introduction and infatuation! That's how time flew in these two years of MBA. All three - Shivaram, Gunjan and Manav – formed quite an inseparable friends-group during the period. Be it was a colleague's party or a college presentation, they were seen together every time. Shivaram was quite a quick witted guy of versatility, while Gunjan was typically a girl with blunt sense of humour accompanied by a weird style of English accent. Manav was a so-called chocolaty guy with funky dressing style and poor marks. In both these MBA years, girls and gadgets did not find any opportunity to miss Manav's company.

At the end of the year, when the rank list was declared, the last three names spelled – Manav, Gunjan and Shivaram. This was probably the most shocking moment in Shivaram’s life. Manav seemed to be quite used to his consistency in rank, while Gunjan was found little upset. Shivaram once tried to console her with his musty compassion but did not seem to be of much effect.

Three years later, Shivaram once met Manav at the Marina Beach. He was in his black Mercedes with his newly married wife Gunjan, when Shivaram waved his hands at him. Manav too waved back and a light conversation went on among them. Gunjan and Manav got married last year and they have come to Chennai to expand their business. After working in the Government sector for two years, Gunjan got married to Manav and joined his father’s business as the Chief Marketing Officer. When asked about Shivaram’s present status, he found himself extremely shaky. Just averted the topic with some passing statements. In actual he was running a small restaurant at the Marina Beach after struggling for two years in one of the private firms in Chennai.

Coming back home that night, Shivaram realized the utter meaning of education in India. Manav joined the MBA course in Management Quota with mountains of donation. That meant in fact nothing to his father’s financial stature. Gunjan got admission under the Scheduled Caste reserved quota with incomparable marks with the open category. Shivaram, among the trio, was the only guy belonging to the General class. All through their MBA life, they formed a single group and consistently scored the lowest due to three reasons – The entire marks were considered as per group performance with no individual considerations, Gunjan’s English accent was too weird to be appreciated

even in terms of marks and Manav's "No studies, only girls" attitude could have hardly earned substantial marks for them to manage a job through campus recruitments. Collectively, it grossed their group the lowest among all the others. Manav did never feel the need for a job. Gunjan too, after his short term Government career, could manage a respectable position by marrying Manav. But poor Shivaram, should have realized it much before that his country does not provide any support to its General category of middle class talented society. It's truly high time to protest for another reservation category for the Generals.

My Lost Note

Ashok da hardly returns anything he takes from anybody. In fact this was quite a long known identity about his entire family in our locality. Otherwise from a reputed background, why they behaved like this nobody had any clues. As communicated to us by our elders, we too used to avoid lending him anything like pens, pencils, colour boxes, notebooks, books, dolls and all such foolish childish items.

Every winter, he used to host a cultural evening in their lawn and all children from the nearby societies, used to participate. Ashok da was too good in acting. He had performed professionally with many theatre groups across the state. It was under his guidance we rehearsed and performed on stage every winter.

I was just in my tenth standard that time, taking part in a very famous Bengali drama. As usual, we were rehearsing at Ashok da's house. The drama chosen was from Tagore's collection and unfortunately he did not have that book where the drama was published. My father was well known for his Tagore's collections and

eventually Ashok da requested me to arrange the book from my father. I had no choice left and quite reluctantly I had to share the book with him. But the function was a big local hit.

A month later, I suddenly remembered to take back the book from Ashok da. As I asked it back, he requested me if it was okay to return just after two more weeks. Actually he would be participating in a state level theatre coming month on the same Tagore drama; I agreed to keep it back with him. All of a sudden I it struck in my mind, I had kept a hundred rupee note inside the book, during our rehearsal. As I asked him to check the same, he got utterly surprised saying, "If it were inside, I'd have found it during the rehearsals." He went back immediately to surf through the individual pages if he overlooked anyhow. But I lived up to my expectations from him – he could not find my note inside! Ashok da was not alone that day. All his troop members too stopped rehearsing and assisted him in searching the note. I could still remember his outright humiliated face – the white skin turned slowly red as my brows went up in doubt. I was so sure to have kept the note inside that book that I stuck to my point without giving a second thought. Perhaps elderly preaches had impacted my thoughts too much to expect the note back from him. Ashok da returned the book next day to my elder sister with a hundred rupee note saying he owed to me the same.

I had never felt so bad before. Soon after that I had found my lost note in another Tagore book but I could never express the same to Ashok da. That was for the last time he arranged any event with the local children. Later he shifted to a mess in Kolkata taking a job there. I got admitted to a boarding school in North Bengal to complete my further studies. We never met again. I

have not been able to forgive myself till today and I don't know whether I will ever be able to do.

Totally Owled

Srijit spends his Christmas at his ancestral home in Chinchwad, every year. There he has his old grandparents and an unmarried aunt. Srijit's grandpa Mr. Dandekar is an angry old man with the boldest voice in the family. Even today, his say is the last say. None can dare to cross him on any point. His wife Kamlaji can't even raise a qualm on even petty matters. She hence prefers to do whatever her husband wishes. Their unmarried daughter Sunita works in a local primary school and looks after the old couple since the time Srijit's father got transferred to Indore. Srijit too is very scared of his grandpa's mood and hardly argues with him on any point. He loves his knowledge on classical music and keeps surfing through his library of gramophone records the whole day.

Last night Srijit slept early around 9pm. His grandpa sleeps next to his bed on ground due to his typical conventional healthy habits. He usually wakes up for toilet at least once every night. With deteriorating eyesight, he keeps a big torch with him beside the pillow. It was gifted to him by his father as a

token of family pride. Srijit was quite accustomed to his grandad's loud snores but that night, a prolonged, weird, shrilling noise disturbed his sleep. Trying to adjust with the pillows, Srijit got awfully annoyed with the same and hence determined to check out the source of irritation. It was four in the wall clock; hardly any sunrays could be expected. He picked up his grandad's torch and came down along the stairs, following the source of noise. It brought him to their poolside garden. There was a giant banyan tree whose branches were just by the side of bedroom's window. A small owl was screeching from there since long – it took Srijit close to thirty minutes to figure out the acute source of noise. The owl was sitting on one of the highest branches where the torch's light could hardly reach its eyes. Consequently Srijit decided to find some pebble from the ground and throw it pointing at the owl. Did just like he thought! He picked up a stone and threw with utmost force. Within a flash of moment, what he saw was just a glare of light flying in the darkness and a splashing sound thereafter. The poor owl ultimately stopped screeching. Flabbergasted and utterly scared by his act, Srijit came back silently.

Next day morning, someone jerked him up! It was his aunt Sunita. Last night some supernatural things had engulfed Mr. Dandekar's house. He used to worship the holy banyan tree in the garden and few years back the old man had planted a black stone below it. It resembled a *Shiva Linga* and hence he watered it every morning with hearty devotion. That morning it had disappeared. Also the torch which he kept beside his pillow was missing. He clearly remembered keeping it with him last night. Srijit found the entire village crowding their lawn, someone from the mob added to have seen a glowing ball flying in the sky from his window last night. This added fuel to the fire. All

decided to give a call to an *ojha* (Indian villagers fight against ghosts through these holy priests who specialize in fighting out supernatural attacks on innocent people) from another village near Pimpri.

Hearing all this, Srijit got totally *owed!* He understood everything – the stone he picked up from ground was none other than the missing *Shiva Linga* and by mistake he had thrown away his grandad's torch which dropped in the pond behind the banyan tree. Srijit almost fainted imagining the *ojha's* impending treatment. Anyhow he managed to pack his bags and left for Indore before someone out there could point out the real culprit behind those so called 'supernatural' hauls.

Ice Tea

It started with a careless scratch. I was ready to write my end semester exam in room number 206, second last bench, right corner. The final bell would ring in a couple of minutes and the distribution of question papers to be followed soon after. Just when my eyes fell on two strips of paper – with Registration numbers written on them and pasted on the desk. One of which contained mine. Since the time I kept aside my belongings, was looking for a suitable place to check my new pen to run smoothly. Except the admit card, had nothing to perform the action. That white strip served me the means I wanted. Carelessly I tried the ink at the other one.

Next day was about to repeat the same action under the same scenario, when a peculiar thing came into my notice. Last day where I left a casual scratch, some more marks are added there after – Three closely spaced question marks in a row. Smelling some craziness, thought of trying something deliberate this time. Beside those question tags, wrote ‘What?’

Other day I was expecting few more carelessly careful marks and it went absolutely fruitful. Just below where I wrote 'What?', there was a steno response - 'M/F?' My anticipation didn't go in vain. In fact I was getting slowly absorbed in the game. Scratched off 'M' from the mark, indicating a clever response.

With two days gap in between when I entered the hall, saw some senior guys roaming around my seat. A bit vexed, I silently walked out as though liked to have a drink. Came back just after the bell rang. Hundred doubts clubbed and kept hovering over my head. Didn't have much expectation from the paper we got, so thought of spending the rest of the exam hour with this crazy game and my secret mate. As expected, there were two responses this time. Probably the other was because of not finding an on time response from my side. In my last reply of scratching off 'M', probably it roused better interest on the anonym. Written - 'Name?' followed by another crypto - '8030241128 - mine'. 21st century lads are not so silly techies to scuff own registration number openly in such a crazy game. There must be some deception left. Finishing the paper, went to our POC lab to surf through the college portal and check for that registration number. As supposed, there were no such entries. It gave our game a new direction. Before leaving the exam hall, I didn't forget to leave an unswerving reply - 'Cool. Tea tomorrow?'

Finding a short, smart and witty reply in affirmative, it mounted curiosity on my equally crazy co-player. I had still two papers left with a break in between. Yesterday I made sure to put a choice of our identity - "Tomorrow Ice tea at the cafeteria before lunch." I was getting too anxious to unveil the anonym.

Neatly dressed, I am waiting for him (her or him still not sure) to complement my Ice tea. Our mess closes the lunch at two. I am sitting just in front of the cafeteria since 12, with an ornately cool Ice tea in hand. Three glasses are already over. Its quarter to two now. Just fifteen minutes to close the lunch. I was sure to meet my secret partner, who in fact kicked off the game and if not complemented today I would not have been sitting here with this Ice tea.

I am still waiting for..... "Hi dear!" A deep male voice interrupted my thoughts. Looked back anxiously. "Hoosy, you?" My mannish bafflement followed by an equally feministic smile. Fingers crossed, with a glass of coyness, he enquired "You are waiting for me right?" The glass of Ice tea made a winking whisk leaving back a sarcastic smile among the surrounding crowd.

Well Hoosy's full name is Hoossain Malik, but that's not the way he likes to be called. God knows why he calls himself as 'Hoosy', but we are fond to call him so for his typically feminine gestures, contrasting to his bold manly voice. Since the first day in the campus, Hoosy was the only senior to be taunted by the juniors. And after dating him (or her) my juniors are taunting me now. The folly that crept into my life with a careless scratch left my life with a careful lesson. Probably the 21st century craziness has started reflecting the ultimate future of our society.

Hacking into a 'Green' World

Ethical Hacking had always been my hobby. Tonight, I'll try to hack some new website...Aha! There is a new one – ET-talk.com. It seems to be a chat site. Wow! I hacked it in just two hours. But wait!! Who all are talking over here? ... As I kept on reading the chat, I could feel ice running through my spine...

X: Hi! I'm X from the planet Xenta

Y: Hello X. I'm Y from the planet Y-land.

X: So, how are you Y?

Y: Fine...In fact great...We've conquered yet another planet.

[Oh! My God...Is it an extra-terrestrial chat site?]

X: That's wonderful! So, which planet is your next target?

Y: Initially, we thought we would attack Earth but now we changed our minds.

X: Why so?

Y: See, there is no point attacking Earth. Its residents will anyway destroy themselves in some days. Then, Earth will be all ours.

X: Is it? But I thought in Earth, there resides a very rational race called the human being? Isn't it true?

Y: Yeah...That's true

X: Then why the planet is in such a fix?

Y: Actually, they do not want to stay green and consequently are heading towards their own destruction.

X: Do they not have enough knowledge about green practices?

Y: They do...they know what is meant by going green....they know how to go green...but the good thing for us is that they are not serious about the implementations of the green practices.

X: Oho! Is it?

Y: Yes and the funniest thing is that whenever they try to promote a green campaign they do so by creating a bunch of colorful 'go-green' posters made of a whole stack of papers. The persons, who attend various green conferences, make sure they travel via AC cars which again consume tons of fuels. So, looking at all these things, we are pretty confident, mankind will soon destroy themselves...

I felt so tensed that couldn't focus on the chat window any more. Perhaps, Y was correct – We know everything about going-green but just hate to implement the methods. Immediately, I removed all the posters from my office cubicle and requested our Eco-Club to change the default desktop screensavers into the same. Let's take a vow! Let's make a difference!

Intelligent Buying

Navin Agnihotri is a middle aged, arrogant, Govt. employee who lives with his wife Sarita in a Govt. housing society near Raipur. They have twins struggling to crack IIT entrance exam since last two years. Neighbours call him “Angry Aged Man” due to his elderly behavioural patterns, slightly outlandish principles and short temperament. He has a notion that buying an idiot box would hamper his children’s studies and hence refrained from taking home a TV since last fifteen years. That day when Navinji went to the local fish market, he heard someone talking over telephone about customer’s buying behaviours. Accidentally, these words came to his ears, “Our Navinji is a piece my God! Last fifteen years he had been torturing his family by not letting them watch TV. Can you imagine? He is such a morbid fellow. I can’t understand these stupid customers’ psychology! Given a chance I will sell him the costliest TV in my store and make the most out of him.”

Navin got so over-plunged with the man’s comments, the very next day he visited his store in the local market looking for a TV. The fellow being ignorant of Navin’s intentions greeted him heartily to exhibit his fabulous collection of world class TVs. Navin acutely

followed the features of all the models and stopped at one of them. There was an ad being aired, depicting unique features of a newly launched imported TV. The salesman could read his lust for the new model and hence rewind the recorded ad to intensely explain all the world class features in it. Unfortunately he did not have that model in stock and hence insisted on procuring within a week and deliver at Navin's home for free. He took it as an almost successful sale, when Navin made his classical choice.

The model airing the ad of the world class TV was just a local made one, hardly costing a few hundred bucks. Navin being immensely moved by the unique features – HD image quality, wider colour schemes, perfect aspect ratio, sharpness-contrast-brightness balance etc – remarked, “I am watching the ad of a newer model with better features on this local made one. If I can feel the higher image quality in this, why to go for that imported one? This one is already giving me the same.”

The entire crowd burst into laughter at the salesman's hour-long vain efforts and miserable facial expression. At the same time, they appreciated Navin's clever buying attitude. We always tend to get the best in the electronic market against higher currency values. Look at this man! He made the perfect choice against a mere investment. Right as he said, if all the higher quality features could be viewed on an inferior TV screen, then what is the point going for the costlier one? Is it really inferior in quality or we just neglect its worth being a domestic product? Do give a jerk to your grey mater next time, before making a purchase. Perhaps that would define intelligent buying.

Titli's Mom

Titli is a ninth standard student in one of New Delhi's international schools. They stay in a posh society near Mayur Vihar II. She is specifically pointed by her distinctive fair skin and pink lips. Her glowing smile earned her the nick name – Bubbly. Just then the Pepsi “Oye Bubbly” ad was hitting the town and perhaps became the possible choice of her name. Her father Dhanesh is an architect running his own firm near Connaught Place and mom Mihika a music teacher at PS International School. Every morning she drops her daughter at the school bus stop and drives to PS. In the afternoon, she picks up Titli and drives back home for tuition classes. Dhanesh frequently goes for globetrotting; thus expanding their customer base. Titli has a younger brother, who is just a year now. Since her childhood, one thought always skewed her mind....and that was Mihika's inclination towards her son. She otherwise scaled both her kids equally; still on grounds of living their dreams, she always took side of him.

Years went on... Titli had always been a very good student with excellent academic records. Mihika did her

Masters in music and hence wished her daughter to excel in the same, along with her studies. Titli was trained by some of the best classical Gurus from Northern India and successfully represented her state at various national platforms.

But even with all these successes, Titli was mentally neither happy nor satisfied. She loves music but it was never her passion! She wished to be a sport star – a tennis player. Her dream had always been to achieve international accolades. She wanted to be like Steffi Graf, Monica Seles, Martina Hingis, Williams sisters....and decorated her room with their posters; hardly allowing anyone to enter her room, except her dad on rare occasions.

Mihika was not much interested on sports and other related sports activities. Every day while her mom picked her up from school, Titli was found heavily drenching at ground practice. This irritated Mihika a lot. Most of the days her tuition students had to wait long for her; thus inviting disappointments from their guardian's side. Dhanesh at least never discouraged her to try hands in tennis.

Titli turned eighteen just a month back when she got selected for an under-19 international tennis championship, to be hosted in France. Winner and runner-up would be specially imparted free training by eminent players for the next couple of weeks. It was only her school coach who trained and nurtured her golden hands, and was the first to inform her of the event. It would be Titli's first global tussle and so was the level of preparation. Mihika was quite upset with her negligence towards music practices. Anyhow Titli could manage Dhanesh to let her take part in the

challenge. After a month's rigorous efforts, she left for France with her dad.

All the participants were put up in the same hotel named "De Royale Paris". On the very first day all the contestants were introduced to the event coordinators – Sarah and Gregory. All the while her eyes were stuck on Sarah. She too wondered looking at Titli at the first glance – they looked so similar! It's said every seventh person in the world look alike; but so much resemblance? Beyond imagination!

Who expected what surprise was waiting for her. Nuts cracked just when Dhanesh met Sarah. Speechless moments flew like the weightless clouds. Titli could perhaps tie the beads of their resemblance now...

Titli could not lift the winning trophy; still what she came back with was a huge triumph! She simply re-joined all her long unrequited queries in just a few soundless ticks. She had no answer to these questions earlier – What made Mihika oppose her sports fancies so much? In spite of mom's incessant efforts, why couldn't she grow interest in music? Why does she take little more care of her brother's passions? Even after knowing Mihika's detest towards tennis, why did her dad still encourage to take on sports? None in her family is a tennis star; where from she got her tennis stints? All dropped to one simple thought.

Perhaps it was all because of her actual mother Sarah's blood that gifted her golden hands in tennis. Titli could never ask anything to her dad on this. When alone, just like the way she spends time with herself, she tried to tie the knots of her doubts on her own.

‘Non-Virgin’ Mama

Mama was Avijit’s pet name among his colleagues due to his typical persona. He weirdly took pride over involving others in his personal matters. He used to get so emotionally involved in every petty matter, his colleagues fondly named him Mama. Word of mouth played such a catalytic role that within a few days all his associates started referring him by this name. In fact Avijit too quite enjoyed it.

One stuffy evening he was enjoying a short movie interval with some of his colleague-cum-PG mates at E-Square Pune, when he met his ex-girlfriend Shafika. Shafika was once committed to him when they were in grads from same college. After passing out, both moved on with their new livelihoods and partners. It’s now after four long years they met again in Pune.

Followed by some formal ‘Hi’-‘Hello’, Mama felt like re-attracted to her. And that was getting clearly reflected through his classic gestures and emotional vocal tones. In fact, in such a short spell of time, they expressed their loneliness after their new partners

dumped them respectively. Tamay, standing next to him, was enjoying their cults since his open compassionate conversation with Shafika started.

The interval was about to clinch. E-Square often screens very few trailers in between movies. So, entering late into the hall may gratify partly missing the concluding part of the so-called thriller on screen. This urged Mama's other friends to make a rush into the hall. Though it seemed from Tamay's facial looks, he was more enjoying the live movie than that on screen inside, yet he had to hurry up to please others. And this had to bring Mama's caring conversation to an end.

While parting, Mama requested for Shafika's mobile number to which she asked back the favour. To involve his friends into this emotional number-exchange exercise, Mama insisted Tamay to give his number to Shafika posing lack of balance as the budding reason. To specify that Mama is more interested in sharing his personal number, he dictated "Hey Tamay, don't give her my official number. Please share my personal Vodafone one. You have it with you right?" Tamay replied with a gentle nod and sent a mobile contact card to Shafika. *[Contact card in mobile technology is a facility of sharing contact details between different handsets, in the same name as it is saved in the sender's contact list].* As she opened the card received on her mobile, it read 'Non Virgin Mama - 0696906969'. Mama was eagerly waiting for Shafika to save his number. But the kind of offended looks she gave after glancing at it, washed all his efforts to revive their broken tie.

After she left, Mama inquired with immense curiosity, why Tamay had saved his number in such a name; to which Tamay replied with a wonky smile - "You asked me to share your personal Vodafone

number and not the official one, correct?” Mama got even more confused at this. “Arre Mama, why are you wondering so much? Your official one is a Virgin mobile number which I saved as ‘*Virgin Mama*’ and the Vodafone as ‘*Non-Virgin Mama*’. Actually I could have changed the name before forwarding it to Shafika” – Tamay repented sarcastically. Friends around patted at Mama’s vain efforts saying, “Just chill yaar. Let’s enjoy the movie!”

Come Back Soon

Twenty years back, in a small village near Allahabad...

Premanand was the second son to his parents; got recently married to Madhu. His elder brother Deva was a ward boy in Army Hospital while he joined Indian war force soon after completing his matriculation. Madhu was a student in a local school before marriage; left as her marital status changed. She was just seventeen when Prema brought her home, hardly knowing anything about what's waiting for her.

Prema had taken leave for three weeks on grounds of his marriage. The very next morning of his marriage he got an urgent call from senior management to join back within two days. That was not uncommon with an on duty army officer. Without any slightest of reluctance, he accepted the call. Madhu was yet to get accustomed to the army norms. With no choice left, she let Prema go the very next day, silently whispering into his ears, "Come back soon!"

Three months down the line, Prema came back home with lots of sweets and gifts for Madhu and his parents. He got an early promotion for his excellent performance in the last assignment and to celebrate the same he got his leave approved. Madhu had to wait long to see her husband from a proximal view. Seven days flew like winds – It was again a remorseful day for Madhu. Prema left for the borders promising to come back soon again.

Nine months rolled the calendar pages. Madhu was expecting their first baby. Prema had packed his baggage to be there during delivery. He used to write every week to Madhu about his thoughts on their baby – probable names, whom it will resemble, how to take care, which all vaccinations to be given, how to protect their baby from unhealthy habits, what all baby products to be bought, what all hygiene factors to be taken care of and so many baby and mom’s health-oriented things. Plans were on at the highest speed and from deepest level of emotions. Prema could anyhow manage three days of leave with Madhu delivering a baby boy.

One day a letter came from the Indian army in name of Prema's father. He being not at home, Madhu received it from the postman. Accidentally the letter headline caught her attention – There seems some cheque inside issued in name of Late Premanand Gupta. She was left thunder-struck reading the letter inside. It read,

“Dear Mr. Dayanand Gupta,

The cheque enclosed is an annual honorarium for our brave heart, Late Premanand Gupta. We regret his demise at the war field last year. In the memory of all our lost soldiers we have organized a Thanksgiving ceremony to their parents for donating their heroic bloods to us.

We would sincerely look forward to your graceful presence at our Delhi Headquarters.

Warm regards,
Col. N. V. Samarajan
Indian Army
Govt. of India

P.S. For any details, please contact us at JN-34, High Court Street, New Delhi, 100005, India."

Prema's father did not have any reply to face Madhu's bucket of questions. He could only say, "We lost Prema even before he could tie knots with you. We failed to gather enough courage to convey the news to your parents. Thought, none had seen Prema before so let his brother Deva get married to you. We could not save our child; at least will not devastate your future. Please forgive us if you can."

Koolget Mint

Rakesh aka Raka was Mumbai's terror since last few decades. People say he had support from gulf to plant his panic plans in India and hence no local gangs could gather courage to interfere in his actions. His sudden demise struck Mumbai with a baleful silence. Nobody could expect him to be off so suddenly. After his body was buried deep, investigations-reports-media coverage etc boomed in massively. Nobody could guess the exact reason of his death; not even the forensics. Mumbai was soon anticipating a counter blow from the gulf in reply. At first hand, the post mortem report read, "...the death was due to food poisoning; but the poison could not be identified..." Tannistha, India's first lady private detective, was very curious to personally take up the case and she started investigating with all due permissions from the Government.

She thoroughly went through Raka's medical records to find any weak links; but nothing exceptional could be found. He was only allergic to garlic and as per forensic report, no garlic was found in his stomach. So, the poisoning was not due to garlic for sure.

Raka was addicted to mouth fresheners. Tannistha checked the metal box where he used to keep them. No doubtable toxins were found mixed in those.

Next Tannistha consulted Raka's physician Dr. Dwivedi to have a knowhow if he had any undisclosed diseases. Other than mild asthma, he was not even susceptible to anything. Tannistha checked his inhaler but there were no traces of poison.

The last food Raka had, the utensils, cooking materials, leftover food etc all were verified by the forensic team. Tannistha glanced through the report in details to find if any clues were overlooked. Nothing as such, except somewhere in the report it was mentioned, traces of cyanide were found in his blood. This struck the bell in Tannistha's mind. Till now whatever investigations done were all in the routes of what all food Raka had taken last night. Perhaps, the string lies somewhere else. Somebody was trying to slow poison him beyond anyone's knowledge and the poison infusion perhaps was taking place since last few weeks, through some unimaginable channel.

Tannistha chalked down few points. The killer must be very close to Raka – one who knew him very closely and secondly he/she must be in his trusted list. She decided to interrogate all of Raka's assistants and people around him to have an idea of each of Raka's movements. There she came to know about a striking fact – Raka used to brush thrice daily with his patent Koolget Mint toothpaste. Though Raka did it previously himself; but since last few weeks Gangotri, his personal kept used to keep the brush and paste ready for him.

Tannistha immediately asked for the paste and brush and sent them for chemical test. That was the first

step towards her rising success in the case. Surprisingly, in the bristles of the toothbrush, traces of PepsUp (a very strong black cold drink) were found. As per a recent chemical analysis, if a strong black carbonated fizz is mixed with a mint, it yields cyanide – prolonged exposure may have toxic effect on humans. It came on newspapers as well. Perhaps that was the source of information and nobody would expect a pair of toothpaste and brush to be used as murder weapons. Tannistha could not stop appreciating killer's intelligence. However clever it may be, anything used for doing crime is punishable under law. Gangotri was arrested by Police and is waiting for her court trial. When interrogated, she collapsed articulating her forceful nocturnal trysts with Raka.

A Sweet Revenge

Malini was the only child to her parents. In an unfortunate accident, she lost both of them at a very early stage. There on, she used to stay with her maternal aunt, Divya. Struck by fate, she was childless and loved Malini more than anything in this world.

Divya got Malini admitted to a convent school, best of its type in the locality. Hardly ever, Divya had to raise voice on Malini. This little girl had a tremendous story-making capability since childhood. You would know her making up stories when caught red-handed while doing some mischief, but the way she delivers her excuses, would be absolutely flawless! In fact Divya enjoyed that very much and never let the kid know about it.

Malini was a very late riser. Every day she used to wake up just 30 minutes before the school prayer started. She could anyhow manage to enter the premises with less than five minutes in hand. One day she got late by 15 minutes and when she reached the prayer hall, the door was already closed. She had no choice than to wait till it gets over. Watching her

standing outside the hall, Father John called her up after the prayer and cautioned her back home. He was not a man to be trifled with and was one among the most stringent missionaries. Malini was just in her VII-th standard. She made an utterly sad face, explaining her reason of late coming. She was on time like other days; but mid-way unfortunately she got dripped into a drain – her white dress got so dirty that she had to go back home to get fresh. This made her late and hence missed her prayer that day. The story was so well put, that even an impenetrable man like Father John could not break through. He realized the fact but had no choice than to allow her ultimately for the day. He enjoyed the little girl's wit and shared the story with me – her class teacher.

Soon after the Christmas, she fell sick and was not able to attend her classes for a week. She got a letter from the doctor and got her leave approved by Father John. Few days after, she was down in a leg pain and Divya did not allow her to move from the bed. Eventually Malini missed her classes again. On ad-hoc bunks, the rule in school was such, the absentee had to get signed a letter from the guardian by the assistant head-mistress. So, was applicable for Malini. Next day, since there was a class test, she anyhow managed to reach school on rickshaw and produced Divya's letter to the assistant head-mistress Marya Fernandes. She was known for her rough throw and bitter words. Even with repeated requests, she denied allowing Malini for the class test. On top, she rebuked in such a manner that Malini was never used to receive from anyone else.

Malini was never a girl to accept this insult silently. She discovered a top secret about Marya from one of her relative-cum-students. Since that day, she was in search of the right opportunity to take her revenge.

After the final term results were declared, a parent-teacher meeting was called up by Father John. It was scheduled to be organized at the auditorium like all previous years. At the end, a group photo session used to take place. Malini figured out the brightest opportunity for her. She managed a place exactly behind Marya, sitting in the front row. Suddenly the entire crowd rolled into laughter. Oh my God! I could not believe my own eyes. Marya was sitting bald, with her wig on the ground. It was so embarrassing for her to face the students there after.

Nobody except Father John noticed what actually happened with Marya. But he kept mum, as if he too was astounded. He was repeatedly receiving complaints against Marya's rough behaviour with the tender hearts and Malini's case too was not out of his knowledge. Much later, Father revealed to me what he saw that day – As the photographer was just about to click, Malini gently swept her palm over Marya's hair. What could have been a sweeter revenge for Malini!

Regular Problem of Regular Lunch

I work in a multinational IT service company with my base location at Hi-tech City, Hyderabad. We have superb canteen facilities at all our branch offices including ours. The name of our vendor is *'Regular Fresh'*. Being an ISO certified company, they are known for providing high quality yet subsidized corporate food. I was the only non-vegetarian slice in the pie and every day I carry my homemade meal in my lunch box. Won't lie, I really miss the 'Regular' special dishes; but cannot hurt my mom's efforts in preparing fresh diets for me every morning. At lunch, I share the table with two of my project mates – Rachita and Sonia; originally hailing from Assam and Gujarat respectively. They generally take their lunch meals from the canteen. Every time we come back after lunch, I find Rachita and Sonia's *Ontime* (company intranet chatting portal like instant messengers) "Away" status message "*Regular problem of Regular Lunch*". I could never understand the meaning nor the reason.

One day I didn't carry my lunch box and hence decided to taste the canteen delights. We ordered

Regular Non-veg & Veg meals, one each for three of us. We came back to our seats within half an hour.

Generally at 5pm, we used to enjoy a brisk coffee break at the terrace. That day after flushing my stomach four times post lunch, I was no way in a situation to go for coffee any more. After I came back from the washroom for the fifth time, I found three missed calls from Rachita and two from Sonia with an SMS reading, “Regular problem of Regular Lunch started?”

Oh! That was such a practical learning exercise for me. It took me five flushes to digest the meaning and reason of “*Regular problem of Regular Lunch*” status message. It was so relevant!

Standing Ovation

I never expected to receive a standing ovation for any of my deeds. It was truly astounding for me when they applauded me for such a mere act. I belong to a remote village in the outskirts of Burdwan, a small district town of West Bengal. Hardly any of the houses here have cable TV connections. I am proud to be one of those families to own it. My father is a Group-D staff at the BDO office. We stay in a joint family with twelve heads to feed from three sources of sheer incomes.

Three months back, I was back from the factory by evening. I hardly spend any time with the idiot box. With none at home, I switched the TV on to surf the movie channels. While browsing, one of the ads in a Bengali channel caught my attention. It said – *“Can you mix different performing arts and perform on stage? Come, participate and win cash prizes up to ten lakhs. For more details ring us at our toll free number – 1000225485672.”* Since childhood, I used to make parody of different songs and add mimicry of the original singers in rap. My friends used to enjoy it very much, though I never got any inspiration from my

family. Suddenly, I don't know what happened; I jotted the contact number down and kept it carefully inside my pocket.

Next day while coming back from factory, I went to district office to make a call in that number. After trying for almost eleven times, it ultimately got connected. There were some recorded messages at the other end...being in English I could get nothing. Suddenly a female voice interrupted the message saying, "Good afternoon! How may I help you?" I had seen some of our factory workers wearing tags saying "May I help you?" and they help us in case of any issues. Hearing the same from the other end, I asked her in my vernacular, "Yesterday I got this number from Zen TV regarding a competition. I want to participate in this." Thankfully she understood my language and replied in the same asking me to meet them at their Kolkata office with a CV. While in school I had heard the term CV from my English tutor. He was the BDO and a very honourable man. I approached him to know more about my CV. He guided me very well and himself prepared the CV for me. With it I met the channel people at their office. They kept my CV and gave me an audition date. With lots of Godly graces, I qualified the audition from my district.

It was the first day of my performance on silver screen. Except for a couple of times in my childhood, I had never performed on a stage also! It was a big day for me to be screened on TV and eventually was very nervous. So many lights-cameras-confident people around me – all preparing and introducing to each other; seemingly very used to the culture. I was standing all alone at one corner of the makeup room, waiting for my turn.

The honourable judges were contemporary stars from the silver world. Interacting personally with them behind the screen was already fascinating for me. Even the show host was one of the most popular playback singers. Soon, I could hear the announcement by him, *“Please welcome on stage the star from Burdwan, Mr. Bikash Chandra Murmu”* – the moment to make live my long waited dreams! With my first step on stage, I was greeted with big yet formal claps. Three big cameras were focusing me from different angles and I found myself on a giant projector screen behind when I consciously looked back. There was absolute silence around me – all waiting for my first performance. I tried best to ease myself and deliver my best to the audience.

Could not realize when my allotted five minutes got over. As I stopped thanking the jury, all three of them honoured me with a standing ovation. The claps were much louder and informal this time. I could not believe my own eyes! Our host hugged me with pride saying, *“I don’t know what judges will say, but in my life, I had never seen a better live performance than this. What a blend of mimicry, parody and voice modulation. Simply awesome!”*

I enjoyed all my performances thereafter and received ovations many a times, but my first experience is still a precious one. Receiving appreciation for some unidentified talent was like a never dreamt dream come true.

Mama's Struggle with the Chicks

Mama is a chicken fanatic. He can't live without chicken delicacies for more than a day. It takes him immense struggle to skip non-veg on Saturdays – a day considered holy by his parents and hence the imposed restriction.

One Sunday Mama scanned the entire Koramangala area for chicken dishes to have in dinner but to all our surprises, it was not available at any of the surrounding restaurants. He became so desperate that he decided to prepare chicken curry by himself. Though we never saw him before trying his hands in cooking, yet his confidence lit some bright sparks in our mind about his endeavour. Excited, Mama went on to invite some of our female colleagues from the opposite apartments to enjoy Mama's treats with us in dinner. It was too annoying for us to live so formally on a Sunday evening, when in general we guys become too wild with innumerable pegs on. The girls arrived by late evening and hence we had to keep control on our drinking flaunts and talk on topics like daily soaps, boss's dressing sense, Indian Talent Hunt performances,

neighbour's cute doggy, new diamond collections by D'damas etc. Mama tried to intervene in between with his stupid sense of humour to add some spice in the feminine conversations which was becoming too difficult for us to digest. Driven by our disinterests, they moved on to help Mama at the kitchen and thus relieving us from the maidenly topics.

At last the hour came. Mama was finally ready with his chicken curry after three hours of sweating struggle with the ladies. We had ordered the rest of the menu from "*Ghar ka khana*" – one of our pet restaurants at the other side of the road. We served ourselves only the ordered menu as Mama planned to serve by himself his own Chicken preparation. He had put the curry inside a porcelain hotpot. As he opened the lid, a muzzy smell at once filled the dining air. The girls typically moved their fingers around the nose to shake off the olfactory sensation but could hardly do away with it. Next was our turn to taste the same. "Horrendous" will be too light a comment to describe Mama's chicken delicacy. I could not take chicken for a month after that dinner. Tamay's gossip made Mama keep away from trying his hands in cooking thereafter- "*Can never forget Mama's three hour struggle with the chicks that night. So hot yet so stale! You need special control on your devices Mama to create such a *****".

A Feel Good

I know Sujal since our college days. He was more of my hostel mate than just another batch mate. I still remember his first entry to our hostel. It was raining heavily outside. A guy of hardly 20, wounded all over the body, fresh blood oozing at some parts, shouting filthiest at one of our juniors from outside his room in the ground floor. That was Sujal. Later knew – Sujal had a terrific fight with him that day regarding a girl which lingered up to the hostel.

Few days down the line, I was playing FIFA on my room mate's computer. A sudden loud voice near the water cooler broke my concentration, with an opponent's goal as gift. My roommate was busy in his studies as usual; so I had to make the move myself. Looking out I found the case a bit wild. Sujal was again skirmishing with that junior and the loud sound we heard was probably of that junior, unfortunate enough to be at the receiving end of Sujal's muscular blows. Thought of interfering into the matter, just when our warden escalated the issue, bringing in Police with him.

Couple of months later... I was busy preparing for the final round of our inter-college quiz competition. Was trying to mug up some sports trivia enjoying an airy walk in the balcony. Strange to find Sujal again in front of the water cooler downstairs. This time, surprisingly in a musical spree. With a sexy guitar in hand, he was absorbed in his own tunes. Found him in a totally contrasting mood today.

The notion I perceived about Sujal from our previous interactions, though passive, was brawny enough to leave a persisting impression. But with time, it started changing gradually with our further interactions. We first communicated in a strange situation. My room was just beside the stairs and the connecting balcony. One day, I returned early from the college, bunking the last Audio/Video lecture. I was just unlocking my door, when I found Sujal moaning. Seemed strange. Went ahead. What I saw was a dreadful scene. Sujal's head was awfully bleeding and anyhow he was struggling to manage it, but all his efforts went in vain. Leaving my bag there itself, rushed to the neighbours around and left for the nearest hospital immediately. Had a direct talk with him for the first time, on our way back to the hostel.

Days after that, Sujal was one of the frequent visitors in my room and also a good *adda* (typical Bengali gatherings) partner. Slowly with time, rather spending more time with Sujal, found him to be a really true person by heart. In fact very few in today's generation are like him. Coming from a very modest background, he had seen a truly closer picture of the society. He uttered whatever he felt and that probably bothered others the most. His short temper frequently drove him to physical fights which invited lots of trouble for Sujal. Hardly anybody could compose and

play guitar like him. Every Sunday morning, he used to play his own compositions diving into depths of solitude. He enjoyed his own company the most. I did never see such an introvert like Sujal. Probably he had started liking me and my petite group of friends. Whenever in despair, he made a silent visit to my room; may be in search of some compassionate warmth.

One fine Saturday afternoon, while enjoying a loud tea *adda* in the canteen, heard of a strange side about Sujal. Don't know why, he had an eerie complex about Manali – our junior batch topper. Beyond crush, but not love. Manali was the daughter of a Gujarat based industrialist, always busy with her studies and Ashu. Ashu was that junior guy in our hostel with whom I found Sujal fighting many a times. Knowing about Manali made me clear my biggest doubt about Sujal's tremendous depression and eventual burst outs.

With time during the end of our running semester, Sujal had become a good friend of mine. Sujal's inferiority complex was gobbling the creative soul within him. One day, called him personally in my room, making FIFA match as the excuse. He made a glad visit. Slowly, I entered into Manali's domain; trying to judge his temperament on the issue. Knowing it to be too sensitive, tried to make a brave attempt to ask him directly. After a few silent moments, he continued himself... "I don't know her feelings, but I know I need her." He took at least an hour to speak up these few words. Spending the whole evening with him, created some cloudy murmurs in my friend circle, but I was more bothered about Sujal at that moment.

Next morning, Sujal himself made a visit to my room. He was panting too fast. It seemed he wanted to tell me something. Ultimately we both bunked our

morning lectures. After listening to all his stuffs, I found him madly in love with Manali. Something must be done to initiate the sparkle. Sujal didn't have that nerve to propose her directly, so eventually had to find out a better way. He was a guy of creativity. In fact he was quite known among us for his guitar work. But simply guitar could not serve our purpose. Ended up with an innovative suggestion.

By evening, he was done with a truly romantic composition, fantastically tuned in guitar. We recorded it in my room mate's computer. Now left was the ultimate novelty. Preparing a powerpoint presentation reminds of an engineer's ultimate talent. Sujal was breaking his head over the same for the last few hours. This time it was not meant for any assignment, but for a pioneering reason. Sujal made a heroic effort to prepare a musical powerpoint presentation as a proposal medium for a study-worm like Manali. It took him around a week to handover that CD to her. That day I found such a contented smile on his lips – I could never forget. His pleased soul left a satisfying sensation with me. Sujal was happy to express his feelings to Manali, irrespective of her response. Five years have passed in between. Even today, he lives with the belief to get a positive response from her. A single feel good to successfully express himself, changed the entire topography of Sujal's life. Gradually he found himself absorbed in his studies, walking out of the college with a tempting job offer. Modesty, self control and self belief are now the complementary qualities to his creative soul.

Cross Link

Yesterday afternoon Suman called me up for Madhav's contact address. Suman is one of my old school mates who have recently lost his mobile at Thane station and was hence busy refreshing his lost contacts since last week. Madhav is a common link between us – he is my cousin and Suman's graduation batch mate.

It was Madhav's first wedding anniversary on Wednesday, and Suman wished to courier him a surprise gift. Unfortunately he didn't remember the address and thus asked from me. I promised Suman to message him the same, but due to some pending workload, I forgot about it completely. Perhaps it went out of Suman's mind too and he didn't follow me up on the same.

Yesterday afternoon all of a sudden Suman reminded me about it and I replied the same way. But this time I promised myself to deliver without fail and so just after keeping down his call, I started surfing the pages of my address book. Not being so techno savvy, I preferred to write it down on a piece of paper and

called Suman. The voice at the other end sounded much different – louder and deeper. Thought, it might be his room-mate who takes up Suman's calls when he is not around. I introduced myself and described him in details, the reason for my call.

What a hilarious scene I created! It was Madhav himself. Perhaps, it got cross-linked in my brain and mistakenly, I connected the call to him, and spoiled all of Suman's surprise plans. You cannot guess how many donkey-bumps I had to tolerate from Suman for delivering such a comic action. There from, none of the duo ever includes me in any of their surprise ideas.

PIS-ing Whole Night

Before moving into the real story, let me quickly introduce Amit to you. The best phrase to define him is '*A Female Fanatic*'. Every girl he finds, be she single or engaged, Amit's heart slips all the times. Most importantly he never restrains himself in just a casual slip. He moves on, in no time, till his proposal with a rose. The results were the same all the time as you are rightly guessing. And his search is still on... His friend Kamal used to make fun of his attitude in a light vain, which to some extent Amit also enjoyed. Let me share one of their many stories.

While in job at Trivandrum, Amit shared his PG room with Rajiv. Kamal's room was just next to it. One fine Sunday morning, Kamal came to Rajiv's room for a short tea *adda* (a typical Bengali colloquial meaning group chats), when he found Amit spraying his Axe deo madly with a blunt whistle on his dark lips. "What's up dude?" – Kamal threw the teaser, winking at Rajiv. "Just have a plan to hang out with Piyali and her roomies tonight." Rajiv commented, "Oh yes. Amit is dating three gals together – Piyali, Indu and Sweta. By the way Amit,

who is going to get the rose tonight?" Amit gently brushed his collars as an indication of accepting the honour thrown at him by the duo. But came back late night with the torn rose in hand.

Next morning at office breakfast, Amit met Rajiv and Kamal again. This time they were accompanied by five more colleagues – two guys and three girls. Kamal greeted all with a casual wish to which Amit replied, "Oh God, yesterday I came so late, I almost missed the morning bus." Everyone else other than the duo exclaimed what Amit could have done whole night to miss the morning bus. As his typical gesture of taking grotesque pride over petty matters, he pointed towards Kamal saying, "Ask Kamal. I had told him yesterday before going out." All five new faces along with funky Rajiv turned at Kamal with highly inquisitive eyes. Kamal was left with no choice to avoid his cranky nature to make prank of Amit. He continued, "Actually Amit was PIS-ing whole night." Everyone present out there including the cafeteria staff burst into laughter. Amit's face was ought to be noticed. His dark lips got even darker.

Amit was still ignorant of the reason why Kamal used the word 'PIS-sing'. Once the laughter settled down, he whispered in his ears asking about the reason. Kamal smiled back with his short reply, 'You went on with Piyali, Indu and Sweta right? Join their initials P-I-S, and you will find the answer to it.' The kind of grievance bubbled on his face burst even a louder fizz of laughter.

Even In Baby Show

Serena was just four years then, born to a welder's family from Kerala. Nevertheless, comparing her beauty with Princess Diana would not be an exaggeration. Her glorious smile caught everyone's heart at the very first go. Lovingly her neighbours used to call her 'Local Diana'. She enjoyed it a lot with no knowledge about the delineation.

One day she came back from school with a leaflet in her hand. It was a note from a local NGO named "Blossoms" who were distributing these in front of the school gate. On coming Christmas Eve, they have planned to organize a baby show. The babies would perform whatever they feel like for two minutes on stage. Every participant would require buying minimum three tickets of nominal value. The amount collected would be donated to a local blind school. Parents were requested to bring their children for participating in the show. This aroused high interests in Serena's parents. It would be her first participation in any form of public competition. The only thing they would need was a fine outfit for their daughter.

Though not backed financially, her mom was very enthusiastic about it. She happily shared the news in the society. Serena was loved by all around and hence, they too took much interest on her participation. A neighbour gifted her new shoes, someone gave her a red ribbon and someone presented her decorative items including a few imitation jewelries. Serena's mom being a tailoring expert sewed her dancing frock of white satin with the best possible design she could think of! Serena was quite good at rhymes and hence prepared two of her favourite poems to rhyme on stage.

Preparations went on for more than a month. At last the day arrived. Serena's father had invited five neighbours for the show offering them tickets from his shallow pocket. Mom took the whole day in preparing Serena with whatever cosmetics she could afford, tying her long hair with a big red rose and finally with the dress she tailored to enact as "Little Miss Muffet".

As they reached the venue, they found numerous participants – all dressed in bright colours and pricey costumes. Serena was looking absolutely gorgeous in the white satin, if not the best among all. Her number came at thirty seven. As her name was announced to be presented on stage, her parents and neighbours clapped loudly in utter excitement. It was their first experience to see Serena on stage, showcasing her talent to a huge crowd. More importantly, the feeling of being attended by others was something which excited them the most. She delivered her rhymes with her lovely accent, finishing in just four seconds short to 2 minutes. As she left the stage, a lady from the back commented, "What a lovely baby. Lucky parents!". It widened Serena's parent's pride on her.

Eventually, the hour of prize distribution came. All the other performances were good too, but Serena's one was the best in her parents' eyes. Total five winners were to be declared. Fingers crossed, all looked up with expectations. The host came and thanked the jury, audience and the parents of all the participants to make it such a successful event. More than fifty babies ranging from three to eight years had participated in the show, thousand twenty one tickets were sold raising a hefty sum of ten thousand rupees. The Jury said, "All the babies were looking very pretty and they performed very nicely as well. Since their performances were not based on the same type of talent, so it could not be judged on a uniform scale. We decided five winners; no first no fifth! Top five participants have been decided based on the number of tickets purchased by their parents, i.e. those five babies whose parents bought the highest number of tickets are declared the winners. And they are...."

Nothing entered Serena's ears beyond this. Her parents were equally shocked at the Jury's decision! "Then what was the show all about? Was it a baby show or money show?" - was exactly her father's immediate reaction. Mom added, "They just cannot play with our child's emotions. This is wrong. Immensely wrong!" But who would share ears to their protests? It all fell on deaf ears. The hall thereafter burst into big celebrations for the winners. Serena's silent tears remained poorly unnoticed.

Even in a baby show, it was not the innocence which won. Is it money which speaks all the times? We really need to assess it over and over again. Apart from the winning five participants, would it not create an anti-competition cognition among the losing hearts? Did they deserve to be abandoned on their parents'

financial statures? Lots of questions arouse as the crowd broke with no one around to answer the calls!

Green Washing

There is a well reputed MNC named Simaya Technologies branched across 155 global centers. Its value proposition is “To make green profits from triple bottom line”. Actually the senior management is highly aligned with all the evolving green IT initiatives and facets like People, Planet, Profit (pillars of triple bottom line). In one of its corporate seminars, the Global Green IT Head had asked the audience a simple yet relevant question, “What is your definition of Green Washing?” I did not have any answer till the time my super boss paid a visit last week.

Recently Simaya have replaced all the CRT monitors with the LCD ones, involving huge procurement costs. Technologists say, LCD monitors dissipate less heat, thus have lower global warming potential. Also they are better for our eyes too. So was the rationale for change. In fact almost at the same time, Simaya have gifted us all coffee mugs to reduce the usage of paper cups at office pantry. Soon after, we started finding a poster in front of cafeteria saying, “If you can manage with one, why take two?” Perplexed what it's all about? Oh yes! It's

about tissue papers. Since last month Simaya have turned all its printers into a restricted asset. Someone from their Admin department would be keeping count of how many prints an employee is taking in a month. If it exceeds a specific number, HR will be taking appropriate actions.

I had an audit scheduled last week; the follow up session on the report was arranged yesterday. With some recommendations and non-compliances reported, we had a discussion with the HR team. Had to note down the closures to update the final report accordingly. For faster facilitation of the meeting, only one among us was scribbling the minutes, so that they can be easily incorporated into the report. Once we got over, my team was expecting a photocopy of the updates noted. Being heartily green aligned, a lady from the auditee team replied, "Since we are saving papers, so no photocopy of this. We will keep this note for our implementation purpose. Hope you remember all the points discussed today." It was quite surprising for us to hear that from a junior employee, but she was correct and hence we agreed.

Recently all face wipers have been removed from washrooms. The reason being the same – saving paper. Even the wash basin taps have been made automatic so that water flows only after you place your hand below it. Whether you can keep yourself clean and fresh, does not matter; but the paper-water consumption should come down – That's the Simaya's green goal of the year.

Last week Manoj, my super boss had a plan to visit our project. He would be coming here directly from Chennai. Planned to take a trip of India across four major cities – Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangalore before deciding on the annual appraisal for his team.

We had to make all arrangements for him – starting from booking his flight tickets, pick and drop vehicle, hotel rooms, meals to office stationery-machine-discussion room-access card....everything! The entire local audit team was busy making imperfect things seem perfect, untimely things appear timely and so on... I overheard a call by Subimal, my boss, talking to our Local Admin Head. It was regarding booking a car for Manoj to pick and drop him as and when required. My doubts on Green Washing got crystal clear knowing the car requirements – it should be an AC Toyota Innova, serving only one person for a whole week. A company believing in implementing all Green initiatives even before any of its competitors do, is not thinking of fuel conservation! No idea of the green destination, but Simaya is saving costs for sure. Perhaps this is called Green Washing.

Delivered Successfully

Mama was quite busy since last few weeks. He had gone to his native on one of his cousin's wedding. Even before leaving from here, he shopped for his outfits from some of the best stores in town, spending perhaps more than the groom. Came back after a break of ten long days with lots of sweets and photos shot at the wedding.

While his out stay, there was none other than me and Shilpa who missed him! Though for different reasons, Mama missed us too which seemed clearly from his messages. Every morning Mama forwarded me a "Good Morning" wish through SMS, at times without even editing it. This revealed Shilpa's presence in Mama's life to me.

One day I inquired Mama, in a casual SMS, about Shilpa. Ah! Mama perhaps was waiting for this moment since long... Now I could guess his reason behind wishing me every morning with intentionally unedited messages. His carefully careless actions on related feminine stakes baited me since we were introduced.

There are two types of people on this earth. One who like to be leg-pulled; the other one is who himself love tempting people like me to pull their legs and feel ashamed while getting pulled. Mama obviously belonged to the second category. And that was his rationale behind hinting me about Shilpa through his stupid forwarded messages.

Once Mama came back, I thought of sharing a tea break with him planning to spend some light moments, talking about his days spent at the wedding. After a few roundabout topics, just as I took the name of Shilpa, Mama burst out in his usual laughing style, as if he least cared for her messages and tried to convince me that he takes Shilpa's 'sweet' messages so lightly that he even forgot to remove her name before forwarding those to me. There was nothing personal between them. It was enough to light the fire of curiosity in me! And I continued...till the time Mama promised me to introduce to her.

Couple of weeks floated off in between and we were preparing well to celebrate Mama's 25th Birthday party at a Royal Pastry House – an international chain of confectioners. What could have been a better ambience for us to meet Shilpa! Frankly I was keenly waiting for her since the party began. Finally after almost an hour's anxious wait, she stepped in with a big bouquet of freshly blossomed yellow roses. Greeting Mama Birthday wishes she moved on to meet her other friends invited in the party. Mama winked at me to keep his promise.

We silently followed her where she was chatting with her fellow mates. Tamay was already around and joined us once we approached her to share a drink together. Meantime Mama introduced us to her in his

typically over-friendly style. Tamay's eyes glittered just as Mama remarked at my handshake with her, "Meet my very close friend, Shilpa." Slightly embarrassed, she responded with a short smile. Tamay greeted her saying "Nice meeting you Shilpa. So you are that lady who keeps on sending those *sweet* (somewhat pulling the word, he looked at Mama once) messages to Mama? By the way we call Avijit by his pet name 'Mama'. Hope you didn't mind it." Shilpa's increasing embarrassment was too evident from her vanishing smile. By the time Mama could take control of the situation, Tamay had hit the height of Mama's mortification! He continued, "Today since morning, we tried reaching him over phone for wishing him Birthday bumps, but found him to be unreachable. At last, dropped an SMS asking him to get back at the earliest. Finally towards the evening, we received an SMS report stating 'Mama delivered successfully' just when his reply beeped in our inbox saying - "Everything is fine here dude. Be cool..." appended with an emotional SMS ending with your name!

All around broke into perpetual laughter at the situational comedy of the hour.

New Reebok Shoes

Jeet was a sports fanatic since his childhood. Full of enthusiasm, always in a playful mood to leg-pull others; believed to enjoy his life to the fullest. He frequently boasted – “I am the perfect man to enjoy life. How will you face God once going up?” We laughed, but he believed.

Jeet was one of my those friends, with whom I spent my afternoons playing football. He was the striker. Once he represented his state in the Under-19 team which reflected from his clean kicks. In the coming month we would be taking part in an inter-club football tournament. First time officially we were selected in the same team. It was a great pleasure for me to keep our goals.

Jeet was probably the most promising player in our team, and the youngest too. He was just a guy of 20 then. His father was the local Post Master. So, many of us nicked him as PM’s son and he enjoyed it. Coming from a typical poor Indian family, he had no botheration. In fact

he seemed to be very satisfied with whatever he had. His ideology gave us a truly pleasant feeling.

Five days to go. We had our first match with the neighbouring Youth Society. We both shared the same ground for training. Before the actual tournament, our coach arranged a one hour practice match with them. Scheduled to start at 4:00 pm. All were ready for the tussle. After a tight struggle, unfortunately we lost the match 2-1. Not in an intention to put blames, it was due to Jeet; more specifically due to his shoes. They were half torn, wildly stitched at many parts with mended soles. That was none of his faults, but an immediate requisite from the team's point. He was our trump card, with no parallel replacement in reserve. Unfortunately, his family income couldn't support his sports fervour. That afternoon, my father made a sudden visit to his house.

Didn't know about it till Jeet himself told me the story. Besides just being my friend, Jeet was also my dad's one of the much-loved students. Yesterday afternoon, he gifted Jeet a new pair of Reebok shoes, made especially for the footballers. Jeet's ecstatic smile and my dad's feat made my day. Later came to know, Jeet was so elated with the gift, he showed his new shoes to the entire society. That day I realized how big joys can come from our simple gestures.

Taking the field, Jeet came straight to me and showed his new shoes with a glowing smile on his face. My dad too didn't miss the vista. The match started sharp at 3:00pm. Within the 4th minute Jeet scored his first goal. The second came just before the half time. We led 2-0. With his stormy performance, all were very happy. Our coach patted him with a greeting smile. Seemed to all – it was his day. He was at his best.

But the remaining half toppled the mood of the match, rather my entire sports life. Who knew, what was waiting for us, for Jeet! Just 10 minutes to blow the whistle, when it happened. Powerless to stop, Jeet was knocked down badly by one of the most attacking players from the opponents. That's what I saw from the goal post. Referee showed his colourful cards with a whistle. Couple of minutes passed, but there was no response from Jeet. He was lying with his face on the ground. Our captain first approached Jeet, taking two more guys with him. Referee was standing at a distance. I could even hear some of the rivals murmuring comments at Jeet's 'over-reaction'. The vibrant crowd was at stand still. Counting every minute. Some of them probably called Jeet's father. I have never seen him silent for so long. No response, no moans, no moves... Our coach was already at the field by then, with the physio. One of the doctors from the crowd made a voluntary attempt to dig into the confusion. His bleak eyes made the prospect devastating to the crowd gathered in a mood to enjoy the evening. Post mortem report said the death was due to sudden increase in his blood pressure possibly caused by some impulsive excitement. As a result, his pulmonary system collapsed. The knock just instigated the failure. People knew the medical fact, but the actual lesion remained deep buried in my father's heart.

Jeet's cold absence dismissed not only our game but the entire tournament. Since then, I could never play a single match. Even the grasses reminded me of his smell. I know, leaving football cannot be a tribute to a player like Jeet, but I couldn't. In his own words, "Jeet is not made for sports, but sports itself is a divine gift for him." Just to honour his belief, I fondly renounced my remaining sports life. Even today, whenever in solitude, I talk to his 'new Reebok shoes' which remained new forever.

On an Emergency

Sukalyan was in his mid-sixties when he had already sustained his first cardiac attack couple of years back. He was a widower and lived with his elder son Kunal in Worli, Mumbai. Previously they were staying in a rented apartment near Church Gate; but recently a year back they had shifted to a self-owned flat in Worli. Kunal had a school going daughter Poonam and wife Bidisha, music teacher in the same school. Kunal was working in a government pest control firm in a leading position. They were spending a very happy life with almost no tensions and family jerks. Sukalyan had been looking after their household affairs like regular shopping, entertaining the cook, maid, driver, laundry boy, offering tea to Poonam's tutors, taking her to various cultural classes, playing with her during leisure hours etc and Bidisha too was very attached to him for his fatherly approach. Kunal hence was in absolute delight while at home.

Yesterday evening Sukalyan was struck by his second cardiac arrest. It was quite massive this time. Poonam immediately called her parents to take care of

the emergency. She was intelligent enough to give a call to Ambulance before Kunal and Bidisha could reach home. They thought to admit him in Jaslok Hospital – one of the most reputed of its type in the city.

City's traffic is globally disreputable. Their Ambulance got stuck near Hindustan Point signal for close to twenty minutes. There were some issues with the signalling system and hence was not functioning properly since last couple of hours. It was a one way. Unable to cross the tri-point, the driver took the Ambulance to the other side of the road. There were almost no vehicles on the opposite track.

Jaslok was hardly five minutes from the crossing. Two Ambulances rushed four bodies to the hospital on an emergency. Huge crowd and police barracks encircled the spot in no time. Ultimately Sukalyan was able to reach Jaslok but none to take care of him after he revived.

Perhaps for the first time some Ambulance had met with a road accident. It was badly hit by a private car coming from the other direction at a high speed. The Ambulance driver, his assistant and Poonam died on spot. Kunal, Bidisha and the driver of the other car were bleeding heavily. Some volunteers rushed in to bandage their wounds. Perhaps the cloth used was not clean and they developed septic which further aggravated their inability to struggle. Surprisingly Sukalyan was not hit much with just a few wounds here and there. Running almost in a senseless condition, he could not feel the bloody jerk. He got to know the emergency from the different reporters in bits and pieces and outlined the devastating account in his mind. Today, while at home he has only one thing to do - just silently wait for his eyes to close forever.

Girls, Look Out !

Mama earned fame in his school in a very short span of time. The credit of this fame goes mainly to his English eloquence. Scoring good at the engineering entrance exams, he got through in one of the competitive universities in his state. Being a relatively good student all through, getting recruited through the campus interviews was never an issue for him. Two months after graduation, he left his residing state to attend the induction programme at Chennai.

First day went on with credential verification and introduction. And that's for the first time Mama should have realized that his centre of pride – English eloquence – was no more a unique competency. All in his surroundings were quite proficient in the skill.

Very soon Mama got into a wide group of male acquaintances, belonging to his state. Chatting in vernacular adds different dimension to light gossips, open comments and kinked whispers even amidst the crowd. And that probably had riveted together all the nuts of Mama's friend's group.

Meantime, let's have a look at a very strange edge of Mama's character. Otherwise he fondly remains very mother-tongue oriented, but as soon as he finds girls around him specially Meera, a sudden change in his behaviour is obvious – all of a while, he starts talking in trendy English lingos. God knows why he did this; we guessed perhaps to float a statement of his American affection. People around him used to make frequent fun of his craziness and open flirting attitude, but of no fruits. Mama was found even more engrossed in his trait, with more girls around. His associates stood witness to his peculiarity who commonly expressed pity for Mama's parents. Once the discussion went so far that they even visualized how bad his parents would feel finding their son behaving like this at such a matured age!

Three months down the line, their induction programme got over. Most of the trainees got posted at their choice of locations and so was the case with Mama's group. Many of the parents paid a visit during the transfer, including his. At the Chennai Central railway station, it was for the first time Mama introduced his parents to his us. His father was a real interactive gentleman with such a polite attitude and love for his mother-tongue, who was the Biology teacher at one of the state board schools, close to their house. He seemed to be quite delighted to be introduced to such a large group of his natives at a distant land. In fact it got naturally expressed through his shrugs and conversations with them. While his mom seemed a bit arrogant kind of a working lady, usually with different patterns of choice than the father and son duo.

As a traditional honorary gesture, all of Mama's friends gathered at the station bent low, touching his father's feet to which he responded in an expected

solemn note. Reverse happened as Mama introduced Meera to him. Seeing others as she bent low, he suddenly started babbling in a weird funky American style, uttering words merely matching with his personality and age – *“Hey buddy! Do you wanna treat at the coffee shop? The train gonna be late for an hour. Let’s break out a party here”* and looked around, putting an effort to include all. Patting on Mama he continued, *“Whazzup man? Will CCD do?”* Mama’s beaming reply *“Lolz!”* removed all clouds of our concerns for Mama’s parents. This is indeed a prodigious example of height of inheritance!

Handicap

Mr. and Mrs. Pendurkar were childless. Even after trying their hard lucks in various world-class medical treatments and surgeries, they failed to achieve any fruitful realization. The final statement from the London Ward read, “Mr. Pendurkar’s impotency and Mrs. Pendurkar’s ultra-small size of uterus are the reasons of their failure pregnancy.”

Eventually they were highly depressed and hence decided to go for adopting a child. Mr. Pendurkar was a professional artist while his wife being an interior decorator based in Delhi, finance was not a problem for them. They contacted some of the high-class orphanages in the city to go for their best choice! Throughout a month they kept hopping across all such institutions but none of the inmates could succeed over. Finally Pendurkar couple met a seven year old boy at “Angel’s Town Orphanage” near Connaught Place. His name was Parikshit, smiling as cutely like a teddy. The officers made special mentions about his intelligence while solving puzzles. He had golden hands in painting

as well. Some of his wax creations were shown to the Pendurkar couple.

Impressed at all these they unofficially inquired about his background. Though professionally unethical, the officer shared Parikshit's sad story with them. He lost his parents in an unfortunate car accident near Saket. He was hardly two years then. Miraculously he survived the blast. As believed by Father, he was successful in passing God's fiery test of life and hence was named as 'Parikshit'.

The Pendurkars had almost sealed their choice by then and eventually expressed their consent about moving forward with the legal proceedings for adoption. They really started fondling Parikshit like their own son and thus wished to give him a warm hug. He was standing at one corner of the room, twisting the curtains with his left thumb. Mrs. Pendurkar looked back from her chair, extending her hands towards the kid. He seemed to be a little hesitant to respond. As the officer beckoned him to move on, he stepped his first stride. It was when the mishap just ushered in. Parikshit's tiny strides were pulled back by his crutches. He had lost his left leg in the fatal accident. Utterly disappointed at this, Mr. Pendurkar rebuked at the chaired officer, "Why did you hide his handicap from us? It's so unethical! Where we have a choice, my wife would not like to take the pain of bringing up a handicapped child. We don't want to proceed with this adoption anymore."

Drops of silent tears slithered through the tender cheeks. Parikshit hid himself somewhere in the garden at the back. Utterly infuriated at Mr. Pendurkar's comment in front of the innocent child, the officer continued, "...I am really sorry Mr. Pendurkar. God has

really made apt justice to you. Calling an innocent kid a handicap on his face and rejecting his adoption on the basis of that is so brutal. Our Father says a couple's biggest handicap is their childlessness. Parikshit could have been a remedy to your handicap. And...who are you to call him a handicap? Before you reject him, we dismiss all our proceedings with adopters like you. It's our decision. Good bye please!"

The Lone Passenger

Now it has been three long years, I am travelling by bus this way all seven days a week. Wondering? Well I am Sheela, running through my mid-thirties. Nothing special to introduce myself – just another struggling head from the ordinary crowd, working in a boutique near the Andul rail gate. I need to travel a 45-minutes bus way from my place to the boutique. No Sundays, no holidays. But Rs. 3000/- per month is quite a handsome salary to bind strivers loyally, for years. Likely, yesterday was just another working day for me.

Generally on Sunday mornings, the passenger rush remains less. So was yesterday. There was just another mid-aged obese lady waiting for the bus at the stand. Last night, the thermometer mercury level hit 100°F and I was feeling the Paracetamol drowsiness while waiting for the bus. My legs were paining since I walked to the stop. For long, I was lusting to sit for a while. Ideally should have taken rest; but at end of the day, the 100/- note that would fill my pocket meant a lot. The approaching bus appeared relatively filled than my expectation. My apprehension went wrong as I got into

the bus through the rear gate. There was not even a single passenger standing inside. All the rush at front the gate was of the grocers, urging to alight faster than the other. To my sheer hope, I found a chair seat vacant near the window. My eyes gleamed at the eased comfort. Suddenly I could feel a sturdy sideway-push and a thrown-out kind of sensation. That mid-aged obese lady at the bus stop hustled to the vacant seat within a flash of the moment. All boarders including me were taken aback at such a feat from the elderly lady. Some even spoke to meander but of no fruits. In return, got walked off with typical feminine shrill flare-ups. My legs pained too much to resist such high-pitched freaks. Blamed a thousand tons to my cursed fate. I was the lone passenger standing inside the bus and such a solitary feeling aggravated by stupor even faster.

“How are you feeling now madam?” – A deep voice and a fatherly touch soothed half of my pains.

“Fine doctor” (tried to smile back)

“Your reports are absolutely normal. So, medically you can take leave today itself. Would you like to get discharged or want to take some more rest here?”

It's been years I lost my father. Doctor Sinha's caring pat reminded of my lost days. He offered me a fresh newspaper and left. A few letters printed in big fonts and a dark photo cleared all that he wanted to convey –

“The lone survivor of the Andul bus accident – Sheela Maity is admitted at the Salap State General Hospital. So far, 36 reported casualties include both the

bus conductors; driver missing! Perhaps all the passengers sitting in the loosely-packed bus could not survive the jerk and toppled into the nearby pool. Miss Maity's proximity to the support rod saved her miraculously."

Still Waiting...

I am still waiting for you dear.... I know you don't even remember me at all. But what can I do? I devoted myself at your service long back. That day when you dumped me sloppily, it really hurt me a lot. Too painful to express in words. My rusting heart longs for your soft touch. My blood thirsts for your care.

You remember.... Once in your childhood, you were playing with my nerves.... And your grandpa caught you red-handed. My heart cried with your cries, my lips smiled in your smiles. Sometimes I thought of blaming God! He gave me the power to speak, but only if ordered. Still could never complain. Accepted it with lowered brows – because that's my job. I remained a silent observer, congregating lasting memories to share with your children. As a kid yourself, you loved playing with me and that probably was the best part of our relation.

With time, your world advanced probably at a much faster pace than mine. Your boundaries crossed the globe to bring home your modern playmates, newer beauties, faster darlings. Replacing me and my love was just a momentary decision for you. Silence taught me the way to take my last few breaths. I am still waiting

for you... Please come back once... If you remember... I
am your grandpa's good old Gramophone.

Jai Baba Lokenath

At last Mama could manage a girl-friend! Her name was Zuani, a Nepal born beautiful girl, with a very simple heart, working with Mama in his office. After a year's bond, Mama thought of introducing her to his parents.

It was last year Durga Puja, when Mama's parents planned to take a trip of Kochi and celebrate the festive days with their only son. Before moving with the story, let me quickly introduce Mama's parents. They dedicatedly followed Baba Lokenath's principles, as both of their ancestral homes belonged to the birthplace of the holy man. Coming from the suburbs of Kolkata, they carried slightly conservative philosophies. So, it was not going to be very easy for Mama to convince them about Zuani's acceptance.

Intelligently enough, though not so expected from Mama, he tried to materialize his parents' dedication to Baba Lokenath in his effort to persuade them about his relationship. He knew well typical dialogues like "I love Zuani from the bottom of my heart", "I cannot live

without her”, “She is my life”, “Zuani and I are made for each other”, “If you separate us, we won’t be left with any chance than to commit suicide” etc etc were not going to work out with his parents. So, he desperately wanted to influence them and hence found out an innovative solution – He instructed Zuani that whenever she would be introduced to his parents, she must anyhow convey the sense that though a Nepali she was immensely involved in all types of Bengali customs since his childhood. The trump card Mama wanted to play was that Zuani’s family too was a die-hard follower of Baba Lokenath’s ideology.

Maha Astami, Mama took his parents to a local Puja pandal for offering their *pushpanjali* to the deity. There as per his pre-fixed plan, they would *accidentally* meet Zuani, who too had come to the puja pandal for the same reason. Zuani used to live in a PG, which was quite close to the Puja venue and hence was natural enough to be there for the *pushpanjali*. Tamay too went to the same place, same time, for same reason and was astounded to find Zuani waiting inside the Puja pandal alone! Just then Mama arrived with his parents. In his effort to amaze his parents, Mama got amazed himself! Shocked Mama swayed his looks between Tamay and parents and tried to pretend as normal as possible.

Everything was going on as per plan... Mama cleverly introduced Zuani (though *only* as a friend) to his parents; first made her feel comfortable with the language hiccups. Mama’s father being well versed in English could make the situation easy effortlessly. As expected, his parents found it surprising to see Zuani’s dedication for *pushpanjali*. Gradually, she started expressing her love for Bengalis and exposure to Bengali customs, which included sharing of a pre-rehearsed childhood memory. That’s for the first time

Zuani could succeed in touching Mama's mom's heart. She patted gently on Zuani's shoulder as she expressed grief to miss those days. All this time Tamay was spell-bound to find Mama standing so serious! He even tried to glint at him to get the feel of the circumstances. Gaining his parent's initial inclination towards Zuani, Mama gradually put the trump card on the table.

Height of coincidence was waiting for Mama – Tamay's family too belonged to the same village as Lokenath Baba's birthplace. Surprisingly he had a small photograph of the divine soul in his wallet which his father had once forcibly kept inside. As a token of his father's memory, Tamay didn't remove it ever. As Zuani started expressing her devotion towards Baba's principles, he smelt bubbles of doubt. First he decided not to prick the bubble in front of the elderly people, but looking at Mama's emotional whitewashing, he couldn't resist himself. Tamay pulled out the Baba's photograph from his wallet and put it before Zuani asking her if she knew the old man. Her single expression devastated Mama's all frivolous efforts – *"Who is this old man? Your grand-dad kya?"* It took just seconds to brush off the beamingly elated looks of his parents to change into red eyes. His mom, who was almost convinced about Zuani's acceptance yelled, *"You call such a fraud a simple girl? She was acting before us so loooooong with such an innocent face! My God! If she can go up to this level now, what will she do with us later?"*

Tamay felt bad to be the reason for Mama's break up with Zuani, but nevertheless it was Mama after all! No relation, if starts with a lie, can bond for long. It develops cracks unknowingly and with time the cracks would eventually end up into crevasses. So, it's always better to uproot it in the beginning itself. If you are

wondering about Mama's reaction, don't worry. He is still single, and ready to mingle.

Slightly Bent

“Everything ok from ground.”

“Ok on board!”

“Fire?”

“Yes.”

B0000000000000000000M !!

The ground engineer checked all the technicalities and sent a green signal to the pilot. The pilot too found everything fine on board and hence reciprocated to fire in affirmative. Soon after, a loud noise could be heard and the pilot found himself successfully taking off his first flight. He was rigorously trained since the past two months on a special art of flying an aircraft. Some of his inmates quite excelled in the art and took off well before his first attempt. Anyways he was happy to finally have it taken successfully!

He was flying low through some barren lands. Not even a drop of vegetation could be found below. As he

looked through the cockpit, he could far find some twisted lines near the horizon. Might be a dried water-flow! He was expecting some desolated icecaps to cross but surprisingly a few discrete dwellings seemed slowly visible. Soon he could find dense human habitations underneath with city highrises ostensibly in sight. Flying for close to twenty minutes, he pulled the shaft he was trained to do after finding the dense domiciles below.

The very next morning, all newspapers and TV channels found devastating narratives to cover! *"...Yesterday afternoon, Labbotabad was hit badly by two consecutive air bombs. 235 casualties on the spot, more than 500 severely injured and lots of civilians are missing. Now the million dollar question which arises, was it an Indian conspiracy? Our Government needs to investigate the case at the earliest..."* was the official version from Paluchistan's Home Ministry. The capital city looked utterly ravaged at the sudden double blows. No idea how the victims would come out of the horrific aftermath. Two gigantic blasts just washed off more than 700 innocent lives who had nothing to do with the international politics. Most of them even struggled to earn their poor livings. What could one earn from this?

The real story was a bit satirist! Terror makes no distinction to bloods. It does not know who is in front. It only knows, it's born to scourge whatever it encounters, be it self or opponent's blood! Same happened with Paluchistan. They are awfully notorious for their international terror strikes and blows. This time destiny played a trick with them. The pilot being not properly trained, took opposite flying direction after it took off. He was illiterate enough to read radar signals and thus ended at a wrong destination. He was anticipating an Indian city comprising of similar highrises, after

crossing the icecaps. Unfortunately he headed on to his own nation's capital. A slight bent while take-off misled him to such self-devastation, snatching countless innocent lives!

Hope it was a big lesson to the whole nation of Paluchistan, pointing to them what it really means when it comes down to own fate. What happened was not at all good; and likewise should not be banged on anyone else in future as well, whatever our political rivalry be!

Height of Coincidence

Every day I take a shuttle from my office at Salt Lake Sector V to Bally. There are around 10-15 shuttles which run up and down the route. Most of these shuttles are Tata's Sumo except a few Ambassadors. They load ten in a Sumo and six in the later excluding the driver.

That day I was at the back seat of a Sumo, waiting for the 10th person to pack it full. In sometime, a lady came and we geared on. She was sandwiched between our driver and a young man at the front row. The road taken is generally full with traffic during the peak hours, and so was the picture that day as well. All utterly tired – some busy with their mobiles, some trying to enjoy utterly insensible music channels aired on radio, rest in dozing!

We were stuck at the Airport signal, when the bubble burst. The lady in the first row seemed to be snoozing since long and many a times her head touched her neighbour's shoulder. The young man at her left, found it to be awkward enough to wake her up and let her remove the head, and hence he slightly poked her every time her head brushed his shoulder. I was observing the

same from the back seat and was enjoying a juicy pastime. Continuously repeating for four to five times, it annoyed him so much that he just let her be how she was!

In the meantime one man from the middle row alighted at the Airport Gate No. 1, and there was another lady who took his place near Gate No. 2.5, right before the flyover... Just to inform, the area near the Airport gates are quite dull after sunset, with hardly any prominent street lighting. And expectantly none of the lights were on inside our Sumo. One can just figure out some still human heads in the shadowy darkness. Since long I was wondering, what this new lady was trying to do? It seemed as if she was troubling herself to take a look of the young man sitting at the front row; but why? While passing one of the road-side tea stalls along the expressway, suddenly she could get a glance of the man's face through the rear view mirror. An immediate shrill woke all the dozing passengers up, except the lady in front - "Hey, that's Monu right?" The young man too looked back, totally perplexed! "S..o..m..a..l..i.. you? In this Sumo?" His utterly baffled, fear-filled eyeballs loomed like a poor bird caught by tomcat at its nightly hunts.

The lady beside him was still the way she was so long... A sudden jerk by Monu brought her back to senses; apologizing repeatedly for creating a misconception about them. But it was too late by then! Somali was highly disappointed at her husband's gesture and clouds of doubts burst out, not even caring our presence inside the car. Monu's prestige was swept off the way landslides wash off the hill slopes during torrents. It was such a height of coincidence! I wish no one falls in a false position like this ever. You are not left with any other option than to accept all inbound blames and blasts. You cannot even deny what you didn't intend to do.

Met Him By Chance

I was in a buying spree that evening. Went to a local fair at Salt Lake where stalls from all states were trying to bring out the best from their respective soils. Personally I always have an inclination towards food so mostly the food selling states were attracting me more.

I was just on the move from a stall to the other when someone approached me in a very polite tone. "Like to share a few moments please?" As I looked back, found a bit aged gentleman standing with a handful of books with a pale look. With some inclination towards literature I nodded interest at his request by extending my right hand, as a gesture to let him showcase his products (books). Extremely delighted at my immediate response, he displayed all his books with tremendous energy. It seemed as though someone let him some free space after a long struggle! He had hardly seven books in store for me of which he was trying to explain the literary beauty of one of his writer friends. From the very first approach, he did not appear to me as a mere salesman. Out of curiosity, I casually asked him whether any of those books were authored by him! His slightly

reddish eyes sparkled silently as he took out one from his jute bag. It was a story book based on Bangladesh's travel-lines. Had never read stories on similar backdrop before and hence I urged him to give me his book, duly signed!

As I came back home with two more books from the person, I was carelessly flipping through the book written by him. My eyes clogged at one of its pages – it contained one of my very favourite childhood poems. I used to recite its every line whenever anyone asked me to tell a poem. Being too long a time, I forgot the poet's name eventually. With these same lines in front, I glanced at the cover page, looking for the name of the author. Oh my God! I could at once recall the poet – they are same names. In the author's introduction at the back, there was mention of his other works which did had mention of his one and only children poetry book, whose stanzas he has used across various stories later on. I met my childhood favourite man face to face by chance but what a loss – could not recognise him!! Perhaps this is how many such wonderful creators get lost in the crowd... Hope to meet him in future at some fair again.

Tsimasham

(All depictions and characters mentioned in this story are imaginary. Any resemblance with the past or present is purely co-incidental)

Bhutan has a flavour of its own. Be it hospital, bus terminus, school, stadium, professional institution, residential building or hotel – all are built in the same colourful style as the Royal Palace. While on a week's trip to Bhutan, we thought of spending some leisurely hours on the valley of Thimphu. Did as we planned. Boarded a local bus from Phuentsholing – the commercial city of Bhutan just on the borders of India. It was expected to be an 8-hour journey and hence we prepared well mentally to enjoy the serene journey. Traveling more than 170kms on hilly roads, was not a matter of joke. We packed a few bottles of locally made juices and chips and started off the way.

On our way to Thimphu, got a break at the Check Point of the Royal Police of Bhutan near Ritcheing. While getting ourselves thoroughly checked and frisked, it thrilled us with the feel of boarding an aircraft among

the hilly turns. We shared a few light conversations with the army personnel there and moved on. Only thing they advised us was to beware of Tsimasham village, reason though being totally avoided!

It was more than 4hours of driving among the pinewoods when the bus stopped for a tea break. As we alighted from the bus, in no time we found ourselves engulfed by the chilly clouds. Hardly anything was visible beyond a feet's distance. We could only see the diffracting parking lights of our bus through the dense fog and a few human outlines giggling on the road. Most of the co-passengers crossed the road and seemed to have been disappearing among the clouds. Actually, there was a clumsy tea stall at the edges of the road just where it took a sharp bend and that was seemingly the lone human inhabitation around. We too crossed the road and moved towards it. It was utterly chilling and a cup of hot tea was much needed. There were two young ladies inside the stall, preparing and serving tea to their customers. A big basket of *mirchi wada* (a typical Indian snacks item) was kept just beside the tea pot and eventually we could not resist ourselves from its tempting smell. Oh my God! What a Heavenly feeling it was! The experience of feeding our taste buds with hot tea and crunchy *mirchis* in such a pinning atmosphere – was simply awesome. Though the tea was one of the worst I ever had, yet the overall feeling was very pleasing.

Just when we realized the blinking of our bus's parking lights was gone! We rushed near the bend where it was parked but to our sheer surprise, it was not there. Even none of those co-passengers, who alighted from our bus, were around. Till then we could not apprehend the impending peril hovering on us. We first realized once we walked back towards the tea stall.

Even that had disappeared! Annoyed, I thrashed the tea cup held in my hand on road, just when anticipated the dicey air of the place! If everything had vanished, how come the tea cup was still there in my hand as-it-is?

By the time we could come out of the shock, we heard a car horn at the previous bend of the hilly turns. Thinking nothing we just rushed towards it and started waving our hands. The fog was too dense to make us visible. As it came nearer, we found it to be a peculiar vehicle, mostly of a goods carriage type; hardly used these days! To our sheer surprise, it did not even stop at our repeated signs of seeking help from it. Soon followed another black private car, open-hood; typically used during British Raj by their Governor Generals. They too did not stop at our signals. Finally we met a couple of mid-aged women, coming downhill with loads of tree branches carrying them at their back – seemed as local villagers. We gently approached them. We were just taken aback as they too passed away silently without even noticing us from hardly a feet's distance. There had to be something wrong with us!

There was a feeble spring on one side of the road. With nothing working fine, we thought of getting refreshed with the chilling water. Where the spring touched the ground, it bunged creating a shallow pool of clogged water. We could not even believe our eyes! As we bent to take a feel of the naturally mineral rich spring-water, our throats choked. The water was reflecting the clouds above us, but where were we? There were no shadows, no reflections, no outlines on the water...did that mean we too vanished? Was this what the police at the Ritcheling check point warned us of? The ultimate bombshell was yet to drop on us!

The whole day we spent breaking our heads thinking only about how to come out of the uncanny peril which was slowly dragging us within the black mist of Tsimasham. It was around quarter to seven in the evening, the sun had just set behind the blue hills leaving trails of some of its dimming rays for the day. Suddenly, a young guy, dressed like a military officer, approached us directly with a persuasive smile. He had a big torch in his hand, strongly gripped; pointing towards us. He introduced himself as the Forest Range officer who originally belonged to the village of Tsimasham. Seeming us to be in impending trouble, he came forward to help us. That relieved us to a great extent, bringing back our belief to be visible again! He assured of dropping us to Thimphu next morning and warmly offered us to take rest for the night at his bungalow.

While on our way to his bungalow, he narrated us the story of the village Tsimasham. Years back, he used to stay here with his family. The name of the village then was something different. Bhutan's king never cared for these villagers and hardly paid any annual visit; whereas he was very regular at other places like Ritcheing, Phuentsholing, Paro, Bumthang, Panakha, Tongsa, Chukha etc. The primal rural economy was governed by seasonal agriculture by the male population and wood-cutting by their better-halves. One prolonged winter devastated the entire wealth of the village. Six incessant months of tremendous snowfall degraded the land quality so much that no foliage grew for the other half of the year. Foods piled by the villagers for the winter were slowly running out of stock, heading towards a disastrous mountainous famine. The village Chief, anticipating the impending catastrophe, sent a note of help to the then king of Bhutan - Jigme Wangchuck. Couple of months

passed...no news came from the Royals. The entire village was struggling against acute hunger. Under duress, Chief went in person to meet the King but was harshly sent back, empty handed. Once back, he found his twelve years old daughter died of the same reason. His wife too was counting her last few breaths with their younger daughter incessantly crying near her head. The picture was even worse at the other houses. The older generation of the village was almost depleted with a hand few of youths still struggling to breathe in. In that same famine, the Range Officer too lost his parents.

There was a little girl, named Tsimasham, who too lost her entire family. People said, she had a tremendous skill of creating black magic since her childhood. Once she was upset with her father and vanished his bicycle in front of all. Later it was found inside a well in someone else's house. Villagers didn't take it much seriously thinking it to be some coincidence. Two years later, some young village boys teased her at her tom-boy looks. At this, one day she silently looked into their eyes for a couple of minutes and thereafter all five were turned deaf and dumb.

Height happened when she took the pledge of devastating the Royal family of Bhutan at their indifference to the village's pathetic condition. For reason unknown, the King always treated the village as his step child. One day she trapped the King's youngest son who was about to travel to Thimphu; bypassing his way through their village. She was hardly at her early teens then. In front of all the villagers, she simply created a grey mist and once it got cleared, the Prince was not there! Everyone later started believing her to be a witch. The King was too furious at her action and sent his warriors to arrest her. But she was found

nowhere in the village and the surrounding woods. The Royal warriors had to trace back in vain. This infuriated the King and he decided to make a visit to the village in person along with his eldest son. They were carrying big barrels of drinking water which got stunningly evaporated on way to the village. Out of immense thirst, the King ordered his men to fetch him some water from a road-side spring. The chilling water refreshed all and they ushered into the village in sometime. The Royals were greeted personally by that little girl with a kettle of warm tea. Villagers around were expecting the King to immediately behead her, at the very first glance. But to everyone's wonder, the King came down of his chariot to have the tea offered by her. She had supposedly already hypnotized them through the spring-water. Taking a sip of the tea, the King spat on the ground and the very moment the entire village disappeared. And the actual story remained undisclosed...

Years later, people from other places of Bhutan walked in and gradually started settling here afresh with a belief that their King might have met some accident while their way and disappeared in the depths of the steep cliffs. King's second son died of an unknown disease within a month's time and Queen's body was found choked at throat in her own room. There were lots of controversies regarding the succession of the throne of Bhutan and ultimately it went into the hands of a new family of Dorjis, who worked as the Chief Minister of Wangchuck Dynasty. Some old people still say that her black magic had such power that stopped the Wangchuck era there itself and they exist even today with no changes. They live in their own invisible world now. It was later in her name that the village was renamed as Tsimasham.

The breathtaking history of the small village passed a chill through our spine. By then we had already reached the bungalow – the dim lanterns were gradually visible. No foods were in stock and hence the guy offered us a large pot of smoking tea. After walking for more than a mile in the cold, it tasted like a heavenly drink and we enjoyed it till the last sip. As we felt sleepy, he dimmed the lanterns in our room and left for his duty. Just before leaving, he requested us to give a look at his table drawer where he had an old photo of the little girl Tsimasham. My friend was so eager to have a look, he opened the drawer immediately after the guy left. All my nerves suffocated glancing at the picture – the little girl’s photo resembled in ditto with this Range Officer we met and there was one more person standing beside her in the photo, seemingly her father. I fainted looking at my friend!

Got back to my senses with lots of noise around me. There were many people surrounding me, busy moving their luggage and surprisingly I was sitting beside the window in that same bus itself which I boarded from Phuentsholing. At a distance, could read a hoarding – “Thimphu Bus Stand”, written in Royal style. I looked for my friend but he was not around. When I inquired about my companion, the conductor’s strange look reminded me of last night. The other person in the photo was none other than my friend himself. I met him a month back at a roadside tea-stall near Jaigaon. Knowing about my interest in composing thrillers, he promised me of sharing some breathtaking plots and it was he who planned for this Thimphu tour. I smiled at my realization of the entire episode. Casually putting my hands in the coat’s pocket, I could feel some paper-like stuff. Pulled it out and found it was that old photo of Tsimasham.

The Dic Boy

Anit was a pampered child since his childhood and it was more his friends who enjoyed his coddle both in materialistic and emotional ways. He was well known among his friends as the '*Frustru Guy*' for his typical self-proclaimed '*Made for Female*' attitude. In fact, Anit was badly in search of a committed girlfriend since his high school days and God knows how many he proposed and got utterly refused!

After he joined a reputed MNC in Gurgaon, his heart slipped at least ten times. One fine morning he was coming back to his ODC after a snacks break at the terrace cafeteria, when Anit found his 11th crush at the same Gurgaon office campus. This time it was a salesgirl. Odyssey – the famous retail chain of book stores had put up a promotional stall at their office campus, just beside the swimming pool and she was the attendant at the stall with two other girls.

Anit, though not at all a book lover, did not miss the opportunity to pay a visit at the stall asking for an Oxford's pictorial dictionary. It seemed from the

overall collection of the books displayed on the table, dictionary does not gel with this blend. And that was probably what impelled Anit to kick start a short conversation with the girl. Her name was Sanya as it was legible from her badge. She communicated the unavailability with a pretty smile and passed a passing comment – ‘We will surely like to arrange one for you. Can you please check tomorrow sir?’ and then she got busy with other customers including me. Among the many management books, I opted to go for Shiv Khara’s the new edition ‘*You Can Sell*’. The discount rate was too lucrative to go for at least one book for a bookworm chap like me.

Next morning, same time, same snacks, same cafeteria, same Odyssey stall, same girl – Anit asked – “Hey dear (God knows when he went so dear with her), you got the pictorial dictionary?” A regret smile with the same comment initiated another conversation. This time I was truly bored and luckily found another colleague to pass the time. Anit did not waste this opportunity to create stories about their conversation so much so he found a true friend in Sanya. She too got equally engrossed with Anit’s emotional nature. If his version had to be believed, they had even shared their contact numbers. Anit stroke the bottom line of their chat with his prediction – “Seems she has fallen in love with me. I don’t understand why girls like me so much...” and he looked damn serious as he usually does.

It was the third and last day of the bookstall at our campus. There were substantial sales which could be visible from the depleting density on the table. Anit, with no exception, was about to approach the girl with the same vigour. Just when a whispering tone bled Anit’s heart – “Oh know! It’s again that bloody *dic boy!*”

We turned aside – it was Sanya looking at Anit with a grim face. Her colleague standing right threw a punning smile at me and tried showcasing herself busy in her job. Perhaps Anit did not get the underlying mockery. “What did she mean to say?” – asked me in a husky voice. “Nothing grave Anit; she just shortened the *Dictionary to Dic.*”

With M. K. Gandhi
on 15th August, 1947

[It is said the legendary Indian freedom fighter M.K. Gandhi spent his 1947's 15th August in 'Haidari Manzil', later named after him 'The Gandhi Bhawan', located at Beliaghata (Kolkata). The story inspired from this and related facts, is entirely a work of fiction and any resemblance with reality is purely coincidental.]

I was one of the *Bangaliwallahas* from the Dawoodi Bohra community, hailing originally from Surat who settled here in Bengal to do business. Born to Sheikh Adam's family, I lived at *Haidari Manzil* in Beliaghata. It was a single-storey mud building with an abandoned pond at the backyard. Since childhood, I found immense curiosity in the pond as I was hardly allowed to go near it. My grandma warned me of ill spirits who stayed in the pond and if went near, they might not let me come back. That was enough to arouse interest in me to go there alone. I heard there was a graveyard further down. Muharram day, all were busy with the procession when I silently made my way to the pond. Seeing the procession approaching, I hid myself in the nearby

bushes. It was no ill spirit which governed the pond; the *tazias* were immersed in it after the procession and it's to keep me away from the bloody vistas, the ghost stories were created. None observed me watching it except an old bald man in a dhoti. I had never seen him before in our *manzil*. Cautiously I made my way through the bushes to my room.

Few days thereafter, I saw the same old man in our garden, talking to my father. I was just thirteen that time. Communal riots were burning Bengal just before India was partitioned and declared independent by the British. Ours was a Muslim slum, surrounded by Hindus all around. I could not forget that night – it was 13th of August, 1947; someone from the rival community had thrown a grenade at our *manzil* to protest against this old man's stay with us. Perhaps he was a Hindu leader, who was trying to establish his anti-communal statement by sharing our roof. Our *manzil* could hardly provide any security to him from the Protestants. It was his old yet bold guts which paraded his stay during the uprising period. Lots of people, from both the communities, came to meet him during the daytime. But with the nightly solitude, there were many others who revolted against his decision.

Next morning, it was 14th of August, 1947 when I found the same old man, being greeted with black flags, bravely facing the revolting crowd with a steady voice. The crowd accused him of not safeguarding the interests of the Hindus. In his own style he conveyed his message to end violence and restore peace. He said, "*...as a born and practising Hindu your bias shows intolerance on your part...*" which eventually helped him convincing the gathered mass.

With the setting of the sun in the west, the West rule too was coming to an end. India was awaiting a new morning, a new air, a new beginning! 12:00 midnight, 15th August, 1947 – hundreds of Indians, irrespective of their religions, lighted the streets of Beliaghata waving the tricolour with pride. Gandhiji, the old man in a dhoti, walked with me held in one hand, a Hindu boy on the other, and a huge crowd following him.

[Courtesy to: The Sunday Tribune (Aug 15, 2010),

The Telegraph (Mar 29, 2009)]

Last Time with My Boyfriend

He is getting married next Friday. After four years of steady pledge, I am going to lose my boyfriend coming week. Before parting, we decided to meet for the last time exactly there where we began our journey.

It is my last Valentine's Day with my boyfriend, Gautam. He is now working in Kolkata as a Senior Process Consultant in one of the French consulting giants. I too have found a job in an Indian consultancy firm. Settling in his new job for more than a year, he has decided to settle in his life too. And coming Friday is the date fixed.

We are sitting in front of the Inox ticket counter, four years back exactly where he was waiting to see me for the first time. But today there are no plans to watch any movie. We wish to refresh our past memories together. Time just flew in the last four years. We did our MBA from the same institute, participated in innumerable management events, won prizes together, watched thousands of first day first shows of super hits and flops, delighted our taste-buds in every roadside

and posh restaurants, enjoyed weekend holidays at spots where hardly anybody would dare to spend, gambled our lucks at lucky draws, left no occasion to gift cards and presents and so on...

Today when we just look back, we have too many things to resurrect. One evening would hardly suffice. Gautam's face glitters when we reminisce our past days. He is so nice a person. I can bet no girl can have a better boyfriend than him. He is handsome, earns an equally handsome salary, carries a handsome educational background, from a handsome family with a handsome younger brother. It's so painful to be separated from such a handsome boyfriend.

Passed some handsome hours to rejuvenate our four years and bid my final good bye to my boyfriend. We won't meet again. Giving his last Valentine's Day card to me, he promised meeting me on his marriage day, with me in my bridal avatar!