

THE

# FREEWHEELER

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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SNU's Literary Annual



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# FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER



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## Dr. Vikram Kapur

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In popular perception, the creative and the critical stand poles apart. The creative is all about the heart. It embodies passion in all its wild spontaneity and inhabits the world of fancy. Its prime catalyst is inspiration. The critical, on the other hand, emanates from the head. It is about logic and reasoning; a product of much thought and deliberation. To paraphrase Kipling: Oh, Creative is Creative, and Critical is Critical, and never the twain shall meet.

That is the first misconception that anyone teaching creative writing has to surmount. Even more so in India where the discipline is still in its infancy and people believe that writers are not made; they simply happen. The realization is yet to set in that the writing of prose, poetry and drama is deliberate rather than spontaneous, and anything that is deliberate has to employ critical thought. That is not to say that inspiration is not important.



It is the moment of inspiration that gives any creative work its X-factor. That eureka moment, however, is arrived at after much deliberation. To paraphrase Thomas Edison: Creative writing is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.

All the students contributing to this issue of *The Freewheeler* have worked tirelessly to marry the creative with the critical. Each story that appears in these pages has gone through several incarnations before making it to the printed page. The final incarnation is as much a result of deep thought as a spurt of inspiration. The stories, themselves, show a wide variety of styles and concerns. There are stories that are sombre in nature, stories that crackle with laughter, stories that investigate deep emotional states, and stories that create suspense. The stories also deal with a multiplicity of issues—sport, madness, murder, love, a troubled family, destitution, giving birth, and being in a troubled nation.

Writers are not the only heroes at *The Freewheeler*. Like the two issues that preceded it, the stories in this third issue of *The Freewheeler* have been painstakingly worked on by editors and copy editors in a bid to make them as good as they can possibly be. They have been enhanced by the efforts of illustrators and presented attractively on the page through the toil of designers. *The Freewheeler* is a result of their collaborative efforts.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues at the Department of English who have been behind this endeavour from the start. The former Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr Shubhashis Gangopadhyay, gave *The Freewheeler* his blessing when it was conceived two years ago and never wavered in his support. The current Director, Dr Ajay Dandekar, has been just as forthcoming for which I am grateful. Without his support, this magazine would not have been possible.

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# EDITORS' NOTE



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## Gokulnath Govindan & Saumya Bhatt

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Before saying anything else, we both have no doubts or qualms about the fact that we are proud to edit this edition of *The Freewheeler*. This edition is special in many ways but it is unique in also being the first of its kind to have two editors who have such distinctive styles and attitudes. While one of them is excited about publishing her own story, the other knows nothing of this excitement. As individuals, it not only helped us gain a taste of editing despite the initial hiccups, it also taught us about what it means to work together in a team. Either ways we both want to do the best we can. Now that we both have praised ourselves, we must warn any successor of ours that this is no easy job. It seems and feels like it could be a day's job but it in fact is time-consuming.

In order to make the job slightly easier, stories were divided and both of us had to deal with a different set of work. While Gokul read stories on Cricket, greed, emotional drugs and what not Saumya dealt with stories having reunion, Friendship, madness and much more. We have to say that reading and editing these stories, coming from so many different people, was altogether a very new experience. They grabbed us immediately as we felt great joy in working with them.

All our work would be in vain without the support of the design team and the illustrators. The design team comprising of Aninya Gangal and Soumya Rampal were always ready to help us with designing the layout and were very patient while we kept demanding for changes frequently. The sketches which complete this edition were done by Sai Swaroop and Aishwarya Reddy and we must say that it was a great experience working with such talented people. We would also like to thank all the writers and Keerthana, who proofread them all. Finally, we are extremely grateful to Dr. Vikram Kapur for giving us this opportunity and constantly guiding us throughout the process. We hope that you all enjoy reading this.

# CONTRIBUTORS



## Editing Team

**Gokulnath Govindan**

**Saumya Bhatt**

## Proofreader

**Keerthana**

## Artists

**Aishwarya Reddy**

**Sai Swaroop**

## Design Team

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**Soumya Rampal**

## Writers

**Toshan Majumdar**

**Siddharth Srinivasan**

**Avantika Panda**

**B. Deewang**

**Maunica Kolla**

**Saketh RVK**

**S Anirudh Vishal Yadav**

**Kirthana S**

**Karan Rajan**

**Saumya Bhatt**

# BIOS

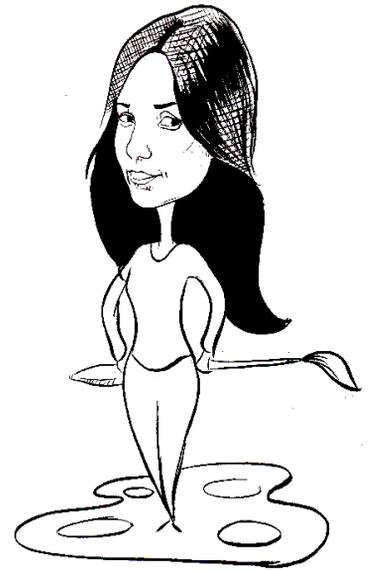
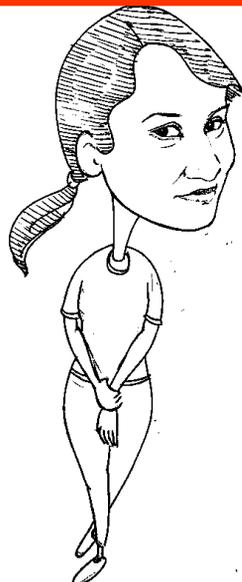


Is an editor but wants to be a writer because it is the only way you can be immortal and lazy.

**GOKULNATH  
GOVINDAN**  
Co-Editor

An ardent canine lover and writer, she enjoys going on road trips and is a selfishly amateurish chef! Loves taking long walks in the night, gazing at the moon aiming to write brilliant poetry.  
P.S.- Don't eye her! She is in a committed relationship with her sleep!

**SAUMYA BHATT**  
Co-Editor



A 21 year old with a teenage heart, type-A hoarder of rubberbands, pens and clothes tags and a love for colours that translates into a very expensive makeup fetish.

**AISHWARYA  
REDDY**  
Illustrator

# BIOS



Soumya Rampal has yet to meet a cupcake or a cat that doesn't like her. She is the illegitimate love-child of Intelligence and Creativity, and now neither parent admits to having had her. Contributing to entropy since 1996.

**SOUMYA RAMPAL**  
Design Editor

Recovering chocolate addict. In search of sanity and sleep. Currently pursuing BSc. Mathematics with an emphasis on illustrating and Bathroom singing. Plans to roam around the world with her ukulele, George. Also a firm believer of spreading smiles like they're herpes.

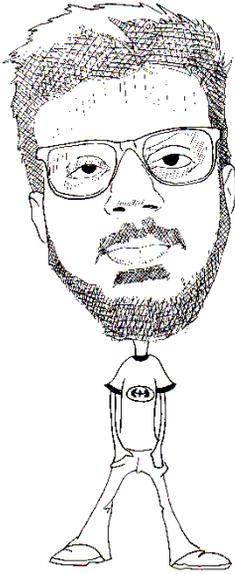
**ANINYA GANGAL**  
Design Editor



She believes that when life gives you lemons, you should construct a crude electrochemical battery.

**KEERTHANA**  
Proofreader

# BIOS



Unpunctual Fauji beta, conspiracy theorist and internet pirate, scrounges for enjoyable stories through articles, books, movies, serials, comics like a raccoon through trash cans. Majoring in CSE, sits blank faced in classes expecting the meaning of his life to strike him like a death in GoT.

**TOSHAN  
MAJUMDAR**  
Writer

He lives by one rule - Life is a joke, laugh at it. But then fine day he was asked to write a funny bio, it was then he realized that not all jokes are funny.

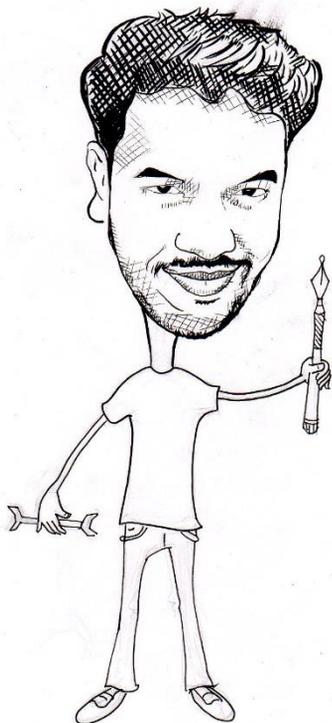
**B. DEEWANG**  
Writer



A bad sense of humour and non stop monologue define Saketh's company. The first words out of his mouth? "Let the games begin!"

**SAKETH RVK**  
Writer

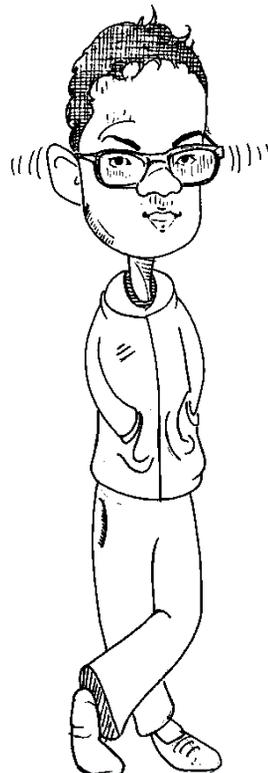
# BIOS



I live in an exaggerated version of life in which music and books are personified.

**KIRTHANA S**

Writer



Studies mechanical engineering but never fell in love with machines, wrote two lines of fiction and fell for writing.

**KARAN RAJAN**

Writer



I seek pleasure in the smallest of things in life. I took up engineering to create a base for myself. But my heart lies in expressing myself through writing and music.

**ANIRUDH**

Writer



Poetry is the religion I follow. A religion with no god. A tradition with no rules. A commitment with no compulsion. As an engineer of words, I build shape my dreams with the chisel of poetry.

**MAUNICA KOLLA**  
Writer



# BOB KA JOB



## Toshan Majumdar

Amlan Roy hurriedly descends into the Rajiv Chowk metro station, an arena of chaos in the stifling summer heat of Delhi filled with people scurrying like ants, and amidst blaring arrival and departure announcements he makes his way to the platform. It is already 8:30 and he cannot face his mercurial boss with any stupid reasons. As he stands behind the yellow line, straining his neck to have a glimpse of the train, a waft of cheap cologne assails his nostrils. He picks up his briefcase just as the train doors slide open. The unruly crowd slams into him like a whiplash, he hears somebody exclaim his thoughts in his own vernacular, 'Ore baba!' Before his senses can track the source, he finds himself in the train, pushed in with the crowd's momentum. The doors close and everybody realigns like molecules in a solid. The train picks up speed.

After three stations, the train goes through a tunnel during which Amlan parks himself next to the object of his speculation. He curiously observes the short, spectacled middle aged man sitting beside him reading the *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* and instantly recognizes the familiar smell of cologne realizing that this must be him. He notices his worn out office sandals, well oiled hair, starched but clearly not ironed shirt and a briefcase similar to his looking exactly like those typical Bengali clerks he would have found walking down Maniktala Crossing, hurrying to board a mini bus. He stands out in stark contrast to the typical Delhi crowd. In a friendly voice, Amlan greets, 'Bangali?' to which he responds, 'Yes! Yes! Apni!' 'Ami Amlan. I'm going to HFCC headquarters in Noida sector

16.'

'Sector 16? I'm going to Noida city centre. I have a *Biye Badi* there. My niece Shamoli's marriage is on the 25th.'

Amlan, furthering the conversation asks, 'First time in Delhi?' to which the mild mannered person responds, 'Yes. *Amar naam* Buddhadeb Onkar Biswas. *Kintoo* people call me BOB!' With the progression of the conversation Biswas then starts lamenting on his unforeseen situation which forces him to miss Kolkata's Durga Pujo for Shamoli's wedding arrangements. Biswas says, 'Dada! How come it is so quiet in Delhi? Right now in Kolkata, you would hear only the sounds of *dhakis* and get the smell of *Shiuli phool!*'

Suddenly all those memories come back to Amlan. Memories of crazy, colourful nights spent *pandal* hopping with college buddies. Ekdalia, Maddox Square, Shingi Park, they experienced it all. Walking through the overflowing crowd all dressed in designer *kurtas*, covertly staring at attractively attired girls, clicking photos of diversely themed mandaps, idols and talking loudly over the prevailing sounds of the *dhakis* and *Rabindra sangeet*. However the biggest draw was always the food. It was as important as the *pushpanjali* on *ashtami* or wearing new clothes each day. The food stalls beside the *mandap* at Maddox Square would be lined by serpentine queues hungering for the exotic *jhalmuris*, eggroll, *phuchkas* or *maach bajha* with *Kashondi* sauce.

After satisfying their *adda* induced hunger, they would hang around the

Suddenly all those memories come back to Amlan. Memories of crazy, colourful nights spent *pandal* hopping with college buddies. Ekdalia, Maddox Square, Shingi Park, they experienced it all. Walking through the overflowing crowd all dressed in designer *kurtas*, covertly staring at attractively attired girls, clicking photos of diversely themed mandaps, idols and talking loudly over the prevailing sounds of the *dhakis* and *Rabindra sangeet*.

nearby *mandaps* to kill time before the crowning moment of the night. The *Tridhara mandap* always organized a sound and light show which would draw such uncontrollable crowds year after year that Amlan and his buddies would have to wait until 2:00 after midnight to watch it. Then the *pujo* fervor would finally end at the Ganga banks where the idols of *Maa Durga* would be brought for immersion and culminate with the cries of 'AASCHE BOCHOR ABE HOBE!'

Amlan is jolted back to the present by the overfamiliar feminine voice announcing, 'Aglaa station Noida Sector 16 hai. *Darwaza baye taraf khulenge. Kripya darwaze se hat kar khade ho jaye*'.

In a maddened rush, he picks up his briefcase and rushes towards the nearest exit after bidding him, 'Aaschi BOB! *Enjoy the Biye!*' After navigating through the officegoers crowd, Amlan takes the escalator and his eyes fall on his briefcase.



He instantly realises his dreadful mistake on seeing the initials 'B.O.B.'. He turns round, grips the rails and runs up the escalator two steps at a time while passing annoyed passengers. Panting, he reaches the platform only to witness the next train cruising in, unloading its passengers. He rushes in shuddering at the thought of his boss berating him for his lack of punctuality and irresponsible behavior. He glances at his steel gray Timex wondering why the seconds are ticking by so slowly. He finally gets down at Noida City Centre, scanning the platform for his friend from Kolkata. He then rushes outside the station and spots Biswas at a nearby Airtel mobile shop. Relieved, he shouts 'BOB!' to catch

his attention. Like a student caught copying, Bob surreptitiously takes a sideways glance, his face showing fleeting fear. Seeing Amlan, he heaves a sigh of relief and breaks into a nervous smile. 'Ki holo Dada?' he inquires, to which Amlan explains the accidental switch of their bags. Both share a moment of anxiety averted as they go their own ways after bidding goodbye. Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Amlan goes towards the platform edge to see his train approaching, when he suddenly feels a deliberate push unbalancing him. Heads strain to follow the trail of blood. Some of them scream in horror; an old lady faints and the train comes to an abrupt halt but it is already too late. The crowd slowly

snowballs as it becomes evident that a mishap had occurred. As the crowd leans forward to get a clear picture, a short spectacled middle-aged man undaunted by all the commotion picks up his briefcase, turns around and starts walking. His face is calm as he mumbles, 'Bidhai, Amlan Dada'. He breathes normally again knowing that no one was privy to the contents of his suitcase, save himself. A brief sense of remorse floods his being only to be cut short by the vibration of his Nokia 1100. His demeanor changes to focus on the voice of instructions: 'Nomoskar, BOB! Tomar target holo: HFCC company er CEO Mr. Rajiv Miland'!

# THE HELPLESS BYSTANDER



## Siddharth Srinivasan

Sorrow contorted her sallow face, and the hands that carried the little brown boy were shaking uncontrollably. Her eyes were sunken, and her cheeks were stained with tears, which continued to trickle down her face. Her sari hung about her loosely draped, and her shoulders seemed to slump, as she trudged toward me. The little child in her arms could not have been more than three years old, his small eyes closed, and his bony cheek resting contently on his mother's shoulder. It was evident that he shared none of his anguished mother's worries, as he rested there, oblivious and content in her arms. Entering the sanctuary of my shade, she stood meekly beneath my arching leafy boughs- a pitiful, haggard figure, apparently under unbearable strain.

As she reached me, she stood quietly with the child at the foot of my vast trunk. Her shuffling feet and shifty eyes spoke of deep apprehension, as her quivering, nervous hands, rough and coarse from hard labour, gently lifted the blissfully drooling child from her shoulder, and placed him on the cold cobblestone. She bent over, sobbing quietly into the *pallu* of her red sari, gazing at the cherub's face with passionate longing, almost as if she was allowing herself a denied pleasure as she drank in every feature she could of her child. When she stood up again, an indifferent hardness had set upon her face; her teeth were clenched and the bones in her cheek were protruding in silent determination. As she turned away from her child, only her eyes showed any sign of her terrible loss, besides the slight jerk in her gait as she walked away.

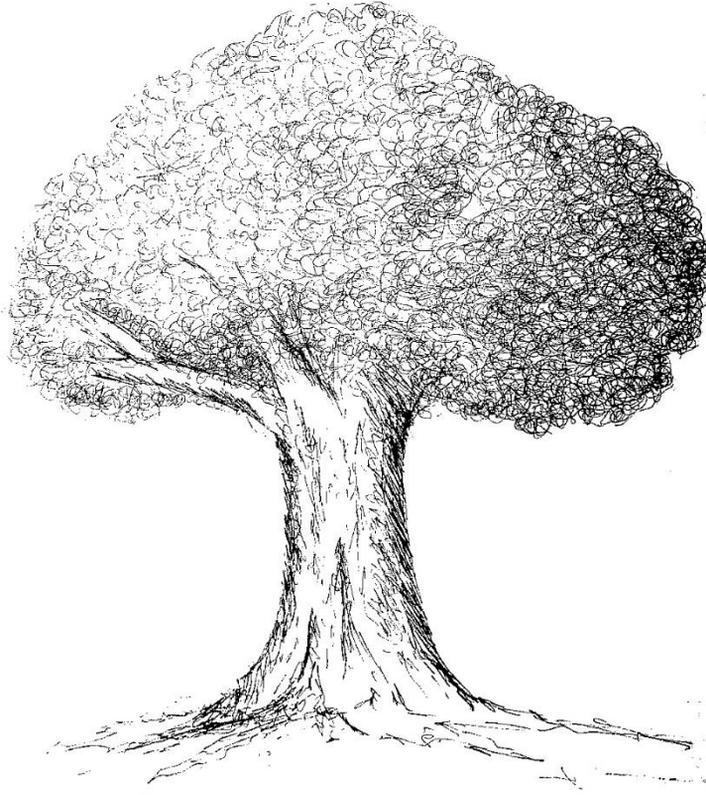
The poor child at my roots would

wake up in a few hours an orphan, alone in this world, facing an uncertain and hazy future. The boy would have to, at this young age, work for a living, would have to provide for himself, and would have to face the harshness of reality. I can still recall with painful clarity those wintry nights when, as a little sapling on the sidewalk, I brazenly withstood the howling wind piercing me like a thousand needles, threatening to rip me from the ground. I empathized with this little fellow, but, being a mango tree spirit, I could not reach out to him- I tried to move my boughs down to lift him up- to caress and cradle him, but they remained rigid and immobile, refusing to comply and help out the orphaned child. I tried in vain to give the sleeping boy more shade, but my leaves left me helpless, letting dazzling sunlight scorch the poor child's face. I could do nothing but hope that the boy would manage and overcome the overwhelming odds. For three days, I watched him intently as he played with the pebbles on the road, satiating his hunger with the temple *prasaad*. I felt responsible for his fate, which I found myself unable to mould, except to provide him with fruit and shade from time to time.

He was thin and quite tall for his age, his face dark and sunburned, with bright black, dancing eyes set in a well-chiselled face, which he seemed to get from his mother. His feet were bare, blackened by the grime of the road. He seemed to believe that his mother would come back for him, often calling out to her in his shrill voice, in between sobs and howls, fear and confusion mingling in his desperate voice.

Four days into the boy's life alone, I saw the old man from the little newspaper shop next to my house walk up to him. He was bent double, wore thick, nearly opaque spectacles and an old walking stick supported his gnarled, senile frame. He tottered about the place in a *dhoti* and a white kurta, peering fiercely out from beneath his bushy, white eyebrows. As he shuffled towards the boy, I felt a wave of anxiety, for the old man was irritable and foul-mouthed, and was avoided by the local folk, who feared his dangerous temper. As he reached the foot of my mango tree, I prayed that my boy had done no wrong to incur the uncouth devil's wrath.

She bent over, sobbing quietly into the pallu of her red sari, gazing at the cherub's face with passionate longing, almost as if she was allowing herself a denied pleasure as she drank in every feature she could of her child.



He approached the boy, surveying him keenly, his long white hair hanging droopily over his wrinkled face. 'What are you doing here, heh? Mummy-papa *kahan hai?*' he growled, his voice as gruff and hostile as usual. The boy unhesitatingly replied innocently, 'Mummy *gayi...*' he squeaked. The old man merely scowled in reply, and barked, '*Salle*, bloody parents just abandon their children here to suffer on the streets, *chutiye.*' As I watched with trepidation, the creased, weather-beaten face seemed to relax, and the old man's demeanour seemed to soften- his thin lips, usually drawn

into a tight line, parted slightly and his eyes seemed to be lost in woeful reminiscence, as he appeared to recollect traumatic experiences of a bitter past. For a blurry moment of suspense, I thought that I had misheard the old man's next words, as I reeled in sheer disbelief. '*Aao... kuch khaao na, beta...*' the old man had said, his face kinder and gentler than I had ever seen it, as his lips turned upwards into a smile that his face had long-forgotten. As they walked towards the shop, I heard the old man ask softly, '*Naam kya hai, beta?*' The boy looked trustingly up at him, and said, 'Suraj...' As they

turned into the shop, I was glad that the boy had finally found a friend. Near my roots, the whirling wind swept another young sapling off the ground, ripping its feebly protesting roots from the soil, whirling the dying plant through the air. While I wished the best for Suraj, I doubted if he could overcome the trying, tortuous road ahead, for he was, after all, a street boy, deemed to live a hard, rugged life. I looked at the boy through the shop window, willing him to be strong enough to stand on his own feet and face the difficult times ahead.

# THE HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER PACKAGE



## Avantika Panda

It's wrong what they've written about us. I don't have a cruel bone in my body, and neither does my sister. Just because the masses typically prefer the stereotypical slim, gorgeous, leggy blonde with the saucer sized brown eyes and that sugar coated voice, they cast people like my sister and me aside and label us bitter and ugly. They've said we were jealous of her and called us vile names. Believe me, there's nothing to be jealous about. She's the evil one and the ugly one, at least on the inside.

Hell upon those Grimm brothers for portraying the story from such an unkind perspective in the first place. But I guess it doesn't matter because I'm going to set you straight right now. Her real name is Ellen. She came into our lives sixteen years ago in the form of a precocious two year old when our mother married her father Frank. I don't know what mum saw in her father. We thought he was a pompous man right from the start. But I suppose mum was lonely after our no-good dad ran off with the Queen's lady-in-waiting. I guess it was hard trying to raise us on her own, struggling with bills, trying to provide my sister and me with the right schooling and social credentials to make it in the world. Up until she married Frank, she could never afford the designer dresses we needed; and she didn't have the connections to get us invitations to the exclusive balls where we would be seen and noticed.

From the moment Ellen became part of our family, things started to go wrong. Tiny, sweet little Ella as her daddy called her, was the focus of all attention. She made sure of that. To

say she was naughty would be an understatement. Even at an early age, she knew exactly how to pin the blame on us for just about every misdemeanor.

Once when she was about five, she smeared Frank's moustache wax all over the floor in the bathroom causing him to slip and break his arm. She told our mother that she'd seen us using it on our ringlets. Yes, moustache wax is great for holding curl, but we'd only sneak a tiny bit every now and then. To be punished for something we didn't do was foreign to us at the time, but it was a circumstance we would find ourselves in many times in the years to come.

So I guess the stories are right about one thing. We hated her.

Sister tried to tell mother what Ella was really like, but it was futile. Her charm had even enveloped our own mother. Ella would curl up at mother's feet and gaze into her eyes.

'Oh, dear stepmother,' she would drool. 'How cruel of fate to deprive me of my own mother whose sweet face fades from my memory each day; but how kind of fate to replace that face with yours... I am truly fortunate.'

By the time she was 15, she could do no wrong in either Frank's eyes or our mother's. The older she grew, the prettier she became. And the prettier she became, the more control she had over everyone. Mother stopped going to her previous great lengths to provide us with the best clothes. Instead she would pick on us

'You girls really should try to lose a little weight. Ella is so slim. How do

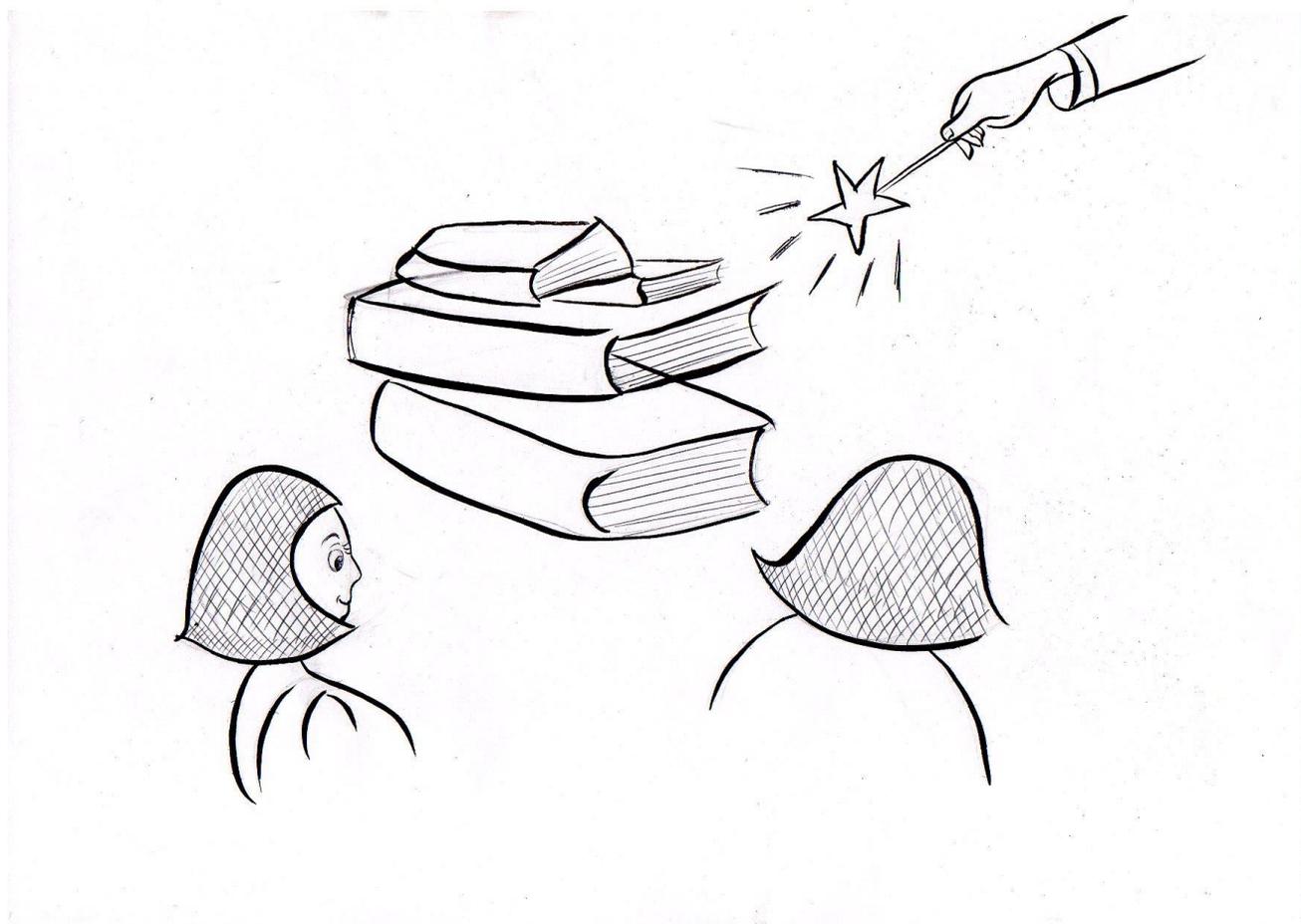
you expect to marry a prince if you both look like hogs?'

Or, 'Your hair looks most crinkly these days. You should spend more time brushing it, as Ella does.'

We couldn't believe how things had changed – but sadly we could do nothing about our situation.

The annual Queen's gala ball was forthcoming. The most splendid star studded event of the year. An evening of gaiety, dancing, fine food and wine... and most importantly, lots of eligible courtiers ripe for the picking, the most eligible of which was the Queen's handsome son, Prince Charming. The news was out on the news blogs and the royal website.

'Hello, dear. I hope I'm in the right place. I'm your fairy godmother—from The Goodwill Godmothers.'



Both Sister and I dreamed of just one dance with him. Sister and I waited anxiously each day for our invitations as we looked forward to the magnificent event. Then they arrived. Sister collected the mail and there, dusted with gold, bearing our names were three invitations – including Ella's! Our worst fears were realized.

Sister's immediate thought was to toss Ella's invitation into the fire. But as I pointed out, this would just arouse suspicion and all fingers would point at us.

'No, I'm afraid we'll have to accept it. We don't stand a chance, dear sister. Once Prince Charming sets eyes on her pretty little face, he'll be smitten, I'm sure.

'Hey, I have an idea,' offered Sister. 'We could have her kidnapped.'

I was shocked at Sister's suggestion, she being so gentle of nature.

Then she added, 'at least until the ball is over, and we'd make sure she wasn't harmed; intentionally anyway.' I must admit, it wasn't an entirely outrageous idea, but valuing my role as the sensible, intelligent one I could only offer weak words of encouragement.

'No, dear sister. The only thing we can do is trust in ourselves. We have class and style. We will be radiant, captivating and we will truly outshine her.'

The next two weeks passed in a flurry of excitement. There were dress fittings, shoe fittings, hair style appointments and much protocol to learn. Sister and I practiced our curtsies, and perfected the art of using a fan. We polished our speech and buffed our manners until we

were gleaming examples of perfect etiquette. As always, we left Ella to her own devices. We neither offered our help, nor commented on any aspect of her own preparations.

On the morning of the big day our dresses arrived. I took the delivery of three magnificent ball gowns; jewel encrusted, shimmering works of art, they had cost a small fortune and we couldn't wait to put them on. They were quite heavy, and as I carried them upstairs to the dressing rooms, I tripped on the top step and accidentally caught my heel on the skirt of Ella's dress. I fell forward and the dress tore from waist to hem.

'Oh dear God in heaven!' I cried. 'Sister, come quickly – I've ripped Ella's dress.'

Sister ran to my aid, her face a pasty white.



She clapped a trembling hand over her mouth.

'You are SO dead!'

'Thank you for mentioning the obvious, dear sister, but what are we to do? Everyone will think I did this on purpose.'

My sister could offer no comfort, only to say I should tell the truth.

'They'll understand,' she said. 'It was an accident. They know you wouldn't do something like that on purpose. Come on, the sooner we get this over with the better.'

Then I remembered why I have always been portrayed as the sensible, intelligent one.

'No, I have a better idea, dear sister. Get me the yellow pages.'

Sister ran to the parlour and came back with a hulking edition of the *Magical Kingdom, Zone Three Yellow Pages*.

I thumbed furiously through it until I came to the Disaster Relief section and found what I was looking for: *Fairy Godmothers*. There were some 20 listed, all with varying credentials. Some promised Rags to Riches relief, some specialized in Species Alteration, both temporary and permanent, and others did across-the-board wish granting. I picked one with her own advertising banner: *The Goodwill Godmothers*. I phoned the number and spoke to a kindly, older woman, explaining my plight.

'Yes dearie, I can help. We actually specialize in ball packages, very popular this time of year. Not cheap you understand, but the price includes the dress, shoes, hair and makeup plus luxury Limo transfers to and from the event. Conditions apply.'

'Oh, do come over right away!'

I bundled the torn dress into a bag, shoved it under my bed, and hung our gowns in the closet, just as Ella appeared in my bedroom doorway.

'Have the gowns arrived yet?' she sneered.

'Er, no, not yet. Ella, I just wanted to say how pleased I am that we're all going to the ball. I know it's your first event of this grandeur and I know you'll have a wonderful time. In fact, sister and I have arranged a special surprise for you.'

Ella curled her top lip and scowled. 'What for? I have no doubt that you've been scheming madly to sabotage this event for me in some way; however, with or without your 'surprise' I will be the belle of the ball. Furthermore, when the prince sets eyes upon my beauty and my stunning gown, he will become besotted and ask for my hand in marriage.'

She turned to leave, but not before spinning around to pitch one final insult. 'We all know that the prince is going to set his heart on me; maybe I could find you two somebody in the court whose lives are as miserable as yours are.' With that, she giggled and stormed off to her room.

Sister sat on my bed and burst into tears.

'Don't let her get to you,' I said. 'She's a nasty little brat and we all know that what goes around comes around.'

'I just wish it wouldn't take so long in coming!' she sobbed.

'Come, come now. Don't cry. Your eyes will be puffy and you won't look your best.'

I comforted her as best I could and just as I managed to help her out of

her misery, there was a cacophonous scuffling inside my wardrobe. I threw open the door to reveal a tiny, but plump elderly lady. Her silver hair was pulled back in a tight knot and her cherry colored cheeks glowed as a wide smile beamed from her face.

'Hello, dear. I hope I'm in the right place. I'm your fairy godmother—from *The Goodwill Godmothers*.'

Sister and I helped her from the closet and closed the bedroom door. She immediately noticed Sister's red eyes.

'My my dear, why so sad?'

The concern in her voice brought on a fresh flood of tears, and I had no choice but to explain the whole story to the fairy godmother. I found myself pouring my heart out about Ella's nasty demeanor, her cruelty toward Sister and me, her evil pranks and her selfish acts. The fairy godmother listened and nodded sympathetically.

'Well my dears, we never advocate violence when it comes to granting wishes, but as it happens, I can help with a swift kick to a certain spoilt butt. But for now, let's get this show on the road. I need a couple of rats, a pumpkin, and that torn dress and a few other bits and pieces.'

When we had assembled the items, we were asked to find Ella.

I tapped on her bedroom door and was greeted with an irritated, 'Get lost, I'm putting on my makeup.'

'Ella, your gown has arrived, and our surprise is ready. It's in the kitchen. Do come.'

'You'd better not make me late.'



Ella presented herself in the kitchen wrapped in a thick, fluffy kimono.

'Well? What's this surprise and who's the gnome?' She looked a little startled when she noticed Fairy Godmother – both sister and I immediately noticed a look of suspicion in her eyes.

'Why? I'm your fairy godmother.'

'And just what do you think you can give me that I don't already have?'

'I'm here, at the request of your kind sisters, to make your first gala ball an unforgettable event.'

With that, she waved her wand. Ella's kimono turned into the most magnificent spectacle of a ball gown we had ever seen. A whirlwind of shimmering pink satin and lace, encrusted with tiny pearl buttons. Much more splendid than the one I had torn. She tapped the pumpkin and the cage containing the two rats. With a puff of smoke, they disappeared, only to reappear as a fabulous sleek gold limo with chauffeurs parked in the front driveway. Ella was speechless – but just for a moment. She looked down at her dress and the gorgeous glass slippers adorning her tiny feet. Her face exploded into a bright beaming smile. 'This is SO COOL!'

Then just as quickly, the smile disappeared and she turned to glare at me.

'Okay, what's the catch? Why all this... for me? Not that I don't deserve it of course, but ordinarily, you wouldn't take the time to throw a cowpat at me. Explain. 'Fairy Godmother stepped in.

Why Ella, you're doubting us. Your sisters are pure of heart, and this is their gift to you because they love you as their own flesh and blood. But you're correct. There is indeed a catch. When your sisters purchased the gala ball package, I neglected to explain about the conditions

'pertaining to the time clause in this package.'

'Time clause? What's that all about?'  
'Quite simply my dear, it means that you must leave the ball by the stroke of midnight.'

Ella's face contorted into a frown.  
'Midnight? Are you kidding? Things will just be starting to rock at midnight. No one leaves a gala ball at midnight. No way.'

Fairy Godmother smiled. 'Sorry honey, but if you don't leave at the stroke of midnight, your splendid outfit and your limo will turn back into their previous form, right where you stand.'

'So... so you mean this getup is only a loaner?' spluttered Ella. 'What a royal rip off! I KNEW you two were out to get me,' she screamed, pointing a manicured finger at sister and me.

'Look, forget it. I just want my original dress, and I'll take a taxi to the ball. No conditions.'

'Sorry, lovely. What's done cannot be undone – till midnight.'

The fairy godmother glanced at her watch.

'Oh my, I must fly. I have a frog to turn into a prince... and a crisis at a gingerbread cottage. A fairy godmother's work is never done. Now you all be sure to have a great time.'

And in a puff of smoke, she disappeared. Sister and I exchanged glances.

'Well, we'd best get dressed. See you later, Ella'

And we left her standing in the kitchen.

The ball was truly an outstanding event. Sister and I had a marvelous time- the best ever. We didn't get to dance with the prince but something much more wonderful happened. It was on that enchanted night that we met our present husbands. Not as our step sister had intimated, but two

handsome brothers – both noblemen, tall of stature and kind of heart.

'A break at last!' as sister so succinctly put it.

And Ella? Well as history reports it, she did indeed dance with the prince, but only once. She spent much of the evening sitting down, rubbing her feet which were badly blistered from the glass shoes. She did leave the ball at midnight, losing one of those glass slippers when she tumbled down the castle stairs. And yes the prince went to extraordinary lengths to find its owner. Not because he wanted to return it, but because HE wanted the other one *and* her beautiful dress as well! The Queen's one and only son made a special announcement that night. He chose the gala ball as his 'coming out of the closet' party.

I am so glad we didn't take the 'happily ever after' option on that ball package.

# HIGH ON EMOTIONS



## B. Deewang

I let the windows of my car down. The whipping cold, dry wind hitting my face was almost refreshing. It had been a long day, and I was finally driving home after hours of paperwork and coffee consumption. It was getting dark but I could see that the city was still very much alive. Yorkbay was a city that had never fully immersed itself into the technological revolution that the past decade had brought; it always had one foot in the past. The city still saw human interaction and the hustle bustle in the market area. Silently cursing the traffic, I drove slowly, allowing myself to day dream about my warm, soft and inviting bed. But I was harshly brought back to reality: my phone was ringing.

'Hello,' I grunted.

'Detective, this is Officer Nawela. There has been a death on the 25<sup>th</sup>, near Zenith House.'

'Son, I'm heading back from a long day. You better be real sure that this is a murder.'

'Um, the M.E. just ruled it as a suicide, but I've seen similar bodies in the past couple of weeks. If you could just come and take a look, I've already called your partner.'

'Oh, have you now? That was nice of you,' I replied, sarcastically, parking my car on one side of the road, 'I'll have to call the Sergeant and notify him.'

'I've done that too.'

'My, aren't you resourceful. I'll be there in a short while.'

I turned my car around to make my way back into the city, and was at the scene in a record fifteen minutes. My partner, Science Officer Tenaspa Lamir, was already there. She was one of the smartest people on the force and I was lucky that she was my

partner. Lamir was one of the infamous Geeklings: a group of civilians who were inducted into the police department without going through proper training at the academy because of their stellar academic performances in areas that the Department was interested in. Though assigned a desk job, the few who were eventually cleared for field duty either couldn't tolerate the pressure or just lost their lives because of sheer incompetence. The remaining left soon after, except for a select few, one of them being Lamir. A stubborn and focused woman, she took what may have been the most obvious decision for the rest of us: she joined the academy. And now after 10 years here she was one of the finest detectives on the force.

'So, what do we have here?' I asked, as I slowly walked past an ornate gate of a palatial house into a garden which to any sane mind would definitely be called a park. I turned my gaze to look at the dead body, a crumpled heap, in front of me. I slowly bent down to inspect it.

'Well, we have a jumper here! Something I, personally, would call a suicide. But Officer Nawela here is pretty damn adamant that this is a murder,' replied Lamir, and then turned towards Nawela, 'I hope you are not planning to use this situation to speed your promotion to Detective, Officer.' I smiled to myself; Lamir wasn't one to mince her words. 'Cut him some slack now,' I told Lamir, before addressing Nawela, 'Tell me, Officer. What's on your mind?'

'Well, this is Mrs. Esco Jones, a widow in her 60s who lives by herself. During our canvas, we didn't come across any eye witnesses. We were contacted by the neighbour who noticed the absence of the apparently

chirpy Mrs. Jones. The point of interest is that I have seen two other bodies like hers; I was the first responder on one, and the second I saw at the M.E.'s. First, they look severely dehydrated and weak, and there is also something about their expressions that just doesn't sit right with me. Why don't you guys just look into this once?' he replied, a little defensively.

'Is that all you've got? Those are some really weak and vague observations, Officer. I can't believe that the Sergeant signed off on this.' I turned my attention to the body. Needless to say, she wasn't in the best shape. I could see that she had broken quite a few bones, which could be just because of the fall. But, there was something about this that just didn't sit right with me. 'Well, I don't think we'll find anything new here. Let's send this to the M.E. Lamir, head to the precinct. We'll sit

The M.E. had never called us this fast. Either he had finally got his lazy ass to work on time or he had really found something.



art by going through the files of these 3 people. Let's see what we can find out.'

The 52<sup>nd</sup> precinct was just round the corner; a building that was as grim as the morning that was slowly creeping up, even sunlight couldn't brighten the building. I hoped the opposite would be true for our day.

We were greeted by an expressionless Sergeant near our desks, 'I guess you guys are wondering why such a seemingly dull case was handed to you?'

'The thought may have crossed our minds. So why was it, sir?' Lamir asked.

'That's because one of the three dead guys was a Geekling.' He turned towards Lamir, 'You'll remember Harry Snow. Well, the higher-ups want this business sorted, fast.'

My eyes never left Lamir while we sat down, she clearly looked disturbed. She shook her head violently, as if trying to brush away whatever she was feeling. Knowing her, I knew asking how she was feeling would be redundant. I pulled up Snow's file. Harry Snow had become a businessman. There was nothing in his file that stood out. The second victim was a woman named Iris Park, a teacher. There was nothing out of the ordinary in her file, and neither in Mrs. Jone's file.

I sighed heavily, unable to make any headway. My blank brain welcomed the ringing phone. Lamir picked it up, 'This is Lamir. Uh huh... I see... Very well then,' she put the phone down and looked at me with slight puzzlement on her face. 'That was Dr. Death, he wants us downstairs.' Her puzzlement must be mirrored on my face. The M.E. had never called us this fast. Either he had finally got his lazy ass to work on time or he had really found something.

We entered the morgue. Dr. Dellirios, called Dr. Death upstairs greeted us with a toothy smile. It was only after I had gotten over the state of his wild hair that I noticed that he was putting his gloved hand forward. On his hand was a small chip covered in blood and, what looked like, brain matter.



'One's company, two's a crowd, and three's a party!' chirped the deranged doctor.

'You know that makes no sense, right?' Lamir said pointedly.

Dr. Death ignored her, 'Your victims had a slight burn which made me dig into their brain.' It scared me how delightful he sounded. 'I found these chips on all three of your victims. I recognise it- it is a memory chip; something which is manufactured solely by Dream Logic Solutions. I think this is worth a look.'

I looked at him intently, 'Is it weird for someone to have that tech in their head?'

'No. Not particularly.'

'Why does everyone want to be a detective today?' Lamir said, annoyed, holding her head.

'Calm down. Let's give him a chance. Tell me, what does it do?' I asked Lamir.

'Well, I'm just vaguely familiar with the concept, but I'll try my best. The chip is a memory recorder, it automatically tags a memory happy, sad or something based on the parts of the brain it stimulates. One can then access that memory anytime, consciously or unconsciously. This tech has done wonders for people who are clinically depressed, have sleep disorders et cetera, et cetera.'

'Wow. I thank you for that science-y explanation,' Lamir replied mockingly, taking a small bow.

'I think this place, Dream Logic Solutions, if I'm not wrong, deserves a visit from our side.'



The very next day, we drove our car into the parking space of the fanciest buildings I had ever seen in my life. Walking through the lobby of the place, I started thinking that maybe I had made a mistake: I should've become a businessman instead of becoming a cop.

We were greeted and directed to a conference room by a really pretty woman. 'Mr. Thanos and Dr. Grimal will be here presently. Please make yourselves comfortable,' she said with a broad smile, before leaving.

The door soon opened, and a smartly dressed middle-aged man walked in. His hair seemed to be whitening a little on the sides and a proud beard covered half his face while the rest of it was covered by huge glasses.

He smiled at us, 'Hi, I am Dr. Grimal and I'm the chief researcher here. Mr. Thanos will be here any minute, but from what I've been told you're more interested in our tech. I think I'll be able to answer most of your questions.'

'Thanks a lot, doctor. We're just following up on a case which left three dead... and on whom we found your tech. It's just routine questioning. So, what can you tell us about your tech?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, I can tell you a lot,' said Grimal smiling slightly. 'The chip's inserted in that part of the brain that controls emotions, and through a programme that I designed, the chip can recognise the centres that light up when someone is in a good mood, and stimulate them when needed, thus, making the patient feel positive at his lowest point. It also records those moments when those regions light up, and while the patient is asleep it runs a slightly edited simulation of those memories so that the patient has pleasant dreams. The Dreamery is what we call that simulation.'

'Wow! That is really interesting, doctor. We also wanted to ask you about your whereabouts during these past few weeks. Um... last Saturday, around 3:30 AM, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of last month at 9:30PM, and also on the 2<sup>nd</sup> at 2:00PM. We're just eliminating suspects as of now.'

'I'm actually retired now. So, I just come around the labs couple of days a month, but spend a majority of my time at home. That is where I was, home.'

The door opened behind us again, and I found myself facing a giant of a man, who I assumed was the CEO, Gravé Thanos. He had a well-built frame, his gelled hair pulled all the way back. He looked like the Boogeyman, which was ironic considering the company's aim.

'Hello, I assume you know who I am. My only question is what kind of an affair would bring the city's finest to us?' he asked in a really smooth voice. I had trouble figuring out if he was being rude, sarcastic or just direct.

'We were just here on a case. Three dead bodies have turned up: a Harry Snow, an Iris Park and an Esco Jones. And the only thing they had in common were your implants.'

'Firstly, I have never heard those names in my life, and I'm sure neither has the good doctor. Secondly, detectives, we're trying to do some good here. I'm sure the doctor here has explained our technology to you. If you need anything else, I would be expecting a subpoena. Thank you for visiting us.'

'Well, if you have nothing else for us, we'll get going then. Don't, uh, leave town.'

I was just about to exit the room when Lamir turned, 'Just one last thing, gentlemen. Your tech, does it have any side effects?'

'Oh, well no, Detective. Apart from small headaches there are no lasting side effects. And even for those headaches, the patients have been provided with medication,' replied Doctor Grimal. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some work to get back to.'

As soon as the doctor exited the conference room, Lamir turned to Thanos, 'Well, Mr. Thanos, do you have anything to add? I know how researchers are; they would never admit a flaw in something they have worked so hard for.'

He frowned, oh so slightly, his thin lips not giving much expression away, 'Look here, detectives. I want no

trouble. I'm running a successful business here, and we can't afford bad press.'

'Do you have anything else to add?' I pressed.

Giving in, he said, 'Well, yes. There is one small issue, something which is very theoretical. If someone else is able to tap into the frequency of The Dreamery while it is active, the hijack will turn it dark, that is, in theory, the patient will experience night terrors, and other such nightmarish things.'

'Before we leave, one small thing. Were you aware of Harry Snow's connection to the police department?'

'I happen to hear his name for the first time today! So no, I did not.'

'Thank you Mr. Thanos, that'll be all. We'll be in touch.'

As we walked towards the parking lot, I glanced towards Lamir, 'Well, I think that went well- we have information on the tech, Harry's past with the department isn't a factor, and I think we have our first suspect.'

'Yeah, this Thanos is a dodgy character. The doctor was a little odd too. And, yes, I'm fine. I didn't miss your thing on Harry.'

'Well, then, we have our jobs cut out for us.'

For a case that didn't have any solid motive, connection, background and even an extensive suspect list, we were exactly where we expected ourselves to be: nowhere. We hadn't made any headway in nearly two weeks now. I spent most of the time thinking on what we might have missed; we had interviewed the family, close friends, colleagues, personnel at Dream Logic Solutions, double checked the alibis of anyone related to the case. Either our luck had run dry, or there wasn't any case after all.

I had just got out of the shower on a warm Sunday afternoon when I got a call from Lamir, 'Thanos is dead. Suicide. Before you even bother asking, yes, chip in the head.'

'We need to go over the files again, this time more thoroughly.'



I was at the precinct at the earliest just to see that Lamir was already there going through the files again.

'Dream Logic Solutions sent over their files. The company wants answers as much as we do. But I have cross checked everything, and I still seem to be drawing a blank.'

'Let me take a look,' I offered as I took a stack of files off her desk. I spread whatever we had on all the four victims on the floor and then I let my eyes dart across all of them.

'Wait! I think I found something,' exclaimed Lamir from behind her computer. 'We know all of these were registered patients with Dream Logic Solutions, but they were also patients of Doctor Grimal years before the company had even started.'

I went through the files in front of me, 'I believe you're right. Ah, here we go, yes! They were all part of The Dreamery programme during its Beta phase.'

'I think we have enough for a search warrant for the doctor's house.

Within 12 hours we had the warrant in our hands, and we were heading to the doctor's house. We knocked on the door, but it seemed like no one was at home, so Lamir knocked it down. We headed forward, slightly crouched, with our guns raised. 'I think we have something!' Lamir yelled from down the hall.

We found him in a small room in the back, his head falling limply over the sofa, he was dead. He seemed to be wearing what could only be called a helmet, which was connected to his computer.

'I called it in,' said Lamir putting her phone down, while looking grimly at the doctor's lifeless body. 'I think I can take a guess what happened. I think he died of an overdose. I guess he was an addict, someone who used to get off on emotions. Since all the victims were his patients before he set up his company, he would've been able to access their Dreamery without raising any alarms. Emotions can give you a really good kick. I think the victims were quite literally living a

nightmare. They must not have been very aware of their surroundings when they fell to their death.'

I shut down the computer. 'Well, I guess high on emotions is not a figure of speech anymore,' I said, while glancing over Lamir grimly. She just nodded stiffly.

# LEGACY



## Maunica Kolla

'Hello, Shyam?' Mr. Khurana enquired over the phone.

'Yes, saabji? Baba is away. How can I help you?' replied Shyam Rog, son of butler Babu Rog.

'Come upstairs. Urgently.' Mr. Khurana hung up.

Shyam Rog walked out of the kitchen and reached the elevator to press two. This residence was like no other house in the small city of Guwahati. It was a crimson coloured five storied building with glass windows. The exterior of the building had carvings of flowers and leaf petals coated with silver paint. It was surrounded by lush green lawns and fountains. 'The house looked like a lotus in a green mossy pond.' It can't be a lotus.

The elevator stopped, he walked on the maroon velvet carpet that stretched across the hallway. Clutters of crystals in the shape of a rose were embedded into the chandeliers that were placed equidistantly. Mr. Khurana's ancestral photos hung on the wall like grapes in a vineyard. He paused at a painting of a man in a royal blue turban with a long face half covered with facial hair. This man's moustache was almost sticking out of the painting. Jet black eyebrows below which lay matching eyeballs that glimmered. He wore an olive green kurta draped with a baldric that held the sword. Shyam was awestruck by this photo and could not look away.

'Finally!' Mr. Khurana sprung up from the brown leather sofa.

'Yes, saabji?' Shyam replied.

'I heard that you act; how good an actor are you?'

'I am very passionate about acting. I have been auditioning and I-'

'Okay okay,' Mr. Khurana interrupted, 'I have a job for you to do.'

'Oh, what is it, saabji?' he replied,

with enthusiasm in his voice.

'I have a son.' Mr. Khurana tried to find the right words to describe the story. 'Veer Singh Khurana; he left us fifteen years ago.

Interestingly, he must be of your age now- thirty two. He was a rebellious child but was loved by his grandfather. Papaji is in his deathbed and has a last wish which must be fulfilled.'

Unable to connect the dots, Shyam asked, 'Saabji?'

'Look, you are an actor. You spend all your life pretending to be someone else.'

'I still do not know what you expect out of me,' Shyam said.

'You have to meet Papaji, as Veer,' Mr. Khurana said.

'Saabji, your father would find out right away. He would know his own blood.'

'No, no.' Mr. Khurana tried to convince Shyam. 'Papaji has weak eyesight and fifteen years ago his grandson's voice was of a young boy. He would not suspect at all.'

'But saabji, deceiving your father is a sin. Where is your son? If you don't mind telling me,' Shyam replied.

'That is not of your concern,' Mr. Khurana replied in a firm tone, 'you will be given a large sum of money for this job.'

Shyam's eyes lit up at the mention of money. His weekend job at Mr. Khurana's residence was not sufficient for his family to pay all the bills. A little more money would never hurt. He left the living room in a cobweb of confusion. On one hand the money dragged him like a magnet while on the other hand his conscience did not blend well with his decision. The idea of bluffing an old man did not go down well with him.

Shyam stood in front of the mirror in absolute disbelief. He had been given a set of clothes that looked very expensive. His shirt was made of twill fabric that complimented the gray coat which was softer than silk. Never had he felt so comfortable in any attire.

He was on the fifth floor and couldn't help but notice the security guards standing in the hallway in blue uniforms. The living room was filled with teak sofa sets and tables covered with pink embroidered cloth along with flower pots and newspapers kept on them. He filled his lungs with a deep breath and slowly exhaled, hoping it would calm his nerves. He walked to the ten feet long wooden door and held the handle. His hands were sweaty and left a damp imprint on it. He pushed the handle with all his strength trying to balance on his weak legs and entered the room.

'Babaji,' he cleared his throat.

The old man was draped in an off-white bed sheet. His saggy skin hung

The man with jet black eyes and moustache looked like he walked right out of the painting. He knew who it was right away.



sunken cheeks, hollow eyes and quivering lips made him look weak. Shyam watched the senile man struggle to sit upright on the bed. He saw him reach for the spectacles that were placed on the side table. Shyam quickly raced to him and offered some help. Shyam handed Babaji his spectacles. Babaji wore the spectacles and as his vision cleared, his lips curled into a beautiful smile. 'Veer? Is that you, beta?' he asked in a trembling voice.

Babaji's eyes brimmed with tears. The old man gathered all his strength and stretched his arms out to pull Shyam closer to him. Shyam felt Babaji's tears on his left shoulder. Shyam drifted into a sea of emotions as he watched the old man melt right in front of him. He saw Babaji's face criss-crossed with wrinkles and gray facial hair. Shyam remembered those jet black eyes from the painting which he saw beneath all those tears. The man with a sword draped in baldric with immense power broke down in front of him. He could not believe the fact that they were the same men.

'Did you forget your Babaji?'

'I never stopped thinking of you, Babaji. I missed you so much in Mumbai.'

'I heard your father has taken you out of the family will. That man has a heart of stone; he will never forgive or forget. But I know you, beta, you have learnt your lessons.'

'I regret everything.' Shyam remained discreet.

'I know you have a lot of debts, beta,' Babaji coughed, 'I am glad you approached me for help.' Shyam did not know what that meant, so he settled for a nod.

'Everyone deserves a second chance, so do you,' he looked away from Shyam and pointed to a white desk in the corner of the room, 'There is an envelope on that table, it has a bank account number which now only you have access to. I have left some money that would help you pay debts and start over again. You can start your business, marry the woman of your dreams and settle down. Please continue my legacy beta. That is all I

can wish for.'

'You said you knew I am in debt?' Shyam could not help but ask.

'Veer beta, you wrote that clearly in most of your letters. Over the years, that was the only communication channel we had.'

'Oh yeah, the letters! I have kept them all, Babaji,' Shyam hesitated but improvised anyway.

'Those letters from you kept me alive and strong. I read them over and over again- your adventures were great entertainment for me.'

Shyam managed to only smile back.

'You wrote in your letters that you would come in the evening, but I am glad you came early.'

Shyam clearly lost track of events and could not come up with any suitable reply.

'Why are you so quiet, beta? Do you want to have some lunch? I did not know you would show up this early, I could have arranged for some of your favourite dishes.'

'Babaji, it is alright. I am not hungry.'

'So, Veer, you wrote about your new work in your letters. Tell me about



the progress?'

'It is going fine. I think you should rest, Babaji and not stress so much. Also I cannot stay here for too long. Papa will not like my presence,' Shyam tried his best to dodge any further questions.

'It is very unfortunate that you have to leave. I am so glad you came and do not forget the envelope. Visit me more often, beta. I do not know how much time I have left.'

Shyam's voice choked up 'Ye-s, I will come regularly. Please allow me to leave now.'

Shyam left Babaji with the envelope in his hand. His emotions were tangled. He knew his conscience was correct which gave him pangs of guilt.

He noticed a man who walked out of the elevator. The stranger wore a burgundy suit. He was six feet tall and had a long face. Shyam could find a strong resemblance to the man in the painting. The man with jet black eyes and moustache looked like he walked right out of the painting. He knew who it was right away.

'Who are you?' Shyam asked the man.

'I am here to meet my Babaji ' he told Shyam

Shyam's thoughts were in turmoil. His grip on the envelope grew tighter. He imagined all the things he could do with that kind of money. He could fly off to another country with his father, they could open a restaurant and he could work on his acting career. He would have plenty of money to buy a house of his own. Like Babaji said, marry and settle. He had built a train of dreams already. He was not ready to let it go.

'Get out of here. No one wants to see your face!' Shyam exclaimed.

'Who the hell are you?' The stranger pushed Shyam. Shyam fell on the floor and hit the wall.

'How dare you?' Shyam pulled himself up and wiped the blood that dripped from his forehead. He could barely stand but he pushed himself just enough to get a grip on the stranger's collar.

On hearing the commotion, a couple of men in blue uniforms walked in. They noticed Shyam bleeding and

helped him out.

'Take this man away from here! He is here to trouble Babaji,' Shyam shouted.

'Nonsense! I am here to meet him!' the man screamed back.

'Guards!' Shyam exclaimed.

On hearing Shyam, the guards grabbed the stranger's hands.

'I want to meet my grandfather. I am Veer!' he shouted. The guards ignored his words. His voice disappeared into the blue as he was dragged out of the living room.

# STUMPED



## Saketh RVK

*Back foot moving back and across, with the body weight transferred onto it. High backlift, bat coming down from the top. Hitting the ball with the full face of the bat in front of the body and most importantly, the roll of the wrists. Crack. Sweet timing, and the ball races to the ropes. Leaning in with the front shoulder, bending the front knee, quick bat swing; keeping the head over the ball, back foot raised up to the toes, accelerate the bat and follow through. Slick shot, and the ball reaches the ropes again.*

'Exactly like Das sir had taught us,' I thought with a smile as I paused the video. This was Krishna's debut match in Indian colours three years ago. I remember sitting in the stands and screaming my lungs out at every ball he touched. A fantastic debut that was. Scoring a vital 56, taking a blinder at extra cover, effecting a run-out and declared Man of the Match: the stuff of childhood dreams. My entry into the international stage happened three years after that. Six months ago I was given my blue cap, number 256. No, this wasn't the movies. Forget announcing our entry together; Krishna wasn't even in the team that day. I played a typical Nikhil innings, buckled down and made 28. I then dropped a catch off the captain's bowling and the batsman went on to win the match for the opposition. It was not surprising. Nice guys finish second and I knew I wasn't going to be the next Sachin Tendulkar. Six matches later I still wasn't the celebrity my best friend was, but I had earned the dressing room's respect. Krishna meanwhile, was throwing it away. Mid-way through our second Ranji season, we were playing Himachal Pradesh at Dharamshala. The team to

play against Zimbabwe was to be announced and Krishna's name was doing the rounds. He'd had a stellar first season and had caught the eye of the selectors as a future prospect. This season he already had two hundreds and three fifties to his name.

'Do you realise no one from Andhra has made it big in the international scene? Sriram barely played 10 ODIs before being forgotten.'

'Krishna, there is always a first time. And the team hasn't been announced yet. You need to focus on today's innings. You are the last recognized batsman left.'

'I know, I know. Just saying.'

He couldn't keep it together that day and returned to the pavilion within an hour. At the end of the day's play, the news came in. My childhood friend had made the cut. The match all but forgotten, the team celebrated late into the night and the smile couldn't be wiped off our faces. This was the best day of his life and I was happier than I had ever been.

'I'm so happy, Nikhil. But I wish we were picked together. You remember how we used to fantasise about making our debuts together and leading the team to victory?'

'Of course I do. It's OK. At least one of us has made it. I will follow you soon, swashbuckler. Now it's time to sleep.'

'Ye dostiiii...'

'Shut up, Krishna.'

'Goodnight brother.'

Three matches into the series, Krishna made his debut. And what better place for it than the Eden Gardens, literally and metaphorically. The whole gang had flown in, and as he blazed his way to his half-century, Das sir remarked, 'This boy is a genius. I

always knew he had it in him to be great. He was my best student ever.' Guiltily I have to admit, I took that statement with a pinch of salt.

Krishna was indeed poetry that day, flawless and fearless. He had become a star over-night and the world sat up to take notice. I called him up late after dinner and he was more excited than ever.

'Hey, Mama! What's up?'

'Great innings, *ra*. You were spectacular. Das sir is pleased as punch. I'm guessing Aunty and Uncle are on top of the world!'

'Oh yeah, they are. First time in my life that your favourite Uncle complimented me without any criticism. Achievement unlocked!' he laughed loud. 'I could see everyone was there. Good thing this isn't a movie, or we would have been so poor that you would have had to watch me in the LG showroom near Diamond Park.' He was laughing louder.

'Krishna Srinivas, are you drunk?'

'No bro! I'm just high on happiness!'

He bends down and touches the ground in reverence. I hadn't seen him do that for a more than a year now. We bump fists as he passes me and mutters, 'Let's do this.'

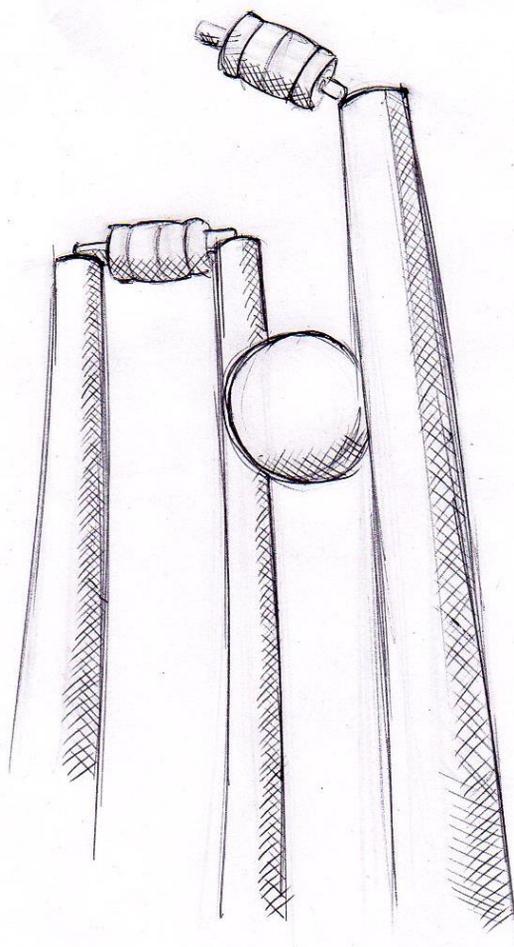


This is the best feeling in my life. I love you too! Goodnight.'

By the end of the series, Krishna was a national celebrity. He was labeled the 'Find of the Series' by the captain himself and the superlatives were pouring in. He carried this form into the next series. He scored his first and then his second international tons and the nation was going crazy over him. While we were still trying to let so much action sink in, Uncle was already worried. 'This success should not get to his head. Fame spoils kids faster than anything else,' he said.

A hectic schedule followed. Krishna traveled with the team to England, West Indies, South Africa and Australia. He was living the dream we had made during our Math classes at school. While everyone else struggled against the short ball he had no qualms about playing it. He would see it early get in position and get on top of it quickly. Timing it perfectly and finding the gap with precision, he was a bowler's nightmare. Krishna was also an expert in playing the on-drive. With perfect footwork, leaning over slightly, bringing down his bat quickly, he would flash it beyond the reach of mid-on to score four runs almost every time he played it. He was a natural stroke-maker and loved accumulating runs. But frequently, he would get out playing unnecessary shots. Even more frequently, I would catch him on the phone not very sober. On the last leg of the tour he dropped catches and seemed very slow on the field. Meanwhile, I was quietly collecting runs in the domestic circuit and moving up the ladder.

Two years after his debut Krishna had grown overweight and there were rumours that he had missed a few practice sessions. The coach apparently was very upset. He was given a break and he returned home. Four days later we were slated to play against Himachal again and I approached him, asking him to play. 'Picha light ra. There is no point playing this match. It is not even



Mumbai or Karnataka. There is no chance I will play this one,' he said tapping away on his latest phone.

'OK. How is life, Krishna?' I asked, awkwardly trying to make conversation.

'Smooth, my boy. As neat as it can get. Hot, isn't she?' he asked, showing me a face which somehow seemed familiar.

'Yeah, she is. Gotta go now, practice time.'

'Have fun bro, have fun. By the way, I can see you still sport the old school crew cut. Long curly hair is the thing, *dost*.'

I nodded and smiled as I left for practice.

About a month later, Krishna was in the news again. He had allegedly fought with 'The Prince' of the dressing room, the vice-captain of the team. And as Uncle said, 'Out of all the things, over a girl?' The two had

reportedly got into a fight after getting drunk in a nightclub. The board expressed its displeasure and promised to look into the incident. Things got worse when he abused a reporter on camera. He did it again with not one but a series of fans. Krishna's image was taking a beating. He was going through a lean patch and his reputation as a 'Spice Boy' was getting more and more prominent. His stubbornness about not discussing these matters was not helping matters in his home. Uncle and he were back to their cold war state.

With so much going on, I had silently made my way into the team; bench warmed for an entire series and made my debut as replacement for an injured player. Krishna was nursing a calf muscle injury and our filmy partnership never happened. A few moments though remained memorable. The spinners were



were troubling us a lot. I had spent some time in the middle and wasn't nervous anymore. Their best spinner came up to bowl. With a short run up he delivered a "wrong'un". He had underestimated me though. I read it, waited on the back-foot and with smooth hands played a late cut, just past first slip. The bowler was stunned at my audacity and the crowd went berserk. Another was when we were fielding. I was standing at mid-off and the batsman played a straight drive, well placed but badly timed. I gave chase and soon realized it was getting out of reach. Instinct took over. I launched myself on the air and took a full length dive, risking the possibility of getting injured. I reached the ball just in time to pull it back and stop the boundary. I had only saved one run but six of my team-mates came up to pat me on the back. I couldn't stop smiling for a full five minutes.

It was a quiet start, with none of the festivities that came with Krishna's entry. But it was a rough phase and we were in an awkward situation, so I had no complaints. By the time we were in the team together, I was three matches old. The dream was finally coming true. Yet, it was seemingly Krishna's last chance to redeem his career. It had been a year, and numerous matches since he had seemed in good touch. I didn't even remember the last time he had gone past 20. He was also the "bad boy" of Indian cricket.

He was picked for the first match. I was watching from the dressing room. He played a few good strokes and lashed at one wide outside off. Took a thick edge and flew to second slip. He was back in the pavilion about fifty runs earlier than the team needed him to score.

Understandably, Krishna was dropped from the playing eleven for the next match.

Ironically, I was his replacement. Even worse, I played perfect partner for the vice-captain's stroke-filled innings and saw the match through. The captain heaped praise on me at the post-match conference. After dinner that night, I ran into Krishna

right outside my room.

'You bastard! You seem hell bent on spoiling my career. Ever since you've come into the team you have been kissing the skip's ass haven't you!' He was reeking of alcohol. He looked fatter than I'd ever seen him before, while I had grown lean and fit.

'Krishna, there is nothing of that sort. You know I wouldn't do that. Especially to you.'

'Shut up! I know everything. Traitor! I thought you were my friend. And now when I need you the most, you have switched sides.'

Something clicked and I flew into a rage. I grabbed his collar, 'If that is what you think, fine! Go screw yourself. But remember, if there was one guy holding out his neck to back you, it was me. Not anymore,' I slammed the door on his face. I could hear him abusing me as I softly cried into my pillow.

We lost one and then won the other match to tie the series 2-2. I was in good form and was probably the first name on the team sheet. Tragedy struck on the morning of the final match. Our regular No.5 was injured and Krishna was the only replacement we had. The captain and the chief selector called him aside and told him, 'Krishna, this is a very important match for the team and for you. There is no way we are going to lose a series to Pakistan at home. And there are too many talented youngsters waiting to grab their chance. Do well, and you will be a hero. Fail us and that will probably be the end of your career.'

After the team meeting, Krishna came up to me and apologised half-heartedly. He seemed in good spirits during warm-up and looked good to go.

'Nikhil, it's time.' Sameer's voice interrupts my train of thought. It was indeed time.

We are set to bat first and I walk in after the fall of the first wicket. Two more wickets fall within the next five overs and we are in deep trouble. Krishna is the new batsman in. As we wait, he walks down the steps and pauses near the boundary. He bends

down and touches the ground in reverence. I hadn't seen him do that for a more than an year now. We bump fists as he passes me and mutters, 'Let's do this.' He is clearly nervous but survives the last ball of the over. I see through another.

The next over will be bowled by Saeed Kaneria, an off-spinner going through a purple patch. As Krishna and I meet midway between the pitch, I say, 'Be careful. He is getting some good bounce and turn.'

'Chill ra. I have played this guy too many times.'

Krishna leaves the first two balls of the over. Uncharacteristic, but the right thing to do. When I'm at the other end of the pitch, I see things in slow motion. Like I do now.

*Third ball. Flat delivery pitches outside off and moves in quick. Krishna leans forward, front knee bent, back foot raised up to the toes, brings down the bat quickly. No gap between bat and pad, closes the face. Perfect defensive shot. Another flat ball, outside off, does not turn at all. Tries a late cut, and misses the edge by a whisker. Bowler takes a lot of time. Glides in, loops the ball high. A tempting sight for anyone holding a bat. The batsman dances down the track but not to the pitch of the ball. Tries hitting it straight over the bowler's head. As the ball pitches, I can sense disaster. It doesn't turn, misses the bat and goes straight into the keeper's gloves. He whips the bails off in a flash. It's over.*

# A QUESTION A DAY



## S Anirudh Vishal Yadav

‘Go faster, Sharath! Or let me handle the wheels!’ I barked.

‘Calm down, Viraj. It’s just an auction and it is going to stay,’ Sharath replied.

If only he could understand my desperation.

I was assigned to take up a project in Hyderabad. I had come to this city after ten years. Sharath, my only remaining friend from my Hyderabad days was there to pick me up at the airport. It was when he said that the furniture of our school, St. Patrick’s, was being auctioned, that my freckles shot up.

At that moment I could feel all the flashes of memory rush back to me at once, as if everything had occurred just a moment ago. There was a sudden streamline of thoughts in my usually precarious mind. At that moment I felt I could erase the regret and despair of ten long years. I felt I could find the answer about the person who had brought immense happiness into my life, only to leave me a thousand times worse off, when I was separated from her. There is a possibility that I could find the table among the furniture. There is a possibility that I could know what the question was.

The year was 2004. I was in 9th standard. I was known as the shy guy of the class – never used to talk to girls, never made eye contact whenever any teacher talked to me, and my hands and legs used to tremble whenever I was made to answer a question in the class. Then came the person who would have a big impact on my metamorphosis. ‘Class, we have a new student amongst us. Sameera, please introduce yourself to your new friends,’ Pushpalata ma’am said.

‘Hello, guys! I’m Sameera. I’ve come

from Delhi. My father works in the Air Force, so we are forced to shift places on a constant basis. I hope I’ll have some good times with you guys here.’ Confidence was oozing from her. I was in awe of her right from that moment. Then she was told to sit next to me (Pushpalata ma’am knowing that I am a shy guy must have thought that her convivial nature would rub onto me).

She had curly tresses flowing down her shoulders and back. Her shiny black eyes seemed to have a voice of their own, intimidating me and luring me at the same time. When she smiled, the glow in them captivated me. I was caught staring at them when she looked at me, and I turned away.

‘Hey! I’m Sameera. I’m pleased to meet you.’

‘Umm... He-llo... I’m Viraj,’ I stuttered. After a few overwhelming and uncomfortable days, I came to understand that she was an ingenuously whimsical person. She loved to talk and I was as reticent as anyone can be. She couldn’t stand my silence for long, and thought about something which would get me engaged and help me open myself up. I felt that what happened on one of the following days was one such whim of hers.

‘Listen, Viraj! Let’s play a game. It’s called ‘a question a day’. Every morning one of us will scribble a question under the desk. The other person will read the question at the end of the day and write down a reply next to it. We’ll switch roles every day. REMEMBER! The other person is only allowed to read the question at the end of the day. It is against the rules to read it anytime in between,’ she said.

‘Alright!’ I replied.

We sat down on one of the chairs and I explained my situation on that day to her. I then realised that it was a desperate situation for her too! She too had been waiting for answers since 2004. And the search for the table was what united us again that day.

This game kick-started my transformation. I started to converse with her, something I believed was impossible till that point. I seamlessly became comfortable with her. And through this game, she too learned more about me. It was turning out to be a special bond. I could see her influence on me. My friends started teasing me, saying ‘the baby has grown into a boy’. It was heartening to hear Pushpalata ma’am say that I had become more confident and had begun participating in the class activities with vigour, at a parent teacher meeting.

The days passed by quickly and one day both of us received some unpleasant news. Sameera’s father had been posted to Itanagar. She had to leave in a month’s time. This was when I began to think about my feelings towards her. The sands of time had flowed down so quickly that we hadn’t realised how fond we had grown of each other. Call it teenage infatuation or innocence, give it whatever name you want, I thought I had developed a “crush” on her.



# LIGHTS IN THE SEA



## Saketh RVK

He smelt it before he saw it- the salty breeze bringing with it the occasional waft of dried fish. As he rounded the corner he couldn't help but gape at the vast blue expanse of water ahead. He cycled along the footpath and parked his bicycle near the 'Victory at Sea' memorial. The people of Vizag loved their beach road at night. They made each night look like a carnival. Under-dressed and over-dressed people of all ages thronged the road. If it was a Sunday, then taking a peaceful stroll along the footpath would be impossible. But today was Wednesday and there were relatively fewer people. Nikhil crossed the road and sat on the low wall separating the sand from the road. He looked across the sea at the tiny ships on the horizon, waiting to dock in the harbor. 'Does this represent life?' He thought. Happiness was like those ships- far away and tiny with the blue representing everything else. He looked around. That's when he registered the din. The noise of the cars, of people talking loudly and of hawkers advertising their wares. He saw his favourite Jal Muri aunty sitting a few meters away. But no, he wasn't going to greet her today. His mind raced back half an hour in time. He was at home and his parents were at it again. Fighting. Arguing. "Discussing", as they would put it, this time about him. The 17-year-old wanted to pursue engineering. But where would he go? He wasn't the brightest student. No college would admit him unless they shelled out a huge amount of money. 'I told you then to get him to write the entrance test for the private university here. But you wouldn't listen, would you? When has my opinion ever counted here,' his Mom shouted.

'No way! He would have written it and the good-for-nothing commercial buggers would have gladly accepted him. And like his sister he would have stayed home and learnt nothing of the world. I made a mistake once, I won't do it again.' His father was on edge, ready to burst. Nikhil's biggest fear, for as long as he could remember, was that the fights between his parents would get physical. So far they hadn't, for which he was thankful. Lately though, the shouting matches were getting more intense.

'Don't try to make excuses now,' his father continued. 'You couldn't stay home for two years and get this useless son of mine to study properly. He has no sense of responsibility, goes around with girls and useless friends. He calls himself a basketballer but has achieved nothing in the sport. What did you teach him? I should have been the wife instead!' The argument escalated quickly and pretty badly. Nikhil had to leave. A green balloon slowly floating past him brought him back to the present. He quickly caught it and looked around for the owner. A five-year-old was running towards him with her anxious father in tow. Nikhil forced a smile and handed the balloon back. He turned back to the sea. The froth and the waves crashing into the rocks had always fascinated him. Today it didn't seem so exciting. His thoughts returned to his parents' argument. 'Yeah! You should have been the wife,' his mother's voice sounded. 'I would have seen how well you would have brought up the kids. And also how calmly you would have accepted my coming home late.'

'I worked long hours and came home late so that I could support my family. I sacrificed so much happiness to

keep you happy. What would I have done by coming home early anyway, except have you cribbing over everything?'

'Cribbing? I challenge you to show me a more supportive and understanding wife than me. I even put aside my aspirations of working just because you didn't like it! That's it! I'm done here. After all the pain and sacrifices I do, you say I haven't supported you? I want a divorce!'

'Sure, you can have one. I'm not that excited about staying with you either!' That was it. When Nikhil's father said something, he meant it. His parents' marriage would soon be over.

It was as if he had fallen into the deepest trench of sorrow. Everything was unraveling at home and then the news that he hadn't made the district basketball team.

Behind him, the sun was setting and everyone near the water was walking back. Here especially, there were never too many people. The reason why he loved this place. Life, Nikhil

All the hours spent on the court, all the sweat was now in vain. The pain he had gone through, the classes he had missed was all for nothing. Basketball was his first love. The sound of the ball bouncing around, of the swish of the net, the roars from the crowd, the feel of the ball in his hand, gave him a high.



mused, wasn't rosy. It was extremely sad. He jumped off the wall and onto the sand. Took off his shoes and started walking towards the seemingly black water, feeling the grainy and sticky sand beneath his bare feet. He couldn't get into the basketball team; couldn't fulfill his dream.

He had now reached the water's edge. He could feel the water lapping against his feet, tickling him. The conversation with the selector rang in his ears. 'No, son, you can't be on the team. Not this time.'

'But sir, what is wrong? I'm quick, agile and my game sense is much better than most of the boys you've picked!'

'You are not good enough.'

'Good enough how? What more should I do? What else should I improve upon?'

The selector ran his eyes his slender, lanky frame. 'Umm... You should be taller. Great basketball players are much taller than you.'

All the hours spent on the court, all the sweat was now in vain. The pain he had gone through, the classes he had missed were all for nothing. Basketball was his first love. The sound of the ball bouncing around, of the swish of the net, the roars from the crowd, the feel of the ball in his hand gave him a high. The very first time he scored a buzzer beater and put his team into the finals of the inter-school tournament was the happiest moment of his life. Never had he felt so much emotion, so much joy. But now it was all over. He would no longer be eligible for the under-17 category and getting into the Under-20's team was almost impossible. His basketball career in effect, was over.

It was high tide. The water was already at his calves, drenching the jeans he had decided not to roll up. His family was splitting. All those nightmares about sharing his time between Mom and Dad, the awkwardness, the questions that would be asked were now coming true. And Rohan. His best friend for 5 years was leaving for Kolkata in a



week. Rohan had always been the ideal guy-good in academics-concerned, well-behaved, from a happy family, and most importantly, liked by everyone. Interestingly and ironically, Rohan was everything Nikhil wasn't. Yet, they got along quickly and were now the thickest of friends. He was clear about what he wanted and earned what he wanted. The only thing Nikhil was better at was basketball. Rohan would try as much as he could, yet not be as good as his friend in that sport. These things though, didn't ever affect their bond. Now Rohan was leaving. Life isn't a bed of roses. It is a bed of thorns with rose petals garnished in, thought Nikhil.

The waves were now reaching well above his knees and standing still required great effort.

If Rohan was here, he would have said, 'How ironic yet aptly poetic that after all the times spent and decisions made here the ultimate enlightenment was that the water be made the final home.' He couldn't

help smiling. The Hyderabad was one crazy guy. He could feel the salt in the air sting his nostrils. He had thought about this moment countless times- about this act, this decision. So many times he had stared at the Swiss knife in his hands, at the pavement from the 10th floor apartment. But never before had he felt as strongly as he was feeling now. He was still stuck in limbo between yes and no with the former dominating.

Out of nowhere, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He didn't have to look. The disgusting sound of munching peanuts was ringing in his ears.

'The water's cold, isn't it?' It was Rohan.

'It's dark. Very dark. Like sadness. And death.'

'Really? I was looking at your favourite sight though. The ships standing still with their yellow lights, subtly grabbing your attention away from the waves and making you want to reach them. Like happiness? Isn't that what you said to me six months



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ago?’

Nikhil turned to look at his closest friend. He seemed calm, unperturbed by how dangerously deep into the water they had waded.

‘Peanuts?’ Rohan offered.

‘The water is too cold. We should be going back.’

They backtracked to the edge of the water and let their feet be washed.

They stood there, arms on each other’s shoulders gazing across the sea, at the yellow lights on the horizon, bobbing ever so slightly, at the most beautiful sight ever.

‘I just realized, bro, this is why we come here. To let the lights drown the sea.’

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# IN-BETWEEN



## Kirthana S

I opened my eyes and saw a limitless stretch of blue sky above me. The sun beat down on the parched ground with searing heat. Erifort city was unusually quiet that day. There was no sign of any traffic bustling. I wondered how long I had been lying here. Surrounding me were shattered pieces of glass with dark red blots of blood over them. The blood patches got predominant towards a car that had crashed into a bakery shop around the corner of the street. The black SUV was an exact replica of my car, but only with its bonnet smashed terribly, doors dangling out, windows cracked and a strangely familiar Iron Man sticker at the back, just like the one my son had pasted on ours. That's when it struck me - it was my car which had crashed. I immediately checked myself for any wounds or injuries. But everything seemed fine. 'Phew, not a scratch,' I said, feeling relieved and surprised at the same time.

Amidst all the mayhem, I had completely forgotten the purpose of my visit to the bakery. It was my son's birthday. I knew that Luke would be really disappointed if I didn't show up with the cake, but it was better than not showing up at all. So I had hurried home.

As I briskly walked across the lane towards the 22nd street, like every other weekday, I noticed that everyone was in a rush. The speeding cars, the hurtling people, even the huge wooden clock at town square ticked faster that day. It appeared as if someone had hit a fast forward button. Just then, I saw a short, stout, darkly dressed man with a funny brown hat, approaching straight towards me. But before I could step aside or move, the guy simply walked right through my body.

'Hey, hey you!' I shouted. The man ignored me and walked on as if he didn't even hear it. I looked around to see if anyone had seen what had just happened, but no one seemed to bother, and then again, in that very moment, another man, tall and well built, in a light grey suit walked straight through me. I was completely dumbstruck; all kinds of crazy things started popping up in my head.

'Did that just happen? That guy just walked through me. What the heck is happening out here? Oh, Good Lord!! Now it makes sense- the car crash, the blood stains... Damn it!!! Am I dead?'

I arrived home panting, hoping that it was all just a stupid dream and it would end soon. The front door was left open. I hobbled in to meet my son, but there was no sign of Luke, Clair or anyone there. Just then I noticed that the lights were flickering. I waited for it to stop. But it didn't. The day was turning weirder by every second. But I tried my best to keep it all together.

'Clair, Honey? Are you upstairs? ... Luke?? Hello,' I said out loud. There was no reply. Where was everyone? The party could not be over so soon?

I looked around and found the birthday decorations all intact. There were blue balloons floating everywhere, glitter spread over the carpet, and the whole house was wrapped in a tangy, fruity smell. A huge chocolate cake lay on the table uncut, beside a tarnished knife. My darling wife might have ordered it at the very last moment to make sure Luke stayed happy that day. Clair always has everything under control. She has this crazy obsession with everything being perfect, whether it is deciding which schools the kids would

attend, which doctors they would visit or which restaurant they would eat in, and not just that, even the holidays were spot on- be it thanksgiving, Halloween or Christmas. It then struck me that Luke was just five years old. There were so many father-son fun stuff I had planned ahead of time- teaching him to ride a bike, building a tree house in the backyard, watching him play football and what not.

Tears trickled down my eyes. The thought that I would have to live without my family crushed me. A huge wave of reality finally hit me. I realised my entire life had turned into a dream that couldn't ever be fulfilled.

Brimming with confusion and stress I walked across the dark hallway towards the basin and splashed a handful of water into my face. I repeated this a few times but not a drop of it could be felt. The water simply poured through my fingers. I looked up into the mirror, trembling. Startled at the vision, I stepped back.

...in that very moment,  
another man, tall and well  
built, in a light grey suit  
walked straight through me. I  
was completely dumbstruck,  
all kinds of crazy things  
started popping up in my  
head.



I couldn't see my own reflection. All I could see was a dark shadowy figure staring back at me. This was insane. All the hope and courage which I was holding on to was gone just like that. It felt as if I would melt into the ground any moment now.

I stormed out of the place not knowing what to do and kept running blindly. On the way I randomly passed through a number of things- people, walls, gates and it didn't bother me anymore. All I wanted were answers. But the question was who would answer them.

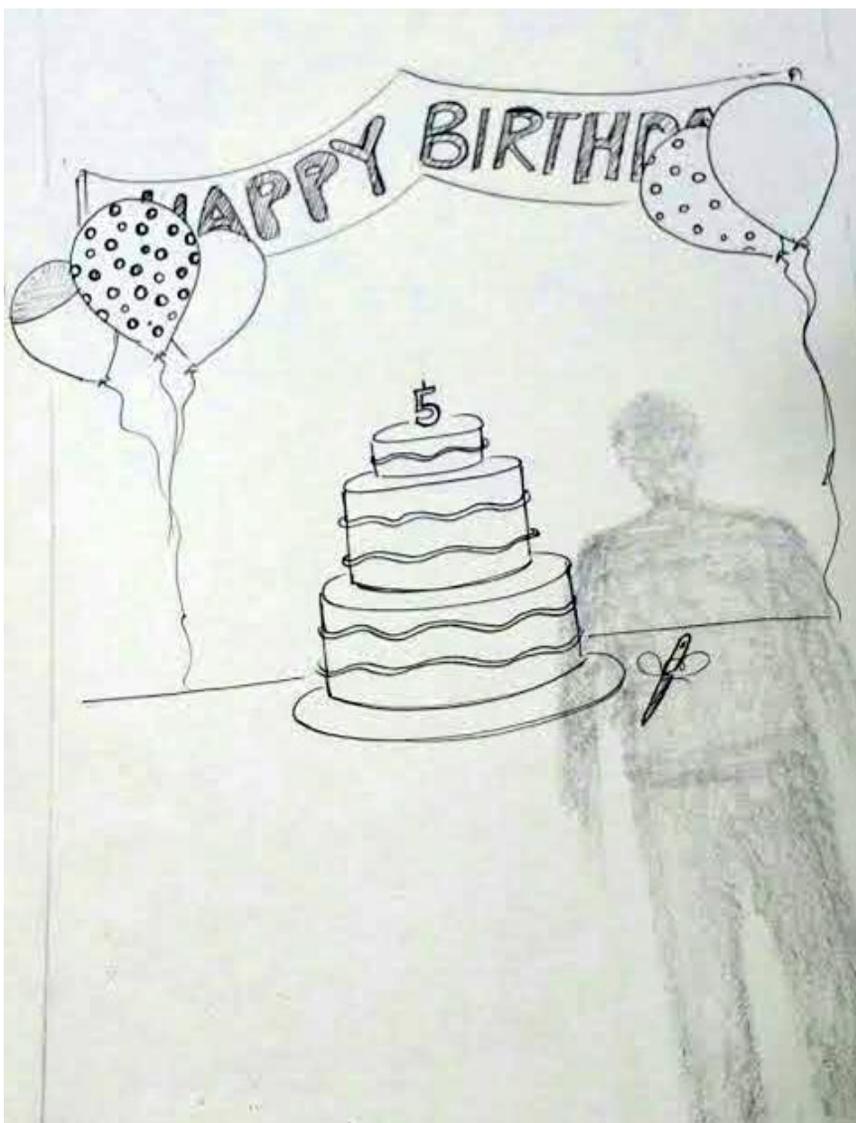
It was past midnight. I had lost all my sanity by then. With almost no hope left, I just kept wandering. The streets were quiet and empty. Across the lane I noticed that the lights displaying Café Sunrise were flickering continuously. This was pretty strange since the café usually closed by 10 pm. That's when I saw an old, grey-haired man in a crisp blue-and white shirt and an immaculate tie, flashing a wide smile at me. Wishing for certainty, I stared back at him for a while, and so did he. I was shocked because till then nobody could touch, see or hear me. With great expectations, I approached the man immediately.

Before I could say anything, the man spoke: 'Hello, Phil. Where do you keep disappearing to? It's hard to keep track of you. Come with me, there are things you need to know.'

'Oh, holy crap, how do you know my name? Are you God? Are you here to take me away? Am I dead? Can I please meet my family one last time!?'

'Calm down, young lad. I am John, just another spirit like you. It has been a long time since I have met someone of our kind though. You are not dead, but you have been detached from your body. If you find it before it dies you can regain your complete self and go back to living your life. But son, the time domain is comparatively slower in our realm than the human world. So hurry up before it's too late.'

'Why are you then still a spirit? Didn't you find your body?'



'My body is permanently unconscious- in an irreversible state of coma. This is my life now. I watch over my darling kids from this side. And I am thankful to this realm for it. But you still have a chance. Get going, young lad.'

I started running as fast as I could. The only hospital near the bakery was Princeton Memorial. I was certain that I would find my body there. The lights of the operation theatre were still on. I saw Clair sitting on a bench waiting impatiently, tightly holding on to Luke's little hand and praying every second.

With not much time in hand, I barged through the door. There I saw my pale, lifeless body lying open on the operation table surrounded by a bunch of white doctors with blood

dripping from their gloves. 'Charge to 300. Let's go, let's go. Clear.' I heard the doctor's stern voice. The room was in a state of crisis. The lifeless body jerked up at the surge of electricity, trying to revive its heart. This was the second call. The ECG showed a straight line depicting no sign of pulse. I wondered whether it was too late. Then I heard one of them say. 'That's it fellows. The last and final call. Let's pray we get a pulse this time. Charge to 500. Okay, set. Clear.' At that very instant I jumped on into my body. I felt a sudden tremor and gasped as the electricity ripped through me. I simply closed my eyes and pictured Clair, Luke and me together.

# THE BUBBLE



## Maunika Kolla

On a Thursday afternoon the sun blazed sharply and the sky wore the lightest shades of blue. As we drove, I gazed out of the window to see some tender coconut vendors with heads wrapped in wet towels. Their skin was oiled with sweat which shone due the sharp sun rays. Sri Lanka was the first place where I had seen coconuts in shades of tangerine. Like every day we stopped for a quick drink. The vendor smiled at us and uttered something in Sinhalese. My father flaunted his linguistic skills as he replied. His training in the Sinhalese language was handy in this country. The vendor held the sickle in the air and effortlessly chopped the top chunk of the coconut. He brushed off some whiskers and placed a straw in the hole. My father held his hand out of the window and passed the coconut. As I sipped, the sweet liquid lingered in my mouth, which forced my eyes shut. It was simply exotic.

While en route to our home, strings of trees passed on both sides of the road. The journey from school was a vast stretch of greenery. Lush green trees hovered from all directions. As we entered the city we would see the trees being replaced by buildings.

'Riya, how was your day?' my father asked, while he kept his eyes on the road.

'Fine, as usual.'

'It is almost the weekend, do you have any plans, Riya?' my mother asked, as she placed her hand over my shoulder.

'Oh yeah. Moe is hosting her sweet sixteen party this Saturday. We have to buy her a gift as well.'

'Moe? Moe Yamazaki? Oh that Japanese girl. That's great!' she continued, 'but you will finish all the homework first!'

'Maa!' I uttered, and frowned out of irritation.

'Don't worry, Geeta, she will do it,' father said in my defence. We passed through the streets which were monitored by the army. Men in green uniforms were scattered all over the place. There were red barricades in the middle of the road. We paused at several checkpoints; like always my father quickly prompted the army men to look at the 'Indian High Commission' sticker. The barricades drifted away and we smoothly moved forward.

This country was beset by a civil war. The Tamil minority had formed a rebel group namely the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). The war prevailed mostly in the northern parts of the country. The town Jaffna was affected adversely. So far, we were immune to the war. Everyone in the city including us lead a normal life. Colombo was well shielded and away from chaos. A protective layer floated about our heads at all time. It was like we lived inside a bubble.

We reached Welwetta, an area majorly occupied by Sri Lankan Tamils. My mother's face lightened up at the sight of the Ganesh temple.

'Riya, let dad park,' she said while she opened the car door, 'we will go to the temple.'

'Maa, why?' I whined.

She sprung from her seat to drag me out of the car. I sighed with submission to my mother's orders. We picked up all the necessary pooja items for the prayers and crossed the road, making our way to the footpath. On our way, two army men approached. They looked at my mother and whispered into each other's ears.

'Where are you going?' one of them

asked rudely.

'Temple,' I answered.

'What is in that bag? Show it to us!' the other one asked in raucous voice.

'Nothing, we came to buy.'

'Can't trust you Tamilians. Give that bag. There could be bombs.' He snatched the bag out of my mother's hand.

'Sir, we are not-' even before my mother could complete the sentence, their laughs roared in our ears.

'Oh, you Tamilians. Haha!'

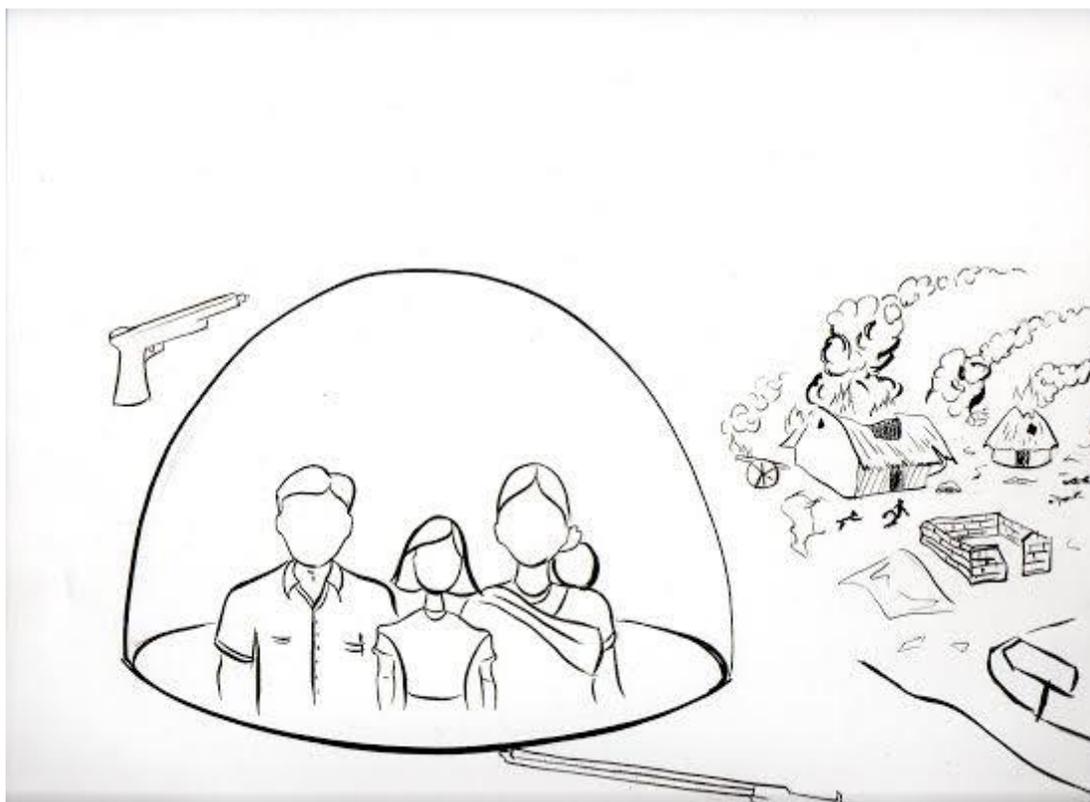
My mother pulled out her purse and showed them her ID-card.

'Indian... High... Commission...' One of them read the words out loud. Their laughs faded and faces turned red.

'Sorry, ma'am.' They handed over the bag and walked away silently.

My mother's skin complexion was swarthy. She wore the saree in the 'Tamilian' way with flowers in her hair. Any local Sri Lankan would remark her as a Sri Lankan Tamil. These men spoke harshly with all local Tamil residents. It was visible that the war had permeated the conscience of

I wondered what could happen next and grew anxious thinking of my parents. What if a blast took their lives? What if I never make it home? What if we all die?



people. The two communities loathed each other at every level. My mother and I felt humiliated, at the same time we understood the gravity of the situation. So neither of us ever spoke about this incident or shared it with Dad.

It was almost evening when we returned home. We saw Mary, our housemaid sitting at the staircase with tearful eyes.

'Mary? What happened?' My mother inquired.

'Ma'am..., ' she stuttered, 'D-I-S-A-S-T-E-R.'

'What kind of disaster?' My father asked.

'Oh baba! My house no more!' she spoke in her broken English, 'pieces! Small pieces!'

'How did that happen?' I asked with my raised eyebrow.

'Bomb! Big Blast!' her eyes widened, 'it went BOOOOM!'

'Your children? Husband?' my father asked in shaky voice.

'Safe! I was at work,' she sobbed, 'children at school, husband too work!'

'Thank god,' I said with relief.

My father quickly picked up the

television remote and pressed a button for the news channel. Our eyes were treated to gruesome images and video clips. There was smoke, fire and burning trees in the background. The firefighters pumped out water to burn out the fire. The buildings were smeared with black smoke and had broken windows; the streets were strewn with dead bodies, some shredded and broken body parts. Fragments of fabric and human flesh were littered everywhere. The paramedics worked with injured people and carried them into the ambulance. Some workers cleared the debris from the blast. The reporter learned about a woman who lost her entire family. A man, still in a state of shock described his narrow escape. Another woman cried to the reporter. She was unable to identify her husband out of the dead bodies lying around.

'This blast was in Kollupitya,' my father explained, 'just three kilometers away.'

'Dad, it was the LTTE?' I asked.

'Yes, the Sri Lankan army had fought hard in Jaffna last week,' my father recalled, 'they were successful in

destroying their tanks. Big loss for the LTTE.'

'Oh, revenge! Now they target the innocent people,' my mother added.

We offered Mary and her family to stay with us. She refused politely saying that they had already made some arrangements. We finally went to our beds. That night I swirled beneath the blanket out of discomfort. I was drenched in sweat even with the air conditioner on. My stomach churned and I felt my intestines tangle inside my body. Images from the blast, and Mary's tears reappeared in a loop.

After a difficult night, the next morning our school bus came to pick me up. As I entered, I saw two men dressed in grey uniform sitting next to the driver. I recognized them from one of those Indian Embassy parties. The High Commissioner was always accompanied by these men.

I noticed the bulge on the left side of their waist. It was from the guns they carried. This civil war spread like a disease and now it has finally reached the nucleus of the cell. People did all they could to stay safe inside this so called 'bubble'.

# THE ABDICATED FATHER



## Karan Rajan

'Aaaaarrrrggghhhh!' yelled Kavya. She was seated in the back of the car. Although, the car's manufacturers had taken sufficient care to provide a backseat that could somehow accommodate three persons, Sushma Aunty had bluntly refused to let the third person— Kavya's mother, in. So when Kavya suddenly confronted labour pains, all we had were the Sharmas. Mr. Sharma, an elderly man, well past his retirement age, was controlling the wheel, and was finding it extremely difficult to meet the demands of the two shouting women— one in labour, and the other in pain upon observing her husband's inefficient efforts to steer the car at a speed that matched the intensity of the situation.

'Make it quick, Sharmaji!' bawled Sushma Aunty.

The needle in the speedometer was stuck at 40.

'Uffho! I could have asked Kavya to run to the hospital instead of asking this man to drive the car for us,' murmured Sushma Aunty, loud enough to make everybody sitting in the car familiar with her thoughts.

'Don't worry, Jai Beta, everything is going to be alright,' Mr. Sharma said to me, ignoring his wife's disparagement.

Unable to get any words out of my mouth, I stretched my lips in reply.

'Aarrgh' cried, Kavya.

'Don't worry, Kavya, we are nearly there,' whispered Sushma Aunty, and scowled at Mr. Sharma.

'Sharmaji, I don't think you care about Kavya that much,' declared Sushma Aunty.

Sharmaji kept his focus on the road. He spoke not even once. This made Sushma

Aunty even more furious.

'You talk to this man, and he doesn't

even reply. I think I was out of my mind when I decided to marry him.' Sushma Aunty spent the next 10 minutes alternating between comforting Kavya and berating Mr. Sharma. The fruits of Sushma Aunty's striving were now evident, as the speedometer matched Sharmaji's age. I wondered for a moment how hard Sharmaji's life would be at home, but quickly steered my attention towards Kavya. She kept her eyes closed, but kept murmuring periodic 'aaahs' and 'ooohs.' She looked beautiful, even though she was masquerading as a human elephant.

'Can't you drive properly, Sharmaji?' shouted Sushma Aunty. The car had encountered a pot-hole, which gave me a few anxious seconds and Sushma Aunty a reason to scream some more at Sharmaji.

Sharmaji surprisingly got us to the hospital within the covenant time. I rushed to open Kavya's door. The efforts I had to put to get her out of the car were, to say the least, enormous. We were told by Sharmaji that Genesis Nursing Home was one of the best hospitals in Delhi, but the outward appearance of the hospital stated otherwise. The hospital was established in 1985, and although only five years old, looked as if the building had stood there for a century. The floors looked as if they were not mopped from the past ten years; the dustbins were overflowing with garbage. The walls looked as if they had never been painted. The lackadaisical employees of the hospital did very little to rectify the situation.

Sushma Aunty and I held one of Kavya's hands and advanced at a pace that would make even the most anaemic tortoise seem swift. Sharmaji

lagged about two three steps behind us, maybe to avoid the embarrassment from Sushma Aunty's scolding at a public place. A frail looking nurse observed us at a distance and was ready with a wheelchair.

'Sir, let madam sit in chair,' said the fragile nurse.

I quickly placed Kavya in the wheelchair.

'You do the paper work, I'll take madam,' said the nurse.

The nurse had to push the chair forward, and with Kavya mounted on the wheelchair, it was for her a tricky situation. The combined weight of Kavya and the wheelchair, refused to co-operate with the nurse. To a certain extent, I felt guilty for the mutilation of Kavya's body.

As if a mortal enemy, my fingers refused to stay close to the pen; it had become impossible to make a firm grip of the pen. Sharmaji, sensing my inability to hold my

Her eyes were shut and she kept murmuring periodic 'Aaaah's and Ooooh's.' She looked beautiful, even though she was masquerading as a human elephant.



composure, as well as the pen, involuntarily seized the pen from me. 'Don't worry, I'll handle it,' said Sharmaji, and promptly started scribbling on the form fretfully. Sharmaji had known us long enough to answer the questions of the form. Although Sharmaji had no reason to be anxious, he looked just as nervous as me.

'Mr. Jaaaaaaaaaiiii!!!!' screamed Aisha, Kavya's sister, from behind me. I wondered why she had so elongated a relatively short word.

'Hi Aisha,' I said. Trying to the very best of my acting abilities I tried to hide my disgust for her.

'Boy or a girl? What do you think?' she asked.

'Hijra,' I answered, in a deliberate attempt to stop all the future questions.

'Sir, madam is in room number 9.' The nurse, along with a ward boy, had managed the Herculean task of getting Kavya to room number 9.

I rushed to the stated room. Kavya lay on a bed that was not sumptuous, but looked reasonably comfortable. The pink bed sheet matched the walls. Beside the bed stood a rickety chair, on whose face Sushma auntie's buttocks were parked. The room's window looked at the parking lot, every square inch of which was occupied. The attached lavatory presented an instant opportunity to unload my bladder, if not the emotional strain. The doctor, after the initial check-up had conveyed that the delivery was due within an hour or two. The needle of the clock moved at a leisurely pace and simply refused to rotate speedily. Time, that day, appeared to be at a stand-still. Having nothing to do for the moment, I came out of the room.

'Worried, Jai?' asked Aisha.

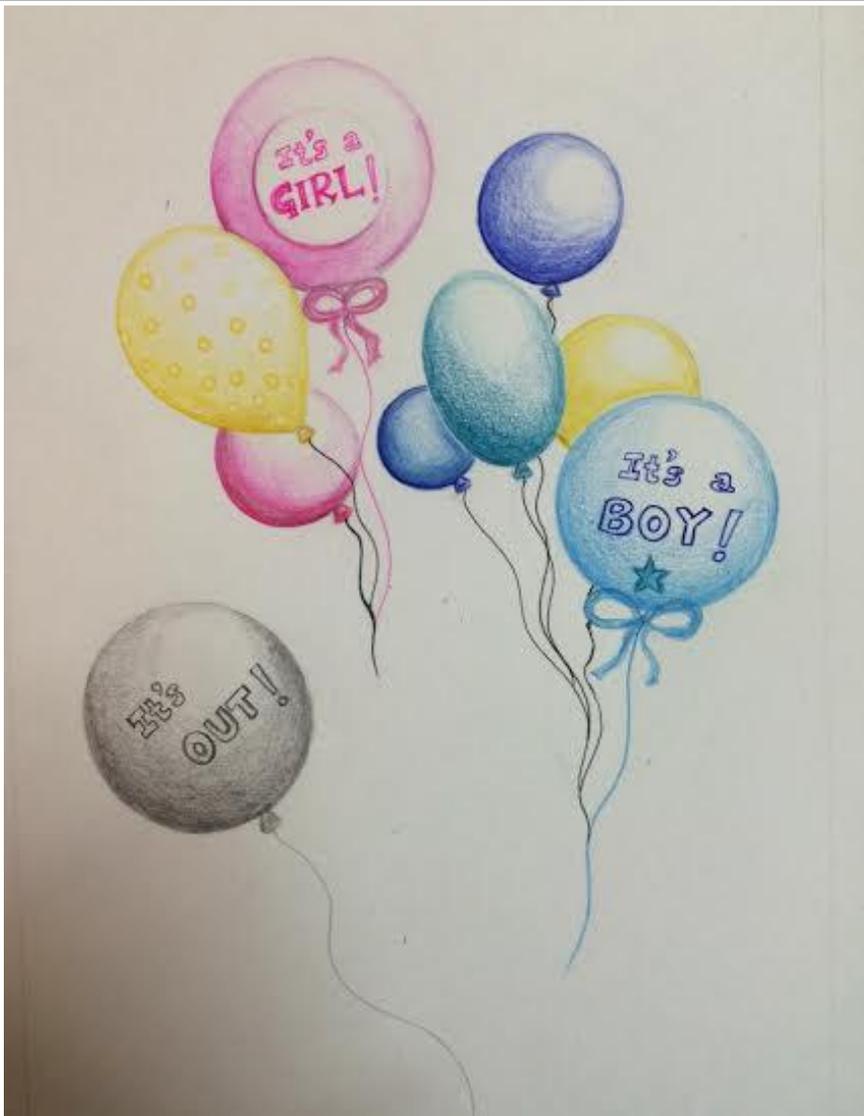
'No, just the obvious tautness,' I replied.

'You haven't eaten anything since the morning. Help yourself to some refreshments.'

Aisha pointed towards a sack which was inflated with food items.

I shook my head: food certainly did not make it to my priority list.

I reverted back to the room after my



saunter. Room number 9 was now occupied by two elderly women, each seated as sentinels guarding both flanks of Kavya's body.

I grinned at Kavya's mother— my vocal cord still on strike.

She was too absorbed in her daughter to make note of my greetings.

'Would you like something to drink?' asked Sushma Aunty to the lady sitting on the opposite side of the bed, on observing the drought and subsequent cracks on Kavya's mother's lips.

She looked once towards her left, then to her right, as a reply to Sushma Aunty's offerings.

Kavya, with her swollen body, looked strikingly similar to her mother. I think her good looks might have come from her dead father. Anyways, watching her mother crammed my brain with memories of my own

mother. She had always loathed my association with Kavya. My parents had warned me that they would disown me as a son if I married Kavya. They had kept their word till date.

'Puusshh!' The doctor applied more energy in saying push, than Kavya had applied to get the baby out. Three quarters of an hour had passed, and the situation had gotten worse. All that I had witnessed was synchronous screaming of a couple of women.

I was told that "pushing" was as difficult as propelling a football out of the nostril, and my vision at the moment didn't betray what I had been told.

'Operation is inevitable,' the dejected doctor conveyed.

'Do whatever you can,' was my spontaneous response.

The bulb above the operation theatre radiated dull red rays for six hours.



'It's out' said the same nurse after the operation- the news failing to excite her.

'I am a Dad,' I whispered to myself, three times. Then I reiterated the same statement ten times out loud, simultaneously sprinting back and forth the entire length of the corridor. I thought of somersaulting, but the granite floorings and my ill maintained body put my aspirations to an abrupt end.

My eyes for the first time in my adult life had become wet. I had become completely numb. Emotions repudiated to distinguish themselves. My stomach bore a palpable heaviness. The usual rhythmic

contraction and expansion of my heart, inside which now resided the newborn, was multiplied to a scale of ten.

'Go have a look,' someone said. Drawn to my own thoughts I failed to recognize who it was.

The door was partially opened and I peeped through the door. Sushma Aunty's corpulent figure blocked the view of anything that was present inside the room. As my patience vanished, I plunged inside the room.

Kavya's mother and Sushma Aunty kept staring their feet. Nobody had any expression on their face. I could see the contours of Kavya's tears on her cheeks. Nobody said anything.

Nobody moved an inch. There was just dead silence.

'What???' I asked, but nobody cared to reply.

Kavya lay on the bed, and besides her, the crying baby.

I grasped the baby between my palms and held it at a height, which scared everybody.

I don't know why I held the baby at precisely that height, as if fate wanted to reveal something, and then the following words involuntarily came out of my mouth.

'WHAT THE FUCK?! A EUNACH?'

# DETECTIVE MAUSS



Saumya Bhatt

He was ready to leave. I ran to the roof to watch him go. My bare feet hit the wooden stairs just like the drumsticks hit the drums. My steps kept disappearing one after the other as the moonlight from the windows alongside couldn't make its way all the way to the top. Now, I could see the broad green pastures lit up with those orange-yellow lights along the streets and in the street right in front of me I saw a car with a man inside, wearing a white coat. I smiled as the car went out of sight. I turned back and stretched my arms as wide as I could. I felt like dancing on the roof's edge. So, I climbed up! But wait, I am not supposed to do this! . This makes me awfully sick! I want to throw myself off the roof! Then the sudden emanating of borborygms from my stomach dispersed my thoughts. I tiptoed my way down..... nobody should hear me. "Let your stomach decide when to eat, your mind just tests you at times!" these words echoed in my ears. I paused and then could not remember when he had said this. Were they even for me? My stomach rumbled again and the taste of what I had thrown up few hours back still remained in my mouth.

It is time to go down and get some grub for this rumbling creature. I reached the end of the staircase and saw the mirror which was hanging at the closet door. I saw my golden gown covered with abstract patterns of red everywhere-some dark and some light. I was delighted for a moment and then to enhance the feeling, my eyes caught the sight of the staircase which had a trail of red following me. It never announces its arrival. I cannot lick my finger, put it up and say- "Madness is in the air!" It doesn't go away even if you beg, cry

or bleed to please it. It just strips you off everything and anything. Brave women fight till the end, don't they? Just like the brave men who have to go away, leaving their families, leaving everything like nothing ever existed. I was fighting too, in here. In this known yet unknown place which was now eating me up and where very inch has a glimpse of him. The darkness here had a light of its own, sometimes just letting me go and sometimes ensnaring me in its pathetic blows.

It is Sunday tomorrow and I had promised Sophie to return her book. I better look for it and Mr. Jones, Sophie's neighbour has invited me over dinner, I shall look for a pretty dress before Ted comes back and stops me from my preparation and puts me to rest. Oh! I cannot wait for tomorrow! I love it when the sun kisses my skin. The birds sing and kids play in the park. I find honking the best and want to tell the honkers, "Wait till I get a car!" Well! I got to work hard for it, do extra time in the office, and bear nasty Beth. She is mean. I don't like her. I don't like the other people in the office too. They stare at me as if I am some animal! What if the doctor comes and sees me every day? I think they are just jealous of me, jealous of my rich husband who pays the doctor extra to come and see me every day. How does it matter to them, we don't live together, so what? He still loves me!

I cannot stop my tears . What am I doing? Again? These useless drops of water! It's been long eating and drinking salt! What happened to the sweetness we shared? Where did it go? Where did he go? "huh huh huh" To the times he lied about me

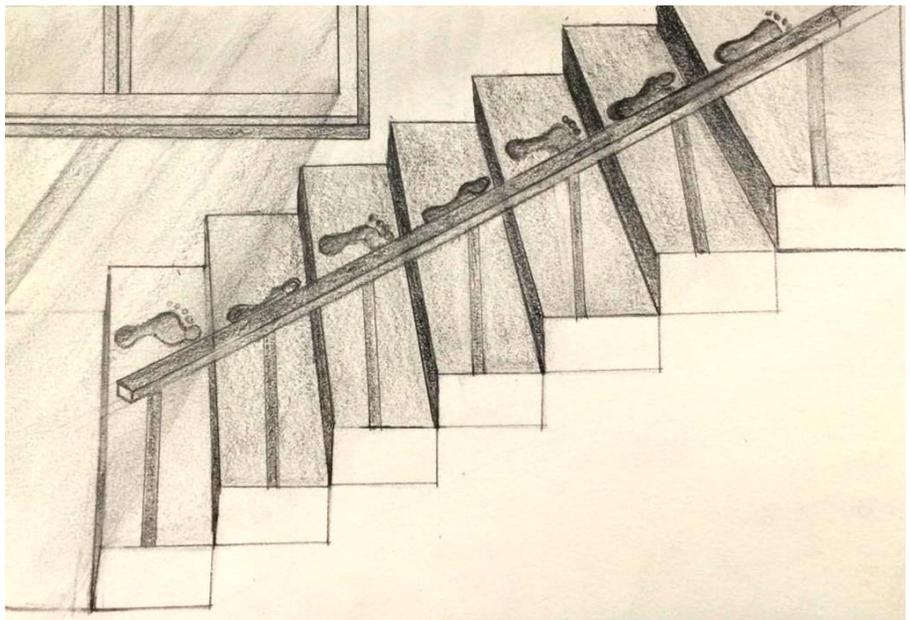
breaking things in the house... I am not stupid! I know what I do..! I have reasons for all which he will never believe or rather say I should understand him. But what about the time when he called me up after three long months and I picked up the phone with my hands shivering, not knowing what to say, with long streams of hot tears flowing down to my cheeks and then to my tightened throat, burning it. He said, "Honey, I am good!" I kept mum, and the words dissolved like sugar in my mouth and this solution tasted bitter and this bitterness still stays. "I love you" was all what I wanted to say. I sat next to the phone for the rest of the day but it had decided not to ring again for another two months and this time he was coming home.... after eight months! It was our first marriage anniversary! I knew that he would be there, standing right in front of me tomorrow and I'll kiss away all the distance! The night was long...long enough for me to sleep several times...wake up many times

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and smile a million times. Half of the next day, I spent standing at the window, telling myself to wait a bit longer and smile a bit broader. The phone rang again but this time my heart sank low...I could sense something not so right in it. I picked it up, it was his voice, he said, "Marcella, I am halfway through but I need to report in an emergency fall-in right now, I am very sorry, will come back as soon as I can.....say something Marcella.....Marcella!" Now was it wrong for me to throw the phone out of the window and go crazy? Was it wrong for me to then end up in the hospital, NO! It wasn't and when I asked him why he did that, he said, "There is no to reason why, there is but to do and die." This was the spirit of the army but then why does he had quit his job? Is it because I found out about Beth and him? Or did he hate me so much for separating them that he doesn't even want to see me anymore. His occasional visits did not do any good....and then I stopped expecting him and whenever I broke something or maybe it was not me who broke it he sent me to the doctor and gradually the doctor replaced him! It was the doctor who used to pay more visits.....and he still does...everyday!

I walked towards the basin to wash the vegetables. I could not bear the rumbling anymore. The water in the sink became red.....long red rivers in the broken desert! My hand...sliced so mercilessly..! Bam! The door to the roof banged! What was that? Someone has got into the house! OMG! I can't let this happen....save me...I have to save myself....save myself...save! He must be in the roof....NO! I left the roof door open! There is a bang on the door again! I rushed up the stairs....blood drained foot-steps....broken glass and a knife...a sharp one! Now who leaves that behind for a detective? It's time for me to get in the form now! Detective Marcella! 15 years of experience....what this little rat will do to you and your house! Gear up...gotta get this one alone! Hah! Wait up you little rat! I'm gonna get



you...how dare you get into my house!! How dare you!! He made my work easy....so close to what I was here for! I got the blood stained knife and went to the roof. Just a few stars above the head and beneath were all darkness trying to engulf me again. I ceased all movement but the blood was still dripping! I waited for a signal but there was none. I planned to go downstairs again with the knife still in my hands. I took careful steps trying to keep the air stagnant. It was all part of the training I had received! Then there was a loud thud on the front door breaking the silence. The muscles of my foot jammed, my whole body jammed... I could not push myself forward but with the increasing intensity of the thud my courage increased! Oh! Now you got the front door haa....Lemme getcha there! You can't go away like that! Agent Marcella gonna get you! No one can get into my house like this! It's my house! My house! No more of Freddy's!

Wait up....you can't get away like that! What if he has a shot gun or a bigger knife....you gotta be careful agent Marcella Mauss! I open the door and find nobody there...I look around and suddenly a man jumps in front of me and hugs me. I panic and stab the man in his neck while he stills

hugs me. The man falls down still holding my hand and as he falls I look at his army outfit, his badge in which was inscribed OFFICER FREDDY MAUSS!

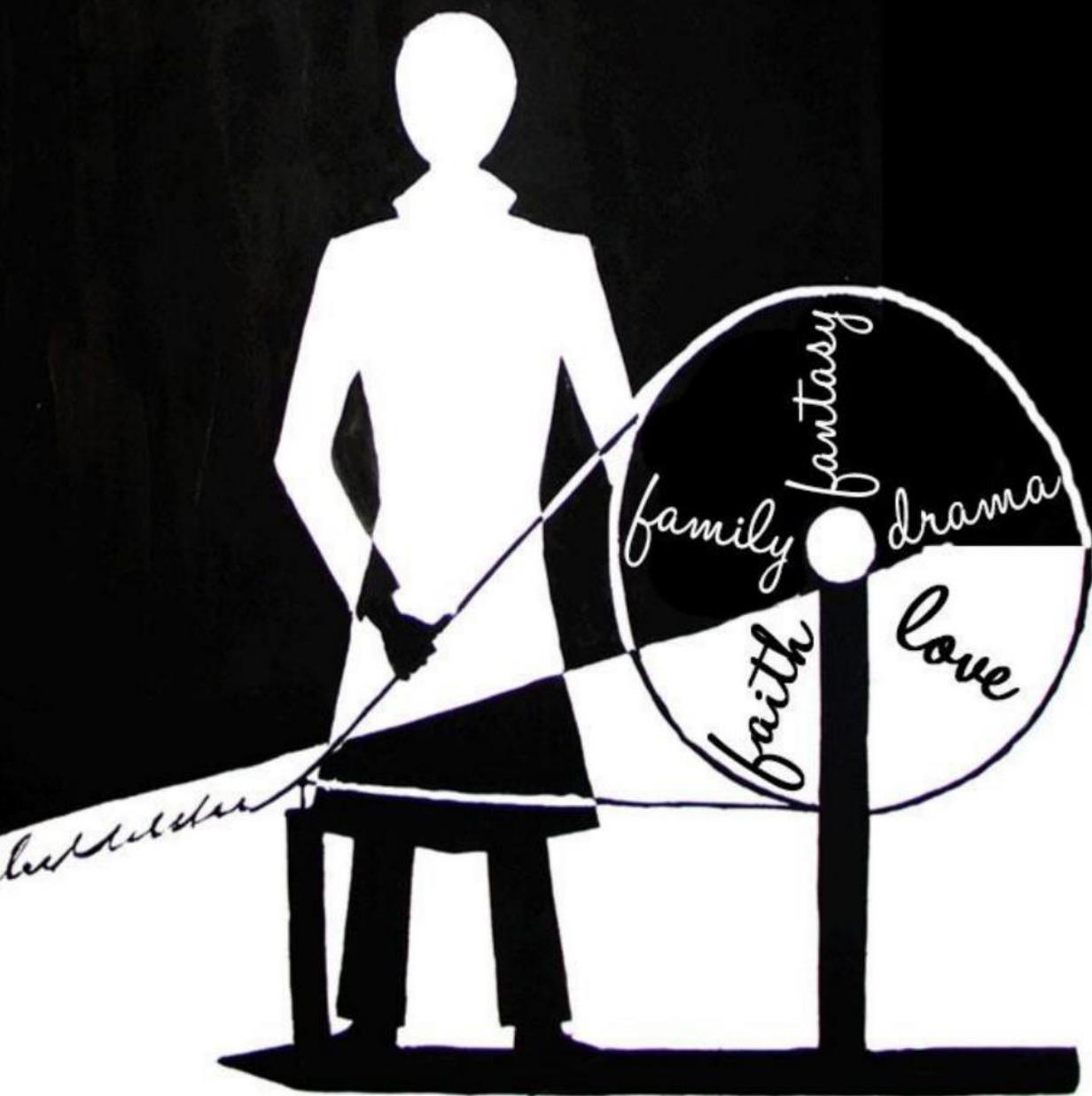


THE

# FREEWHEELER

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SNU's Literary Annual

**THE**

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INAUGURAL  
ISSUE**

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All our words are but  
crumbs that fall down  
from the feast of the  
mind.

- Khalil Gibran