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THE FREEWHEELER



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It is strange to be writing this message when the coronavirus pandemic is looming all over the world. What is the role of literature in times such as these where the prevailing circumstances make people acutely aware of their mortality? I have been pondering that for the last few days. Literature is a source of comfort at any time, but more so in times such as these where our hearts and minds long to turn away from the morbid and the frightening. Literature gives us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in worlds full of intrigue and adventure where even the most unlikely David can slay the most powerful Goliath. It bestows belief and hope when we need it most by awakening the hero within us through stories of courage and endurance. And it allows us to dig deep into the mysteries of life at a time where every day concerns seem trivial as larger issues of life and death take precedence.

The Freewheeler fulfills the purpose of creating literature on the SNU campus. In the process it allows students to flex their creative muscle while giving the entire SNU community the experience of reading good creative writing written by some its members. Every year we have gone from strength to strength and this year's issue continues that tradition in terms of its excellence. Each incarnation of The Freewheeler is the result of the collaborative efforts of a number of

Faculty Advisor's Message



Prof Vikram Kapur
P.G Advisor

students. However, I would like to make special mention of this issue's editors, Oorja Mishra, Rishi Kohli and Sagar Arora, whose hard work makes this incarnation of The Freewheeler possible.

Over the years The Freewheeler has grown into a respected publication. None of that would have been possible without the support of several people. My colleagues at the Department of English, who have been behind this endeavour from the start, and the Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr Ajay Dandekar, without whose unstinting support this magazine would not have been possible.

I thank you all.

From the Editor's Desk



Oorja Mishra
Editor-in-Chief

Releasing the FreeWheeler 2019-20 under such unprecedented circumstances has been an absolute rollercoaster. Until March 2020, we were planning on an April print launch. By April 2020 we had decided to move the launch to August 2020. Considering how Mr Corona has decided to become that very unwelcome guest that refuses to leave over our house, we decided to have an issue entirely in the digital format.

From editing the literary pieces, to being a contributory artist and to taking an online course to be able to design the issue, this entire journey has been an absolute pleasure. With multiple deadline shifts, numerous frantic emails and more than one panic attack, we present to you this year's literary magazine. This issue contains stories of love, loss and hope,

all of which Mr Corona is actively making us feel everyday. A gripping travelogue to satisfy your adventurous spirit while you're comfortably settled on your sofa, a gut-wrenching story of friendship that'll make you call your best friend, a struggle with all the abstract concepts that dominate our life that will make you call your therapist (ha-ha), a look at surviving university that makes you miss your life at SNU, a mind bending memoir that allows you to introspect your own choices, a thrilling short story with a Star Trek reference, a story about a difficult decision that has far reaching political consequences, an account of loss and remembrance that makes you want to hug your family, a memoir that allows insight into the human condition and gives you the courage to finally pursue that dream you put on the back burner and a story of recovery and finding oneself that will leave you curled up with a box of tissues. I hope that reading this brings you as much joy as putting it together brought us.

I would like to give a huge shout out to the entire team, my co-editors Sagar and Rishi, our proofreaders Sanyukta and Soujanya, all the authors who contributed their beautiful pieces and my best friend Roopkatha who very kindly agreed to contribute her art for our cover page, and also helped this beginner in design put together the issue. A huge thank you to Prof Vikram Kaopur, our faculty advisor for his immense patience and valuable guidance. And all you readers, without whom none of this would be possible.

Here's wishing Mr Corona leaves us soon!

Words can together shape a world that can be experienced in the harmony of the mind. As an editor of this edition of the Freewheeler, I want you, the reader to understand the power you hold while exploring these short stories. As a writer myself, I believe that a set of words intentionally expressed exist only as stars in the void of space, unless they are noticed by someone in search of constellations. Someone who seeks to deploy meaning to the creation.

As a student of literature, I undergo various investigations only to find the arbitrary nature of things. Only to end up in an existential dilemma that helps no one, not even my grades. Therefore, you are important, you are the part of the chain that carries meaning to this world and you, yourself. Outside the existential, lies the essence, that we offer you to explore and identify.

In times of the COVID-19 crisis, your literary voyage becomes even more important. Stay home, and explore the world through your vision of these stories. I am grateful to the whole team that put together the 2020 edition of the Freewheeler, especially to Professor Vikram Kapur who has always inspired us to go beyond the static field of theory and experience literature at its heart.

From the Editor's Desk



Sagar Arora
Co-Editor

From the Editor's Desk



Rishi Kohli
Co-Editor

If anything in these strange times-Thanks! COVID 19- I can assure you that though you can't go out much, you won't be bored. Don't worry. Don't shake hands. But read.

We have in store for you some fun literature containing adventure, heartfelt moments, mysticism, cynicism, introspection, therapy and creepy in this edition of the Free Wheeler. I hope in these works there will be something for everyone's taste buds.

I would like to thank all the contributors, without your creative spark we won't have this edition. And to Dr Vikram Kapoor under whose guidance this creative project was possible.

Now, sit on a comfortable chair, silent your phone, forget about your assignments, critical theories (wink), the virus, and enjoy reading.

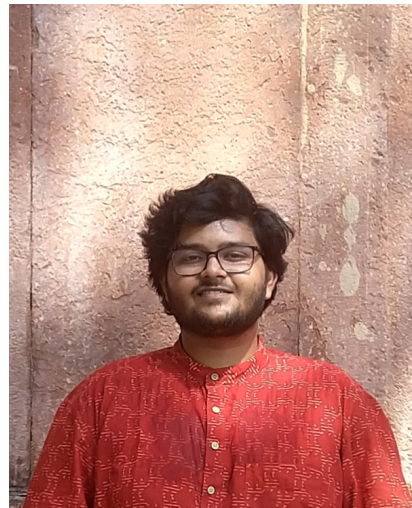
MEET THE AUTHORS



Hala Fatma Siddiqui

Department | MA English

A professional hoarder, a failed watercolour artist with a passion for reading period romances.



Dhruv Prakash

Department | B. Technology

And then the interviewer goes, "watching large amounts of movies and anime without having to move from a spot isn't a relevant job skill????"



Mehul Bhardwaj

Department | BA Economics

A reluctant economist and aspiring writer, he looks for stories in strangers. Known for devouring all genres of fiction, it is strictly advised not to leave him unsupervised in a bookstore.



Oorja Mishra

Department | MA English

Just trying to live up to my name even though I'm always exhausted. Thanks, mom.



Rishi Kohli

Department | MA English

AWOL! The writer is inspired by Stephen King, Kafka and Poe. His close friends say he is investigating a secret alien base inside SNU.



Sagar Arora

Department | MA English

You can find me seeking birds and stories by water bodies and mountains. Bring along some food, please.



Sanyukta Shiv Kumar

Department | BA English

Nuh-uh. You're not reading a few lines about me and thinking you have me figured out. If you want to know me, come find me. Tea?

A Fish Out of Water



by Dhruv Prakash

Kaira reached into her rucksack and pulled out a jacket because the two she had on weren't nearly enough protection from the cold. She dusted off the snow from her shoulders before putting it on, but her eyes didn't waver from the cave in front of her.

She'd been travelling with two Sherpas and a couple of donkeys to carry her luggage, but she'd asked them to turn back when they reached the foot of the Kangchenjunga.

There was a snow leopard in these mountains and she was here to photograph it. It's called the 'ghost cat' because it never lets itself be seen, and a group of three would be too large and clunky in remaining hidden from it. And this was the one sighting she'd always been waiting for; there was no way she'd jeopardize it like that.

She unloaded her rucksack, and she bid her guides farewell.

It had been a week since she'd been wandering the mountain alone. Climbing in the fresh snow with equipment as heavy as herself, pitching a small flat tent at night so it doesn't fly off into the storm, she wandered in the mountains in search of the snow leopard.

She'd come across its trail two days ago and been in pursuit ever since. And now she sat wedged between some rocks with her lens trained on this cave, about a hundred metres in front of her. She still hadn't seen it, but she was sure that the snow leopard was inside it.

Her watch told her that it was nearly six in the evening. That meant she'd been

“The snow felt like tiny daggers falling from the sky, digging into her face, and she had to wipe off the ice from her lashes every once in a while.”

sitting here for eight hours now. And all this while she couldn't move much, so her joints were beginning to ache and she was going numb all over and her eyelids were weighed down by anvils, but she worked through it for the photograph.

It was a cloudy day and the winds were fierce. The snow felt like tiny daggers falling from the sky, digging into her face, and she had to wipe off the ice from her lashes every once in a while.

It would start getting dark soon and this snow leopard was really taking a long time to show up. If it didn't come out soon, then Kaira would have to move closer, and she wasn't particularly thrilled about that. Just then, in her lens, she saw some movement. Silently, she put her eye to the viewfinder.

Yes! She could definitely see something move. This was it! It was moving towards the mouth of the cave and soon it'd be showered in the diffused evening sunlight.

The silhouette came into her lens' view and it was a giant flying koi.

What?

Kaira couldn't believe what she was seeing. The koi was over four feet long, white scales with patches of orange, yellow, and black, its tentacle-moustaches were half its length and flowed next to it as it swam through the air, a foot off the ground.

The koi swam out of the cave but stayed close to it. It swayed from side to side, and it started bouncing in the snow on its belly, almost as if it was playing. Kaira was paralyzed. The koi shrugged off the snow that had piled upon its head and swam back into the cave swiftly.

Kaira was still paralyzed as she realized that she hadn't clicked a single picture. Her brow was knit and she was at a loss for thoughts.

She didn't know what to make of the koi. She stood up and as she did, relief ran through her joints. She thought about what had just happened and what possibly she could do now. Only one answer came to her.

She detached the lens extension she had on her camera and slung it around her neck. Still sceptical about her choice, she began trudging through the snow towards the cave.

She hid behind some rocks before the cave and picked up a rock. She threw it into the cave and heard it rattle on the floor. No sound came and nothing came flying out of the cave. She guessed that it was safe enough.

Against her gut instinct which had fallen like an anchor into the snow, she walked to the mouth of the cave and peeked inside. Nothing. It was

too dark to see too far into the cave. Alright then, she thought. Let's do this. She dragged her feet forward, kicking small rocks out of the way. Soon it was pitch-black, and the only light was from the mouth of the cave behind her. Only a little distance into the cave, it turned to the right and became pitch-black. Kaira turned around to look at the mouth for just one second and took the first step in the darkness without looking. In that step, her foot didn't touch the ground and she fell into a hole into the ground. Well, it wasn't exactly a hole, more like an extremely steep cavelet. She would've screamed, but she fell at an awkward angle and each impact with the ground knocked the wind out of her. Grunting and thudding, she fell down this cavelet, getting jabbed by rocks all over, until she rolled out of the mouth of the cavelet and finally landed in something soft.

"Uuuunnnggghhgh-ah-ah-ah--" Kaira let out a long groan as she lay there unmoving. Now that she wasn't falling anymore, dread started seeping in. She was high in the mountains where nobody ever ventures and she'd just fallen down a random hole in a random cave. This is it! she thought. Fuck fuck fuck fuck, is this how I die? No no no no, not like this, not like this! She panicked. She was in incredible pain and she was just beginning to register where her limbs had landed. Alright, nothing felt broken. She wiggled her fingers and toes. She sighed in relief as the dread dissipated. You're alright, you're okay, just breathe. We'll find a

way back in a minute.

Kaira realized that it was snow that she'd landed in. She lay there for a couple of seconds, waiting for the pain to lessen. She just started naming the stars she could see above her. Sirius, Bellatrix – Wait, what? Stars? She thought. What was the time? She jerked her watch to her face and saw that it had stopped working. Maybe it broke during the fall. And had that cavelet thrown her out into the open? She jolted up and scanned her surroundings. She couldn't tell where she was.

She looked back at the mouth of the cave and crawled to it, and her hands sank in the snow as she put pressure on her hands each time. It was pretty narrow, but she knew it would fit in it. Focus Kaira, she told herself. Click the koi. Thinking of which, she reached for her camera and saw that there was a huge crack in the body of the camera, but the lens was alright. She pushed the power button, and unbelievably, it actually switched on. She pumped her fist in victory and started getting out of the snow.

She slipped and slid out of it away from the cavelet and shrugged the snow off from her hair and clothes, and kicked it out of her shoes. And as she did, she started noticing something weird. She'd just assumed that it was pretty dark down here, but was this snow actually blue?

She reached down, picked some snow in her hand, and watched it sift through her fingers. It was definitely blue.

She looked around and then at the sky. The sky was far deeper than it was just twenty minutes back, but the clouds had cleared away and the air was still. The ground sloped up for about twenty feet and then just ended. As far as she could see on either side, there was only an untouched sheet of the indigo snow. Kaira walked to this edge to see what was on the other side and her mouth fell open.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach and she could feel the chills spread across her skin. Awestruck, she stared for so long without blinking that her eyes started tearing up, and she had to blink the wetness away. After the edge, the ground sloped gently down to a large, circular valley draped in the indigo snow, and a ring of pine trees surrounded a water body in the centre. It was as if a thousand-foot glass of water was kept there, the glass magically vanished, and the water refused to fall. This anti-gravity pond was alive with movement; hundreds of fish swimming around inside it, breaking out of the surfaces, splashing back in. As she stood in awe, a smile spread across her face and she started laughing in amazement.

The anchor in Kaira's gut was being pulled straight towards the water, as if something was tugging at it, a silent voice echoing and beckoning her forward.

She had to get closer.

She was running through the snow before she knew it, trudging through

the snow that was one foot deep, making the only trail in the otherwise untouched blanket of snow.

Looking up, she saw a blue whale break the surface on one side of the cylindrical pond and splashback in.

“Whoooo!” cheered Kaira as she picked up the pace. As she approached the woods, they began looming over her. Soon, she reached the ring of woods and stood at its edge and caught her breath.

Keep going, she thought. You’re almost there.

Still panting, Kaira walked into the woods. A little way in, she saw something move to her right. She tried to get a look at what it was.

The Koi!

It was keeping its distance. Kaira took cover behind a tree and hesitated for a moment, but she looked at the koi properly. It floated closer and was looking at her as if waiting for her. The voice that had pulled her here, assured her that the koi was a friend. It was kind of like a hunch, and on that hunch, she came out from behind the tree and walked towards the koi.

“Hi,” she said. What now? Standing in the clear now she realized she hadn’t thought things through. The koi was hovering in place, looking at her patiently.

“I was just going to the water over there. This place is really beautiful.”

The koi flapped its fins gently and swam through the air towards her. When it reached her, it was at waist level with Kaira, and started gliding in a circle around her.

“I was outside that cave there, with the white snow? I saw you there.” Kaira turned her neck around to keep up with the spiralling koi.

“If I was in here though, I wouldn’t go out there at all, I mean”, she gestured all around her and laughed weakly.

The koi started bouncing in the snow again, as it did outside, playfully.

Kaira laughed and heard it echo in the trees. “I like snow too”.

Suddenly, the koi swivelled around and slapped a wave of snow at her with its tailfin. Kaira was in shock from the cold for a second but then broke down laughing. She reached down and balled some of the snow in her hands and threw it at the koi, but it just flapped its fins and moved out of the way. In another quick flourish of movement, Kaira was buried in a blue wave again. She spat some snow out and her laughter filled the woods.

Kaira felt like she was six, playing in the snow with a friend. She giggled and hooted in glee as she ducked and ran and jumped around in the snow to dodge the koi’s snow-waves, and after several misses, one snowball finally made a connection with the koi’s top fin.

“Ha! You think you’re safe just because you can fly?” Kaira gloated at that bare touch. The koi turned around swiftly and slapped some snow at her. And started moving away.

“You sneaky little,” chuckled Kaira and collected the snow from her shoulders and threw the half ball at the koi. Their game went on, and the koi was leading her around by the nose



Photograph by Sagar Arora

through the forest now. After getting hit a few more times, and getting in a couple more snowballs herself, Kaira started getting winded and she took cover behind a tree.

The koi was on the other side of it. Kaira silently gathered a snowball, and tip-toed around the tree. Halfway around the bark, she saw that where their game had led her.

The naked tower of water stood scraping the sky. The top of the tower looked like it was breaking off and scattering in chunks. The snow around it was laid out in rings, like sand on a beach. She could see the hundreds of fish swimming around inside it, and she could hear the silent churning of the water. She could see little spheres and

droplets of water floating around the tower, and each of them had a soft glow to them, like old lanterns. For a while, Kaira just watched. Then she started to go through the minefield of floating droplets. She touched a large droplet and saw it break into several little ones and float away as if they were in space. It was all so still, yet everything was always slowly flowing, and Kaira was entranced as she walked towards the tower of water.

Even the surface was flowing, Kaira noticed as she put her hand against it. She could feel the water. When she put her hand against it, it felt like it was flowing through her like electricity or something. She couldn't

quite tell what it was, but it was something she'd never felt before. She wasn't sure what this sensation was, and yet she could feel it with a clarity she'd felt for a few other things in life.

She didn't think about it, she just held her breath and stepped into the tower of water.

The water didn't hurt her eyes and she could see clear as day. She could feel the weight of the water and it fell heavy against her ears. She was surprised that it wasn't cold. Not at all. It was actually warm and she could feel the heat seep into her skin. She looked ahead at the multitude of fish that were witnessing her for the first time. They didn't pay her too much attention, like regular strangers on a crowded street. She took a few steps forward but looked up and stopped. It was unimaginably daunting, looking up through so much water and her primal instincts were afraid she was drowning, but she knew she wasn't.

Right in the middle of her hesitation, the koi broke through the surface and rammed into her full-speed from behind. She went toppling through the water, screaming out bubbles. Afraid that she would choke, she cupped her mouth. Slowly, she realized that she wasn't choking or gasping for breath. She definitely wasn't breathing, but oddly, she didn't feel the need to.

Pretty neat, she thought to herself. She looked around the schools of giant fish and saw them swim lazily in circles at their chosen heights. The larger fish were all higher up in the

tower.

Come on, are you seriously just gonna stand here? she said to herself.

With her heart pounding in her throat, she pushed off the ground and lurched forward far faster than she'd anticipated. With the sheer rush from the acceleration and the sensation of the water rushing past her, Kaira howled and hooted in exhilaration, although instead of sound, only bubbles came. She pulled her hands in front of her and pulled them back in a breast-stroke and she felt something amazing. It was as if each of her limbs was much longer and more powerful. Her arms felt like albatross wings, and her legs like squid tentacles. She pulled her arms ahead again and spun upwards as she pushed the water down. She squinted as she sped through the water and it flattened her hair against her head. The koi was right next to her, spiralling around her upward trajectory.

The koi nudged Kaira off her upward spin and swam away. Kaira saw it jumping around looking at her, and a new game of tag ensued between the two.

They swam past schools of fish the size of cars and between dolphins who were in games of their own and between the behemoth manta rays flying one above the other and around the wide back of great blue whales. This whole place, this whole time was so unreal. Kaira was literally flying around in the water and she had a flying koi for a friend. This was the best day of her life and it was a

light year ahead of the second-best day.

She looked up and a thought struck her. For a moment she abandoned her game of tag and swam to the centre of the tower. She looked up again and flapped her arms as hard as she could. She went soaring upwards, and she flapped again and again and again until she finally broke through the upper jagged surface of the water. She floated higher than the water for and then just stopped mid-air, suspended above it all.

Above her, the sky was freckled with stars and flecks of green and blue. She could see the trees far below her and the sheet of indigo snow covering the valley beyond them, and she could see the land slope upwards on all sides to edge which she'd have to cross on her way back.

Just now for the first time, it occurred to her that she couldn't stay here. The thought of leaving this place pained her. Floating there, the voice from before resounded at the back of her mind and Kaira was unexpectedly consumed with the feeling that she would never see this place again.

Her weight started returning to her and she fell slowly, but the koi broke the surface and glided under her before she got too heavy.

"Thanks," said Kaira, hugging the koi's back. Now that she weighed again, she realized that she was all soaked. Her jackets, her hair, her camera, everything.

"Can we go back to the snow, please?" Kaira asked. The koi flapped its fins

and turned to one side, and they glided down to the snow across in a gentle spiral. They were descending quite slowly, and Kaira wrapped her arms and legs around the koi best she could and looked down. The snow, the trees, the tower of water and all the fish. She was still in awe of this place, and she tried to drink as much of it as she could in the little time she knew she had left. As they got further from the tower of water, the water from her clothes and hair started to get pulled off of her, as if each drop was tied to the tower by strings. She held her camera up and shook it, and saw a huge stream of water flow out from the crack from earlier.

Eventually, it all got sucked out of her clothes and hair till she was completely dry again, and she felt the cold stab at her skin again. She slung the camera around her neck and hugged the koi tighter as their descent came to an end. She got off of the koi and jumped into the snow. The koi just hovered there, as if waiting for her to say something.

"I can't stay here too long can I?" she asked the koi, kicking snow around.

The koi didn't move. What was she expecting?

"I know, I know." The same voice in her head that was telling her that she would never see this place again was telling her that it was time to go. This voice wasn't harsh or hateful. More like a parent putting a child to sleep. She'd never heard it before and she could tell that it was the voice of this place, and who was she to argue

with that.

"Guess I won't be seeing you anytime soon," Kaira said and plopped into the snow and buried her head in her knees. The koi remained hovering in its place. Kaira raised an elbow and peeked, and pulled a snowball from under her knees and caught the koi in the face with it.

"Ha! Gotcha!", rejoiced Kaira and started laughing and rolling in the snow. The koi splashed her with snow, and she got buried in it.

"Alright alright! You win!", laughed Kaira as she shielded herself from the next wave of snow.

"Can you take me back? I'm new here you know."

The koi swam around and parked itself in front of her. She got up and dusted the snow out of her jackets and her. She climbed onto the koi again.

"Alright, let's go."

The koi flapped its fins and they were on their way, up the gentle slope to the ridge. Just before reaching it, Kaira looked back one last time with a sad smile. They were approaching the wall where the hole in the rocks was. She couldn't see it yet, but the koi was speeding towards the rock-face. She gasped and closed her eyes and buried her face in the koi's back. She felt the space around her narrow and she knew they were in the tunnel. Then the koi stopped rising suddenly and she knew they were back near the mouth of the cave. Before she looked up, they'd already flown into the open and the snow was falling

sharp again, sideways. She lifted her head and the koi spiralled to a stop near the mouth of the cave. Kaira got off and pulled her jackets closer. She looked at the koi. "I'm gonna miss you," said Kaira.

The koi just hovered for a second, then swam around Kaira in a close circle and slowly went back towards the cave. Before it was swallowed by the cave, it bounced twice in the snow, leaving some large belly prints. Kaira pulled her camera up and wondered if the water got sucked out of the camera completely. She hit the power button, and unbelievably, it turned on. She put the viewfinder to her eye and got a semi-wide frame of the mouth of the cave, with the snow and rocks around it. Belly prints included. Through her tears she focused the camera best she could and clicked the only photo she would end up taking on the entire trip.

The Hearty Boys

MEHUL BHARDWAJ



“From putting superglue on the back of dusters to filling the teachers’ purses with powdered chalk, they were known for all.”

Every day after the last period bell rang in school, Zameer Ahmed and Hriday Kumar would race to the school gate. The loser would buy the other his favourite flavour of ice-lolly. This way they were the first ones out of the gate and didn’t have to stand in the endless line of kids, each waiting to get relief from prickly heat. It was ice-lolly in the summer and warm popcorn in the winters.

The boys would then turn left and walk along the boundary of Delhi Public School to reach the loaders lane. It was the boys’ term for the road which housed the wealthiest lot in

town. As soon as the school was out of sight, Zameer would take out his ancient radio, which would not switch on before some hearty smacks. “It’s not used to the heat. It used to work fine back in Srinagar,” Zameer would explain. With songs from Salman Khan’s latest flick playing in the background, the boys would imagine the lives of the people who owned the lavish houses and devise schemes to get rich quickly and legally. Marrying daughters of wealthy businessmen was the most feasible plan that they had come up.

The end of loaders lane would lead them to the Bazaar, which was a web

of small alleys housing a plethora of shops. In the bazaar, the boys would stop at Jain Electronics if cricket was on. The store owner was an amiable fellow who allowed the boys to watch if they kept quiet. Initially, the boys used to stop only when cricket was on. One day, however, they were pleasantly surprised to find Jain uncle's daughter, who was tall and had brown hair that matched her eyes. Wearing uniforms streaked with the day's dirt, the boys had barely left an impression on the girl. Nevertheless, they had made sure to greet Jain uncle every day on their way back home since then.

Apart from the fact that both the boys' parents had decided to name their child 'heart' in their own languages, the boys had little in common. Hriday Kumar was a thirteen-year-old short and stout boy with curly hair who was yet to be touched by puberty. While Zameer was a tall, lanky fourteen-year-old boy with sharp features and the beginnings of a beard. Hriday's father owned a small bakery whereas Zameer's father was a clerk, who had moved from Kashmir along with his family four years ago. After loitering in the bazaar Zameer and Hriday would then proceed to the small iron bridge over the sewer, which led to the Mandi. They could avoid the stench and take the other route but Zameer liked to go over the bridge. "There are lots of bridges

back home," he would say before breaking off into stories about his hometown. The end of the Mandi led them to Kailashdham apartments which were home to Hriday while Zameer lived four blocks away.

Their names coupled with their antics in school had earned them the title of 'hearty boys'. From putting superglue on the back of dusters to filling the teachers' purses with powdered chalk, they were known for all. They were punished, but their good grades saved them from facing the worst of it. Their most frequent victim was the political science teacher, Sandesh Arora. Inspired by her name, the boys had once filled her drawer up to the brim with the Bengali sweet Sandesh. Another time, they had convinced the whole class to sing for their teacher. No sooner had Sandesh Arora entered the class that the children began singing, "chitti aati hai sandeshe laati hai, ki ghar kab aaoogayy."

"The families of soldiers are waiting for the official death count as several soldiers have been critically injured. The attack is being touted as the biggest act of terrorism against the army. Meanwhile, forensic reports and eyewitnesses' accounts reveal a shocking truth. The suicide bomber was an Indian citizen of Kashmir."



Photograph by Sagar Arora

Zameer and Hriday had gone to Jain uncle's shop on their way home in hope to catch the last few overs of India's innings but were greeted by the reporter on the news. The reporter went on to state more facts about the attack before the commercials began. Jain uncle diverted his gaze from the television and eyed the boys. His eyes narrowed as they moved from Hriday to Zameer.

"How can I help you?" he asked the boys in a tone that suggested the opposite. The boys took the hint and showed themselves out of the shop.

"What's gotten into him today yaar? We weren't even ogling his daughter," said Hriday

Zameer responded with silence as they saw a bike heading towards them. The rider applied brakes at the last minute and sneered at the boys.

"Get out of my way losers."

"You came right at us Prashant," Hriday

retorted.

Prashant was their classmate and one of the loaders lane brats. He blared his horn and accelerated away from the boys. Hriday and Zameer then headed towards the Mandi, where the bustle of the marketplace seemed louder than usual. The disputes over space were replaced with discussions over the terrorist assault.

"They crashed their car in the soldiers' convoy and the suicide bomber was inside."

"Why are our faujis silent. Kab tak chup rahenge hum!"

"The death toll is up to 39 now."

"How do these haramis even get inside and do this?"

"You're talking about getting inside? Hum hee aatankwadi paal rahe hai. It's all over the news."

The boys usually passed through the marketplace without attracting any attention but eyes followed them

today as they scurried through the commotion. The densely packed grey buildings of Kailashdham apartments loomed before them.. A group of five women, each of whom held a bulging bag of vegetables, were having a conversation just outside the apartments. Hriday let out an exasperated sigh as he recognised his mother in the group and cursed his luck. He was hoping to slip in before his mother returned from shopping.

"Hriday! You should have been home an hour ago. What have you been up to now?" Hriday's mother was a plump woman who shared his frizzy hair. She didn't like him spending too much time at the bazaar.

"Our maths teacher wouldn't let us go. We have a test tomorrow and he needed to complete the syllabus."

Zameer was already on his way off when Hriday called out

"See you tomorrow Zameer"

Zameer turned around to wave at his friend and saw that the women had stopped talking. Hriday's mother was smiling through pursed lips while the other woman stared at him. Zameer quickly spun around and started walking again. The women had started talking again in hushed whispers. Zameer was able to catch some of the words before he went out of reach.

"moved from Kashmir"

"...only Hriday's classmate..."

"ask your son to stay away...."

Hriday was in a sour mood the next day because the maths teacher had set a difficult paper and they had to endure two periods of political science in a row. He was sitting at the last bench while Zameer was in the opposite corner. Sandesh Ma'am always made sure they sat away from each other. Hriday looked at his watch and groaned. There was still a lot of time before school ended. He decided that the only way time would move faster was if he listened to the lecture.

"...secularity is the state of being separate from religion, or of not being exclusively allied with or against any religion..."

Hriday felt a tap on his shoulder and looked sideways to see Prashant beckoning him over. Hriday leaned closer towards him to see what he wanted.

"Do you want to know the truth about your friend?" whispered Prashant

"What do you mean?"

"He's from Kashmir, right? And how does he describe it? The jewelled crown of India? Paradise on Earth?" Prashant chuckled. "I think you deserve to know the truth, you're his best friend after all," he continued

"I don't understand a word of what you're saying."

"Here take my phone and go to the washroom. Turn the volume up and watch this video," he said pointing Hriday knew that Prashant was up to no good but he was tired of the lecture anyway. He pocketed the phone

and got up to ask permission. The washroom was empty as Hriday took out the phone to play the video. The first few seconds of the video were blurry as the cameraman appeared to be in a crowd. The video suddenly went black and then cleared again as the cameraman started recording from a vantage point. A huge crowd was gathered around a makeshift stage at the base of a hill and the people were continuously chanting words which Hriday was unable to make out. The chanting grew louder as a man appeared on the stage. He had donned a bulletproof vest on his torso with camouflage pants beneath. He had shiny long hair that reached his neck and an assault rifle was strapped to his shoulder. Hriday's eyes widened as he recognised the man whose photo was all over the news. The chanting grew louder and Hriday could make out some words. "Lashkar walo aage Badho hum tumhare Saath Hain!"

"Meri Jaan meri Jaan, PAKISTAN PAKISTAN!"

The man with the long hair came forward on the stage and began chanting himself. He then took out his gun and fired a few rounds in the air as the crowd grew wilder. The crowd was composed mainly of lanky Kurta clad teenagers who shared an uncanny resemblance with Hriday's best friend. The video ended with the man jumping in the crowd, who held their hero and carried him on their shoulders. Hriday pocketed

the phone and went to the class. He returned Prashant's phone without a word and waited for the class to end.

Hriday got up slowly as the last period bell rang. He saw that Zameer was already on his feet, his long legs helping him make longer strides. Hriday was craving an ice-lolly but he was in no rush to reach the ice cream vendor. By the time he reached the gate, there was already a horde of kids surrounding the vendor. He noticed Zameer standing near the vendor, his eyes scanning the crowd. Instead of pushing his way through, Hriday skirted around the throng and turned right to take the other route home. He began to wonder how long Zameer would wait for him but quickly pushed the thought out of his mind. The next day he entered the class to find that Zameer had saved a seat for him by his side. Zameer raised his hand to greet him but he avoided eye contact and sat at the back of the class with Prashant. The last period bell finally rang and Hriday saw Zameer bolt towards the gate. He waited for a few minutes before getting up, then headed towards the gate at a leisurely pace. He saw Zameer waiting for him but was successful in evading him again.

Hriday had been avoiding Zameer for two weeks and felt terrible for it. He knew it was foolish but he felt

angry at his friend. The past week, however, had been dreadful and he felt ashamed of himself. He decided to apologize to his friend as soon as he saw him next. Hriday entered the class on Monday hoping to see his friend but found to his dismay that Zameer had not come to school. Tuesday provided similar results and he was absent on Wednesday too. On Thursday, Hriday decided to ask around. After school ended, he dashed through the loaders lane, pushed his way across the bazaar, crossed the Mandi and his home to reach the street where Zameer lived. His mouth hung open as he looked at the house. The windows were broken, shards of glass and brick scattered everywhere. Hriday did not bother knocking on the door as the house was abandoned. To his surprise, he found Prashant's bike parked outside and the owner standing a couple of feet away

"What the hell are you doing here?" asked Hriday

Prashant hesitated before replying. "I've come to visit a friend."

"Have you seen Zameer?" Hriday enquired

"I thought you knew..." he said softly

"Knew what?"

Prashant took a deep breath before replying. "Zameer's father was attacked last week. He was on his way home from the office when a group of young saffron-clad men came out of nowhere and beat him senseless. The next day their house

was pelted with bricks. His whole family was inside and they were injured too. They packed their things and left for Kashmir two days later." Hriday was unable to speak. He stared at Prashant wide-eyed, his mouth hanging open. He felt a lump in his throat.

Didn't Notice.

Photograph by Raul Lieberwirth



by Sanyukta Shiv Kumar

I Didn't Notice.

Vulnerability is like a blade running the length of your body. It cuts fine and sure and removes the top layer of skin. If you're unguarded, still, it removes the next one. And then it goes around and around every inch of you till it reaches the bone. No one knows what happens after, for no one survives that deep of an unveiling of secrets too sordid to fly from mouth to ear till they finally reach the wrong person, or of lies that have always taught the world what truth is. Truth is, all of this, to me, matters not. Every layer of my skin is covered in chainmail. Unless a dragon were to exist to melt away the iron and iron wills, no volume of torture or seduction would I allow to penetrate even the first layer. Even when I used to bare it all to Jenna in the deepest corner of the night, I was always the one to take us both under the convincing promise of Pleasure. I am never undone. At least, I was. Before her.

Blades slashing the air, a sliver of anxiety peeping through my eyes, determination dripping down my neck perhaps too much, "Yelena, now!"...

The flashback lasts half a second. In fact, throughout the length of it, I caress my hair as I watch an autumn petal being rocked in the air by the now-settled wind. It coos to the petal in a language I feel on my arms as it settles it on a rearranging pile of petals and leaves and the whisper of change that has been on the ground since a quarter of a month. My eyes capture the present as my mind

“My love for her rested somewhere between her Light and my Dark. The light still remains. Only, Dark has gotten a stronger hold.”

flashes me my past in a whirlwind of disarray and too many images. My mind spins and I sit down. I almost sit on one of the knives. As I push it to the side, I notice it clearing away fallen leaves, just fallen leaves, a ladybug, in its path. If only pushing away our mistakes were that easy. I stroke the knives from tip to hilt as used to do when nerves got the better of me at times and made my shaking palms exclaim "Gods help you now!" Grandfather's knives are smaller than mine and have interwoven patterns on the blade. When as a child I used to visit him, he'd tell me stories that he heard the knives whisper to him when he needed shelter under the canopy of lies. Ironically, though, he insists that the tales are no lies. I always think that they were born when Truth extended his coy arms to Lie and Lie had nothing better to do. So, they made these stories that speak of lies and truths and both and neither. The blade I stroke now has a braided little girl with claws that plunge a flower in full bloom. Maybe I overthink, maybe it's the now-picking-up wind distracting me, maybe it's a chest full of maybes that don't equal to anything. But, when I look at the flower, it seems poised to attack. That thought is so peculiar it gives me pause. Not trusting my mind any longer, I stand up with a knife in each hand. No more stonewalling, Yelena. A whisper of a half-second before I allow that thought, my mind prepares to screen the rest of the

incident.

I watch as my knife hits my mark a moment after Jenna ducks an inch down the robber's neck. It settles neatly in his left eye and his chokehold on her loosens. A sigh leaves my lips, but before it could fly, a horrified gasp strangles its neck and breaks it. My horrified gasp then flies.

I'm a natural with knives. Throwing four at a time is now no more difficult than blinking twice. Perhaps it was confidence that cut me at the knees. Was my confidence too less or too much? I don't know. Then I know this: as I aimed the first knife, I also aimed the second. My first throw found its mark. My second should not have. She didn't see it coming. Neither did I. A tear runs down the inside of my throat, disallowing me to even swallow. I'm stunned blind as I realise my second throw had found its mark in the middle of Jenna's torso. I find her face and watch as she breathes through her teeth. Five more times.

As the last vestiges of the uncalled-for memory end, I tap my head in a deliberate attempt to knock the memory to the side to make space for Focus who had been waiting patiently on the sidelines for fifteen minutes. I brush off a few strands of hair from my hand, lock my body, I'm ready to strike.

"You're not ready for your mind yet, Blue mine." It takes me a split second for my eyes to come back to Jenna. Inside in my mind, though, I pull my leg back, ready to lunge at Doubt

who gives me a smirk and...“Come back to me,” she whispers. Lips on my neck...thighs straddling me...She then looks up at me from under her lids. Those eyes hold Conviction in a fist that punches Doubt and sends her cowering. My hands-on her thighs tighten. Her hands-on my heart tighten. They leave imprints that stand guard against my mind. Blue. That’s what she calls me when she knows I need it most. “Deep. That’s what you are,” she always tells me. “You have depth that defies logic.” I hold her chin now. She holds me down, my ground. Another chip in my chain mail. These days, around her it barely hangs on...

I close my eyes, pull my arm back, my mindset on a dark brown splotch of colour on the sixth ring from the bottom of the third tree bark from my left.

Tears on my palms, tears on my nails, blood on my lips.

But, I also remember the smiles she used to shine at me from behind Agony when Agony kept on visiting. Those smiles used to say “You’re stronger, Yelena. Believe in me. Believe in you. Like I do.” I remember her voice that used to cut through my nightmares. She’d rock me in her arms after the tears would give way to more menacing emotions. I remember that we never declared our loyalty to each other. It reached to a part of us that lied underneath the ruins of Lie and Loss, Truth and Misery. Grief. My love for her rested

somewhere between her Light and my Dark. The light still remains. Only, Dark has gotten a stronger hold.

I take a shaky breath, letting it go nowhere. More focus, Yelena! Will if not Peace. Will if not Peace...

Her death is on you. Grandfather’s voice. Accept it and you throw.

Another shaky breath. Again, I don’t breathe out. I have been holding my stance for far too long. I don’t move a muscle and my body protests. It is okay. It is not okay. It is still okay. I imagine the strange splotch, open my eyes and shout as I wrench back my hand and throw.

You didn’t notice. You didn’t notice. Grandfather’s shock registers in his face a second after it registers in mine. His breadbasket, the wind, my creeping dread, all of it is suspended in air.

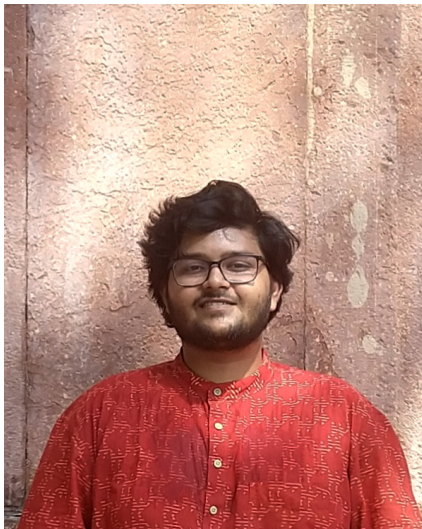
“There you are,” she says in a gentle voice and wraps her hands around me.

“What do I do when Mistake begins defining lives?” I ask her. She tilts her head, looks at me with eyes that know too much at the wrong times. “You incapacitate Mistake so her work doesn’t take hold.” I wonder how she knows what to say when. Everything makes sense when she bends words to her will and places them on my palms. Most of the time, my palms end up being too small for all those words and I give her back some. She always puts them in my drawer for when she won’t be there. Now, I kiss her with all the emotions that burn up my throat.

I stand in place as I watch the knife
make its way through the air straight
towards Grandfather's forehead.

B.Tech (Class of 2020)

DHRUV PRAKASH



“It was bright orange, the sun. It rose slowly and painted the dawn sky red, as if melting itself away.”

Music pounded on the shut windows as it does on Friday nights. The only thing that moved was the fan swinging lazily in its orbit. The mosquitoes glued in place to the walls, the spiders were content with their cobwebs in the corners, and even the light had stopped flickering lately. Nikhil sat unmoving for a long time in the corner of his single bed. He sat unblinkingly and stared at the pale-yellow wall in front of him. A while later, he leaned forward and pulled a cigarette and a lighter from his desk-drawer, lit it, and went back to his corner. His eyes returned to the wall in

front of him.

Last semester it had gotten very ugly when he'd failed, his mother had cried on the phone when he had called home with the result. As he sat there, he couldn't help but think about that night, even though tonight had been uglier. “Fail ho gaya ladka! Kya ho gaya hai tereko, pass hi toh hona tha bas,” she sobbed that night. He had wept back then too.

Smoke from the cigarette rose in a swivel and reached the invisible barrier formed by the sluggish fan where it spiralled out and vanished.

He took a drag.

This semester was worse. He'd gotten his result a couple of days ago and finally managed to call home about it today. This time he just sat silently and listened to his parents take turns to speak and yell and sob. Once his parents hung upon him, he tossed his phone at the far wall, as hard as he could.

He took another drag from the cigarette and realized he was burning into the filter. He stubbed it in the ash-mug and got up from his corner. He was going to do it.

He walked to his roommate's side and fetched his phone from the foot of his bed. The tempered glass had chipped clean off from one corner and the glass underneath it lay cracked; like lightning spreading across the screen. He had to make a call.

"Bhai Nick-khil, itni raat ko kaise call raha hai? Soya nahi ab tak?" Siddhant answered the call.

"Haan yaa, neend nahi aa rahi thi. Woh na... soch raha tha ek joint--" Nikhil started when he was cut off.

"Haaiinn? Yeeeh main kya sunn raha hoon bhai?! Nick-khil phoonkne ko puch raha hai?! Oye Sandy, aiyo zara, dekh toh Nick-khil kya keh raha hai!" he yelled gleefully to his roommate, also named Siddhant. He took the call, and a significantly more bearded voice took the phone.

"Nick-ji, kaise ho? Suna aap smoke up karna chah rahe hain?" Sandy said in a daze. Nikhil picked up a bunch of

papers from his desk and tapped them on the table till the edges matched.

"Yeah bro, I mean, agar extra rakha ho tumhe--" started Nikhil, sliding the paper into a brown envelope and tying it shut.

"Kaisi baat kar rahe ho bro? Tum jitni jaldi kamre aaoge, utni jaldi roll kar lenge bro."

This room had the exact same layout, but it was nothing like Nikhil's. The two tube-lights were switched off, and instead, the room was lit with several strands of green LED lights taped to the walls. Unlike his bare walls, these were covered with posters on one side, and on another, there hung a green-black monotone cloth hanging of Bob Marley laughing with his eyes shut. It quoted him: "No-one but yourself can free your mind". But the thing that hit him most was how the room smelled. The air was stuffy and everything in the room reeked heavily of ash.

Nikhil was sitting in a chair, Sandy sank into a bean bag, and Sid was sitting on his bed and diligently crushing weed onto his Artificial Intelligence end-semester paper.

"Yaar ek baat bata. Saal, do saal se toh main hi tujhe keh raha hoon ki sutte sab apni jagah pe, tu maal phoonk ke dekh. Aaj kis-se baat ho gayi teri, ki yahan baitha hai?", said Sid, focusing on his work.

"Tch, kyaaa puch raha hai tu Nick-ji se?

Isn't it obvious?" said Sandy from his low seat.

Sid looked up from the paper and gave Sandy a clueless look.

"Result nahi aya tha aaj?" Sandy rolled his eyes.

"O bhench--! Haan, bhai, result. Nick-khiiiiill, kaise gaya iss bar?", said Sid looking at him wide-eyed.

His heart sank, as did his eyes, as he answered, "Wohi bro, fail kar diya phir se."

"Fuck bhai, yeh galat ho gaya... koi ni, agle sem se pakka--" Sid began consoling Nikhil, and he looked down and nodded. Sid spoke for a while longer but silence fell again, and it was broken only by the crinkling of the paper as Sid rolled and folded the rolling paper over itself. He licked one edge and pressed it down.

"Nick-ji, it's your first boom", chimed Sandy, holding out a lighter for Nikhil. Sid inspected his finished product for any defects, smiled when he found none and held the joint out for Nikhil to take. He did and held it in his mouth. He held the flame of the lighter up and took a breath. The taste was stronger than a cigarette and it was very harsh on the throat, but he managed not to cough. He breathed out a small cloud and watched it hang in the air above him. It caught the light from the LEDs and the slivers of smoke glowed different shades of green.

Sid and Sandy were fixated on the cloud as well. Sandy patted Nikhil on

the back and said, "Dekho, cloud nine." Sid laughed profusely at that and Nikhil giggled. He took three more drags and passed it on to Sid.

By the time the joint made the circle back to him, he'd already started feeling it. A heaviness behind his eye, and chills in his face. He smoked more and passed it back. The more it hits, the more his thoughts slipped.

"Result: Fail" floated before his eyes. He thought about how proud his mom was when he got a seat in Computer Science at this college. "Kitna hoshiyar hai mera bacha, bada engineer banega," she had said.

"Shaabash!" his father had said as he bought him his first watch as a gift the day of the entrance result. That same night, they hosted a huge dinner at home and invited all the neighbours and family friends and cousins and whoever else called to ask about the result.

The joint came back to him, he took three drags, and passed it on.

"So how are you liking it?", Sandy asked Nikhil, sinking further into his bean bag. It was now that Nikhil realized how heavy his eyelids felt.

"Haan?", Nikhil gaped at Sandy with reddening eyes, and Sandy broke down laughing. He held his stomach and leaned back and just lost it, and at the sight of a helplessly laughing Sandy, Nikhil couldn't help but let his horse-laugh out. And for the same reason that Nikhil and Sandy were laughing, Sid also started rolling on his



Photograph by Sagar Arora

bed with laughter.

“Kitne stoned ho bhai tum dono?” Sid managed to get out through his laboured breathing.

“Sid, gavaar, kitna stuff dala hai tune? I’m not gonna be able to wake up for my nine o’clock now,” said Sandy panting and still holding his stomach.

“Same bhai, kal ka nine o’clock lecture toh miss,” said Nikhil wiping the tears from his eyes.

“Toh kal ki proxy cancel?” snorted Sid. “Jitni attendance milti hai bhai, woh teri proxies ke bharose hi hai.”

That was the worst part for Nikhil. It wasn’t because he slacked off or blew off work that he was failing. He went for every lecture, didn’t sleep in class, paid attention to whatever the professors said, and even took some notes. But he just couldn’t do it. He had never wanted to do this, but his parents had made him.

No, not directly, they hadn’t. His parents had struggled for a long time and lived in poverty for most of their lives before they had him. They pulled themselves out of it and they were adamant that no son of theirs would face the same life.

“Bohot hoshiyar hai mera Nikhil.” That’s how it had started.

“Bade aadmi banega humara Nikhil, dekhna.”

“Bohot aage badhega life mein Nikhil.”

“IIT se engineering karke US mein job karega Nikhil,” his parents said in 10th when they made him take Science to keep his options open in the future.

They had such dreams for him, and how could he say anything against them when they so neatly wrapped all their expectations in such love and concern. He’d managed to get through the first year with average grades. In the second year, they

started slipping badly, and he failed for the first time in the first semester of the third year.

“Fail ho gaya ladka! Kya ho gaya hai tereko, pass hi toh hona tha bas.”

And now, he'd failed the second semester of the third year as well.

“Samjha mujhe, kyun kar raha hai tu aisa? Kitna hoshiyar maante the tujhe, ab DO-DO baar fail ho gaya!” his mother's voice wailed over the patchy call connection.

“Pichli baar kya kaha tu tumse? Result sambhal lo abhi, warna life mein kahin nahi jaoge, koi nahi puchega tumhe! Yahan toh sahib-zade ne padhai-wadhai bilkul hi chhod di!” his father yelled after his mom broke down completely and left the room. He wondered what his parents would say if they found out that he was smoking up.

“Kis BT mein baitha hai Nick-khil?” Sid pulled him back with a hand on his shoulder.

Nikhil looked up and blinked blankly at Sid for a while and watched his face come into focus through bloodshot eyes.

“Arey bhai, theek hai na tu?” asked Sid with great concern and surprise at Nikhil's expression.

Sandy also sat up straight in his bean bag and asked him, “you good bro?”

Nikhil blinked the moisture in his eyes away and shook his head saying, “arey haan haan, yeh maal bohot sahi ha bro, bohot stoned hoon mein. Chal, ek match PUBG kheltein hain?”

Sid and Sandy shared a look and Sandy responded, “chal bro, kheltein hain.

Squads?”

The three of them started a game and played for a while. They sat there in the dim green fog with their faces lit by phone screens, and someone lit and passed a cigarette around. They played it well and at the end of it, stood victorious with the “Winner Winner, Chicken Dinner” banner waving over their avatars.

They started another game, but Nikhil got sniped early in the game. He spectated Sid's game on his screen for a while, but then started getting restless. Nikhil was too stoned and the smoke that still hung and swivelled around the room was making it hard to breathe.

“Bro, mein nikalta hoon?” said Nikhil.

Neither Sid nor Sandy said anything at first, but then Sid looked up from the game.

“Kya cheez?” he asked with his mouth hanging open.

“Nikalta hoon bro, jaake sota hoon.”

“Pakka bhai? Ek aur roll karne ki soch raha tha”, offered Sid.

“Nahi bro, aur nahi phoonk sakta mein, I'm too stoned,” Nikhil smiled and shook his head.

“Koi nahi bro. It's his first time Sid, he's dying,” said Sandy still playing his game with focus.

Nikhil chuckled. “Bro, can I borrow a few cigs? Room mein khatam ho gayi hain”, he asked Sandy.

“Yeah yeah, in my drawer. There's a box, take it.”

“The whole box? Pakka?”

“Yeah yeah, lele bro.”

“Damn, thanks.”

Nikhil sat on the edge of the parapet. He sat with his feet hanging off the edge and a cigarette in his mouth. He'd been here for a while now; long enough to smoke six cigarettes at the very least.

Having a remotely located campus had its perks. There were sparse clouds streaking the sky here and there, beyond them the black sky was dotted with more stars than you could ever see in a city, and a crescent moon hung to his left. It was a beautiful night.

He lit another cigarette.

Nikhil sat there thinking about the last few years; watching the words and formulae turn to chalk dust and fly off the board, not being able to understand algorithms that everyone in his class found easy, about being made of fun of for falling so far behind everyone else, and more than anything else he thought about how he had done nothing but disappoint his parents over and over again.

He pulled out another cigarette from the box and lit it.

At some point in the night, he could tell that he wasn't feeling stoned anymore. But that didn't stop all these thoughts from cascading before him in a mess.

Another one.

He heard his mother crying and he heard his father's disapproval and disappointment, and the guilt that those brought.

He sat there all night, drowning in his thoughts. The moon fell below the horizon to Nikhil's left and an hour

later, the sun rose to his right. There were only two cigarettes left in the box by this point. He began pulling another one out, but pushed it back in and set the box along with the lighter on the parapet next to him.

Nikhil stood up on the parapet and jumped back onto the roof. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and set it down next to the box and lighter. Then again, after walking around a little, he stood upon the parapet, looking up into the sky.

It was bright orange, the sun. It rose slowly and painted the dawn sky red, as if melting itself away. The wispy clouds glowed bronze in the heat and the early birds flew in their perfect V-formations. It was a beautiful day.

As Nikhil stood there, his heart rose to his throat and his eyes welled up. He held his chest and cried. He wanted to scream, but his agony only came out in pained and laboured sobs.

The Mind Palace



by Sagar Arora

I am generally in the backyard with Memo. Memo and I have been great friends for an incompressible strand of time. I am mostly away from my mind palace, but Memo always takes guard. He can sniff off any subtle activity that might harm the arrangement of my memory in the palace. I found Memo meditating out of angst, I could not find my passport and I had an appointment for the renewal in the evening. I sat in silence for a bit and tried Sherlock's idea of a Mind Palace for sharper memory. I had just watched the final episode of the series where a golden retriever was an overlay of the mystery. I suppose that the dog and the skill intertwined and then there was Memo.

The first time, Memo helped me out, I was on a date. I was out with a friend who would enjoy the company of funny guys. I had to look out for a joke and what's funnier than an embarrassing memory which also makes you seem cute. She had gone to collect the extra cheesy fries we ordered and I closed my eyes. Memo greeted me with a puzzling judgement. I followed him to the room of positive recollections. A beautiful set up with a collection of events that I could share with anyone. Outside the window, my favourite tree from childhood was dancing with the wind. I looked around and found the little water gun I used as a child to annoy the group of women going to the temple

“It’s funny how everything in the finite imaginary space would remind you of an infinite stack of memories.”

on the festival of Holi. I told her how the group of ladies almost threatened my friends saying that they will take me away. It wasn't really successful, but nonetheless, since then, I know that I have a memory dog keeping a house filled with recollections somewhere in my head.

There are days when I am just hanging out with Memo and he takes me to someplace in the mind which I have not explored in a long while. My favourite room will have to be the darkroom at the end of the staircase where my old fashioned head develops photographs from some moments in time. To visit the room I first took the old metallic torch that was owned by my late grandfather. It's funny how everything in the finite imaginary space would remind you of an infinite stack of memories. Having a tight grip on the torch I follow Memo to the darkroom where I witness various photos hanging on the wire to dry off. The prepared ones are usually present on the table. I remember discovering a picture of my sister smiling with a huge

pizza, the exact same one that I have on my mobile phone. But somehow memory has more dynamics than any digital visual cue in reality. There are times when I am really low and I would revisit the dustbin in the dark photograph room. The shredder makes a painful voice, the voice that still gives me nightmares. The dustbin is full of failures, some of them are better off as a lesson so they find a place on the floor. That's the thing about memory, it's never truly gone. Especially the darkest ones. It's just so evident that all of them are in the trash waiting for you to confront one of your moods.

There are some days when some music from the past meets my ears. Closing my eyes, I realise that the music is coming from one of the rooms. As Memo and I discover which room it is, we realise it's an event of celebration. On my 21st birthday, I remember laying on the roof of my rented flat. I was with my roommate who asked me to remember the best memories of my earlier birthdays. I closed my eyes and discovered the music. The wooden pavement changed into my childhood mattress. The ones with Mickey and Minnie holding balloons. The light coming from the window was that of a fresh spring morning. The Neem tree in his glory was dancing to the birthday music and everyone I had lost to time was alive in that very room. Surrounded by all my birthday gifts I would just sit in my head. I took almost five minutes to open my eyes

again and reply that the very moment was my best birthday memory.

I often find myself in the body of my childhood self, when I witness school socks hung somewhere there. I was 10 years old when I joined my first English medium school. Everything was so tall and fancy for me, even the girls in my class. Life was simpler back in my home town and this was a step outside my normal world. I was scared. In the beginning, it was almost like another planet. The bus used to arrive at 6:15 am, 2 hours earlier than the rickshaw that would take me to my previous school. I still remember the first day, I was pushed into the morning assembly at the time of the prayer medley. It was a crazy Christian party out there. I was asked to dance along with the prayer songs like every other kid. It was like a forced dance which became a part of my life for the next 8 years. No matter how shitty my day was to become, I had to dance to the prayer medley like an ignorant religious enthusiast. Not that I was against it, in fact, I became the guy who would be called out to sing on the stage. But that's a big leap of time. You see, the boy in 12th was singing in English. A language that probably changed my life.

By 8th standard, I almost got used to the slaps that I would receive in the English classes. I had no clue how the language functioned. Every Tuesday we would have two English periods. Every Tuesday would be a nightmare. Things changed when I

started watching a TV series called f.r.i.e.n.d.s. the characters would give me freedom and I realised I was able to escape my stupid life so easily. I just had to convert the episodes into a 3gp format and I would labour to do the same every night before I could lay down to sleep and watch at least 10 episodes.

Soon the 10 seasons of the show were exhausted by then I was in the 9th standard. Things changed when Ms Leena started teaching English, she was the first person who actually taught me the beauty of the language. My grammar was still terrible and probably still is, however, I had fallen in love with words by then. I would read my English textbooks in other subject periods. I started writing songs at the back of my science register. I start imagining and writing a story where I would ask out my 3 year-long crush and be successful at it. I did ask her out at the end of the 10th standard and got rejected. And then everything changed.

Not because I was rejected, but the horrific 11th standard came, I became the vice president of the school because by then I could slay debates and other presentations. The best part about being young is that you may or may not make sense, you just had to articulate it well.

The final two years of my school life was accompanied by a lot of academic failures, a lot of extracurricular fame and also my grandfather and neem passing away. Neem was the tree in

front of my house who became an important muse to accompany my mind forever.

So I hated science and my parents knew, I loved debating and my parents knew, the naive decision was to pursue law after school then. But, I didn't get any good college for Law just after school, so I joined a course in a nearby private institute to get an English Bachelor's degree. The next three years of my life changed everything. Near about 300 poems, 80 prose pieces and 3 incomplete novels, I knew then that I wanted to become a writer.

Following the staircase of my spine, I find wallpapers of the short stories I have tried to create. In the top-most room of the palace, everything is a mess. It's a creative junction filled with movie memorabilia and books that I have enjoyed. It is a mess lately because I barely get the time to rearrange my most impactful fictional getaways. On the right side of the room, there is a bookshelf playing Hans Zimmer's interstellar theme. Every time I arrange the book on this shelf, I can look at all those beautiful times that I have heard Hans Zimmer before presenting my seminars in my bachelor's classroom. The shelf and the music have more to them. This is where all the Deja Vu faintly survives, some dusted realisations that can never make sense in abstraction. For instance, the time I wrote my 100th blog post, I walked in a total fog on my terrace, even though the full



Photograph by Sagar Arora

moon was hidden. I was inspired to create a fiction of coming across time and space while I was listening to the music of the movie, Interstellar.

Right next to the interstellar shelf, there is a passage to a bridge that I borrowed from Harry Potter. The bridge on which Professor Lupin tells Harry that he has his mother's eyes. On the bridge, I am surrounded by the memories of Professor Rajnish Mishra. My writing companion who shaped a lot of this mental space of inspiration. This is the place I have not visited since my Master's program started and now that I recall this memory, I wonder what is wrong with me.

But there is room for all those doubts and questions as well. The fourth room filled with only mirrors. All types of shapes and sizes, making my own reflection seem absurd. But each shape has an insecure memory

attached to it. The biggest one makes me look fatter than I already am, each time I look at that mirror I am taken back to all those times when I looked at my body and felt out of place. The next one is simple. It asks me, what am I doing here? To which, the answer is always the same. I am in this part of my memory palace because reality has stopped making sense. I know this is the time to decide on a radical change.

The mirrors are too much to take, but the lawn space is the opposite. So I visit the lawn a lot more often with Memo. The bench in the lawn faces nothingness, it is opposite to the mind palace. I cannot describe how it really looks on the outside. I just know the insides of the palace. While sitting on that bench, with my eyes closed, just like reality. I can hear my favourite conversation in the face of

nothingness. Sometimes, an owl visits with a letter that can change the weather.

The owl comes from beyond what I have known about myself, with information that cannot enter the palace. Some infant memories, or strange experiences. Once while sitting with my friend who gifted me a pocket watch, I suddenly closed my eyes to find a letter with a sketch of an old wristwatch which was probably owned by my late grandfather. I even believe that some letters come from outside the domain of my current life. There have been various sketches of wolves and oak trees that don't seem to make any resemblance with any memory.

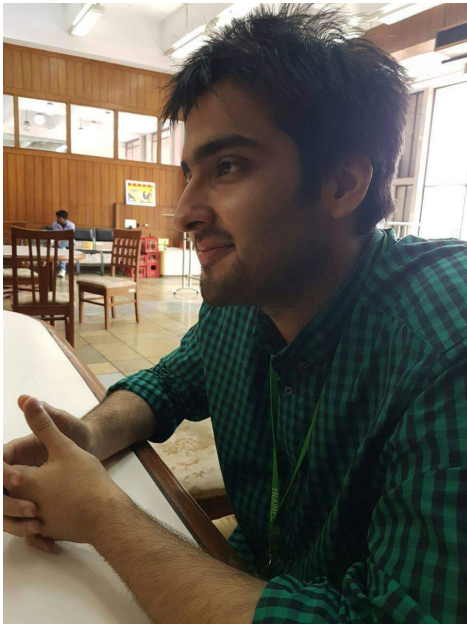
It is a beautiful place, my mind palace. It is an escape that will get further structured with everything that I will write. I really want it to be more structured because it seems that I can never approach it in a serious situation. Maybe my mind strains when the virtue of memories becomes a necessity of the present. It's good I never went for science or law, or any other profession that would demand a force of allegation or remarks of the past. Rather I have become a journal within myself with mysteries disguised as muses of the future.

Another fun thing about this magical place of mine: You see, you can enjoy rain anytime you want in there. You just have to be depressed enough. Depressed enough to try to light a

fire to those memories. And unless you don't meet with an accident in real life, the memories will come alive by making you cry with your eyes closed. It will rain like a sublime power had announced immortality for all the memories that you were trying to forget. In the same manner when you are crying too much to let the wooden palace submerge into a sea of depravity. There is warmth within the castle and you can escape anytime you like. The memories seem to be the involuntary friend of the time, almost independent of your space, but very much yours.

Beam Me Up, Scotty

RISHI KOHLI



“Not everybody is like you; we embrace the future, while you crave for the past.”

The storm of colours hit my face, felt like God himself had pissed. Neon lights, these fucking neon lights. The wall of the opposite building from my office was playing an advertisement. People in it were dissolving their dirty underwear's and masala stained shirts in buckets and doing some stupid jiggle wiggly to sell Washing Powder Nirma-Thoda Sa Powder But Jhag Dher Sara (little powder, but a lot of bubbles) singing this evergreen slogan. Then it switched to another advertisement of Virat Kohli selling Red Bull. Neon lights and corporate eyes were everywhere. Tailor-made sir

to suit your need, I remembered the slogan of Numerical- the company that was everywhere.

“Hey, are you on for tonight?” it came from behind. I turned around; it was Abhishek in his neat white shirt and glistening red tie. Corporate Schmuck. I said yes to him, why not. I could take anything to avoid a long night spent in bed with my wife- a corporate slave. They had rented her soul for a two week period- yes gone were the days where cars, houses or people's bodies were the only things rented. Who rented her you ask? The people who wore black suits and blue ties and

sparkling white shirts- thanks Washing Powder Nirma- that came to our home with TwitchFace. The technology that borrowed your soul in return for cash. "This is the updated version sir", they had made their case.

"We could use the money Akash, to pay the loan on the house," she made hers.

My job was enough to afford a comfortable living. But the pressures of meeting the expectations thrown by our nosy relatives made us shift from our little cosy flat to this new one.

"Sir, don't worry," said one of the guys from Numerical who had a paunch and sauce sticking under his lips. He smiled and assured me standing near the dining table of our new home.

"I'm not sure, could I take my time, go through the brochure, make myself comfortable," I said.

"Sir we are Numerical," said a lady with a sterner look and stricter voice. She then tried to smile and with a toneless voice said, "Tailor-made to suit your needs."

I looked at my wife Disha. I wasn't comfortable with her giving away her soul. But I could see it in her eyes she wanted this. It was not just about the house loan. Her friends had done it, jeez it was trending, and her eyes spelt it for me. TRENDING... TRENDING. Don't you get it Akash? I could imagine her chiding me in her head. Not everybody is like you; we embrace the future, while you crave for the past.

Numerical- the company that was everywhere- was behind TwitchFace. The concept that was sold to the public in layman terms was very simple. The company will rent out your soul, which in turn will be used to create energy to run the company HQ's around 192 countries because fossil fuels were a few years away from running out completely- yes gone forever. The renting period could be for a minimum 2 week, a month and hey if you are really inclined to help the greatest company in the world you can take the family pack, a month each for every family member. That was the maximum limit as till then. And you will be paid each day an undisclosed amount for renting your soul. And nobody was allowed to disclose the exact amount of money they received, but rumours were rife that poor and middle class were targeted easily, in other words, shortchanged. The pink slip had whetted the company's hunger for so long, but now since their coffers were loaded with it - 1 Trillion US Dollars- our souls were eaten to feed their appetite for more and more. The white LED lights in the elevator stared at me as I exited the office. Neon lights everywhere. They tried to console me- don't worry Disha will be fine- don't worry Numerical doesn't do anything bad. I stared back at them. In my mind like bubbles in a frothing bathtub, images of the future I had imagined came and blew apart.

Captain Kirk to Spock: Beam me up, Scotty.

There were poor kids on the streets running around, all were connected to a thing called an eyepiece-Numerical's answer for Smartphone-and so were pedestrians, drivers, rickshaw wallas, the shopkeepers, aunt's, uncle's, even toddlers in their cribs laughing at 24 x7 feed of Chota Bheem: almost everyone wore an eyepiece. Everyone was plugged in. Eye-piece was like a smartphone, not an eye-patch, that worked as a screen, a digital aid that acted like a phone, GPS, vital stats recorder, Video Player, Music Player, basically a key to the world of Internet and Beyond. Or the bugger Numerical used to be in touch with everything about you. I had said Numerical was everywhere.

And some people were just following the TREND- using TwitchFace that is- nothing big Mr Old Skool Akash, we just sold our souls that is all.

Through the windshield, I saw the dying sun in the purple-orange sky; I turned on the radio. Only a few stations were still running; all the rest had closed shops, even everyone's favourite 93.5 Red FM. I turned up the volume as the guitar riff from Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven rang in my ears and Robert Plant's nasal voice prophesied, "She is buying her stairway to heaven."

Then suddenly the radio went static as I turned a corner. Then an energetic baritone blared out " This is to inform the public that TONIGHT

AT 12 PM NUMERICAL IS COMING WITH A BIG SURPRISE FOR ALL OF YOU, STAY TUNED AND DON'T MISS OUT...WE KNOW YOU CAN NEVER MISS OUT...HA-HA-HA "

I added that last bit, I could imagine the announcer laughing in the end. Were there any more surprises left, after the money for soul scheme, the tits for dick scheme, pig brain for brain scheme, eyepiece for smartphone scheme, what was the big surprise Numerical had in store this time (god in your pocket scheme?).

I turned off the engine and got out. In my society, Spring Valley, the crowd was jostling gathered around a stage. White circles were dancing in the sky, music like Star Wars was being played and on the stage, a white lady shining like a wreath against a pink background with a digital clock on it was placating the crowd.

"Guys, Guys, Ladies and Gentlemen please be calm. Only 4 hours remaining before the big announcement. Whatever it is, everybody will get a chance to have it."

I looked at my watch ignoring them; two hours before I joined Abhishek at the nightclub. Till then I had to be upstairs, where my wife Disha was waiting.

The elevator opened, and the smell of the machine, TwitchFace, was strong outside my apartment. It smelled like semen mixed in egg whites. One could vomit.

I came into our bedroom and saw the box-sized machine and Disha lying as they left her. Pipes and wires



Image by prettyssleepy1 from Pixabay

came out of the half-melon shaped equipment on her head; joining the machine ports. The liquid inside the pipes was purple, and slimy with sparks going inside it. I asked them why they said these sparks were her soul. Her face had lost its colour, her eyeballs were rolled upward and the touch of her skin was cold. She was like a lump of cold meat that I once saw alive but couldn't anymore because she was TRENDING. Was money the reason why we did this? I asked my wife. She began shrieking out loud. The user manual said this would happen; her soul was being used by the machine. I locked myself in the bathroom and

cried and splashed water over my face. My hair was a mess, my beard not clean, and my eyes blood red. I wasn't using the eye-piece, didn't use anything of Numerical, and where was I in this world.

I dressed for the night club, black t-shirt and blue jeans, and I applied the cologne profusely to get rid of the smell of the machine. I came out saying goodbye to my dead wife. People gathered around the stage were shouting, hooting, screaming and crying.

"Numerical, Numerical, Numerical."

"Only 3 hours left for the big surprise people, HURRAY, let us all say it again,

who owns everything?"

"Numerical, Numerical, Numerical."

"Fuck you Numerical", I said and left for the club.

Luckily I found Abhishek and his friends early; they were standing in a queue near the entrance of Sky Club. They welcomed me, laughing out loud. The girls stared at me.

"Akash is old school. Hates the eye-piece." Abhishek clarified to their shell shocked faces.

"Oh okay," they said in unison.

Great now I was an outcast.

My eyes met with one of the girls in the group.

She wore green-rimmed spectacles and looked like a nerd and to my shock: she was unplugged.

We went inside the club; the place was full to the brim with people. Bright lights everywhere. Couples, groups, all had one shining eye, the eye-piece. Music was numbingly loud but the dance was perfect. Connected to the cloud, their dance instructions were being fed to them on the eyepiece.

After small debate shots were ordered. I stuck to my beer. Abhishek and his friends teased me for it. But the girl with green spectacles ordered a beer as well.

"Heard they are launching a new product today?" someone in the group said.

"Yea a new eye-piece, model XV."

"No that is for next year, today is something bigger, I have heard rumours it is a portable version of Twitch Face." Piqued my interest, I asked, "As in?"

"Like you could do your work while your soul is being rented out. You don't need to be on the bed."

"Wow," said one of them.

Soon Abhsiehk and his gang, cheerfully drunk, went to the dance floor. I promised to follow, but chose to stay, and so did she, the girl with green specs.

"Don't feel like dancing?" I asked her.

"This beer hasn't gotten me there yet. I should have taken the shots," she smiled.

"Then why didn't you?"

"Because you didn't. I thought you might need some company here."

I smiled.

"So what do you do?" I asked.

"I manage sales. What about you?"

"In advertising. A jingle writer." I replied.

"That is cool. One of the few remaining things you can do without the eye-piece."

"Yes, so far. They don't pay me much because I don't use it. But somehow they still need me. They say people can tell, at least for now, the difference between what an AI wrote and what came from the human mind. They are more comfortable with the latter."

"Have a look around here; I don't think this will be the case for long."

She said. I nodded in regret.

The music made it difficult to hold the conversation long.

"I think you and I share something in common. We both don't have eye-pieces" I said.

"Yes, we both are old-school then. Like your friend Abhishek put it."

She was cute. Her cheeks and hair glowed with the life I was missing. Her perfume was charming. It wasn't loud, it was soft. I wanted to dance with her. Standing in front of me was life; I had to be around it.

Before I could say anything she said, "Are you with someone?"

I saw the pale body of my wife connected to TwitchFace.

I said, "No...No, I'm not".

She kept the bottle on the table.

"Do you want to dance Abhishek?"

"Yes, why not...?" I paused to get her name.

"Mehak"

"Let's go Mehak"

We climbed down to the dance floor. She was leading the way, holding my hand.

At first, we danced casually, going at it like a middle-aged couple, clueless of each other's clues regarding where and what to move. But her energy coaxed me, embraced me, naturally we picked rhythm and grace.

We began dancing near our friends, but slowly moved to a corner, our corner

She began to come closer to me, and I to her. Soon I could taste her breath, which smelled like vanilla with an after taste of Corona. It was appealing. After a long time, I was turned on.

Can people like her exist anymore? I looked around me, like a swarm of fireflies; eyepieces were dancing. They were puppets of Numerical.

The just for show DJ played my favourite party song from a movie of

another era, Cocktail.

And we danced freely. Two people with free-will.

I put my arms around her waist, and she followed my move. Was it alcohol showing up now, or the desperation of not having fucks with a dead wife and the resulting dead penis which now smelled oxygen? It felt so quick, so unafraid we were. I kissed her on the lips. Then she opened her mouth and our tongues met. Nobody noticed us. After the kiss, I whispered to her ears, "I may fall for you if you kiss me again like that."

She whispered back in mine, "I shall be careful then"

I tickled her sides; she laughed and slipped away from my grasp into the crowd. I followed her inside; she was teasing me as she led me on, turning behind to look at me and with her finger signalled me to follow her.

Smiling we came outside the club.

"I don't have a car. She said.

"I don't have a place". I replied

And mutually it was understood, who had what to offer.

"I shall get the car then". I pointed my thumb at the parking space on the other side of the road. She happily nodded.

God! Under the streetlights, she was the most beautiful woman I had seen in a long time. Never since college had I done something like this. I walked towards my car, nervous, guilty, tired yet excited.

The radio station proudly announced: LADIES AND GENTLEMAN HALF AN HOUR TO GO BEFORE THE BIG

ANNOUNCEMENT. ARE YOU ALL READY?

I looked at Mehak, and she looked back at me, she rolled her eyes and I said, "You want me to turn this radio off, I have an album of Bryan Adams Greatest Hits."

"Why not, and you know the song to play right?" she said.

"Of course, I haven't lost my brain yet," I said and tapped the button on the music player in my car till it showed track 4 on the yellow display, Summer Of 69. This girl had a taste, and those tastes matched mine.

We reached her apartment, which was nothing fancy and faced the road without trimmed gardens or swimming pool or a tennis court.

And inside the elevator we held each other's hands and were humming to the tune of the last Bryan Adams song we had heard. Outside her apartment there was no smell of protein, there was the smell of hibiscus potted plants lined up outside her door and incense which I assumed was coming from her neighbour's apartment whose front door had a Ganesha photo on it.

She unlocked her apartment.

We didn't care for the big announcement by Numerical, of course, we didn't. Our clothes were shed in a jiffy, lights were dimmed down and what followed was an hour of good old fashioned pleasure. Then we saw outside our window something odd, something peculiar, something funny like a bad CGI from a 70s movie.

A bright light, like a disco light, was floating in the sky far away. It was a splashing array of many colours all around it and then as we moved to the window we saw that the whole sky was dotted by these individual balls of flickering light.

It was a UFO, it had to be and no I'm not wrong. And the next thing we did was turn on the T.V.

"Like it was announced by Numerical the big surprise is here..."

"Oh my god!" Shouted the reporter looking behind her.

It was a big podium outside the Whitehouse and a tiny, scrawny, green jelly faced, head on a stick creature was standing with the CEO of Numerical, Mr Gorgios Speakgood who was there before an awestruck, dumbstruck, pig head for a brain public. The news reporters were there too and before anyone could process anything, the duo shared their surprise with the world. In fact, Mr Speakgood did as the tiny alien only made incompressible sounds understood by few.

"AbabaGrrrrr LolaGrrrr Blablablaba Blah," with his hands circling in the air.

"The deal has been completed," Mr Gorgios said adjusting his tie and with a proud look on his face, "and we hand our company and billions of users around the world over to Mr Gogo from outer space. Who will now do as he pleases? Wait what was that Your Highness Gogo?"

"Aba Abababa Grrrrr Blu Blu Lobolobloblo" Mr Gogo said

promptly, his frog eyes rotating in circles, his tiny figure twerking.

“Okay, ha-ha-ha, yes you have jobs for each of us. Ha-ha-ha we will be happy to serve you, won’t we?”

And the crowd shouted,
NUMERICAL, NUMERICAL,
NUMERICAL...

We sighed and went for another round of sex.

Choices



by Oorja Mishra

I should call my mom. I hear my phone go off in the other room. I sit up on our bed, but it stops ringing and I am too tired to move. I don't know how we got here. We've had this conversation before, it was never a decision I've had to make before this, but I've always been sure of the decision, until now. Ali and I have been talking, screaming, hugging and crying for about 5 hours now, and then we decided to take a break. He's in the kitchen making coffee when I hear my phone ring, and then his. I hear his muffled voice talking on the phone and lie back down on the bed.

"You're going to hell."

"I don't believe in hell."

"It's murder," a stern face screams at me. "It's your duty, you're running away from your duty. You're selfish, that's it. You're just a selfish, terrible person."

I open my mouth to speak but am stopped by the blood trickling down my legs and feel myself fall to the ground.

"I am not a murderer... I'm not."

Zaphia?

I hear Ali's voice but I can't see him.

Zaphia?

Suddenly I'm back in our room and I see Ali squatting on the floor next to the bed, concern in his eyes.

"I must have fallen asleep, I'm okay. Just a bad dream."

Ali takes my hand, "It was Sam on the phone. Your mom is in the hospital."

"There is silence in the room while both my mother and I stare at my crumbling ceiling."

I nod and feel myself get up, I put on my shoes, pick up my purse and keys, "can you drive?"

"Yeah," he says pulling me in, "It's going to be okay, babe." I nod while covered in his arms, tie up my hair and head down to the car.

Ali keeps looking at me like I'm going to turn into dust. "I'm okay, Ali. Stop looking at me like I'm about to melt."

"I know it's a lot to process right now, we don't have to think about the other thing right now. We can decide that later, and you know that whatever you decide, I'm going to support you a hundred per cent. Don't worry. Let's focus on your mom for now."

I nod and smile at him, he takes my hand in his, and I feel myself breathe better.

"You're making a mistake, Zaphia."

"Alright, mom, then it's my mistake to make. Let me, I'll deal with it if it blows up in my face."

My mother lets out an exasperated sigh. "You should listen to me sometimes; I might actually know

what I'm talking about. You've only been dating him for two years; you've just started working. You're rushing into this. Why can't you move in together in two years? When you're more settled?"

"You don't even know him, mom, how do you know it's a mistake?"

"Exactly."

I hate it when she does that, acting like she knows what is best for me all the time. "You were never interested in getting to know him, so now you don't get an opinion. Don't worry, I won't come crying home if it blows up in my face."

"Don't be ridiculous. I just think you're rushing. But fine, do what you want. Bring him along for dinner this Friday. Do you want help packing?"

I look at my mother and smile, as much as I hated it, she did know best sometimes.

She was wrong about Ali though, and she admitted it to me later. Ali and I had been living together for the last six years, and my parents loved him. My mother often called him to 'catch up' and I swear she liked our dinners less when Ali wasn't free to attend.

"We're here. You head in, I'll park the car and see you inside. They're in the Emergency room."

I nod and get down as the car Ali rolls away behind me to park the car. Suddenly I'm too tired to move again. My dad didn't know what had happened, my mom had just collapsed and he had rushed her to the hospital. My feet are frozen, and I could feel

a lump in my throat. I could feel an anxiety attack coming, and I just stood there, staring at the door open and close as people went in and out of the hospital. All I could do was move my feet enough to sit on the bench outside and wait for Ali and then I felt his arm around my shoulder.

"I couldn't move. I tried, but it was like I had a hundred kilos tied to my feet."

"I know, it's alright, why don't you take a deep breath, stand up slowly, and we can take this literally one step at a time," he smiles at me.

I take a deep breath in and stand up. With my hand firmly entwined with Ali's, I finally make it to the Emergency room. Sam isn't there and I feel the blood drain out of me. Ali can feel me going cold and holds on harder. We go into the waiting room and find Sam sitting on a sofa, his mouth open and his eyes close. He looks lonely sitting there on the pale blue hospital sofa, and for the first time in my life, he looks his age to me.

I gently shake my dad awake, "Sam, where's mom? What happened?"

"Oh, hi. They said she had a minor heart attack and lost consciousness. They took her for an angiogram just five minutes ago. She was fine, she was feeling tired from work, she went in to take a shower while I fixed her a drink and then she just lost consciousness."

Sam, still groggy from his nap, looked

older to me than he did five minutes ago. I held his hand and sat next to him while Ali went and got him some water. We sat together in silence for a while, and I was just about to tell him, just to distract him when we heard the doctor come in.

"We found a small blockage. She's going to need an angioplasty. It's a simple procedure, won't take too long."

I go back to the other time my mom had needed an angioplasty a few years ago. It was a false alarm; tests had been wrong and mom was pissed she was stuck in the hospital unable to go to work. "Babes, the world won't end without Maya, the Executive Director; treat it like a one day vacation." My mom shot Sam a look and he quickly excused himself. I laugh and settle down in the couch next to her. "I'm bored," my mom whines.

"Good. You haven't had time to be bored in more than 20 years. Take a break, watch some Netflix."

She grunts in response and unlocks her phone. "Hey mom, why did you never marry Sam?"

Mom looks at me with her eyebrows knitted together; "that's an odd question. Why don't you want to marry Ali?"

I give her a look of exasperation and look away. "Oh, that is what this is about. I didn't marry Sam because we had both already done that. Wedding, marriage, divorce-- we didn't see the point to it anymore. We were perfectly happy as we

were and we didn't need legality or papers to define it. You can say we are disillusioned with the institution. Now you go, why are you so adamant you don't want to marry Ali?"

"I'm not 'adamant'," I say, making air quotes. "I've always been disillusioned with the institution, and like you, I don't think I need legality or paperwork to define my relationship with him or bring me security, so what's the point?" I say settling back onto the couch with my laptop.

"Don't be disillusioned because of the mistakes I made in my marriage, or mistakes that your dad made. You're not us. And you're allowed to make your own mistakes."

"Why though, if I can learn from your mistakes? And other than convenience I don't see any other reason to marry Ali, and that doesn't seem like a good enough reason. We're happy, why rock the boat?"

"What does Ali think?"

"He doesn't want it. But I think he'd do it if I wanted to. But since I don't, we're pretty much on the same page."

"Pretty much. You've always been so headstrong, it reminds me of me. It's annoying."

I roll my eyes and my mother laughs, making some comment about our generation and goes back to her emails.

Ali's voice brings me back to the waiting room, "You want coffee babe? Or something to eat? I'm getting some food from the vending machine for Sam."



Free Image from Getty Images

“Coffee would be great,” I smile at Ali. As I see him walk away and suddenly wonder what our kid would look like, and if they would get my clumsiness or Ali’s forgetfulness, who would they walk like? I shake my head and slump down further on the couch.

“She’s going to be okay,” Sam says to me, half consoling me, but mostly convincing himself.

“I know,” I smile at him.

“Is everything okay between you and Ali? You seem worried.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, shrugging it off.

“Actually, Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Oh.” I look at Sam and his face is completely blank. Sometimes he can’t help but be a lawyer and right now, I couldn’t be more thankful for it. “I know this is more of a mom

conversation, but just know that we support you whatever you decide. You’ve always known what you want.” “Thanks,” I look at Sam and smile, I wonder if Ali had already told him and asked him to say that.

Ali and the doctor come back at the same time. “The procedure went perfectly, she’ll be fully conscious in a few hours. We want to keep her for observation for another day, but she should be able to go home after that.” Sam thanked the doctor and Ali hugged me and shook hands with the doctor. I felt relief all over, like I was drowning and somebody had just pulled me out of the water.

“Can we see her?”

“She’ll be moved to a room in half an hour, you can see her then.”

Ali and I made arrangements for the room and paid the immediate

expenses. Once my mother was in the room, the doctor said it'll take a while to be fully conscious, so Ali took Sam home to freshen up and I stayed with mom in the room. She looked older, like I had missed a few years of her life. But she still had that annoying all-knowing look on her face, and it made me smile.

I had found out for sure this morning that I was pregnant. I was two weeks late and had taken a test yesterday morning, gone to the gynaecologist yesterday evening, and gotten the result this morning. I was 6 weeks pregnant and my gynaecologist had explained my options to me. I could either take a pill and abort the foetus or have a baby. I had never wanted kids, my mom had always thought I'd change my mind, my friends thought the same, but I never did. And I thought I was sure until this morning. Actually being pregnant had changed everything. Or maybe not. But now I was thinking about all these things about this foetus, I didn't know what it was, but I was thinking of little feet and little eyes and I was seeing babies everywhere. And so, by the time I called Ali home from work and reached home myself, I didn't know what I wanted. And Ali understood, he said he wasn't sure what the right thing to do was, but that I would be a good mom, and he would support my decision either way. I thought I could decide on my own, so I didn't call mom. But right now, I needed someone to tell

me what I wanted, and I wanted my mother and her all-knowing self to give me a big lecture on what was the right thing to do. And almost as if on cue, my mom woke up and asked for water. After a few hours of fading in and out, she was fully conscious, and stable, she had already scolded Sam for eating a whole chocolate bar, and Ali for not stopping him. When Ali and Sam left to get me some lunch, I decided to tell her.

"Mom?"

"Finally. What is bothering you?"

"How did you? Anyway, not important. I'm—Um. I'm pregnant."

My mom doesn't say anything.

"I know what you're thinking, we were very careful, I don't know how we slipped, and now I'm pregnant and I don't know what to do."

"I can't tell you what to do. This one is totally yours to decide."

"Oh, come on mom, you love telling me what to do. Please."

"I know, I really do. But you've never actually listened to me, not as a teenager and not as an adult. You were more open to suggestions as an adult, but you always knew what you wanted, Zaph. You just always needed a little help, but all your decisions, it was always you."

"Okay, so then help me."

"What are you thinking?"

"I've never wanted kids. I've always been so sure. And then I find out I'm pregnant, and I'm not so sure."

"Why?"

I don't know why. I slump back into

the couch and feel my mom smiling at me. "Look I would love to be a grandmother. But this is your decision, and you know what you want. Give yourself a little time. How far along are you?"

"Six weeks."

"Then you have time, just allow yourself some time."

"Do you think its selfish, if I don't want this child?"

"It's not a child yet. It's not even a peanut yet. And no, this is your life. Nobody should tell you how to live it. Not even your mother, no matter how much she loves doing it."

I smile at her and she falls back asleep. My mother gets discharged the next day, and other than an increase in medication and being asked to slow down a little, she's perfectly fine and back at work in two days.

I call her in three. "Mom, can you come over? Ali is here, but can you too?"

"I'll be there in an hour."

My mother comes with candy and food and alcohol. She sends Ali to buy some flowers for the house and lies down next to me.

There is silence in the room while both my mother and I stare at my crumbling ceiling. One minute I'm thinking about calling the landlord to fix the seepage and the next I burst into tears. My mother doesn't do anything for a while, she just holds my hand while I fill the silent room with my sobs. Ali comes back then

and rushes over to my side, exchanging a knowing look with mom.

"Shhh, it's going to be okay," my mother strokes my hair while she hugs me.

"I know I did the right thing; I don't know why I'm crying."

Ali holds my hand, and smiles at me, he knows how hard the last three days have been for me.

"I know. It wasn't an easy thing, what you did. Knowing what we want, and choosing to live our truth unapologetically, can be hard sometimes. But we're all here for you, Zaph. Plus, it's the hormones, you'll be okay after a good cry. Now tell me, soup? Or Drink? Or Both?"

I wipe my tears and smile at her, "both."

Acchi Wali Ammi

HALA FATMA SIDDIQUI



**“And I don’t know if it’s
a memory, or memory
of a memory that
remains, do you see?”**

Eduardo Sacheri

When I think of summer, I think of my Nani’s house in Allahabad. It’s the same house where my mother grew up along with her four siblings, and where I also learnt to take my first steps. My Nana and Nani lived in a quaint bungalow overlooking the beautiful Khusru Baagh. The lane that they lived by was one of the most beautiful streets that I had ever seen. It was covered with bougainvillea flowers in the winter, and as soon as summer arrived the bougainvillea gave way for Champa flowers to bloom in all their splendid glory. It was not a humungous piece of property, but somehow it had

never felt small, for my large family made up of some twenty people. It had a garden out front, where Nani had set up a water bath for the sparrows, and where she grew a variety of herbs to be used in the kitchen every day. I can still remember the sense of achievement I used to feel whenever Nani asked me, out of all my cousins, to pick some mint leaves or coriander from the garden. Everyone liked to believe that they were Nani’s favourite grandchild, and moments like these just added to our confidence.

However, the garden wasn’t my favourite place in the house. It was the

courtyard, and not without reason- it was here that Nani spent most of her time as she prepared a variety of jams and achaars for us to take back home every summer. The pungent aroma of the achaar is still alive in my memory. Even at seventy years of age, she was as light as a bird on her feet. I, in fact, do not recall her ever getting tired of her daily chores or complaining about them. She was a petite lady but possessed herculean strength. She insisted on doing everything by herself, even as the grey replaced the black in her hair, and her spine turned curvier. She couldn't tolerate even her daughters assisting her since it made her feel like a "glass doll"- something she had once proclaimed to my mother during her visit to Delhi. She had successfully raised six kids, never discriminating between my aunts and my uncle when it came to opportunities. A free thinker, she was the heart and soul of the family. The house that she lived in has changed a lot over the years. The walls with their white chipped paint, as my earliest memories remember them, have now been painted yellow. The ambiguity behind the original colour of the house has always been a heated topic in the household. The two primary participants of this debate are my mother and my aunt. My mother maintains it was initially painted white, but my aunt believes otherwise. This point of contention between them awaits resolution

even today.

But for me, the colour and the architecture of this house have never really mattered. It has remained in my memory perennially as the place exuding warmth, a place I could always recall with fondness. No amount of paint jobs could ever change that feeling. However, it all changed one summer, when all the belongingness and comfort the house fostered was replaced by biting gales of cold. I still remember the summer of 2007 clearly; the year Nani's house became a sad reflection of its past glory.

The daily bulletin that my father listened to every evening after returning from work, claimed that this summer would be the hottest one of the last decade. I didn't care, because with my vacations just a few days away, I was brimming with excitement. The thought of soon heaping Nani with my unobtainable desires, only to have them lovingly fulfilled by her, made me giddier with every passing second. I had foolishly started packing my clothes, thinking it would somehow make the days go by faster, and save precious time later. I also planned on finishing my holiday homework before the vacations began, so I wouldn't have to waste even a single day while in Allahabad. I was to be travelling with my mother and brother. We were supposed to leave the coming week, but the plan was preponed for reasons I was unaware of. The change in the dates



Illustrated by Hala Fatma Siddiqui

only made my brother and me happier. We would get to spend extra time in Allahabad, and what's more, also miss a whole week of school! This excitement soon turned to confusion when I saw Amma's face. Why was there gloom in her eyes after hearing such great news? She was also behaving differently. The infectious excitement which, at the thought of meeting her parents and siblings, had seized her all summer, was now gone. I still remember being annoyed by her lack of enthusiasm, that too right before our trip, so much so that I took it into my own hands to finish packing my clothes.

On the day of our departure, Abba came home early from work to drop us at the railway station. The journey

from New Delhi to Allahabad was 675 km and would take us nearly 11 hours to reach our destination. I was counting down minutes. Amma, meanwhile, continued to be absorbed in her own thoughts. She didn't even notice when Abba came home that evening since he wasn't offered his usual cup of tea. He didn't even ask for it. What he instead asked was for us to sit in the car. He picked up my brother, who was five years old at the time, into his arms, while he squirmed under his grip, pleading to play with his ball a little longer.

The car ride to the railway station was filled with a thick silence, except for my brother's howls over the ball he had left behind, which nobody seemed to pay attention to. The

lack of conversation was making me extremely uncomfortable. Amma had still not spoken a word to me, even after my countless attempts at making her do so. I had started to wonder if I was at fault in some way. Could this silent treatment be a result of Mr Mehta's complaints about his window that had been sacrificed during one of our volleyball matches? Or could it be because of Polomi aunty who had told Amma about the theft of her purple petunias? In an effort to make her talk and get some reaction out of her, I broke the silence by lying about leaving my holiday homework at home-

"Ma, I think I left my homework worksheet at home."

"Nothing can be done now," she replied matter-of-factly with absolutely no expressions on her face. Her response left me disappointed and surprised at the same time. I had expected her to scold me for my forgetfulness, but she had hardly said anything. Dejected, I decided to follow my parents' example, and not speak during the car ride.

Upon reaching the airport, Abba looked at Amma rather apologetically and promised her that he would join her in Allahabad as soon as his leave application was accepted. Oh! So, this was the reason behind Amma's indifferent attitude about the trip; she was displeased because Abba wasn't accompanying us to Allahabad like he always did. We bid goodbye to him when we located the platform from

where we would board the train.

The train ride felt exceptionally long as I had no one to talk to. My brother had already slept when we had reached the station, and Amma was still not talking, except for having asked me if I was hungry. I did not even touch the comic books I had packed for the journey, and instead fell asleep, woeful. The next morning, I was woken by the calls of coolies, an indication of our arrival. I was sincerely hoping that today would be a better day. At the platform, I was expecting to see my Mamu's familiar face amongst the crowd. He always came to pick us up when we visited Allahabad. After being unable to locate him in the sea of alien faces, I finally asked Amma if she knew where he was.

"I can't see Mamu. Did you forget to tell him that we are arriving today?"

"He won't be coming," she replied exhaustedly and started walking towards the taxi stand located on the opposite end of the road. In no time, she booked a taxi without having entered into a bargaining war with the taxi driver, which was unusual for her. The taxi ride was torturous, as Amma was still mute. The harsh sunlight entering the taxi was making me thirsty, and as I turned towards her to ask for water, I could see her eyes glistening with tears as she held her head, as if in pain. I couldn't bring myself to ask her for water anymore and sat in silence with my parched throat.

After what felt like an eternity, the yellow coloured house began coming into view from the taxi window. The house still looked the same, save for a few minor changes. The creeper with red flowers was in full bloom, making the air fragrant. My Mamu's motorcycle was parked right in front of the gate. What was surprising was that there were many other motorcycles parked near his. Amma held my hand tightly, as if for support, and we headed inside.

The door opened onto a sea of unknown faces in the courtyard. I was utterly confused, and scared, by the constant chatter that filled the air. I hurried forward to get closer to Amma, but she had vanished into the crowd. A sound emanated from somewhere, making my stomach turn. Before I could proceed any further to investigate the source of the sound, Amma swooped in and caught hold of my hand. We made our way forward.

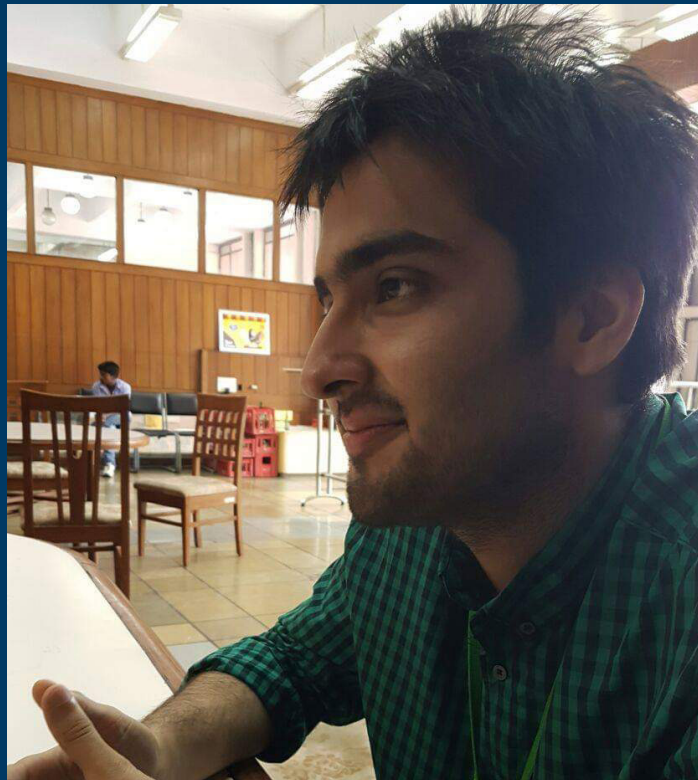
The bed in the courtyard did not have Nani sitting on it, as I had expected. This was where she used to cut mangoes and prepare achar. But now, a figure clad in a white blanket was lying down on it, surrounded by crowds of people I didn't know. I was afraid of moving any closer to the bed and was trying to comprehend what all this meant. It was then that I heard it. From beside me, a heart-rending wail escaped Amma's mouth, a sound unfamiliar to me. Screaming, she collapsed on the ground upon seeing the sight ahead of us. My aunt

had rushed towards Amma, helping her get on her feet, while her own face was filled with deep agony. Before anyone said anything to me, I already knew that the worst had happened. That which no one wanted to think about had struck my family. The realisation that the body on the bed was my Nani's had numbed me before I even felt the shock. I didn't move or speak but wept a hundred tears. I had many questions, but I didn't know who would answer them. Everyone was overcome by grief. But in all this, one thing became very clear to me- summer would never be the same for my family anymore.

It has been twelve years since I lost Acchi Wali Ammi, my Nani. People say that time is the best healer, and I wish I could believe them. I thought that with every passing year, the pain of losing her would somehow lessen. But it has only increased. Those people never told me about the power of memories, and their ability to trap you in time. It's funny how the happiest memories I had with her are now my biggest sources of pain. Her laugh, her wrinkled face, the faint fragrance of Johnson's baby shampoo from her thinning locks, and her soft little hands- all of it remains etched in my memory. The house in Allahabad isn't the same anymore. The herb garden is infested with weeds now, leaving no traces of a garden ever having existed there before. The glass jars which stored the achars have dissolved into thin air, as if by magic. I refuse to go there anymore because

everything seems to remind me of her absence. The house could be packed with throngs of people now, and it would still feel empty to me because the one person I long for wouldn't be there. It's been twelve years since summer became just another season for me.

Animals



by **Rishi Kohli**

“Go to sleep little you, go to sleep.” My Grandmother’s gentle voice urged me to pull my head away from her lap and put it on the pillow beside us. She had to go and serve dinner to my grandfather and then help herself.

“Go to sleep, or they will take you away,” she warned me.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“You ask too many questions that you are not old enough to understand, for a child. Now go to sleep.”

She kept the Arabian Nights on the bedside table and tucked me inside the blanket. She gave me a kiss on the forehead and switched off the light.

“Badi Mummy,” I called before she was about to close the door and leave me in complete darkness.

“Leave the door a little open.”

She said goodnight and kept the door open enough that white light from the living room could squeeze between the gap at least for an hour before my grandparents would go to sleep. My bedroom was near the front of the house. It was closest to the street outside.

My Grandfather was always the last to leave the living room after watching the late-night news. He would switch off the living room lights but by then I would be asleep. Aloof and safe from the fear of darkness.

But that day I wasn’t asleep. I was shifting in my bed, turning left and right, trying hard to sleep before the lights went out. I kept playing in

“Then it dawned on me that we were animals. “

my head moments from that day at school. In one of those moments, me and my best friends, Karan and Sakshi, were sitting on the fence while the rest of the classroom was playing football on the field.

Karan said, “I told my mom I am going to play cricket like Sachin.”

“And what did she say?” I asked.

“That the odds of becoming a cricketer are real slim.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Sakshi pitched in.

“What does your mother have to say to you?” I asked her.

“About what?”

“About your future?”

“I can be whatever I want.”

“Wow!” Karan and I said in unison.

“Don’t your parents say the same? You can be whatever you want until we find someone for you?”

“Find someone for me? I would be happy if she found a car,” I said.

“Yes, a car and a bike,” Karan added.

“No, idiots. She meant to find someone for you to marry. I can be whatever I want if I marry.”

“My parents want me to be an engineer.

They don't talk about marriage," I said. "Same with my parents, but I don't want to be an engineer," Karan said with a look of sadness.

The football came rolling towards us and this got the attention of our sports teacher. He blurted through his whistle and signalled us to join. There was no other option, we had to participate.

Though caught in these memories while lying on my bed, through the narrow light that came in my room, I could see the time on the wall clock facing me. Fifteen minutes remained till 10:30 PM, then Grandfather would switch-off the T.V. I could hear the voice of a woman reading out:

This year's All India IIT Entrance Topper Rahul was welcomed in his house with a hawan and a mouthful of boondi laddu. When asked, his younger brother said he was eagerly waiting to take coaching from Better Tomorrow Inc., to secure a better tomorrow for himself also.

As I heard this, my Grandmother's warning repeated in my head.

"They will take you away."

Who were they? Were they animals? I thought. I was afraid of animals. Very afraid.

I tried to shut my eyes hard and sleep. The voice from the T.V. went silent. I heard the sound of my Grandfather getting up and walking with heavy and slow steps. The lights outside turned off. It was dark now. There was an uneasy silence. Then came the sound of him opening his bedroom

door. A click of it closing. I drifted away to sleep sometime later.

In the morning Grandmother kept my school clothes neatly folded on the bed and busied herself making breakfast. I was eating a sandwich standing beside her in the kitchen while she was making tea for Grandpa. The sandwich was delicious. It was thick and juicy. It was expected; this was the season for the beautiful fingers.

Mom gave a call on our landline before I left for school.

"How is Badi Mummy?"

"She is good, Ma."

"Have you been a good son?"

"Yes, mother," I said with hesitation.

"Father Xavier gave me a call yesterday. Said he caught you with a dirty newspaper during lunch. You were staring at something you shouldn't have. Is this true?"

"Ma, I'm sorry," I said with a jittery voice.

"You know what we expect of you, son, and this is unacceptable. Your father thinks you're a nice boy, don't disappoint him." Her voice was like needles pinching the ear.

"You don't want to be as they are. Otherwise, we will leave you."

"I'm sorry mother. Last time, I promise, please d...d...do don't leave me."

Behind her voice, I could hear my father calling her for tea.

"You're a good boy, Avi." She hung up. In school, the first thing I did was go to Father Xavier and show him my

notebook. I had written in it five hundred times: Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. He looked at me through his large brown-rimmed spectacles and gave a smile. He put a hand on my shoulder, and made a sign of the cross over me and told me to go and join everyone in the assembly.

"What did I say about Beckham?" Karan asked while we were having lunch sitting in our classrooms later in the day.

"Yeah, what did you?" asked Sakshi.

"That you can bend it like Beckham," I said.

Sakshi chuckled.

"Na, we cannot be like Beckham. They won't allow us to become footballers," he said.

"Chances are slimmer than us being like Sachin," I said.

"I can be like Victoria," Sakshi said.

Can we be like animals? I wondered. I looked out of the window. Someone was walking in the corridor, wearing a black suit, black glasses and carrying a black suitcase. Our school principal, Sister Daniel was accompanying him. Both of them entered the classroom. Everybody went quiet and was looking at them. They were quiet too, and with their serious, pinched faces they began scanning the room. I was getting nervous. My legs shook. I had a bad gut feeling.

The Man in the black suit turned his head in my direction and whispered something in the ears of our principal. She came to me and asked.

"Did they try to contact you?"

"Who are they?" I asked

She told me to come outside the classroom. My weak legs were causing me to stumble frequently. The Man in the black suit felt like authority.

They took me to the principal's office. The windows were closed and curtains were drawn. Only the white tube light overhead was switched on. I was sitting facing the principal, and the Man was standing beside her.

"It has come to our notice that they have tried to contact you," said the Man.

"I don't understand," I said.

"This is serious, son," said the Principal.

"I will never again read the dirty pictures, I promise," I pleaded.

"And Sachin," said the Man.

"Only praise him."

"And Beckham?"

"Only admire him."

"Maths?"

"Will love it."

"What will you be?" he said loudly.

"I will be whatever you say," I was on the verge of crying.

"And Karan," the guy placed his suitcase on the table." We have a strong suspicion that he belongs to they. You will no longer talk to him." "But he is my best friend."

"But he is they, son. He asks too many questions. He doesn't obey elders. He breaks rules. And he doesn't pray." The principal made a cross

over her head after hearing this and said, "Oh Lord! Forgive these sinners, for they have sinned."

"I don't want to see you talking to him again. Or we will tell your mother." She looked at me with blown eyes.

"No, please," I said. I became quiet and bowed my head in shame. I threw the dirty-pictures newspaper -which I still had secretly- in the dustbin when I came out of the office and went to class.

Six months had passed since I had stopped talking to Karan after I was warned not to. For the first month, Sakshi was unhappy with me and reminded me I was crazy. But then she started spending less time with me. Karan and her had become best friends. Much closer than I was. One day I spotted them kissing. That day a strange feeling grew inside me. I felt I hated them. I was cheated.

But Karan belonged to them. And mother had said they were animals. And God doesn't want us to be animals. It was wrong.

I had started taking maths tuitions from my neighbour Balwinder Uncle. He was highly respected in our neighbourhood. Mother had said he would be a great influence on me. He was called a genius.

He taught me in his verandah. He would drink tea and read a thick book called "Samadhi" while stopping in between to give me a new set of questions and clear my previous doubts. He would occasionally, while

reading, close the book and shut his eyes and say,

"Such beautiful prose," or "I see what you did there," and then laugh or sometimes he would just laugh without saying anything. If I would get distracted by this, he would slap me on the back of my head and say "Do what you are told to do."

One day I reached there on time but he wasn't there waiting for me in the verandah. I saw a door open inside a bedroom. Hesitant, I went in.

I could see Balwinder Uncle writing on his study table. A big pile of pages was stacked beside him.

"Come here," he told me.

"I'm writing a book."

"For which class?" I asked.

"No, it is not a school book. It is a storybook. A novel."

"A storybook?"

He went quiet.

"Nothing," he sighed.

"Balwinder you haven't eaten your food," said a female voice from behind a closed door. It must have been aunty.

"Balwinder, the servant will arrive. Eat before that." Her voice sounded urgent.

"No tuition today. Go home." He looked disappointed.

I was about to leave when he said.

"Wait, son. Do you see that wall?"

I looked to my right, and the wall had certificates hanging on it.

"I have worked hard all my life. I have studied hard. I want you to be like that."



Image by Victor Juric

"Balwinder, food!" she called again.

"Go now," he said.

My weeks were lonely without my best friends. They forgot me, I couldn't. One day at school I saw Karan playing the guitar and Sakshi kissed him on the cheek. That day in the tuition I couldn't focus. I wanted to confide in Balwinder Uncle. I loved Sakshi. I wanted a guitar.

But something was different about him today. It took me some time to notice what it was. It was the book he was reading, the cover was red. It had no name.

"Uncle?" He seemed to have not heard me. I choked and pretended like I never said anything.

"Uncle?" Yet, I persisted.

His eyes had become moist. His face was twisting. He was crying.

"We are all that we have for a better tomorrow," he said slowly, staring into blankness.

"We are all that we have. We are not like those animals."

"Uncle...Uncle is Karan an animal? Is Sakshi bad? They were kissing."

"Will you?" His big eyes stared at me. "Never."

"Go bring me a towel."

I went inside to bring him a towel. His eyes were red like the book. The towel was on the wash basin near the kitchen. The kitchen door was closed. From inside I heard the metallic noise of a knife hitting a marble shelf, and then scraping on it. This noise was just like the noise that came from Grandma's kitchen when I was not allowed to enter. I forgot about Sakshi and Karan.

It was the day before my Maths exam. Mother had called that day to remind me to spend an extra hour with Balwinder Uncle.

"Clear your doubts. I want you to know all the answers. Goodbye," she had said on the phone. She was never at home, yet she was always there on the phone. Yet, she cared so much. Yet, she never forgot to give orders. No. I mean never forgot to tell me what was right. She cared so much.

It was raining that day. I went to the verandah but Uncle was not there. Instead, on the floor, pages were spread out like somebody had thrown them. They looked similar to the pile of pages Uncle had on his study table. His storybook. But the pages were half burnt. I could feel something was not right.

The door to the living room from the verandah was open. I went inside the living room and sat on the sofa and waited with books on my lap.

As I waited, I could hear Uncle and Auntie arguing with each other in the kitchen.

"Should we make him see?" Auntie said.

"Yes, he should know. He has begun to doubt," Uncle replied.

"Will he have a taste?"

"He is already fed."

Then they called for me. They knew I was here. They knew I would come. I walked through the corridor and turned a sharp left to enter the kitchen. As I entered, I saw Karan. My

gut couldn't hold. I puked all over the floor.

Balwinder Uncle gave me a tight slap.

"Take that away from here," Auntie shouted looking at my vomit.

It was Karan's head on the marble shelf. His hair twisted into patches and his eyeballs were gone.

"Was it Beckham or was it the dirty pictures?" His face was asking me.

Then it dawned on me that we were animals. They are animals. We are they. I know the answer now. No god, not him. Yes, we are. Yes, we are animals. Karan just questioned.

So, How Are You Doing Today?

OORJA MISHRA



“You look at her, wondering whether you should trust her, you lie back down. Fuck it, what have you got to lose anyway?”

Session 4

You’re sitting in a tired, no, exhausted grey room. The air is stale, tense, the air conditioner uncannily silent, the white light too bright for your sleep-deprived eyes goes click in unequal intervals. Your therapist stares at you, her pen hovering over her notepad, itching to write down any material you give it. You don’t meet her eye. You stare at the ceiling—white or is it grey? Who cares? You close your eyes, maybe you can get a nap in. Your therapist clears her throat, “This is the fourth time.” You don’t look at her; the white spots on the ceiling starting to merge with

each other. “The fourth time what?” “The fourth time you’ve taken a nap on this couch in my office.” “So?” “So, it’s your money, and ultimately your choice, but Vani was under the impression that you wanted to get better; and she told me the same.” Vani’s name gets your attention; so, she already knows everything.

“Was really trying to get better.” “Why the past tense?” your therapist asks you as she scribbles on her notepad. “What’s the point? It’s not like it’s getting better. In fact, my parents don’t even think I have a problem. They think I’m burning a hole in their wallets just

for the attention. Why are you so expensive by the way, if you're trying to help people?" you say as you look at her with raised brows.

"Because life isn't fair."

That gets a snigger out of you. You throw your legs in the air and sit upright. "What do you want to know?"

"That's up to you. Why do you think your parents think you don't have a problem?"

"Oh, because they're assholes."

"Also, because they don't know anything," you add as an after-thought, almost inaudible.

"What do they not know?"

You look at her, wondering whether you should trust her; you lie back down. Fuck it, what have you got to lose anyway?

Session 8

30 pages into her notebook, your therapist finally asks you, "Tell me about these nightmares."

"I don't know what's there to tell."

"When did they start?"

You scrounge up your eyes trying to pinpoint the exact origin of your nightmares. Was it after a month you started doing cocaine or was it a month before? Before, definitely before.

"Before the drugs."

"So, did you start doing the drugs because of the nightmares?"

You take a minute to reply. You couldn't exactly blame the whole thing on the nightmares, they're terrible, but you did actually like the drugs. "Maybe. Partly, I guess."

"So why did you stop? Have the nightmares stopped?"

"No. I stopped because I had to. Almost dying will do that to you."

"But you keep saying you want to die. Isn't that contradictory?"

"I guess. But I don't want to die like that."

"So, what happens in these nightmares?"

You shut your eyes. You can feel the shiver in your body. You close your fist—a futile attempt at trying to stabilise yourself. Your therapist pushes a glass of water towards you. You ignore it. You lie down on the couch. Beads of sweat are forming on your forehead, your breathing is strained and you need to leave. "I need air."

"There's enough air; you need to tell me what happens in these nightmares."

"I can't."

"Try."

You sit up, your arms cradling your knees. "There's always this man, I can't ever remember his face. Can't see it. He's always over me, and I feel this pressure, and my hands won't move and my feet are immobile, and I'm always..."

You look away, shame taking over your body. "And I'm always silent."

"You never scream in these nightmares?"

"No. I'm always silent. And then I wake up. And I can't go back to sleep."

"How often does this happen?"

"Every night."



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Session 11

You haven't slept in five days. And you look like you've lost five kilos. Your body seems to no longer be yours and you carry around a weight. Shame? Fear? Anger? Who the fuck knows.

"You changed the couch."

"I was told the last one wasn't very comfortable."

"Yeah, it sucked."

"When was the last time you slept?"

"I don't know, I think it was five days ago."

"Nightmares?"

"Yes." You pause, you think if you should tell her, you almost open your mouth to speak, but change your mind. "At least now my parents think I do have a problem and it's not an act."

"Did you tell them why you think you have the problem?"

"No."

"Why?"

Because you are ashamed.

"Because they wouldn't understand."

"Okay, you tell them when you're ready. You have time."

Maybe you'll never have to. Maybe you have run out of time. Maybe that's how you get better.

Session 13

The bags under your eyes have an identity of their own. You're now on so much medication, it's like you're back on drugs again. Your parents no longer know what to say to you, your friends have gotten tired of your 'sadness' and you are now an alcoholic.

"I've decided I'm not going back."

"To Bombay?"

"Yes, to Bombay."

"Why did you make this decision?"

"I can't go back to that place. I can't wake up screaming at night, I can't constantly worry about ODing. I can't look at those people again, and I... I don't think I can survive. There, I mean."

"Have you told your parents? What do they think?"

You look at your therapist but she knows you're looking through her, your face is now just a shadow and your mother's words ring in your ears. "They told me not to be weak. My mother thinks I'm disappointing her, because she raised a strong daughter and I'm giving up," you chuckle as your therapist smiles at you.

"It's not easy for everybody to understand this disease."

"She's seen me, you know, she's seen me not be able to get out of bed all day, not have the energy to even

take a shower, be exhausted all the time, and yet not be able to sleep, to rest, to even stop my brain from thinking about..."

"About?"

"Nothing. I don't understand how she doesn't get it. How she can so clearly dismiss me, categorise me as weak. Anyway, weak or not, I'm not going back, and she knows she can't change my mind."

"How are the suicidal thoughts? In control?"

"Yeah."

Session 15

"What was the trigger?"

You laugh, you can't remember the last time you laughed, but you laugh. It's almost maniacal, you're laughing so hard, so loud that your stomach hurts and there are tears in your eyes. "I'm so sorry, I know it's not funny—" "But I can't stop—" "Oh my god, what is wrong with me—"

Your therapist just looks at you and scribbles in her notepad, she's now on the last page of her notepad. She waits for you to settle down, and pushes a box of napkins and a glass of water.

You dab your eyes with the napkin and sip on your water. "There wasn't a trigger."

"So, it was planned?"

"No."

"Then there must have been a trigger."

"I just woke up and decided that was it. There was no trigger, no planning, nothing. I just got up, and decided not to participate in my own life

anymore."

"Why?"

You fall silent. You're carefully folding the napkin into small squares. "I just realised I've never cried in your office."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I don't cry in front of people."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not weak."

"Does your mother still think you're weak?"

Your mother doesn't know what to think anymore. She came with you to your new college, claiming that she wanted to see the campus. She doesn't let you lock your doors anymore, she bangs on your bathroom door if you take too long in the shower. She keeps your meds under lock and key and only gives you one when you need to take them. Your mother is terrified. And you're responsible.

"No."

"Why did you laugh?"

"What else am I supposed to do?"

That night you go home and cry in front of your mother.

Session 18

You look a little better, you ate today, your sleeping pills have finally started working and your mother can joke around you now. She saw you laugh at her joke yesterday and burst into tears, and then she hugged you, for almost an eternity.

"How's the new college?"

"Weird."

"What's weird?"

"I don't feel like myself. I mean I haven't in a very long time, but I can no longer talk to people. I just sit quietly in a corner and hope nobody notices me."

"Why?"

"You tell me. How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"Why wouldn't you know?"

"Do you ever not answer a question with another question?"

"Do I?"

You both laugh. "Come on, give me one straight answer. I've had enough of the introspection."

"I can't give you the answers, you need to figure it out."

"Bullshit."

"I know, it is."

Session 20

"Have you made any friends, yet?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Two. They're nice, but I never know what to say to them."

"Are you still drinking every day?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"You can't replace one crutch with another. You need to take a break from drinking."

"I thought you weren't supposed to give me any answers?"

"Stop drinking."

"Fine."

You know she's right. You do need to stop drinking. But you really like drinking. When you drink, you can talk to people, you don't second guess every word that comes out of your mouth and you feel needed.

You're the fun girl, the one who jokes around, the one who's up for anything, nobody gets tired of your sadness when you're fun you. But she's right, you do need to stop drinking. The piercing pain in your upper right abdomen is getting worse.

"What about sex?"

"It's amazing, you should try it."

Your therapist raises an eyebrow and looks at you pointedly, "What about sex?"

"Under control."

"Sure?"

"Yes. Once I figured out why I was using sex as a crutch, it was easy to get it under control."

"What did you figure out?"

"I wanted my agency back. Sex was mine to have, my choice, of who, when, where and why. I wanted him to disappear, that pressure to disappear. I was fucking him out of my system."

"Did it work?"

"You think I would have tried to kill myself if it'd worked? Killing yourself isn't exactly a recreational activity, you know. You should know that you're a therapist."

She just smiles at you. She's so infuriatingly calm, it annoys the fuck out of you. She keeps looking at you, keeps smiling at you. You let out a sigh, she might be annoying, but she's effective. "No, it did not work."

"Do you still feel shame?"

No, you just feel rage. You constantly want to punch a wall, you jump at a sudden touch and you constantly look over your shoulder.

"I want to kill him. I know, it's not a solution, but I really want to."

"You should start dancing again."

Is she stupid? What the fuck kind of suggestion is that? You look at her with disgust.

"Trust me. I know it sounds like a terrible suggestion to you right now, but you should start dancing again, training again."

This woman has lost her mind.

Session 22

"You were right."

You say as you settle into the blue couch, sweaty and almost delirious.

"I'm right about a lot of things, what is it this time?"

"I started dancing again. Going to class, an hour, three days a week, I stopped drinking, I only drink in social settings, once a month, not more than four drinks. I smoke only 3 cigarettes a day, and I am not angry all the time."

"What changed?"

"After you told me to start dancing again, I decided never to come back to you again, I thought you had lost your mind, I wanted to ask for all my money back—" Your therapist laughs, and you burst out laughing with her. "Then my mother told me I should at least test out your idea before plotting to sue you, so just to keep all my bases clear, I booked a trial class and made the effort of going. And it was the best thing I ever did. I felt like my skin was mine, I was exhausted, but good exhausted, different exhausted."

"So, you went back?"

"Yes, and I joined the dance society in

college."

"Do you want another crazy suggestion, of course at the risk of me losing my practice?"

"Shoot," you grin at her.

"Start writing again."

Your grin widens as you produce a diary from your purse, "way ahead of you."

Your therapist instantly gets up and high five's you, you both smile at each other. "Thank you."

Your therapist scribbles on the last page of her notepad, you lie down on the couch.

"So, tell me about your day."



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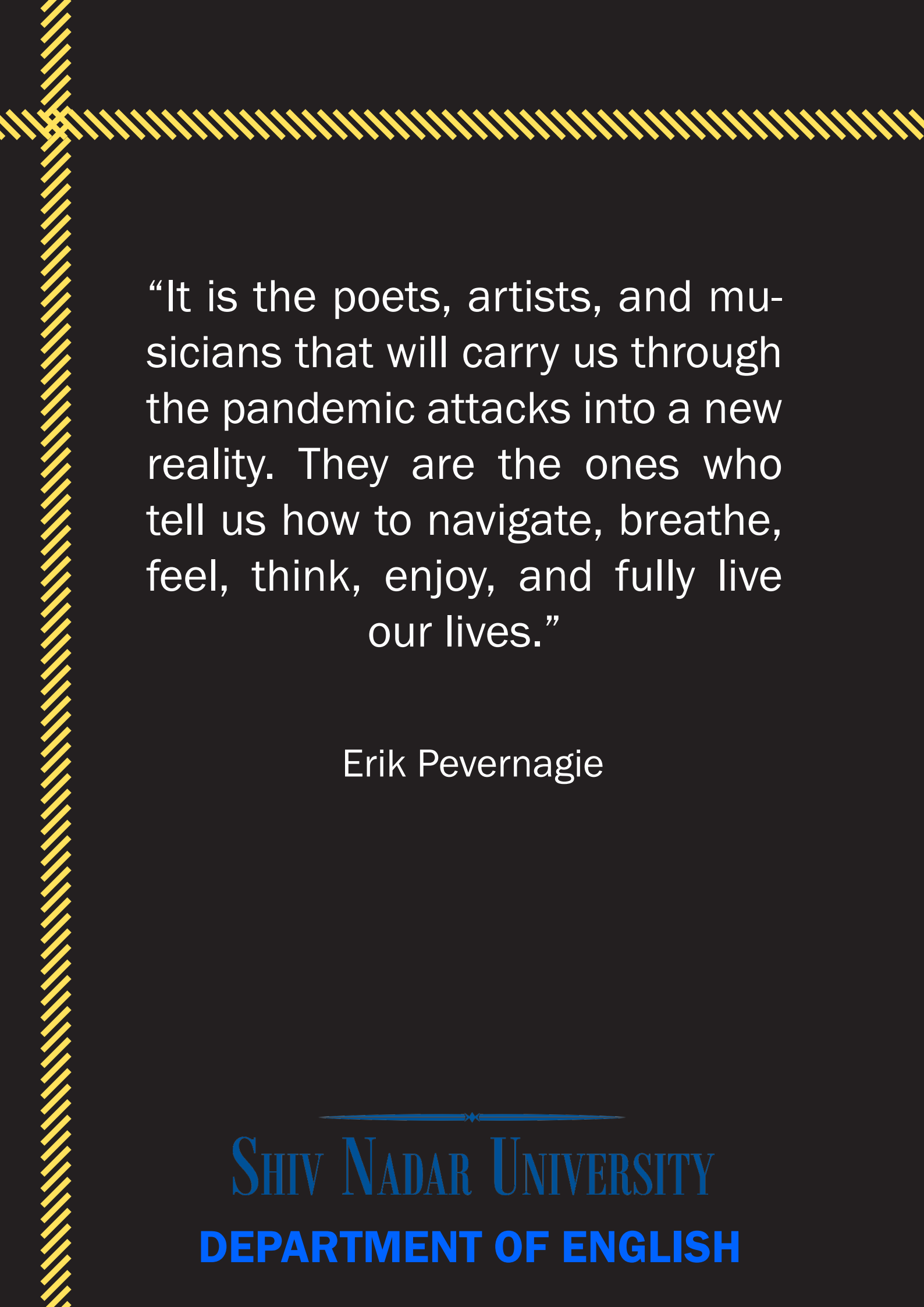
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Erik Pevernagie

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