

A Memoir of Moments, Mishaps, and Meaning

Looking Back

Mihir Chakravarti



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Stories Matter

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Dedication

I dedicate this book of mine to my long-gone Baba and Ma(moni) who had showered me with their abundant love and helped me be what I have been.

Also by this author

LAUGHABLE LOVE and Other Stories

Foreword

Looking back is all I do these days. Mostly. As I know now, in my eighties, that all the interesting and fun things happened way back then, the times gone by.

So here's a few of them, in the form of short stories I have written, recalling events from those times that will not happen again.

I trust and hope that you, dear reader will enjoy reading these as much as I got writing them.

Contents

Light in the Fridge.....	1
The Class Bully	6
The Sly Inquisitor	9
Dot Dot Dot.....	16
The Interview	26
Dutch Courage	39
No Monkey Business	43
Crow at the Window	49
A Very Strange Tale	52
The Time of the Day	71
A Smokey Tale.....	83
OCD.....	105
Not Welcome	113
Moving back in Time	119
Song of the Leaves.....	125
Odd.....	128
Quantum of Solace.....	133
The Stalker	137
The Pull of Love	140
Bottoms Up! Up?.....	143
About the Author	150

Light in the Fridge

We got our first fridge in our house ages ago, when I was around ten or so.

That was a pre-historic era, when acquiring a fridge in one's own house was quite something. It was like a status symbol, although I wasn't familiar with the term then.

I wasted no time running out to tell my friends that we had got ourselves a fridge in the house. It caused instant envy among them. A number of them ceased being my friends from then on. I didn't understand then. I had only wanted to share my joy with them. I had so much to learn.

After the first flush of ecstasy had settled down, we gradually got used to having the fridge in the house, using it to store bottles of cold water and make ice cubes which I would often prise out from the ice trays and suck on. I had learnt to be smug with my distant friends, to ward off their often not-so-veiled barbs and scoffs.

Every time I would return home in the evenings after my playing and running about with my friends (those who still remained so) the first thing I'd do after washing off the dirt and grime from my face and hands was to yank open the door of the fridge, jerk out a bottle of cold water and the Tims' Orange Squash bottle stored in the shelf within and make myself a tall cool delicious drink with an ice cube floating in it. That was the high point for me during a hot summer day. My habit was forming

in that distant day of what I'd do later in life, after I got back from the office. Only it wouldn't be Tims' Orange Squash then.

I never failed to be surprised by the light that would automatically come on as I opened the door to the fridge and would shut down as I closed it. It was a little game I used to play with myself: I'd switch off the room light in the evening when it had grown dark outside and then open and shut the fridge door on and off. Together with the light inside I would be splashed with a blast of cold air as the door of the fridge opened and then vanish with the light as I swung the door shut. This I would keep up till my mother would catch me at it and then I'd get a sound slap on my head to stop playing with the fridge.

My young mind often wondered how the light in the fridge would turn off by itself as the door was closed. How did I know that the inside was really dark when the fridge was closed? How could *anybody* know for that matter? Supposing the light still remained! Nobody had actually seen inside the fridge when it was closed. This was a riddle that kept me wondering at night while I'd try to sleep. I couldn't, for the life of me, find the answer to this riddle.

Finally, unable to suppress my curiosity, I asked my mother. She looked at me queerly and then severely (she was a very severe, no-nonsense type of mother) and sternly said, "Go do your studies and stop with these silly questions."

Thus chastened, I'd go back to my table and pretend to open my books. But the worry never left me. Then I decided to ask my father. That was of course a very

difficult proposition. He was an extremely busy lawyer trying to set up his practice and we'd hardly see him. Only at dinner tables during which he'd wear a stern expression and keep his head bowed down over his plate with a frowning, worried look (thinking about his so many clients' affairs maybe). And he had a temper, on top of that. I'd be scared of approaching him for anything, let alone my "silly" questions.

But ask him I did. One day I found him in a jolly mood: he was chatting and laughing with my mother, a pretty rare sight. It was a Sunday afternoon and they had retired in the living room after lunch and both were in a good mood.

I sidled up to my father and asked him my million-dollar question. He hadn't heard me at first and made me repeat, "Baba - how do you know for sure that the light in the fridge goes off by itself when you shut the door?" His mind must have been elsewhere and he looked quizzically at my mother as to what kind of a question *that* was. My mother got her chance to immediately raise her voice and complain that I had been pestering her all week long with this same old silly question. If I put my mind in my studies, I'd learn something worthwhile. My father tilted his head back and roared with laughter and then ruffled my hair. He said if I was a good boy and stop annoying my mother, he'd take me for ice cream to Ferrazzinis.

Ice cream at Ferrazzinis! This was *manna* from heaven. Ferrazzinis on Lindsay Street in the early fifties was one deliciously cool Swiss ice cream parlour where they had the best ice creams in the world. To be treated

there was an earthly paradise that a boy of ten could only dream of.

My father really kept his promise and took me to Ferrazzinis. That very afternoon itself. And I forgot all about my light in the fridge.

Then I got my chance. It had already been three months that the fridge had come and it was time for the first free service by the company technician. I wished and prayed that he would come on a day when I didn't have school. I had made up my mind to ask him about the light, and surely, being a technician, he would know. I was convinced by now that my parents actually didn't know the answer themselves, and to hide their ignorance from their inquisitive little boy they were resorting to their adult tricks.

The technician finally came on a Saturday afternoon, well after I had got back from school. I watched him do his servicing from the start and then when my mother was not around, I asked him my priceless question. To my delight, he didn't act surprised or taken aback or have any of the reactions that adults were displaying all this time. He showed me the little switch on the edge and how, when the door shut, the little button would get pressed and the light would go off. Such a simple answer! And I had been worrying myself sick with it all this time. I was so, so relieved. I looked up at the service man with ever such grateful looks that he chuckled a bit to himself and then got back to his work.

Now that I knew, I felt like a king. Knowledge was power. I could show off now to many of my friends, who I bet, didn't know the answer themselves.

Now all this was when I was ten.

*

Then years passed, and decades rolled by, we crossed a century even, stepping from the twentieth to the twenty-first. I had forgotten the incident.

Now that I am inevitably and inexorably reaching that final post, memories from deep inside and distant past keep bubbling up, as though from the deep ocean of my past.

Of late this question has again popped up in my mind. I ask myself often, that switch or no switch, does the light *really* stay out once the fridge door is shut? How did the technician know for sure? Had he actually been inside a fridge after it had been shut? Has anybody?

I even asked my wife one day recently. She looked at me exactly as my mother did, and I knew right away that I had made a bloomer. I make so many with her these days that I hope she'll not mind and maybe even forget that I asked her.

But seriously, I have to admit that I have no answer to that. I doubt if anybody else does. This, I believe shall remain as one of the many mysteries of mankind that will forever remain an enigma.

The Class Bully

He was ugly as a toad. This Anglo-Indian boy, two years my senior, but in the same class, Vth Form in school, where he stayed, being unable to pass for two straight years. I was fourteen and Moses, John Moses, was sixteen and a head taller and stupid as an ox.

His passion was picking on boys smaller in size and weaker than him, particularly the Bengali boys in class whom he despised venomously. He'd go out of his way to be mean and cruel to them. His favourite trick was shoving us against the wall and trampling on our shoes and yelling nastily "Hey you stupid Bengie", (a highly derogative term for us Bengalis, then in use by Anglo-Indian boys who wanted to be mean), "Get the hell out of my way." So saying, he'd just push us out of his way or bang our heads against the wall and walk on.

This was routine for him, an everyday affair. We couldn't complain to our teachers because they would all tell us to settle this amongst ourselves. There was no one we could turn to.

Every day I would get back home and cry in my pillow seething with fury at the day's outrage and humiliation.

Then, one day I made a decision. I said to myself that this must stop. And come what may I'd face up to this bully and challenge him. Once and for all. I knew I would be badly thrashed up. But I was determined to give back a hit or two too. Because all this daily humiliation was

getting too much to bear. It was worse than even dying. I decided that even if I got killed in the process, I'd face it.

The next day, during break (interval) I saw him in the passage, coming towards me with a wicked smile on his face. I stopped right in front of him, and looking up said "Hey Moses, I have something to tell you."

He stopped dead and his eyebrows shot up, surprised at my dare. I told him again, keeping my voice level and calm, "I want you to stop this stupid bullying right now. You hear?"

I could see he was really surprised. He had never expected that I would stop him and talk to him in this cold voice, fury dripping from every syllable, and challenge his superiority. His first reaction was to raise his hand and double it into a fist. All ready to smash into my face.

I told him, "Go ahead and hit me you nitwit." I was ready for that. I half raised my right foot off the floor. I knew that if I could land one swift and well-aimed kick right between his legs and pulverise his scrotum, he'd be emasculated for life. I might even kill him. I didn't care. Even that was good. He noticed the movement of my right foot, all poised and ready to let fly. That really shook him up. He lowered his fist and backed away quickly. Then turned tail and just fled down the passage.

I yelled at his fleeing figure, "Come back here you stupid moron." He just disappeared.

That was the end of it all. After that incident he would give me a wide berth whenever he saw me in the

passage or on the playing field. He'd never even meet my eyes. I knew then that I had vanquished him for good.

That was one valuable lesson I learnt in life. Always stand up to a bully and never back down.

February, 2022

The Sly Inquisitor

I won't forget the slyness of the elderly.

It all happened many, many years ago. When I was eighteen. In those times we weren't as smart or savvy as the eighteen-year-olds are today.

I had just cleared my Admission test. To get into engineering, the Bengal Engineering College, Shibpur (as it was then known). It was the foremost institute in those days, perhaps second only to the IITs that were coming up all over the country. The nearest one was at Kharagpur. I had cleared the test for that one too. But my doting parents wanted their one and only close to home and had ruled out Kharagpur without even checking with me. Parents never checked anything with their offspring then. I wonder still why did they then encourage me to sit for the admission to Kharagpur. Perhaps to flaunt to their friends and other relatives how bright their boy was.

If truth be told, I never much cared to go for engineering. My first love was English literature and Fine Arts. But as I said, in those days an eighteen-year-old didn't know "what was best for him". Only parents knew. They were the chosen ones who were privy to such special insight into their son's future. Or even their nature.

Anyway, here I was, all prepped and ready to face the final hurdle, the viva voce. By no less than the Principal himself, famed as the Black Jewel of Glasgow.

(He was pitch dark in complexion and had also come out of Glasgow University with record marks and high scholastic achievements).

Principal AC Roy was known far and wide for not only his brilliant academic career, but also the able way he administered his college and all the vast horde of students in the live-in hostels adorning the big spread, the campus.

Not only his fame, even otherwise he was highly respected and revered by the students, other faculty members and also outside, in the entire academic community. But his name also sprang fear among the students as one of the strictest disciplinarians who used to rule over his domain like a King.

He would brook no nonsense from any quarter and would and did turn out any student found to be causing any major disturbance in the campus. His favourite diktat to such an errant boy was “Pack up your bags and baggage and leave!” That was final. No appeals, nothing could persuade that Iron Man to waver and change his mind.

Not at all like what happened much later, when anything called discipline and respect for teachers in the country totally broke down and disappeared.

I was to face such a man across the table on the appointed day and hour. Needless to say, we were all boning up on all our GK (General Knowledge) and outside information, some even as arcane and irrelevant as what was the annual yield of crops in Argentina or what was the capital of Ghana. But of course, all that

was totally unnecessary. As it turned out. The aim of the viva voce was to visually assess what kind of a boy was entering college, his general deportment, whether he was smart and/or savvy enough to face an interview in future as he eventually would have to when starting a career, without his nerves giving way etc etc.

The D-Day came at last. I was ready from the morning. My father had taken me to Shibpur, crossing the Howrah Bridge (what a marvel of structural engineering, I thought while over it). Soon we were there in the lush surrounding of green meadows and rows of hostels, many newly built, shining in the morning sun. We had arrived well before time. I took leave of my father (waiting in the car) and headed for the main college building.

Nearing the Principal's office, I came onto a long waiting area where a number of young boys like me were also awaiting The Call. Absolute silence prevailed. The only thing you could hear was the combined heartbeats going lub-dub, lub-dub. None of us spoke a word to each other. Not a breath was wasted on small talk. We were waiting much as sacrificial lambs do in the slaughter house. Every fifteen or twenty minutes a boy would emerge from the inner sanctum wearing either a smile of triumph or a hangdog expression. A much-harried clerk would also pop out with a sheaf of papers, and after giving us all a once-over, call out a name. The boy would spring up from his seat, give a nervous little cough, and walk in. Then again, total silence reigned till he came out, followed by that clerk with the papers.

Soon my name was called out. I was ready. I decided to show no outward sign of nervousness, and taking a deep breath strode in after a brief knock.

It was a huge cavernous office with a black mahogany desk at the other end and the Principal sat there, in full formal attire, a charcoal-grey suit with a bright silver tie. His spectacles, a gold frame, glinted under the bright overhead lights. The desk was bare, an acre of shiny gleaming glass plate over it. The Principal had a longish register open in front and he had a (gold again) ball point in his hand he was bobbing up and down. Those were the only signs of officialdom visible to me. I was so keyed up then that I took in all these little details at first glance. My sensory nerves must have been working on high-alert to have done so.

The Principal looked up from his register and gave me a bright warm smile of welcome (my God! I thought) and cheerily sang out “Hello M_, come right up and take a seat.”

The smile had a strange effect of instantly calming my nerves. (“Seems to be a nice man after all,” I thought, “not at all like I’d heard.”)

Then he put down that register and started chatting with me. I mean literally “chatting”. No question-answer session. He asked me what my favourite subjects were in school, whether I had any brothers or sisters at home etc. He asked me why I was choosing engineering as a profession and what my interests really were like. When he heard literature, he sat up and asked me who my favourite author was, questions like that. By this time, I was totally at ease with this fella.

Then he asked what are the things I had noticed on the way to the college that morning. I told him the most striking thing that I had seen that morning was the Howrah Bridge. I had marvelled at the feat of engineering that had gone into making it. I went on a bit, I guess. He let me do that and then, suddenly he asked me, ever so gently, as though it were a passing thought - "Can you tell me M_, what that bridge is made of?"

I really wasn't ready for that. He looked at me, and in a conspiratorial mode, as though passing on a clue, silently mouthed the word "aluminium".

The fresh aluminium paint on the bridge that morning, under the dazzling sun was still in my mind. And I had just been waxing eloquence on the engineering skill that had gone into erecting that massive structure spanning the wide Hooghly without any supporting pillars in between.

The aluminium paint, the whispered clue, all combined together and I blurted out "Aluminium, sir. The bridge is made of aluminium."

"WHAT?", the Principal nearly jumped out of his chair. And I jumped out of my skin.

The loud surprise coming from the Principal shook me out of my reverie. The man was all frowns and scowls now. Gone were all the friendly looks. The tiger was coming out of the cave I thought, utterly dismayed.

"It's a *steel* structure M_, *steel*." He stressed on the word "steel".

“Those are steel joists and struts and beams criss-crossing the structure. You said *aluminium!*” the Principal explained with a much-pained expression on his face. I knew right away that I had made a major blunder. I attempted to hurriedly make amends.

“Y-Yes sir. Of course, sir. Those are steel beams. M-my mistake sir...”

The Principal held up his hand to stop me. He looked down, gravely shaking his head at his Register and picked up his gold ballpoint.

I sat and sat on that chair, turned to stone. Time flew. I didn’t know what to do. After a while he looked up again from his Register. What was he thinking? His earlier look had returned. From a look of total disbelief at what he had just heard me answer, he was again back to his normal friendly self. In fact, he had a twinkle in his eye as he looked at me a while, a long while. I lowered my gaze. I couldn’t keep looking at those extra bright eyes boring into mine. I thought I saw a sly smile break on his lips.

“Very well M_,” he finally said shutting the Register, “it was nice talking with you.”

The viva voce was over. I stood up. Bowed stiffly and said “Good day to you sir” and walked out of his office.

Coming out I knew I had blown it. There was no engineering in store for me. I don’t remember if I came out of the office “wearing a hangdog expression” or not, or with a head held high. Everything got blurred during those moments.

My greatest fear was what would I say to my parents. After passing the written test if I had flunked my viva voce it'd mean a great loss of face to them.

Secretly though, I was kind of happy. Now I wouldn't have to study engineering and I could go for the subject I held dear to me.

But I guess life had other plans for me.

When I look back and think about that gross bloomer of mine, I would also blame the sly manner in which the Principal, almost with a wink, had mouthed that word "Aluminium". If he hadn't, I know I would have said "steel". It had been like a magician who forces a card on to you, his chosen card, and then tells you without looking what you have picked.

I think in the end the Principal had also realised that he had deliberately played a mind game with a nervous teenager into giving him the wrong answer.

That is what eventually made him decide to put a tick mark against my name on that Register of his.

Oh, I so wish he hadn't, the sly inquisitor.

Dot Dot Dot.....

You must be wondering at the title. I don't blame you. Let me tell you about this little gem from my past.

The year was 1959 or '60. I was then in my first or second year in the engineering college I went to in Shibpur, Howrah. It was then known as Bengal Engineering College, a premier institute of engineering in the country. One had to get through a really difficult written test followed by a rigorous personal interview by the then principal AC Roy also known as the 'black jewel' of Glasgow, as he had a very dark skin and had secured record marks, still unbeaten, in Glasgow where he had done his engineering. This AC Roy was one formidable character, known far and wide in the academia as a nonsense and strict disciplinarian, who by a mere look at an erring student could make him dirty his pants. No kidding.

Anyway, this place of learning was a residential college set amidst a lush green spread on the riverfront. In this green oasis one entered, after traversing the filth and squalor of Shibpur, a dingy, overcrowded, dirty town of Howrah district, there were open playing fields, tanks and with numerous hostels, where we students lived for the four years we would need to get through college and acquire a degree in engineering.

Spending nights and days side by side for this prolonged stay away from our homes, a wonderful friendship grew up among our class and hostel mates.

Apart from our studies in the difficult subjects we had to tackle in order to pass, we had a lot of free time, and more importantly, an absolute freedom from the rigorous and strict upbringing for many of us at home. Understandably, quite a number of us went astray and couldn't get through. They were given one or two chances to make good in their failed papers, but if you flunked even those, you were stamped as CNR. This was the most godawful punishment, like the ultimate capital punishment a criminal faces. CNR meant "cannot repeat", and once you got *that* stamped against your name, you had to "pack up your bags and baggage", (a favourite expression of Principal AC Roy) and leave. That was final. No appeals lay against that diktat.

This was the ambience then, where we were to spend four years of our late teens and early twenties, a time when we dreamt big and thought that the world would be in our pockets once we passed out. It was such an age and time.

Now let me tell you what this story is all about. We had a subject known as Industrial Chemistry. This was taught to us by a professor (actually he was only an assistant professor, not yet having been promoted as a full professor), who had a mannerism we all picked up on soon after our classes had begun.

We were a merciless lot, we students, in homing in on particular quirks or oddities among our teachers and named them suitably. These names stuck and became widely known among the student community. Few of us ever knew or even cared to remember the actual names of our professors. We would device ways to mimic them

in the privacy of our hostel rooms and break into whoops of delightful laughter at the teachers' foibles and idiosyncrasies.

Now this professor, the teacher I'm talking about, had this habit of using the expression "you see" a lot. His sentences were peppered with these "you see"s. He would begin each of his explanations of a topic with an "you see" and go on with those "you see"s all the way to the end. At first, we didn't really think much of this. But later it began to sort of become more and more apparent. Till we all began noticing this affinity of the professor for this expression.

At times it was downright funny. For example, while describing the workings of an iron smelting furnace, he would tell the class "You see boys, all the chemical reaction goes on inside the furnace, that you cannot see from the outside, you see?"

Like this, the prof would go on and on and on throughout his lecture. We had by this time all begun noticing this habit of this professor.

Back at the hostel one evening when we had all been discussing our various teachers and making fun of them, as boys in a hostel often do, someone said that this Prof UC (we had begun referring to this professor by these initials that we had already endowed him with) must be saying this "you see" at least five hundred times on an average in each of his lectures. One of us had to demur. Or else how could an observation like this be allowed to pass unchallenged and undebated?

Immediately a few of us said “No no - I don’t think it could be *that* many”. The fellow who had first quantified the number as five hundred stuck to his guns, and with a loud voice announced, “Of course it is. It’s well over five hundred. I have some sense of number. Not like you, you dimwits.”

In the hostel we merrily called each other such bad names, many far worse and quite unprintable. None of us minded. It was all in friendship and general camaraderie.

Soon that point developed into a heated debate amongst us. One group said five hundred and more and the others insisted that it had to be far less. There was a wager among us, serious betting, as you have in cricket these days.

As money had now come into the picture, we couldn’t just laugh it off and forget about it. This important issue had to be resolved. A lot of money was riding on the outcome.

But how? Who could keep a count of the exact number of times the prof uttered those words in a lecture of his? And how exactly was the thing to be done? These were the vital issues that had to be sorted out first before we could proceed any further.

This is how we finally decided that such a seemingly impossible feat could be accomplished. We would select one of us, who would, in the next class of Prof UC, under the pretext of taking down the notes of the lecture, be putting down dots on his exercise book. Every time those fateful two words were uttered, our count-keeper would

jab down on his exercise book with his pencil or pen and put a single dot or a squiggle mark. He mustn't miss a single mark. Nor must he put an extra one when the prof hadn't said "you see". All this needed a fearful amount of concentration. This was now serious affair. Money was involved, wasn't it? A lot would depend on the outcome.

At the end of the class, back in the relaxed atmosphere of the hostel, the counting would be done under close scrutiny of the two sharply divided groups among us, the over-five-hundreds and the under-five-hundreds. Almost like the counting of votes after an election, in the presence of opposing political parties watching on like hawks.

We had also to ensure that the counter would have to be neutral. He mustn't be among the wagerers. He couldn't have an interest and must keep count fairly and squarely.

The most diminutive boy in our class was Jayanta Basak. He stood all of four foot eleven and a half inches in his stockinged feet. He insisted on that half inch over the eleven so that he could pass himself off as a five-footer. Quite naturally, the name he earned among us was 'Giant'. That also sounded like the Hindi version of his name and so he couldn't very much mind.

"Hey Giant," we all called out in unison. He was a natural choice for us, as being the smallest in size, he was nearly invisible to the lecturing professor in the class, his head barely making it over the desk in front. So we all zeroed in on our one and only Jayanta Basak.

“Look Giant,” we instructed him, “here’s what you do in the next class of UC. You’re going to sit right up front and concentrate hard on the lecture, and note down with dots..”

“Yes, yes, I know all that” Jayanta stopped us short. “What do you fellas take me for? I know what you all want me to do. But could I actually do it? It’s going to be one helluva tough job to keep a track, you know.” Jayanta sounded a little dubious.

He had to be coaxed and cajoled into accepting the honourable role of being a most trusted and disinterested boy among us. Someone who could be depended upon not to let us down. He was our only hope, his size being the prime consideration.

But mere words wouldn’t satisfy him. He was far too savvy for that. He might have been short in height. But there was no mistaking his IQ. It was high, really high. He knew his price all right. Eventually we had to promise him a royal treat, drinks included, at any plush restaurant on Park Street of his choice the following weekend.

“Done”, we all agreed, jointly breathing a sigh of relief. Without Jayanta, we would have been left without a truly reliable counter who could do the ‘dotting’ on his note book right under the nose of the professor, yet totally unnoticed.

We got him a new exercise book, specially meant for this job and a set of freshly sharpened pencils which he could use while doing the dotting. He had to have more

than one in his pocket in case one broke in the course of his furiously jabbing and stabbing on the exercise book.

*

Then the D-day arrived. We had a class in Industrial Chemistry in the afternoon session.

We were all in a state of suppressed excitement. All too often we would keep asking Jayanta if he was ready. He was. Ready and primed to do the job that lay ahead.

Our classes were of forty-minute duration. In that forty-minute period the task at hand was to count exactly how many times those two-word-expressions were used by the professor.

Jayanta took his place right up front, facing the blackboard where the professor could sketch diagrams or write out formulae and equations that we could copy down in our exercise books.

The class began. We all went quiet. Absolute quiet descended in the entire classroom save the droning lecture from the professor's mouth. We all maintained the quiet, holding our collective breaths, so as not to disturb Jayanta in his furious state of intense concentration to not miss out on a single one of those "you see"s.

Apart from the professor's lecture the only sound we could all hear was the intermittent staccato sound of a pencil-point hitting the hard surface of paper on the wooden desktop over which Jayanta had lain open his new exercise book, his pencil poised over it. Truth to tell,

the professor himself was a little surprised at that pin-drop silence that prevailed in the classroom that day.

Usually, on other days, there would be a thin layer of subdued murmur running throughout the class, some of the back-benchers whispering among themselves softly chatting, somebody coughing, sound of feet shuffling, you know, the general backdrop of sound that is always there in any classroom. The professor must have thought that the quality of his lecture was so good that he held the entire class in thrall. Ha! Little did he know what was going on.

The lecture drew to an end. A beaming professor, utterly satisfied with the way he had had his class mesmerised with the “brilliance” of his lecture wound up with these words.

“You boys today have been very attentive I notice. You see, this is the kind of attention I expect from my boys, you see? I am very happy you see, with your attention to my words, you see. I also notice you all have been faithfully taking down notes of my lecture. You see, that is most diligent of you. These notes will help you through, you see?”

Tap, tap stabbed Jayanta’s pencil-point, sounding like a lonely woodpecker pecking away in the silence of the afternoon.

Then the professor sauntered over to the desk where Jayanta sat still with his head bowed down over his exercise book, the pencil held high in the air, ready to go. The professor reached over and picked up Jayanta’s exercise book.

We all gasped in horror. What would happen now? As the professor turned over the pages of Jayanta's exercise book his words of happiness spluttered, and then died. His jaw fell open, nearly hitting the floor. He gave a pathetic croak - "What's all this?" He was looking at page after page of neatly lined rows of dots. He lifted aloft the open exercise book for us all to see. All we could see, as we knew beforehand, was an endless sequence of dots and dots. Nothing but a sea of dots.

There had already begun a stifled twitter running among us, rippling along the tiers of benches where we sat.

Then loud and clear, and totally unafraid, Jayanta's voice rang out, "These are the notes I took down sir."

"WHAT!" bellowed the professor, getting his voice back.

"Notes? Notes of my lecture, you, you,...!" the splutter had come back.

Bold and beautiful, not in the slightest bit perturbed, Jayanta, drawing himself up to his full height, explained:

"Yes sir, my notes. In shorthand. You see sir, your lecture goes so fast I have to take down everything you say in shorthand."

Wow! What a comeback! An absolute classic!

The professor's indignation collapsed, like a punctured balloon after this. He just hemmed and hawed and coughed to clear his throat and swallow the bile that must have been rising in him.

He knew he was beaten. But he had to have the last word in before he left the class. We let him have that. He was after all our teacher, wasn't he? We had to give him the chance to save his face. Shaking his head, while giving back Jayanta's exercise book back to him he said in an admonishing tone

"No no Jayanta. This won't do. You see, I want you to write your notes normally. I can assure you that from the next class I shall speak slowly enough so that you all have no difficulty, to take down my notes, you see?"

"No sir, never again sir," Jayanta assured the professor in all earnestness, "Thank you sir."

This had indeed been one narrow escape. Anything could have gone wrong. Had the professor seized the exercise book and marched off to lodge a complaint against Jayanta to the higher authority (read the dreaded Principal), Jayanta's future would have been sealed. Only his fearlessness and quick wit saved not only Jayanta himself, but all of us too, from a scathing condemnation from all the other faculty members.

Jayanta had lived up to his sobriquet. He truly was a Giant of a man. We decided then and there that we owed a lot to our diminutive Giant. Not one treat - we were ready to treat him twice over.

The Interview

This is not my story. I had it from an old college friend of mine.

Some years ago, we used to organise annual reunions of us, old boys of 1963 vintage, the year we had graduated from the then Bengal Engineering College, a premier engineering institution of the country. We would get ourselves together along with our wives to these get-togethers, which had plenty of drinks and lots of good food to make these occasions memorable.

It was in one of these, that we got to talking about our first job interviews. Our friend Sachin told us a tale that has remained with me till this day. I'd do well to put it all in his own words. Here's how it went:

*

We all graduated in the summer month of 1963 and many of us got placement offers at the college campus as soon as results were out.

I was overjoyed to see that Jessops, one of the leading engineering companies then, had offered me a placement as a graduate trainee engineer with them. But first, I had to clear the interview.

I had already received the call letter from Jessops, telling me the date of the interview and the time. I was also told to bring along all the certificates and mark-sheets of my School Finals, I. Sc. (Intermediate Science)

and of course the final results of B.E. (Bachelor of Engineering).

I put all those certificates and mark-sheets in a folder to make my portfolio that I was rather proud of. They were all quite impressive, I thought. Certainly, I was impressed with my own scholastic record.

Their office was on NS Road at Dalhousie Square, now called BBD Bag, the commercial hub of Calcutta then. It was going to be my first encounter with the big world outside, and a company like Jessops at that. Naturally I was quite nervous. I had to make a favourable impression on the *burra sahib* (big boss), one Mr S Mullick, Head of the Structural Designs there, who would interview me and decide if I was good enough for them. I was only twenty-one then and had never strayed outside the student world or the college campus, into the world of big business and commerce. In fact, I had never yet seen the insides of an engineering company and had only vague notions of what they looked like.

Anyway, the big day arrived. I put on my whitest shirt and my best trousers. I made sure my shoes were shiny. I had been told that all these things mattered. I just couldn't go to an interview with a scruffy look. I didn't even know how to wear a tie, imagine! My father had to help me put it on. I was already feeling a little strangled with the collar sitting tightly around my neck. But I had to have a "smart" look about me if I wanted that offer of trainee engineer. Then my mother put on a dab of *doi* (yoghurt) on my forehead like a *mangal tilak* (symbol of luck). This, I promptly wiped off as soon as I

boarded the taxi that our servant had fetched for me, with the portfolio tucked under my arm.

The taxi dropped me off just opposite No 63, the building where Jessops HO was. It was an impressive building; I entered and stood before the lift cage. Those days the lifts had collapsible gates, two of them, one on the outside and one inside and a liftman who operated the lift by moving a brass handle fixed on a brass panel on the wall inside with a slot showing the floor numbers.

I told the liftman Jessops HO as I entered the lift along with a few others. I was let out on the first floor. Oh! I thought if it was just one flight up, why did I take the lift?

I pushed open the big plate glass door with the name of the company emblazoned right across it. You couldn't miss it. At once a blast of cold air greeted me. The entire office was fully air-conditioned. There was an Anglo-Indian lady, all decked up, like a movie star (as she seemed to me) unused to the commercial world as I was, who was sitting at the reception counter. She looked up with a smile and said "Yes?"

All I managed to say was, "Interview, madam, interview."

She could tell at a glance, from my hesitant and nervous demeanour that I was a fresh graduate, possibly come for his first interview.

"Oh, please take a seat there," she indicated, "And let me have your interview letter please," she directed me, all business-like and efficient now. I took out the call letter from my portfolio and handed it over.

I took my seat as directed, on one of the several chairs and sofas along the wall on the far side of the reception area. Then I took out my handkerchief and wiped the sweat off my brow. Despite the air conditioning I was still sweating a little; nervousness, I guess. I took a few deep breaths and told myself to take it easy. And then sat down to wait and look around, getting used to the office atmosphere.

There were already seated a few other youngsters, all around my age, with similar folders and files with them. No doubt they were there too, like me, for *their* interviews. None were from my college. I could see that these boys looked tense, just as I was looking myself. None of them spoke among themselves or even looked at each other.

I looked at the big clock on the wall and then at my watch too. Ten thirty. Well in time. My interview time was 10.45 AM.

As I sat and looked around, I saw a number of people come in and go out from time to time, visitors to the company. The receptionist sat next to a big wooden box which had several terminals from which cables ran out. She was always on the phone, speaking in a low murmur that even in the quiet hush of the reception area I could hardly make out. Obviously, she was also the telephone operator of the company and was busy answering calls, and working the cables taking one out and plugging it in another terminal and then softly talking to someone inside the office, connecting him to the caller. That big wooden box with all those multiple cables that came out of it, was what I realised, called the office telephone

exchange, or PBX in office terminology. I was picking up fast.

Then the receptionist looked up and called out to one of the boys “Mr D. Ray”. One of the guys quickly got up and strode across to the reception desk. Another fellow in a khaki uniform of the office bearer was already standing there.

“Please take the gentleman to Mullick sahib’s,” the receptionist instructed the bearer, nodding to the fellow who had obviously come for the interview like me. The bearer turned on his heels and with a contemptuous jerk of his head indicating that the young man was to follow him pushed open a door and disappeared inside. What a snooty bastard that bearer was, I thought. If a lowly bearer acts like this, who knows how the big guys inside would?

The interviews had begun at last, I figured. Then there was nothing of interest that was happening for quite a while. The usual crowd of people, visitors as I had noted earlier, kept visiting and leaving.

After about half an hour had gone by, the inside door opened and the fellow who had been interviewed came out. The other interviewees and I strained to catch a glimpse of his face to see if he looked happy or dejected. But he left quickly before I could form an opinion.

Then the vigil began again. We didn’t know in which order the names would be called. Naturally, suspense began to build up. After some time, the receptionist looked up again and announced another name. It wasn’t mine. The same routine followed.

Time dragged on. One by one all the others who had been waiting there had been called in, interviewed and then released after an interval of about a half-hour or so.

It was close to 12.45. Only one other fellow had remained apart from me in that reception hall. There were of course others, but older people, obviously come for other business.

My name was called out by the lady at the reception. I didn't wait for the insolent bearer to give me that customary jerk of his head. Instead of following him like a meek lamb to the slaughter, I brushed past him, opening the door myself that led inside, ahead of that now open-mouthed bearer. Once inside. I looked back at him and gave *him* a quick jerk of *my* head telling him to take me to the *burra sahib's* office. I had put him in his place, I felt. I was way more confident of myself by now, having been able to score a point in a minor battle of nerves.

The inside was one big hall where there were rows of tables at which sat the staff, draughtsmen bent over their drawing boards, clerks and typists, all busy. There was a low hum of activity, people talking in muted voices, soft clatter of typewriters and suchlike. Very different from one or two government offices I had been to before. Nobody looked up from their work.

Along one side of the hall was a long corridor. There were closed cubicles along this corridor where the executives and heads of departments sat. On these closed doors were nameplates with names and designations mentioned.

That sullen faced bearer took me up to one such door marked S. Mullick, Head, Structural Designs. The bearer said to me, "*Kripya knock karke andar jayie*" (Please knock and enter). The fellow had to have the last word in with me before he left.

I rapped smartly on the door and asked "May I come in sir?"

"Enter," sounded a booming voice from inside.

I pushed open the door and entered. The cubicle was fairly large. There was a medium sized desk on the other side of which sat Mr Mullick, the Head of the Structural Designs, obviously a very important man in the company. He looked to be a guy in his mid-forties, swarthy of complexion and dressed to the pins. He had his profile turned sideways as I entered, busy trying to light a pipe. Even in the stifling heat of a mid-summer, the man was in a jacket and a tie. Lucky, I had put on a tie myself. I nervously handled it to make sure it was in place.

The way the man kept puffing and puffing on that pipe to get it going, was something to see. It took him a good part of five minutes, while I sat like a statue on the other side from this Mister Big Guy. Till then, I had never actually seen a person smoke a pipe. I had only seen people with pipes in English movies, and that too, not all that often.

At last, he had it lit and going to his satisfaction. He let out a long plume of smoke skyward that got instantly sucked out by the ventilator in the AC duct overhead.

It was then that he turned round and looked at me, over the rim of his glasses. It felt as though I were being X-rayed. I was sure that those piercing eyes could look right through me.

Then he extended his hand and said “Let me see your papers Chatterjee,” addressing me by my surname. His voice was low, grave and rumbling, as his earlier command for me to enter had sounded. He exuded one formidable personality, urbane, sophisticated, and also someone you couldn’t take lightly.

I was ready. I took out all the documents that I had arranged in an orderly manner that very morning, and handed them over to his extended hand.

As he went through them, he would just keep nodding and saying, “Hm....Hmm...Mmm...” This went on for some time, with more such “Umms” and “Mmms”. Then he looked up at last and handed my papers back. He actually smiled at me approvingly. He had no more that forbidding look as he had when I had first entered his chamber. I felt a little easy now.

“Well Sachin.” He addressed me by my first name now, “it seems you have always been a pretty good student right through. Hmm? Good marks all along. Specially in maths. Hmm? I like that.” This was one guy who loved his “hmms” and “mms”.

I felt encouraged. “Maths has always been my favourite subject sir,” I piped up.

“Has it now? Indeed! Mmm...That’s good. You’ll need to be good in that if you want to do structural designs,

you know?" he offered, his voice mellow now, and almost friendly.

Then he seemed to have a new idea and announced, "I'm going to give you a little test now. Is that okay?"

Before I could nod my head in assent, he continued, "Just a few simple things really. To see your grasp of the fundamentals."

I said, "Yes sir. Certainly sir," to show him I was ready.

He took out a pen, a Mont Blanc, I saw, from his pocket and reached for a blank sheet of paper from his pad. Then he drew something on it in quick deft strokes and slid it over to me.

"Here's a beam resting on two supporting props. I have also placed a few loads of varying weightage on the beam at certain points. All dimensions are given, as you can see," Mr Mullick explained.

I looked down and studied the diagram. Fairly simple distribution of loads along one single beam. No complications there. Then I looked up and met my interviewer's eyes.

"Yes sir," I said, "I see it sir."

"Now I want you to draw me the bending moment diagram. Think you can handle that?" he asked me.

Oh! This was easy. In fact, quite, quite easy for me. I was tempted to say "Elementary my dear Watson" in the fashion of the world-famous detective Sherlock Holmes, my favourite fictional hero, who would often say

that to his sidekick Dr Watson. But of course, I didn't say it out loud.

I put my hand to my pocket to take out my pen. And stopped. I realised to my acute embarrassment that I had left my pen back at home.

I looked up, "Sir," I pleaded, "may I have a pen please sir?"

Mr Mullick's eyebrows shot up a few notches, registering surprise that a fresh graduate engineer had come for a job interview and had not brought his pen along. But he didn't say anything to make me feel more embarrassed than I already was. He had noticed already the expression on my face.

"Help yourself young man." He said magnanimously, extending his hand towards a pen stand on the desk.

There were quite a few fountain pens in that. Ball point pens were not much in use those days. Pens always meant fountain pens. I reached over and picked one up.

The pen I had in my hand was a most ordinary one. The kind you get for a few rupees at pen stores. They were called 'regular' ones, meaning that the barrel would contain all the ink, that would last a long time. I myself used a Pilot pen, very much in vogue among students those days, that had tubes in metal casings with a press lever on them that you had to squeeze holding the nib of the pen dipped in the inkpot. The ink would get sucked in the rubber tubing for use. And those too would last long. The advantage of these fountain pens over the regular ones was that these wouldn't leak. And also, the

nibs of these pens were of a superior quality that made writing smooth and a pleasure.

Anyway, I unscrewed the pen and bent over the diagram Mr Mullick had drawn. I put down the pen on the paper and drew my first line. But there was no mark. This often happened with these cheap pens. You had to give them vigorous shakes to get the ink flowing down to the nib from the barrel.

I raised my arm and gave the pen one mighty shake.

What happened was unbelievable. The nib that was to have been screwed on tightly to the barrel of the pen, wasn't. As a result, it just came loose and flew across the table hitting Mr Mullick square on his forehead, right between his eyes, nearly giving him a third eye. Like a dart it had hit the bull's eye. And the barrel, now open-ended, also let out the ink inside that followed the nib in a jet stream, splattering blue-black ink all across Mr Mullick's expensive shirt front, jacket and tie.

All this happened in the blink of an eye. Mr Mullick, in a reflex action, put up both his hands covering his face and let out a yelp of pain and surprise, "Ooof Ma!" And he jerked back violently.

The backward jerk was so severe that the swivel chair he was sitting on, tipped over and fell down on the floor with a loud crash. With Mr Mullick in it. I sprang up, equally shocked, out of my chair and out of my wits, and leaned over across the table.

There was Mr Mullick, on the floor, where his head had hit with a thud and his legs were up in the air, flailing helplessly.

“Help, help”, he croaked feebly, “Security”, he called out.

I sized up the situation in a flash. I had blown my chances with Jessops for ever. I didn’t think I should linger there any longer. Any moment I might be seized by the security guards and handed over to the police for “unprovoked assault with a deadly weapon”. Anything could happen. I picked up my portfolio from the table and yanked open the door of Mr Mullick’s cubicle.

Then I broke the world’s record for a fifty-yard sprint down the corridor of the office. I whizzed past the reception area and out the plate glass main door of Jessops and on to the landing. I didn’t wait for the lift. I hit the stairs, taking them two at a time, racing down.

I came out of the building and blended into the lunch time crowd on the pavement outside.

I spotted a near-empty south-bound bus just about to take off from the bus stop. I hurled myself inside and the conductor pulled the bell twice to signal the driver to start.

The bus started and I found a seat and sat down. “Whew!” I said to myself, “that was one lucky escape.”

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Sachin stopped. There was an awed silence among us. We just didn't know what to make of it. But this was certain, that after this tale, there could be no other stories of "interviews".

This was the mother of all interviews.

Dutch Courage

We all piled out of my friend's place around midnight.

This was our yearly bacchanal. It used to be held just among the five or six of us, old friends from the same *para* (neighbourhood) where we had all grown up together from boyhood through adolescence. Till it had been time to become responsible adults, and move away to other different *paras*. But the early bond had remained.

Only one among us had settled abroad, in Germany. And it was during the winter months when he would be back home for his two or three-week vacation. And while here, he would hold these parties at his place in the old *para*, where I had stayed on.

It was here in these parties where he would unload all his goodies, like Single Malts, cans of German beer, tins of Danish cheese, sausages thick as your wrist on us for the festivities for the three or four nights during his stay.

We would never tire of these yearly-once get-togethers where we would all assemble, reliving old memories. By natural choice these were strictly stag. Our wives knew of this and were quite understanding, at least on the surface. After all boys would be boys, they must have reasoned, some indulgently, some grudgingly. But who cared, once we were out of the house? The only condition was that we must all get back

home by midnight latest. And we faithfully kept to that curfew hour.

So, as I was saying, all of us had had our last drink for the night and decided to knock off. We said our goodbyes outside and promised to meet again the next week. The other boys got into their cars as they left. I was the only one among our friends who had stayed on in the same neighbourhood, just a few minutes' walk from my friend's place. I turned towards home.

The clock had already struck the midnight hour. In the height of winter in December the streets were empty and deserted. But the stillness of the night was broken by sharp sounds of barking dogs.

That wasn't unusual. Stray dogs often wailed their lonesome, mournful songs in the silence of late nights. But this was different. It was a collective sound of growling – low, guttural, snarling and aggressive barking of a number of dogs, all together.

I rounded the corner. The sight that met my eyes made me stand still. A large pack of growling dogs stood around a dumpster piled high with the day's garbage. Atop this mound of refuse and dirt stood a lone cat, with its back arched, petrified with fear.

There were easily a dozen or so of these ferocious canines that had targeted this lonesome cat. And there was no escape route left for the poor trembling creature.

As I took in the scene, my sense of justice kicked in. In the blink of an eye, I stepped right through those gnashing fangs and faced the pack. The dogs had never seen a human act so foolishly. They all stopped for a

second and looked up at me, thoroughly puzzled. Possibly trying to decide if they should ignore me or tear me to shreds right then and there. It was this element of surprise I was banking on.

I raised my voice, as loud as I could go, keeping it deep and severe and addressed the general assembly:

Hey you *sonofabitches*,” I thundered in choice Bangla expletives, “Whaddya think you’ll are doing?” I asked, and then launched into a diatribe of ethical sermons, keeping to the Bangla expletives, a language these street dogs are used to hearing all day long from the street urchins. But I took care to not look these dogs in the eye. Dogs hate that.

Keeping my gaze fixed over their heads, just as a seasoned orator does before his audience, I took pains to point out the sheer unfairness of what they were doing, ganging up all together against one puny little cat. The argument was irrefutable. I had logic on my side, their awed attention, and of course my choice vocabulary. Each word sunk in.

I don’t know how long I orated thus. I was getting into a full flow and got carried away, thrilled by the torrent of filthy words spicing my lecture, and the sound of my own voice booming in the quiet of the night. The words, the tone of rebuke, everything was so scathing that after a while the dogs, all of them, lowered their heads and one by one, slunk off in mute shame. Soon I was left all alone, with no one in front of me.

I had won the day for the poor cat. I turned round to look at it for a look of gratitude. But there was no cat!

Where was it? There was no cat, and certainly no dogs either. Taking advantage of the wavering attention of the snarling dogs the cat must have made a quick escape. Unnoticed by both dog and man.

So, there I was, standing before a dumpster having rattled off an extempore speech on ethics and morality and no one to appreciate but the dead silence of a winter night. I looked around. There was not a soul, either man or beast, anywhere to be seen or heard. The houses around me remained dark and mute, unresponsive to my voluminous presence a few minutes before.

I was greatly puzzled. Did it all really happen? Or had I imagined it all? To this day, frankly, I'm not sure.

I turned homeward. Quietly opening the front door with my latch key, taking care not to make a sound to wake up the household, I took to the stairs. I rounded the landing and looked up. There she stood, my wife on the upper floor landing with a frown that was far more menacing than any of the dogs I had just braved. Without a word she pointed to the wall clock. I looked obediently. The time stood at twelve thirty.

It was now her turn to raise her voice, which she did. And my turn to slink off shame-faced, with my tail tucked between my legs.

No Monkey Business

This one's a little hard to believe. In fact, I don't believe it really happened. But believe me, it really did. Just the way I'm about to tell you.

I was doing a matrimonial trial then in my early lawyering days. The days of hearing were fixed on Saturdays at the Alipore court. This was a courtesy extended to me by the court in view of the fact I was actually a High Court lawyer and could only find time on Saturdays to appear in Alipore as the High Court remained closed on Saturdays.

The hearings were fixed in the mornings. That meant I could get out of the court by twelve thirty or one o'clock.

On my way back I'd stop over at the club, the Lake Club for a beer and a sandwich or a plate of fish'n chips, my standard Saturday lunch.

In the seventies this club was still mainly a rowers' club with a bit of social activities too around the evenings. Saturday afternoons it was mostly deserted.

The upstairs hall and a wide adjoining balcony overlooked the lakes. The waterfront stretched for over a couple of miles beyond the lawn below and you could see the few high rises that had begun coming up on the far side. On one side lay the green foliage of wooded coastline with all kinds of trees, mahogany, Ashoka, neem, Peepal, Gulmohur, banyan, Sal, coconut trees, teak and many others I don't know the names of. It was

like an impregnable green wall of trees and made a for stunning backdrop to the shimmering body of water in front. On the rear side of this green fortress lay the slums of Gobindapur which could not be seen from this side.

There was also a huge banyan tree by the north of the wide balcony and its branches grazed over the railing. From time to time the branches would be trimmed so as to keep the building clear of the branches and those leaves, but soon they would grow back. That tree attracted a large variety of birds whose twittering and chirping made for a soothing backdrop of melody I would find so calming.

So, Saturday afternoons, when I'd be on my way home from the court, I'd stop by for my afternoon refreshments.

Saturdays, as I said, the club being kind of empty, there would be a lone waiter, one Keshto, who would faithfully attend to my needs. He would bring me my beer and nuts to start with and my weekend reading, either the TIME or Newsweek magazine. The bar was a small affair at the far end of the hall inside and I would sit out in the balcony listening to the twittering of the many birds, gazing out over the railing across the wide and long waterfront. I'd be all alone in that vast emptiness enjoying my brief solitude and savouring my beer while poring over the week's news.

It so happened that one such Saturday as I was sipping my beer, my nose buried in the magazine open before me, I became aware of another presence. Without looking up I could feel that somebody else was also there, close enough. When that presence had begun, I don't

know. There had been no sound. No chair scraping over the floor, pulling of table that would happen if another member had walked in.

I looked up gradually and looked out of the corner of my eyes. There was indeed someone sitting at the next table by my side. It wasn't a member. It was a rather large sized simian, a monkey. The monkey was observing me intently and following each of my moves. I knew enough not to make any sudden movement or even look at the fellow squarely in its eyes. Animals don't like it, not even strange dogs. Slowly, ever so slowly, steeling my racing nerves, I lowered my gaze to my magazine. Then I took a sip of my beer and lowered my glass, cool as ever, as though nothing was the matter.

I then put some nuts on a spare plate and reached across, again ever so slowly, steeling myself against making any sudden moves and placed the plate on the table where my companion was sitting. Not once looking up at him, as though he were another club member and I was just sharing those nuts with him.

I could see, again with my side vision the monkey, instead of grabbing the plate and all the nuts in one fistful, was picking up just one or two at a time, popping them in his mouth, exactly the way I was doing. I was quite surprised. This was one gentleman monkey, I thought. And he was mimicking my every move. No wonder they're called apes. I was in fact quite relieved that this was no wild animal but a civilised monkey.

Then I thought to myself, why not go one step further, and offer the guy some beer too. I threw out the water from my glass of water over the railing next to my

table and poured a generous amount of the frothy beverage into that glass. Then again, very slowly, almost unmindfully, taking care not to stare the monkey in the eyes, I stretched out my hand and placed that glass on the monkey's table.

And then, surprise of surprise, he, the monkey, instead of upsetting the glass, picked it up using both his hands and began to sip it. Just the way I was sipping mine. This was something I hadn't expected really. I was quite prepared for the glass being rolled off the table dumping all the contents on the floor. But no! He drank the beer, not in one gulp, but in little sips and smacking his lips every time he'd take a sip. He was indeed a perfect gentleman. The monkey finished his beer, put the glass back on the table and quietly left. Without hanging around for a second helping.

I went back to my reading and my remaining beer. Soon Keshto appeared bearing my tray of fish'n chips. He saw the empty beer glass at the next table and the plate licked clean of all the nuts I had put in. Very hesitantly he asked me if I had been bothered by a monkey that had of late taken up residence in that huge banyan tree. And sometimes made his appearance in and around the club premises. But of course, he added, the monkey had never troubled any members so far.

He earnestly requested me, "*Saab*, please don't indulge the monkey any more. Then he will start his tricks and annoy other members. Things may go out of hand."

I assured Keshto, “Arrey, don’t get scared. He is a nice monkey. Not like others you see. He didn’t bother me at all.”

Keshto didn’t look convinced. He persisted, “*Saab* - if you allow this monkey to have food from the table, what will other members think, sir? My job will be at stake.”

I looked up and saw he had a point. What could I do but relent? I said to him, “All right Keshto. Don’t worry I won’t do this again. If it’s your job you’re afraid of ...” I left it unsaid.

“Now go get me another beer please,” I requested him. I had given nearly half of my earlier bottle to my simian friend.

I finished my second bottle and my fish’n chips in peace, signed my voucher and left for home.

The next date of the trial at Alipore court came up after nearly six weeks. I hadn’t been to the club in all this time. But again, that Saturday, a month and a half from that incident, I sat down at my usual table on the balcony of the club. The first thing I noticed there was the strong and thick wire netting that had been put up all along the railing of the balcony covering it up on all the three sides.

When Keshto made his appearance to take my order, I pointed out the netting to him and asked him, “What’s all this Keshto?”

Most apologetically, lowering his head with an embarrassed half-smile he admitted, “Sir, that other day

some other members had seen what you had done with the monkey.” And had reported the matter to the President. A Committee meeting had been held. It was decided to put up the fencing. So, the monkey could never come inside and trouble members or steal food.

So that was that. My adventure with wild life was short-lived. It had been decided by superior powers that the club was meant for gentlemen. There was going to be no more monkey business.

Crow at the Window

I have a favourite window in my study. I love sitting by it and read, muse, think and while away my après déjeuner (that is after breakfast) hours. There's a nice gul mohur tree with its swaying branches just outside and I listen at times to the music flowing out of the rustling leaves while the sun's slanting rays glance off the green leaves turning them gold. All in all, a peaceful, blissful hour or two while I "soak" in nature and talk to myself sometimes.

The other day a crow sat in one of the branches. And began cawing. I didn't look up from my book. Lots of birds including sometimes parrots find that tree a haven too, like me. They come and twitter and chirp and go their mysterious ways.

After quite a while it somehow dawned on me that the cawing had been going on for a bit long. The cawing of a crow is harsh and penetrating. Somehow because of its unceasing duration the sound had found its way through my deep concentration in the book and struck home. I looked up.

I found the fellow comfortably perched on a low hanging branch just opposite, observing me quite intently. Every now and then it would swell up its throat and let loose another trumpet sound. I put down my book on my lap and kept eyeing the fellow. He kept up the stare. And then blew up his neck for another blast.

I refused to get up from my chair and try shooing it away by wildly waving my arms about. I knew it would be futile. The crow knew it too. It would keep on doing exactly what it had come to do. It was deliberately trying to nettle me, make me lose my cool and do something foolish.

This was a game that crow was playing with me. I could see that right away. I decided to play along and took up the dare the crow had thrown my way. I would also see which of us were the stronger, the crow or I.

Once I decided to keep calm, I saw to my surprise that the anger that had been slowly building up inside, just melted away. I got into the spirit of the game.

I got my reason to work for me. I remembered that famous line spoken by Bruce Lee in that iconic movie of his “Enter the Dragon”: the art of winning a fight without fighting.

I saw that the crow was deliberately doing that incessant cawing solely for the purpose of upsetting me and make me behave like a madman. That was the kick the crow was aiming for. I decided then and there to do exactly what that crow was doing. I cawed right back. Yes, that’s exactly what I did. I made my voice hoarse (as it is my voice, with age, does sound rather harsh), and let fly a near enough imitation of a caw.

After I gave him back his caw, and kept going, caw for caw, the crow suddenly stopped. It looked very indignantly at me, as only crows know how, by twisting its head first one way and then the other. But I didn’t give up. I kept cawing.

Then I began to laugh at the crow's obvious discomfort. The laughter grew and grew inside me, coming out of I don't know where. What started out first as a little chortle grew in volume as the laughter fed on itself. Soon I was howling with laughter like a hyena, at the crow's distress. Finally, the crow had had enough. It gave me a look of utter disgust, spread its wings and flew away. I had won.

I was still laughing, tears streaming down my face, when the door to my study flew open and my wife ran in looking highly concerned. Before she could ask me what the matter was, I was pointing at the window and mumbling, "the crow, the crow".

She looked out and obviously saw nothing. Then she too gave me a look of disgust and muttering to herself and shaking her head left the room.

Aah! Peace again!

A Very Strange Tale

This young American couple I met was very indignant. Seething in anger, I saw. And very justifiably too, as it turned out.

The story I am about to tell you now is very strange. But it really did happen. Although I sometimes now wonder, did it? Really?

I have to admit right off, that as this involves very real people and a well-known foreign bank, I have changed the names. The two principal characters and also of course the bank's name.

All this happened in the late seventies. I had already begun my professional career as a lawyer in the High Court at Calcutta for a number of years.

I had had my name enrolled in the panel of the American Consulate as one of the several Indian lawyers in the city who would be able to undertake legal work in behalf of any of their American executives, or other Americans in the city, should they require any. There wasn't a great deal of work. Nor were there any that needed long-drawn litigation of a complex nature. There was some consultation work for many Indian NRIs living in America who needed legal advice or assistance in India. Those were done over the phone. Emails did not exist then. That association with the American consulate was not a great career move as such for a young aspiring lawyer. But I would get occasional invitations to

consulate parties, which itself was quite an attraction for me at that age.

Robert Ledger and his pretty wife Miriam got involved in a scrape at the First National City Bank in the city with the staff there. Quite a bloody one, in fact.

They had just moved to Calcutta from Madras where Robert was attached to the American Consulate as a Radio Officer. They had their bank account with this bank's branch there in Madras (now Chennai) and naturally wanted that their account and other bank assets be transferred from the Madras branch to the Calcutta branch, where he had now been posted. A simple enough operation, isn't it? Today this would be done with a few clicks of the mouse on the computer – a matter of a few seconds, or minutes at most.

But this was not today: it was the seventies, long before personal computers, PCs as we know them, were invented.

So here was Robert Ledger, a gangling, tall guy and skinny as a bean pole, along with his beautiful blonde wife Miriam, who found themselves in a hall full of clerks sitting over big fat files and folders, apparently immersed in work. After much asking around as to which of these tables they ought to go to, to get their transfers done, they arrived at this desk, which, needless to say, was empty. Where was the *babu*? Nobody knew. And nobody seemed to care.

Americans, as a rule, are not used to this kind of sloppy and slovenly attitude in an office, particularly in a bank. They had a lot to learn, of the way and pace of

work in West Bengal. It took a lot of patience and understanding to realise the vast difference that existed and will always exist between the East and West.

Plus, the Left rule in West Bengal was well under way. The workers all over, in offices, factories and mills were given nearly endless leeway to work any which way they pleased. Nobody could discipline them. The management in industries and other commercial establishments could be held to ransom by workers' unions that held sway over managements all over, and they could get away with almost anything.

"Workers – Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains" was the buzz *mantra* in those times.

So, this couple just stood around, feeling rather foolish, in a sea of people who were all studiously ignoring them. Nobody even showed the courtesy of offering them a chair.

After about an eternity, someone, with a number of files under his arm bustled across the hall, heading for the empty desk. Robert and Miriam, by now a little exasperated, breathed a sigh inwardly. This guy must be the fellow to do the job.

The *babu* settled down on his chair and looked up at this *firangi* couple at his desk.

"Yes?" he inquired.

Robert gave a little cough and began, his tone purposefully gentle and courteous, hiding his impatience, "Good morning. We have an account with your bank. In your Madras branch," he explained.

Then he went on to spell out his need, that is, the transference of his account to the Calcutta branch. Also, the shares and other assets he had from the Madras branch.

The *babu* let Robert go on and on. It was not very clear how much that *babu* could make of the words, all spoken in an American accent which was of course difficult to follow by a bank clerk, if spoken in a rush. Anyway, the *babu* stared and stared, and then after Robert had finished, he started to shake his head vigorously so much as to mean that all that was not possible. Then he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, though it was dry and then blew noisily into it. That done, the *babu* carefully folded the contents of the handkerchief and put it away in his pocket.

Then he looked up again blankly at the great height of Robert and repeated his one syllable question, "Yes?"

This was getting too much. Miriam, the wife decided to take over. She leaned over on to the table and looked at the *babu* and gave him a smile. Then she started to speak, softly and slowly so that the *babu* would have no difficulty.

She did much better. It dawned on the *babu* after the second or the third repetition, what these people wanted. He leaned back in his chair giving an understanding smile to Miriam, exposing the interior of his *paan* chewing mouth, letting out a revolting stench of *paan* and *supari*.

"Yes, yes madam, I understand," declared the *babu*. "Wait please."

So saying, he got up from the chair and again, with his ungainly crab-like gait went away dodging the other desks, stopping at one or two, to exchange pleasantries with the other clerks, taking all the time he needed to perform all these important tasks.

The *babu* was gone for nearly a quarter of an hour before he showed up carrying a huge ledger account book. He came over to his desk and dumped this ledger book on the table top with a thud, raising a cloud of dust that nearly choked the Ledgers. It was about to become a case of ledger dust choking the Ledger couple.

Then again, the *babu*, with a look of disgust at the film of dust that had settled on the desk, yelled for the bearer of the office. "Raju! Raju!" he shouted. A bearer-kind of fellow was dozing on his stool at the end of the hall. He woke up with a start and stretched, yawning loudly that could be heard all across the hall. Then he rubbed his eyes, driving away the still lingering sleep, and finally got up from his stool, taking his time doing all this. Then he shuffled over.

This khaki-clad bearer with the bank's emblem stitched on his tunic stood before the *babu*, and with great disdain asked him, "*Kya hua babu? Chillate kyon?*" (What's the matter, sir? Why're you yelling?)

"*Dekhte nahin? Kitna mayla jum giya hua. Abhi abhi saafa karo.*" (Can't you see? How much dirt there is. Clean it. At once) commanded the *babu* with as much authority as he could bring to his voice.

With a scornful show of indifference and reluctance, the bearer brought over a duster and swept out the desk

top and also the big ledger book, which had perhaps been brought back to life after a long period of hibernation in some filing cabinet or other.

All the while this drama was going on, the Ledgers stood by, unable to do anything to hasten the process. And they were both getting quite hot under their collars. They had never seen such a lackadaisical attitude in a workplace, least of all in a bank.

Finally, the table was cleansed of the dirt, and the *babu*, with a great ceremony opened the ledger book, a voluminous record book containing myriads of entries, all done with pen and now-fading ink. After much page turning back and forth that went on for some more time, the *babu* was able to spot the Ledger's account number and their details. With a smile of triumph, the *babu* leaned back and tapped the spot on the still dusty and musty ledger page where the Ledger's account details were recorded. The *babu* stretched his arms upward expansively, to show what an awful lot of work he had accomplished.

"Here sir!" he gleefully informed the Ledgers of this great discovery he had made in locating their account in that musty volume, undoubtedly a Herculean task. Robert and Miriam both leaned across and took a look at their names on that dirty ledger page. Just to make sure.

Then he again advised, "Wait please!" pushed back his chair and scurried off, just the way he had done earlier.

“Hey, hey!” cried out both Robert and Miriam together at the departing figure, “Where the hell d’you think you’re going?”

The *babu* turned round giving them both a toothy smile stretching from ear to ear “Bathroom, bathroom. Nature’s call,” he explained, making his meaning clear to the *firangi*.

The bathroom break took another fifteen or twenty minutes. The man must have gone for a smoke outside, the Ledgers reckoned. Now that the ledger book lay open before them and their name and account also had been spotted, the rest of the work wouldn’t take so long. Just a few more new entries would have to be made. And that was all. But this blasted *babu* was making the task needlessly longer than it should have taken. It was now close to an hour that the Ledgers had entered the bank. Understandably they were not very pleased at the way this *babu* was handling the job.

Finally, the *babu* did arrive at his desk where the Ledgers waited. Still standing on their now-tiring legs, rooted to that one spot in that hall.

Then this innovative *babu* began another game of his own. I think he was just doing this out of sheer cussedness, in order to show these *firangis* where they stood with him. He started looking for his pen. First, he patted the pocket on his shirt, then dived into the drawers of his desk that he kept opening and closing one after another, rifling through them, collecting all the clutter inside and piling them on his desk atop the open ledger page. But no pen.

Then he leaned sideways to his neighbour's table and started talking with him, another *babu*, possibly asking if he could borrow a pen from him. The talk continued. Both started a long chat. Sometimes they would break into little chuckles among themselves. This carried on without a care in the world, a long gossip about this and that.

The Ledgers had had enough. Something snapped in Miriam. She whipped out a pen from her purse, a shiny silver Cross ball point and leaned over holding the pen under the *babu's* nose and screamed at him.

"Hey you!" she yelled at the top of her voice that rang out through the hall.

"Stop shooting the breeze and killing time. Here's a pen," she screamed, holding the tip of the pen under his nostrils, almost touching it. "Now take this goddamned pen and get on with the work!" she hissed savagely in the *babu's* ears.

What happened next was beyond expectation. The *babu* threw up his arms and jumped up from his chair, tipping it over. It fell with a loud crash. The *babu* started yelling at the top of his voice "*Banchao banchao! Mere felle re!*"(Save me, help! Help! Murder murder!").

Instantly there was chaos and pandemonium in that quiet hall. Two of the staff jumped up and seized Miriam from behind, pinning her hands down so she couldn't move. Then others joined in the fray. Robert, quite dazed at the sudden change of scenario, and seeing that his wife was being manhandled and grappled by a number of these men, took a wild swing at the nearest fellow

landing a solid punch on his face. The fellow covered his face and slumped down. His nose was bleeding profusely, the blood streaming through his fingers. The fellow began howling in pain "*Baba go, Ma go, morey gelam*" (Oh! Oh!! I'm dying, dying, oh Ma!").

After this, total bedlam ensued. The others all pounced on Robert and brought him down to his knees raining blows, punches and kicks all over him.

The manager and executives, all came running out of their cubicles, trying to quieten the hysteric mob. That was quite beyond them. Then the manager rushed back to his cubicle and called up the police at the nearest Park Street *thana* (Police Station).

The police responded promptly. After all it was the Bank Manager of this well-known foreign bank. They sent over a contingent of force right away.

As soon as the police arrived, a sergeant accompanied by four or five constables, everything quietened down. Like magic. The sergeant, a tall broad-shouldered guy with all authority under his command, strode down the aisle and came over to the group of clerks that had the Ledgers surrounded in their midst. There stood Robert Ledger, all bloody-faced and bruised, where he had taken all the punches and blows the crazy crowd of clerks had rained down upon him. Miriam stood looking frightened, dishevelled, her hairdo ruined and flushed in anger and utterly bewildered.

The sergeant took stock of the situation in one glance. He could see for himself that this foreigner couple had been harassed and set upon by this still

militant crowd of bank staff. He had to get them out from among the aggressive crowd as quickly as possible. He raised his voice addressing the couple “Sir, madam. Please come with me to the *thana* (police station).

Then he turned on his heels and strode back down the hall with the constables now escorting Robert and Miriam safely out of the bank premises.

The Ledgers were put in the police van waiting outside and whisked off to the Park Street *thana*.

Once there inside the police station, they were given first aid and allowed to sit down on the bench and recount what had happened. Soon a few of the representatives of the bank staff including the *babu* with whom all this hullabaloo had begun, arrived at the thana to lodge a formal complaint against the Ledgers. The Ledgers were allowed the customary phone call and Robert rang up the American consulate to inform the office of their plight. Soon the Consulate people including the Consul General himself turned up at the police station and it got crowded.

The complaint of the bank staff, in particular the clerk involved, was heard at length by the Duty Officer, who, in his plodding manner wrote it all down in the register.

How could there be a complaint from the bank staff? It was the Ledgers who had been assaulted and thrashed up. And for no fault of theirs.

It appeared that the bank staff, that *babu* in particular, told a most bizarre tale. It was complained that the memsahib had tried to “kill” him with a knife

and had threatened to “shoot” him. Also, that the sahib had assaulted the staff and broken somebody’s nose. All this went into the FIR (First Information Report) that was officially and formally lodged against the Ledgers at the Park Street Police Station.

Naturally in the face of such grave allegation the Officer-in-Charge had no other option but to arrest the Ledgers and lodge them in police custody.

The American consulate people had come over along with a lawyer and bailed the Ledgers out from the Park Street police station then and there.

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All this had taken place about two years before I formally met the Ledgers. I got the entire story from them.

What happened after the Ledgers got bailed out was that they first got back home, had all the injuries that Robert had sustained treated at the Belle Vue Clinic (one of the premier hospitals in the city then) and finally got back home to plan their next coursed of action.

A criminal case had been initiated against Miriam by name and her husband Robert as accomplice, co-accused by the *babu* of the bank, one Makhan Mondol.

The official allegation against Miriam was that she had attempted to murder the complainant, that Makhan Mondol with a knife/deadly weapon and also threatened to shoot him. Robert had gone wild and started assaulting other staff members of the bank and broken somebody’s nose. The fact that it was Miriam who had

been grappled and manhandled (thus “outraging her modesty”, a criminal offence under the Penal Code itself) and that it was Robert Ledger, the husband who had been beaten and thrashed black and blue, were conveniently left out.

Another factor - that there was no sign of the “knife/deadly weapon” with which Miriam had allegedly attacked the victim *babu*, was also very conveniently omitted from all that First Information report (commonly termed F.I.R.).

The trial began at the Bankshall Court, the police court where the preliminary criminal trials are held. The American Consulate had engaged a trial lawyer for the Ledgers to represent their case before the Magistrate.

The Ledgers had also sent a legal notice to the Bank threatening to sue them for a hundred thousand US dollars in damages suffered by them in the Bank premises.

As is quite usual here, in the lower courts, be they civil or criminal, cases drag on. They have this habit of lingering on and on, both sides asking for unnecessary adjournments, and getting them, just for the asking, from the obliging judges so as to line up their pockets at the litigants’ expense. Here too the situation was no different.

The Ledgers would get notice that a date had been fixed when they would need to appear, in person, along with their lawyer and say their piece before the Magistrate, or the Judge, whoever. They would faithfully attend that crowded and shabby place, the court

premises, and wait along with their lawyer and the jostling crowd. Only to be told at the end of their hours-long wait that either the magistrate had not come or that the prosecution lawyer had a stomach upset and hadn't attended court or some such worthy cause. The upshot was that they would be given another date, usually two or three months later.

This went on. For the best part of two years. In that time the Ledgers had faithfully attended the court each and every time they had been summoned to do so. But even after ten or twelve such valiant attempts, they had never seen the face of the complainant or his lawyer, who would present his case first, before the Ledgers would be called in for their defence.

The Ledgers, understandably, had become totally sick of the judicial system here in India. Also, it was becoming time for another assignment for Robert to be either posted back home to the USA or some other country.

But before that could take place the Ledgers, still free under the bail-bond, had to clear their names in the trial and be legally free. Or else if they left India, it would be a penal offence for them, of jumping bail. They would forever lose their legal right to come to India. It was a Catch 22 situation all right.

It was at that stage that their entire case got referred to me by the American Consulate. To see if I could do something in the High Court to either get the trial moving in the lower Bankshall Court, or have this ridiculous and sham criminal proceeding against the Ledgers quashed altogether.

This was when I met the Ledgers face to face for the first time. In my chamber they sat across my desk and told me the entire tale as it had happened: a blow-by-blow account that I have already narrated above.

It was still a bit of a mystery to me why that idiotic clerk Makhan Mondol, the *babu* had filed the complaint against the Ledgers with this wild and ludicrous accusation of assault and threat to kill by shooting. The Ledgers themselves were equally at a loss.

I then made Miriam repeat verbatim what had actually passed between them before the clerk had jumped up crying out, yelling blue murder.

"We were standing around as I told you. And this asshole kept jerking us around," Miriam said to me.

"I think something snapped inside me and I lost my cool," she added.

"But then what happened Mrs Ledger?" I asked "Please try and remember every little detail that happened. That will help me understand why all of a sudden, this man would jump out of his chair and start screaming. Strange!"

"Something must have happened to send this man off his rocker," I added musing.

"What could have happened? I can't figure out myself," Miriam shrugged. "I just got my pen out and held it before him, as the guy had been looking for one."

"Could you please enact the scene for me Mrs Ledger?" I asked. "Just the way it happened and try to remember exactly what it was you had said. The words,

the words. And say them to me exactly the way you had said the words to him.”

“Just think for a moment that I am the *babu* and you are standing at the desk, totally exasperated with me, and you just lost your cool,” I explained.

“I’ll try”, said Miriam Ledger, recalling the scene that had happened two years before and tried to work up some rage to her play-acting as I had instructed her to do.

Then she got up, stood leaning over me. Suddenly she swept her hand right around holding a pen under my nose, up so close the tip was tickling my nostrils. By reflex action I jerked back. Then she raised her voice to full pitch and screamed at me. All those words that she now remembered, word for word.

“Stop *shooting* the breeze and *killing* time.....”

Of the stream of words that followed, two words stuck out, like sore thumbs: “Shooting” and “killing”.

These were the two words which that clerk had picked up on. It was obvious that what with the sudden appearance of a shiny silver pointed thing held under his nose and the screaming *firangi* woman snarling words like “shooting” and “killing” his mind must have jumped to a sudden and terrifying conclusion: that he was under attack. His fight-or-flight reflexes must have kicked in and he had chosen “flight”. He had thrown up his hands yelling for help as he was being “murdered”.

The silver Cross ballpen gleaming under the overhead electric light must have seemed like the tip of a knife held too close to his throat for comfort.

All in all, the *babu* too had lost his cool. Not just Miriam Ledger alone.

Mrs Ledger sat down after her demonstration. I had understood now how and why all this had happened.

“You were charged with having assaulted the *babu* with a knife Mrs Ledger,” I said. “Was there any such knife recovered from the place of occurrence?”

Apparently not. The Cross-ballpoint pen too was never recovered as it got lost or quietly pocketed by some *babu* in the melee that had followed.

I jotted down all these important points in my notes. These were very relevant and would come in handy later.

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The rest was fairly straight forward. I had filed a case on behalf of the Ledgers invoking the superintending and revisional powers of the High Court. These powers were extraordinary and had a sweeping reach over all subordinate courts of the State. Whenever it was pointed out to the High Court that any of these subordinate courts were acting beyond their powers or with manifest inequity and unfairness (as it certainly was in my clients’ case) these courts would be at once straightened out by the long arm of the High Court.

That is exactly what happened. The High Court, upon hearing the story of my clients immediately sent judicial notices to the State and the actual complainant,

that Makhan Mondol to appear before it and explain themselves.

Needless to say, none of them appeared at first. Then after the second or third such call, a thoroughly unprepared government lawyer appeared and entered a formal appearance on behalf of the State before the by-now-thoroughly-irate Judge.

“What do you have to say about all these adjournments?” asked the Judge testily.

“Let me see – hmm,” the Judge counted off the dates from the Order Sheet of the lower court, “Twelve, - thirteen!” The Judge looked up highly surprised.

The lawyer for the State looked blankly up at the frowning Judge and scratched his head. It was clear he had no clue, and no answer for the now quite visibly annoyed Judge.

“M-my Lord,” he stammered, “I need some time...” the lawyer trailed off.

“What? More time?” thundered the Judge from the Bench.

“You people have already wasted two long years just to get going with this case. You have done not a single thing in all this time but seek adjournment after adjournment *ad nauseum* against a foreigner couple. And that too, a couple from the American Consulate. What kind of an impression will the foreign press make of our criminal justice system?”

The Ledgers in their visitors’ bench and I in my counsel’s seat sat quietly. I could sense that the case was

moving along favourably. I just let the Judge give vent to his feelings. His Lordship was now in full control. He had seen what a frivolous complaint had been cooked up against the Ledgers. And where *indeed* was the actual complainant?

Nowhere to be seen. Neither in person, nor through a lawyer. Even *he* must have realised the folly of pursuing his utterly flippant and unbelievable charges against Mrs Miriam Ledger.

The Judge said finally, "I am giving you just one more week. You better be here before me by then, ready with all your answers. Or else I know what to do."

I knew then and there where the case was heading. The Ledgers couldn't suppress their immediate sense of relief.

The following week again, we were before His Lordship. The lawyer representing the State was also there with a sheaf of documents in which he had buried his nose. But, as usual there was no representation of the complainant Makhan *babu*.

Our case was called on. I stood up. That State lawyer also stood up to face the Judge who asked him just one question, - "Yes? Are you now in a position to enlighten this court as to why you have been sleeping for the last two years, Mister Rip van Winkle?"

The sarcasm cut right through the court room. The State lawyer squirmed and again went through his head-scratching routine.

That was enough for the Judge. He signalled for the court officer to take down his verdict.

The verdict was short, simple, straight-forward and direct. His Lordship quashed the entire criminal proceeding against the Ledgers and released all the bail bonds. The Ledgers were now free of everything. His Lordship further awarded damages to the tune of a hefty ten thousand rupees to be awarded against the State machinery, payable to the Ledgers.

The Judge didn't just stop there. He had some stinging comments to make of the way the lower court had handled the matter from the beginning. The magistrate/judge who was responsible for prolonging the case for this long would have some pretty unsavoury remarks and strictures made against him in his Annual Confidential Report that would be considered before the question of his promotion came up.

Served him right, I felt.

That was the story of the Ledgers' fight in court that eventually ended well for them.

After this I became quite friendly with the Ledgers for the rest of the time they were here in India. We were on first name basis now and had plenty of good times together. But towards the end, a very queer incident happened, which might or might not have hastened their departure. I'm not really sure.

But that is another story.

The Time of the Day

It was the height of the hippie season. Back in the late sixties, early seventies.

They came to India in droves. From all over the world, these pot-smoking, peace-loving flower children in search of bliss and *nirvana*.

The two or three places they thronged to in the subcontinent were the pristine beaches of Goa and the old city of Varanasi, and also the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal and its capital Kathmandu (Cat- man- doo, as they pronounced it).

I was then at the Calangute Beach at Panjim, Goa. I had gone there from Mumbai (then Bombay) aboard a steamship (my first ship ride) run by Chowgule Steamship Company that sailed down the coastline of western India, an overnight sail all the way down to the port of Panjim. The ship wasn't too big, like an ocean liner or anything, but big enough. It had two decks, an upper and a lower and a few cabins at the top. Also three classes of tickets: real cheap ones for the lower deck, where the passengers were mostly labour class and peasants, the upper deck which was a huge sprawl open on all three sides with a thick canvas awning overhead covering the sky, the middle class and of course the smattering of cabins, the upper class, which were nothing but small cubicles, stuffy, cell-like, where I suppose two or three bunks were thrown in for passengers. These cabins were meant for rich Indian

tourists who could afford them, and the class - typically camera-toting, safari-suited, *paan*-chewing; affluent *baniya* (tradesmen) class. I avoided them like the plague.

It was the upper deck that I preferred, not only because I could afford it but also, I wanted to mingle with the hippie crowd that all headed for Goa. A large gathering of these hippies (or “budget travellers” as they preferred to be known as) were all assembled and took up seats on the long wooden benches arranged in rows all the way up and down that spread of that upper deck.

The ship gave several warning hoots as the sun dipped westward in the late afternoon and began slowly to move out of the jetty. It began ever so slowly to get away from the mainland and head out for the open sea that I didn't at first realise we had started. The land receded and I watched it slowly fade away in the distance, at the railing where I hung on, looking as long as I could see. Soon it disappeared totally from view and an unexpected lump rose in my throat. We were now on high sea, steaming southward.

I slung off my backpack (yes, I had managed to get a hold of one in those days when this was a rarity in India) in which I carried all my belongings like a spare pair of jeans, a change of under clothes, a couple more tees, pyjamas, toiletries et al and found a place in one of those long and wide benches adorning the deck. The wind was streaming freely across the deck as gradually the sun sank in the western horizon over the edge of the sea tinting the whole sky first amber and gold and then a fiery orange.

Then I settled down and looked around, taking stock. There were no Indian faces that I could see. It was a sea of foreign white (some tanned to a shade darker by a patch or two than even me) faces, boys and girls (more girls), with long tresses and some weird hair-dos and all kinds of, what I can only term as outlandish attire. But wearing faded and often tattered blue jeans was a *de rigueur* I found. I was happy I had one and a tee-shirt on. I blended right in.

I noticed a number of things. Firstly, with such a crowd onboard, nearly seventy or eighty of them, you could hardly hear any noise. Rather, their talks amongst themselves, in many tongues, not just English, hardly ever rose over a soft murmur. Sometimes one would see a guitar being picked up and sounds of strumming of chords would float across. Some would sing along. All were smiles. It seemed as though they all knew each other. But no, that wasn't it at all. Whenever eyes would meet the two persons would smile and nod at each other. Everything was peace and harmony. Only the rush of the wind, as it grew stronger through the night, sounded as it raced across our face.

I tried out these free and easy smiles too and voila, they worked! It was magic. Soon I began to feel as though I too belonged. Someone would bring out a *chillum* (the clay pot) and with great care and concentration pack the marijuana (*ganja*) into it. Then he would touch it to his forehead reverentially (a practice I'm sure he had picked up in the *ghats* of Varanasi) and have it lit up by another while he gave several strong pulls at the lit *chillum*. After holding it in for long, deep down his lungs, he would raise his head heavenward and let out the lungful of

smoke that would instantly get whipped off his mouth in the strong wind and go dissipating and spreading the strong, sweetish aroma of *ganja* all over the deck. He would then pass on the *chillum* to the girl or the guy next to him and she'd follow suit. After she was done, she would pass the *chillum* onto the guy or girl next to her and this would go on till the stuff was burnt out.

I reached for the *chillum* too when the fellow in the next bench was offering it around. I took it from the guy's hand and doing the ritual *namashkar* bellowed out the *mantra* - "*Byom Shankarr*" and gave a long pull. Then I held in the lungful of smoke for as long as I could before letting it out. I could see a few curious faces turn my way. A blonde girl, who was sitting among us, asked me to repeat that *mantra*. She wanted to learn it. I found a few others too, eager to chant it and they asked me the meaning of that *mantra*. I launched into my usual spiel.

I explained first the meaning of the word "*Byom*". I told them "It's not 'bomb' as you're saying it. Try 'home'," I told them.

"Good. Now add a B before the 'home'."

They tried it several times and then got it.

"It means 'Hail!' It's a salutation to Lord Shiva whose another name is Shankar," I lectured.

"He is the God of Destruction. He is usually asleep. Stoned cold on *ganja*. But when Evil runs wild then He has to awaken and dance the '*tandava*', the dance of death and destruction of evil and restore peace and good in the world."

These flower children were, by now, lapping it up and I was having a whale of a time expanding on this theme.

Soon I had collected quite a few friends among them. I was by then practically a part of that crowd. This is what I wanted. To travel to Goa being a part of these flower children and experience first-hand their lifestyle and pick up a few of their jargons.

A little after seven thirty there was a kind of clanging of bells all over the ship, that announced that dinner was served. Night had fallen and the sea, or the ocean was dark. Standing at the railing at the prow I could see the shadow of the ship cast on the sea by the ship's light as it sailed ahead. It was quite a sight to stand there and gaze out beyond, the wind whipping over you.

At the dinner gong we trooped in a file to the ship's canteen where each of us were given food packets and a bottle of drinking water. The food, mostly dry, however was surprisingly good and tasty I remember.

Afterwards, we got back to our benches and lay down for the night. I unfurled my sleeping bag (yes, I had that too rolled up and carted atop my backpack) and made a place for myself. Many were still up, some getting more and more stoned on the *ganja* and were singing out songs and ballads among themselves.

There was much overflowing friendliness all around and the spirit of bonhomie washed all over me.

So passed the night in a blissful slumber. All that ozone plus the bit of cannabis in my system and the

gentle roll of the ship, were having a hypnotic effect on me.

Next morning, we left the mid-sea and the ship turned shoreward. We could see the land appear slowly over the horizon and grow bigger. Soon we pulled in to the harbour.

The land at last. I kind of felt a little relieved. We could see figures of people on the jetty running about getting ready to receive us. We pulled up at last and anchored. I was all excited and packed, ready for the gangplank to be affixed to the ship down which we would disembark.

By this time, I had made friends with a few of my co-passengers on the deck and was considered as being one of them. It is from them I knew that we would all be taking a bus for the beaches.

I had no notion of what Goa was like and what facilities were available. I had been, in those early years of mine, a bit whimsical, happy-go-lucky and somewhat disorganised. Just get out of the house first with some travellers' cheques and my backpack, and then decide where to go, where to stay etc while on the move. A bit bohemian in my attitude, you might say.

And so it was, I got on to a bus along with these young travellers, all foreigners, and headed out to a beach named Calangute.

The bus took us through the city of Panjim down neat streets with lots of green surrounding the countryside and quaint villas, all single storied bungalow-type, much after the Spanish *haciendas*. After

all, Goa was under Portuguese colonial rule till 1962. Much of the Portuguese culture, lifestyle and laid-back attitude had stayed on. That was at first visible from their architecture. I had never seen these types of bungalows anywhere else in our country.

Then we came up on the seaside. There were star hotels on the beachfront, which I didn't even consider for a moment. Not only because they were far too expensive for my budget, but also, and more importantly for me, these were the hotels where those cabin passengers in the ship would be flocking to: the loud-mouthed, pot-bellied, camera-toting bunch of tourists with their loud, blaring transistor radios, belting out cheap Hindi film songs day and night. I simply hated to be seen associating with that kind.

The next best thing, and there were plenty on offer, were a string of beach shack hotels, Goan family-owned small affairs, where accommodation was cheap, the sanitation clean and hygienic, and meals provided in cosy little homely dining halls at modest rates.

Oh, a word about Goanese cuisine. These mouth-watering yet hot dishes like Pork Vindaloo, Chicken Xacuti, Feijoada, Chicken Cafreal, to name but a few were food I had never had before. Nor do I think did these young travellers from the West, as they were mostly used to bland, non-spicy food of their cold and temperate countries. I have a feeling these exotic sounding foods were concoctions of Portuguese and the *Konkonese* food, but again, I don't really know.

It was in one of these beach shack hotels, proudly bearing the name Ocean View Lodge, where my few

friends and I decided to put up to start with. This was just a couple of hundred yards away from where the waves lapped on the beach and had a veranda facing the open sea. An ideal location to spend a short holiday.

I had to share a room with a couple, a French couple, Jean and Simone, who spoke English with a strong French accent that needed getting used to. But the two and I had no difficulty communicating, sharing a three-bedded room. (One of the beds went mostly unoccupied at night though.)

They were fun to be around. I enjoyed their company as much as I believed, they did mine.

I was getting used to a lot of the jargon and words that the hippies used in their communication and I soon found they had become a part of my language as well.

In the evenings there would be an informal party somewhere on the beach under thatched sunshades where a motley bunch of these boys and girls would assemble around a pit fire with a suckling pig slowly roasting over it. There would be bottles of Feni going round. Some of us would light up *chillums* of grass (as *ganja* was called) and blow out long plumes of smoke towards the moon. There would be singing and guitar strumming. Everyone shared. Everyone joined in. It was something I had not experienced before, this abundant cordiality and overflowing friendliness sweeping over us. The scene reminded me of John Lennon's iconic song "Imagine". It was really an imaginary dreamworld to me.

My days passed in that idyllic place in idle enjoyment. There were any number of little makeshift

bars (thatched roofs and all) that sold the country wine Feni that Goa is famous for. Feni was their own brew, a wine made by fermenting cashew nuts that grew abundantly all over Goa. I loved to have a drink now and then and Feni suited my wallet and taste just fine.

With a dash of Sprite or some lime juice in it, Feni made a super cocktail as the sun would go down over the western sky. I don't think I've ever seen such splendid sunsets anywhere. I'd sit on the veranda with a drink in my hand and gaze out across the Arabian Sea in front, at the orange sky change slowly into vermillion and then violet as the sun sank, getting lower and lower. The endless stretch of water glittered with many shards of colour and it would seem as though the sea was on fire. Finally, the red ball of fire would suddenly sink out of view.

Soon after that the sky would get dark and a thousand little chips of diamond would light up the firmament above. Such glorious evenings were a regular feature.

Some evenings I'd sit out on the beach when Jean and Simone would join me with their cloth bags slung across their shoulders containing all their paraphernalia. They'd bring out their *chillum*, and their plastic jar containing their stock of grass. We'd light up while the sun would go down on us. Then maybe some others would stroll by, and getting the whiff of *ganja* would join us, and soon we'd be a sizeable circle where *chillums* would pass around. Some girl would get up to dance a gig as someone brought out his guitar and croon softly.

One day Jean had decided to spend the night with another two girls, I think a Swedish girl named Anita who was sharing a cottage with her girlfriend Gisele and had wanted to share a night with Jean they had both taken a sudden liking to. That seemed to be all right with Simone. I had ceased being surprised with their lifestyle by then. They were such a free-living and free-loving group of people. "No possessions" - I remembered Lennon's song.

Anyway, that night (which, incidentally was to be my last night in Goa) I remember, I retired with Simone, seemingly totally unconcerned. I don't have to tell you that the three-bedded room had two beds vacant that night. I took things in stride. And why not? When in Rome etc, I remembered the age-old saying.

But all this, like all good times, had an expiry date. And that date, for me, was already there. I had nearly run out of funds. So it was time.

My friends Jean and Simone knew that. So, this last night of mine was a kind of farewell present to me from them for the lovely week we had all spent together.

I had decided to return overland, taking a bus from Panjim that ran through the night along the Ghat section - that's hilly, with lots of ups and downs.

That last day of mine I had gone for a last swim after breakfast. This was something I always looked forward to. I enjoyed splashing about among the mild breakers and running and leaping about on the beach with my two friends. On this day after I had had my fill of scampering about in the water, I had clambered up on

the beach. Simone and Jean were still in the water leaping about and yelling with their sheer joy of living, their *joie de vivre*. Yes, Jean was back then from his night out with the two Swedes.

I dried myself with my large bath towel and sat down to watch my friends cavorting in the water. I didn't have a watch on me. I had left it back at the lodge. I needed to get back and grab lunch before checking out and heading for the bus stand, Check-out time was twelve noon.

I looked around for somebody with a watch who could tell me what time it was. There was a young fellow sitting a few yards away with his nose buried in a book. It was *Papillon*, by Henri Charriere. This book was an iconic book then, and almost everyone who read, had either read it already, or was deeply absorbed in it.

He had a big sports watch hanging around his wrist, the kind you can wear in water. I hailed out "Hey man!" This was an accepted way of calling out to a stranger, a stranger you wanted to talk to.

So this guy tears his eyes away from his book and looks at me.

"Man, can you tell me what time it is now?" I go.

This fella, cool as you please, raises his eyes heavenward, glancing at the sun, and then, taking his time all the while, looks back at me.

“It’s daytime man,” he drawls, and goes back to his book.

Hmm, I get the message. Without disturbing this cool cat any further, I get up and trudge back towards my lodge with a last goodbye wave to my friends, still in the water.

A Smokey Tale

We called him Smokey Joe. A friend of ours, a close friend in fact.

We had all named him Smokey not because he smoked a lot. No, not at all. He was very particular about the cigarettes-causing-cancer scare. And that was in our earlier years when public awareness about the evils of smoking had not yet caught on. Well, not to the extent it has now.

He was christened Smokey Joe by my close friend and confederate Sydney Francis, an Anglo-Indian police sergeant I used to hang out with a lot. Though Joe was so careful about not smoking, his rules went for a toss when he was having a drink. And at Syd's place there was always booze flowing. Well, if not always, at weekend Friday bashes, he (Syd) would have at his McLeod Street flat. Being a police sergeant, he had access to cheap rum from the police lines. Booze was never in short supply at Syd's.

I am talking about the early seventies. I had been a late entrant to the legal profession and Sydney Francis was one of the police sergeants on duty there, in the Calcutta High Court where I began my legal career. Along with another Anglo-Indian buddy of his, Rodney something. Sydney and Rodney were close buddies of each other, and fun to be with. It's but natural that I would get to meet them and form an instant alliance. Joe, short for Jotin, was also a lawyer like me. Well, not

really like me, but a lot smarter and savvier version than I was, or was ever going to be. I looked up to Joe with a lot of admiration, not unmixed with a tinge of envy.

So there we were, four close buddies, drinking buddies and partying pals you may call. There were a lot of others in our week-end crowd, mostly Anglo Indians (there still were a large population of them in Calcutta, (not yet Kolkata), a still fun place to be in), one or two Goans, a very pretty Goan girl Pamela, I remember, who was the girlfriend of an elderly, quite a jealous sort of a fella named Sam, who used to eye me with great suspicion whenever I tried being friendly with that Pamela. Sunday Jam Sessions in Mags, and at the Madhouse atop what now is the Park Hotel and sensuous crooners at the Blue Fox, Moulin Rouge and Trincas; these were our usual haunts. Alas, where have they all gone now!

Anyway, let me get on with the tale I heard from Smokey Joe one quiet evening at Syd's place. That was a Sunday and there were no parties on. Just Syd, Joe and I were hunched over a freshly opened bottle of rum among us, having a quiet drink. Rodney was hung over from his binge the night before and so absent. Then suddenly Joe piped up "A funny thing happened a few months ago I havta tell you guys about," he announced.

Naturally this piqued our interest. A tale from Joe had to be juicy. He, despite being a lawyer by profession, and not a bad one either, led a very colourful and Bohemian life. Bohemian by other lawyers' standards. Most other lawyers had to lead a very quiet, orderly and regulated life.

The exacting nature of the very profession of law demanded so. Or else one didn't last long. But not Joe. Either he was too brilliant or was too dazzling a personality, or perhaps he was a magician. No matter how hard he had partied over the weekends, come Monday morning, he would be the epitome of a well-poised, well-groomed, polished lawyer, ready with his briefs and notes fully prepped, to argue his clients' cases before the stern no-nonsense judges of the High Court. How he could manage it was an enigma to me. I knew I couldn't do that. And I would often remain absent in court. Perhaps that was the prime reason why I was such a resounding failure.

Again, I am digressing. Let me go back to Joe's story.

"You guys know I have professional connections with the American Consulate here, don't you? I have to help them out at times with their legal problems," Joe began.

This, I knew well enough. He was in the panel of lawyers that the American consulate had for resident Americans who were stationed in Calcutta and ran into legal hassles. I would often see him with his foreigner clients in the corridors of the High Court. That, naturally, drew a lot of stares. A lot of envious stares I might add. Not just from me. From almost everyone else as well.

We all thought or imagined Joe raking in big money in dollars from his American *murgas* (read suckers). People are always jealous of another's success, particularly in the same profession or calling.

“There was this young American couple, a Mr and Mrs Ledger, who got involved with a nasty business in the First National City Bank sometime a couple of years ago,” Joe continued. We all leaned forward. Some strange tale would surely follow now.

“They had gotten in a scuffle with a whole bunch of staff inside the bank following some misunderstanding. That hadn’t ended too well with this American couple. In fact, the husband got thoroughly thrashed up before the Park Street police had rescued them,” Joe elaborated.

Anyway, there was the inevitable criminal case that had gone on for a while in the lower courts that wasn’t going anywhere. Finally, the consulate people had sought Joe’s help. Joe had filed a case in the High Court in the revisional jurisdiction and had finally brought everything to a very happy and satisfactory end. Happy for that American couple, with a substantial financial award of damages in their favour in the bargain.”

“After I got them off the hook, the Ledgers became close personal friends,” Joe said.

“Americans, as you know, are basically a friendly lot. If you’re on their right side, that is. They don’t much dwell on formalities. We got on first name basis right away after the whole imbroglio blew over. They were just Bob and Miriam to me and I was Joe, not ‘Sir’ any longer,” Joe continued.

“Bob was a tall gangling beanpole of a guy, (think length without breadth), while Miriam was a corker of a beauty. A blonde, hazel-eyed, lissom - a slender rosebud!”

Joe gave us this rather salacious description of the characters of his narrative.

“Ooh!” we all went in unison, licking our chops, fairly drooling. “Now it’s getting better Joe,” Syd chortled, “And hotter!”

Joe gave Syd a look and gravely shook his head. “Look fellas, you all ought to know, whatever you may think of me, I never fool around with my clients.” Joe had suddenly turned serious. And also, a bit holier-than-thou.

We hastened to appease Joe or else the story would die. And we didn’t want that to happen.

“Sure, sure, I know that Joe, don’t worry.” I assured him with an admonishing glance at Syd. “We all know you have principles Joe,” I continued.

“You bet I do. You ought to know,” he continued addressing me, “that you don’t take a crap on your own doorstep.”

“Here I am trying to tell you guys about a strange thing that happened recently in which these clients were deeply involved. And in the strictest of confidence too - and you fellows are trying to make light of it with your cheap digs,” Joe still fumed.

Then Syd held out his cigarette packet as a token offering of truce. Joe took one. I held out my lighter for his first drag. He took it deep down and let off a mouthful of smoke. Then he leaned back and said “Aaah! That hit the spot!” he smiled at us. Peace restored.

“So,” he picked up his story again, “as I was telling you, Bob and Miriam and I had become close friends. There wasn’t a single party or get-together at their place or at the Marine House, that I wasn’t invited to,” Joe said.

“Not that I’d go every time they called me, mind you. Only on weekends. Couldn’t afford the time. We lawyers have a gruelling life you know,” he informed us. As if I didn’t know it only too well.

Syd nodded vigorously and sagely.

“Sure, sure, Joe - that I know. You lawyers have to bone up on your law books every night staying up late and all that.” Syd made it clear that he was no stranger to a lawyer’s lifestyle.

“I would come up for the air too, you know, now and then. I just couldn’t go on accepting their hospitality all the time. Off and on I’d take them to my club for dinner and Sunday beer mornings,” Joe went on to explain.

It was clear that Joe was no sponge, leeching on people’s largesse. He had to show that he was no less than this rich American couple. Joe was a member of the Calcutta Club, one of the most exclusive and high-end of the clubs in the city that wasn’t easy to become a member of.

Joe, it must be mentioned here, had never once offered to take *us* to that club of his. We never expected that either. Perhaps, and rightly, he felt that we didn’t quite fit the profile of the standard of guests that would be expected in that club of all clubs. But he did often take us to his not-so hi-fi Lake Club for drinks. So, we

really had no grievance against him on that score. This I knew that despite the fact that Joe associated with us like close friends, he was connected. Connected with the really important people of Calcutta's posh society. His father was a top-notch eminent lawyer in the High Court handling big-buck clients, his uncle (*mama*) was a Supreme Court justice too, and Joe was used to meeting many bigwigs on a one-on-one basis.

Again, I digress.

"One day, while having a drink at their place at Harrington Mansions, we got to talking about the hippie culture of the West." Joe had begun his tale.

Now we all knew that waves of hippies used to throng to our country during the seventies. They had two or three destinations they would head for. One was Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal these hippies would pronounce as *Cat-Man-Do*, and the other was the verdant and sandy beaches of Goa. They had only one thing in mind: drugs, mostly soft drugs like marijuana (*ganja* in Hindi) or hash (*charas*). At both these places *ganja* and *charas* were freely and abundantly available. And no hassles or harassment by the police. There was yet another place where one saw these hippies in droves. That was the holy city of Varanasi (aka Benares) on the shores of the river Ganga. Here too, you could see these hippies in clumps with their ubiquitous *jholas* (cloth bags) across their shoulders and *chillums* (earthenware pots) in hand, they would sit in circles smoking pot and blowing lungfuls of smoke heavenward. These were common sights to us Indians and the government was quite tolerant in those days.

Syd and I also knew that our friend Joe, in his wide experience, had often forayed among these hippies in Goa and Kathmandu and had personal experience of these hippies and their free and easy-going lifestyle. He had a couple of times offered to introduce us to the “pleasures” of pot.

“You should try pot at least once you know. Shall I get some pot for you?” Joe had asked us once.

“Oh no. No! Not that. Please!” we fairly jumped out of our skins. None of us in our group in that McLeod Street crowd would ever dream of trying something that we only knew to be what the *thela wallahs* (cart pullers), rickshaw pullers and *jamadars* (street sweepers) would smoke. We were perfectly happy with our booze. We didn’t need to try anything that was so infra-dig.

Joe only laughed at us and shrugged it off. We knew that Joe would at times use these drugs and those were the weekends we wouldn’t see him. No wonder he had been named “Smokey” Joe by Syd.

“Well, as I was telling you fellas, talk had turned to the hippie movement and naturally the subject of drugs came up,” Joe said.

“Now you know that all drug use in the US is considered to be a federal offence. Not that people there don’t use them. But they have to be careful, always looking over their shoulders to see if any Narc is lurking around.”

“What’s a Narc?” I asked Joe.

“Oh that’s an agent, Narcotics Agent from the DEA, the Drug Enforcement Authority. These Narcs pack more power than ordinary police. They catch you using drugs, or even in possession, you’re screwed,” Joe told us.

“That’s why these hippies flock to India,” explained Joe, “because here you can buy grass (*ganja*) or shit (*charas*) quite freely from government licensed shops,” Joe elaborated.

“Hey you guys,” suddenly Joe flared up. “You want to hear my story or hear a lecture on the hippie movement?”

“No, no Joe,” we assured him, alarmed at his short fuse. “do go on. We’re all ears. No more stupid questions.”

From here on let me tell you Joe’s story in his own words, as far as I can remember.

*

Bob was an officer in the Consulate, a Radio Officer or something, involved with transmitting and receiving of messages, I don’t really know. All I knew was that he had a very important job there. He wasn’t very clear about what exactly it was he did, and I didn’t ask. Perhaps he was part of the US Secret Service. Who knows? And who cared? I didn’t.

Instead of the Marine House on Gokhale Road next to our club, (that unique complex of American buildings that was so distinct and stood apart from all of Calcutta’s architecture), where most of the US marines and other officers of the Consulate lived, they had been given a

large exclusive flat almost next to the US Consular office on Harrington Street itself.

So, as I was telling you, we were having a quiet drink up at their apartment one evening and talk had turned to hippies and drugs.

I told them, casually, that I had access to *ganja*, having once hung around with these hippies.

“Really?” exclaimed Miriam and looked at Bob. Bob’s curiosity was piqued too, I saw.

“Yeah. Why, would you all like to give it a shot some day?” I asked them.

I knew that this was an unthinkable thing for them to do, being a US consular officer and all. There were strict protocols in place. Use of drugs was an absolute no, no.

I could see that they were interested, Miriam, more than Bob. All they needed was a little nudge. I wanted to see if I could make them try *ganja*, once at least, with me. Just for the heck of it, you know. After all, *ganja* was a soft and harmless drug and not really addictive. Unless of course you chose to become one yourself. The choice lay in you. Even alcohol could get you addicted and make you a slave.

After a bit of hemming and hawing Bob asked me “Do you have it here with you Joe?”

“Oh no, no. Not right now. What do you think? I carry around stuff like that with me? I am not a hippie. Nor a pusher Bob!” I exclaimed.

“And besides, I wouldn’t mix booze with grass if I were you. The two don’t go together. You’ll get sick,” I explained to these two greenhorns.

This time they got really curious, both Bob and Miriam.

“And why is that?” Miriam asked me, her hazel eyes wide open with eagerness.

That made me lean back. I had their undivided attention now. Like a true-blue guru, I expanded on my pet theme and theory.

“Look. It’s like this. Booze makes you loud and boisterous. Doesn’t it? It makes you aggressive. And argumentative.”

I laid it on them as though I were an expert medicinal man. I could see they were lapping it up.

“Yes, yes,” they said together nodding. “I’d say that it does do that.” Bob agreed readily.

“Well pot, or grass, has the exact opposite effect on you.” I informed these avid students of mine.

“Pot will make you go all quiet and introspective. Gone will be all your aggression. Peace and harmony will take over your inner self,” I intoned, surprising even myself.

“Ooh!,” Miriam cooed. “Sounds bizarre!”

I could see Bob’s and Miriam’s eyes were popping with awe and wonder.

"I hope you're not putting us on," said Bob guardedly.

"No way Bob. I know what I'm talking about," I assured him. "I'm telling you all this from my personal experience. And I've had plenty."

"And there's only one thing you have to be careful about," I went on, "and that is - just don't mix alcohol with marijuana. The result won't be good."

"You see," I expanded further on the theme, "while booze inside you is pulling you in one direction, namely to become an extrovert, brag and a show-off, the cannabis pulls you deep within yourself, to your innermost core. There will be a terrible tussle inside you, between these opposing forces." I was like a professor to my two docile pupils.

"Oh, oh okay we get it," they said together. They were now really interested to try it out. Hooked already?

"So, when do you think you can get us some pot Joe?" This was Bob, having decided at last after my little lecture, totally sold to the idea of trying out pot, at least once in their lifetime.

Next Friday I landed up at their first-floor apartment along of course with my stash. The Ledgers were eagerly awaiting my arrival. Friday was Happy Hour at the Marine House where booze and eats would be on the house. But they had given that up. For me and their first taste of cannabis.

Little did I know, or even they, what lay in store.

At the Ledgers' flat we settled down. They had made no arrangements for drinks as I had earlier warned them not to. I laid out my stuff, a newspaper-wrapped package holding the grass and also along with it my *chillum* and a tamper that you use to tamp down the tobacco in a pipe.

They eyed the *chillum* with great curiosity.

"What do you do with this?" asked Miriam picking it up and turning it around in her hand inspecting it up close.

"Let me see," Bob picked the *chillum* out of his wife's hand, turning it up and down, his eyes curious as to how to use it.

"That's called a *chillum*, a pot as you can see, where you put the grass in here," I showed them. "And light it up and then drag down the smoke deeply through the narrow hole below.

Gawd! I thought. They're like naïve children. I'm going to have to spoon feed them, it seemed.

"You guys need to be potty trained or what?" I asked them, Ha ha. That got a big laugh all round.

"Look," I went on to explain, "you can either smoke the grass as a joint or straight from the *chillum*," I said.

"A joint is where you knock off the tobacco from an ordinary cigarette and then mix the tobacco thoroughly with a bit of grass, pack it back in the now empty cigarette, and then light up."

“I think as a beginner that will be easier for you,” I said.

They agreed to that and so I made us three joints out of the three cigarettes from Bob’s pack of Marlboroughs.

I thought that since it was going to be the first time for these two non-initiates, I’d better go easy at first. Mixing the grass with the knocked-off tobacco from their cigarettes was like adding a little water or soda with your whisky. Kind of making it mild.

The two looked with great interest as I cut up the grass into little shreds with a small pair of scissors, that also came out of my ensemble of gadgets I kept with my stash of grass.

“It’d be nice if we could have some music while we’re about it you know,” I told them. “The grass will heighten your listening pleasure. You’ll hear sound like you’ve never heard before.”

I laid it on a bit, I think. “You’re going to hear the full range of their guitars and drums,” I added.

The Ledgers had a big Akai audio system with huge speakers that could really blast. Their LP collection was an enviable array of the latest rock music.

“Sure thing,” Bob said as he got up to browse his record collection and pull one out. The first one he put on was by The Doors, a favourite Rock band of mine. The LP began with the number “C’mon baby, light my fire”. How very appropriate, I thought.

We lit up our first round of joints.

The music played in the background. I had packed in quite a bit of tobacco with the grass so as to make the joints light. I wasn't really very happy with that tobacco bit you know, because of the cancer scare.

I told them to make sure to keep the smoke deep in their lungs for as long as possible. To get the effect of the grass fully.

After we had finished our first round of joints, we began to feel a little buzz in our heads.

We sat around beaming at each other. Most of our talk had, by then, dwindled down to short mono-syllabic moans and mumbles. We were getting fonder of each other - the first flush of pot, the euphoria one feels when everything is nice and beautiful. And peaceful.

I don't remember how much time elapsed. Seemed a long while. Pot affects your sense of time. Stretches it like elastic.

Then Bob got up and went over to his audio console. He flipped the disc to play the other side.

I told him to let The Doors rip.

"Just turn up the volume Bob honey," requested Miriam. She was swaying a little to the rhythm of the music, I could see. She looked at me and I, also affected, but only slightly by the music, looked back at her, nodding my head to the rhythm of The Doors. Then I extended my hand to her. She took it and we got up to move to the music that was now loud, drowning us and crashing in waves over our senses.

Bob sat down, with a beaming, indulgent smile on his face. A real nice guy. He was enjoying the threesome party that we were already very much into.

The record ended. Bob walked up to his system to change over to another disc. Miriam and I had quite exhausted ourselves by now after our hectic dancing and wild gyrations on the floor.

We sat around the table on top of which lay all my stash of marijuana, scissors, *chillum* and open packet of cigarettes helter-skelter. What a sight, I thought.

Time for the second one.

“Let’s try it from the *chillum* now,” suggested Bob. “but you gotta show us how.”

“Yes, yes,” enthused Miriam. “Let’s do that.”

“Look guys,” I cautioned them, “this one’s a bit tricky. You havta hold the *chillum* like this.”

I showed my two eager students how exactly to hold the *chillum* and at what angle. And then make a small opening between one edge of your thumb and the side of your hand below the index finger.

“Bring your mouth down to the hole. See? And drag the smoke down deep. Deep as it would go, down into your lungs. And hold it there.”

They tried a few dry runs with the *chillum*. Without anything in it. And they got the hang of it. They were like two little children with a new toy. Holy smoke! I thought.

Then I began packing the pot with my *ganja*. I did mix it with a little bit of tobacco, just a wee little bit, from the left-over heap on the table. Then I tamped it down after mixing it thoroughly with the *ganja* to make a good smooth texture. The *chillum* was finally ready. And we were ready too, to take off.

I went first with Miriam holding the flame from her Ronson over the mouth of the *chillum*. I gave a few short puffs to make sure the fire caught. It did. And I dragged in my first lungful from the *chillum*, now rich with the cannabis, and just a wee bit of the tobacco.

Holding the smoke deep in my lungs I handed over the *chillum* to Bob. Doing it the right ritualistic way by sharing the *chillum* among friends. Just the way I had learnt from the *sadhus* at the *ghats* of Varanasi before.

I was surprised to see that Bob held the *chillum* like a well-experienced pot smoker. He had learnt my little lesson well. He took a drag, a long one deep inside and then handed the pot over to his wife. I had to help Miriam a bit with the exact way of holding the *chillum* in one hand while cupping it with her other hand so as to make the little orifice through which she was to drag the smoke in. But she too, like her hubby, had picked it up.

After the pot had gone around three or four times, we had burnt out all the grass in it and laid it down on the table between us.

The marijuana was beginning to have its effects on us. I was no stranger to such effects and for me it was at first slow in coming. But the other two got it right away. I could tell by their faces. Totally stoned. With beatific

smiles, almost divine, they looked upon me as some sort of an avatar or something.

And oh, let me tell you about the music in the background. The Eagles were wailing out 'Hotel California'. I'm quite sure all three of us in that dazed, zonked out stage, could actually see the "shimmering light" "up ahead in the distance".

We lit up another *chillum*. By now we were blowing out lungfuls of smoke. *Chillums* make an awful lot of smoke. Dense plumes of it were coming out of our mouths after being held down for some time to absorb every ounce of the cannabis into our bloodstream. These, we would raise our mouths heavenward, and let out in long jet streams with accompanying "Aaahs" and "Oooohs". The smoke would instantly get sucked out by the overhead AC vents to be spewed outside.

Time passed. We were quite unaware of the duration. It seemed long, really long. No more talk was necessary - we vibed so beautifully among ourselves with our smiles and eyes that verbal words were no longer needed. We were all on a different plane altogether.

As I had said, the sound from the powerful speakers drowned all our hearing of outside noise. The music had taken over all our sensory perception.

But over and above the music of Deep Purple, the disc that was now playing, I thought I was hearing the sound of bells clanging in the distance. Harsh and strident rang the bells, a continuous irritating sharp metallic dong, dong, dong, that cut right through the music of Deep Purple and reached my ears. Not just my

ears. I looked up to see the deep furrow of a frown form on Bob's face. I glanced at Miriam. She was in a trance-like stage. Almost like in a *samadhi* that *sadhus* sometimes attain deep in meditation.

Then the clanging sounded nearby, not from afar. There was no mistaking it now. And then it suddenly stopped.

Bob and I relaxed. Whatever the disturbance was, it had gone. We dove into the swirling waves of Deep Purple again.

Then an unthinkable thing happened.

We heard the sound of boots running up the staircase. They reached our landing and frantic hammering on the door with heavy hands began. Then came the sharp piercing sound, a continuous ringing of the doorbell. Whoever it was, he kept his finger jammed in the bell, not once lifting it.

We jumped out of our skins. Gone in a flash was all the trance-like stage we had all gotten into. Even Miriam, who had been the most affected among us, came out of it. She literally leapt out of her seat and yelled, "What the fuck!"

Bob rushed to the door and flung it wide open. Three or four guys with firefighter's helmets on and firemen's uniforms rushed in, brushing Bob aside. They all had fire extinguishers with them and were dragging in a long hose pipe, already dripping water.

"Where's the fire? The fire, the fire, where?" they all yelled frantically at us.

Without waiting for an answer, they ran right through the apartment, upsetting chairs, side tables, what-nots in their mad rush. From room to room they all burst into, with not a care of what they were doing. What a bedlam! The three of us were transfixed. Totally dumbfounded, we stood rooted to one spot wondering what the hell was going on.

Their leader then came out of the kitchen to where we stood, in the living room. "Where's the fire?" he demanded, raising his voice unduly high in a frantic quest for the answer.

"What fire?" This time it was Bob who raised his voice. "What the fuck's going on here?" he demanded to know, drawing himself up to his full height of six two, towering over the fire guy.

"Who the hell called you fellas in here?" bellowed Bob at the leader of the firefighting team that had burst in so suddenly, like a pack of wild buffalo into a private sanctuary.

"Hey Bob," came a voice from the open doorway. We looked around. An American was standing there with a raised arm calling out to Bob. It was the Duty Officer, an American marine minding the front desk at the Consulate, while the rest of the marines were enjoying the Friday Happy Hour at the Marine House.

"Hi Charlie," hailed back Bob. "What the hell's going on here? Why're all these jokers farting around in my home?" asked a very angry Bob of his fellow under officer. "What fire are these clowns looking for? You can

see for yourself Charlie, there's no effing fire anywhere. Is there?"

Charlie had by now walked in and sniffed. The air was still strong with the typical sweet smell of cannabis. Smell of cannabis takes long to disappear. It lingers. In the room, in the air, on your clothes. Then Charlie's eyes fell on the array of my stash of grass and the paraphernalia of the pot party, all laid out in full view, openly on the table.

The fire fighters, the four guys who had so unceremoniously broken into the Ledger's apartment, had by now departed, being thoroughly satisfied that there wasn't any fire anywhere in the apartment.

It was then that Charlie explained the whole fiasco to Bob. And to us all. The smoke (voluminous, as I had said earlier) from the *chillum*, had risen through the AC duct and set off a highly sensitive smoke alarm that had already been installed at the Ledger's apartment. That in turn had alerted the Duty Officer manning the front desk at the Consulate office. He had, in turn, lost no time in calling up the Fire Brigade and given them the location of a possible fire. This was as per protocol. Then what followed was easily imaginable.

The evening was totally ruined. I picked up the detritus of our experiment with cannabis from the table and shoved them all in my *jhola* (cloth bag). Then I took my rather rueful leave of the Ledgers.

*

Joe finished his tale and pushed forward his empty glass toward Syd for a refill. We all took refills, the one-

for-the-road drink that would mark the end of the evening.

As we said Cheers to each other Joe said, "All what I've told you happened nearly six months ago. Since then, I've heard nothing from the Ledgers. Not one single word," sighed Joe.

"How do you mean?" Syd asked, concerned.

"I don't know really. Every time I'd call up the Ledger residence, an operator's mechanical voice tells me 'This number does not exist.' I fear the worst. And I don't even dare to actually go there on a visit," mused Joe.

"Why don't you call up the Consulate?" I suggested.

"No good," Joe shook his head sadly.

"Don't you think I tried that? But here too I drew a blank. They just flat out told me that they cannot divulge any info about any of their employees. Then they just hung up."

That was the end of the Ledger story. And who, come to think of it, was responsible?

Who but our Joe? Old Smokey Joe.

OCD

I love my porridge at breakfast.

Not every day though. Three days a week. The other days I eat eggs. With toast and marmalade and other stuff like fruits and all.

I make that porridge myself. This, I like to do soon after I am up and making my bed-tea, which I shall have before I go for my walk.

I like making that porridge myself because I do it rather well. Don't snigger. That's not the only thing I make well. I can make a boiled egg and also, I have to tell you, that scrambled eggs turn out really fluffy in my hands. I can also turn out a delicious mug of coffee in my coffee maker. Oh! Did I tell you about the nice warm, crispy, golden-brown, crunchy toasts I can make in my toaster?

Well, that about sums it all up, my culinary skills. Not bad! What do you say?

Now, about that porridge. I use, have been using, for as long as I can remember, a favourite sauce pan with a Bakelite handle and a lid with a Bakelite knob on the lid to hold without getting your fingers burnt.

Some time ago that handle had become loose. The screw that held it firm on the side of the sauce pan had worn down over years of use. I really can't blame that screw. It *had* given me years of good, dependable service.

But when one day, as I was boiling an egg in it, and the egg and the water had come to a full boil, almost bubbling over the rim of the saucepan, I turned off the gas and picked up the sauce pan from the fire. What I'd better say is I *tried* to pick up the sauce pan.

What happened next could have ended in a big disaster. The handle came right off the body of the sauce pan and the panful of bubbling, frothing, steaming water along with the egg in it just fell off my hand and hit the floor at my feet with a big clang.

I must say my reflexes kicked in at just the right moment I felt the handle give. And had jumped. I had jumped back far enough to clear my feet and legs away from all that falling cascade of steaming water and egg and the pan. I was still clutching the by-now-loose handle in my hand.

The deafening crash in the still, silent, early hours woke up my wife with a start. She came running in to the kitchen.

One look at what lay on the floor, and me with that loose sauce pan handle in my hand told her what had happened. She's one smart lady. Catches on quick.

"What happened?" she shrieked, "Are you hurt?"

"No no, oh no," I hastened to assure her. "It's nothing really..".

"Shut up!" she snapped, cutting me short. "You call this NOTHING?" She raised her voice to a pitch far outdistancing decibel-wise, the clang that my falling sauce pan had made on the floor.

“How many times have I told you to throw away that old dented sauce pan? I’ve been noticing that the handle was loose. And you should have got a new sauce pan by now,” she reminded me.

It is true. She had been harping about it for quite some time. And I had been adamant in my belief that the handle wouldn’t come off the sauce pan. Ever. And now just look at what happened.

“It’s by God’s good grace that nothing happened,” she concluded. She’s a very devout God-fearing person. Very unlike me, I have to admit.

“For God’s sake,” the raised voice again, in admonishing mode, “Will you give up this ancient sauce pan and go to the market this morning and get a new one?”

“Yes y-yes of course,” I stammered, my head down, shame-faced.

It was a narrow escape from what could have been a really bad accident. Only my lightning reflex had saved me. If that loose sauce pan had fallen over my lower torso, I would have been drenched with fiery water all down my crotch to my toes. It would have been a first-degree burn case and I would surely have ended up in a hospital. I may not have even survived. Yes, it had been a narrow shave indeed.

Needless to say, I had a chastened quiet breakfast of toast and a banana *sans* eggs and porridge that morning.

Afterward, when she wasn't looking, I put that old sauce pan and the loose handle in a bag and went down to the market. There in the basement was Ganguly Mechanicals, a workshop where the owner is an adept hand at repairing ordinary domestic appliances and utensils. I took my sauce pan and the handle that had come off. This was child's play for Ganguly Mechanicals. They repair complicated electrical appliances like microwave ovens, blenders, grinders, OTGs and the like. There's always a crowd of people, mostly local housewives with their kitchen gadgets that have stopped working. Ganguly fixes them and makes them new so the owners don't have to throw away their dead appliances and buy new ones. So, for them to fix that loose handle onto the sauce pan was, what else, but child's play?

Ganguly Mechanicals were busy that morning, as all other mornings, and told me to leave my sauce pan and handle with them and to come back the next day. They had too much work on their hands to waste time on a two-bit silly job like mine. They would take it up once they had a little respite from all those heavy-duty jobs lying around, waiting to be attended to.

What could I do? What I had thought would take a mere fifteen minutes or so to fix, by using a new screw to tighten that loose handle onto that sauce pan was now going to take until the next day.

Reluctantly I turned back and came home.

My wife had seen me head for the market with a bag in hand. The moment I got back she asked me where I had been to. I told her that I had gone to Ganguly

Mechanicals to have that handle fixed. She looked pretty annoyed with me.

“And didn’t you get a new sauce pan as I told you to?” she asked.

“I-I looked. B-but I didn’t get any,” I lied smoothly.

Now she looked really angry. “What do you mean you didn’t find any?”

I knew my lie had sounded hollow. I had to improvise, and quickly. Didn’t I tell you my wife’s one smart cookie? No getting past her so easily.

“Of course, there were sauce pans. Lots. And all sizes too,” I hastened to assure her.

“Then?” that stern one-word question from my wife needed an answer, and a reasonable sounding one.

“Not one of them had any Bakelite handle like ours,” I *ad libbed*.

“They were all full metal bodies,” I continued. “I would need a set of hand mittens to handle those all-metal sauce pans. I wouldn’t be able to handle a sauce pan like that without a hand mitten. That’d be a little too much. Besides, we don’t have mittens at home. And then, the sauce pan might slip,” I embellished for good measure, congratulating myself at the same time silently for my creativity.

“Hmmm...” was all she said as she let go of the issue for the time being, shaking her head. Quite disgustedly, I must add.

Emboldened by my flair at making up things on short notice, it was now my turn to equalise the balance that had been tilting in her favour.

“I have already given our sauce pan to Gangulys. They’ll fix it good and proper. You’ll see that for yourself tomorrow,” I told her. “Why do you want to waste money on a new sauce pan? For nothing!” I managed an indignant snort.

She whirled around. Exasperatedly, she asked me, “And must you insist on using that old, dented, broken down sauce pan? That sauce pan must be a hundred years old. Why can’t you just throw it away and get a new one? Are we so poor that we can’t even afford a new sauce pan?”

That hurt. Hurt my male ego. As a husband and a provider. She had instinctively known the right button to push. Trust a woman’s instinct.

All right, I said grimly to myself. That does it. Tomorrow I *am* going to go out to the market and pick up a brand new one.

Next morning, as soon as the shops opened, I went down to the market straight to Gangulys, where my old faithful had been waiting for me. I saw that it was. Fully done. They hadn’t just screwed it up with a new screw. But welded up the handle with a rivet. A rivet, not a lowly screw that could again come loose. This was a *rivet*. Wild horses wouldn’t be able to tear off that handle now from the sauce pan. This was better than new. It was newer than new now.

So, instead of buying a new sauce pan, as I had earlier planned to, I returned, triumphantly, with my old sauce pan - now made "new". Back home I brandished the "newer than new" sauce pan to my wife with a victorious smile - so much as to say "Now what?"

"Look at this now," I announced to her. "It's as good as any new sauce pan you'll get in the market. Look at that rivet," I told her proudly.

"You look at it," she said, an expression of utter derision writ large upon her features. "I knew you'd go back to that old useless junk of a sauce pan," she said with as much hopeless resignation as she could manage in that single sentence of hers. Then she left me holding on to that sauce pan in the kitchen like an idiot.

I could find no earthly reason why I should have gone out and purchased another new sauce pan when I already had a perfectly good one that would give me years and years of service. As it already had, and had proved its efficacy to me many times over. I put it back in the pantry, and resolved to use it the next morning to make me a bowl of porridge.

I have to tell you I have this habit of using old materials as long as they are serving my purpose. For example, I always sign cheques with a beautiful Mont Blanc fountain pen I inherited as a legacy from my father. I never use any other pens to sign cheques. Only that Mont Blanc that I have been treasuring through all these years since my father's been gone. Hundreds of ball point pens, mostly use-and-throw types have come

and gone through my desk drawer, but the Mont Blanc will remain with me for as long as I can hold on to it.

I remember that likewise, in my younger, jauntier days, my motorcycling years, I had a pair of Ray Ban Aviator sunglasses I had become very attached to. On no occasion would I be seen on my bike without them. I have been like this for as long as I remember. Well, that's me, like it or not.

My detractors would say that this is a kind of unhealthy attachment to objects. I don't know about the "unhealthy" bit, but sometimes, not often though, I do develop a personal attachment with things that are inanimate. But it doesn't hurt anybody. It's perfectly harmless. If I have a personal and private liking and attachment with things that serve my needs faithfully and diligently, I admit I do develop a fondness for them. Just because they're inanimate you can't say they don't have a soul, hidden inside them, can you? It's like that with me.

I have been told that there's even a medical term for this fixation on objects. It's called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, OCD in short.

Okay, so be it. I don't see any "disorder" anywhere. Except that those who know me up close get upset and it's *their* peace of mind that seems to get into disarray and disorder because of *my* attachment with objects that are mine, mine and mine.

That OCD is *theirs*, not mine.

Not Welcome

Recently, after the first shot of the vaccine I have been emboldened enough to venture out.

I have taken to going out to the ILSS, the swimming club by the lakes which has now opened up and is now serving food and beverages like before. But only a skeletal number of members attend. People are still hesitant to step outdoors and go to clubs as they used to. A somewhat strict adherence to all the protocols is in place, like the wearing of masks, sanitising hands, keeping distances between people etc. I'm not very sure though of how much distance could actually be maintained among a group of friends sitting at a table for a morning *adda*.

Whatever it may be, I make sure to sit at the farthest table, all by myself, with a book, in the shade under a sunny sky and oh what a wonderful breeze streaming over the waterfront across the emerald green lawn. Simply divine! I think these couple of hours that I am there from ten to twelve, make the high point of my day. There I have my mid-morning tea and biscuits before getting back in the car to go home.

The other day, before getting into the car I thought of taking a short walk along the lakefront that I was so fond of only a year ago. Sorry, a little more than a year ago - before this pandemic swallowed the world.

I turned the corner and started walking along the familiar walkway skirting the lake shore, the drooping

trees making a canopy over my head shading me from the fierce sun overhead. The breeze here was strong and was blowing all the time so hard that one didn't mind the sun even without that canopy of leaves overhead.

It was twelve, midday, the sun was at its harshest but the breeze cooled it off no sooner than it stung.

I was thoroughly enjoying my sunny walk along the familiar route. What struck me to be way different from the scene in the early mornings of my morning walks was that all the benches along the walkway were now full. They were all filled up with young courting couples; young, teenage boys and girls sitting cosily-cuddled wearing no masks. The masks were probably tucked away somewhere in their bags. But who cared? You can't wear a mask and smooch, can you?

I quickly got off the walkway onto the main road lest the courting couples feel disturbed and irritated by the presence of an old "peeping tom" like me. Which I'm not. But what did they know about me? These youngsters have always felt disturbed by the presence of old voyeurs. Their experience tells them that old people are no good. Perhaps they're right, I mused. It is a fact that often old lechers go about poking around in other people's affairs. There are plenty of these sick perverts the world over.

Anyway, I finished my walk and came back to the car and got back home.

The next day, a big surprise awaited me.

I went to the club as usual around ten. I had my tea at a secluded table, basked in the morning's glory, with

the colourful hedge of flowers trimming the club lawn and of course the ever-present fresh breeze. That heavenly breeze allowed me lungfuls of clean fresh energizing oxygen that's in such woefully short supply these days, cooped up as we all are at our homes. Nearing midday, I thought it was time for my quick *chukker* around the lake like I had the day before.

I handed over my *jhola*, the cotton shoulder bag that had my book, my hand sanitiser and my bottled water to my driver and proceeded lakeward.

I started walking confidently along the road leading to the starting point of the lake. It was then that I noticed them. I saw to my utter surprise a number of stray dogs stand up at the junction and keep staring at me with what I can only describe as decidedly unfriendly looks. Then one of them gave a warning bark. Soon, others joined in. That one bark had alerted a number of other stray pariah dogs nearby. They all ran up to their leader, the alpha dog of the pack and stood, their hackles up, at the crossing - forming a kind of barricade and bared their fangs. They were about twenty yards away, all looking quite menacing and growling in a hostile manner. Their attitude was unmistakable. They weren't pleased with me.

I stood my ground thinking they would stop. I was shocked beyond my wits. This had never happened to me in the past. These dogs, all local strays, should know me by now, I reasoned with myself. I thought of taking my mask down so they could make out my face and realise that I was no stranger to the lakes.

That did me no good. Their growls grew stronger and more threatening. I knew it was useless. I didn't take one more step, but kept standing, rooted to the spot. I knew it would be foolish to turn tail and make a dash for my car which was some distance away. Their hunting instincts would at once kick in and they would all be on me in a flash tearing and ripping me to shreds. I would be a goner in no time.

So, keeping a watch over the howling hounds I slowly started walking backwards. Their growls at once went down. They were relieved that I was not going to disturb their peace but make myself scarce from the scene. After I had backed down quite a few steps I slowly turned around and started to walk normally towards my car. That was still some thirty yards away. Utter silence reigned. I knew that the dogs were no more agitated.

On my way, back to the car I met quite a number of youngsters in pairs heading for the lake. These were part of the army of love-struck mooning teenagers who were all seeking a peaceful undisturbed haven where they could get close to each other on those benches or behind bushes that abound the lake area.

As I said, these young boys and girls, already clinging on to each other, had no masks on them. It was kind of foolish of me to expect these kids to be going to the lakes for what they had in mind with masks on.

I looked back. They were all strolling arm in arm past the dogs, still lying around, and turning in to enter the lakes. Not a dog stirred or lifted so much as even an eyebrow. Very strange, I thought.

I reached my car finally. My driver had been standing outside and had witnessed the entire scene. I was really puzzled by the strange behaviour of those dogs. How was it that just the day before when I had taken that noon-day stroll these dogs who were still there had not barked or even noticed me. And yet today, the scene had changed so completely.

I voiced my surprise to my driver as we drove homewards “Did you see what happened Sukanta? Funny, isn’t it? Nothing happened yesterday though.”

“You did the right thing sir, to come back,” my driver assured me.

“Yes, I know, I muttered. “But strange, why those dogs didn’t do anything to all those young boys and girls?”

My driver remained silent. Perhaps he too was puzzled like me. At this unfair treatment of me by those dogs.

Soon we reached home. It was while I was getting out of the car that Sukanta, my driver hazarded a guess, “Perhaps sir, those dogs are used to seeing only young couples at this time in the lakes. You sir, alone, were a new stranger to them.”

“Hmm,” I thought. “Quite possible.”

But then what happened the day before? I wondered. “I was alone just as alone I was today.”

“Perhaps sir,” my driver persisted in his speculation, “If tomorrow you could take madam along with you to the lake...” he trailed off.

This was getting out of hand I realised. I didn't respond to that line of suggestion as it was already bordering on impertinence. I told my driver, a bit stiffly I'm afraid, to garage the car and take the day off.

Later, much later as I was dozing off to my afternoon *siesta* post lunch, I got it.

The first day the dogs didn't object to my entry in the lakes as they just didn't know what to make of this lone intruder. They were actually the self-appointed keepers of the tranquillity of the lake. Couples were all right - as the dogs knew they would be far too engrossed with themselves. But this lone individual could be a nuisance to them and the surroundings. They must have held a conference among themselves and come to this decision not to allow stray individuals in at those times when courting couples would arrive. And around noon was the ideal time when they would, in droves, as a matter of fact, to spend the entire day out there by the lakeside till dusk fell and groups of evening-walkers began arriving.

Now it was all clear to me. If I wanted to resume my walks in the lakes, I'd have to do so in the early hours, like seven or eight in the morning when in fact the lakes would be full of regular morning-walkers, in singles or in groups, children playing around and the entire scene was a lot different than when it was around noon.

But around noon, I was just not welcome there anymore.

Moving back in Time

A most strange thing happened last week. Bizarre, you could call it. I still can't fathom how it could be possible.

It concerns a watch of mine, a most favourite watch I inherited from my father when he had passed on, back in 1996. And I wear it all the time. Even when I go to bed with me at night, that watch stays with me next to my pillow.

It's a gold-plated Seiko automatic with a window showing both day and date. It has a chocolate brown dial and a gold colour centre-sweep second hand. It used to have a gold and silver coloured metal bracelet that the watch had originally come in. The bracelet was very attractive, but a little loose for my slender wrist I found after my father had left. So I had taken it to the nearby watch shop to have it shortened. But the idiots there made such a mess of that metal bracelet while trying to make it fit a little snug around my wrist, that it was now too tight for me. In the process of making it just right for me, they wrecked that beautiful bracelet beyond repair. It was now useless and had to be discarded.

I was wild, and cursed them black and blue. They tried to pacify me by offering any of the metal bracelet-straps that they had in their showcase - but none of them quite matched up to the beauty of the earlier, original one that Seiko had made. Finally, I had to settle

for an ordinary leather strap of the same colour as the dial, chocolate brown.

All this was years ago. Since then, I have been wearing that leather strap around that watch, which of course has had to be changed from time to time as leather straps wear out after a year or two. But always, I made sure that the strap would be of the same tint as the dial of that watch.

That watch has always given me perfect time, never going slow or fast. I have never ever in all this time had to pull out the little adjusting button at the side to make any adjustment of the time, or day, or date. That by itself is unusual. Every watch in the world has to be adjusted for correction now and then. Even the most expensive watch, be it a Rolex Perpetual or Omega or whatever. But strange though it may sound, I have never had to do that with my dear old Seiko. Not once, in all these years now that I've been using it ever since my father left me. It's better than any chronometer, I could boast to myself, that Seiko watch my father used to wear and now I do it. Or at least did until last week.

Last week it had rained heavily one night. Along with thunder and lightning and strong winds that made my windows rattle in fear.

Next to my pillow is a window with glass panes that was shut tight. On the sill lay my watch that I had taken off my wrist as I had turned in at ten. The frequent flashes lit up my darkened room through the night as the lightning shrieking down from the heavens above continued to strike helter-skelter all over the city, tearing the sky apart.

I don't know when I had fallen asleep in all that bedlam. But when I awoke the next morning, everything was still. And silent as a cemetery. The sun shone through my window pane and hit my eyes prompting me to awaken.

The rains had stopped. I opened the window to a clear blue sky. The air I breathed deep inside my lungs was pristine and pure. Clean and crisp as if it had just been washed of all the grime and dust and other floating matter that normally make our city air so unhealthy. It was like a fresh start to a new day, a cleaner world where anything was possible.

I looked at the wall clock ticking away and saw it was seven. God! I had overslept. I picked up my watch from the window sill, glanced at it before heading for the bathroom.

Then I frowned. The watch said five o'clock. Aah! It must have stopped. I shook it a bit to get it going again and went to the bathroom. I knew automatic watches kept themselves automatically wound up by the normal movements of the wrist. If they're kept on the shelf, or in a drawer for a long time without anybody wearing them, they stop.

I came out of the bathroom after about an hour, after my morning ablutions, and ready to start a new day with a hearty breakfast. On the way to the dining room, I picked up my watch still lying on the window sill and put it on.

At the table I looked at it and stopped. The time it showed was about a quarter to four! How could it be?

The wall clock on the dining room wall said it was a quarter past eight in the morning. Surely my watch, if it had stopped in the night on the window sill and was showing that it was running two hours behind, the time now should have been a quarter after six. Why even more late - at a quarter to four? It needed to be adjusted right away. I tried to pull out the adjusting button at the side of the watch. That adjusting button was designed in such a way that it lay flush with the body of the watch. Only at the bottom of it was a small groove where you could insert your finger nail and pull it out. I did just that. But I just couldn't budge that little button. I had never in all this time of nearly thirty years of constant use, had an occasion to pull it out. Not even once, and it must have gotten jammed inside due to prolonged unuse. Now it was impossible to pull out that adjusting button.

Then I noticed something else in that watch that gave me such a start that I nearly fell off my chair. I saw that the watch hadn't stopped at all. As I had previously thought. It was running all right. But it was running the wrong way - backwards. The centre sweep second hand was moving all right, but in an anti-clockwise direction. What was *this*? I never saw such a weird phenomenon.

How can a watch run *backwards*? It was like moving back in time. And that's a paradox of Nature. "God doesn't play dice," old Albert Einstein had said, I remembered. By "God" he had meant Nature.

No wonder the watch was showing erratic times. I looked more closely at the watch's Day/Date window. Sure enough, it was showing the day and date of the

previous day. Did something happen inside the watch's mechanism due to all those thunders and lightning last night?

I decided to take it to the watch repairer at the local watch shop. But it was a Sunday, and the shop would be closed.

Then an idea struck me. What if I stored the watch for a day or two in my lowermost desk drawer or somewhere and not give it any movement to keep it going? Then, when it once stopped, I'd start it again by giving it the physical movement it needed to wake up and keep ticking. Maybe it needed a little rest. Let it rest then for a couple days and then wake up to a fresh start, and in the right direction this time - by the centre second hand doing its clock-wise sweeps. So thinking, I took off that watch and kept it in the deep recesses of my locker drawer where it could sleep in peace for a few days to start again later.

That was Sunday morning. Tuesday evening, I opened the drawer and brought the watch out and looked at it. It had stopped, as any other automatic watch would, if it is not nourished by normal movement of the human hand. Finally, I gave it a few jerky movements to get it going again.

And, as expected, it began its movement again. And to my huge relief, in the right direction – the clockwise direction. I tried to pull out the adjusting button and it came out easily enough and I adjusted the watch now to the right time, day and date.

It was a miracle. The watch is now around my wrist again as I write this, doing its job perfectly, as it has always done.

What had happened is something I'll never know. It will forever remain an enigma.

Did the watch really move back in time?

Song of the Leaves

A strange thing happened this morning.

I am still not sure whether it did actually happen or was it a delusion. But something inside tells me that no, it was not a delusion – it did really happen. Just the way I am about to tell you.

I have started on my morning walks again, gradually, after my recent bout with Covid and sodium imbalance that had sent me to the ICU of a nearby hospital for a full week. I had come back from there alive true, but only half so. It took me a full two and a half months to three months to get back to what I was before. Only recently, having taken the booster dose, I have begun to feel confident enough to start stepping out of the house. Hence the morning walks that I have resumed.

From mid-April to the whole of May the Dhakuria Lake is a paradise. The cool breeze that blows non-stop over that vast expanse of water is so heavenly that you don't feel like leaving the place even after your walk is done and you are sitting on the bench in front of the water. You are letting that cool breeze wash all over you, taking the last traces of the tiredness out of your limbs. You are refreshed by that abundance of fresh oxygen beyond measure. You feel like staying on a bit longer.

And so it happened that as I was briskly walking up the pathway that skirts the bank of the lake, I came upon a spot looking out to the mosque on the little island

next to a rowing club connected by a small hanging bridge. And stood there, catching my breath. A big branch of an *awshwoth* tree was hanging over the water, its single bough laden with a cluster of leaves stooping down to see their image reflected on the water below. Like Narcissus.

The incessant wind was rustling the leaves and making a pleasant backdrop of sound to the quiet of the lake. I stood and looked over - beyond.

After a while I could suddenly discern a pattern to that rustle. It was not erratic, as you would imagine. A definite rhythm, with a steady uniform beat seemed to be emerging. This was unusual, most unusual. I stood listening intently. Sometimes the octaves would rise and at times it would diminish, like a wave with a distinctive uniformity about it. To my utter astonishment I could even hear a musical score being unravelled, and I placed it quite definitely as Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody in C Minor, a sad yet exultant tune. I was transfixed. I do not know how long it is that I stood there. Listening, just listening. I was so enchanted by this unique phenomenon that I lost track of everything.

But then it suddenly stopped, at a delightful point of the Overture section of that tune that was being replayed. For my benefit?

A sudden appearance of a bunch of yakking youths that burst in upon the scene quite drowned out the spell I was under. Gabbing nineteen to the dozen, they passed, shattering the magic of the silence.

Quiet returned. The leaves had fallen silent. I waited, rooted to the spot, for the music to return. But no - the fiddlers had put down their violins, the pianist shut down his keyboard. No more music for now.

I thought at first that the wind had fallen. But no, it had not. It was there, as always, the leaves too danced their joyful dance in the sun, but they would not rub against each other to make heavenly music any more.

It has long been common knowledge that plants have lives. But it is now emerging that they are sentient beings too. And highly sensitive to human presence. As was amply demonstrated to me this morning. The leaves that had been playing such golden music for me, an appreciative audience of one, were repelled by the rude cacophony of those mindless, heedless youngsters who had suddenly shown up in the concert hall. Such divine music was not for the riffraff.

I turned around and made my way back home, my heart singing, yet sad that it all had ended so abruptly.

26 April 2022

Odd

An odd thing happened to me the other day. I am still trying to figure out how it happened. Or why?

Let me tell you about it.

It was in the evening. I normally spend it downstairs in my atelier. That's my studio/workplace/study, my whatever, where I escape to, when I don't want to be disturbed by others, or other mundane stuff of daily life.

All evening I had been scribbling and doodling on loose scraps of paper, with my pencils, pens and then finally decided to work seriously on a portrait I had been planning on for some time.

I arranged a fresh sheet of paper, a rather large one on my slanting table. Then I got out my charcoal pencils and charcoal sticks and got to work.

After about an hour or maybe a little longer (I am a slow worker) I got the semblance of the elderly gentleman whose portrait I was working on. Then I worked some more putting in the shading and values using my fingers while blending the dark charcoal powder. Slowly the picture came alive. At least it seemed so.

I stood back. As artists have to from time to time, to put a distance between what they have drawn and themselves, so as to get a perspective.

At last, it seemed fairly okay to me and I decided that it had been a good piece that I had turned out. I was sure

that the gentleman would also like it when I showed the results to him.

Now I had to “fix” the drawing. That means spraying a fixative spray over the charcoal drawing so it became permanently stuck on the sheet and wouldn’t smudge if you touched the drawing accidentally with your hand or anything. I was running a little low on the fixative. I shook the can. There was very little left in it. But I had to use that up or else my efforts might be ruined if I had to wait until I got myself another fresh can of fixative. So whatever little bit there was in that can, I used it all up spraying on the portrait. Then I laid it out flat on my desktop under the fan to dry.

*

Right then my mobile rang out. A very old friend I had been meaning to call up for some time but hadn’t gotten around to, had herself called up. Naturally I scooped up my phone and retired to the corner sofa and sprawled down for a long chat.

The chat lasted nearly an hour. Then it was time for me to close up and go upstairs for my supper.

I closed down all the windows and put back all the pencils, loose sheets and other detritus of my earlier doodling and cleared up all that junk from the desktop. I like to keep that desk of mine more or less neat and tidy. Not that I am always successful, but I try.

*

Then I looked for that portrait I had laid out to dry. But where was it?

I looked hard from one corner to the other of my rather large expanse of the top surface. Not a trace. Even the empty can of fixative lay on its side on my tabletop which I had totally used up. But where was my portrait?

Naturally then, I looked down at the floor. I had forgotten to put down a paperweight over the drawing. I had laid it flat on the surface of my table top face up directly under the fan which was on full blast. It must have flown off the table, I thought at first. But then when I looked all over my not too small a room, I didn't find it anywhere on the floor. It was no small scrap of paper. It was a rather largish sheet of cartridge paper on which I had done the portrait.

Thinking it perhaps had slid off under the desk I went all the way down and laid myself prone on the floor. Then I peered under the heavy desk. No matter where I looked and every which way, the blessed sheet was nowhere to be seen. Then I crawled across the floor on my knees and went over to the bank of filing cabinets, book case and the two almirahs. And looked under, knowing it just couldn't have travelled all that distance and somehow found a refuge under one of that heavy furniture.

After about a quarter of an hour of exertion in this most undignified manner, after I had satisfied myself that I had gone over every square inch of floor space looking for my disappearing portrait, I finally got up and sat down on my sofa thoroughly beaten. Damned funny, I thought. That large sheet of white paper just couldn't have vanished into thin air. Yet it apparently had.

I hadn't left the room for even a minute after I had laid the drawing out to dry under the fan. I had just been lying back on my recliner enjoying a long overdue chat with a dear friend. And nobody had even come in during all this time. The drawing couldn't have just grown wings and flown away. And yet, it must have. Or else how could I accept its strange disappearance? I was feeling its loss deep inside. I kind of had grown attached to that portrait, having poured my heart and soul into it, to bring out the exact expression on the person's face as I had remembered. I certainly couldn't accept this bizarre vanishing trick.

*

Mongola, the maid came in to tell me that dinner had been served and was getting cold and that my wife had sent down her summons. That couldn't be ignored. So, I reluctantly got up, checking an impulse to give the room a once over one more time.

But before finally turning off the lights and fan and leaving that room I asked Mongola, who does the cleaning and dusting every morning in that room, to look for a large sheet of drawing that could be lying around just anywhere on the floor. She might chance upon it the next day while dusting that room, I explained to her.

"Is *that* it?" Mongola asked me, pointing at my feet. I looked down. And there it lay. The portrait. At my feet, caught between the underside of the open door and a leg of the chair on the far side of my desk.

"Oh Mongola!" I exclaimed as I swooped down and picked up the sheet from the dusty floor cradling it as though it were my long-lost baby.

I checked all over. No damage had been done. No smudges anywhere. Whew! What a relief at last. I just didn't know how to thank Mongola. She had saved me from such a heartburn. She must have guessed how grateful I was by the overwhelming look of gratitude I showered on her. Being a shy and backward woman from the suburbs, I think she felt a little embarrassed, and hiding her face quickly left the room.

I lost no more time. I put up the now dry portrait on a board and fixed it securely on the top with clips at the two edges. Then I set it up on my empty easel facing the door, so I would see the face the first thing as I entered that room again next morning.

As I finally began switching off the fan and the lights one by one, I turned back to see the portrait facing me and said aloud to it, "That was quite a run around you gave me pal."

At once a most odd thing happened. The face gave me a smirk and a sly wink. I swear it did. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. There it was, no sign of any mischief: just an elderly guy looking as sober and dignified, a trifle sad perhaps, as expected from a man his age and station in life. Just the way I had drawn.

I quickly banged the door shut behind me and locked it from the outside. And then hit the staircase two at a time, heading for the dining room.

Something odd was going on.

Damned odd.

Quantum of Solace

The James Bond movie of this name (not written by Ian Fleming, as all of you know) in which Daniel Craig for the second time appeared as the hero, was released, I think around 2008.

I was in Gurgaon visiting with my son, who was living in a flat in Ambience Island, a vast sprawl of residential complex. The movie released at the nearby movie plex at the Ambience Mall, reputed then to be the largest of its kind in the whole of the country (its perimeter was one full mile long).

Being a die-hard Bond movie fan, I *had* to see the movie as it opened. Ambience Mall was about a ten-minute walk from my son's block. I had with me a ticket for myself for the late-night show. My wife has no stomach for violent movies and had wisely opted out and stayed back.

Of all the malls that were mushrooming in Gurgaon, together with high-rise residential complexes, in those times, this Ambience Mall was the snazziest and most eye-poppingly grand. The floors were so shiny and in a perpetual state of high glaze you could almost see your face in it. Together with the huge mind-numbing space and glitter all round as you entered the Mall, you were at once transported to a fairy-tale land. In any case, encountering all this glitter and glitz, someone from a backward and regressive city like Calcutta, unused to this high standard of sophisticated urbanity, I was

understandably a little taken aback, almost like a country hick visiting a big city for the first time.

I found my seat inside the theater and settled down.

Though it was a late night show the hall was nearly full. After all it was a Bond movie and the much-hyped macho new guy Craig fellow was appearing for the second time as my favourite hero 007.

Now, a word about the James Bond stories that have been made into movies. To this day, I find that the most true-to-life characterization of the 'gentleman spy' that Mr. Fleming had created was done by Sir Sean Connery. To me he has been the most authentic James Bond as had been conceived by the author.

All those who came after him, (I have seen them all), not one among them had ever been able to stand up to Sean Connery.

Also, the movies that were made from actual novels written by Ian Fleming were the most genuine and believable ones.

Anyway these are all my personal opinions. You may have your own.

The movie started. Within the first ten to fifteen minutes, I knew it was going to be a big let-down. After the titles were over, the screen filled with all kinds of mindless violence exploding across the wide, wide screen.

The bad guys on one side and the muscle-bound Craig on the other, taking them on single handed, and a flurry of impossible acrobatics and car-chase sequences

seemed so unreal that it failed to achieve the suspenseful thrill the movie director had set out to create. And also, the wizardry, now possible with the latest cinematographic technology, was so bizarre and quick for the human eye to follow and fully comprehend, that it gave me a throbbing headache.

Plus, the fact that there was no storyline, or not much of one that one could thread along to the last, left me, as I am sure other Bond fans of my vintage among the audience, utterly disappointed. But I'm sure that a large number of youngsters of the present generation who had neither witnessed the real James Bond a.k.a Sean Connery, nor turned a page of what Fleming had written (ha! Imagine youngsters of today actually reading!), went ape-faced with their jaws hanging down to their toes and drank it all in in spellbound silence.

Anyway, I am not writing a critique here of the movie. I am here to tell you what happened afterward.

The movie ran for over an hour and a half and mercifully ended at last.

I wanted to get back home quickly and not get caught in the swirl of crowd emerging from the hall. I hastened up the steps without waiting for the last scene to fade from the screen. But already there were others like me, who had had enough of this movie, and were all bent on a quick get-away. I came out the door along with these others, and turned sharply to the right to get to the bank of elevators at the far end of the hallway before the rest and lunged forward. And tripped.

My foot caught the edge of the step and I stumbled headlong onto the gleaming floor of the hallway. I fell

with a crash and force that knocked the wind out of me. The dazzling white floor was so polished and gleaming it actually resembled a huge slab of ice.

The momentum hurtled me forward. Like a sledge down an icy slope I slid, thus prone, past the astonished crowd, and shot forward all the twenty odd yards, right up to one of the elevators as its doors were closing in upon me. My short journey thankfully was halted as I slid inside the closing elevator cage. As I collected myself and raised my body, first to a sitting position, and then slowly stood up, my mind was racing to assess any damage I might have suffered during this extraordinary journey from the theatre door to the elevator. No, there weren't any visible signs of any damage to my person. No bones broken. All in place and ticking. The elevator began its smooth, silent journey downward bearing me as its lone occupant.

By the time it had reached the ground floor and its doors slid open with a slight pneumatic hiss, I was standing up, the only one in that elevator, thankfully, to emerge unscathed outside but thoroughly rattled inside.

I was able to, in the end, get back home in time well before the clock had struck the midnight hour. I lay in bed trying to assess the net result of the evening's adventure, particularly the end as it turned out. I concluded that *that* was my very own achievement, a real one, that far outshone all of Daniel Craig's crazy heroics (no doubt performed by a professional stuntman) on the silver screen.

It was also my very own quantum of solace.

The Stalker

I have started my morning walks again.

At the lakes. After being cooped up for nearly eighteen months at home and making do with endless rounds on the terrace, a monotonous drag, I have started venturing out again. Of course observing all protocols in force, like the mask, the distancing and of course the hand washes once back home.

The lakes too have opened up for the walkers from 6 in the morning till 9 and then clanging the gates shut. I have begun going around eight when the sun is bright and the overnight smog has lifted. The air on the waterfront is crisp, fresh, invigorating. Taking in big gulps of that fresh air is like pumping new life in your body. The open space, the trees on the other side, all create a world that is at once new as well as reminiscent of the one we have left behind but getting slowly back again.

Once I have crossed the road at the three-point crossing at Gol Park I am on the pavement at the corner of the Rama Krishna Mission building. The pavement rounds the bend and stretches a long three hundred yards till you reach the gates of the lake. This long stretch of pavement is usually deserted, save one or two walkers like me either heading for the lakes or coming back. You begin to see clusters of people again at the gate of the lakes where there is always a bunch of farmers with fresh vegetables doing brisk business.

It was while I was at the three-point crossing at Gol Park that I noticed her, a little way ahead. She was wearing a bright red turtleneck pullover that accentuated her lithe young figure. She wore trainers at her feet, obviously going for her morning run I thought.

Then I made my crossing and began my slow trudge along that lonely stretch of pavement up to the gate of the lakes. I noted with a little surprise that the girl who should have been at least twenty yards ahead of me, had fallen behind, and was walking by my side.

That was a bit strange. Why was she lagging behind? Anyway, I looked straight ahead and kept walking. Surprisingly, she kept pace with me, side by side. It was almost as though we were together. I felt slightly uncomfortable and began to outpace her by taking longer strides. She kept pace with me, easily. I glanced at her, not directly, but with a sidelong glance. She was young, very young; not a day older than seventeen or eighteen, not yet out of her teens. I slowed down. She slowed down too. Then, just to see what she would do, I stopped dead. She stopped too.

This was a bit much. Clearly, something wasn't quite right. The distance between her and me was close enough for any observer to think that we were together, a father and daughter, or more likely a grandfather and a granddaughter, out for a walk. I just couldn't fathom it. She made no attempt to look up at me or try to talk or anything of the sort. She kept her head bowed down, staring at her mobile, as most youngsters all over always do. But she took care, I could see, to keep up with me, step for step.

All kinds of weird thoughts were racing through my mind. I had never in my life faced a situation, so odd and

yet so commonplace at the same time. I thought that if this had happened to me fifty years ago, I'd have surely started a conversation going by now and picked her up. She was a bit late in the day, I thought with a smidgen of regret.

With all kinds of weird possibilities buzzing in my head, we had reached the gate at the lakes. We went through. Together again.

Then she looked up, put that phone of hers away and for the first time looked me square in the face. Then she gave me a smile, a smile that I have not received for many, many decades from a strange girl. She also mouthed a silent "Thank you sir". And then wheeled away from me and began her run. She ran steadily away till I could see her no more as she turned the bend at the end of the winding lane, and disappeared from view.

*

It was while I was at my usual bench facing the water where I do my meditation and breathing exercises, that it dawned on me. The girl, upon crossing the three-point crossing at Gol Park had deliberately chosen me, an elderly guy as an escort, to walk side by side with, along that lonely deserted stretch of pavement. This was done so as to give an impression to any stalker lurking nearby, that she was not alone, but with her guardian alongside.

She was not the stalker, as I had mistakenly imagined before. She merely used me as a "protector" from any possible stalker.

Smart girl!

The Pull of Love

I was coming back home from the lake after my walk this morning when I saw this.

There are usually a number of stray pariah dogs that lie around near the gate under the sun. Curling up in singles and groups enjoying the last traces of a friendly sun as winter is on the way out and the fiery summer is yet to set in.

I noticed an old bent guy, carrying a jute hand-bag trudging along ahead. He shuffled over to a dog, curled up as I said. Then he stopped behind it and reaching inside the bag brought out a handful of biscuits and cookies. Stooping down he put them in front of the dog's mouth resting on the road. Then, before he straightened up, he began patting its head gently with loving care. Just as one would do to one's pet dog at home. He reached behind its ears, tickling them and rubbing his hand playfully and caressingly up and down the dog's throat that the dog had now raised to receive more of the old man's loving touch. It was thumping its tail on the road. "Whump, whump," it went, while the dog lay on the road, its paws in the air in utter delight.

After a while the old man gave a final fond farewell pat to that dog, and walked off in search of other dogs in the area he could feed.

This is quite a common feature in the lake. These strays often get kind souls walking in carrying bags of

feed for them and these dogs have by now come to know them on sight.

But what I witnessed now was a little different.

As soon as the old man had straightened up, the dog quickly got up too, and kept staring at the old man's receding figure as he began walking away. He even took a few tentative steps following him, leaving the biscuits untouched on the road.

I was standing by, now watching what would happen next. The dog kept looking back once at the small mound of biscuits and cookies waiting for him, and then back at the diminishing figure of that old man as he went in search of other dogs. Obviously, the dog couldn't make up its mind whether to go eat his breakfast that was beckoning him, or to run after and follow that old man who had just given him so much love and tenderness. He had a hunger for both. Both equally urgent, both equally pressing.

Then he stopped turning back to where his food lay and kept on staring fixedly at the old man. For as long as the old man could be seen, until he finally disappeared around the bend. Only then did the hungry dog turn back to where the biscuits lay.

This scene stayed in my mind for a long time as I headed for home. This hunger for love that I had just witnessed. The need for this is so strong that a hungry dog can be thrown in two minds: whether to give in to his immediate need for food, or to his long-standing hunger for a little show of love, a little feel of loving pats

on his body, a few soft kind caressing words of tenderness he had just received from an old geezer.

I wonder at times how universal is this need, and how strong really is this power, this pull of love?

(18 February 2023)

Bottoms Up! Up?

This happened a long time ago. I was a fledgling lawyer then, having joined the profession kind of late in life.

My neighbour Peekay (a sobriquet by which he was known, taken from his initials PK), two doors down, not much older than me in years, was a seasoned lawyer by then, and a big success already. He had been made a partner with a big firm of solicitors and had specialised in International Arbitration laws. He was always flying off abroad every two or three months a year on professional business with important international corporate clients. And he was making big bucks in the process, (mostly in hard currency too) while I was desperately trying to find a foothold in a very crowded and demanding profession.

Despite this glaring disparity between us, we were friends. Quite good friends in fact. Actually, it was he who had befriended me and showed great keenness in furthering this friendship. I must say though, I never found him to be patronising or condescending in his behaviour. In fact, he always valued my two-bit opinions on any subject that we would be discussing, from philosophy to politics, from literature to secrets of the cosmos. I think he liked me for the fact that I loved to read. I was interested in a wide variety of subjects, except perhaps the law. And he considered me to be somewhat an erudite person.

But never, ever did either he or I discuss our respective professional standing. Except in a most passing way, in the vaguest of terms. I think he sensed that I might feel a little uncomfortable if *that* ever came up.

Oh, also we liked to drink. Both of us. He'd often call me over to his place, usually Saturday evenings, for a spot of elbow-bending over a single malt or a glass or two of chilled Chablis, or a glass of Burgundy. His cellar was always well-stocked, with all kinds of foreign liquors and wines, courtesy his frequent trips abroad.

It's not always that I ran over to Peekay's whenever he called. Sometimes I tried, from my end, to return the favour. Life is a two-way street. One can't just keep on taking. But all I could offer him was what I could afford. Naturally I had only *desi* rum or *desi* whiskey with me.

You'd think he would turn up his nose and "politely" decline if offered this *desi* fare. Oh no! Not he. He was really far too sophisticated a person to be *that* callow. *Au contraire*, he'd tell me how much he enjoyed these *desi* rums and whiskies, the stuff he "grew up on" as he used to say. But of course, these days, he'd almost rue, he had to keep the "*biliti*"(foreign) stuff at home as he had to entertain his clients on occasions. They'd "raise *their* eyebrows to the high heavens" (again Peekay's phrase) if they were offered this indigenous *desi* stuff. I had a feeling he was saying that only to make me feel okay about the drinks I could offer a guest.

Anyway, I have to admit he had a style, a flair, a certain elan he had picked up from his association with the kind of clients and people he associated with - the

ultra-urbane and jet-setting international foreigners, all from the world of multinational corporate houses. And all this, despite the fact that he himself was from a very modest and vernacular background and schooling. He had shed all his earlier *desi* manners and had adapted to a new image makeover. He had become a real *pucca sahib*. He however tried on a *faux* Brit accent at times that made the bottom fall out of his act. Here he became, at times, really ludicrous. But no one could say that up to his face. Could one? Certainly, I wouldn't, though I could hardly suppress a laughter that would suddenly threaten to erupt, hearing him try to speak like an Englishman. This actually he used to try especially after a drink or two. And with me. I suspect also with others. He, I think nursed a complex deep down that he had never been to an English-medium school, whereas I was fortunate enough to have been in one.

It so happened that one day an uncle of mine had gifted me with a bottle of scotch on his return from abroad. I decided then and there to call Peekay over one weekend for a drink when I'd be able to offer him a scotch at last.

Then came that Saturday. It was only Saturdays that lawyers could take time off from their otherwise busy chamber work. I was so looking forward to the evening. I had taken out two crystal cutglasses from my father's cupboard, without of course his permission. He'd throw a fit if he knew I had borrowed from his collection of crystal cut glasses that he prized so, and only brought out on special occasions when *he* was entertaining.

On the dot at seven Peekay rang our bell. I hurried downstairs and escorted him up. I hadn't yet told him that this evening I would also be offering him scotch. I wanted it to be a surprise.

"Good evening old chap!" he hailed out walking in and settling down on the sofa. "Hello Peekay , *kemon aachho* (How are you?)" I addressed him in Bangla. Most times I'd speak Bangla with my *sahib* friend. That didn't perturb him one little bit.

"Well," he said expansively, leaning back, relaxed but well poised. "Can't complain, I must say old boy."

He eyed the unopened bottle of scotch and the two cutglasses on the table and raised a supercilious eyebrow, but didn't say a thing. He had that unique gift of raising just a single eyebrow that itself said a lot. He cut a very debonair, dandy figure of a man-about-town. His looks helped him a lot too, a devilishly handsome fellow with a well-trimmed moustache, that, from certain angles, made him look just like Clark Gable did in "Gone with the Wind". And he was acutely aware of the effect he could make, particularly when ladies were about.

So there I was, with an unopened bottle of good quality scotch and two cutglass whisky tumblers, just the kind to go with the scotch.

I poured each of us a drink, a large one to start with and asked him if he'd like water or soda.

"What? Soda? Do you want to kill this fine liquor?" Peekay was aghast, nearly jumping out of the chair.

“No, no, m’lad, you don’t do *that!*” he exclaimed, “You’ll simply ruin a good scotch if you pour soda all over it,” he informed me. “You take it just neat, as I do in England. But here you drink it on the rocks,” he added for my further elucidation.

“How many?” I asked reaching for the ice bucket.

“Oh top it up for me, will you? There’s a good chap,” he further guided me.

So I packed in about three or four cubes of ice in his glass all the way up to the brim and added one in mine and then, much to my friend’s horror, added a splash of soda in my glass.

“Cheers,” I said, raising my glass.

“Chin-chin! Bottoms up!” wished my friend as he raised his.

What happened next was simply unbelievable. Such things only happen in funny movies or sci-fi movies.

Before Peekay’s glass had reached his lips the bottom just fell out. The thick bottom of that cutglass whisky tumbler just seemed to shear off neatly and fall with the whisky and the ice cubes all together right on Peekay’s lap.

I had never seen anything like this before. Nor do I think did Peekay. It was just one of those rare and bizarre occurrences that happens once perhaps in a lifetime and remains totally unaccountable. Like so many of life’s mysteries.

“Dhoosh saala!” exploded Peekay (a slang Bangla expletive) as he broke the sitting-high-jump record. Raising both hands, he practically flew up from the sofa. I was thunderstruck. Peekay’s trousers from the crotch all the way down the thighs to his knees were drenched and dripping wet with the liquor and melting blocks of ice.

My wife rushed in hearing the commotion and stifled her cry of surprise. She took in the situation in one glance and then hurried back in again with a fresh towel from the bathroom.

But what could the towel do? The damage had already been done. Peekay dabbed and rubbed the front of his trousers furiously, but the dark patch had already grown all over.

We cleaned up the mess that lay on the table as best we could, moving out the neatly cut disc that was, till a few minutes ago, the bottom of the cutglass tumbler that will never be used again. The tumbler itself was now just an empty cutglass cylinder, open at both ends that stood on the table, winking at us the reflected light off the lamps in the room as though it were mocking.

I thought of offering a pair of pants of mine to Peekay to wear while his trousers would be dried out. But I knew that being bigger in build than me, my trousers would never fit him. I even thought of offering him my baggy and loose pyjama bottoms. That would not pose too great a problem. And we could continue the evening as planned, while I freshened up my friend’s drink in another glass (alas, not a cutglass tumbler).

But my friend would have none of it. The evening was totally ruined. In more ways than one. He stood up. Smiled ruefully at me and put his hand on my shoulder to reassure me. "Sorry old chap," he comforted me, regaining his composure, "Another day perhaps. But I have to go home and change. And right now, if you didn't mind, old fellow."

Saying this, his trousers drenched in front, making him look as though he had done something bad in his pants, he took his leave, his dignity, his style, his cool intact and very much in place.

What could I do? I saw him off at the door and came back. I gulped down the drink I had poured for myself and hadn't yet had a chance to taste.

"Bottoms down!" I said to myself as I raised my glass to my lips settling down to figure out an acceptable explanation to my father for his missing cutglass whisky tumbler.

About the Author

Born in 1940 the author did his Senior Cambridge from La Martinière School, under Cambridge University in 1957 and went on first, to the Presidency College, Calcutta and then Bengal Engineering College, Shibpur, graduating as an engineer in 1963. Then, after a few years as an engineer, studied law at the University College of Law, Calcutta earning a degree in the Law in 1972.

After a long stint as a practicing lawyer in the Calcutta High Court he finally retired from active profession. Then the pandemic struck and made us all prisoners at home.

It was then that he decided to take up the pen to write fiction. Instead of dry facts he had written all his working life in briefs he held for his clients.

The result was a compilation of a number of fictionalised accounts of certain incidents that had occurred or nearly occurred in his long life.

Out of that, here is a selection of twenty such stories.

The Author currently lives in Kolkata with his family.
