

# LOCKDOWN TALES

***BOBBY GHATAK***



BlueRoseONE<sup>.com</sup>  
Stories Matter

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# Foreword

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'Lockdown Tales' is an appropriate title about a period when many suffered and in the end triumphed.

Businesses and livelihoods came to a standstill, bringing about financial hardships and uncertainties and triggering emotional storms within all.

These short stories about simple truths are candidly written, yet stand out for being honest and full of empathy.

Jaydev Mody

Chairman, Delta Corp Limited.



# Foreword

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It has been almost three years since that fateful day which struck like a thunderbolt. As the author rightfully mentions, it was certainly done for the larger good.

Saying that it brought in difficult times would perhaps be an understatement but for many like me, it provided an opportunity to pursue long-forgotten abilities that lay somewhere buried in the daily humdrum of life. For many, the 'Lockdown' provided an opportunity to hone their skills, rediscover their lost moments and regain their lives.

These short stories ring a bell and make us examine the world afresh. Not only at the new normal but also at a new us.

Janet Ellis Prajapati,

Casting Director, Janet's Casting Hub, LLP.



# Dedication & Acknowledgement

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To the millions who braved the Lockdown and those who were cleansed by it.

The Almighty for bringing back mankind from imminent extinction.

To my wife Lopa and our daughter Chandni, for being my lockdown partners and encouraging me to pen down my thoughts.

Thank you Abhik and Tania, for your masterful suggestions and for rendering long-distance comfort and unbridled laughter during those bleak times.





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# 1. HOMECOMING

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The message pinged again: 'please check in.'

Pooja pulled out her details and punched in her id since a web check-in would make her wait shorter.

It was a changed world that she saw at the airport. Those coffee shops and those food counters were all deserted; those long lines at the boarding gates had people studiously keep each other at a distance. Humans were not discernible; as if a giant heist was in progress, a world of gas chambers; a sea of mask-wearing people: black, white, blue. She wondered if there was a cataclysmic event in the offing. Beneath her mask, she took a deep breath and walked towards the signage where the message 'Boarding Bangalore' was blinking.

Just then her phone rang. Its screen quietly displays 'Mom calling.' She loved her mother but sometimes her over-the-top concern irritated her; what was she doing, how was she feeling? Had she eaten, what did she eat? Like a daily questionnaire which she dutifully heard out and answered. Those hostel days of classes, late nights, poring over books and the occasional parties had sort of waned her bonding with her parents turning them into a far-off memory. Thankfully, academics was well embedded. A couple of months ago at the University she had stepped on the red carpet leading to the podium for accepting her huge certificate, rolled up like royalty, to loud hoops and cheering of 'go-go-go.'

'Crew ready for landing.' The aircraft landed with a dull thud. The inflight recorder softly announced 'welcome to

Kempegowda Intl airport' and a brief update about the 'temperature outside' and how they were 'indebted for choosing them', a quick caution about 'wearing your mask' and the airline's 'best wishes for your stay in Bangalore.'

As she stepped out she was greeted by a slight drizzle that cast a lighted glow on the tarmac. Her phone rang. It was mom: 'Beta welcome! We are outside.' The bus ride towards the disembarking point took about two minutes and a brisk walk towards the final exit took another five or so minutes. As the mask-wearing crew and passengers spilt out, she saw her parents waiting for her at the gate. Her mom hugged her tightly while her father helped put her luggage in the car. They were soon speeding away towards their home.

A day later, she along with the entire country woke up to the grim announcement of:

*'Aap jahan hain wahin rahiye.'*

As the prime minister announced a new phenomenon called 'lockdown' Pooja was amused by the political churning that was throwing up a long list of terminologies; *shehzaade*, *boodi aurat*, *acche din*, *notebandi* and now, a complete lockdown spell of 21 days...

On the twelfth day, her parents were preparing for the evening show of lighting candles and lamps. As her parents set about in bringing them out, Pooja reminisced moments from a year ago. Last year, the same day, she had landed a decent job, and this year she would be waving candles to shoo away a killer virus. The comforting thought was that she would return to Delhi three weeks later. About four years back a 'Sars'virus had given a small jolt that had lasted a week. This one was known

as the Novel Coronavirus and just like the 'Sars virus of 2017, little was known about it. Well, three weeks more and it would end. Just like those demons of demonetization, this too would end. That's what she thought. As the sky turned dark and gloomy, and those candles melted away on the balcony floor, she asked - "what's for dinner Ma?"

'Tonight we have dal, rice and aloo paneer' her mother smilingly replied.

The pressure cooker whistled thrice to announce that the rice was ready. So was their meal; so was the table. Plates and bowls were soon emptied and at the table, the small family discussed the new world. Her father dozed off while mother and daughter kept chatting well past midnight. It began to rain, this time louder and a few minutes later the local 'Bescom' office sprang into action by promptly shutting off the power supply to their area. The darkness nudged them to call it a day. Pooja and her parents were soon sleeping soundly.

Day 28: she woke up with a headache. Blinking several times made her realise she was not in Delhi but at her parents' house. Her groggy mind slowly woke up fully. There was a disease floating around with the world squeezed inside its deathly grip. A pandemic. Her phone came alive with several notifications to show her the latest headlines: 'WHO struggles to control pandemic' - 'Trump accuses China.' The next one was a mail that opened after several clicks to reveal that the dream job was on hold. Closing her eyes she forced herself to peer out of her balcony. A pretty wagtail with a blue collared breast perched on a nearby branch, unaware of the brouhaha around, was tweeting her glad tidings. From the end of a long lane rose shrill cries of 'Soppu soppu'. As old memories of

yore came swarming in front of her eyes she remembered he was the same hawker who sold leafy greens, when she was studying in school. The hawker had turned savvy. He was now peddling his ware by reaching out through a recorded message in his voice and playing it from a portable loudspeaker. A knock on the door made her turn around. Her father peeped in smilingly.

‘Shall we play chess?’ Her father eagerly asked.

‘Not now pa, I have work.’

‘In the evening then.’

‘We shall see.’

Even though the world outside was deserted, work on the internet superhighway was coursing as usual. A speed of 156kbps sometimes felt slow. Tapping on her pc she continued her chores of proofing, writing, typing, looking hard at her screen, changing a word, deleting a line or typing out a petition that her office had mailed her. Time just flew she thought and hoped that one day this too would pass. Just then her mother came in to inform that lunch was ready.

‘Not now ma, I have work.’

‘You need to eat beta it's 2 O'clock.’ Pooja turned down her screen, came to the table and sat down to eat. The food felt delicious. It was years since she had had her favourite ‘sambar-rice’. ‘This is yum Ma, wish there were some papads.’ Pooja asked eagerly. ‘Here they are.’ Her mother smilingly put a plate heaped with a dozen crisp poppadum. Looking at her father she asked him ‘Pa, do you still have pickles?’

'No' her mother replied, "doctor has asked him to stop.' She looked back at her father. His grey hair had turned several shades of snow and his eyes which always had a glinting sparkle now had faint hints in the form of dark circles under them. As she ate her thoughts went back to a time not long ago when meal times were galore. The ones that she had with friends at those fine dining restaurants inside Khan Market or one of those exotic ones in the vicinity of the 'Qutub Minar'. Those paid meals; in exchange for a swipe and few punches on a 'PoS'. The meal at home was two handfuls of sonamasoori rice, dal, and fresh vegetables brought by Papa and cooked and preened under the loving gaze of 'Ma'. Indeed priceless over those astoundingly priced dine-ins where all pleaded for star ratings. Exhaling away those thoughts she gave her a deep hug and said 'good night Ma.'

Day 66: the house was quiet. Dark clouds and the invisible sun made the day look gloomy. Usually, Papa was up and about at this hour. But he was not around. Must have overslept, she thought.

Ma came out of his room. She looked worried. Rubbing her eyes Pooja asked, 'what's the matter?'

'He has a slight temperature.' Pooja froze; fever in such times was a cause for concern. 'Don't worry ma let me see.' Her mother was right. His forehead felt warm. The temperature showed 102 on the thermometer. 'He also has a runny nose Ma.'

'It is okay beta, the weather is such' her father replied.

'I know papa, just lie down and relax.'

Turning to her mother Pooja asked her to bring a bowl of cool water. Dipping a clean kerchief she gently rolled it over and kept it pasted on his forehead for a minute.

‘Just relax papa and close your eyes.’

Again, she dipped the square-shaped cloth in the chilled water, squeezed the kerchief and placed it around his temple. She squeezed some ointment and rubbed it on his chest, gently. The warmth from the ointment slowly coaxed him to sleep, all over again. Her mother looked relieved. Looking at her husband who was now asleep, she turned to Pooja with a worrisome look and said ‘Mr Nair on the third floor had developed fever. Their son you know is in the USA and Leela aunty was so shocked. She had called up the ‘Helpline’ in Nandini layout.’

‘What happened then?’

‘Someone came from the BBMP and they insisted to take him away’. Eyes welling up she held her daughter's hand hard and asked, ‘will they take your papa away?’

‘No way Ma. He’ll be ok. You go get some sleep, I will be with him.’ She placed a fresh kerchief and again gently rubbed his chest. The burning heat all over his body an hour ago seemed to have abated. She bent low and brought her ears close to his chest. She could hear his soft breathing. As she realized he was now asleep. A smile, full of relief, came all over her face. She spread a bed sheet beside the cot and lay down. The soft pitter-patter of the raindrops falling outside felt like a lullaby. As she sunk into a deep sleep, the gentle showers outside soon gathered up to form a thundering downpour.



Pooja opened her eyes. It was still dark. She turned to check her father's bedside clock, instead, she felt the cold of a steel tumbler and beside it the smooth frame of the little Titan clock she had gifted him. That was a long time ago. Its small incandescent arms showed it was 3.30 am. She leaned up and saw her father and mother sleeping soundly. She touched her father's forehead. It felt normal. She sighed softly. The stinging heat felt ten hours ago was no longer there. She lay back on her mat. Strangely, she did not feel like going back to her room.

'Wake up beta. You slept off on the floor.' Reaching out to hold the warm cup of tea held out by her mother, through her sleep-filled eyes she could see her parents thronged deep in their morning chatter. It felt nice to have normalcy back. As she sipped her tea, Pooja knew that her worst fears were indeed over.

The mailbox again shot an alert: mailbox1222.154.26.788 full. She swiftly got down to clear hundreds of junk mail. As she kept poring over subjects and started deleting them, one of them caught her eye.

**From :**

*Pentagon Landmarks,*

*The Landmark, NCR*

That was the one that she had wanted and aspired for. As she clicked on it with her little wireless mouse, the attachment sprang up to display a short message:

'Dear Ms Pooja, this refers to your Resume and the subsequent discussion had with you over Skype on 15.3.20.

We are pleased to inform you that you have been taken on board as a team member. The CTC considering your limited experience would be 18.80 lacs.....”

The letter went on to promise her a world of opportunities, espousing their company's philosophies and their well-lauded social care initiatives.

The joining date was mentioned as ‘not later than 25.9.20’ She shut her Pc. It was hers. What she had been chasing all these months. Strangely, she did not feel elated. It all seemed humdrum. Instead, she found her fingers symphonically lifting to punch out, a new mail.

To,

*Mr Janardhan, CEO, Head Hunters*

*Palace Orchards Road*

*Bengaluru-560002*

Sub: My resume and offer from Pentagon Landmarks

Dear Mr Janardhan—due to personal reasons I regret to inform you that I need to decline the generous offer from Pentagon landmarks. I would instead, request you to trace out suitable opportunities for me here, in Bangalore.

Thanking you,

Sincerely,

Pooja Govil

Next, she clicked on 'Yatra.com', and typed her name. Immediately, her flight details for Bangalore-Delhi, booked just a week back, appeared on the screen. She shut her eyes

and thought for a while. She then pulled the cursor over the word 'cancel'. Staring at it momentarily she smiled, then firmly, tapped on it.

Satisfied, she went inside. Her father was still asleep. She looked around for her mother.

The softening sound of the rain had cleared the din and she heard her mother calling out for her, 'where are you Beta.'

*'Coming Ma, coming, I am not going anywhere.'*

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## 2. PEDAGOGUE

---

Vinod Khosla, the Chief Executive Officer, looked out of his office chamber. A little branch of a nearby tree kept leaning against the glass of his large-sized window pane.

Vinod smiled. He went through the just-arrived morning reports at his desk. He was his normal self when efficiency at his production floor hovered at an 80% figure. But today was a red-letter day; it was at a jubilant high of 90.2%, which in plain terms meant that out of 24 hours the machines had run non-stop for a little more than 21 hrs. He praised his managers, and those shop floor supervisors and they in turn passed on the appreciation which multiplied downstream to the workers, the security personnel and even the pantry man. A 90.2 % efficiency! Hence today was a good day to spend time on some 'management chats'. The first was his 'Production head' Mr Saurabh Rele. He memorized the fourth chapter from Jack Welch's book 'Winning'—(this he had read last night). Those management lessons were swirling inside him like a rising tide and someone needed to be splashed under it. So here was that man, the first lucky recipient of the morning.

'Rele, this is too good!'

'Arrey saverey saverey aisi acchi khabar sunaya karon.'

Rele adjusted his tie and shook his neck to shed his normal self and wear the mask of obsequiousness. Those principles of production, and time-motion study soon changed course into areas of motivation when Khosla uttered a quote: 'Control

your destiny or someone else will'. He was careful not to reveal Welch's name. Vinod continued and discussed Ad nauseam. Rele stared tongue-tied; what a learned man he was working for! He was now convinced that a thousand trips to the biggest university could never yield such a fountain of gurgling knowledge, that too, available 24/7.

Next was his HR head. A bald thin man looking askance. Stirring his cup of black tea, Khosla read out a few lines from Paul Coelho's 'Alchemist': 'when you want something all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it'. He stopped and looked at him questioningly: 'Mazaa Aaya?' He nodded. 'Don't you agree?' The HR nodded vigorously this time.

He then called the entire staff inside his lavish conference hall: the occasion was to celebrate the breaching of the 90 per cent mark. Then came many cups of tea from the pantry, in shiny cups and assorted biscuits in equally shiny trays. As all sipped their tea and munched biscuits, Khosla held court. This time he had memorised the chapters from 'Thinking Hats' and from the corner of his eye, his photographic memory was turning each page as he uttered verbatim. His staff gushed, transfixed and utterly rooted: 'Wow what an extempore man we have here.' Such was the riveting effect, though the authors remained unsung.

When he returned home, he found his sycophants ready at his doorstep ostensibly to hear out his words of wisdom but in reality to catch up on free sundowners. Later, after the booze was over and his tongue still, tired from its incessant wagging, he doused his wife's complaints by incoherently quoting from Sigmund Freud: 'the ego is not a master in its own house!'

Vinod Khosla fostered several bonds: with his friends, relatives, and neighbourhood. He adored the epithet of 'management guru' by his office staff and the title of 'Boss' by his close friends. They made him feel invincible. He even had a website in his name "[www.vinodkhosla.com](http://www.vinodkhosla.com)" whose pages had hundreds of passages lifted from management-based journals, best-selling books, and even lectures. It had Impressive categories like, 'My thoughts of the day ', 'Pearls of wisdom ', 'Best Sartorial sense' and even a page which was an entry form for prospects willing to enrol themselves for 'self-help' classes ( at a fee of course).

To the vast uninitiated, the unlucky ones, and the have-nots- this website was their veritable 'Britannia Encyclopaedias' and 'Lonely- Planet' rolled into one. Supposedly written and researched by this mighty 'all-knowing' Khosla whose name adorned its wall, where the only names missing were of the original authors and content creators. If any of his friends pointed out the missing author's name, he was quickly downgraded to a 'lower circle' and those perks of being invited for free drinks and kebabs in the evenings quickly came to a halt. In that rare unfortunate event if that person happened to be one of his employees then that poor man's career in the company was as bad as 'rigour-mortis'!

He loved to believe himself to be a 'problem solver'. 'I am the Doctor of Everything' he proclaimed. To solve a machine issue-the Khosla sahib with the authoritarian hat was the man.

To get stuck goods cleared from an outpost—vitriolic Khosla Babu was the go-to man.

To solve a familial dispute- the non-empathetic Khosla 'chacha' was the helping hand.

Best places to hang out in Goa?—who else but the know-all Vinny Khosla!

Soon, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of that month, Vinod Khosla met his 'Ides of March.' The factory was shut and he was forced indoors. The daily flurry of reports, 'salaams,' praises, and gloating, all disappeared. It was an agonizing moment for him because all those mouths reciting incessant praise had suddenly clamped shut.

It was more than a week since that fateful day. He had devoured many books, scratched away all journals, and drowned himself in various news channels. To absorb them he had cupped his ears to all the debates and arguments in the world. A half-page article from the 'economist' was carefully snipped, punched and inserted inside his 'private' file which was a piece of three-paragraphed print news on the 'Wuhan Crisis' and having read it, was embedded deep inside the inner layers of his brain. What he now desperately wanted was an aperture to pour them all out. He wanted pairs of ears, many of them, ears that would hear. Even if not understood, he wanted those tongues to roll out in 'aah's and those heads to nod in swift jerks. But there were none. Not even one call. This made Khosla fidgety. He thought of the proverb 'If the mountain won't come I will go to the mountain' and smiled. He called Saurabh, his trusted acolyte. 'Yes sir.'

'Saurabh this is funny. What will happen?'

Saurabh turned his neck sideways, let out a 'pop' and sheepishly said 'Don't know sir.'

'Don't you worry my boy, this is just an experiment. Like how I keep conducting. The Congress had the '*nasbandi*', and the commies had '*naakabandi*'. The BJP came out with '*notebandi*', and now this '*Lockbandi*.'

'Yes sir, you should have spoken about this at the 'manufacturers association of owners' exhibition.

'Ha-ha-ha, if they had waited for another week our YTD for Q4 results would have breached.'

Saurabh let out a nervous giggle and by habit burst into a deluge of flattery: 'yes sir, you will give us a solution sir, I challenge anyone on this sir'. Cradling his phone awkwardly, he kept peeling the boiled potatoes given by his wife, but all the while pondering on his next round of admiration that would gratify his Boss.

Khosla was joyous. After a long time, his ears echoed with 'admiration.' Pouring a large Red Label into his crystal glass he brought it close. As he inhaled, the smell of oaken wood further heightened his joy.

Day 17:

The 'Spartan-Thali' was laid on Khosla's enormous marble-topped dining table. It had barren potatoes, dry chapattis, a lump of cabbage that resembled a dark cloud, a small plate of salad and a bowl of curd. Gazing at it he thought aloud: 'to eat is a necessity but to eat intelligently is an art.' It was another matter that at dinnertimes, such Spartan meals were washed down with his favourite 'Red Label.'

Long nights of fitful sleep added to his woes. Ennui was soon getting the better of him. His tongue, doubly skilled in



spewing wit and acid, now lay like an idle propeller. His friends and especially those trusted acolytes were turning into distant islands. Bereft of his daily '*darbar*', his stock of pithy statements, funny anecdotes and catchy proverbs that could trigger endless debates, were all on the brink of extinction. He called up an old friend, a retired army major. His wife answered to say he was exercising. Next, he dialled his millionaire walking partner, who stayed two lanes away, and asked him whether they could meet for drinks, but that guy revealed he was on a "detoxification drive", leaving him truly exasperated. He dialled Saurabh: his son answered, 'Sir, father has gone to meet granny'.

That night he woke his wife and insisted that she hear him out: 'Bindu see, this whole mess has been designed by the Chinese and it is proved that the virus was created in their lab located in their Wuhan province.' Please Vinod, let me sleep I need to go to Pandey's place to pay wages to my workers.' Switching off the lights she turned over to the other side and soon started snoring.

He stared at his sleeping wife. Decades of being caressed under the law of diminishing returns had turned their love into a forgotten love ballad and their one-time oneness was now lying in decrepitude.

Day21

Khosla was alone. None of those numbers was responding. Bindu had not yet returned from Pandey's place. As he tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the sofa's edge, he heard a squeaky voice call out.

‘Chai Sahib.’ She was Chhaya, their maid, and she held out a cup of tea.

The glint in his eyes suddenly reappeared. His tongue barred in his mouth since long found an opportunity to recoil and rise, for Vinod Khosla had found his audience for the day: Chhaya the maid. He insisted that she sit, not on the floor as she normally would but on the sofa, facing him. He spoke about the pandemic, the mask, sanitisers and how China -

‘Cheen Sahib?’

‘Haan.’

He started his spiel, about how China had a role to play and how she never needed to bother about savings because ‘working in his house was itself a blessing.’ How she, an ordinary illiterate woman from an obscure village was ‘more fortunate than her American counterpart, who had to bother about social security.’

‘Umrika Sahib’ she uttered wonderstruck.

‘Haan’- Khosla replied, not at all liking her interjection in his moment of ecstatic enlightenment.

In this long stage play of percentages, GDPs, efficiencies, and the racism chasms between black men and white men, a strong deep waft touched his nostrils:

Vinod stopped, keeping his spiel on pause.

He looked at Chhaya, who looked back at him wide-eyed. His knowledge certainly had one more admirer, he thought.

Chhaya turned towards the kitchen and ran, howling with tears streaming:

'Mera dal jal gaya sahib. Mem sahib aaj mere ko mar daley gi!'

As the dark smoke from the burnt dal glided into the room,  
*Vinod Khosla flung away his file, put on his mask and went out,*  
*dejected.*

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### 3. GOAN RENDEZVOUS

---

'I need to go to Goa', Pradip said. Priya heard him quietly.

'I have to go to Goa, he screamed. No reply.

Desperate for an answer, he shook her.

'Whaaaat! Can't you see am working? Leaving me alone and going off! Why only Goa?'

That hit Pradip. Like someone bringing down an empty bottle of beer on his head. Thud!

Yes, why? - He thought. In their three years of marriage, they explored hills, mist, and glades and experienced pine rushes in deep forests. Then why only Goa? What was it? Was it the sea, shirt-free days, those never-ending boozy nights with friends or just the thought of undiluted freedom?

'Please Priya, see I have even changed the tyres. The new ones are of Michelin.' Priya continued tapping on her pc. She worked for 'Accenture' and her commute took a good one-hour journey from their apartment in J.P.Nagar to her office in Electronic City.

'So what say?' He slipped his fingers into hers and as they entwined, she turned towards him 'Do what you want Pradip I have work to do.' Even though it was said coldly he could read the look of consent in her eyes.

After her morning routines it took her about two minutes to reach the gate and board the bus, today she almost missed it.

'Hey, morning' her colleague Anjali waved her hand and wished. Priya got up and sat on the seat next to her.

'Looking worried,' Anjali asked questioningly. Priya replied without looking 'It's Pradip.'

'Now what?' Anjali asked. 'Nothing re, he and his perennial fantasies about Goa.'

Anjali frowned 'Didn't you guys go there last Diwali?' Bending close to her and softening her voice, she whispered 'I think he humps you better there. Just joking. Or has he found some Konkani chick?'

'Now you don't start- please.' Priya gave her an irritating look.

Anjali winked 'Chal yaar, let him go. I can come over for pyjama sleepovers. Vinit has taught me some lovely cocktail recipes.'

The phone pinged. Pradip saw a message from Priya 'Ok baby, pack up for Goa, but just three days ok Luv u.'

Pradip snapped his fingers 'Luv you jaan right away.' He brought out his shorts; those striped ones x 3 mornings and the polka-dotted ones x 3 evenings; the pastel shaded tees x 3 days and those floral printed x 3 evenings. Next came those sunglasses: wayfarer and the ray-ban, sun lotions, and floaters. Zipping them up in his new blue Skybag he felt all set and sorted. He slept early and kissed Priya at dawn, was quick to reach the basement, and was all set to move. As he turned the ignition key, the panel lit up brightly to display the overall fitness of the car. It also displayed the date and time:

5.00 AM 21.03.2020

The SUV rolled out majestically and left behind the still-dark roads to reach the toll gate. Soon he was cruising at 110 per hour to reach the end of the smoothed tarmac of the 'NICE' road, from where he mounted the NH4.

The slow emerging sun was now turning the blue dawn into a reddish flare. After a quick breakfast in the town of Tumkur his mount felt like it had sprouted wings and began racing towards the distant horizon where white cumulus clouds could be seen hovering over Chitradurga, the town of the historic citadel, then ahead the ancient textile town of Davangere, and further up Siri, the land on which stood a thousand windmills that harnessed energy. By early noon he reached the roundabout, that crossover point which gives tourists the choice of driving straight across towards Maharashtra or taking the service road- a narrower one that leads to the last toll gate to cross over towards Goa. Pradip naturally took the narrow one and after about 150 meters stood an old, rusty board with words that felt magical to him: 'To Goa'. Sensing a terrific sense of anticipation the board was a harbinger of the exciting time that lay ahead. He parked at a quiet corner side and dialled Priya. 'Sweetie I am halfway. Now at that check-post: yes, lovely weather.'

'Ok take care...bye'. Priya replied in a reassuring tone.

Thank God, he thought. She did not grumble. The guilt gnawing away at his mind gave way to a tumultuous relief.

The fragrance of lemon tea from inside an old man's crumpled tea stall gave him the cue to light up a fag: 'onde tea' he said. The old man with a wide toothless smile held up a cup of tea which Pradip took it smilingly. He also picked up a

few packets of chips and juices, as these would serve as his lunch for the day. A stomach full of heavy meals last time had made him feel dangerously sleepy at the wheel hence he preferred to have some light snacks over lunch. Munching on one of them, he started the final leg of his journey that would pass through the green verdant of the Dandeli forest. After driving through it roughly for about three hours, the sun had now crawled towards the west bringing back the orange allure of dawn. Very soon, he entered areas that bespoke of 'old goa'; those little houses with sloping roofs and ornate verandas, where aunties in frocks chattered with neighbours and wine shops that bore Christian names. Speeding away, he sighted the glint of the Mandowi river making his heart roar with delight. The thought of approaching Panjim spurred him to press hard on the accelerator and in a few minutes he reached the huge roundabout that delivers motor-borne tourists to Goa's various corners.

The turn towards the eastern side enters the heart of Panjim while the right turn climbs up towards the bridge across the Mandowi. Driving up he could see those ubiquitous 'Cruise ferries' running criss-cross on the water, floating casinos that appeared stationary, glittery joints that had just upped their shutters and bobbing fishing boats, safely tethered to crowded piers. He clicked on google maps and typed 'hotel Palacete Rodriguez' Anjuna. Google guided him to the tri-junction in Porvorim opposite which lay the iconic restaurant 'O' Coquiere'. Turning left towards Baga, the app instructed him to turn right onto a road which ran beside paddy fields and empty patches, used as football grounds during daytime. The road keeled upwards and passed the 'Xanadu' restaurant

which of late, he had heard, had evolved as a better option to the age-old 'Titos'. In minutes, he was at the hotel gate.

The 'Palacete Rodrigues' with its Portuguese-styled façade, tall columns painted in bright white and coconut trees landscaped like minarets flowing out of a cashew grove gave it an elegant touch. An excited fellow with a gleeful smile came running to him saying 'Welcome sir' and started carting his two bags. A dark-faced lady with big-sized eyes smilingly opened the Guest register. Pradip began filling up those usual columns:

Name-Pradip Goyal

Age-33

Arriving from Bangalore

Date of check-in: 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020

Approx. duration of stay: three nights.

'Palacete Rodrigues' also has a pool, where a maximum of three persons at any given time could have a leisurely swim. Its sit-out in front of the kitchen had about a dozen cane chairs and tables. The reception area was adorned with gigantic oil paintings of biblical angels and events from the 'The Holy Magi'. But its real beauty lay in the rich spread of antique items in the form of several pieces of furniture: huge broad beds with ivory panelled bedsteads from Peking, elegantly modelled lamps that had embroidered shades from Spain, large sized rocking chairs made of black Malaya wood and exquisite vases that had pictures of Ming emperors painted on them.

Wiping away his balmy sweat he unpacked his bags and pondered whether to enter the empty pool. With its



underwater lights casting an inviting glow, he unpacked, wore his swimming trunk and entered the warm water. After eleven hours of driving, a few brisk laps magically relaxed his body that had gone taut and those resultant bursts of cortisol rejuvenated his tired mind. Soon he emerged and as he wiped himself dry, he was now thirsty for a pint, which soon gave way to two and three and then he lost count. All around was music and gaiety. The strains from *'Hotel California'* added enormously to it. As he nibbled on some exquisitely cooked tiger prawns, he dialled Priya's number. It was unreachable.

He clicked and uploaded pictures of his meal on Instagram, hoping she would check. The same he sent her on WhatsApp captioned 'Wish you were here!'

She replied: 'ya -if you took me. What are you doing? Having a beer am sure, and what are you eating?'

'Your favourite ,Tiger-Tiger'

'I feel like choking you. So what's for tomorrow?'

'I'm off to Baga.'

'Ok take care Luv you.'

The next day Pradip took his backpack and put in sunscreen, his wallet and his cell phone. With a dark red Lee cap perched on his head and brand-new Nike floaters on his feet, he was raring to go out. From the numerous bikes available just outside the hotel he hired one and gave his room keys to Mrs Pereira.

'Good morning Sir- breakfast? We have special sausages and... Before she could complete with a wave of his hand he replied 'Am off to the beach.'

‘Ok’. Pointing at a young boy she said ‘If you want a scooter Savio can help.’

Savio was in the business of renting out bikes and operated from his house located a few meters away from The 'Palacete Rodrigues.' Riding the Activa rented out by Savio, Pradip found himself humming loudly Frank Sinatra's 'Fly me to the moon....'

As his bike reached the end of the road he was stopped by a policeman.

‘Go Back.’ The policeman gestured with his hand.

Perplexed, Pradip asked ‘Why, what happened?’

‘Today Janta Curfew.’

That's when the impact of the 'Corona' word started sinking in. He returned to the hotel and searched for the newspaper. A copy of a local daily called 'Navhind Times' was fluttering on one of the chairs where a headline prominently mentioned: ‘12-hour Janta Curfew.’

He looked around and asked Mrs Rodriquez: ‘is everything closed?–yes sir.

‘Beach?’

‘Yes sir.’

All?

‘Yes sir.’

He called Priya- ‘yo what happened?’ What is this curfew thing?’

Priya replied, sounding equally confused. 'Yes –no one can go outside. All shut.'

'Peacetime curfew. But I'm telling you something is going to happen and in such times you went off to Goa' Pradip winced. 'Just three days. I am not settling down over here.'

'Never mind'. She asked 'did you have breakfast.'

'I had thought of having at that shack on Baga's entrance.'

'Anthony's? Now, have it at the hotel.'

'You?' 'I will make some dosa, there is some batter in the fridge.'

Pradip plopped himself dejectedly on the huge armchair. Just then Mrs Pereira walked in: 'Breakfast?' He had no choice but to reply 'yes'. He went over the menu. It had several items listed under "Breakfast" starting from the innocuous 'boiled eggs, omelettes, and parathas, with the bar slowly rising with exotic names that sounded 'Mediterranean': Beef Carpaccio, Grilled prawns, Ravioli, Prawns lollypop. He settled for the less 'brain-teasing' and easier to understand: 'Classic English Breakfast': Choice of bread-plain or buttered or toast/ Choice of eggs: boiled, omelette/masala/plain/cheese-Choice of juice: orange/watermelon/pineapple. Choice of sausages: chicken/ pork

Pointing at it on the menu card he said 'I will have the 'English Breakfast.' The waiter was a migrant. He smiled and said 'Jee Sir?'

'I will have bread toast, plain omelette, and chicken sausage with ...watermelon juice.'

‘Sir no watermelon juice! Only orange.’

*‘Theek hai Jaldi laa.’*

With his plan for the day lying quashed, he ate his breakfast and then spent the entire day chatting with Mrs Pereira. She narrated to him, her story.

Fifty-five years ago she had come as a young bride to this mansion what was then a typical ‘Portuguese villa with colonial charm.’ The area all around was draped under bougainvillaea, thick flowery vines, slim creepers made up of tiny clover-shaped leaves that grew rapidly all over the walls and a manicured lawn with a fountain at its centre that completed the royal look. She said ‘we did not realise for quite some time that they( Portuguese) no longer ruled over us ’ implying that the act of changeover even though violent, its repercussions never reached Anjuna for almost a week. Her father Mr Dominic Pereira, whose huge portrait hung from one of the walls, was a government diplomat working with the Portuguese government. He had gifted his son-in-law with a plum dowry and that explained the huge caches of antique furniture in the guest rooms, her private rooms and all those Ming vases and ancient mural paintings adorning every wall. Her husband passed away about a decade ago and her only child, a son, went off to the USA. So, with the help of her nephew Mr Joaquim and his wife (the dark lady with large eyes) she converted the mansion into a hotel.

By the time she finished her story, it was 6.00 pm and the ‘Janta curfew’ too came to an end. He dialled Priya:

‘Can you hear?’

‘Yes. The curfew is over. Tomorrow is sorted. Baga by the beach. Just two more days.’

‘Take care.Gudnite luv you.’

He lay down on his bed and from the dining area a faint strain from one of Sinatra’s numbers ‘*Strangers in the night exchanging glances wondering in the night...*’ and as those words in Sinatra’s mellifluous voice floated in to flood his room with those warm memories with Priya from last year’s trip, he found himself singing aloud: Yes, he thought ‘what would be our chances?’

The thought seemed to take the form of a serious question that defied any known answers. The sheer weight of the thought lulled him to sleep. Sometime later in the night when all the occupants were overcome with sleep, the music stopped playing and the huge mansion plunged into a melancholic blackness. He suddenly woke. It was past midnight. His mind again drifted off to the beach at Baga and he slept again.

The morning tweets from hopping birds gently woke up the land of Anjuna; their musical chirp heralded a bright day that gently woke up Savio who was now set to wash his fleet of scooters. Alongwith the morning Mrs Pereira sashayed in, to supervise another day, while Joaquim was exercising in his room and his wife, armed with a cup of tea, was unlocking the reception. In tandem Pradip too woke up and was ready in minutes. As he walked towards the reception, his flip-flops slapping on the porcelain-dotted floor, he handed his room keys to the big-eyed lady. ‘Please get my room cleaned’ he said and she nodded with a smile. Turning away, Pradip sensed the sight of a deep dimple on her dark cheek.

Savio was ready with the Activa scooter. Pradip smilingly mounted it and then turning around the bus shelter he was soon racing alongside the vast expanse of green fields. As a soft breeze brushed against him and as the scooter gained speed on the well-tarred road, a narrow stream of water that directly flows into the Baga creek too, loomed ahead to join him. That was the point he was wanting to reach. As he approached the Baga point, what he saw, rattled the memoirs of his last visit.

That huge tract of land used exclusively as a gigantic parking facility, teeming with cars, SUVs, tempo travellers, and bikes, was now blank and arid. From the parking lot, he rode onto the sandy pathway where a few meters across it lay the iconic Baga beach. The usually boisterous lane dotted with shops selling colourful shorts, pyjamas, and catchy tees was gone; all shut inside padlocked shutters. Those colourful souvenir shops and shacks had their doors locked. There was no sign of life at the famed 'Anthony's' shack and the beach, forever teeming with relaxing tourists was empty. Only a few mongrels were there-lying dejected and curled up. His 'to-do' list of things to be done in Baga was shorn of all words. He went and sat at the edge of the water. On his right was the Baga creek from where a fishing boat with a fluttering flag was sailing out to meet the sea. Turning left, fortunately, there was one shack that appeared open. As he made his way hurriedly towards it, the name was as incongruous as the barren scene at Baga: 'Sai Lakshmi Shack'.

With a few chairs neatly positioned to face the sea Pradip sat on one. Ordering his first KF pint of the day he stretched his legs and stared at the waves carousing in their world. The

horizon appeared decked up in three stripes: a deep blue, then a dull grey and a faint green. On the green stripe, he could see faint outlines of a ship which appeared heading towards nothingness. On the blue, he could sight some fishing boats bobbing aimlessly and ripples of water rolling forward towards the beach like a hooded army where most of them lost their momentum midway. Amongst them, a few would rise larger like a hydra and those are the ones beach-combers would wait to jump in, get dragged for a few meters, be wrapped up in its huge splash to feel the rush of underwater swimming, even though it lasted for a few seconds. Then for no reason, those ripples quieten into a long spell of placidness, changing its colours and soon another hydra appeared gushing out foamy bubbles, as if from a laughing gargoyle embedded deep below the sea. Sometimes a current rolled out diagonally as if to embrace the one coming from the other end. As these wooing waves danced and drowned in their appeasement, the sun, high above the Baga, had moved and was now perched on the horizon.

Coming out of his reverie, Pradip blinked, staring at the empty bottles on his table. He called out for the bill and was soon on his way up towards his hotel.

In the courtyard of 'Palacete Rodriguez', there was the din of excited chatter. Just then his phone rang. It was Priya.

'Hey are you back?' yes was at the Baga. 'There is an announcement at 8.00 O'clock by the Prime Minister.

'What about? This virus thing? Ok got it.'

After a light shower, and a refreshing change from the sweaty tees and shorts into fresh ones, he joined the few guests and staff watching television.

'*Aap Jahan hain wahin par Rahiye*'....said the Prime Minister, announcing the total closure of the entire country.

He called Priya. 'What's this all close mean?'

'Means you cannot come back for at least 21 days.'

'I'll come by road.' 'Too late Dumbo, I had told you! Hope you are wearing a mask!'

'Will wear' he replied confidently because he remembered that he had kept two masks in his bag.

'Pradeeeep!' She shrieked. 'Don't be angry I will.'

Pradip looked at the mask in his hand. The straps listlessly fluttered, just as his mind was, on this bleak night. A crackling 'phut' that sounded like burning firewood came from the kitchen. Taking his look as a cue, a waiter asked him whether he needed something: 'Get me a *mojito* right away.' Pradip thought hard. What was this new terminology hitting the country-'*Lockdown*'? The concept of 'Bandhs' was known; they were around since time immemorial- '*rasta-roko*', '*chakka-jam*' and so on. But this was from the realm of the unknown. Airports shutting out planes, trains idle, workplaces closed, and markets shut. All shut, except this damn virus.

But the first morning of the Lockdown had the unmissable Goan charm; the chatter of birds, the terrain lush and peaceful, the vast blue sky nestling in the warm embrace of the sun, dotted with cotton balled clouds floating around, belying the agony of a strange uncertainty unfolding below. The cold



drink shop, tea shop and the one selling all sorts of knick-knacks were open, but there was a pervading sense of gloom. Pradip ignored it, and looked away, determined not to get affected. He wore his mask and thought about exploring one of those many lanes leading towards the Vagator beach. There was nobody. But the scenic beauty of the large squared greens, whose peripheries were marked by coconut palm trees and somewhere in between those trees a lone mongrel chasing a rooster helped him relax. All the humans were inside, obeying the diktat of their leader.

His phone rang: 'Priyaa I am stuck but watch these captivating scenes.' He raised his phone skywards 'see the lovely skyline.'

'This is no time for a joke how will I stay alone?' He had no answer. 'Ok take care. Better go back to the hotel before some cop shoos you away.'

The day passed off with 'thinking' about his 'Goa-plan': he would have gone to the Aguada fort and tried to peep into its freshwater reservoirs and walked on its imposing ramparts. A little ahead from its farthest point, one could watch merchant ships entering Mormugao Harbour to lay anchor and from the mouth of the Mandowi, barges ferried iron ore to be loaded on those ships on their onward voyage to China. Then he would have explored the inside of Panjim city, where he would have lunch at 'Cafe Bhonsale' one of the best-known places to eat a fish-thali. He would have applied suntan cream and sauntered on the roads wearing his Lee cap and explored the sidewalks to search for some rare goodies and then catch up with a refreshing sundowner at the 'Fontainhas'.

As the futility of his thoughts sank in, he asked the boy for a beer. The boy handed him a corona. 'KF'? He asked.

'No supplies' the boy answered. 'Corona' beer was expensive. It was three times more than a Kingfisher. He thought for a few seconds, changed his mind and said instead 'get me a soda-fenny'. A little later, as the ice cubes splashed in his 'soda-fenny' he opened his PC. A torrent of emails flowed in. Some of them advised words of caution and general well-being, while most of them were from his customers, who were either cancelling orders placed or asking him to pause them, indefinitely. 'There goes my incentive in smoke', he murmured while dutifully replying to all. By the time he was done, it was midnight. As he sat in silence he knew that in the morning he had to speak to Mrs Pereira about the room charges.

'Good morning Mrs Pereira I need to speak about the room tariff. Looks like I will be stuck here for an indefinite number of days or even weeks and I cannot afford the cost for such a long time.'

Mrs Pereira looked surprised then, turned thoughtful. Since there were no new check-ins and the occupancy in her hotel had dwindled, she made him an offer.

'I shall give you a lump sum offer. 10K for the entire stay.' Pradip stared wide-eyed disbelieving his stroke of good luck. To further allay him Mrs Pereira cajolingly announced 'okay okay I will also add complimentary breakfast to it.'

'Okay done.' He found this an offer that he dared not evaluate any further.

Days passed in lingering loneliness. Except for the sea, the land of Goa appeared comatose. Time was spent only watching the news or reading the 'Navhind Times', staring at the long array of coconut trees and empty fields, watching dainty birds flying around and waking up to chattering parakeets disturbing his afternoon siesta. Meal times were usually made up of eating fish curry with boiled rice and drinking Feni in the evening. One day, as he was walking back from his idle walks, he was called out by Savio, who offered a lift. Pillion riding, Pradip asked Savio 'so what do you do besides this bike rental business?'

'Sir, I am doing a hotel management course at the Deltin College of hotel management, in Panjim. But nowadays I help 'Mama' at home.'

'And your dad?' 'Papa works at the ferry counter.'

As they reached his house Savio smilingly invited him to come in. 'Come sir, have some beers.' This proposition lit up Pradip's mind.

'Okay.'

Savio's house was one of those many that from afar look like made up of mud, but have been sturdily built with laterite stones. Some rare ones also have their floor made of wood, like Savio's home, which had its hall having a wooden floor and a tiled roof. A simple plaque with the words 'Gomes House' embedded below the symbol of a Cross, hung from its gate. The adjoining portion of the house had a makeshift shop and beside it was an open space which had one of those many restaurant umbrellas that doubles up as a soft-drink ad, with two little chairs and a small table under it. This was their

home-bred 'bistro' or a tavern or whatever one may call it. One could buy loose lentils, rice, spices, and some basic vegetables. On a shelf much away from the essentials spot, were half-empty bottles of rum, whiskey, vodka, and a few crates of beer. This was their 'bar' for which a license in Goa is perhaps not mandatory. In these dire times, Pradip was certainly not complaining. Savio dutifully opened a pint and held it out for him. Pradip asked 'do you also serve food?'

'If we get specific orders we do.' 'Then Let me have lunch here.'

'But we just have *'sopa'* and *'sorpotel'* said Savio.

'What's that? Pradip asked.

'Sopa', Pradip learnt was a soup and *'sorpotel'* was a kind of pork curry. Pork! Wow, he couldn't help exclaiming. Three and a half pints later Savio's mother arrived. A short woman with silvery hair and a smile that could endear all. She held out her hand and greeted him in a voice that resembled the early morning magpie cooing from the trees around Mrs Pereira's abode: 'Helloo I am Jenny Gomes.' Placing a bowl of *'sorpotel'* she asked him in the local dialect *'vaath or pao re?'* The *'pao'* is a short round bread that looks similar to a bun and *'vaath'* meant rice.

'What do you have with normally?'

'Both'

With his belly growling for food Pradip replied 'Well, then I too shall have with both.'

The *'sopa grossa'* was a thick soup made up of boiled cabbage, potatoes, and meat broth mixed with powdered pepper and

starch water derived from boiled rice. The '*sorpotel*' was as red as fire and tasted like made of many kinds of meat. He could recollect a similar kind which he had in Mysore and the locals knew it as 'spare-parts curry' which had almost the same ingredients but without the starch water. Pradip kept aside the spoon and the '*sopa grossa*' was wiped clean with the '*pao*' and the fiery '*sorpotel*' was devoured barehanded with rice.

As he sat back satiated, his phone glowed indicating a call from 'Accotel'. That was the one from where he was expecting a major payment. Tingling with excitement he sweetly uttered the chirpiest 'hello' ever:

'Mr Pradip?'

'Yes Sir'

'Hope you are doing fine.'

'No issues sir and how about you?'

'Very well. This is regarding the payment which was supposed to have been credited but we are extremely sorry that it has been delayed.'

Trying his level best to not put off his prestigious caller, he bravely replied: 'No issues sir you can do it tomorrow.'

'Am afraid we can give you a clear picture only after the lockdown because as you know all our shipments are being cancelled and there is a terrible bottleneck rising.'

'So, by when sir?' Asked Pradip dumbfounded.

'Will try our best to let you know about it soon.'

'Oh' was all that he could manage to reply.

He reached out for a glass of water as his throat fell dry. His shoulders drooped as he paid Savio's bill and trudged out to his hotel. He knew he had to sleep it off....

As he lay in bed, the darkness outside appeared more pronounced with the portico lights being shut. Why not- he thought. With no guests left in the hotel, income would have ground to a standstill, everyone had to think of scrounging in whatever possible way; shutting off those portico lights was one of them. The cool salubrious breeze blowing in from the window comforted him and slowly lulled him with some good hours of deep sleep.

He stirred a bit and was soon wide awake. It was just 4 am but he felt well rested and energetic. He got up, wore his mask and stepped out of his room. He went outside and woke up the watchman requesting him to open the fettered gate. The darkness outside was still young and the sky a youthful navy blue. The quiet din was shattered only by his footsteps. He walked with a renewed ardour which helped him to reprise last evening's waking moments: 'so the great 'Accotel' was not paying and the orders from an invincible German brand called 'Clockhouse' were on pause or perhaps even cancelled by now. As he briskly walked on with the mask taut over his face he soon reached the edge of shimmering pools of water along the betel nut trees. The silvery-toned moon high above him had lit up the whole landscape where the white silhouette of a bird continuously shifting on a branch caught his eye. To his mind, it appeared like a heron, or was it an eagle? No. He stared for some more time and that fidgety winged creature stared back equally hard. Bristling feathers and a nodding head, its curved beak and huge piercing eyes, revealed its

identity. Pradip was thrilled. He was staring at a giant white owl. As he recalled hearing many tales about the 'white owl' he crouched on his knees, looked again and joined his hands, praying for some good luck.

Days turned into weeks. He missed Priya terribly. All were inside their homes and he was a 'free bird'; he smirked at the thought but he had learnt a new meaning of this land.

The first phase of the Unlocking was ushered on the 31<sup>st</sup> day when some relaxations were initiated with major changes in the form of withdrawing the day-time curfew, allowing vehicles within city limits, and all-day movement of essentials.

Preparing for one such trip Mrs Pereira's nephew, Joaquin Almeida, was wiping the windshield of his Mahindra Scorpio. He planned to go to the market at Mapusa, a suburb about 10 km away. Pradip decided to tag along to which Joaquin readily agreed. As the Scorpio muscled up to race ahead, Joaquin spoke about his relative who had a warehouse in Mapusa market. The once bustling market had turned into a sad sight of a near-empty one.

The 'warehouse' that Joaquim was talking about was a clutch of five shops. These stocked all sorts of items classified in such times as 'essential'. Besides the usual grains and spices, it also had several bags of assorted dried fish (*sukhi macchi*) like 'dried-mackerel, prawns, baby sharks, the 'bombil' and many other kinds, all twisted and contorted like preserved relics. 'Fish is an everyday meal', said Joaquin. It was an answer to Pradip's questioning look.

'Dry fish is the food for every home in Goa and in the monsoon, the catch from the sea is practically nil. Fishermen

are wary to go deep sea fishing so this is where the 'dry fish' comes in handy.' So saying he bent down to pick up a sack containing some essentials. He also picked a few packets of 'dry mackerel.' Pradip bent down to help him 'why just a few packets?' Joaquin grinningly answered 'This is for our kitchen. Not for guests as they never prefer. Turning around the mountainous pile of dry coconuts, and 'kokum,' they stepped to the next one where a guy handed him two crates of 'feni,' the local brew.

'Why don't you allow 'Feni' to go out of Goa ?' asked Pradip.

'Because production is limited. The distillation of the cashew apples is not enough considering almost every Goan drinks it.' To which Pradip questioningly asked 'If it is limited then it should be priced higher.'

Joaquin thoughtfully replied 'That would be akin to penalizing every Goan, and since production falls short of demand it is not allowed outside. We have gradations in 'Feni' just as there is in whiskey. The Feni also has its equivalent of single malt called 'VSOP Feni' which is consumed during special occasions' he explained with swelling pride. Pradip listened attentively, appreciating the fifteen rupees peg of potent brew which certainly had its own aura.

'There is one more variant which is my favourite. It's called the 'Urrak.'

'You mean arrack?'

Joaquin curled up his nose in disgust "that's hooch this is Urrak, a higher version of 'feni'. He leaned closer and said 'tomorrow early morning I have to meet my pal at Baga creek. Will you come?'



A 'no' was unimaginable, Pradip agreed by nodding his head vigorously.

The next day at the crack of dawn, Joaquin & Pradip drove down to Baga creek, and stepped down at the same spot 150 meters away from 'Anthony's Shack'. This time, he stared at another world. The water was dotted with boats of many-hued colours in blues, reds, and whites, each of them proudly displaying its God-fearing names on their hull: 'Sagar Mata', 'St Anthony's', 'Shivaay' and many more. Most of them were sailing into the creek with the fishermen's wives and their families waiting with their scythes and baskets to help pack in the catch. At those spots, where beach-beds stood the whole day for beach-combers to lie upon and watch the sea, at this hour of dawn in their place, the beach had gigantic nets containing numerous species of fishes, lying still in its strong nylon strings, spread out carefully where men and woman crouched on the sand were carefully segregating the catch. Joaquin scanned them all and gave a shout-out to one of them: "Hey Pedro". A dark man of average build came to them with a large grin on his face that displayed black stained teeth. On his shoulder, he held a huge fish that had a nose shaped like a long pointed needle. He noticed Joaquin ahead and wished him:

*'Hey Joaquim deu boro dis dium?*

*'deu borem korum. Maka Urrack haadshi?'*

'Kitley?' Joaquin showed two fingers. Pedro lit a bidi and both shared puffs from it. While Joaquin sized up its weight, Pradip tried to feel its contours by moving his fingers, especially, all along its pointed nose.

‘That’s a Swordfish,’ said Joaquin. ‘Last night he had a good catch and so he is happy.’

Pedro led them into a little shelter where in a corner and hardly visible due to the still dark sky, stood two tall jerry cans. ‘Here is the Urrack’. Staring at them Pradip exclaimed: ‘hello I just need a bottle and not the whole can.’

Pedro laughed ‘No loose, for you one and Joaquin one.’ So saying, he handed over the bulky swordfish to Joaquin and walked towards his boat bobbing on the shallow water. Seconds later the Yamaha engine strapped onto it purred softly to life. With its hull raised, Pedro deftly guided it away from the several boats assembled and then with a roar and a splash, sailed out to meet the sea.

Many days later, when the sun had set yet again, Pradip & Joaquin opened the can of *urrack* and under a sky bedecked with an array of twinkling stars, clinked glasses and relished ‘bombil-curry’ with Goan boiled rice. Sipping it he felt it less hard and a milder version of the local ‘feni’ but equally potent. He learnt from Joaquin that the best Urrack was served in an old heritage house that lay on the banks of the Mandowi river.

Pouring a large one for himself and Pradip, Joaquin said ‘the house is about 200 years old.’

‘It must be in ruins’ replied Pradip.

‘No sir it is one of the best maintained and attractive looking mansions in the ‘Old Goa’ area. And, it is owned by a single family.’

The interested Pradip leaned forward and with eyes glowing with enormous excitement he asked ‘Can you take me there?’

Swallowing a large sip Joaquin promised he would.

As Pradip tightened his mask and walked back to his room he watched an announcement displayed on the television:

*Unlock- 2 begins in a phased manner. Civil Aviation commences flights to non-containment zones.*

He checked the 'GoAir' portal. In bold Caps, it said 'Bookings Open.'

He called up Priya. She answered and sounded happy. 'Where were you we didn't speak the whole day! I think you should start moving out now, restrictions are being lifted.'

Pradip smilingly replied 'I don't think I will be returning soon.'

'Have you gone totally mad?'

'I have a delicious idea. Check your mail.'

Priya opened her mailbox and found a 'Go Air' ticket in her name.

She was livid: 'is this a bloody joke.'

'No. I am serious. We both are working in WFH mode, no? Join me here. We have seen through enough of air-conditioned rooms and room service, buffet lunches and fine dine-ins, been there and done that. Now, I will show you the other side. We shall walk in fields that are knee-deep in slush and pluck the lotus, we will eat sorpotel with 'pao' and take in the pure smell of 'kokum' at the colourful market in Mapusa. We shall visit the Baga beach at dawn and buy fresh lobster which I will cook for you. We shall work by day and then, explore the other side of Goa.

'I'll be there at the airport to pick you up... and yes.. Don't forget to carry Sinatra's collection, we shall play them every night on Mrs Pereira's vintage turntable.'

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## 4. BLUE FROCK

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It was a land of arid black soil. Loose mud that felt soft to naked soles. From the periphery of trees and thickets flowed a wide stream that was fed by an upstream river. On the bank of this flowing stream, stood the crematorium which was put up on a large square tract of land. It had three raised platforms under three tin shelters. Facing it were steps hewed on a slope where bearers of the funeral cortege sat beside wailing relatives of the dead. On the other side was a covered shed large enough to stock split wood, logs, cans of diesel, kerosene, stacks of clay pots, sticks of incense and much paraphernalia, which helped in the final journey of the dead. These remained locked and its key hung from the thread of Aghora, the 'Chandaal'. His job was to sell the wood and supervise the pyres. To guttural sounds of 'Om-Shanti,' he also assisted the male progeny to bear a pot of water on his shoulders and encircle the pyre. Later, he collected urns from those families and cast away the ashes for helping attain 'Mukti', salvation for the departed soul.

On the bank of the stream, Aghor lived with his wife and daughter. Their thatched bamboo hut with two dwellings inside stood at the farthest corner of the crematorium. Every day Aghor roamed the vast cremation ground with his staff that accompanied him like a faithful lackey. It was his guard and protector. He used it to jab at the piles of ash left behind and sieve out the 'naabi', or the navel, known as the centre point of all humans which contains the undead souls for that is the one, the faithful believe remains unscathed. His hair

perennially lay under a thin veil of ash and whenever he looked up at the sky it always appeared a dull grey. In the night, he raised his staff high to shoo away screeching owls and bats or sometimes chase away a wandering fox. He also used it to rest, when tired, then cool off his sweat and wash off the ash in the flowing stream, where he soaped himself and changed.

The next day, relatives of the departed along with their male heir came to collect their pot which he dutifully handed over in exchange for a few rupees which they gave on their own for his wellbeing.

The world to him seemed cloaked under a grey blanket. Only the shelter, where he lived had a different one; it was green, the green from the matted dough of hay and cow dung spread lovingly on the floor and the walls by his beloved Karuna, his wife, where they lived with their daughter Kajal. Just as the blue-necked Shiva nestled the world, Aghor nursed Karuna in his heart and Kajal in his eyes. He stepped out of this world only when he needed things for them. Those essentials, like rice, flour, vegetables, meat, eggs and sometimes a piece of sweet for Kajal or white jasmynes for Karuna.

At the market, nobody spoke to him. They stepped aside and made way for him to pass, not out of brotherhood but a sense of revulsion. He never spoke to the shopkeeper. They would ask him and he merely pointed at what he wanted. He never had any creditworthiness in their eyes. This suited him, since he preferred to be in the clear by paying in cash and not leave behind a debt register for the shopkeeper to smirk about. From inside the fold of his dhoti, he would bring out rolled-up notes that had some freckles of ash on them. Upright ones

returned the remaining change but, he never waited. Pulling his blanket close he would hurry off. The massive thick layer of matted hair on his head served him in many ways. It saved him from the cold and helped him conceal his timid gaze from those inquisitive eyes: the condescending, the pitiful and the angry. For him, it was an errand for his family; for the onlookers, his presence was a necessary evil.

As a child, he remembered holding his father's finger and walking to the market. In the night, he watched his father closely when he would poke at the charred wood that would crack its grid and come crashing down to form lumps of blackened ash. His father then went about doing what he today continued: searching for the 'naabi' with some bone fragments and putting them in the earthen pot.

Aghor reached home and gave the bags to Karuna. Joyfully Kajal followed and held his finger 'Appa where is my sweet?' he picked a small packet and unwrapped it to reveal four lumps of sweet fritters. They were her favourite '*badusha*'. She smiled and the twinkle from her eyes glowed inside their small hut. Karuna carefully unwrapped the lentils, spices, tea, chunks of jaggery and a bar of soap. Each of those packets was emptied into tin boxes lined in a corner and the rice was poured inside the hollow of a stout bamboo stump whose insides had a hard layer of dried cow dung. This helped in warding off insects to keep the rice clean.

As both, father and daughter walked towards the stream, Karuna placed a dark pan whose bottom was covered in soot on their mud-baked oven and in it placed washed rice and lentils soaked in spices, where they swirled to cook fine '*khichdi*' for the family.

Aghor removed his vest. Claspings his little child he waded knee-deep into the cold water. The sharp chill soon evoked laughter and splashing ripples brought the still water to life. As lathery shakes of soapy dew cleaned them, Kajal's peals of laughter jingled some music into his ears which were otherwise always filled with sounds of breaking, crackling and burning wood. Draping his little girl with a '*gamcha*' his gaze wandered off to the opposite bank. A large-sized car came filled with children, pretty ladies and laden with few vessels. A man stepped out carrying a stove while another carried a few vessels. They all were laughing and looked very happy. Laying out a large mat under a tree they seemed to be preparing to cook a picnic meal. Soon a long funnel of smoke floated up and as the faint hint of fragrant saffron and cashews wafted towards Aghor's nostrils, he wrapped Kajal in the '*gamcha*'. Lifting her in his arms and placing rapid strides towards his hut he whispered in her ear "what will Kajal have today?" To which the little one happily chirped: '*Khichdi - papad-aachar.*'

On the caked floor, Karuna laid out the straw mat where the family sat for their meal of hot khichdi, papads and juicy pickles made of lime. As they ate, Aghor spoke of getting a new dress for Kajal and a sari for Karuna. 'I don't one, the one bought last time is still lying crisp which I have kept for the Devi festival of Yelamma. And so is her dress.'

'But Ma I want a blue one.'

'What is wrong with this, it is a nice red.'

'I don't want red. I cut my finger it was red, your bindi is red and the temple festival is red.' Looking up at her father she



said “Baba’s eyes also turn red after he drinks the white water.’ Aghor cringed.

‘Yes, I will get a blue one for you.’ The child hugged him. The father smiled and then shut his eyes scared that he would reveal a teardrop. So blue it was.

The next day he went to the market. There was a fancy shop with glass walls. Behind it was a statue of a smiling child and wearing the most beautiful blue frock made of shiny fabric whose touch felt softer than silk. It also had buttons that shone like pearls. As he stared at it longingly, a uniformed man tapped his shoulder. Aghor pointed at the mannequin. The guard raised eight of his fingers and said “*Aath Sau*”. The word hit him. He tried to hide the shock on his face by pulling his blanket closer and shrank away.

The next day at the crematorium, one cortege came of an old man. All the accompaniers had their face covered with a wad of cloth. His ‘Sardaar’ came and gave him a similar one and asked him to wear on his face.

‘There is a disease everywhere which brings death, so always wear this. It will keep you safe.’

Late in the night when his world changed from grey to green, he gave one to Karuna. Perplexed she wondered what it was. He explained to her about it. She understood and promised to wear it always. Kajal was asleep. He went into a corner and took a swig from his toddy. He felt lighter. But the blue dress and those eight fingers of the guard at that shop remained impaled in his head. He took another swig and soon fell asleep.

In the morning he met his 'Sardaar' boss for some advance. 'How much?' "Hukum aath sau". The boss was startled: 'why so much? Somebody ill?'

'No.'

'Then?'

He kept quiet. 'I will see, be careful. There is a disease. Don't come near me and don't go very close to people also. It's sitting on them like flies. Do you understand?'

Aghor nodded.

A cortege came. One more soul was delivered. Aghor came and cast the ashes in a pot. Someone slipped a ten rupee note into his hand. Aghor was worried. At this pace, the blue dress would turn into a mirage. The next day five corteges came on the trot, which was unusual.

'Saavdhaan...be careful' said his 'Sardaar' 'they have been killed by the disease.'

'The face-cover disease hukum?'

'Hmm.'

Tightening his mask, he carried on with his stave: poking a pyre, pushing the wood, pulling a log, dousing out embers.

Soon the new disease rose like a wave; numerous corteges appeared. Being the lone '*chandala*' made Aghor grow tired. As he sat on the side to take in some leisurely breaths a man approached him. He had thick hair that was dyed black and he had enormously rounded dark circles around his eyes. He had gold all over his body; his neck was adorned with a thick chain, round earrings, and a large ring on every finger. He also

had a thick bracelet on his wrist and trouser pockets that bulged with something forbidden. From one of those bulging heaps, the unknown man slipped a thick roll in his hand and whispered close to his ear: 'Please do mine first we are in a hurry.' Aghor bent down and clasped the fat pile. Never had he held such a fat one. It seemed many times thicker than the monthly wages that his master gave him: was it real? He brought it under the shade of his blanket and he saw the distinct magenta colour. He pushed it into the folds of his dhoti where he rolled and kept them saddled. His heart thudded as he looked at the two frail bodies lying on bamboo mats. Deftly, he pushed one sideways and pulled in the one that was queued. Mantras were swiftly recited and even before someone could see something amiss, the pyre burst into flames. As the pyre bellowed dark smoke skywards, the relatives and the dyed-black-haired man joined their hands. Soon a rising breeze fanned those flames, turning those logs into a ball of fire. The relatives hung around for some time and then walked towards their parked cars.

Much later when the night was halfway and the flames had quietened to leave alive red embers, Aghor walked to his hut. The door was ajar. Karuna was kneading the dough. She looked up and asked, 'Shall I lay the food?'

'Hmm let me clean first.' He went behind the curtain and carefully brought out the thick roll and kept it under the mat. Taking the '*gamcha*' he went to the stream. Scrubbing hard a shrivelled soap all over he was thinking about a thousand ways to keep it a secret. But one thing was clear, the blue frock would soon come.

The next morning he walked like the wind to that fancy shop made of glass and bought it. The next day he got another wad and got a blue sari. Next, he bought a little blue curtain. Then one day, tired after finishing his gruelling tasks, he came home and kept his stave outside. Karuna asked, 'Shall I boil some milk?'

"Okay.' He went to the stream and bathed and hurried back excitedly. The moon seemed to have gone under a dark cloud and he could hear a dog moaning. The door of his hut was ajar with the lamp inside casting an orange glow. As he stepped inside he could smell the fragrance of cardamom-laced milk. Kajal was fast asleep. But in the other dwelling, he saw the floor littered with scattered grains and many of those magenta-coloured notes lay strewn all over. Karuna stood there still.

She flung the glass of fragrant milk on the floor and whispered tearfully 'when I die please don't light my pyre.' As the spilt milk disappeared into the dung-coated floor, Karuna swallowed her tears and stuffed those magenta notes into the oven where dying flames came alive to devour them.

Outside, dying embers from dead fires hurried to ring in the darkness.

*As wisps of smoke rose to find their solace they watched Aghor weeping aloud, with his arms outstretched, pointing his stave to the sky.*

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## 5. CHALK AND MOUSE

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It was a hot summer afternoon in May. After the one-day curfew, a complete twenty-one-day lockdown had kicked in. Twenty-one days of idyllic pastimes soon ended but for Lakshmi and Rosy it gave rise to a monumental issue.

Lakshmi was chatting with her daughter and watching the news on the television. Everywhere the world was changing. She was worried about her job as a teacher. She loved her twenty-five-year-old career as a teacher and had become accustomed to the daily routine of waking up in the morning, getting ready, packing tiffin for herself, her husband and her daughter and then spending the whole day at school with her students. But today her world had changed. The schools had declared an 'indefinite' shut-down. An uncertain future was opening wide. She dialled the number of her colleague Rosy, who was also her closest buddy.

'Hi Rosy! What's up?' she asked. 'I'm fed up', replied Rosy. The usually jovial Rosy sounded unsure and distant to her. Lakshmi felt a pain in her voice. Rosy was an extremely positive person and Lakshmi was her 'go-to' friend whenever she felt doubtful or in low spirits. 'What happened Rosy?' 'Nothing, I'm now fed up of life. You know schools and all colleges are closed and God alone knows when they will open.'

'What are you saying? Who gave you this information? What about the students? Is the school closing down?' Lakshmi showered her with questions. 'No, no, due to the pandemic it

is risky to conduct teaching in classrooms or on school campuses, so the government has decided to keep schools closed indefinitely.' Rosy asked in a low voice, 'What are we going to do then? Are the children going to lose this year?' Lakshmi had no answer.

That night while having dinner, her husband and daughter enquired about her worrisome look. They placed their arms around her and soothed her by saying, 'Don't worry, some solution will come up.' Usually, after dinner, they used to play a game of cards. They tried goading her to play one round but she could not concentrate and soon excused herself. She quietly went in to lie on her bed. Shutting off the lights, she lay in the darkness, wide awake staring at the invisible ceiling. Her mind felt heavy with many thoughts crossing her mind that had no answer.

For the past two decades, Lakshmi and Rosy were working as teachers in a prestigious school. Indeed, besides being a way to make a living their job was something that both were passionate about. Everything was going fine and now suddenly they were facing a grim situation. A day back some of their colleagues had been asked to put in their papers with just a bare notice of a day. She thought, will it be their turn now?

Lakshmi turned and tried to sleep. Towards morning as her tired eyes finally found themselves ready to sleep, she was jolted by the ringing of her phone. It was her principal, Mrs Lobo calling. She couldn't gather the courage to take the call. So this was it? The end of a two and a half decades career? She called back 'Sorry Ma'am, I was in the kitchen and missed taking your call. Hope everything is fine.' Mrs Lobo replied in

hurry, 'I want Rosy and you at the school in an hour as important matters are to be discussed'. The urgency in her voice indicated a world of uncertainty. Lakshmi felt cold and now knew why Rosy was upset last night. Lakshmi informed her daughter and requested her husband to drop her to school. She was going to school after two and a half months and she felt a swirl of excitement and eagerness yet questions were lingering. The normally talkative Lakshmi remained quiet which her husband could not help but notice. He wrapped an arm around her and said, 'Don't worry so much.' She just smiled and got off at the huge gate where she had been going in and out for so many years.

She stared at the building which stood silent, bereft of giggling school kids, chattering maids, the clanking of the school bell, the long queue of scooters neatly parked near its boundary wall and the sound of children walking on the pavements. The world had changed and so had the school, turning quiet and unsure of its new role. These everyday glimpses of a normal day for years were now in one stroke relegated to memories. She held back her tears lest someone saw them. Just then Rosy entered, lightening her mind and making her smile. They were seeing each other after a gap of more than two months. Greeting each other with great delight they soon walked together to Mrs Lobo's office.

'Come in both of you,' Mrs Lobo said smilingly and putting on her glasses gestured them to sit.

'You both have been selected for a training program for online teaching', she said.

Both looked at each other and then at Mrs Lobo. Both of them had questions bobbing up in their minds: 'Computers!' Except for preparing brief PowerPoints' that stretched for hours they were not used to nor knew anything about the nitty gritty of a computer's working. Mrs Lobo continued, 'Don't worry dears, just relax, you both are smart, hardworking and intelligent enough that has held you in good stead for such a long time. This is just another crisis that you all should face head-on.' The two teachers nodded their heads blankly not exactly knowing what was in store but somewhere they felt a sense of relief to know that their job was still theirs.

The next day was a new morning for both. Even though it was a cloudy day, the air around them brimmed with unusual warmth. Lakshmi was excited. For a long time, she had been hearing all her tech-savvy engineer friends speaking about emails, excels, and zoom meetings which to her back then were all Latin and Greek! But today, she was excited to know that she was stepping into that same world of technology. Soon both were holding their PC and setting them up in their homes. They felt a sense of relief. For them, the laptop was that buoy to help them stay afloat in the choppy world of a pandemic. 'Learning a skill in itself is a good thing', they thought. The next morning they felt like little children out to face their first examination in school.

The training program was going to begin at 10 a.m. sharp. As time ticked away, Lakshmi soon received a link on her school's WhatsApp group. A sense of trepidation seemed to weigh down her confidence. She dialled the number of her best friend and the same doubtfulness was on Rosy's side too. Both of them were hesitant to call Mrs Lobo and they were afraid



of their reluctance. Lakshmi turned to her daughter for help. She patiently heard her and taught both of them the basics of using a PC and how to use such links. In a couple of days, many concepts became clear and the keyboard became their new playground. Gripping their mouse and clicking on it soon opened a new bridge of hope. The lighted screen opened up a new world; just like a movie screen that came alive in a darkened hall . Like those childhood days when they cupped their palms around their eyes to peer into the travelling hawkker's bioscope, a ragtag revolving funnel which had pictures of many wonders of the world. As they regained their composure, the sun too shone bright indicating that there indeed was light at the end of the invisible tunnel.

The training went on for a week and by now both were confident enough in conducting online classes. This regular practice not only heightened their skill but also allowed them to be in touch, gossip a bit and regain their old ways of being aligned. It started first with each of them sending links and the joy of watching each other on screen and discussing their work and families.

Mrs Lobo informed them that their virtual classes would start the next day. Rosy and Lakshmi were excited that they would be soon meeting their beloved students. 'Which sari are you going to wear tomorrow?' asked Lakshmi. 'Sari? Why? Who is going to even notice on the screen, just a dress would do', replied Rosy. For many years all the teachers had been maintaining a self-imposed protocol of draping a new sari on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the reopening of their school, so Lakshmi was disappointed.

The day soon dawned and there were butterflies in Lakshmi's stomach. Sipping her tea, she was not sure if she should call her bestie. She had never felt like this even on the first day of her job; 'Why does my head spin?' she thought aloud. Mrs Lobo's message popped up on her phone wishing her good luck. It gave her some courage. As the class was scheduled to begin in another twenty minutes, she quickly draped a cotton sari that she had bought online during the lockdown. For both, whether a festival or a new academic session, the draping of a new sari symbolized the start of a fresh season, like the freshness of spring. She messaged a good luck note to her friend, then, silently reciting a little prayer to the Goddess of knowledge, she switched on her laptop. In a few seconds, the screen lit up.

As she logged in, the 'join' button glowed and as she clicked on it she could see the smiling faces of about 25 students. All of them wished her 'Good Morning Ma'am.' As her quivering fingers permitted the camera to open up, she marvelled at her new classroom. The students were smiling and looking expectantly at her. She smiled, letting the waves of fear slide down and vanish. Waving lightly to all she began her first virtual class. She took the first roll call and then began the first chapter on English literature. She read out passages from Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' regaling them by literally acting out Shylock's cocky answers. The clock soon showed that forty minutes had passed by. The children maintained full decorum and appreciated their likeness. Later, many parents messaged her their appreciation for giving the students a patient hearing.

What more could Lakshmi ask for? She quickly readied for the next class. The door opened and her husband peeped in and whispered, 'Hi, how did the class go?'

She muted her mic and replied 'Great! Will serve lunch in an hour.'

Turning back towards her screen, she opened her Geography textbook. Flipping its pages, she mentally refreshed herself with a few important points. She searched her box for a pen and she found a piece of chalk. She held it in her fingers and recalled the thrill of those powdery flakes leaving their imprint on the blackboard that helped her impart education to a generation of children. She kept the piece of chalk back in the purse, and looking at it she lovingly said 'don't worry, one day you shall come back.' Turning back to the screen she confidently clicked on the 'join' notification.

*This time she was already smiling to herself.*

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## 6. KARTIK BAR

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Rakamma Chudappa never knew when he was born. The few things that he recalled were those youthful days from a long time ago when he could chase a bull and tame a snooty one, or behead a goat who refused to be slaughtered or keep those chickens pinned who kept flailing when decapitated. But as time flew by his life too went past and today at seventy-plus years he knew these acts were now just specks of dust in life passing faster than those ripples in the Cauvery. With rental income flowing in he hardly found the need to work for a living. Tending to his vast gardens or playing with his grandson was all that he looked forward to and of course, his sundowners.

Alcohol was taboo inside his home. His wife of fifty years, Bhagyalakshmi - or 'Bhagya' as he lovingly called her, had been unable to rid him of this habit though she was able to ensure that the rule was scrupulously followed; This was Bhagya's law which he had non-grudgingly accepted. He was disciplined and stuck to only two measurements or, an unexpected third when he was in the company of friends like the vegetable merchant or the condiment dealer and then, the usual half-hour ritual would end up as a two-hour bonhomie.

After flirting with many genres of booze, he had in the past few years settled down for brandy. It became his favourite which he downed every evening at the 'Karthik Bar': a neighbourhood bar put up in an unlit lane. Bulk of its customers were the daily tipplers: those men who consume at least one quart a day. The rest were the daily workers, masons,

painters, hawkers and the autowallahs; then came the bi-weekly tipplers who usually dropped in on a Wednesday or Friday or rather, any day that gave them room to skip those holy days dedicated to several Gods and Deities. Then came the parcel carriers who preferred to carry them into the comfort of their homes or have it inside their huge SUVs with their tinted glasses rolled up, music blaring. Lastly, came the rabid ones who made their roll call twice: noon and night. These were the ones distinctly recognizable in their shabby garbs and wrecked demeanour, unkempt, eyes bloodshot. These were the accursed creatures under the spell of a dangerous curse, who looked upon this ghastly liquid as their meal of the day. Over a period of time litres of this potent liquid had turned them into living derelicts.

Kartik Bar's dispensing counter was fortified with iron bars that resembled a prison. Behind it on a tall stool sat a stern-faced 'jailor' or rather, the man-in-charge. The wall behind him had steel racks stacked up neatly with brands that catered to separate categories of customers: one shelf had those premium brands like 'Black&White', 'Black Dog', and Blender's Pride serving that rare, white-collared worker, who would unexpectedly pop up. The rest of the shelves were focused on serving the interests of the masses; starting from the lowly 'Original Choice', or an 'Officers Choice' and their ilk. In a corner, a little away from this 'single-window' counter, stood a table on which lay a huge steel plate that had tempered with time. It was heaped with puffed rice and their whiteness sparingly dotted brown by a few stray peanuts. Beside it stood a bowl of lime pickle; these were the free accompaniments that were gorged upon by the tipplers. The ritual followed was the same for all: a sharp bite on the 90 ml cartons that helped

tear open an aperture, from where the entire potion and some water from a nearby jug were poured into a plastic glass filling it to its brim. Then, chug the whole concoction in one long swig, grab a fistful of the puffed rice or take in some pickle by dipping an index finger, suck on it gleefully and then walk away, satiated.

Chudappa belonged to the first category. But coming from a wealthy stock he was not those 'standing-joint' types. For him having idli or a dosa at a standing-joint was a normal activity but not this. This very act had to be carried out with elements of luxury and relaxation generously thrown in. Like the other elite customers, he too had a place of seating earmarked exclusively for him. Every day, precisely at 7.30 in the evening, a corner table inside with a matching chair was kept as 'reserved'. As soon as he entered, Rajkumar, the waiter would come with his duster and wipe the table. Then, one-quarter of brandy, a glass and a bottle of bubbly soda would be laid out. Minutes later came a plate full of freshly made fritters. Soon, the boy was making a drink for his biggest tipper of the day: the first had to be a large one- a full 90 ml. Sipping a large swig from it he held out a fifty-buck note. As if on cue Rajkumar knew what to do: hop outside to the pan shop and get three gold flakes for his evening's overlord.

By then the warm liquid had coursed inside his being, making Chudappa sense that familiar feeling enveloping him, and now as Rajkumar helped him light up one of those three fags a sense of energy swelled inside him. As the alcohol coursed down faithfully to perform its tricks, Chudappa would attend to his business; like admonishing an errant tenant for slipping up in paying rent, then call up his friends in the sugarcane

town of Mandya and enquire on prices, market and the weather. By 9 the quarter bottle was emptied. Satiated, he tipped Rajkumar and started his scooter while acknowledging his orderly salute him repeatedly. He would reach home in minutes and enjoy his dinner made up of mutton rice and curd. So, life went on for this mid-sized landlord, with rental income flowing in, tending to his gardens, dropping off his grandson at the school bus, keeping a tab on his real-estate investments and sipping sundowners at 'The Karthik Bar.'

On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, this idyllic life got turned upside down.

On that day, the entire city of Bengaluru ground to a halt. He had watched it on the tv news but its implications had not sunk in. It was only the next morning when his grandson playfully jumped up on his bed and announced excitedly 'Taata -school raja.' That was how the meaning was revealed to him. The entire city was shut; the shops, the schools, and his beloved 'Kartik Bar were buried under the desolateness of a 'lockdown'. That evening he met at Reddy's place who had a couple of bottles stocked in his home and soon Chudappa found himself with Reddy and his friends on their terrace. A day later even Reddy ran out of stock.

On the fourth evening, Chudappa turned desperate. He became disinterested in other daily events: his grandson came proudly to show a colour sketch of the Mysore palace with the Chamundi hill on the horizon. But Chudappa failed in appreciating the little child's efforts. Instead, he lay listless on the bed. The mutton stew made by Bhagya failed to enliven him. His mind was swirling around that warm feeling which used to descend in his belly after swallowing brandy. That night he had his meal in silence and went off to sleep. Hours

later he awoke to see darkness all around. Thinking it to be dawn he stared at the clock on his bedside which showed it was still a couple of hours away. Ugly thoughts pestered his mind. What was happening? He usually fell asleep at 11.00 and dutifully woke at 6.30 am, that was his body clock. Not finding an answer he again dozed off until Bhagya woke him.

‘What happened Ri,’ asked Bhagya, holding out his favourite filter coffee in a steel tumbler "are you not feeling well?’

‘Just thinking about our Mysore site. This lockdown has thrown water on my plans’. As both sipped their coffee Bhagya looked at him and the creases on his forehead. She knew that something was troubling her husband.

‘Ri don’t worry, it will happen later Alva?’

He sipped quietly and did not reply. The day passed off. By late evening, he was again engulfed. To his shock, he was able to even recollect that steel-like smell of ‘mansion house’ brandy in his mind. So that evening he rode out on his scooter. Keeping the accelerator low and slowly riding alongside grey muddy walls and watching few people moving around wearing masks he reached unnoticed at Kartik bar. From the gauze of the clamped rolled shutters, he stared with pity. Where hundreds spent their evenings under dimly lit porticos, it was now totally dark. Kartik bar now resembled an abandoned fort and a constable standing outside with his mask on resembled a ‘trojan’. A little ahead the tarred portion of the road ended to merge into a service road covered with broken gravel and clumps of bushes that made the area resemble a mini forest. Beside one of those bushes stood a handcart like a discarded relic. Just a week back when the



world was normal, and evenings were wrapped in mirth and merriment, brisk sales used to take place from this handcart. With a gas stove gurgling continuously under a blue flame a mammoth kerosene lamp usually lighted up the spot with its incandescence, from where Ravi, the handcart owner churned out piles of fried fritters and chicken lollypops. The spot always remained feverishly active for two reasons: one was with people waiting to buy a clump of their favourite 'Gobi-Manchurian' and on the other side speed orders continuously kept flowing from Kartik bar. But today was another day. Today it was a dark, unlit area with a hand cart that stood uselessly abandoned against bushes stinking of piss. As he stood over there recollecting those times, a few urchins walked across from those bushes. One of them saluted whom he recognized as 'Rajkumar', he was the waiter and his 'go-for' at the Kartik's.

'Saar', he asked sheepishly-' do you want some stuff', showing a few miniatures concealed in his pockets. Chudappa rejoiced, feeling an instant musical chant flowing within him. He gladly pulled out a 500 bucks note and grabbed two of them. Shoving them inside his pocket and without a backward glance, he walked and disappeared behind the bushes. Making sure he was alone he took one of the miniatures. Tearing its cork he placed it between his lips and swallowed. The second one too met the same fate and both of them in minutes lay discarded. Its potent liquid was now cascading down his gullet, bounding through his oesophagus and settling inside his abdomen. Soon, Chudappa felt its fumes whipping up their deathly magic. For a few seconds, he felt a sense of spinning inside his head which forced him to hold on to the

cart for support. Seconds later he kick-started his bike and nosed it towards his house. Back home all seemed hunky-dory: His grandson's peals of laughter, those cacophonous soaps playing on television with the whole family deeply immersed in watching.

After his meal, he soon hit bed happy with the thought that his cosy encounter that evening had gone off well. But the next evening Raj Kumar was not to be seen. The narrow alley was deserted. With not a soul around and the 'trojan' cop absent, Chudappa could feel the heat. His throat was turning dry and he kept rolling his tongue desperately trying to moisten it. Grudgingly he went back. The news on television narrated the woes of 'Lockdown'. But they were 'nothing' when compared to the alcoholic pangs he thought. He commanded Bhagya to layout out his dinner.

'But it is only 7.30..!'

'So what, you have an issue with that?'

She kept quiet and dare not question him. She knew what was troubling him. She placed a plate made of silver and served his favourite rice and curry that had chunky pieces of liver fries and lots of sliced onions on the side. The taste calmed his restlessness and that night he slept soundly. As the morning sun lit up his courtyard, he awoke with a smile. He looked out and felt happy. Though he could not find an answer he tried to find its origin: was it the delicious dinner that Bhagya served him? Or was it because he had hit the sack early?

That afternoon, he brought out his red book where he wrote down his income from rent inflow, expenses, and loans. His

son walked in. He wanted money to pay for the masonry work completed on an old ancestral land. Drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the table he told him, 'Let us pay after this lockdown. People after being paid come up with a hundred excuses.' Not that he did not have cash; several lacs were lying in Bhagya's account and some lay still inside the almirah.

As dusk set in, his head again swirled. The start gained since the morning sunshine leading him onto a clear mind and the urge to go about his routine with an eagerness to partake of a delicious meal, was suddenly pushed to the foreground. They were quickly replaced with something else: his mind was now agog with thoughts of 'meeting' the lad at the far end corner of 'Kartik Bar'. Precisely at 7.30, when the twilight orange was in the cusp of darkness Chudappa on his Activa scooter reached the clump of bushes. His eyes brightened on seeing Rajkumar who apologetically approached and said, 'Saar, I don't have 'Mansion House' but I have 'Mcdowell.' It did not matter to him. He paid him off and hurriedly sneaked away behind the darkness inside the bushes where he could have all the privacy. To his dismay, it wasn't brandy but whiskey, which he abhorred. It took him seconds to cast off such aspersions. Soon, the landlord of several tenements and acres of land, stood alone beside a dense bush littered with emptied tetra-caps and gulped down two drinks neatly down his hatch. As his body quaked from the fumes he had just swallowed, he quietly slinked off home. That night he was unusually praiseful of Bhagya.

The next day he just rolled into bed and in the end, at sunset, clambered away to the same spot. He saw no one, except for a few hungry mongrels. That night while grumpily eating his

meal he cursed everyone in the house. In the morning he made up his mind to call up all his sources. His friends Reddy, Mohan and Ramesh, his brother-in-law. He even called up the Registrar's office but no one had any stock.

'Chudappa avre, whatever little supplies remained in pipelines has also dried up", Ramesh explained. In desperation, Chudappa called up Anna Reddy, the owner of 'Kartik Bar.'

'Anna!'

'Yes, sir how are you?'"

'Fine, I want a few bottles. I need to give them to some revenue officials for getting the 'khaata'.

'I am sorry, but the excise guys padlocked the shop and the key has been deposited with them. Forget me even Lord Govinda cannot open it.'

Chudappa's dejection knew no bounds. He sat on his bed and thought hard. He knew he needed a drink so he decided to duplicate it. He called out to his grandson:

'Bhujji'. The little boy came running happily on hearing his grand pop's voice.

'Give me some Coca-Cola', said Chudappa. The boy gladly brought out the bottle. Everyone was amused on seeing grandfather and grandson regaling each other over a soft drink and a packet of chips. Later in the night squatting on the bed he recollected his grandfather teaching him breathing exercises and uttering lines from an old book that was thick and heavy.

*Ahankaram balam darpam kamam krodham parigraham vimucya  
nirmamah santo brahmabhuyaya kalpate*

He closed his eyes and opened his mind letting in those words and memories to rush in rapidly.

'Hold your breath as if you have just seen Shiva with his matted locks. Then, exhale, just as you watch a flock of beautiful birds flying off to the distant sky.'

'Yes Ajja'. He breathed in -held it still until he finished counting to 8-then gently exhaled.'

'Good-that's the key.'

He opened his eyes. Bhagya had gone off to sleep. A sense of peaceful longing came back. It was ten minutes to eleven. He yearned for sleep and woke up exactly at six. Even though it was a hot May morning, the sky was unusually dark. 'Might rain in the evening,' he thought. Wearing his tracks and sneakers, he walked out towards a leafy area dotted with clean parks where entry was barred due to the pandemic. Nonetheless, this did not deter him. Breathing exercises and a new world bereft of his friends, his 'go-for' Raj Kumar and 'Kartik Bar', had started rejuvenating him.

Wiping streams of sweat felt like a cleansing process. He felt great.

A month later the 'Lockdown' ended paving the way for booze shops to reopen. Tipplers heaved a sigh of relief. Kartik Bar received a bumper opening: queues outside had turned serpentine and the cops had a tough time controlling them. Even though all looked forward to normalcy it had left many changes in its wake. Even though many of his tenants had not

paid and many showed no signs of returning, personally he was celebrating a bigger triumph.

That evening Reddy called, 'Anna, let's all meet today at 'Karthik's. Time to catch up now!'

Just as a faulty network butted in to end his conversation, Bhagya called from the kitchen: "Ri, are you going out today?"

Facing the wall, where a withered photo frame of his grandfather hung for decades, Chudappa stared hard at it and said:

'No, I'm not. Can you prepare some liver fries with ghee rice?'

As twilight twinkled and the clanging of bells from the nearby temple beckoned the pious, Chudappa wore a fresh 'veshti' and sat cross-legged in front of the dark-stone idol of Tirupati Balaji.

*He lit up an incense stick, shut his eyes and smiled.*

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## 7. THE GLUTTON

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His Sunday was ruined by the 'Janta Curfew'. Now, Monday was at hand but the evening din was yet to start. Ajay stepped inside the highly feted restaurant to savour its 'Aglia olio'. He was politely welcomed by a young hostess leading him into the parquet floored restaurant. He searched for a seat from where he could get a panoramic view of the bustling MG Road below. Finding one, he sat back and stared at the iconic road with traffic dancing down seamlessly inside the huge rectangle formed at StMarks Road, touching Thimmaiah Road, curving towards Brigade Road and flowing ahead to join the Residency Road.

Next, he gazed at the big fat menu of continental cuisine. For starters, he ordered a large portion of garlic bread with cheese and a tall glass of chocolate smoothie. From the main course, he ordered 'Aglia olio', a delightful spaghetti pasta. Before it could appear, he had wolfed down the cheese garlic bread. The chocolate smoothie was the next to cascade down his gullet through the straw, on which he was sucking noisily to bring in those last remaining fragments of the gooey paste. Soon, the 'Aglia olio arrived in all its steaming glory in a deep round bowl. The garlic bread and cheese had partially satiated his hunger, so for now he could pause. And there was a reason, for the Aglia olio had to be dealt with lovingly. First, he leaned forward and made his nostrils hover above the bowl to take in the fragrance of the olive oil, garlic and chilli flakes marinating the diced chicken, olives and mushrooms. Then, an ecstatic smile spread across his face, making him softly

exclaim: “perfect!” Satisfied, he felt something more needed to be ordered. Again, he reached out for the menu. Turning over a page and pointing at the word ‘prawn-biryani’ he called out: ‘Excuse me, please pack this one.’ Later, reaching his flat, he saw his daily tiffin box dangling from the door knob. Picking it up he could feel the fresh fragrance of ‘pappu’: a classic Andhra- style concoction of thick gravy set in leafy greens and lentils. That would be for later-he thought. Changing into his tees and coloured shorts, he lovingly placed the sumptuous ‘prawn biryani’ on the table and stared at the mound of long fine rice. With fat juicy prawns lazily spread across a carpet made up of long-grained rice wet with sauce and the vinegar lending taste and a gleam, made him float away into a realm of happiness. But first, he knew that he had to deal with a long chain of emails and WhatsApp messages from his mother, friends and clients.

As he checked them out on his phone, he made sure to ravish the plateful of biryani. That wasn’t enough because later that night while watching television, he finished the Andhra styled ‘pappu’ in the ‘tiffin box. Before calling it a day, he browsed for breakfast options for the next day and seconds later a name along with a page popped up on his screen: ‘Hole-in-the-Wall’ where he started cursorily browsing its menu, had words like, a meaty omelette, frittata, sautéed mushrooms and seconds later, he could sense pools of saliva gathering in his mouth. He shut his phone, shut the lights and went off to sleep.

Next day he called his tiffin supplier and told him not to deliver his breakfast. His mind was already sewing up plans to



visit 'Hole-in-the-Wall', a newly opened breakfast joint. A cosy place famed for its gigantic breakfast spreads.

He tapped on 'reservations' and within an hour he was inside that joint. He took his place at a corner and looked around. Those tall walls painted yellow, rising up towards a high ceiling, with framed posters of waterfronts and causeways gave it a European look while cane chairs topped with fluffy cushions completed the comfy look. Happy with his surroundings and sitting back on a high backed emperor styled chair, he started reading with boundless joy their infinite menu glittered with fancy titles: 'The Farmer's-Breakfast', 'The Big Frenchie', 'The Great White' 'Two birds with one Stone', 'Just beat it', 'The Dirty dog', 'The Full Monty', 'The Italian Job', 'Live & let Liver', 'Bob's Hash Brown' and many more that exhausted Ajay. Without delving further he ordered two from them: 'The Great White' and 'The Dirty Dog'.

Their exhaustive description sounded as mighty as their names. While one was a four-egg omelette stuffed with spinach and served with a grilled tomato and two slices of bread, the other was a fat hot dog roll filled with sausages, bacon, and cheese. Soon he was staring lovingly at the two dishes neatly kept on his table. 'The Great White' was a magnificent looking four-decked sandwich with each of its 'deck' indicating its filling from their colours; red for neatly laid tomato slice; dark green for spinach; white for cucumber and in between them were thick chunky layers of omelette. 'The Dirty Dog', was a brown hotdog loaded with three sausages, bacon, bits of cheese and diced olives. The tall standing sandwich and the fat hot dog ingested a mission-like

spirit which he proceeded to complete with aplomb. He examined the multi-decked sandwich and felt that it required a finishing touch. He picked up a bottle swollen with ketchup and squeezing it, sprayed the multi-decker with jets of red, and then his fingers dived towards it. After conquering the multi-decker, he felt thirsty. He looked around for some water and reached towards a broad glass filled with chilled water. But just then, as he was about to sip, his eyes fell on a jug full of watermelon juice filled to its brim, with a tantalizing cold fog around it. Small pieces, which looked like ice, were floating in it. He kept away the glass and ordered a melon juice.

Hearing a chain of multi-burps the waiter as if on cue, traced out the epicentre to his customer and gave Ajay, a wide appreciative smile. Ajay smiled back and whispered with a wink: 'Check please!'

As he came out after paying the bill, his mind was now beset with thoughts for lunch. As usual, he had a candid solution. He drove down three lanes away and there it was: 'Pirates of the Ocean'. He had read about it in 'The Bangalore Times' where it had bagged the 'best-themed restaurant'. Indeed, the doorkeeper whose costume bespoke a la 'Jack Sparrow' style and sartorial sense: same cloak, curved hat and right skin tan, but instead of bellowing 'my hearties' this man blurted 'shalam shaabji'. The usher inside guided him through the dimly lit interiors that resembled the insides of a century old sea-vessel with dark furniture, models of cannons on staircases, walls covered with wooden boards with pictures of long scimitars etched on it with thick mats and rugs thrown on the floor. Facing him was a sprawling bar counter and

some waiters, standing alert, attired in their curved hats and tail coats.

As he sat he observed that business seemed unusually dull. Such places in upmarket suburbs always did brisk business. Ajay straightaway asked for the menu and placed a takeaway: 'pack one flavoured bulbous rice in Chilean sauce and a bowl of Lebanese chicken'. As he sipped on some water, his attention was diverted towards blinking headlines shining on the television screen:

'Threat of covid-19 looms. PM Modi to address the nation today at 8.00 PM.'

He rushed home. His maid was standing outside with his tiffin boxes. He gestured for her to take them away which she did happily. Later, as he sat with his bowl of 'Lebanese chicken' he watched the prime minister on television announcing the lockdown with folded hands:

'Aap jahan hain wahi rahiye. Bahar nikalna bhool jaye, aanevale 21 din ka lockdown.'

Ajay ate his meal but strangely felt a lack of desire. He closed his eyes and tried to rummage through his mind which was clouded with various thoughts. Just then his mother called from his hometown: 'be very careful nobody knows what's going to happen. Don't step out and hope you have a mask.'

'Yes ma I will be careful and you too and papa please take care of yourselves.'

After assuring them of his well-being he checked his emails and there it was:

'In view of the Lockdown announced by the Hon Prime Minister, however grim it might seem, has been made for everyone's safety. All employees are to honour the lockdown. Until then any updates shall be duly intimated. Take good care of yourselves.' Manager-HR

Ajay read the word 'grim' again. Was it grim? He pondered about the brighter side of it, like, twenty-one days of paid leave! But the excitement was short-lived. It also meant no fine-dining and no food packets. But for now, he could devour those packets from that pirate-themed restaurant.

The next morning as the clock tolled 8 am on the wall, he began checking on the 'Food apps.' Each one displayed a bland single-line:

'Due to Covid-19 restrictions currently, we are unavailable. We shall get back as soon as the situation returns back to normal.'

Just then, there was a familiar knock on the door followed by the doorbell ringing. The maid outside was holding aloft a gleaming tiffin case like a trophy and saying: "Anna *Khaana*."

Ajay nodded and told her to place the three-storied steel box on the kitchen platform.

Doing as she was told she saluted him by saying "Accha Anna" and left. He opened the fridge and peered. The first shelf had a can of beer and a cup of curd. The second had a glass bowl with leftovers from the pirate-themed restaurant and half a loaf of bread. The side rack had a few pellets of butter. Rubbing his palms he knew that the next 21 days would indeed be a challenge. Opening the microwave, he placed the

bowl of chicken leftovers to warm. As the device buzzed for forty seconds he pulled out a plate, upturned the bowl and opened the last can of beer. Placing himself comfortably on his couch he stretched out his limbs and switched on the tv-remote. Pictures of deserted railway stations, empty roads, shuttered shops desolate localities and a gloomy populace were the only events discussed on the news channels. The crackling buzz of a growing economy lay comatose. Like a giant Gulliver rendered immobile by a Lilliputian.

At night, he opened the tiffin boxes and stared gravely at the sambar, rasam, rice and poppadum. After warming them in the microwave he ate them quietly. The sambar had some baby-faced onions with curled skins and the rasam –a bland concoction of salt and pepper. The next day and thereafter, it was the same routine. He was getting fed up with the same mediocre fare and implored the cook to add some variety. In response, that day's meal had an addition in the form of a packet of curd! Ajay in turn, to add variety crushed the poppadum and mixed them in the curd sprinkling a pinch of chilli powder, turning it into a veritable 'raitha'.

On the twelfth day, all residents in his apartment gathered on their balconies to light candles. After the end of the candlelit evening, he decided to try his hand at cooking. He called up the maid and told her not to get his tiffin. Instead, he asked her to get some onions, tomatoes, coriander and mint leaves. The bewildered maid came in and handed him all that he asked for. He laid them on the kitchen platform and googled some basics. Then he clicked on YouTube and tried to sync what was being shown.

‘Now lay out your chopping board and slice the onions, tomatoes, two chillies and three pods of garlic and keep aside.’ He hit the pause button and thought. Since he did not have a chopping board he took out a large-sized steel plate from the kitchen shelf and started slicing each of them. While the onions made him teary-eyed, from the haze of falling tears he could see that his sliced tomatoes looked bent and crouched, looking nowhere near those neat slices standing erect on the screen. Then, he washed a cup of lentils and put them into the pressure cooker:

Un-pause video: ‘add a little turmeric and cook till one whistle goes’-pause video

Un-pause video: ‘warm a spoon of ghee or groundnut oil and lightly fry the onion, put in the pepper, tomatoes and when very hot pour the dal and stir for five minutes on sim’-pause video.

He washed two cups of rice and put them in a smaller cooker and waited. Three whistles later, instead of shutting off the burner, he put it on a sim. Five minutes later he took out a ladle and excitedly welcomed the first self-cooked meal of his life. But first, he recorded them for posterity so as to hoist them on his Instagram account. But that was not to be. The Dal refused to be cupped in the ladle—it was stuck to the bottom of the pan. Opening the other, he saw the rice had turned brown. Its unusual colour made him realize that his event marked for posterity had flopped. Never mind, he thought. In such an emergency he could still fall back on what the canteen contractor supplied. He scraped the burnt food out into the trash can but in between, he could detect some joyful fragrance that belied their current state. This motivated

him and he joyfully put those pictures of half-burnt dal and caked rice for his friends to watch, laugh and comment. In the rush of cheers, and smileys from his friends, a former colleague commented:

‘Better luck next time, Glutton!’

As the evening faded away, and news channels parroted the forbidding conditions outside, night came beckoning in the form of hunger pangs in his belly. For now, Ajay was not unduly worried. He felt like Robinson Crusoe, willing to eat the scarce and the simple, cooked or the uncooked and in such bleak times that three-tiered tiffin box with sambar-rice-rasam was faithfully dangling outside his door. The smell of the green gravy felt aromatic, the warm ‘rasam’ with its herbs therapeutic and the fried poppadum seductive.

As he dived into them, those memories of fine dining restaurants with their lip-smacking dishes and dazzling interiors, failed to impress. Instead, his mind was enveloped with images of those food stalls by the roadsides and inside crammed alleys that he used to haunt long back. As forgotten memories rushed back he could recollect the fragrance from fritters bobbing in hot oil, those hot ‘vada-pav’ that he gorged with fried green chillies and then longingly eye upon dark brown ‘*jamuns*’ swimming in shallow sugary syrups. He yearned for those idle days when he spent hours under those tile-roofed cottage-styled shelters where steaming idlis and piping coffee, rejuvenated his gloomy mind. But a new script penned by Providence and titled ‘Lockdown’ had disarrayed that cosy world.

The next day he was determined to make another attempt. But this time he wanted to make an omelette. First, he examined all that he would require: those spices inside their little containers looked fresh, but the tomatoes looked anaemic and the few onions had definitely lost their sting. He called up the maid but she did not take his call. Ajay realized this errand would have to be done by him so he picked up a bag and started walking towards the nearby supermarket. The broad roads where traffic rolled daily at a snail's pace were quiet. Those metro pillars where six coached trains cavalcaded every six minutes were silent. As he stepped on the pavement, several pigeons with the rhythmic rocking of their necks were busily pecking at scattered grains. As he watched them keenly, he felt glad that animals and birds were unaffected by the virus. While the lockdown had given them some respite from the din of daily traffic, a world of peace and solitude for all had temporarily restored.

Outside the store, was a long queue of masked people and to maintain a safe distance each one had to stand inside a circle drawn on the floor. Ajay stood inside one and waited his turn. Soon he had in his bag the vegetables, eggs, bread, cheese and other provisions that were required. Armed with them he walked with renewed vigour towards home, determined to churn out a decent dish for himself.

He called the maid and someone who sounded like a child answered: '*Saheb mummy ko bukhar hain*'.

'*theek hain beta.*' Ajay grew concerned and realized she would not be around for a few days. He also remembered that he had not paid her salary. Tapping on his 'Paytm' he promptly transferred the amount to her number.



Back home, he brought out the bread, eggs and butter. Then he washed the tomatoes and carrots and nicely sliced them, peeled the onions and cut the chillies. Then he played the video on YouTube and memorized it well to replicate the entire event like a play. He broke two eggs and battered the yolk and glair furiously. Seconds later, it swelled up as rich foamy bubbles. Rolling out the batter lovingly onto the heated pan he placed a thin layer of cheese and embossed it with pieces of carrots, tomatoes, onions and chillies. Then he added little butter, for according to the video, butter 'gave it an added richness. Like a well-reached milestone, he looked at the thick bulbous-shaped prize. Placing it on a white porcelain plate, he put some sauce and three slices of lightly toasted bread on its side. Recollecting a picture from one of those restaurants of yore he placed a thin stem of coriander above it. Then he placed a fork on its left and a table knife on its right. Finally, he clicked a picture on his iPhone.

While he sprinkled some salt and relished his brunch, the technicoloured post of the colourful omelette on Instagram captioned 'From Glutton with Love' was being peppered with smileys.

Two weeks later 'Food Apps' resumed deliveries. Ajay was tempted to order the 'Aglia olio' from that same fancy restaurant, but those pricey costs pegged at 999/-, now looked prohibitive and a waste. He shunned the thought and instead decided to order its ingredients and he knew where to order them from. The name was 'Bounty's Basket', a store famed for its gourmet groceries, organic fruits and veggies. He punched in an online order for a packet of spaghetti, a bottle of olive oil, red pepper flakes, a jar of parsley and a cup of Parmigiano

cheese. This would be his next big milestone. But first, he had to pay somebody a visit.

The maid was inside her rented tenement made of tin sheets and tiles. Her husband greeted him with folded hands and a smile and said that she was recovering. As Ajay looked around, the warmth from the tin-walled shelter radiated a pleasant feeling that belied the tension swirling beyond them. Sipping from a cup of tea offered by her husband, Ajay told him not to push her into resuming work, 'Let the lockdown end' then we will see.' Seeing a worried look on the maid's face he assured her that she need not worry on that count.

He returned back home and waited with bated breath for the delivery man to reach his place. Until then, he set up his iPhone to play out the video of his favourite spaghetti dish.

*Indeed, the 'glutton' was now turning into a discerning gourmet.*

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## About the Author

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Bobby Ghatak lives in Bangalore with his family.

A self-confessed cinephile, he usually writes about 'Bollywood' and the enticing world of cinema.

His book 'Teen Sey Chhey-Rewinding Bollywood' was written and released during the Lockdown.

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