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**Editor's Note**

Dear Readers and Contributors,

Being an editor for an academic journal has its share of learning experiences. But editing the creative section either in the regular issues or the special issues provides succour to the mind. Being a literature lover, I believe that criticism should be balanced with creativity. IJELLS has always been supporting of creative endeavours, which are on the downward slope because many dedicated platforms aren't readily available. IJELLS took a vow to be one!

I have chosen some choicest phrases from each one of our stories to be a torchbearer for what is to be expected from them.

Happy Reading and Sharing!

Dr. Mrudula Lakkaraju
Chief & Founding Editor



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Editor's choice of phrases

The myriad shards of 'me' lay scattered around the 'I' –

Christina Dhanasekaran (Stench)

My father out of his hangover is a gem.

Dhanappa M Metri (Life Changing SMS)

A tiny drop of moist smiled at the corner of Rishi's eye.

Geetha. M (Theetu)

She was trapped and engulfed by destiny.

Jabeen R. Siddiqui (I Never Thought So)

There was a "happy rage", everyone started describing the answers in their own style.

A. Kishore Kumar Reddy (The English Lecturer)

I was given lectures and moral support about rejection and acceptance at the same time.

Mouli Chowdhury (My First Meeting)

He settled into his, creaking, slow, sure, swishing pace, wheezing asthmatically, his wise eyes set deep in the humorous crows' feet looking into the distance.

Murali Raman (The Khaki Sombrero)

The word pierces her heart. But she remains silent.

Nilima Meher (Eraser)

He had a decent academic history, a couple of internships, some extra-curricular activities to sell to his potential employers.

A Sandhya Reddy (Choose to be 'You')

Running with the chaos of the world, I learnt the best lessons of life.

Trisha Dewangan (How Blue is My Sapphire!)

The sky glowed just as bloody red as anywhere on the planet, the streets were just as loudly chaotic, and the billboards just as obnoxious with their flagrant procession of silicon and skin.

Tushnim Gangopadhyay (Oasis)



Stench

Christina Dhanasekaran

Armed with a fusillade of disapprovals he shot a glance at another morning-face. I swallowed his ocular darts along with my coffee, both equally flavoured: hot and slightly bitter. I did not count the briny water drops that stained my cheeks. I let it fall into the kitchen sink and saw it float with the leftovers of last night's dinner in a half-rinsed pan. I looked up to see the ray of sun break into a hundred splinters of dust and light just outside the window pane. A few hand spans from it hung a mirror that wore 'clean and shine liquid magic' for makeup. I took a few steps to stare at my veneer shrunk and sans all magic. I preferred to look at the view that crept by my window.

On the eleventh floor there was height, less love, but a view so enthralling that it caught my attention a tad longer. A thick smell of shower gel; a strong aroma of shampoo and aftershave lotion amalgamated into a virile aura to crown his male identity this morning. A quick mumble, he superimposed silence upon silence and began to foist his supplications on the stone image he called god. Some unintelligible chants, with a hurried throw of flowers he turned to face the door behind with a halo of self-righteousness. I ignored the god in the background to welcome Him with reverence. Luck had favoured me in locating his socks and I fetched his laptop bag with a certain domestic piety. With relaxed brows, I tied his lace with ease, after all a few things that adorned my house-proud tiara. He stood up with a massive satisfaction on his face that obliterated the glorious view outside. I sighed quietly letting my perceptions fly out of the half open window. He left me with a kiss on the cheek. It felt like wet, cold marble. I waved him a nervous goodbye.

I spun around to behold an empty room and my palms scrubbed my cheeks to purge away his smack of affection. A small post-it note glared at me from the refrigerator door. My eyes could not wink it away. The note snarled a 'to-do list' at me. I deciphered my not so legible curves of responsibility. I promised myself to finish it all by afternoon then maybe I will have time to complete a bizarre writing activity I had begun a week ago. The stench of words...***stop dreaming and get to work***, snapped my Reality Angel. So the wall clock and I got to work. Strangely, it was always ahead of me. After many ticks and a few tocks, a lazy afternoon breeze greeted an exasperated housewife. What is a housewife? Does 'homemaker' sound better? Any other euphemism that I am ignorant of? Ah! The stench of words: decayed thoughts left to rot in the mind, no?

I brushed back a lock of hair with callous indifference to my musings. The myriad shards of 'me' lay scattered around the 'I'. An annoying buzz reverberated in my head. I absent-mindedly looked at the telephone, and then realized it might be the doorbell. Might? It is! It should be. I tiptoed towards it, imagining myself in a surreal universe. Am I a figment of the Greater Power's imagination?



And on the other side of my reality, was a snarky face creased with ire. A tired and irritated voice announced itself. Someone wanted to register my presence? Oh yes! The government! Right! How wonderful?

“Would you like to come in?”

You have the option of leaving anytime, unlike me. A choice I am too afraid to make.

“No, madam. Just answer the questions, please. How many persons are staying in this house?”

“Two.”

And a million unaccounted voices in my head, but they don't count, do they?

“What is the name of your...ah...husband?”

“One minute...”

I scurry into our bedroom to locate the ration card.

“Here you go. The necessary details.”

“What is he?”

A husband guilty of dereliction.

“A Software Engineer.”

“And you?”

A wife guilty of supererogation.

“Housewife. No, no, homemaker. Actually any label that is in fashion now. Oh, and we are law abiding citizens. Just saying.”

“Oh!”

“We're not happy citizens though.”

“Huh. What, madam?”

“NOT HAPPY!”

“Oh happy...that's not important. Thank you, madam.”

“Not important?”

Shock Waves

I had yelled into a vacant corridor. Shamefaced I return to the happy company of my empty room. The smell of putrefaction. One word smelt more repulsive than the rest of the scent left behind by the weird Government lady- Happy! Was this not the same word that had launched my bizarre writing exercise a week ago? It was from a soap commercial. Are you happy? The husband-actor was asking. A cesspool of words topped with clichés. I would have chosen the truth only I was not clear how I should be saying it truthfully. Anyways, I had spotted a clean sheet of paper and gotten to work. What happened next was an extreme bout of mental bulimia. **Stench**

Words: soak them, use sweet smelling conditioners, wring it, throw open the window and allow the sun to dry it. Clip and secure its place in this world.

It implores a strange sort of imprisonment in my mind. Unwilling to be released, into a world tainted by the villainy of meanings, it hesitantly hung from the



dark ceiling of the kiln, of un-burnt words. *The Stench of Deceased Time Not Pickled In Memory.*

My page is unprinted, my pen languid and my mind uninterested.

Tick tock, tick tock, quick! The stage is ready...the theatre of night unfolds...I await His return. I pause and poise in the wings (A stench of oblivion pierces the pride of my golden nose ring). I breathe slowly and then heavily, wishing never to sniff in the growing stench.



Life Changing SMS

Dhanappa M Metri

Air India flight landed safely at Sahara. Two young smart members of the crew in their traditional nine yard silk saris and short hair styles came down at the end, displaying their hundred per cent hospitality.

“Uja” Said the short one, “Five days rest, any plans?”

“I am my mother’s baby for the complete period with a special plan” mumbled Uja.

“Is she at Mumbai?”

“No. She is at a remote village of Maharashtra”

“You mean in rural India?”

“Yes, and I am desperate to see my family”, said Uja.

“Who are all there?”

Uja asked Tara, “Why are you trying to open the pages of my closed book?”

“Uja from our very first meeting I wanted to know, who inspired you to fly.”

“It was an SMS” answered Uja.

“Come on Uja open your heart, tell me your story,” Requested Tara.

“Well”, narrated Uja, “I am from a family which never believed in the concept of a small family. Education is an unknown thing and the girls by their twelfth birthday are mothers. To survive, people migrate seasonally like birds and most of the responsible members of the family are alcoholic. Women, financially not independent accept them as they are. I have witnessed my mother’s sleepless nights and it is still fresh in my mind, my drunkard father tossing fifty rupee notes, from his advance payment for sugar cane cutting labor, while I was on my way to my board examination. I was collecting the notes instead of preparing for the examinations. My father out of his hangover is a gem. I always dreamt of higher education living in that hell.”

“Uja I am sorry your story seems painful you can stop if you don’t want to” Said Tara. “My mother always mentioned the name of her nephew,” continued Uja, “a lecturer in a Mofussil college. ‘Our Shankar, is Parmeshwar Guruji somebody who controls the whole class just by raising his finger. He lived a life of hardship and achieved the impossible.’ I many a times thought that, he should be an ascetic in his saffron clothes



but when I saw him in person, to my surprise, he was a professor in English to whom my illiterate mother called Parmeshwar Guruji.”

Tara laughed holding her belly for some time and said, “It is quite interesting, proceed please.”

“My cousin Shankar was the only oasis of my hopes,” continued Uja. “But I had never seen him in my life. After my SSC results, my mother took me to him. On our way, my mother told, that Shankar and herself were brought up in the same cradle. My mother was hardly six months older than him. Tara! You can imagine the life those days.”

“My God! What an interesting story, a nephew and the aunt equal in age, continue please.”

“Tara, you have taken me down my memory lane, you stop me whenever you feel uninteresting.”

“No, it is quite interesting continue please” said Tara.

“When I reached his place, all my dreams shattered. First of all he didn’t look like a professor at all. He was tall, weak, baby- faced with dark complexion .Any one could mistake him for a college student. His house was solidly built but the walls were unpainted and there was no furniture. It was clean and one room full of books. There was a portrait of a smiling ‘father of the nation’ in the hall. The kitchen had utensils sufficient only for his nano- family. He used an old bicycle to go to college. Though there was no scarcity of water, only a bucket of water for bath was his rule. He swept the streets by his house in the morning. He believed in cleanliness and self service. He showed no mercy to his kids, if they failed to switch off the unwanted lamps. I felt sorry for them. He went to college like students, I mean with books and magazines in a cotton hand bag made out of his discarded shirts. His wife clad in a simple cotton sari, very beautiful to look at was from a very rich family but she had to do every household work because Shankar always insisted on self service. When they had a housemaid, he gave her weekly holidays. He warned his wife not to give her stale and left out food. He asked her to consider the servant like a family member. He lectured that she was there to help them not a slave. Fed up with these conditions, his wife did everything on her own.”

“His kids?” Asked Tara.

“He has two daughters, right combination of their parents, father in brain and mother in beauty” answered Uja.

“Where do they live?”

“At Sangli in Maharashtra”.



“As a teacher?”

“Every inch! He is named IT teacher by his students which stands for an Inspiring Teacher. His address on the campus is either the classrooms or the reading room. Titles of books make his mouth water. Many outstation students write his name for their local guardian and the needy approach him without hesitation.”

“A teacher in true sense.”

“But Tara, I did not like his mindset of not forgetting his previous days of hardship. He spoke truth and told everything he did to attain his goals. He introduced me to his students who were my classmates, ‘this is my sister, she is a rustic, poor, stranger to this place, please help her’, Tara! These words hurt me.”

“I think you did not read him well,” opined Tara.

“I thought the man spoke without giving me respect. I felt insulted, I never befriended any girl. City life was like a foreign land for me. The girls in the hostel made fun of my traditional dressing and language. I complained this to Shankar but he neglected it. To modernize myself I clad in a fashionable dress but Shankar commented, ‘People are known by their performance not dress.’”

“He was absolutely right,” Commented Tara.

“But his daughters dressed fashionably. I started hating that man. On the other hand my performance in the examinations made him to dream my career in administrative field.”

“Was he not cooperative?”

“Only in studies and career”

“Was he selfish?” asked Tara

“No.”

“So you found him conservative?” asked Tara

“Very much”

“Did you avoid him?”

“Yes, the city itself and came to Pune after my graduation, to pursue my dream and it made my life style more modern”

“Does he know about your job?”



“No, he doesn’t know my whereabouts.” confessed Uja.

“What about the life changing SMS?” asked Tara eagerly.

“OK, let me finish the story. He admitted me in his college. While admitting me in the hostel, he had given me his old stove, an aluminum plate and a pan from his meager stock of utensils.”

“Then?”

“Before I left to Pune I discarded them in the dustbin. After attending seminars on career guidance in Pune, I choose this career.”

“What about the SMS and what is there in that gift packet?” asked Tara.

“Tara! You know the dress code here, and our personality development courses, they opened my eyes.”

“Forget the man and come to the point, the life changing SMS and what is there in the gift packet?”

Tears rolled down from Uja’s cheeks. Her voice grew weaker and she uttered, “Tara this gift is to my life changing SMS, only. He is nobody but my cousin, Shankar. He is Shivasharna Mahadev Sagare to whom his friends call with affection SMS. I am going to him with my mother tomorrow”.

“Why?”

“I have realized that Shankar’s way of simple living and high thinking is difficult but it is the real way”

“Happy Journey! I think he will pardon you, as it is the quality of the great.” wished Tara.

Uja walks towards the terminal towards a man whose principle she now understands and believes in. There is renewed hope for a more meaningful life than mere appearances and superficialities.



Theetu *

Geetha. M

9.00 a.m. Friday. Rishi's office.

“Take another sweet, Lakshman Sir!” offered Rishi.

“Best moment of your life, eh? Congrats, man!” remarked Lakshman Sir.

“Well, I am not supposed to tell anyone yet. But, you know, you are my well wisher, my guide and a brother to me. How can I not tell you!” replied Rishi with a grin painted on his face.

“Oh, come on! Cut it out! But, it's true! You are not supposed to tell anyone yet! They say.... what is it? Ah! 45 days to complete!” said Lakshman Sir with a wink.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! But still...” he sighed and smiled. Turning towards Lakshman Sir, Rishi said, “I have heard of people getting butterflies in their stomach! Today I know how it just feels! Very happy, Sir!”

A tiny drop of moist smiled at the corner of Rishi's eye. Lakshman Sir simply beamed back at him and squeezed his hand, words failing him.

9.30 a.m. Friday. Rishi's home.

“No, Amma!....Yes, Amma!... Hmmm... Hmmm.... OK! Amma! Please! I know!..... Sure! Ok Amma! Bye!”

Varsha ended the call on her mobile and stared at herself in the mirror. Her face looked cherubic.

“Maybe this is what people call that kazhai **!” she thought.

“Vachu!!!!” shouted a stern voice from somewhere inside the big traditional style house with too many rooms.

“Coming, Amma!” replied Varsha with a shiver in her voice. It was her mother-in-law.

Varsha found her in the puja room with her prayer beads trickling between her fingers and sloka books open in front of her.

“Oh, God! What did I forget this time?” wondered Varsha. A slight shiver ran down her. “Amma! You called?” she asked in a small voice.

“Did you clean the agar stand properly? Look how the ashes are all strewn all around the place! If you feel you cannot do these things properly, tell me! I will do them all by myself!” replied the mother-in-law gritting her teeth.

“No, Amma! I think those are from today morning....”

“What! Do you think I don't have sense to differentiate? I bet those are yesterday's. It's my karma that my son has to be married to someone who doesn't even know how to



clean an agar stand! Girls today! Rama!!! Just because they have a degree to boast of they think they own the world! Don't listen to elders, no respect for our words....”

Eyes glistening, Varsha started cleaning the puja place.

This was not something new. Amma always was stern and point blank when it came to screwing work out of Varsha. She called herself a perfectionist, a very spiritual person and the most caring of all mothers who lives only for her son. Varsha..... well she was just a daughter-in-law.

Amma knew Varsha had skipped her period this time and was waiting for confirmation. But she never took that as an excuse from letting her off the hook. It ran in her age old green veins; to be a strict (inconsiderate) mother-in-law.

3.30 p.m. Saturday. Wellness Clinic.

“Am Sorry, Mr. Rishi! I know it's going to be a huge disappointment. But, please! Both of you are still young. You have time. Let Varsha get well. We can go for a thorough check up. It might have been stress! I am quite sure there's nothing wrong otherwise. She's weak. Let me prescribe some medicines. Let her take a healthy diet and ample rest for few days.” The doctor consoled the couple.

Varsha simply stared at a vague spot on the doctor's table, silent tears rolling down her pale cheeks. Rishi did all he could to control himself. He simply squeaked a mild thank you and walked out with the prescription in hand.

The ride back home seemed to take ages.

Varsha was able to hear unclear words being transferred from Rishi to his mom. She confined herself inside the room the entire evening.

It was dark. She realised she had drifted off to sleep. She tried to get up fearing what her mother-in-law would say about 'napping in the evening'. Her stomach clenched and she felt a sharp inexplicable cramp. Gritting her teeth, she turned on the lights, got herself freshened up and walked down the hallway.

Rishi, who was sitting in front of the TV, was flipping through channels absent-mindedly. Sensing her presence, he turned. Varsha's face was puffed up and her eyes all red. She managed a small smile.

“Vachu!” stammered Rishi. He got up and went closer, his mind muddled with a hundred thousand words of consolation, when he heard a sharp voice... the voice of his mom.

“Kanna! Don't go near her, pa! Theetu!”

Rishi gave his mom a blank look, turned to Varsha, held her face in his hands and softly whispered, “I'm here for you! I love you!”

* - a state of being unclean; ** - face glow



I Never Thought So

Jabeen R. Siddiqui

The atmosphere is cool, full of fresh air with serenity amidst the busy town, was our home in Beed dist named as Majalgaon. People of all caste and creed live in harmony there. Education was given a lot of importance in our place. The people were hard working and the major occupation was farming. Ours was a big house with twenty rooms on the top floor and on the ground, white washed and clean. Everything was close by to it like the hospital, the schools, the market and the bus stop. My family used ten rooms and other ten rooms were given on rent. The tenants of the outer rooms were a court clerk, a college accountant, a senior teacher of the local school.

Kareem as a clerk at court was a very good person was newly married to Mysha. He was tall, with light eyes; commerce graduated and was working when they came to stay in our house. He was gentle and had seen the tough times in his life. Both the couple were very happy. Mysha was beautiful, fair skinned with long silky lustrous hairs. Her eyes were dark, with long eye-lashes with dimpled cheeks. She was fearless, five- feet six inches tall. She has a keen interest in music and always put on the love songs while doing the household chores. Kareem was prompt in his duties he used to manage the court records. He used to assemble the documents and materials that are required for court proceedings. He used to assist in the administration process to run smoothly. He was punctual in his job and would start by 9 am and return by 7 pm. Meanwhile Mysha used to clean the house, talked with the women in the neighbourhood and fill the drinking water. In front of our house there stayed the Khan family with four daughters and three sons. Daughters were elder and they got married soon. Mazhar, Afroz and Feroz were three sons and among them Mazhar was married and had two children. Afroz was 18 yrs old was a vagabond and used to wander in the lane without studies and no work. All the people used to call Mysha as *Bhabhi*. Mazhar's wife was also a friend to Mysha.

Mysha was pregnant and after completion of nine months she delivered a baby girl Guddi. She was also smart like her mother. Kareem used to hand over his salary to Mysha and she used to manage all the expenses. The baby was three years old and she was again pregnant with the second child Munni. The husband was not so keen about his wife beauty but each and every one else in the neighbourhood secretly desired to have a look at her. In emergencies Afroz, Feroz and even Mazhar would help her in bringing the medicines of the children, paying light bills, sometimes filling the water from the tanker. The two girls grew up they were in sixth and third standards.

“I will bring u the cough medicine from the bazaar as u take rest, I will be back after some time “, says Mysha. As she started to go, she met Afroz in the way he also joined her. Kareem was suffering from cough. Due to severe cough, he was unable to sleep. Kareem also suffered from chest pain, or pain with breathing or coughing. His weight



also started to reduce unintentionally. He never makes her laugh nor listens to her or talks to her openly. He started to avoid her and it was noticed by the neighbours because the shine and the bloom on her face started to fade up. The frustration of unbearable disease makes him to stay alone. She kept herself busy with the household works, cooking, washing clothes, sweeping. She tells “You are coughing from last three months let’s go the doctor and have your check up. As you have to work all day in the office. Mr. Gupta is a good physician, we will have his appointment.” In negation she scolds her and he told her ‘*kya tum mujhe beemar samajhti ho*’. She kept quiet, cried, and became busy in her work. In his absence the neighbourly relations grew more. As Afroz use to sit in front of their house on the basement, he use to come inside the house in the afternoon and talked to her. He liked her, she also liked him, he talked with him very pleasantly, gently and a bond of comfort and support between them. Sometimes they both have a lunch together. He would spend some time and always appreciated her; her looks, her taste of food and would leave before her daughters returned from school. If she is filling the water he used to take the pot from her and would fill up the water tank.

As the years passed by, the condition of Kareem worsened. Afroz as a neighbour’s son and Mysha took him to doctor. The x-ray and blood tests were done and it was judged that he was suffering from TB. Dr. Gupta prescribed him antibiotics for a long period of time. He said to take “nutritious food, adequate sleep, exercise, and also to include food rich in anti-oxidants.” Both the couple became nervous and depressed as the doctor also advised them to keep distance. He also suffered sexually and his frustration and anger were shown on his wife and children. The glint of love grew between Afroz and Mysha. He was younger to her, younger by five to six years. But he was handsome, brave, robust and the *dada* of the *galli*.

Kareem also was suspicious of the relationship between them. He would often say “Why is that bully seen in front of our house, why did you smile at him? I am still alive. Keep safe distance from him, otherwise.....”, and he used to throw things at her. The girls would be scared and cried “mummy...mummy please protect us!”

Her interest in Afroz grew. She started dressing for him. Kareem was not taking the medicines properly. He missed the doses and had started to cough up blood. He took leave from his office. He had no appetite and after some days he died due to the complications of the disease.

Mysha became a widow with two girls and there was no source of income. She was a single child of her widowed mother. She was now of thirty years old. No relatives came forward to help and support her financially. Someone named Abbas, Kareem’s friend advised him to apply for the job at her husband’s place as his widow. Considering her widowhood she got the job. Somehow after some days she was appointed in the same place as a peon. Her mother too died due to sudden heart attack.



On the other side, the bond between the lovers grew profoundly. Afroz was most of the time seen at Mysha's house. They ate food together, chatted, laughed and were very happy. Her daughters were noticing them. They use to send them out to the neighbour's home. Afroz was not afraid of anyone. It was an emotional intimacy between two of them. The neighbours noticed that she was not staying as a widow and was not loyal to her husband.

Afroz's mother one day informs "I will find a bride for you and will arrange your marriage soon. You are not doing any job nor going to farms and you are after that widow. It's not a good thing. Do some work and start some earning." After listening to this he became angry "I am not eating anything at your home whatever I do, it's my concern. You don't worry about my marriage .You find a girl for Feroz. He is your lovely and adorable boy to whom you love so much'. He stormed out; his family was familiar about his bad habits and temperament.

Mysha got her salary and she bought Afroz a new dress as a gift. She also gave him some money. With that money he gambled and lost.

They would become physically intimate in the afternoons when the girls were in School. He would fill water; bring vegetables, and all types of helping jobs for her. He would also drop her on his bike to her office in the morning.

It became a talk for everybody and the neighbours complained about the relationship. Mysha used to give money and would tell him to bring gifts for her daughters. The girls were also pleased with the uncle. He also used to pay their fees, take them to the hospital if they are having fever. Bring the parcels of food from the restaurants. Take them to the fair. Sometimes he used to spend the whole night with Mysha, embracing her, loving passionately. His father Akram Khan was a farmer and would be rude with Afroz and he always disliked his son because he never helps him in farming and doesn't earn. Mumtaz Begum, Afroz's mother, would always get furious when she sees Afroz. He didn't get proper parental love at his home and it was noted and compensated by Mysha.

Mysha would bring him new t-shirts when she used to get her salary. Afroz would say 'Mysha why don't we not get married and live a certified married life. Otherwise my parents will marry me elsewhere. I can't see you without *mangalsutra*.' Mysha became nervous and moody, she remembers her first marriage. She tells "Girls in our society get married once, I am a widow with two girls, your parents will not agree to see me as their daughter-in-law".

He replies "No Mysha don't leave me alone. I can't live without you .You are the whole world to me." And he started to cry.



Once some time ago, Afroz talked to his parents about his relationship with Mysha and told them that whether they would arrange their marriage or he should do it himself. After listening to this Akram Khan's anger knew no bounds. He said "Don't take the name of that prostitute, she is a cheater, she had deceived us, a bad omen, finished her husband and now is after my son. One day she will also eat you. She is six years older to you, I will beat her and throw her out of our lane and will cut your legs, so that you will not run after her." To this Afroz also became angry.

He shouted "What you are talking, she is my love, my life and to me everything. I can't listen to a single word against her. You people mind your language first. What is older or younger, I don't mind it. You people want a lot of dowry and you sell your son and bring ugly brides. I am not going to listen to you." The mother also shouted "Go out of our house, I do not want to see you again." He said "I am going and will never come again but give my share of the property".

That day he came to meet Mysha and he was drunk. At the Kazi they somehow got married and lived in other lane with the girls. Mysha had to give him daily hundred rupees. He drank and spent the money on eating pan and tobacco. The initial few days were happy, both were seen in the town on a motorcycle. His family never approached him. The girls grew up; they became more beautiful like her mother.

Mazhar and Feroz also demanded their property share and the distribution was done. Afroz was given a wetland, a place full of garbage and no farm. He started to clean that land, thinking why to spend money on rent, if he can build two rooms and live here. He was cleaning the garbage when a snake bit him. He had a fight with a snake. It was deadly. He then felt difficulty in breathing. The venom spread through body. He started to sweat and salivate. Nobody came to help him as this was afternoon. Mysha was in office and the girls were in school. As the toxicity spread some neighbours approached but nobody took him to the doctor. His body was paralysed as Mysha approached him she noticed that he there was respiratory failure.

The doctor was called up but all the hopes were finished. Mysha cried a lot, the girls cried, his brothers and family blamed only her, cursed her, and called as a man-eater, his father-in-law hit her. This time she cried more and mourned because no one was there to support her. She was trapped and engulfed by destiny.



The English Lecturer

A. Kishore Kumar Reddy

I was dumbstruck seeing the world's tallest monolith of Gautama Buddha situated in the middle of Hussain Sagar, sitting in a squatting position and tightly closing his nose. The stench of the lake was unbearable for a passer-by. In such a condition, Buddha, who is standing for such a long time in the middle of the lake, depicting himself as the one who gives shelter, yet liberates, looked as if was in a terrific condition. I did not know what to do. I tried to move towards him and felt someone was pulling me. Suddenly, I woke up to find myself all alone. The sun had already risen and the hands of my wall clock pointed to 7:23.

I shook my head briskly, got up from the bed, and took a look around. Everything looked same in the tiny, rented room. I stand up and glance over at the room. But, there is no hint of anything. It was already seven – thirty. I had to hurry for the college. But, when I reached the bathroom, it was engaged. The bathroom was filled with the humming of a popular Telugu song. I had to pace in the semi dark, damp place with a towel round my neck. A few minutes, and the door opened. The other tenant, a student, came out dripping. He smiled at me and left. I emerged out of the bathroom only to find the tiny rented space with stacks of books and some empty vessels mocking at me in the darkened living room. I was ready to start.

It was not the first time I had entered into a class. I was already familiar with the environment that prevails in a class. I was in this field from the last three years. But, this time, when I entered the class... again, I felt as if it was all new to me. It was a co-educational degree college and I was to deal with a second year class. I was asked to teach the poetry part. There were around 120 students in the class. I found myself in a very tense situation. I could not pray to god for help, as I was an agnostic. My belief stopped me from praying. I felt as if I was entering into a state of nothingness. I still feel it.....it was a state of oblivion. It seemed I had jumped into chaos. But, I remembered that, I had to do it....it was the profession that I had loved, respected from the day – when someone asked – what is your goal in life. I could not answer to them, at that time that I wanted to teach. But, now I could see everything in front of me.....making fun of me. The students did not care; the English lecturer for them is a person, who is tidy, without a beard, well dressed, and the one who is imbibed with all those qualities of a “gentleman”. I could sense by seeing into their eyes that they were still mentally colonised and were dangling with the idea, that English is the “Master’s” language.

I started off with Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*. I did not know who was in front of me. As I started reading, I felt that I was moved by the force and sensuousness of these lines. There was an anaesthetic sensation that carried me on.



*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains...*

Suddenly, I realised that there was a girl student sitting in the front row. I felt that she was listening with great intense. This brought me some strength, a bit of hope, and made me feel that I was on my way back. I was going on and suddenly I stopped. I felt like knowing, if they were getting the essence of the poem, and knew the meaning of the words that I was telling them. I could get some answers, which were raw, and some comments – negative ones. I was used to such comments. I had this urge of kindling the thought process of the student, and felt that if this could be achieved, the rest would make its way. I was waiting for some responses, but, all of a sudden I asked them, if they knew about the ‘aching of a heart’, ‘drowsy numbness’ and finally ‘pain’. I was waiting for responses. And suddenly the bell rang. I had to walk out of the class. I sensed that my attempt of making them to think has worked. The moment I was leaving, the students started asking questions and were making some remarks. I did not feel like waiting. I was broke down and felt helpless. The main reason was, the girl in the front row. She made me feel that she was completely “lost”. I knew that it was not my fault, rather my nature of getting infused into the poetry that I teach, that has to be blamed. And, finally, the master’s language. After all it was not our mother tongue...

The next day, the moment I entered into the class, I found that there was an excitement in the whole class; the front row girl was more excited. I could see it in their faces, especially the girl’s. I asked them, about my questions that I had posed to them yesterday. There was a “happy rage”, everyone started describing the answers in their own style. I liked it. I sensed that I was making them to come on to the track. The front girl did not respond, I did not feel like questioning her, I will not tell you the reason, if you want to know it, ask an English lecturer.

I started lecturing, after a while; I stopped and asked them again about, the meanings of the words in the second line,

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk...”

This time there was no response, I started off by questioning them about the state of intoxication. I started giving them examples of various states of intoxication. The state; when someone smokes a cigarette, the state; when someone consumes alcohol, and finally the state; when someone smokes *ganja* (Marijuana)....I stopped giving further examples of intoxicative states of the mind and body, as I was not familiar with any.

Suddenly, I was stopped with a question. The girl in the front row, asked me, if I had experienced all the above said states. I replied very humbly, yes. I replied to her



that I have done the above actions to know the state of the poets. I could feel that she was astounded. Her face became pale. I could sense from her body language, she was once again getting “lost”. I did not know what to do. I was just standing there. I became numb. I don’t know why, but one thing is for sure, I knew that I had lost a student. I could not do anything. I was at a loss and spent the rest of the period giving a general analysis, which did not make any sense to me, leave about the student. It was time, and I could not utter the lines

*Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!*

The bell rang. I just left the class.

The next day, the moment I entered the class, my eyes started searching for her. I could not find her. The attendance said that she was present, but I could not find her in my class. I knew what had happened. But, I was helpless; after all, I am a lecturer, who teaches poetry, and most of all, a devotee of romantic poets. I was standing, watching vacantly, remarking to no one in particular. I shut my eyes, arms folded across my chest. Standing, I sensed that sweat was dripping all over my body. My shirt clung to my back. I tried to recall the “lost” girl, yet, could not. She was not there. It looked as if she had amputated herself from my consciousness. I could sense only the shadow of her on the bench in which she had sat. The nod of my head was indistinct. My thoughts wandered off into the deep thick forest where there was no light. I just said to the students about my condition that, “I was down”. I did not teach. I just left the class. The next day, I found myself in the same situation. Further, she was not present, but absent. I completed my lecture, without any essence in it. I sensed that I was not worth. I lost hope. I was down.

I felt that I was not doing well. The wave-length did not match with the student. I could not do anything, but quit the college.



My First Meeting

Mouli Chowdhury

Meeting, not necessarily an official one, is where we meet people, belonging to our profession, or a family one, where all the members meet, to discuss more about familial achievements, than the well being of its members. My meeting, was to find the one, I am going to be with, after my parents disown me saying that I am a “paraya dhan” (Someone else’s wealth).

It started off after having a huge break-up followed by some small term hook-ups. I decided to accept that I can’t take this anymore, and that it is better to go with the traditional flow. After some initial look-ups, here and there, I rigorously went through my matrimonial profiles. Vigorous search, not because I am blessed with Athena’s beauty, but I had very few options to choose from. Finally, love struck with one of them, I immediately informed my sister about it. My not so excited female sibling, thought, it to be one of my sweet adventures and tried to judge the seriousness of my intentions followed by regular session of lectures on how to choose the perfect partner.

Finally, my dear father, came into this small picture, and decided to take over. After many phone calls the day was fixed. My prospective groom gave me a call one fine day and my heart missed many beats, through the tete- e- tete. I realized that I hated cooking and men are more interested in controlling you by giving you veggies to cook with a menu card of their own. I know all men are not the same; he was an exception in today’s world. So the day was fixed and I applied for leave to commence on my journey towards finding my soul mate.

It wasn’t that nice after all, as it felt like meeting a doctor, who is going to scrutinize if I was fit to survive in his world after marriage. My father made arrangements, preparing me to such an extent that I could have been engaged. Parents will be parents, not willing to leave a single stone unturned to impress their already accepted son-in-law.

Finally the day came my so called soul mate was to arrive. I was not allowed to wear black. I mean what has my favourite colour to do with that. A lot of hustle and bustle was going on for welcoming this guest. I was given lectures and moral support about rejection and acceptance at the same time. Everybody apart from me was busy making themselves look their best and flaunt their Bengali aesthetics to the point, I wondered who came to see whom.

O gosh! He arrived but nobody was there to receive him because after so many preparations my family missed out on this important fact. I panicked a bit, my family double panicked, but finally it was all sorted and the hero of the day arrived. The moment he arrived till the moment I finally met him everyone else made their suggestions on how the heroine should enter. Finally, the heroine, without bothering



about who said what, entered without anyone's consent and introduced herself and sat with all the confidence she had to show off. After initial sweet talk, we were asked to have a talk alone. We discussed many stupid things and I felt the bigger stupid, because I was an amateur he appeared to be a pro. Asked me questions which I felt were rehearsed and in this question-answer round he passed with flying colours with all those serious, intriguing, life changing questions. I think I acted more like a feminist trying to rate him on the scale of being MCP.

He went and announced that he liked me. The whole family was already celebrating. My father denied buying me saris for college because that was wastage of money when they already have to buy for my wedding. Give me a break Baba! Where were all your saving money strategies when you were preparing for my first meeting?

All is well that ends well.

Later on due to reasons known to him and me he called off this wedding. Fortunately the so called soul mate said no to this alliance and he saved me and himself from this terrible match.



The Khaki Sombrero

Murali Raman

The grating out-of-tune complaint of the one chain link that was not aligned with the others was the only, repetitive sound that emphasized the silent swish of Rudraiah's cycle. His wise eyes far away, his lips pressed close together, Constable Rudraiah pedalled his slow, sure way along his night beat.

His precinct was the Narayan Nagar Police Station, standing guard over a far-flung suburb that was populated, in the main, by very well-to-do businessmen – people who lived in palatial, badly built eye-sores that had had the singular virtue of converting black currency to white. This was a special night, for it was Diwali night. Some of the palaces were garishly lit up. The horizons exploded now and then into lightning strokes of crackers and shooting stars – a brightness and loudness that was enhanced by the deserted unlighted streets, the dark, still open lung-spaces called parks, the looming black hulks of menacing concrete.

But Rudraiah was oblivious to everything around. He reached one hand behind to the carrier, feeling for the smooth, shiny bamboo lathi and the symbol of his authority, the flamboyant khaki wild west style hat with the distinct pinned-back edge. With a satisfied grunt, he shifted his lanky 45-year old frame on the creaky cycle seat, took a right turn automatically and continued pedaling. His shiny black eyes lit up with the reflection of a warm cracker glow. His mind was far away...

Rudraiah was the picture of rustic health. His wizened, dark face carried the deeply grooved lines of care – the face-prints of a lifetime of suppressed desires, domestic upsets, the scars of culture shock. But most of all, it was worry. The gnawing regret that the one hectare of land he owned in his native Arsikere was mismanaged by his stupid, self-important father who barely managed to keep his other son, Rudraiah's idiot brother, alive and as sane as his ambit of influence would allow. For Shivaiah, the father, would not, if he could help it, allow any other person to express his individuality. It was to Rudraiah's credit that he pulled through a motherless childhood and reached the threshold of man's world with the least stifling influence. Instead, he was fired by a burning craving for independence and self-expression.

A happy occurrence was his early marriage to Sushila, his aunt's daughter. The girl proved to be a naughty, cheery spirit who was totally supportive to Rudraiah's yearning for a new life and a fresh order of things.

Thus it came to pass that Rudraiah moved to the bustling, growing city of Bangalore. The fertile soil of this hilly city beguiled his dizzy senses with season after season of flowers – the soft downy yellow jacaranda which made a golden carpet on the ground, the delicate feminine lavender that floated in slow motion around him, kissing his



cracked, dusty, dark brown rustic feet, the shocking scandal red of the devil's trumpets.

Enrolling in the Police School, he was put through his paces at the training school on Mysore Road. His simple mind thrilled at the excitement of this regimentation, the khaki uniforms, the early morning drills, the barked orders, the marches, the canteen food, the rifles and the lathi-charge practice. His vocabulary expanded, his rough village language adding vigour to the new-found epithets he was learning to use as a matter of course (but which would have reddened his ears in shock just a year earlier).

And so he walked through the flowers with Sushila. The seasons passed by, marking the passage of the years, and yet they remained childless. And Sushila was slowly giving up her faith in her Gramadevata, the village deity. She visited the snake-hill every Friday though, and mumbled her simple, sincere, anxious prayers every morning at the Tulsi shrine.

Even this evening, she would have lighted the lamp to her deity at 6 pm sharp, constant in her prayer – but as an empty, mechanical ritual. The problem was she paid more attention to these prayers than to a practical, physical solution to her desire for a child. She and Rudraiah had grown old together, closer in spirit, farther away in body. For life was a constant struggle to lead a hand-to-mouth existence. The meager earnings of a constable who showed no promise to merit promotion, the squalor of a badly-in-need-of-repair police quarters (part of a colony of hopeless humanity – the ‘protectors’ of the citizens!) – all this had taken their toll on this once-bubbly couple.

Whistling asthmatically up the punishing slope at the end of his beat, Rudraiah glances at the green fringe planted by the city planners to denote the limit of the city at this point. Called poetically the “mini-forest”, these thick woods were reputed to harbour a variety of snakes and sometimes, people had reported seeing jackals slinking about.

Rudraiah looked at the brooding, black darkness of the trees on this dark starlit night and shivered involuntarily. He knew, from police yore, that an even greater evil lurked there. Man, in his vilest manifestations. Many crimes were buried in those uncharted depths.

Turning to go, Rudraiah detected a familiar, foul smell, and caught glimpses of a naked fire. Some low voices soon became audible, and he realized that he had unwittingly chanced upon the much-talked about illicit liquor gang. A bare 15 feet away, they were busy practicing their industry. An irrational chilly fear gripped his heart and he backed away from the bush from behind which he had been surveying his find.

A twig snapped, his heart leapt to his mouth. At a sensation, he whirled around to face the large, black, face of Ranga, the ring-leader. He was leering at Rudraiah, red fat lips drawn back over yellow teeth in an amused, cruel snarl.



Too old to face the superior, wickedness of this menacing, younger man, and too naïve to cleverly exploit his authority, Rudraiah could only listen to the few, grating words of warning spat out by Ranga. A clear threat to his life if he did not forget what he had seen this night.

Carried away by the Diwali spirit, the gang had been indiscrete about their activity. But this doddering, stuttering wreck of a once-well-built man could be handled very easily. How fervently Rudraiah wished that he was far away! Remembering some of his younger colleagues, their tall, strapping, handsome Coorgi virility with the light of courage shining from their gentle, light eyes – he wondered what one of them would have done in his place – Chengappa, for instance!

Knees knocking in an unfelt terror, for he was too numbed to feel anything, Rudraiah took off on his complaining cycle, pushing himself till he could hear the taunting laugh of Ranga no longer. He remembered, with no shame but with gentle regret, how he had avoided compromising situations even earlier.

The day, when in mufti on the lonely road to the bazaar, he'd seen the ragged body of a dying schoolboy in white, surrounded by a small group of people. The boy had been thrown off his cycle, and run over by a monster of a bus, which was standing 50 yards away, empty, silent.

The bus crew, and the passengers, had conveniently disappeared. While everyone tut-tutted in sympathy at the pulsing, convulsion-wracked rag of a boy who was fast slipping into a cold death, his mouth spitting out a thick blood – the only sign of heavy internal haemorrhage – Rudraiah had watched dispassionately, and continued on his way. He had to buy the jaggery and the flowers for the Gramadevata puja that evening – Sushila was waiting. He gave himself specious logic – reasoning that he was not a traffic constable after all, and that this was not in his precinct, and that he was off-duty after all. To this day, Rudraiah himself had never been convinced of these arguments to himself. His conscience was ever uneasy about this incident. And the name, Sandeep Singamani, was burned deeply in his mind – for that was the name of the poor boy who had died such a pathetic death that day – he had found this out from the news article he looked for and found in the local paper the next day.

Still shivering involuntarily, Rudraiah found a returning strength in the awareness that he was nearing the end of his beat. He could quite easily forget the night's encounter, at least officially.

He settled into his, creaking, slow, sure, swishing pace, wheezing asthmatically, his wise eyes set deep in the humorous crows' feet looking into the distance. His hand crept behind to feel for his khaki hat. He could not afford to lose it. It cost money.



Eraser

Nilima Meher

One Sunday a childhood friend of mine came to my house to develop her hand in computer. She opened paint and told me to help her in learning it because she was going to a computer institute for a course. There she was not getting time as well as opportunity to do anything by her own in the computer. Her mate in the computer class who was her practical-class partner was like a despot. She hardly allowed her to touch the computer. Many times the teacher had instructed the stupid proud girl to cooperate her. As she is silent by nature she never complained to teacher because she knew the attitude of the girl who always turned a deaf ear to the teacher. So she remained silent and helpless. From her computer she only knew how to write text in paint and to erase something drawn on the file. When she opened the paint and made some lines without any meaningful shape. I told her as because she was not accustomed to mouse her lines are not in proper order. So now she has to create a new file. So, I instructed her to create a new file but she told she likes to erase. She brought the eraser and asked me how to enlarge it. I helped her with that. She cleared the file. I let her do her do her work. After sometimes I came to see her. I again found her erasing. I then showed her how to select the picture and delete it. She learnt it. Then I again came and looked my work. But a few moments later I found her doing that again and just told her if she likes to clear the file with eraser and to use that file not the new one. She told yes. She had drawn some pictures which were not looking good and she had not saved any of them. When she finished I told her to show me the file but she told as those pictures were not nice she had not saved them. When she will be accustomed to computer she will paint a beautiful picture and will save it and also will show it to me.

I knew her for a very long time and could mark her activities from her gesture and posture. I knew that it was not the used file she erased rather it was the part of her life she wanted to erase with the same people. She wanted her kiths and kins with a sweet behaviour with love and affection towards her. On a festive occasion I remember, everybody of her family bought new clothes so also her neighbours. But nobody thought about her. Her father, mother and two brothers were immersed in their own world. They were drowned in the joyous environment. But she was sad as because nobody had asked her why she has not worn any new dress. Nobody had thought to buy a new dress for her. Even she always contributes her part of money in the family affair from her childhood when she was only eight years old through her own effort. Still she had neither dignity nor identity in her own home. She wanted to get their attention by paying her own labour. She is ready to do everything only to get the attention of her family. Even at one occasion her two brothers quarrelled she went to stop them but in return somebody among the two beat her. Blood trickled down from her head. But they did not stop. Nobody saw at her. None of them asked her what happened to her. At that moment she wanted to erase those two persons from



her life. But some days later she wanted to forget them. But the people are not allowing her to live peacefully. She thinks of the peaceful conditions of the neighbourhood. Though they earn less in compare to their family still they live happily and peacefully.

When her relatives call her they tell her that she is very lucky even people outside her house who know her as the lone girl child of their family say so. She must be living comfortably and happily. So, they call her “Rajnandini” who rules over the house. The word pierces her heart. But she remains silent. She wants to erase the same file with the eraser and wants to use it again instead of a new file.



Choose to be 'You'

A Sandhya Reddy

Manish was tense just like his other classmates as they were about to face their first campus interview in a couple of days. It was 11 in the night and he was glancing at his resume while sipping the hot coffee his mother left by his side before dozing off after a long day's work. He had a decent academic history, a couple of internships, some extra-curricular activities to sell to his potential employers. He had almost reached the end of his resume but he was stuck at one field – Hobbies. As he thought of what he wanted to list as hobbies, he kept striking them off because he realized that if he had not pursued any of them seriously and did not want to risk being caught bluffing. After much contemplation, he listed some common ones like writing, reading, watching TV shows etc... But something pinched him inside, deep down he wished he had pursued something apart from his academics.

Now, Manish had just been initiated into Tabla when he entered 10th grade. And all of a sudden, his entire world changed. From parents and teachers to friends and relatives, everybody told him that this year was very crucial and that it would decide his future and career. His parents felt even the little time he spent on sports as a waste of 'valuable' time and his Tabla classes had been halted. All he was told was to focus solely on academics. Manish's parents were from a middle class family and struggled very hard to make money so it was natural that they were concerned about his academics. On his part, Manish understood this and worked hard in anticipation that this was only temporary.

After summer break, Manish joined a coaching institute which would basically prepare him to fare well in entrance exams and also impart intermediate education alongside. The schedule in the coaching classes was grueling. The students had to understand the concepts, write tests every week and be under the constant stress of competing with others. The situation was as if the world would come to an end and the sad part is that the students could do nothing but cope. Manish like many others went through cycles of depression but he kept trying, thanks to the relentless persuasion. All his efforts paid off and he landed a seat at a reputed engineering college. The choice of his branch however, was influenced by what one of his aunt's colleague's daughter who was pursuing her MS in US had recommended.

Luckily enough, Manish did his interview well and got placed with the very first company to visit campus. He was extremely happy and so were his parents. He was eager to prove himself and stand out from the crowd, so he began slogging at work. This meant long hours of work and little time for other things in life. Even basic things like having meals on time and getting enough sleep seemed like a distant dream. When the weekend arrived, he had energy just to party and then hibernate until Monday morning.



A year had passed and his company had organized a ghazal night to reward their employees. Manish was dressed at his best and chatted with his friends at the event. The ghazal singer was accompanied by a gifted Tabla artist. Manish, was reminded of his Tabla classes and all he could do was tell his friends that he loved playing the Tabla but he was not able to pursue it.

A couple of years went by and Manish wanted to go abroad and pursue his higher education. In the process of preparing his applications, Manish realized that while he had a good academic record and work experience to back him, he had to make up his hobbies and social contribution. The feeling that he had while he wrote his resume had returned, but it was too late to turn the clock backwards.

As the tale comes to an end, the following thoughts come to my mind,

If only we valued skills such as art, craft, dance and not just academics
If only we taught our children that they were free to pursue whatever they wanted
If only we could educate our children to make informed career choices
If only we could create an environment where all professions are respected
If only we realize for what we toil so much in our life...

Then probably, Manish would have been a Tabla maestro or at least learnt something that is enriching in life.

Let dreams be given wings to fly. For those who dare to dream will only dream to dare...



How blue is my Sapphire!

Trisha Dewangan

Past has been the most evident thing that nobody could ignore. It has been the most frustrating and at the same time the most memorable part of our lives. I, Rhea Sharma, done with lots of brutally hurting bruises from my past, want to embrace my future in the best way possible. Running with the chaos of the world, I learnt the best lessons of life. Looking back at time all I could open my eyes to are the compromises I made, all the small sacrifices which ended up flowing with the tears. For the beauty, each dream accomplished, inside me and for the scar it left for not being fulfilled. Going back five years brings the most worst and some best decisions I took for my life. I now certainly have realised that whatever happens has a reason and that reason is the thing we need to find sooner or later.

Moving on I have learned that all those bad decisions were the reason I am able to take the decision right now. The decision for not being the one to compromise for not being the one to cry hard as the light faded away for not being the small cocoon which opened up only to myself and thought about the vitality of my existence. Nobody has ever been able to move away with the past be it a good or a bad one in one single stroke. It takes ages to forget, but once it is done it feels like it has been only a fraction of second that left those scars, faded now, at that place. Some carry their past and grieve on with them for the rest of their lives, I fall in this category unless for the angel, my very personal angel, I have been gifted with, Parth.

He remained the light in my so black days, my reason of happiness, my strength and the reason I could muster all this strength up to face it.

After all these years of suffering and agony, it is he who bestowed that small faith inside me and here I am now. All set, ready to conquer the fears that haunted me all these years.

Its 10 am, 22 February 2016. I enter Maa and Papa's room.

"Good morning Dad."

"Good morning beta. Are you not feeling well? Your face looks dull."

"Not exactly. But yes I am having some sleeping problems from last few days."

"Why? You should have told us. Why didn't you inform us?"

"Relax Dad. I am all fine. I am here to talk about something to you."

(Soon Mom enters the room too..)

"Rhea? Is everything okay?"

"Yes Mom. Wanted to speak about something to Dad and I am glad that you too are here now."

"Okay. So what is it about?"



“It is about my future and how I want to save it. Dad, I know you are the last person to ever see me falling down in life but this is quite important for you to know.”

“Carry on beta. We are listening.”

“Dad I don’t want to go for M. Tech but I want to do MBA.”

“What? Rhea have you even given a thought to it?”

“Yes Dad. I have been thinking of it since past 2 years but was never able to tell you.”

“Mridangini, why don’t you make her understand that all we want is her bright future and nothing else. Since the day we have got her admissions in the college she thinks we are her enemies. We have been through this harsh world and that’s why we want this to further ensure her security and well being.”

“I know dad. You have always seen whatever is going to be the best for me. But dad let me handle this independence all by myself for once? I am young only once. I know what I want to do and I will be totally responsible for whatever happens in future.”

“And if something wrong happens then what are we supposed to do? Sit and watch?”

“Raj, you need to calm down. It took her lots of guts to come here. Try and understand her for once.”

“Mom, being a girl there are lot many compromises I have done which were not desired but essential simply because I am a girl. I know what conditions future is going to bring and that’s why I want to live this present all at my risk.”

“What is this risk you keep talking about Rhea? Are we not supposed to protect and take your decisions?”

“You are taking it all wrong Dad. You guys are my inspirations and always will be. All I want from you to give me is my own independence where I make my own mistakes and nothing else.”

“But why don’t you..”

“Raj! Calm down. I understand everything Rhea. I will talk to your dad. You go to your room and we will tell you what we have decided by the night.”

“Okay mom. Thanks”

I left the room and went to mine. I raced to the most dialled number on my cell phone.

Dialling Parth....

I told him about everything which took place around 5 minutes before dialling his number. He listened to me very patiently. He always does that and I just babbled every portion of my heart to him without the fear of being judged.

Parth was the warrior himself; he had taken certain major steps in life which he is proud of now because he followed his heart. He left engineering after the 2nd year of the course. Everybody was like why do you want to do this Parth, you have already invested your 2 years into this. To which he would simply reply,

I am going to save my 2 years too, bro. I am counting on that.



That was the message he wanted to give me, to look into possibilities when you are surrounded with negativities. He at the most time makes sure that I am at the best of myself and I love what I am doing. But for the last 4 years it was not possible and now I have got the courage to fight it. Courage to be the light I always wanted me to become.

Dad is my hero. But at these hard times all he could think of is my security and a big bright lit future and in securing things for me there remains small problems which has brought the distance amongst us. These small proportions of life decisions have brought such big differences between us. Even with time I was not able to fill them up. At dire times I simply go back to time when I could be the wholesome me in front him and we could simply enjoy all those big moments very easily. When his first priority was mollycoddling me, it is still now but somewhere with the flow of time we buried our emotions and despite our very hard efforts it ain't coming back in its original form. But above all these I know I have my hero still there protecting me and loving the same, with the only wait for the clock to tick the time right.

Mom has been my best friend since I gained actual senses not because I shared my emotions with her but then I realised for the first time that I speak the most brutal words out of anger and she still kept loving me all the way long. She never hated me for who I am. She exactly knows when my heart is in pain even if I can never say it. She has watched me all these 4 years suffering without me uttering a word and that's why she knows the worth of this independence. My heart has always belonged to her even if I never am able to tell her how much I love her and that I have been so sorry each time the words which were never intended to go to her came out of my mouth.

The main reason is that these years have brought me the darkest scars. Even if I try, they don't leave me. Due to them I end up being the most ridiculous person on earth. I lost friends for speaking the worst of things, for pushing people away from me when they were to bring the best out in me. And here at the midst of all these thoughts I sit with the most lovable thing that has ever happened to me. Buzo, my love, never intends to speak a word, not because he can't, but because somewhere he knows, that there right inside me, there is still that person alive who I always have been. 5 year old Buzo is the cutest creature for me. On the other hand he is ferocious for the neighbours but his heart stands the most pure. He is the soul of the house and is the naughtiest. As soon as I enter home my heart always flies to him every time by just looking at his cutest eyes.

I don't know if what is being planned for me behind the doors, all I know is whatever happens I need to stand up for myself. Time passes but with itself it takes a lot of us with it too.

I have already lost a part of myself in all this and now it's no turning back.



10:00 pm, Dining Area.

There was not a single word exchanged at the table. We silently ate our meals. As the night slipped in my anxiety had been at its peak and I could not sleep the whole day, amidst all those uncertainties Buzo was there, awake all night with me.

Next Morning, 7:00 am

Dad came to my room and found me half lying on the couch. He very gently touched my forehead and had tears on the corner of his eyes. I woke up by his touch.

“I am proud of you Rhea. Not today but each day that has passed and for the coming ones. Go for whatever makes your heart happy.”

All of us live with our past. All of us allow it to shape our future. But some of us know how to shrug the past. I think that is who I am...

*It matters not how strait the gate
How charged with punishments the scroll
I am the master of my fate
I am the captain of my soul.*

(These lines from *Invictus* by William Henley, very perfectly describes me now.)

This is how blue my sapphire is, the brightest now. And from now it will always be the brightest shining armour of mine for I have shrugged my past and head all held high I move towards life. Life, that will all be mine today and always...



Oasis

Tushnim Gangopadhyay

The place was sleazier than I had imagined. The city was almost the same, which felt a bit off, since this was Tokyo, a place where I have never been before. Nonetheless, little seems different anymore. You get off at the terminals, you know exactly how much you have to haggle, you know when and how the cops will make their rounds . . . it's all the same. The sky glowed just as bloody red as anywhere on the planet, the streets were just as loudly chaotic, and the billboards just as obnoxious with their flagrant procession of silicon and skin. Swap one hell for another, the whole place deserved to go up in flames.

I got off the cab a block away from my destination and decided to walk the rest of the way. The streets downtown were crawling with creeps like me, but you can never be too sure.

“Hey! Check out this . . .” Punya began for the umpteenth time since last night.

“Shut up, numbskull!” Ann4 snapped.

I generally prefer to keep my com link muted during work, but this time it seems it'd be better to stick together. We were in the big leagues now.

The sheer amount they had paid in advance was enough for me to know that this was from the higher ups – we were the government's hounds this time. And the higher ups have a complete deniability clause, which means my buttocks might just be grass if I messed up. Punya, my roommate and muscle for hire, has been punctuating my thoughts with random yelps ever since he received his share of the upgrades. While we all know now – thanks to his nonstop chatter – how big an opportunity it was to have been upgraded from his garage-tech to the cutting edge Ares™, I personally find the chatter distracting. Ann4 wasn't a big fan either.

“Second alley to the left, Ghost.” Ann4 continued, “Multiple armed individuals. Some metals, but they seem to be on the staff. Be on your guard.”

As if I needed to be told. I could see through everyone on the street, and seven out of ten were armed in some way or the other. Surprisingly few metals though, considering the downtown slums are where they usually thrive most.

“What have you got on our man?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Ann4 replied, “All that Marut said is all that's to be found. Eco-aficionado, ex-PAN operative, later turned eco-terrorist.



Assumed to be dead for the last fifteen years. Low profile. Low danger. And that's all."

"What does the packa . . . ?"

"Hostiles on you!" Ann4 snapped with some urgency.

I looked around. The figures lying on the sidewalk, whom I had assumed to be sleeping or passed out hobos, had all stood up. I cursed myself. Should have suspected counter-intelligence!

There were six of them, steadily approaching me. A couple started pulling out something from under their shirts, which on a scan showed up to be cattle-prods and SMGs. Terribly mixed arsenal!

My lips curled into a grin of their own volition. I have had enough of Punya's fawning over his toys. It was time to test my own upgrades.

In a most clichéd way, the three with the firearms whipped their tools out and stood at some distance.

"Hands where I can see them, rat!" one of them tried to growl as menacingly as he could. Was it a movie line? He said it like it was. I wouldn't know though. Meanwhile I could sense the three with prods approaching me from the flanks and rear. They clearly meant to take me alive. I didn't mind either way; but if they were not here to kill me, that meant it would be in bad taste if I killed them. I know Ann4 would give me hell.

I raised my arms skywards, and while the harmless movement had their attention, turned on my cloak. This was perhaps my most cherished upgrade. Ann4 could probably explain how it really worked, but all I know is that it redirects light to turn me visually imperceptible for ten seconds. This was the first time I had the chance to see it in practice.

"What the . . .!" one of my assaulters gasped.

I wish I had some time to savor the horrified look of shock on their faces, but I had places to go. I slipped in behind the SMG-hobos and knocked the heads of the nearest couple together.

"Shit!" the third shouted and tried to back away, while the prodders charged towards my general direction. I decided to release the cloak, since that would save me a few seconds of charge at least, and grabbed the retreating man before he could turn around and start firing random shots. It was a cakewalk! With these latest upgrades my hand-eye coordination, strength as well as reflexes were enhanced to several times



that of the strongest human body! Like picking a cat by the scruff of its neck, I grabbed the aggressor and threw him bodily at the charging bastards, where he fell heavily on two of them. Before any of the chargers could react, I closed in, dragged the third prod-wielder along his trajectory, and slammed my knee in his guts. He swiftly collapsed on the spot. The remaining three seemed to have inadvertently electrocuted themselves during the collision. I looked around to see if there were onlookers. Everyone was walking around oblivious to everything in the world. That's as it should be. You don't go charging in or calling for help if you see six armed men getting their butts handed to them by one guy.

"Bravo!" Ann4 drawled over the line, "Punya's not the only kid with new toys in this town it seems!"

"Meh! Those ain't worth shit!" Punya grumbled.

"Cut it out, you two." I needed to close in before the target could run. This might very well turn out to be a trap, but I had no alternative. The package had to be secured within the next half hour.

"Did you see a runner?" I asked. The alleyway was in front of me. My scans showed quite some arms and metals, but none of it seemed too hostile.

"No." Ann4 replied, "There wasn't one. I think they are using aerial surveillance. Or maybe they are tracking you somehow. Whatever it is, the target knows you are here. There are metals inside, so you can't hide yourself either."

"I am aware, Four!" I growled. I was losing my patience with the whole deal. There wasn't a single good way of infiltrating the place. I knew very well what Ann4 was about to suggest and I didn't like it at all. It didn't help my mood that a drunken leech was trying to tempt me with a bunch of semi-nude photographs.

"Look, just go in and negotiate." Ann4 sighed, "Marut and his boys are listening in – so they might be able to help with that. And if things go hairy, grab the package and cloak somehow. Or try to subdue the target. Punya has his orbital strike on the ready. Just be sure that you and the package are well out of the five meter radius. And my name's not ****ing Four!"

"Yeah, yeah." I waved the pimp aside and stepped towards the pub. Calling her Four was the easiest way of shutting her yap. It was a typo, really. Somehow the hospital had misprinted her name to include the first letter of her registration id, and she had given less than a rat's fart in that regard. So now she was Ann4, and I'll be damned if I can't take a crack at it every now and then.



I walked into the pub. The bouncer was clearly a metal. He had his implants sticking out at the joints, less the result of clumsy assembly and more for the intimidation value I'd bet. He glared at me until I was out of his sight, but didn't challenge me.

"Target's at you five, apparently alone. Go see what he has to say." The com link whispered.

I turned to find an old man in a grimy white polo. He raised his beer at me and took a sip. As I thought, he was expecting me and was definitely not scared.

I went and sat facing him.

"Mr. Subra 'The Ghost', I presume?" the man smiled genially.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Mr. . . ." I replied with a poker-face.

"Oh please!" the man waved, "You know very well who I am and I know who you are. You are here to procure a package from me, after all."

"Okay, let's play ball." I replied, "Are you going to hand it over? I really don't want to use force."

"That is because you can't, my friend. You don't know how many guards I have around me, and most importantly, you don't have any idea what the package might be. Am I right?" the man sat back and sipped his drink.

"Let's see." I leaned in, "If you know who I am, then you also know that I can snap your neck and break out of this hole before your guards have the time to blink."

"Yes!" he smiled, "Break my neck and then what? Look for a brown package on me? Drag my body with you as my people give chase? You are bluffing with an empty hand, and you know it."

I kept gazing into his eyes. He had me and he too knew it.

"Keep him talking, you moron." Ann4 ordered.

"I was hoping that you would turn up, you know." The man smiled again, "I knew PAN would send someone, and I was hoping it would be you. You and I are – to reiterate a clichéd expression – not so different."

"Really?" I arched an eye-brow.



“Sure! I am a big fan of your blog! In fact, it was after reading your review of Witch Hunter V that I tried my hand at the series. I agree with your assessment entirely and believe that you and I have a lot in common regarding ethics and aesthetics.”

“I’m flattered.” I replied. An eco-terrorist was a fan of my game reviews? What did that say about me?

“Let us consider your experience with that very game. You have written that you spent thirty long hours playing even after completing it, simply because you wanted to see the only oasis it had hidden somewhere in the map. You had grown tired of the post-apocalyptic wasteland and wanted to end the game after seeing a bit of greenery, didn’t you?” the man leaned in now.

“So?”

“So, Mr. Subra, what if I say I want the same thing? What if I told you that I too am tired of seeing this . . . filth all around me, everywhere I go, and want to see a little greenery before I die?” his eyes brightened up, “I once had a cat, you know. Not one these synthetic ones. It was a tiny little creature I had rescued once, and it died of lead-poisoning three months after I found it. I don’t know for sure, but I think it might have been the last of its kind in the entire country! Not the last cat, but the last non-human animal!”

“PAN has been trying . . .” I tried to interject, but he cut me off with another wave.

“PAN doesn’t do shit Mr. Ghost. I know. I was PAN once upon a time.” His face lost its amiable quality and turned rather stormy, “We sued companies and received mere pittance as recompense. It was never enough. And after the companies paid their due, they went back to doing whatever they pleased. Mostly, they were not even convicted for their actions!

What could we do with that? Clean the Pacific? It was a cesspit seventy years ago, and it still is! Re-freeze the ice-caps? Not in our lives! Breed the endangered species? They were not even around anymore to begin with! So don’t tell me what PAN has been doing, Mr. Ghost!”

The man was a fanatic! I knew time was ticking away. Something has to be done soon!

Ann4 wasn’t talking any more. I couldn’t tell if PAN was really listening in, but they didn’t utter a single squeak! What on earth were they expecting me to pull here?

I decided to get more info out of him.

“Do you think blowing everything up will repair the damage we have caused?” I asked.



The old man frowned.

“PAN didn’t tell you anything, did they!” he tried to peer into my eyes. Though what he could see in my lenses was beyond my imagination.

“Typical, really.” His face seemed to soften a bit, “How much of your past can you remember, Mr. Ghost? Eight-nine years?”

“I don’t . . .” I began, but even as I did, I could hear Four drawing in a breath.

“KEEP. TALKING.” She chewed and rasped at the same time. The girl has amazing vocal chords!

“Five.” I said, a little confused, “But I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. I know how we metals are made. I personally am grateful that I have been given a second shot at life, even if I am made of more prosthetics than flesh. It’s better than having died at . . .”

“The turf war between your clan and some others?”

“How do you . . . ?” I was taken aback.

“It’s always that. Turf wars and terrorist attacks and family feuds and the like. And you believe them. Just like you believe them when they tell you I am planning to blow stuff up! Why would I do that? How will it benefit me?”

Yeah! That was the million credit question here! Ann4 is treating me like a brain-dead lackey, Marut probably has no idea what he has gotten us into, and I’m supposed to figure out why jackasses are jackasses? Why would anyone want to blow shit up? Why does the moon shine? Why don’t unicorns go around farting rainbow clouds made of bubble gum?

“. . . just ‘cause?” I ventured.

“It’s almost time for me to proceed with the plan anyway, so I guess there’s no harm in telling you. Would you like to know what it’s all about?” he smiled the smile of an old fart with too much time in his hand.

“Does it really matter? It has got to do *something*. Maybe melt our faces?” I replied.

“There is no bomb, Mr. Ghost.”

Apparently you can read a 50% prosthetic face, ‘cause he gave me a most undeserving patronizing look. And they say my poker-face is second to none!



“I know it sounds like a load of bull to you” he resumed, “And to PAN, who I can bet my failing kidneys is listening behind your ears. But really, there’s no bomb. There’s just me. I know the way your mind works, and let me tell you before you try to clonk me on the head and drag me out of here, it’s not going to work. After a certain length of time has transpired, whether I live or die, my body will release a strain of genetically engineered spore. These will inhabit the bodies of one particular type of human beings – of course I won’t tell you what kind – before reaching the second phase of their mutation, wherein they can prosper in the present-day atmosphere. With luck, you’ll live to see your oasis.”

“But that’s worse than a bomb!” I gasped.

I had heard Ann4’s sharp intake of breath during the explanation. Four was shocked. At any other time, this would have been a matter of considerable glee for me . . . but right now I needed her ten steps ahead of my sorry bottom! And where the **ck was the mongrel, Marut?

“Is it now?” the man replied, “Is it too much of a price to pay in order to set your eyes on a world where at least a semblance of life has returned? A world where you, or others like you, might have known your own name and family instead of having been bred like a silicon cat?”

There was silence on my link. He stood up and patted my hand.

“I am leaving you in the faith, Mr. Ghost that you will do what you know is best. Maybe we will sit together and talk about your past someday. Or maybe we won’t” he winked, “It’s a gamble either ways.”

With that he turned towards the door and started hobbling out, not once looking back or betraying a single sign of concern regarding my existence.

“He doesn’t know about the strike!” my com link exploded with Ann4’s voice, “Punya, on his ten!”

It struck me then! There was no way the target or his pollens could evade the strike! But when exactly does the process start? Has it started already? Did it start before I had entered the hole? What am I to do right now?

Time was running out . . . precious, unstoppable time! Or maybe it has run out long ago! As Ann4’s shouts kept bludgeoning my ears, I allowed each nanosecond slip through my fingers, watching the target leave the pub, trying to weigh a world on the scales of my slipshod comprehension, and waiting for the obvious answer to present itself.



Author Profiles

Christina Dhanasekaran is a professor of English at Madras Christian College, Chennai. She is a passionate teacher who believes in the transformative powers of education. An ardent reader; a lover of poetry; she loves scribbling free verse and exploring different facets of literature, culture and mythology. Her new avocation is to pen down stories recollected from random thoughts.

Dhanappa M Metri, is a winner of a scholarship from RELO. He is an Associate professor in the Dept. of English, Sangameshwar College Solapur, Maharashtra. He writes both on Higher Education and ELT.

M. Geetha is working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Jerusalem College of Engineering, Chennai. Her interest in literature specifically lies on translation, creative writing and fiction research.

Dr. Jabeen Siddiqui is an English Lecturer at Dr. Md. Iqbal College of Arts and Science, Latur. She has contributed many research articles in national and international journals. Her areas of interest include Indian English Literature, Post colonial literature and feminist studies.

Dr. A. Kishore Kumar Reddy works as an Assistant Professor of English at Dr. B R Ambedkar Open University. He is a contemplator of surrealist and metaphysical issues.

Mouli Chowdhury is a research scholar working on her doctoral thesis in the field of English Literature from RTM Nagpur University, Nagpur. She has Master's Degree in English and stood third in order of merit. She has three publications to her credit and four years of teaching experience. At present she is working as an Assistant Professor in School of Humanities, K.R. Mangalam University, Sohna, Gurgaon.

Murali Raman is a writer, painter, installation artist and advertising professional who dabbles in photography. He writes poetry, short stories, short film and television scripts and feature film screenplays.

Nilima Meher is at present working in Panchayat Jr. College, Bargarh (English Department) as Junior Lecturer. She is pursuing Ph.D. and many research articles are published in various international journals. She is a critic, short story writer and poetess. Her poem collection songs of life has been published recently.

Dr. A Sandhya Reddy is an Associate Professor in English at CBIT, Hyderabad. She did her MA, MPhil & Ph.D at Osmania University. She has 23 years of teaching experience and is a certified soft skills trainer. She has published 17 papers in reputed journals both national and international.

Trisha Dewangan is a student of Electrical Engineering at her final year. Her interests include travelling and writing. She prefers being practical most of the times rather than being all dreamy eyes and that is probably reflected in every piece she has written.

Tushnim Gangopadhyay is a research scholar at the Department of English, B.H.U., who has a passion for translation, creative writing, and experimenting with graphic and interactive literature.

