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Bio – Indian, male, worked as an electrical engineer in Government service. Now retired, aged 66,unmarried, living alone . Interests – Reading, imagination, contemplation.

A few words about the novel - I am not good at manufacturing marketable blurbs. So I will just try to give a general picture.

1.The main undercurrent is one of humour, gentle, dignified!

2.The hero has got A HUNDRED names! I am sure no other novelist has come up with this idea.

3.The style of writing is engaging and endearing.(I am being as objective as possible)

4. There is enough action to continuously engage the reader.(Would a dour grammarian suggest that the word ,continuously, be placed after the word, reader?)

5. There are a couple of really touching scenes.(I am being objective, again.)

The overall theme is to blend reality and fantasy in palatable proportions and make it seem as reasonable as possible. A special kind of logic called fuzzy-dizzy, has been utilized for this purpose. It is very tasty, and heady too.

A few excerpts from each chapter are presented below : -

Chapter 1 ENTER THE JESTUS

He got me my first billions.

He is still alive, the old bag of bones. His age varies from seventy to a hundred depending on when and where you meet him. For all outer appearances he seems to be a lunatic; mad, loco, crazy. His words are crazy enough. His actions are crazier still.

Before I tell you how I made my billions because of him I have to introduce two persons.

The first person is the one and only Michael Magnum. If you do not know his name you must have been just out of Sing Sing after doing fifty years of solitary. It is possible to imagine people who have not heard of Shakespeare or Einstein. But you cannot possibly imagine anyone who has not heard of Michael Magnum— except may be those still twiddling their toes in their cribs. Michael Magnum, as you know, is *the* richest man in the world. (I don't mind saying universe.)

Michael Magnum and I became friends through a chat-room. A person of his stature never bothers about chatting- where is the time for such lavishness? By some quirk of fate he entered a chat room of the www, out of sheer curiosity- under a well-disguised ID of course. I too do not like to squander my time in chat rooms, but the same quirk of fate threw us together on that day. We chatted briefly. The time was ripe or the chemistry between us was right. We hit it off famously. We vowed never to enter chat rooms again. We exchanged e-mail IDs.

The second person is the very famous psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung. I was fascinated by his works during my college days. In one of his works he introduces the word synchronicity. In bald common language you could call it strange coincidences. But his concept goes beyond that and I will not bore you more than is absolutely necessary. The mad person introduced at the very beginning was my nodus of synchronicity.

I was idly strolling in the city park when I first saw him. A casual look at him told me he was mad. The old man—bag of bones as I said—was practically naked. A small dangling piece of loincloth symbolically served as his dress. Urchins in the park were teasing him. It was not a memorable or momentous event and I had forgotten him.

I saw him by chance a week later as I was passing through a street. He was about two hundred yards from me, but I could not mistake the unclad aged figure. Nothing special there. I saw him the next week and the next.

At this stage the event entered the realms of synchronicity. Every time I went out of my house I would see the fellow— always at a distance and for a few seconds.

I mentioned this curious occurrence to Michael Magnum in one of my e-mails. He did not bother to reply. But the old loony did bother to offer me his divine revelation every day. I pestered Magnum about this. He replied that it was a strange coincidence and not to dwell too much on it. The quirk of fate was not a quirk at all. It was a well-laid trap. For Michael Magnum. When I mentioned a third time about the loony he bet one dollar that I would not see the old man next day.

I did see the lunatic the next day and promptly sent an e-mail to Magnum reminding him he owed me one dollar. I ribbed him gently. If he was willing to bet again I would like to parlay my winnings. He agreed and lost. I had two dollars coming from him.

Magnum never lost to anybody. Fate reminded him of that. He was irritated and upped the ante. Two dollars became four dollars. Four dollars became eight. Eight begat sixteen and sixteen begat thirty-two. If thirty-two begat sixty-four can one hundred and twenty eight be far behind?

Magnum wanted to get back all he was losing. The old lunatic never failed to show himself to me. (God bless him.) Magnum trusted me completely. (God bless him too.)

I am not an Euler or a Gauss or Neumann or Gödel. But after consecutively winning the bet which was doubling daily, for thirty five days. I calculated it out. (I have this gizmo called a digital calculator. You too can hold it in your palms, it won't bite you.)

I e-mailed Magnum bringing to his notice that he owed me dollars two raised to the power of thirty-five. I suggested to him that he better stop the game before he went broke. Everything about Magnum is grand. He is a grand sport. In his reply mail he laughed (through an emoticon). He asked me to name a bank and city.

I naturally thought of Zurich. And the most famous, the most secretive, the most secure bank, the D'or D'or et Fils. Magnum created an account for me and wired the full odd billions, within twenty-four hours. He sent my account ID and password by encrypted mail. Michael Magnum is one heck of a swell guy. (That those billions were peanuts for him is a different matter.)

I was out of town for a few days. On Monday I went to my usual haunt for strolling, in the city park. Sure enough I met the goose that laid the golden eggs for me. The old loco sat quietly under a tree gawking at the trees and birds, smiling widely, inanely.

Since he was instrumental in my getting the billions I just wanted to have a look at him from close quarters. I casually walked towards him. I have already described his nakedness and general features. Except, from near you could see innumerable creases on his forehead, cheeks and around the eyes. That day his eyes were blue and shining. I was at a distance of about twenty feet from him as I inspected him. I mentally thanked him (out of a sense of humor) and was about to depart when he beckoned me.

I was hesitant, for you never know with these crazy guys. Some of them are violent and the strength of a mad man is proverbial. He beckoned again. His smile was charming, in spite of those blackened toothless gums. I felt an attraction. I went and stood by him. He patted the patch of grass on the ground, gesturing me to sit down. I obliged.

"It is mine, give it to me.", he said gazing at my shirt pocket. I had a ballpoint pen. I touched the pen instinctively and held on to it.

"At least half of it." he pleaded. Then I knew he was a real nut. I took out the pen, removed the cap and asked humorously,

“Which half do you want?” I showed him the cap. He shook his head negatively. I offered him the unprotected stub of the pen. He shook his head again. I explained to him, as to a child, “See, the cap in my left hand is one half. This, in the right hand is the other half. Which half do you want?”

“Not this, not that.” the old man said, “But the other half.” It almost looked like some childish riddle to me.

“What other half is there?” I asked waving both hands in front of him.

“The other half in D’or D’or et Fils.” he said distinctly and with dignity!

I was stunned. I was literally tongue-tied. How the hell did he know about my affair with Michael Magnum? It was improbable; impossible. I pretended I had not heard him properly.

“Beg your pardon?” I said. It was very lame, I knew.

The mad man replied in a very reasonable voice,

“Come son, no games. I said D’or D’or et Fils. You heard it properly. There is only one bank in the world by that name. There is only one man in the world who goes by the name of Michael Magnum, who is a friend of yours and a trillionaire at the same time. Have I made myself clear? Do I have to repeat?”

My mouth went dry. Since I was unable to speak right then, I just nodded my head. I looked furtively around to see if anybody was listening to our conversation. Fortunately we were in an almost secluded spot.

The old man continued.

“You got your billions because of me. So it is only reasonable that you give me half of it. If I were a really greedy shark I would have demanded ninety percent of the moolah. I am a highly reasonable man, you see.”

I recovered gradually. And got thinking. I have a weakness. When somebody argues with me, I don’t know how, but I invariably come to accept his way of thinking. The lunatic’s demand seemed logical and reasonable to me. It was really true – if I had not spotted him continuously for thirty-five days I would not be having my billions.

I smiled at last.

“Okay, pop. I agree to your proposal.”

“Now that is real gentlemanly. Are you sure you are willing to give me my half? No cheating?”

“No cheating, I promise.”

“That is good.” grandpa replied, “Nobody, especially you, can ever cheat me. You know what I will do if you cheat me? Do not think that you can agree for now and give me the slip once you are out of here. You know what I will do? I will squeeze my balls till you beg me to stop.” He burst out laughing at what he thought was a really good joke. I smiled. A good-hearted, harmless crank I guessed.

“I see you do not believe me.” he said looking at me, “Maybe a little demonstration will convince the monsieur?”

I was about to remonstrate. The joke was moving towards the farcical and further towards the obscene. Better beat a tactful retreat, I was thinking.

To my horror, the old man actually thrust his palm into the recess between his thighs and gripped his own pudenda.

At that very moment I felt an invisible hand grip *my* balls. It was eerie, fantastic, unbelievable. The old goat tightened the grip on his balls and squeezed hard. I yelled sharply. The pain was excruciating. I was incapable of making any kind of movement with my body. I had read in a dozen books, of the treatment they used to inflict on prisoners at a certain red building at Dzerzhinsky Square. Those images floated past my reeling eyes. There was only one way out for me. Gag and faint.

The lunatic in front of me mercifully released his grip on himself and smiled his toothless smile.

“That was for starters, as my favorite author would say.” he said gently.

It took me a few seconds to recover. Miraculously the pain vanished as quickly as it had come.

I told him reproachfully, “Papa, that was quite unnecessary. You know I would honor the deal. If you want I will give you a written note.”

He was beaming.

"Thank you. But I was just indulging in some innocent fun. I like you. You have a good heart. Now let me tell you something. I am saying this seriously."

He suddenly swept the ground in front of him with his right hand and scooped out the earth. He showed his open palm. Shards of grass, mud and sand lay there. He extended his left hand, palm up. He weighed both hands in imaginary scales. Like a ham actor he declaimed loudly,

"This, here in my left hand, I hold your billions. This, here in my right hand, I hold, as you can see, mud, earth, grass and sand. I weigh them. To me, sir, they weigh the same. But in my heart, I value the contents of my right hand more."

It was funny. He was outdoing the best of ham actors. His wizened eyebrows were dancing in delight. I had to laugh heartily.

Quite unexpectedly the crazy man threw the contents of his right hand: mud, earth, grass sand and all into his mouth and began to chew vigorously. I was aghast. I winced. To chew sand between toothless gums is not a pleasant sport. He did not spit out. He chewed; he masticated with enthusiasm and swallowed the whole darned mess. There seemed to be no end to his mad tricks.

He let me simmer down. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as if he had just eaten the choicest of Swiss chocolates.

"That makes two of us, if I may be permitted to drag in my favorite author," he said.

I was anxious to know who his favorite author was, but I was more curious to know what he meant. Without my being aware of it, I had already come to like the crazy man immensely. I said in jest,

"Excuse me my gymnosophist. You could be a crazy old mattoid for all I care, but I would prefer to be a bit sane, if you don't mind, that is. Ha ha, excuse me if I laugh."

"Gymnosophist, ha ha," he laughed, "I like it. But I maintain sir, we are two of a kind."

I was puzzled, and raised my brows exaggeratedly. He explained.

"Quite simple. I indulge in dreaming. You indulge in dreaming. That makes two of us."

From the moment I sat in front of this nutter everything was going haywire. I was feeling light-headed. There was no longer any point in trying to be sensible. I tagged along with him.

"You, venerable philosopher, fantasize. I dream. There is a difference there."

"Essentially none my boy. We shall have a proper dialogue at length on that interesting topic some other day. Do you know why I said you were dreaming?"

"Tell me."

"You were dreaming of your billions, you poor sod."

I was roused.

"Oh, come on sachem. Michael Magnum is a real person. As real as you and I. My bet with him was real. I have printouts of my e-mails to prove it. The bank is more real and solid than both of us."

"But your billions are not."

"What do you mean?" I asked. Every odd minute the crazy man was either talking or doing something unexpected.

He pointed to my shoulder bag.

"Take it out and talk with them," he suggested.

The old man knew I had a cell phone in my bag. Was it an educated guess? Quite probably. If so, was he really a crazy man? I did not know. If he was not mad, loco, nutty then how could he eat a salad of mud, grass and sand? How could he sit there under the tree practically naked, with sharp blades of grass, sand and thistles sticking into his bare ass? I did not know. I was confused.

As if hypnotized, I took out the cell phone. I pulled out my pocket notebook and found the numbers and code words and passwords. I connected to the DDF.

"D'or D'or et Fils," announced a voice, dignified and vibrating in the rarified frequency of big money.

I explained who I was, who Magnum was (though that was unnecessary) and what had transpired between us and what Magnum had done for me, through the agency of DDF. The satellite linked voice listened patiently.

"All of that is true sir," it explained. I smiled at the old man from the corner of my eyes.

"Then my billions."

"They are safest and most permanent and most fixed," the voice assured. Something did not sound right—the way he was using the words and stressing them in an odd rhythm.

"Fixed? I can't quite get it."

"Yes sir, you can't quite get *at* it. Your money; you see, it is more than fixed. It is frozen."

I froze.

"How do you mean?"

"You may not be aware of this. You see, we have different types of accounts. The account Mr. Magnum created for you is what you call, in ordinary terms, a kind of one-way street. You can put in, but you cannot take out. If you want to, you may put in a few more billions."

"But that is ridiculous."

"We have a wide range of customers throughout the world, with equally wide range of requirements. So we have many types of accounts. Mister Magnum opened this account especially for you, sir."

"But there should be some special contingency under which the money can be drawn?"

"Oh, yes."

"What is it?" I asked eagerly.

"In the event of your death, sir. Drawable by Michael Magnum." The voice waited patiently to see if I had further questions.

If I had a regular telephone with the cradle, I would have slammed it down. I switched off my cell phone and threw it.

The old man rose (off his haunches from a sitting position, without pressing the hands on the ground), picked up my phone and handed it to me with an expression of mock condolences.

I dialed Michael Magnum. I briefly explained to him my encounter with the Zurich gentleman and shouted at him,

"What the hell have you done?"

He listened patiently to a few more expletives from me and said,

"Boy, billions do not come so easily. You see, you have to sweat for it. Quite a lot." I kept quiet.

"Anything else, boy?", he asked.

"Nothing. Thank you." I put the phone back in the bag.

And then I burst out laughing uncontrollably. I laughed till my belly ached. The crazy old man too joined.

A couple of passers-by looked at us in a peculiar manner. They could not decide who was the crazier of the two. The laughter subsided and gave way to giggles. The giggles rose in ripples. The ripples ebbed away.

Crazy said, "If I may be permitted to quote my favorite author.." I caught on.

"This is the way the cookie crumbles.", I supplied.

"Easy come, easy go.", he rounded it off.

After a moment's silence he said,

"You see it has taken a big load off your mind. I can see your heart has become lighter."

"Yes. In a way, that money was never mine. It was sitting thousands of miles away from here in some godforsaken sector of a godforsaken hard disk. It was as tangible as a dream. Poetically I would say it was a common dream shared by Magnum, you and me."

Crazy nodded. Gazing at the distant clouds, he said,

"Life itself is a vast unending dream. You and I have our petty dreams within that dream."

His words touched an unsuspected chord in my heart. I almost felt I understood him. And then intuition failed me. All I could was to doodle on the grass. Dusk was fast approaching. The air was getting chilly.

The crazy coot said, "Well, we had an interesting evening. Let us toast to it." I looked at him quizzically.

He swept his hands behind his back and brought them forward. There were two paper cups in his hands. Hot steam was rising from them. I smelt the fragrance of my favorite drink—coffee. He smiled and offered me a cup. I did not understand how he did it, nor did I care a rap. I took the cup. We sipped in silence.

I felt as if I was standing on the edge of a thin borderline. I was not even sure what lay on the other side. It could be the land of dreams. It could be the depthless region of insanity, where the old man apparently stood. He was beckoning gently. I wavered and hovered on the border. The pull of temptation from the other side was strong.

With a jolt, I stepped back into the reality of the present; or what I thought to be such. The crazy man was observing me intently, a thin smile playing at the corner of his lips.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I uttered, not knowing what I meant.

We had finished the coffee. Crazy coot said,

"We had a good meeting my lad. I like you. You can meet me any time you feel like." To this day I do not know how it happened. I just accepted his friendship totally, without reservation.

"Where do we meet?" I asked, as if it was the most natural question.

"Not to worry. You will be guided. It is enough if you have the intention.", he replied. It was a very strange reply. The light was quickly fading. We stood up. Suddenly he embraced me. I was subconsciously expecting the fetid odor from his dirty body to engulf me. To my utter surprise the aroma of jasmine was emanating from him. It was pleasing and confusing at the same time.

I shook his hand. And then slapped my forehead with my open palm. I had all the while forgotten to ask his name. He understood immediately, the crazy wily wise old coot. He laughed loudly and answered my unasked question.

"To-day my name is Jestus. To-morrow it could be Jesticus, or Laffenstein or Bagus, Bagston, Baginsky, Bagliere, Baggenhein, Bagliano; anything. I tell you what; you call me by a different name every time you meet me! "

It was a fitting end to an outlandish evening. I looked around. Night had set in. The park was poorly lit. The fox said,

"And now you have to excuse the painful pressure on the prostate of a poor old man." I understood. He turned and went behind a tree to relieve his bladder.

I had deliberately withheld my name from him. He called out from behind the tree.

"Good night mister Wide Heart. Pick up the empty cups, my lad and drop them at the bin near the gate. I do not like clutter or litter."

I was not surprised. If he knew of Magnum and D'or et Fils it was logical (sic) he should know my name. The computer geeks use the phrase, fuzzy logic, while dealing with certain software programs. My evening had gone further than the supremely fuzzy. It had gone beyond dizzy. I waited for a considerable time for the crazy man to come out. Everything was silent. The darkness around the park was thickening. I went up to the tree and peered around. He was not there. He had vanished.

An inexplicable thrill of happiness engulfed me, I picked up the empty cups and strode briskly towards the exit gates, whistling and waving.

* * * * *

2) From chapter2

We rested on the rock for a long time, neither of us speaking. I was in a state between alertness and drowsiness. Thoughts were forming somewhere, far, far below, but they did not come up, floating to the surface. It was a very pleasant feeling.

Bagus was gently murmuring,

"This is how fantasy works. How dream and reality merge."

His words caught me off guard. What did he mean, I wondered.

"What do you mean?", I asked, now fully alert.

"I imagined quite interesting things for twenty four hours, did I not?", he replied.

"What do you mean by imagining? The events actually happened, did they not?"

"I don't care a whit whether they happened or not. I imagined them"

"But they happened.", I persisted.

"I imagined their happening too."

"But I, as a second witness was there."

"I imagined you too."

This was going too far, even by the fuzzy-dizzy logic.

"Shut up. I don't care if you imagined me. I was there. I am here."

A most peculiar smile rose on his face.

"You imagined you were there. You imagined me. I imagined you."

I got irritated, hot and angry, step by step. I shouted loudly,

"Do you mean to say the events of the past twenty four hours never happened?"

He replied calmly,

"Imagining the event and witnessing its occurrence are not different. Don't get worked up. Let it go. Anyway, what twenty four hours are we talking about here?"

The last question angered me again. I began,

“Your frigging mongrel, your frigging black hole, the poor students, Harry and Jug, the gorillas, the rattlesnake...”

Bagnomura had raised his hand in protest. There was something eerie in his gesture. Joining the index finger and the thumb, he pecked in the air, pointing at my wrist.

“What is the time like, dear?”

I had forgotten all about time. I checked my watch. It was about two p.m. Same as the previous day when we had the not so barmecidal feast.

And then I noticed the date. It was the eleventh!!

I went cold. All reason, all logic was screaming at me that it should have been the twelfth. My heart almost skipped a few beats. It was impossible, impossible, illogical. Maybe, the watch has stopped working, I thought. I looked again. The seconds hand was moving steadily, beg your pardon, as steadily as the seconds hand of a clock. Maybe, the internal mechanism is faulty, I thought. But it seemed to be a faint possibility. A tidal wave of confusion swept over me. Every cell in my brain assured me that the events of the past twenty-four hours had actually occurred. Memory, clear-cut and detailed was there to prove it.

Bagus as usual, had caught my thoughts.

“You can have a clear and distinct memory of dream too. Memory proves nothing. It, by itself, is a gigantic delusion, called maya. But you are not yet ready for that. Don’t bother much lad. Be happy you enjoyed all that happened.”

I sat brooding for a long time, unable to extricate myself from the skein of thoughts.

At last Bagus said,

“Drop it lad. Don’t brood. Brooding is poison for the soul.”, and thumped me on the back. His thump had a strange effect on me. All worry dropped away from me. I felt buoyant and carefree.

Who cares, I thought. The events of the past twenty-four hours did really happen. I told myself. So, if my watch showed that it is still to- day, then,

I HAD GAINED ONE EXTRA DAY IN MY LIFE !

I laughed aloud, releasing the pent up emotions. Bagston joined me. The woods echoed with our laughter.

“Let us close this chapter properly.” Bagus said, “By completing our lunch and then we can say goodbye.” I said, nothing could be better than that. Bagus slid open the cover of the black hole.

Bagus had schnapps, samovar, vindaloo and *zuppa di verdura* and patchouli. I took graham crackers and Madiera cake.

We celebrated the glorious lunch with a bottle of Bourbon, shaken *and* stirred for a change. I surreptitiously glanced at my watch a couple of times. The seconds hand was moving, for sure. Needless to say that all cutleries went back into the mocking black hole.

When it was all over, Bagus cleared his throat and declaimed at the top of his lungs,

“It is all a dream. Dream I can, dream I will and I will keep on dreaming for ever, praise the lord.”

I smiled. Bagus stood up. Turning clockwise, he made obeisance to the four major directions. He put his hands on my shoulder and said,

“Come, pal, I will accompany you up to the highway. Somebody is waiting to take you back to the city.”

We trudged along the now familiar route. When we neared the scene of the attempted robbery and rape, I was urged by curiosity. I looked around carefully for clues. There was nothing to indicate that anything out of the ordinary had happened. I could not find the hole where the gorilla had buried the plates and pieces of knife and the pistol. I gave up. Then, Bagus mischievously pointed to the trunk of a palm tree. I remembered Bagus had made a cut on the trunk. Sure enough, the blaze mark was blazing innocently in the afternoon sunlight. I ran my fingers along it to make sure my eyes were not deceiving me. I felt hopeful that at least there was one piece of evidence with which I could badger Bagus. He simply said,

“First, we have to find the sharp instrument that caused it, before jumping to foolish conclusions.”

I deflated. Really I deflated the way an American citizen “hurts” when somebody hurts him.

I learnt a lesson with Bagus at that spot. You cannot barney with Bagus. He can easily make the impossible possible and the possible, impossible.

We reached the highway and stopped right near the curb. A Cadillac was grounded, apparently. The driver (evidently the owner too, by the way he was dressed) stood outside, anxiously on the lookout for help.

He noticed Bagus first and his face registered revulsion and disappointment. Bagus asked him, "Wanna help governor?"

"Yeah", he grunted, "My Caddie has stalled."

"Excuse me, guv, you can surely use your cell phone." The man looked at Bagus as if he had just proved his madness.

"Sure did. First thing. Guy takes one hour to reach here."

"My question was preliminary and logically inevitable. You have to start from first principles in any process of deductive reasoning, you know." Bagus intoned in Bostonian accents.

The man's eyes widened. He looked Bagus up and down. An ex-professor gone nuts, he decided.

Bagus bent his thumb back at me and told him, "My son can repair it."

The dude inspected me, weighing me. He was smart, sharp I could see. Unfortunately, all I know about cars can be summed up in one word – nothing. I was hesitating. The fellow was accustomed to instant gratification. I could smell the stink of money. Bagus pushed me forward,

"Come son. Help a gentleman in need." I felt utterly foolish. I opened the hood of the Cadillac and peered inside— like a joker in a comedy. I moved my hands vaguely over the unfamiliar parts of the engine.

Suddenly, I was aware of a tingling sensation in my arms. They were moving involuntarily, disdainfully detaching themselves from the electrical signals of my befuddled brain. I watched detachedly, my detached hands. They pulled some wires, tightened some screws – I was not sure what they did.

From the back of my head I heard Bagus telling the dude, "Now, governor, start the engine."

The man went in and started the engine. The engine purred into life. I hastily shut down the hood. I did not dare look at it for a second time. The engine was idling. The man peered from behind the window.

"You going towards the city?"

"Yes, in fact.", I said.

"Hop in. I will drop you."

I rounded the front, to reach the other side. I felt a secret tap of Bagus's hand on my rump. His touch told its own story. It was telling me— it is OK. Do not worry. Bye, my lad. Have a nice day. All is a dream. Live in peace. Ah, and come back again and see me some day. I slid in the front seat, beside the man. He noticed my clean hands with suspicion but made no comments.

"Ciao." Bagus said. I waved. The Cadillac picked up speed. It had not occurred to the owner of the Cadillac to invite Bagus, I wondered. On the way to the city, the man engaged in small talk.

"My name is Dorian Blank."

I said, "I remember now. Is it not the name of the most famous lawyer in the city?"

He was pleased. "I guess so."

My name is "Wide Heart." I volunteered.

"That old man, your dad?"

"Not really. Close friend, sort of."

"He seems to be well educated. Must have been a professor before he went loco."

"Could be. It is highly probable."

"You don't know?"

"He has partial, selective amnesia. He does not remember some things of his past."

"Pity. I could pay ten thousand dollars to acquire his accent. What do you do Mr. Heart?"

"Nothing earth-shaking I am afraid. I am a freelance writer."

"Does it pay?"

"Not much. Matter of fact, I write once in a while, just for the pleasure of it."

His lips tightened. I answered his doubt.

"I was lucky I guess. My grandpa willed some money for me when he died. Not big money, but enough to live comfortably."

I felt his disapproval. He did not like people who did not have ambition. His manner cooled down.

The car halted at the traffic lights at the Briand Square. I said,

"This suits me. I will get down here."

"Are you sure? I can drop you home."

"Thanks. I have some work here. The home is not far; just two minute's walk."

We shook hands. He said as I got out,

"Nice to have met you."

The lights changed and the Cadillac purred. I watched it disappear amidst the traffic. I walked to the nearest deli and had a cup of steaming coffee.

I reached my lonely house—den would describe it better. I washed, changed and plunked on the bed. I drew the covers over my head, curled up and shut my eyes tightly. A peculiar thought crossed my mind before I fell asleep. I do not care if I slept for twenty four hours at a stretch, for I had gained an extra day this week!

The first thing I did when I woke up in the morning was to go out and pick up the newspaper from the letter-box.

I looked up the date. It was the twelfth. So, so, so, I cogitated. I could not proceed further! After a while I gave up. I thought wryly, at least I had made a Guinness record of sorts. I had conjured up a sentence that started with a dozen 'so, so' s that went nowhere.

I brushed my teeth, washed my face, took my coffee and bathed. I was not sure if I was imagining all those actions or if I was actually carrying them out. I could be imagining the very house I was living in. It could be in any part of the world. It could be in the US of A or Australia or GB, or India. Damn it, I cursed.

Then from somewhere from the back of my vaporous head, the voice of Bagus soothed me, "Take it easy lad. Don't cogitate. Let go. Engage yourself in daily routine. The routine is a most powerful thing. It anchors you firmly to the world around you. Do your daily crossword and Sudoku." The words were extremely comforting.

I read the newspaper from end to end. I opened the all familiar eleventh page.

The daily cryptic crossword and Sudoku ('very hard') smiled at me. I eagerly took up my pen.

I was already salivating like the Pavlovian dog.

* * *

3) From chapter3

"It was an intuition of mine. But for once I was wrong."

"You win some, you lose some." The lawyer remarked philosophically. The car sped towards the city.

Late in the night, Marlon was in his bed and slowly drifting into sleep. Somewhere, in the borderland, the submerged memory that was nagging him, came up. But it was too late. He had crossed into sleep.

The laughter he had heard from Bagus's throat in the forest! He had heard it somewhere. His subconscious mind made the connection in his dream. He saw the outer walls of the writer's house. He noticed the blue swastika, glowing faintly. The swastika began to oscillate rhythmically like the pendulum of a wall clock. Then it began to giggle. The giggles grew louder. The chip grew larger. The glow too increased. The giggles bloomed into full throated laughter. It was an old man's laughter, but powerful nonetheless. He immediately recognized that voice. It was the voice of that mad fellow he had met in the jungle! Marlon was startled by the revelation. He wanted to wake up, but heavy keif was dragging him down.

The swastika had by then grown bigger than the wall. It flew into the air and began to expand further. It was so bright that the street below was lit, as if by a dozen flood lights. The mocking laughter was like the roar of the Niagara. Marlon was paralyzed. He could not even shut his eyes.

In the centre of the scintillating swastika, the face of Bagus, thirty feet wide, ear to ear, was glaring down at him. The same red and green eyes he had seen in the evening, now blazed like lasers. His roaring laughter was so powerful, the windows in the street below rattled. The echoes rolled off the distant clouds, like thunder. In response, an aerie of hundreds of eagles circled the swastika, emitting piercing screams. Below, owls from the tree tops hooted ominously. Hundreds of dogs in the

street lifted their heads and bayed loud and long. Four elephants entered the compound of Marlon's house and trumpeted fiercely. Sixty nine hyenas gathered together and tried their best to imitate Bagus in the sky. Fifty three horses came stamping the ground and neighing fiercely. The city was submerged in the terrible din. Frightened citizens ran to the rooftops, stretched their hands skyward and wailed in terror.

When Marlon screamed and woke up, his whole body was shaking violently. The bed was damp with sweat. He swore then and there never to meddle with Bagus again.

In the morning, he stood in his balcony, completely tamed down. Dad and Siren were on their stairway, looking like pale cadavers. To the left, bully too, stood trying to avoid their gazes. They all managed to look one another and instinctively knew that all of them had been visited by the same nightmare.

Laffenstein narrated the above story with his customary elocution and fanciful fustion.

He popped the last of the peanuts into his mouth (all the thirty two teeth were glittering white, solid, in place and original). He said with a smirk.

"After those blokes ran away in haste, I sat in my cave and laughed for one whole week."

I believed him. He could very well laugh continuously for one month, if it fancied him. As I have said umpteen times, there is no telling what Bagus was capable of doing. He took the empty paper cornet from me. He crumpled both cups in his palm, got down from the platform and walked a few paces. Using his bare hands and stiffened fingers, he removed clods of earth until a hole one foot deep was formed. He carefully placed the crumpled paper in the hole, shoved back the mud, and softly patted the ground. "Dust to dust", I heard him mumbling softly.

"What with all the talking and munching of these peanuts, my throat feels parched.", he announced. He rose and approached me. There were two bottles of coke in his hands. He blew onto the top of the bottles. The lids fell off. He offered me one. While in his company I never worry about food and drinks. When he had taken a few sips, a chimp hopped up to him from nowhere and jerked the bottle out of his hands. I was startled but recovered immediately. The chimp half emptied the bottle and gave it back to Bagus.

"Thanks pal", said Bagus, half-emptied it again and passed it on to the chimp. The bottle was full. The game of passing the bottle continued a few more times. Taking a final gulp, Jestus thrust the full bottle into the primate's hands, patted its rump and said "Off you go, boy." The chimp ran off with the bottle. I bent down and collected the lids from the ground. I put my empty bottle and the lids in my shoulder bag, intending to dispose them off in the city. Bagus does not tolerate litter in the forest.

The time of parting had arrived.

"Well, so long, Bagus", I said shaking his hands warmly, "Thanks for everything."

"Ah, boy, nothing to it. You are welcome any day, any time."

I did not bother to look at my palms. I knew with a certainty that Jestus's hand would be clean and spotless – like his conscience as he had joked on an occasion.

Very, very reluctantly I turned my back to him and walked out of the woods. The farewell notes of a cuckoo followed me all the way.

* * * * *

4) From chapter4

"Two sentences? For such a gravid question? That is a harsh sentence, dear judge." he laughed and continued, while a wide range of emotions like amusement, bemusement, mockery sudden elation at the discovery of an enlightening concept, paraded on his face in exaggerated proportions. A ham actor would have sold his soul to obtain a copyright of that performance.

"Where am I right now? I am here, I am there. I am up, I am below. I am everywhere. In my mind I am sitting on the highest cliff of Machu Pichhu. I am sitting in the company of meditating yogis on the mount Kailas. I am right now inside that cabin in the Titanic where Jack was handcuffed to a post and where Rose cut off the darbies with an axe. Right now I am at a distance of ten kilometers from the sun directly gazing at its blazing center. Even physically, I tell you, you miserable pupil of Sigmund Freud, I am now spread everywhere. In the room where your henchmen locked me up yesterday, there are my foot prints and finger prints where you can find thousands of dejecta from my skin. They are all parts of me. I spent half a night in that dungeon breathing to stay alive. Innumerable molecules and cells that were inside my lungs and nose are now performing a playful pavane there.

The nerves in my body and the cells in my brain are constantly engaged in intense electrical activity – just like your body. Any physicist worth his salt will tell you that where there is electrical activity, there is a magnetic field. A magnetic field theoretically spreads out to infinity. Thus even physically, I am every where. And so are you. Ha ha ha. You are in me and I am in you. Ha ha ha. How strange and how puerile of you to ask me where I am ! You ask me what I am doing now. There is a catch there. Did you catch it? No? I will reveal it you out of compassion. The thing you call, now, comes into existence only if you focus. Do you understand? If there is no focus, then, now and then are all here and there. This is a very deep mystery zealously guarded by the elite of the inner-most circle. I am revealing it to you gratis. If then, then and now are here , what happens now? I tell you. I am sitting in this mimicry of a chair in this hideously painted room haranguing you. I am also witnessing the battle at Waterloo. I am looking at the poor prisoner who is being tortured right now at the Lubyanka. I am standing by the side of Mallory who is breathing his last on mount Everest. I am now hovering behind Nero, who is fiddling while you know what Rome is doing. I am moving round the court physicians who are embalming the body of Tutankhamen. Right now I am standing besides Socrates, as he is lifting the cup of hemlock to his lips. I can clearly see Sherlock Holmes wrestling with Moriarity and both of them tumbling into the ravine below. On the other continent, I am observing Perry Mason rise and smartly say, ‘I object, your honor’”.

The psychiatrist shuddered violently. My god, what have I got into, he was wondering. And by god how do I stop him, was a more pressing thought.

He was feeling groggy. He felt as if he was crawling out after a fifteen round bout with Joe Frazier. This old crazy coot is a tough customer. Okay. So what? I have handled tougher cases in my career. I have a lot of weapons in my arsenal. Or, as the scatter-brained motor mouth would say, I have a lot of quivers in my arrow. Let us see to-morrow. He yawned and stretched.

The receding back of Bagenheimer was about to cross the boundary of his vision. Suddenly Bagston turned back and said in a feeble but distinct voice,

“Sir, but excuse me. One does not put quivers in the arrow. One puts arrows in the quiver. Your misshapen sentence illustrates neither a metaphor nor a synecdoche.”

“I did not say anything!!”, Jay Paul shouted, losing control.

“I know. But all the same, one does not put quivers in the arrow. Bon appetite professor.”

* * *

Bagus was in the couch, Jap Paul sitting by his side, Pinky was fiddling with the audio recorder.

“ Watch your breath mister Bagus. Close your eyes. Take a slow deep breath. Feel it filling your lungs. OK? Now slowly breathe out, no hurry. Easy does it. As the breath leaves your lungs, you can feel the tension going out. You are feeling like a deflated balloon. Your chest is relaxing.”

Jay Paul was pleased to see that Bagliotto was following his instructions obediently and with case.

“ Yes, that is it. Breath in and out. In and out. Slowly, peacefully. Your arms are relaxed. Now the stomach is relaxed. Relax, relax. The relaxation is spreading to your legs. Down, down to the tips of your toes. Down, down. You are sinking, sinking into peace complete peace...”

“Now you are listening to my voice. Your friend and mentor. I am your guardian. You will hear no other sound except my voice. The voice of your friend. Your protecting doctor. You have full trust in that voice. Down, down, peace ,peace, complete rest.

“And now listen. I will start the countdown. I will count from ten downwards. At the count of zero you will be fully hypnotized. You will hear only my voice and obey it. Follow me.”

The body of Bagliardo, lying in the couch seemed totally relaxed. Not a muscle twitched. His face had lost all its previous tension. It was in full repose. Even the innumerable creases on his face had vanished ! His breathing was so soft it was hardly noticeable. Jay Paul grabbed the initiative.

“ Ten,...six..two, one, zero !” He stopped to watch the figure on the couch. He turned and signaled to Pinky.

And then the figure on the couch took up the countdown logically in a mathematical progression.

“ Minus one, minus two, minus three...”, it went on and on ticking off, with unerring precision, like a metronome.

JP was startled at first, but he recovered fast and took the control. By that time Bagliostro was at minus twelve.

“ Stop it !” he said firmly with authority.

“ I cannot. Minus thirteen ,minus fourteen...”

“ Wake up!” Jay Paul commanded.

Bagliotto woke up, opened his eyes and smiled ruefully. “I could not stop it doctor. I was just carrying your order to its end. An order is an order.”

“This was unusual and unexpected. Okay, let us start again.”

Jap Paul tried the induction two more times. Bagliardi faithfully went beyond minus fourteen and minus seventeen, before JP woke him up.

“Entirely unusual. I have never seen a countdown go beyond zero”.

The old doddering Bagus had vanished. The ever fresh, alert, humor-filled Bagliottto was present.

“Doctor, but excuse me. You seem to have forgotten your college physics. There is an absolute zero in physics. It is minus two hundred and seventy three degrees Celcius of temperature. I was proceeding towards that absolute zero and then stop there. While you were inducting me, you wanted my obedience. I was demonstrating absolute obedience. Pardon the pun, dean, but the human mind can be irrationally logical at times. Pardon the paradox.”

Both figurative and physical lines of worry manifested on the learned brows of the doctor.

* * *

“First I will tell you briefly what I am going to do. I will place two electrodes on your left and right temples. The idea is to impart measured electrical shocks to your brain, for an extremely short duration – just an impulse. The strength and duration are controlled from the console there, so don’t worry. This method has proved to be empirically useful in many cases, especially in curbing violent tendencies. We can also monitor the vital parameters of your body, like heart beats, breathing, temperature, sweating etc; but I do not want to stick so many probes into your body. I will be watching you all the while, so you have nothing to worry. If you want to shout or groan or scream do not hold it back, go ahead and get it out of your system. It benefits you a lot. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

“None whatever.”

“You do not feel anxious? A lot of patients get very nervous and need sedation. I can give you a shot if you want.”

“I need nothing from nobody.”

“Shall we go ahead, then?”

“By all means.”

Jay Paul placed the delivery unit on Bagston’s head. It could sit tightly on the head, pressing with enough grip to prevent it from sliding, if the head or neck jerked. At the two ends, in place of earphones, there were circular silver strips roughly one inch in diameter. They were the actual electrodes that delivered current to the body. A twin core flexible, insulated wire ran from the unit to the back of the console.

“Close your eyes Bagus. Don’t open them. It is not advisable to keep them open when you receive the shock. If the reflex action is severe, it may harm the eyes. Shall I put eye-patches?”

“ No, not necessary.”

The doctor said to Pinky Ajum.

“Pinky, let us start with the lowest setting for the initial impulse. Set the voltage to one point five.”

Bagliano said without opening his eyes.

“Why, doctor, that is nothing. It is the voltage of a single battery of an ordinary electric wall clock. It won’t shock even a baby.”

“Yes Bagus, you are correct. I am testing the console, see. Kind of setting up.”

“OK”

“Pinky, make it twelve volts.”

Bagus said, “That is the voltage of a common lead– acid battery set. Sorry, I hope I am not intruding. Do you want me to keep my trap shut?”

"I see you are knowledgeable Bagus. You can talk; no objection to that. As I said, you can groan or scream, ha ha. That happens often with over frightened patients."

"OK."

Pinky pushed the button.

"How does it feel, Bagus?"

"Very mild tingling. Like minute ants crawling inside my skull. It is a pleasant sensation."

"Good. Pinky, step it up to forty please."

Pinky set the dial to forty and pushed the button. Paul did not ask Bagus how he felt. Because at forty volts almost all people feel a shock. The shock may not be alarming but the body will exhibit reflex action. Paul waited. There was no response from Bagus. A bit surprised, he asked.

"Did you feel it Bagus?"

"Feel what?"

"The shock."

"Dear earl, are you joking ? Forty volts you say? I feel as if a soft breeze is playing on my forehead."

At the mention of the word earl, dormant memories in Paul woke up. He was transformed. The slow burning embers of revenge were stoked. His eyes turned red. This time he did not instruct Pinky Ajum. He personally went to the console and set the dial at eighty. Pinky's eyes widened. Then only did she notice that the model in front of her was different from the regular one she had been using all these days. Paul pushed the button. (Fortunately, these types of machines did not need a stop button. Once the push button was activated, they deliver current to the electrodes on the patient's headgear for a very brief time and, automatically go off. The built-in safety was mandatory.)

"How about that, my hero?"

"By that, I suppose, you mean this."

Bagliano said with a touch of deprecation.

"What this?" the doc shouted.

"This sensation I have between my left and right temple. I feel as if a current of nectar is passing between them. Thank you Pedro."

The name "Pedro" did not send Paul three hundred years back. This time Pedro of three hundred years ago came back and occupied the present body of Paul. Paul was in a frenzy. He set the dial to a hundred and ten and pushed the button.

"Take it. That is for the stroke your gave me on my forehead."

Pinky whispered hoarsely, "Doctor, that is dangerous. Hundred and ten is the voltage of our house hold equipment. It is like putting a finger into a live socket." Paul did not hear her. He was breathing hard. There was no reply from Bagliano. Paul pushed the button again. Bagliano did not move.

With trembling hands, Paul moved the dial to two hundred, pushed the button and looked at Bagus expectantly. Bagliano's body jerked violently, but no words came from his mouth.

"Tell me, you thief; how does it feel? That one was for cutting me on my left arm on that day."

After a lapse of five seconds, Bagliano said.

"Earl Pedro, obviously your hand seems to be incapable of hurting me whether it is armed with a sword or with a push-button."

Paul pushed twice in succession. Bagliano's body jerked up twice.

"And now?"

"I stand by my previous remark."

Paul was sweating. He was quite worked up. He turned the dial up. Three hundred! He pushed the button.

"Take that, you arrogant bastard. You will see the button is stronger than your sword. Take that and that, for piercing my right chest. And again take that for stealing my wife! And that, for defeating me in front of my friends and wife. Tell me how you feel, you bastard. And take that !"

He would have gone on pushing and pushing the button if Pinky Ajum's hand had not gripped his arm.

Bagston's body repeatedly jerked violently every time the button was pushed. It was terrible to look at the old frail body rising and falling like a rag doll.

But no groan, no scream came from his mouth. After the cessation of the last shock, Bagliano said calmly.

“ Thank you signor. That was quite generous of you. I thank you for inflicting the electrical shocks. I accept it as justice meted out. Thank you. Now we are even.”

Alongside with Pedro, Satan was attempting to tailgate into Paul. Froth was forming at the sides of his mouth. His nostrils were flaring.

“No, we are not even. I have not heard a single groan from you. I want to hear you scream. I want you to beg for water. I want you to beg abjectly to stop the treatment. I want to see you weep.”

Paul set the dial at four hundred. His jaws were clenched so tightly, Pinky could hear his teeth grinding. She again put a restraining hand on him. With the strength of the devil, Paul brushed her off. She staggered back. She weakly slumped into the chair, fingering the cross, her lips trembling.

Paul pushed the button three times in succession. Bagliano's body convulsed fiercely. He did not utter a single word. Paul had reached the end of frustration. He jabbed the button another three times.

“Watch this Beatrice !”

This time, nothing happened. Bagliano's body did not convulse. There was no reaction. Paul jabbed again. Nothing. And again. Nothing again.

Paul inspected the digital read-out. It read four hundred. He checked the LED indicators. They were glowing red. The power was on. He checked the fuse. It was OK. Lucifer tempted him. He set the dial at four hundred and fifty!. The digital meter showed four hundred and fifty correctly. Other system indicators were all OK. Glowering fiercely at Pinky, he shouted.

“ Beatrice, this goes in your name. watch! ”, and hit the button. Pinky's body tensed. She did not dare to look at Bagliano.

Paul's hand jerked back violently. He had received a shock. To receive an electrical shock at four hundred and fifty volts is not a joke. Paul was surprised. He pushed the button a second time. He was thrown back. His mouth went dry. The muscles of his hand twitched.

It took him some time to recover. He inspected the console. All systems were showing the correct signals. He touched the body of the unit. There was no leakage of electricity. He looked down at his shoes. They were of leather, good quality. And they were resting on a costly carpet. He thought over, biting his lips. He walked up to the cupboard in the wall and took out a pair of rubber gloves. He strode back, adjusting the gloves into his hands. He sat down in front of the console, ready to push.

“ Don't attempt it signor. As I said, you meted out your quota of justice. A firm line has been drawn by fate. You cannot overstep it signor. The referee above has blown the final whistle, my dear conte. It is time to stop the game.” Bagliano's voice was firm and calm.

Pedro did not heed those words. He had confidence in his gloves. They were designed to withstand more than five thousand volts – it was legibly printed on the gloves; the company had tested the gloves in their laboratory.

He pushed.

The jolt sent him back thudding into the chair. His jaws chattered. The tongue went dry. The spasm in the muscles of his hand was so severe his whole arm went numb. His thinking was impaired.

In a last effort, he mustered up all his strength, growled like a wild animal and hit the button.

The shock was tremendous. He leaped in he air and fell on the carpet. He had lost consciousness.

Pinky was nonplussed. She looked at Bagliano desperately. Baglino said calmly,

“ Leave him alone for now. He will come to. There is no danger to his life. Listen, I am quite capable of tearing away these manacles holding me down. But the last act of Karma decides that you have to unshackle me. The keys are on the table there.”

Pinky picked up the keys and came back. She unlocked the straps that bound Bagliano to the table. For that brief moment she had become Beatrice. Bagliano got down as nimbly as a panther. He touched Pinky Ajum on her forearm and said,

“Thank you. By that act, you have freed me from my past and at the same time freed yourself too from the last strand of Karma. Your life henceforth will be fully devoted to the contemplation of the Lord.”

Bagliano knelt beside Paul. He pressed his palm gently on the forehead of Paul. Paul opened his eyes. There was the light of understanding in them. While he lay on the carpet, unconscious, the Unseen Power had purged his mind of the one last vestige of the past karma – the black macula of revenge. He was cleansed.

Paul smiled. Bagus extended his hand and helped Paul stand up. They embraced. It was over.

* * * *

Bagus walked out without looking back. His steps were light, easy like a gentle breeze. The security man at the main gate had already been briefed. He shook hands with Bagus and said. ‘ So long.’ Bagus stepped outside as the gate slid open.

The two ex marine guards were standing there. They greeted him. One of them said. “ Hey old chap, that thrust you gave us was just out of this world. We would like to learn how you did it. Teach us man, we will give you a treat.”

Bagus said, “ Sorry colonel. Those things are top secret. They are highly dangerous. It is a very difficult art and requires many years of dedication and discipline. This art is not for ordinary men.”

“Man, we are ex-marines. We have fought a lot of battles. We are tough men. We will teach you a few tricks in turn.”

They were still arrogant and supremely confident. A pity. Bagus offered his hands and simultaneously shook both of their hands.

He was smiling a wickedly innocent smile.

“It is like this you see colonel.”, he explained indicating his hands.

“I touch you and the power hits you. As simple as that.”

“But nothing has happened to us. Your hand is in fact as soft as a flower.” one of them said.

Bagus, still smiling, said.

“That is the beauty and art of it. Nothing has happened to you, colonels because my hands are still in touch with you. My hands are protecting you. The moment I withdraw, you will faint.”

They laughed out of politeness. So, this man is still a crazy nut, they thought, disappointed.

Bagus withdrew his hand.

Both of them fell unconscious, on the ground.

“ They never understand.”, Bagus said to the security man who was gaping at the fallen bodies. The man had witnessed the whole sequence.

“Drag them inside, friend.”, Bagus advised him. “Otherwise passers-by will mistake them for a pair of winos.”

And he was gone.

* * * *

5) From chapter5

Shube Lakmee was holidaying. She was in the Glorida, east coast. It was a big city, far south of the coast line. Big, clean, well-ordered. For most of the year the weather was warm, the sun shone brightly, but not unbearably hot. Rich people flocked the beach for tan.

She was walking along the sandy beach idly, nothing particular in her mind, idly fancying how she could put more punch into her back hand. A fat beer-bellied person, wearing polo shirt (open buttoned) and Bermuda shorts, bumped into her. Her tennis training helped her from falling. The man, on the contrary, lost his balance and grunted heavily as the breath went out of him.

“Look where you are going.”, she said sharply. Then they both recognized each other. He was Borland, an old friend of hers. She smiled.

“I should have punched you.”

“Oh Shube. So sorry. I was absent minded. Your push was enough to drain my breath. Say, you look extremely fit. Fancy meting you here.”

“ Just holidaying. I had heard of Glorida, but somehow missed seeing it. So, let us see what glory it contains, I thought. Just exploring the city.”

“Glorida got its name for its glorious sunrise over the sea. Now-a-days it is more famous for the races. I am sure you know it.”

“I do not fancy racing. It is a tricky business and so chancy.”

“It is complicated. But if you have brains you can make a living out of it. Matter of fact, I was doing my maths over to-day’s races when you bumped into me.”

“Was it me or was it you?” Shube challenged.

“We will share the guilt fifty fifty, like good business partners.” They both laughed. They were walking together, away from the sea.

"I have a hot tip, Shube, and accurate calculations. Like betting on my favorite horse?"

"Thanks, but no thanks Borland. I don't want to waste money on uncertain speculations."

"Shube, this is a cinch. I swear I have not disclosed the info to anybody. I tell you what. Remember I owe you a hundred dollars. I will bet that money on your behalf."

"Okay. You are a real addict, Borland."

"Done, I will phone my agent right away. But don't you want to know the name of the horse that is going to bring you a fortune?"

She laughed. "I am not that mad after races, I told you. OK, tell me. If I lose, I will curse the horse three times."

"Shube, I am putting your hundred dollars on the horse Brilliant Ramon. It is the favorite and I have inside info it is going to win the Shenandoah Shield."

Lakmee's ears pricked. In the horizon, there was haze and beyond it, white shapeless cloud mass. She could discern gray patches embedded in the mass of the clouds, mixed with a faint suggestion of copper – as if an undecided artist was doodling on a canvass. The copper color grew brighter and the gray mass changed.

Suddenly she saw a face emerge from inside the mass of gray and roan. A hand came out from below. The hand crossed its fist and made a thumbs down gesture. Repeating it insistently. The face, she noticed, was that of an old man. Wild features, eyes bulging, red tongue lolling out.

Shube Lakmee asked Borland in a strange, distant voice.

"Tell me the name of the least favorite."

"It is a horse called My Flanders. It ran three times this season. It came at the bottom, in the also ran list."

"Place my money on Flanders."

Borland was startled. He had never heard of such a suicidal request in his career. He hoped Shube was joking.

"Come again."

"Place the hundred dollars you owe me on Flanders. I mean it."

The face in the cloud beamed. The fist reversed and made the thumbs-up sign. She wondered dreamily if that face carried a name. It was a silly thought, she knew. The hand changed its contour into that of a writing finger. B-A-G-U-S. The letters were large and in rubric. By the time she read the name, it was wiped out. The face was still smiling.

Borland was concerned. Shube was acting strange. He looked at where her gaze was fixed, but found nothing unusual either in the sky or in the low hanging white clouds above the sea.

"Shube, you will lose the money. There is no way that horse can win. Listen to me, I have a lot of experience." Shube Lakmee was back. She was smiling. Her eyes were glowing mysteriously.

"Borland, do me a favor. Don't ask questions. Just bet on the horse Flanders, OK? You can do yourself a favor too by putting your money on that horse."

Borland was thoroughly puzzled. He asked,

"You know something I don't know?"

"My grandpa just told me to lay the money on Flanders. Not only the money. Even my life." She was beaming widely. It made no sense to Borland.

"Okay," he shrugged resignedly. "It is your money." He took out his cell phone and gave instructions to his bookie. He said.

"I would love to offer you a drink but I am late for an appointment. Gotta go. Will you excuse my hasty exit?"

"Bye, wish you all the best. I am staying at the Blue Beach hotel." Borland hurried away.

Shube sauntered, wondering who or what Bagus was.

Next morning, she was woken up by the ringing of the phone. The receptionist from the desk said.

"I am sorry to disturb you miss Shube. But a person called Borland is on the line and insists on talking with you right now."

"It is all right. Put him on."

There was a faint click. The voice of Borland came in loud, clear and filled with cheer.

"Shube, Borland here."

"I know it, you silly."

"Sorry, I mean happy to wake you up."

"Don't beat about the bush. Tell me the good news."

"So you already know?"

"There you go again. It has to be good news. Otherwise you dare not wake me up in the morning."

"OK – I give up. Your horse came first: it was a total upset at the turf."

"Thanks. How much do I get?"

"Shube, you raked in fifty grand."

"Not bad."

"Not bad? It is a fortune for guys like me. I will bring the cheque later. You be there."

"Sure. Your favorite bottle of Scotch will be waiting. And what happened to your favorite horse?"

"Don't ask. I lost hundred dollars on it."

Borland was laughing loudly over the phone.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Shube, do you remember you often called me a smart ass?"

"My memory is not that good in certain matters."

"Ha ha, I lost a hundred on my horse. But I had placed twenty on your goddamned freak. I collected ten grand. I have never dared to do such a stupid thing in my life."

"But stupidity paid off."

"Oh yes, and in style. But seriously, Shube, why did you bet on that nag? Did anybody tip you?"

"Yes, my granddad. He was signaling me frantically while we were on the beach."

"But your grandpa is dead, no?"

"Yes. He was signaling me from the clouds."

She heard Borland's uproarious laugh.

"Shube I seriously advise you to take up a job now."

"Jobs? Not for me."

"Fortune telling." The laughter exploded once more. She joined in.

"Bye, meet you later."

"Bye."

Shube went to the bath room, to wash up. She was happy she gained fifty thousand. But she was more happy because the horse named Flanders had won – against the favorite Ramon. What a fantastic coincidence. Fit to be included in the pages of Ripley, she thought.

Of recent, everything connected with the name Flanders was bringing her good luck and happiness. She was not superstitious, but the fact that the favorite horse had lost must mean something to her. She felt it was a clear indication, one could almost say – though it was silly to think along those lines.

And thinking of indication – what was that strange apparition she saw or imagined she saw in the clouds? The message from the hands was unmistakable. Thumbs down, thumbs up; fantastic. And the face of the old man? Had she imagined it? Had she seen that face somewhere?

She vaguely recollected having seen a raving mad man, jumping and shouting in an alley sometime back. The face in the cloud bore a resemblance. But she was not sure. Whoever it may be, god bless him.

She flew back from Glorida that evening.

* * * * *

It was the last show at the city's famous Green theater. The drama was a runaway success. It was staged on three hundred successive shows. The author, whose reputation as a dramatist was well established, was basking in the glow of lime-light.

He had taken up the ubiquitous theme of love between a man and a woman and had raised it to the level of a sublime experience. He had used inventive, but extremely touching dialogues. In short the drama was the talk of the town. Many people came out of the theatre dabbing their eyes with hand kerchiefs.

Dillon, the top-ranking actor was playing the lead role of Watson, the hero. Catherine, the tempestuous actress was cast against him, depicting the heroine, Pearl. Dillon and Catherine had acted together in two earlier dramas and they had a fine rapport. They had given a dazzling performance, especially in this drama, all viewers agreed. The critics too had concurred. They had praised the

climax scene in the final act, where Watson and Pearl reunite, as one of the best performances. Hollywood was ready to grab them.

“Sure to inspire many reunions in real life.” One leading critic had said in his review.

Ramon had obtained two tickets from a scalper with great difficulty. He had invited Joan and she had accepted with pleasure. Both were seated in the theater ten minutes before the show began.

Soon they were absorbed in the drama. They were familiar with the story. They had read the reviews, the hype, the wild eulogies of some cheap magazines.

But from the first scene of the first act, they had forgotten all they had read and heard. Every line and the enactment was fresh.

The audience were totally immersed in the deluge of audio-visual experiences. There was the complete absence of distractions of any kind. Even the occasional and obtrusive coughs were absent.

Joan and Ramon were transported to a different world as the drama progressed. A gamut of emotions paraded on the stage; like, affection, appreciation, approval, love, jealousy, dislike, dissatisfaction, rejection of egos, separation, sharp soul searching, suffering and agony, mind going over the edge, then at last the miracle of grace, birth of a new understanding, wisdom, the re-discovery of the real love that was there all the time.

Joan gripped Ramon's hands tightly. She had fully identified herself with Pearl. Each line of the dialogue that she heard, she felt as if she herself were uttering them. Ramon was inside the body of Dillon, feeling himself as Watson.

The final scene of the final act was nearing the climax. Joan and Ramon were physically in their seats but their minds were there, together on the all-absorbing world of the stage. At that moment both became aware of a presence. The presence, they felt, was somehow inside both of them and part of them at the core of them. The presence was willing something. The presence was pushing each of them, as if using both hands simultaneously. They were now inching out steadily. They were out in a strange dimension. Immediately they were aware that the presence was inside Pearl and Watson too, now beckoning them from that side. It pulled them inside, the inside of Watson and Pearl.

On the stage, the audience were witnessing the last scene. Watson was on the left and Pearl on the right. It was a street scene. Both were on the same side of the street, standing on the pavement.

Watson saw Pearl first and called,
“Joan!”

Pearl stood like a statue.

“Joan, Joan Akie, don't you recognize me?”

Tears were welling in her eyes. Her breasts were heaving with emotion. She nodded vigorously.

“Yes Ramon. I recognize you now from the inside.”

“Come, darling, come Joan, come to me.”

Pearl rushed towards Watson, shrieking and sobbing,

“Ramon, oh my Ramon, here I come.”

She stumbled and fell. Watson ran up to her and lifted her up.

“Are you hurt Joan?”

“Not any more Ambro. Hold me, crush me Ramon, Take me inside of you, into your soul.”

“No Joan, you hold me. I will dissolve into you, Joan. I am ready to melt and be part of you, Joan.”

They embraced tightly.

“Joan, Joan, forever Joan.”

“Ramon, Ramon, forever Ramon.”

The scene was so intense that the audience did not notice the anomaly for a few seconds. The visual impact was so powerful that the audio input was held back temporarily.

By the time they realized it, the play had ended. The unexpected introduction of new names had a strange impact on the audience. People debouched through the exits, discussing.

Small groups formed outside, in the foyer, engaged in heated rhubarb. Some thought Dillon and Catherine had been practising another drama and somehow the lines got intertwined. That too seemed improbable because the duo had given three hundred previous performances without a hitch. Almost all agreed that the scene was the most powerful, the actors were so highly charged that they must have probably gone completely out of control.

An old lady was telling her young companion.

“You know I dabble in the ESP phenomena. I tell you that in the last scene I could feel some powerful entity hovering over those two on the stage.” Her young companion was not far behind. She said in amazed whispers.

“I was aware of a couple, two rows in front of us. They were totally absorbed in the scene. I saw a globe of light surrounding them. Then the globe split into two and it flew over to Watson and Pearl. The two globes entered them while the final lines were being spoken. I saw intense blue lines of force exchanging between them. It was fantastic. I have never seen such a thing in my life.”

“Ah, there, you see, I was correct!”, the old lady said triumphantly. She continued in justified anger.

“I hope the director or the producer do not sack Dillon and Cathy for this lapse. I will fight with all I have got if they are taken out.”

“I am with you all the way.” The young lady agreed eagerly. “It is a cinch that the names of the couple I saw must be Ramon and Joan. They must be a really special pair. I envy them, even in a good-hearted way. For, not every man and woman are blessed with the gift of such a love.”

Ramon and Joan heard the remark on their way out. They pressed each other’s hand more firmly.

The incident, of course was reported in the papers. One journalist had penetrated the fort around the director, producer and author. He quoted the comments of the author.

“I do not mind it. I was there in the balcony yesterday watching Dillon and Cathy. As far as I can say, it was a mystical experience. It happens once in centuries. I don’t have anything against Dillon and Cathy.”

When the author himself felt like that, the director and producer went along with him.

The journalist did not stop there. He somehow managed to interview Dillon and Cathy who were quarantined more securely than astronauts returning from outer space. Dillon spoke for both of them.

“It was totally unexpected. We have complete empathy. Something—I can’t describe it more precisely— entered us. I was seeing Joan before me. I myself had become Ramon and she was seeing Ramon in me.”

“Can you make a guess how such a thing could happen?”

“This is off the record. I think there are two possibilities. We were so emotionally charged that possibly some scene from our past lives might have surfaced up. Please don’t quote us on this. The other angle is more eerie. A couple among the audience could have been fired up by our performance. They might have left their bodies and entered ours temporarily.”

“You mean on OBE? Can it happen?”

“OBE is more common these days than you think. And now excuse us.”

The quotes, in spite of being off the record, had made it to the paper. The journalist had simply qualified the statements as being off the record!

The incident lingered in public memory for a few days. Stronger headlines were always there in the queue trying frantically to push up the stack.

But for Ramon and Joan, the memories were etched permanently. It was a turning point in their lives.

* * * *

Rock Van was sitting before his eternal companion and blithely pecking away at the keyboard. Two windows open on the computer screen, as usual and he carrying on a conversation with me, as usual. “The name of Alexander’s horse was Beaucephalus - cephalous, head, beau beautiful. How many know it?”

I recited the next line of catechism using his nickname. “Uttam, it is quite sufficient if you and I know it. Don’t you ever get up from there?”

He chuckled, satisfied.

“Of course I do. When I go to bed.”

“I am sure they are going to invent a blasted gizmo that can be operated even in sleep.”

“I would welcome it.” That was the essential Rock Van. Solid as a rock. Nothing disturbs him. Cool, clear and reasoning out everything. The mysterious appearance of mail from Bagus and the scorpion on his lap had not affected him in any way.

“Wasn’t that abnormal ? Are you not affected by such incidents ?” I had asked. He had said.

"That is exactly it. They are abnormal, you see. Normality rules ninety nine point nine, nine, nine percent of the time. The disparity is enormous. A person who focuses on the contemptible point not, not one percent ought to have his head examined." End of the conversation. After our last meeting he had acquired the latest antivirus software. He had installed a formidable firewall, in addition.

"Your zany friend - what is that, Bagloco? – has not bothered me since then."

"Maybe, he did not want to bother you. Or, maybe he manifests only when I am in your presence."

"Manifest, ballocks. You and that old buzzard have some kind of synchronizing mechanism as I said last time. He was talking through his ass when he was expounding about the rearrangement of the rectangle. That reminds me of the two points of your rectangle. Ramon and Joan. I read the brouhaha about that drama."

"It was remarkable."

"It was sensational journalism."

"It was true Rock. I met Ramon and Joan and they confirmed it."

"I suppose you ascribed it to your Bagfu Maddest."

"You said it, Uttam."

"I said what you left unsaid." That is Rock, unbeatable in an argument.

"And Jack and Shube are moving towards each other. Bagdotcom has now properly aligned the points of the rectangle. So Bagloco's theory of imagination is working fine."

"What other zany things is the crank doing with the rectangle?"

Rock had incorporated a sound software in his e-mail. The computer beeped. A new mail had arrived. The sender was Bagzanny.

"Good morning, Mr. Rock Van. I didn't bother you all these days because I link to you only through Mr. Wide Heart. Now that he is there with you, I thought I could send a message. Hope you don't mind. I take a perverse pleasure in talking with you."

Rock looked at my watch and mumbled, "Perfect, fine synchronization." He typed a reply. "The feeling is mutual." We heard the bellowing laughter of Baggdotty. They were corresponding by e-mail and audio output was coming out! Some geek, great hacker, was what I heard from Rock's lips.

"You were asking Heart what other zany things I was contemplating with the rectangle."

"How the fuck can you hear our conversation? Mister wisenheimer?"

"Easy. My message is on your screen right now, is it not? Where my message is, there my presence is."

"Balls. Tell it to the birds or better still, tell it to our mutual friend who is sitting here." Rock grinned at me crookedly. Again the laughter from the other end. Rock typed.

"I suspect Wide Heart has a concealed listening device, a microchip and you are tuning on to him, mister Bagmonster."

"His pure and wide heart is his listening device."

"Touché." Rock had met few, very few people who could match him in repartee.

"Let me continue with my answer to your question before we forget. The points of the rectangle are now properly repositioned. Nothing more needs be done. However, to make surety double sure, as your bard said – and please do not ask me, 'how many'. Ha, ha – I am going to peg down the points firmly in place."

"Using your theory of imagination as a hammer?"

"I detect sarcasm Mr. Rock. The theory of imagination is greater than the theory of Relativity. That theory is after all relative though the Great man, ironically put forward the *absolute theory* of relativity. Imagination on the other hand is unbound and unlimited in scope."

"Sorry. I have no use for it. Solving a differential equation or translating a German text into English gives me more pleasure. I can live without imagination."

"Have you ever tasted it.?"

"Not my cuppa."

"Okay. Every man has his own preferences. It has been a pleasure talking with a no-nonsense kind of person like you."

"I appreciate that Mr. Bagloco. Are you signing off?"

"About to."

"You don't see any scorpion this time ? Ha ha ha."

“No. But I see a green cat behind you, right on the top of the fridge.”

“Green ? There are no green cats.”

“There is one, right behind you, with red eyes. Bye.”

Rock van was tempted to look behind. A green cat with red eyes was staring at him, unblinking. It jumped onto the window sill and leapt outside, out of sight.

“The power of suggestion. That is one of the tricks magicians have perfected.” He rubbed his eyes. His voice did not carry much conviction, though. He was examining me speculatively. It was possible to conceive I could be carrying a hidden bug. But a big green cat? He was busy trying to fit *that* into a reasonable hypothesis. I got up discretely and headed towards the exit.

* * * *

Jack said gratefully, “Dear dotty professor, I thank you for bringing me here. I am contented now. I will shield her if the bomb goes off and I will die on her lap. Thank you dad.”

“Don’t make me laugh, son. Wake up. When one step has been climbed, it means other steps too can be climbed.”

“What other steps are left, professor? I am not able to work out a strategy of exit. I am afraid my body is fit only for playing tennis.”

“You can do something else with your body.”

“Can’t follow you. Please clarify that.”

“You can rent your body.”

“Holy ghost, come again?”

“I said you can rent your body and mind. You heard it properly.”

“You have a very cocky sense of humor. Either that, or I am unable to catch the catch.”

“I am somber and serious. You can rent your body and mind to me – temporarily that is. I need your permission to enter. It needs faith and courage. Will you permit me?”

“And what happens then ?”

“I can transform my imagination into action. Action that can bring down those three misguided souls who have trapped you here. Action that can rescue you and your fellow men.”

“Is it possible? How about the infernal bomb?”

“Leave it to me once I enter you.”

“OK. I agree. It is better than dying passively . What am I supposed to do now?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh boy, there you go again, with your riddles.”

“Jack, listen. Do nothing. Just sit back and witness. You got it? Go back to a corner of your mind, sit back and just witness. That is all I ask of you.”

“OK dotty. As you say. Just a last foolish sentence. I love you. You can occupy the house now.”

It was a strange conversation. Shube was listening with fascination, temporarily oblivious of the men around her, the hall, the bomb.

Then she perceived an immense, irresistible force filling up Jack’s body and mind. Jack’s body was tingling with electric charge. She straightened up with a jerk and looked at Jack. There was a transformation in his face. His eyes were glowing strangely. She touched his unshaven cheeks lovingly.

* * * *

Jack pulled back the door with his left hand, the right hand holding the Mauser, cocked and ready.

A space of twelve feet separated Jack from the second man. He was standing in a relaxed stance expecting his companion to emerge from the doorway of the loo. He saw Jack with a pistol when the door opened. The man was a trained professional. His machine gun was resting against the wall. His right hand automatically went for the gun in his waist. His hand moved fast, the way it was trained countless number of times, again and again.

If one object can move fast, another object can move faster. Jack had already leaped. Jack’s body moved in the air performing a series of moves, to learn which, a professional acrobat would have groveled at his feet. The leaping body of Jack twisted in the air performing a summersault. Jack’s head was down, bent knees up in the air.

In that position, his right hand had extended. The Mauser fired. Just once. The bullet hit the man sitting in the stairs, below, on his right shoulder blade, shattering it.

By that time. The man in the foyer, facing Jack had drawn the gun. He had not expected Jack to perform a high leap. His brain signaled to his arm to readjust the line of fire.

By the time the signals traveled to his arm, Jack's body had completed the summersault. Jack's foot hit the standing man on the bridge of the nose, smashing it. The man crashed to the floor, the back of his head thudding onto the floor. He was neither aware of the pain, nor of the blood oozing out of his smashed nose, nor of the torn upper lip and broken teeth.

The man in the staircase was the leader of the group. He was trained to make instantaneous decisions. The moment his right shoulder was hit, he understood that his two colleagues were out of action. He took the most important action at once. With his left hand he pressed the button of the bomb activator. His brain was ready for two things. One, to hear the shattering sound of the explosion, which would throw his attacker off guard. Two, to use that opportunity of a split second, to nail down his attacker. His left hand, which had pressed the button of destruction moved to the gun in his belt. His brain did not receive the input it was preparing for. There was no explosion of the bomb, no sound at all. That millisecond put his brain off course.

The moment Jack hit the man in the foyer on the nose, he was still in the air. Jack's foot used the face of the man as a spring-board and made a reverse summersault, changing his direction of flight slightly to the right and down the staircase.

When the left hand of the leader below had disengaged the pistol, Jack was landing down on him, feet first. Jack's right foot kicked the man at the base of the spine, breaking it. The man was paralyzed by the time Jack had regained his balance. Jack removed the leader's pistol, machine gun and hunting knife. He did not bother with the bomb activating device—just smiled contemptuously at it.

Outside of the building the police heard the gun-shot and became alert immediately. Their immediate assessment was that one or more of the hostages could have been shot. Mark Tines spoke into his cell phone.

"Hello commander. We heard a gun shot. What happened? We are anxious to hear you."

Jack picked up the phone from the paralyzed body and spoke into it.

"Hold on guys. Stay put. Nobody moves. I will call back again. Repeat, no moves, or you start counting the body bags."

It was a tense moment for those outside, but still Mark Tine detected an unknown voice.

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After chatting in general, Ramon turned serious. He asked Joan.

"Joan, I want to ask a favor from you."

Joan replied, "Ask anything of me. It will not be a favor, it will be a pleasure."

Ramon held for a few seconds. Then he put his hands on her knees and said.

"Will you marry me?"

Joan Akei was stunned. She could not speak for a moment. Her lips began to tremble. From the day she was discharged from the hospital, she was looking at her face daily with grief and despair. She was not sure how long she could go on living, bearing the grotesque face that stared back at her from the mirror. She herself could not bear to look back at her own face and smile.

Ramon was concerned. He repeated, softly,

"Joan, will you marry me?"

Joan made a brave attempt at joking.

"Have your eyes checked, first, Ramon."

"My eyes are perfectly okay, Joan."

"Then have your head examined."

"It is fine and serving me well."

"The only thing remaining is your heart. But then, I can certify it is made of gold."

"I don't know what it is made of. I only know there is a vacuum there. Only you can fill it up. There is an ache only you can cure. I do not know if I deserve you. Am I asking for too much?"

Joan bent her head. She placed her hands on Ramon's, which were still on her knees.

"My dear Ramon, look at my grotesque face squarely and honestly. Can you bear to live with it for the rest of your life? I myself cannot tolerate my own face and body."

She burst out sobbing. Hot tears cascaded down her cheeks. Ramon gently disengaged her hands. He knelt beside her and wiped her tears with his fingers. He said,

"Listen Joan. I loved you dearly from the beginning. I love you more now. I do not care how your face looks. I am poor at talking. I only say that I am aching for you. And look, I have got some money stashed for the rainy day. It may not be much. I will spend it all for your face. Let us consult a plastic surgeon."

"Oh, darling, don't think I am heart-hardened. I love you darling, but I do not want to spoil your life."

"Honey, I will say this for the last time and it is the solid truth. I am not affected in any way by the way you look. You are my angel that is all."

"You are the real angel, darling."

Joan began to weep again. She stood up, and went to the wall, facing it, covering her face with both hands.

Ramon went to her and embraced her gently.

“Do not weep. I cannot bear it. I am not as well read as you, but hear me. Your heart is filled with sorrow now. I will scoop out that sorrow and fill it with the love I carry inside.” He paused and said lightly, “It is not a bad deal,” and laughed.

Joan turned back, laughing through her tears,

“No, it is not a bad deal at all. But I feel guilty.”

“I will scoop out that guilty feeling too and fill it with love.” He added again, laughing ,

“There is plenty of it. War surplus, you know.”

Joan could not help laughing too. She gathered him tightly. Ramon said.

“Come, say yes.”

“Yes” Joan replied and swooned in his hands.

* * * *

6) From chapter6

I deliberated whether to inform Rock Van about the successful completion of the Mission Improbable. His reaction was always lukewarm and a bit cynical. In the end I decided to meet him. I had gone to him to tell a tale. Why not complete it and have done with it – whether he liked it or not?

I entered the all too-familiar scene. Rock Van in silk pajamas, carrying on his love affair with the computer—two windows open on the monitor and Rock banging away on the key board.

And the familiar cup of coffee and his familiar greeting.

“The original name of Kirk Douglas was Issur Danielovitch Demsky. How many know it?”

“It is quite sufficient if you and I know it. OK?”

He would never be satisfied if this ritual was not carried out. I said.

“I read the book, *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott. I liked it much.”

“Oh, that?” he said, “Yeah. I read it recently in 1960.”

“Recently ? In 1960? You call that recent?”

“Why not? It is still so fresh in my memory. You want me to quote a few lines out of the book?”

“No thanks. I believe you.”

He smiled happily. As with jokes, so with books. You name a book and he will quote sentences out of it. I think I said somewhere that when the mood is on him, he walks along the street (and across) reading a book. He says he holds the book slightly below the eye level so that he can have two views— of the book and of the traffic. Like the two windows on his computer, he had further clarified. Like all those men, heads permanently tilted to one side, clutching the mobiles between shoulder and neck, yakking and driving their vehicles. Multitasking, modern man’s motto and mantra you see. Amen.

I waited for a strategic opening. At the earliest opportune moment I updated him with the latest development. Jack Flanders will soon marry Shube Lakmee. Ramon will marry Joan Akei. The end. Bagus, after all did rearrange the rectangle.

Rock Van snorted when I brought in the name of Bagus. “That gas bag ? Why bring him in?”

“He is fantastic Rock. Meet him once, you will see for yourself.”

“Thanks for nothing. I did meet him once, in the city park, you remember? That was one time too many.”

“OK. I have no quarrel over that. But Jack, Ramon, Shube, and Joan think otherwise. They are much eager to meet him. Doesn’t that prove something?”

“It may prove that the crazy old goat is also a great con-artist”, Rock added allowing for a slight pause, “ apart from being demented and ditz.”

“Different folks, different strokes.” I shrugged.

“Ah, that reminds me. I like *uppuma* very much, as you know. The wife prepared really high class *uppuma*, in the morning. When you called me in the morning I didn’t take breakfast. I have been waiting for you. Let us eat together. You will know what *uppuma* really tastes like. ” I agreed, for I knew his wife was a good cook.

I was not conscious of wearing my watch, but Rock was glancing at it repeatedly. As I have said earlier, he had this fantastic theory that Bagus and I were synchronizing our watches.

"Not time yet?" , he asked mischievously.

"For what?" I said innocently.

"For your mister gasbag to materialize?", Rock replied and laughed uproariously.

The audio system of his computer sang out. clearly, audibly.

"He is here, Mr. Rock Van, at your behest. Good morning to you." The text too appeared on the screen.

"Fantastic synchronization." Rock said (to me) with sarcasm.

"It was synchronization of a different sort Mr. Rock Van. I just wanted to point out an error in your statement."

"Error? In my statement?", Rock was aghast, "I am generally very careful with my grammar. But while in conversation with a friend, grammar is not predominant."

"Thank you for calling me a friend."– (Here, Rock Van winced) "I venerate grammar, just as you do. But the error I was referring to, was factual, not grammatical."

"Factual Mr. Bagus? Fantastic. I am always sure of my facts. Otherwise I do not speak at all."

"Excuse me my friend. What you were convinced was a fact could possibly be an illusion or imagination."

"Please explain. Don't beat about the bush."

"No sir, I was not beating about. I was gently preparing you for the shock."

"This is too much." Rock was getting irritated.

"Come, shock me if you can."

The audio system expounded the matter in Oxford accents.

"Just a few seconds before, you were telling our mutual friend there, that your good wife had prepared *uppuma*. I wish to point out that the dish in question is *rava idli* and not *uppuma*."

Rock Van burst out laughing. The demented dotard was challenging him in his own turf. Real dotty.

"Mr. misguided professor, I am showing respect to your age. Else would I have asked you to fuck off. The dish in question is *uppuma* and nothing else but *uppuma*."

"It is *rava idli*, I imagine."

"You imagine? Imagine?"

"Yes friend, imagination is the most potent thing. I imagine what exists in your kitchen hot box right now, is *rava idli*. And it shall be *rava idli*."

"Mr. dotty ex- Oxford professor, I am in an expansive mood today. Let us do one thing. I will lay a bet of hundred dollars. I will bring *uppuma* from the kitchen. Wideheart and I will eat it. Then Wide Heart will testify it. The loser will pay hundred dollars to the winner. Will you dare to take the bet?"

"Dear friend, I refuse to take the bet out of sympathy for you. I will modify the bet. If I lose, I will pay you hundred dollars. If you lose, don't pay me anything. How is that ? I am saying this because I am so sure of my imagination."

"You keep your imagination to yourself. I keep my *uppuma*, OK? The bet is on!"

I groaned in dismay, for, I knew who was going to lose the bet if not the hundred dollars.

Rock Van got up cockily and went into the kitchen jauntily. I heard the noise of plates and spoons, and tumblers. Then there was a softer click. The hot box being opened, I guessed. After that there was dead silence. No noise, no sound. And after that, my supersensitive ears detected the vibrations of heavy breathing admixed with intervals of wheezing.

"Damn, damn it." I heard him cursing. I smiled to myself and waited.

Rock returned, carrying two plates loaded with *rava idlies*. I expected him to be a bit crest fallen. Not he. His mind was already racing, trying to find passable, plausible explanations.

"I swear it was *uppuma*. I saw it in the morning." He said, placing the plates on the table, drawing a chair. He called out to me. "Come, let us do justice to the dish." I went and sat opposite to him.

"Your wife cooks excellently.", I said, savoring the *idlis*.

"Damn it all. It was *uppuma* I tell you." Rock persisted. Then he became suspicious. Looking at me calculatively, he asked.

"Did you, by any chance enter the kitchen while I was immersed in front of my computer?"

"Don't be daft Rock. You know quite well that as soon I entered that door I came straight to you. I have not stirred from that seat ever since."

"How about before that?"

"Do you mean B & E?"

He nodded his head shamelessly. I had to admire the guy. He was pulling out every strand of reasoning available.

"You should have been in the FBI. Why don't you call the finger print experts?" I retorted.

"We have to explore all the possibilities, you see."

"You would have probably dreamt of eating *uppuma* early in the morning. When missus said *rava idli*, you might have heard *uppuma*."

"No way. I told you I actually saw *uppuma* in that steel vessel, touched it, smelt it and even tasted a pinch of it."

"Then possibly you could be dreaming now."

"Up yours." He said firmly.

"The proof of the pudding lies in the eating.", I said irrelevantly. It was his favorite line of argument. He snorted.

After we had finished, we carried the plates and spoons inside, dropping them into the sink. We came back.

The timing for his computer's screen saver was one minute. He expected the display of his favorite screen saver, flying saucers.

The face of Bagus was griming at him solemnly. Bagus had managed that feat.

"I have a serious proposition. I had asked you not to pay me hundred dollars in case you lose. Could you possibly donate that amount to the church of Saint Mary? The church is just two hundred feet from your house, walkable distance."

I had never seen Rock lose a bet. But he was a gracious loser. He accepted.

"Fair enough. I agree," he said "But don't think this is the end of it. I propose to dig out two things. How you two guys pulled out this little cute trick and how you are able to penetrate my computer's fire wall and appear on the conference screen."

"Do that by all means, respected friend. I now have a second solemn proposition."

"Go ahead, professor and cheap-tricks puller." Bagus laughed and proceeded.

"Dear Mr. Rock Van, this is probably the last time I am having the pleasure of talking to you. As a mark of friendship and gesture of love, I would like to present you with a gold watch. I consider it an honor if you accept it. Please accept it. I love you genuinely."

Rock Van was moved. In spite of his outward hostility towards Bagus, there was an undercurrent of affection. He said.

"Alright, Thanks! I appreciate it professor. I will give you my address."

"Thank you for accepting my humble token. But the address is not necessary."

"You mean you will send it through Wide Heart?"

"No sir, I am not that cheap. I have already sent it."

"What do you mean?"

"It is there; inside the drawer of your writing table which is locked. Please note the word locked."

Rock Van went to his writing table and unlocked the drawer. A tidy gift-wrapped package lay inside. 'To Rock Van, an erudite gentleman, from Bagus, a crazy but love-filled nomad' was written on it. Rock untied the wrapper and opened the package. An exquisite gold wristwatch, nestled inside. He took it out and examined the back of the dial. His name had been embossed. Rock Van was immensely pleased and touched. Still, the rationalist in him was squirming uncomfortably. He stared at me intensely, his eyes performing a CAT scan of my brain. I said.

"No, I am not an expert lock-picker."

He glared at me. Then he turned to the smiling face of Bagus on the monitor.

"I thank you, first of all." He said formally.

"And then ?" Bagus asked.

"Mr. ex-professor, I have read all the books of the Sherlock Homes stories, all the Perry Masons and Edgar Wallace and Agatha Christies. You two make a fine pair of tricksters. I am not going to rest till I unravel how you performed this cute little legerdemain."

"I look forward to that eureka moment, sir. *Au revoir* till then." Bagus waved his hand. His face dissolved. Rock Van's pre-designated screen saver came alive.

I said to Rock, "I came to-day, to tell you my story. I think it has come to a satisfactory conclusion."

I walked out. When I was at the door step, Rock said aloud,
“When you come next time, I will have the answer ready.”
“Answer for what?”
“For the near perfect trick you two guys played today.”
“Take it easy. Don’t sweat over it.” I replied and stepped out.

* * * *

Bagliano began.
“Dear children– please permit this old crazy destitute to call you so – dear children, I love all of you. That is the basis on which I am going to utter a few words now. I am now speaking directly to Joan Akei.
“My daughter with the heart of gold, are you acutely self-conscious of your face and body?”
One look at his face, and Joan knew he was not being cruel. There was infinite compassion in those nitid eyes. Others too felt it. Joan replied in a steady voice.
“Yes grandpa. I am. When I am with you and my dear friends here, I do not feel it. But at other times it keeps nagging at me. I have overcome the initial reaction of sorrow. However, I often long to have my old face back.”
“Yet, your face has character, as I perceive it.”
“Yes grandpa. I look like a bulldog mashed up” She said and laughed.
“You know why this gruesome accident happened to you?”

Joan remained silent, going deep within. None of us stirred. We held our breaths. It was a very tense moment.

Joan replied slowly, but clearly and steadily,
“I think you already know it grandpa. You want me to say it before others. I was secretly filled with pride. I think god has bestowed proper cure for it.”

It took enormous courage to say it. We bowed our heads. Ramon clenched his fists, fighting to hold back a sob. Bagliano’s face was inscrutable. He was sitting like a carved statue. His eyes were focused on some distant scene of which we were unaware. He said,
“Yes my daughter. You are cured now and pure. The pride which you spoke of was a remnant of your distant past. In one of your past lives, you were the daughter of a very wealthy and powerful man in Spain. Your beauty was unrivalled. A common peasant youth was attracted to you. He dared to look at your face and speak of his love. You had him punished through your father. His cohorts beat the youth thoroughly and branded his face. What happened to you at the Barry’s Book Store was karma’s way of making you realize and atone.”

In the silence of the forest, his voice carried over and reached directly the soul of Joan Akei. Her eyes glazed over, as if she were witnessing a past incident.

She came back. She did not wince. Her eyes shone like diamonds amidst the surrounding ugliness of her face. Her voice changed. She spoke like an angel.
“Yes father, I see it clearly. Pride has totally dropped off from me. I am in no way perturbed by my face now.”

The next second, she was behaving normally, as before. There was a collective sigh of relief.

Bagliano was relentless. He gave everybody a chance to recover. Then he took off at a tangent.

He addressed Joan again in a most mysterious tone.
“Joan, my daughter, you were rather a bit proud of your learning too. Of your knowledge of books and languages.”
“Yes my grandpa. I now see it is all futile and pointless. When I compare it with the love that Ramon bears for me, I feel humbled.”

Ramon and Bagliano rose together. They reached Joan at the same time. They both kissed her cheeks at the same time.

Bagus went back and sat, still intent on some thing. Joan was shedding tears of happiness.

Bagus drew her attention and said.
“Joan, I want to play word games with you. Will you please permit me?”
“Dad, you can do anything you want with me.”
“Joan, there is this phrase; licking into shape. It is stupid even to ask you if you know that.”

“Grandpa. It refers to the bear. The bear is supposed to lick its newly born cub into shape.”

The other three persons were now genuinely puzzled. They could not make out anything. One moment the crazy man was talking most somberly and the next moment he was playing trivial quiz games. May be, he is trying to provide some diversion for Joan, they thought.

Bagliano continued.

“Bear. Yes, and then we have this kindergarten game. Transforming one word into another by gradually replacing one letter with another, a step at a time. For example, the word bear can be changed into deer in two jumps. Bear, beer, deer. Is it not so?”

“Yes”

“Now, Joan, have you ever seen a deer?”

“Yes, in zoos, and national parks.”

“Have you seen a golden deer?”

“No dad. A golden deer is a legendary animal I had read about it in the translated version of an Indian text.”

“Would you like to meet with one?”

Joan smiled. She was relieved in a way.

“After enjoying your barmecidal feast, it is a natural concomitant to meet a golden deer. I am ready to bet it will spring out from the black hole, the moment you whistle.”

We all laughed. Bagliano said.

“Tut, tut Joan. For such a splendid creature to crawl out of a hole, is rather awkward and inappropriate. Remember I said that old Darwin’s hairs will stand on end if he saw some genera of animals of this forest? A golden deer does exist in this forest and it is most willing to meet you. Your guess about the whistling part was correct. Here we go.”

Bagus put his fingers to his lips and emitted a loud whistle – so loud, it was unimaginable it could come out of the tiny frame of an old bag of bones. All turned back, towards where Bagliano was gazing intensely.

About two hundred yards from us, the skyline was dotted with marula, mopane and tamboti trees. Their trunks were hidden from view by the beautiful, flower bearing weeping Boer beans. The foreground was fully interspersed by lalapas and jack berries. A narrow, meandering clearance carpeted with flowers and yellow leaves was barely discernable in the dense shadowy undergrowth. The spot held our attention.

Bagliano whistled a second time. We saw a movement among the bushes. The animal stepped out, into our view. It was a white polar bear. It approached us majestically, one muscle-rippling foot after another, and stood staring at us from a considerable distance.

Bagenheimer’s voice, from behind us, gave a commentary.

“You see a bear there, Joan. As I explained to you just now, ‘bear’ can become ‘deer’ in two steps.” He whistled again.

The bear jumped a distance of fifteen feet. It reached the base of the peach tree. The bear circled it and made another similar jump to the root of the next peach tree. It circled the tree again and was hid from our view for a fraction of a second.

The next second, a magnificent golden deer was frisking towards us. Every part of it was golden—the body, the tail, its antlers with proud, branching tines. The spots on its belly and neck too were golden, but of a darker hue. It came prancing, its tail wagging joyfully. The four of them stood mesmerized.

The deer came straight at Joan Akei and stood near her, rubbing her body. Joan stroked its graceful neck tenderly. Nobody spoke, or stirred.

Joan repeatedly stroked the deer lovingly.

Joan was dressed in a short-sleeved blouse and wore no gloves. There was no point in hiding what was obvious, she had decided.

The golden deer made a go at her palms as if desiring to lick it. Joan offered her open palm. The deer licked her palm in earnest.

There was a discontinuation in Joan’s concentration. When she snapped back to attention she became aware of a strange sensation in her hand. She glanced at her hand and cried aloud. We were startled by the sudden cry.

“ LOOK!” Joan was flashing her hand at us, “ LOOK. The skin has changed. It has become normal.” We looked. The portion of her hand and palm, which the deer had licked, had been healed completely and absolutely. All discoloration, wrinkles had vanished. Her original skin was shining through. Jack, Ramon and Shube gasped in astonishment.

Joan extended her bare upper arm to the deer. Joan’s right hand up to her sleeve was restored. Her old, original skin was back, the flesh firm, smooth, shining healthily. She then offered her left hand, which soon sprang back to its original state, while the others mutely looked on in wonder.

Joan knelt on the grass, her legs bent at the knees, spine erect. She closed her eyes, face up and surrendering it to the mysterious animal’s healing tongue. The deer went at her face, like an artist controlling and directing each stroke with care and precision. Time seemed to stand still. The deer licked her face, neck and head unhurriedly with elaborate care.

Joan Akei stood up, looking around at us, askance. The beautiful real face of Joan had been restored. The smooth curving forehead, the thin cute nose, the fleshy, but not thick lips with the Cupid’s bow, the fine curve of her chin, the smooth arched eyebrow, everything was back. Even the auburn hair on her head had grown in thickness – and longer.

I had seen a techie friend of mine working on an image on his computer; deleting, adding, stretching, morphing it completely. I was reminded of that when I saw what was happening to Joan’s face under the artistic tongue of the golden deer. It was like a live demonstration of a sophisticated imaging software on a live model!

Bagliano’s voice broke in behind me,
“ Adobe Photoshop or Corel Draw?”

I replied.

“Neither. It is Bagliano’s Beatific Brush,” The others who had not moved a muscle or spoken a word, lest the spell be broken, laughed in relief and joy.

Bagliano pulled out a mirror from the black hole and held it in front of Joan. She looked at herself for three seconds. She kissed Bagus on the checks.

Joan cradled the supple neck of the deer in her hands fondly. She was gazing at the distant clouds and beyond. She said.

“ Grandpa.” Bagliano knew what was in her mind and said. “Go ahead.”

Joan Akei stood, arms akimbo, looking at the four of us defiantly. She announced.

“I want to do a Godiva.” The other three were puzzled.

“With your permission grandpa. I don’t want to miss this golden opportunity, horrible pun notwithstanding.” She said and giggled.

“I said, go ahead.” Bagliano assured her, “Nobody minds.”

The other three began to understand what she meant, when she got into action.

Joan Akei removed her shoes. She unbuttoned her blouse and dropped it onto the ground. Unhesitatingly, she removed all her clothes and stood stark naked. She stretched her body once. Her chest, stomach, thighs, legs, back, every part of her anatomy had been scorched and disfigured. The others now understood what she had in mind. Joan stepped on to the rocky platform and lay on it, prone, open to earth and sky. She lay there completely composed and detached. The deer went up to her and began licking.

We turned our gazes aside, looking at the trees, the flowers, the warbling birds, the blue sky punctuated with languidly floating cotton clouds. The hares and the crows had finished scrounging the leftovers. The hares had gone back. The crows hung on to the branches, expecting a second course. Jack and Shube went for a stroll nearby hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder.

After a lapse of fifteen minutes Joan came and stood before Ramon, now fully dressed, resplendent. She was a sight to see. Ramon kissed her. Jack and Shube saw her from the distance and returned, congratulating her.

Bagliano came out from behind the bamboo bushes. He was holding a pearl necklace and a gold bracelet.

“This was the only thing missing.”, he said giving them to her. Joan put them on, overflowing with happiness and gratitude. She embraced Bagliano deeply, placing her head on his chest, murmuring “Grandpa, grandpa”. She wept with joy, her tears drenching the old man’s chest. Bagliano said.

“Tut tut, my child. Enough. It has been more than four score and seven years since these eyes became wet with tears. You are going to spoil the record. Stop it honey.” He gently pushed her away. One tear drop hung at the corner of his eye. He raked it off with his pinky.

“The darned thing refuses to obey me. Schwärmerei and Aberglaube are not good for the soul.”, he said. Ramon lifted the hands of Bagus and kissed them. He was at a loss for words to express. Bagus patted him on the shoulder.

Jestus looked at Joan with affection and said,

“Joan, I hope I have played the little word games to your satisfaction.”

Joan declared, “Dad you played the game marvelously. Nobody can match you.” She stood there, radiant in her necklace, brimming with emotions of love, affection, gratitude, joy.

* * * *

I said, “Sorry doc. The goddamned but blessed deer entered the stage and created havoc, like a bull in a China shop”.

Bagus waved his finger at me professorially,

“That, lad, is a mixed metaphor.”

Joan and I laughed. I began collecting the chairs. Jack joined in. We dumped the lot into the black hole. I glanced around, checking up if we had missed anything else. All the paraphernalia were in. (The earth, presumably, had swallowed Bagliano’s cigar butt.) I drew the stone slab over the black hole. Bagliano came and began stamping with his bare foot along the periphery where the lip of the hole and the outer edge of the slab met. The slab got itself welded into the original rock surface. When he finished, there was no trace left to indicate that there was a hole with a lid on that spot. Just plain, continuous rock surface. Solid. Not even a hollow sound.

“That,” declared Bagliano, “is the proper way to finish. No trace left to indicate anything happened. Like the collective dream we all had. The dreaming of a story we shared together till now.”

The finality in his voice told it was time to break up.

The guests wanted to express their thanks once again. But there would be no end to words, once started.

As if on cue, the five of us joined hands and made a circle around Bagus. We ran around him three times and shouted. “Hip, hip, hurray.”

Then we clapped heartily. We broke the circle and returned to the two cars, waiting for a move from Bagus, five long shadows reaching up to his feet. Bagus blew a kiss in the air.

The golden deer was sauntering at a distance. Bagus gave a low whistle. The deer lifted its head, belled, and came trotting. As it passed us, Joan embraced its neck for the last time and kissed it.

The deer went and stood by the side of Bagus, caressing him with its neck. Bagliano mounted it. He patted the deer and scratched it behind the ears. The deer belled and wagged its tail with pleasure.

Bagus looked each one of us in the face for the last time. He raised his hand and waved.

“*Au revoir.*”, he said with feeling.

He spurred the deer gently with his knees. The magnificent animal trotted away, into the forest, the way it had arrived, carrying a magnificent crazy old man. All eyes were riveted on him, till he went out of sight.

The sun had dipped below the tree line. The air was turning chilly. We got into our vehicles, in the same order as before.

The starting sounds of the engines intruded harshly into the serene atmosphere. That, I mused, was going to be the backdrop for the humdrum lives we were going back to enter.

As we neared the highway and took a turn, the enlarged copper colored sun came into view, low in the horizon, heralding the end of an enchanting day.

From the backseat Joan sighed deeply and murmured.

“It was a beautiful golden dream. A dream that changed us all.”

I concurred.

* * * *

V.S.Sury