

Anant Brihaspati
&
Family

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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ANANT BRIHASPATI

I

It was 7:30 in the morning, or so did the round-rimmed, old-fashioned metallic alarm clock show, and as the alarm was set exactly between seven and eight, it started ringing. Within about a second, it was silenced by a swift thump of hand. The reaction was so quick that one could have almost sworn about the momentous metallic clang being an illusion. Had it been a Sunday, Anant could have safely passed it off as an illusion. But it wasn't a Sunday; it was a weekday, and like all the other weekdays, Anant had to go to the office that day.

Again? O God why!

He had woken up long before the ringing of the alarm, maybe because of the noise made by the early morning traffic outside, or maybe because of late it had become a habit of his to wake up at that time. Whatever the case might be, waking up early wasn't something that he regretted in the least. He had recently discovered that lying half-awake in bed early in the morning gave one a rare opportunity where one could think and dream at the same time. Although, after waking up, Anant would completely forget about what he had dreamt or imagined, still, merely lying there thinking like that gave him enormous pleasure. It made him feel as if he was extremely intelligent, and had, in recent times, become

his sole source of entertainment. Previously, he mostly used to amuse himself by watching old regional films. He watched whatever he could get his hands on, and, when he couldn't find anything new, out of the previously watched ones, he watched the movies that he liked the most. Anant used to think that one could amuse oneself like this forever, but in no time, he had exhausted all his sources of entertainment and had become quite tired of watching the same movies again and again. He wished if he could, like his early morning dreams, forget all about the movies he had seen, and watch them over and over again. The impossibility of this made him very sad. Now, the sole joy that he got from those movies was not by watching them but by thinking about them. Quite often, during these early morning dreams, Anant used to direct his dull, slumberous eyes towards the vivid movie posters that covered most of the white windowless wall opposite his bed. When looked at in such a state, those posters acted as portals that transported Anant to the worlds he wanted to be a part of. They gave him new eyes through which he could discover the beauty he never found in the world around him. Time itself slowed down and became more pleasing. The people he was now surrounded by were people he could talk to and people he knew intimately. He was his true self in their company. It was as if he belonged to their worlds and not to the one in which he was born.

Oh God! Why was I even born!

When preoccupied with such thoughts, the ringing of the alarm came as something diabolical to Anant. Time to go to hell, he would say to himself. Hell—as he had learned from one of the movies that he saw—was a place where one was trapped eternally and where one had to suffer repeatedly from some particular form of suffering. His life, when he thought about it, seemed no better than hell. He hated his job, hated his family, and there was no way he could free himself from either—not even in his distant future. In fact, he had planned to leave his job long ago, but under current circumstances, he couldn't afford to do so unless he had

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another one lined up before him. Although looking for a new job wasn't all that difficult, but since Anant had working Saturdays too, he had to take a day off if he wanted to appear for a job interview. It wasn't easy. To take a leave, he had to send a leave application directly to his boss first, who would afterwards invite him to his cabin and carefully scrutinize his reasons for taking a leave. Most of the times, the boss would decide not to grant the leave to Anant. Apart from that, the response that Anant got at the few job interviews he appeared for was so overwhelmingly negative that now he shrank from the mere thought of applying for another job. No one ever gave him the good news that he has passed the first round of the interview and should prepare for the second. Nobody even cared to call him up and say that he has been rejected. When he himself called up to enquire about the same, he was either told that he would be informed shortly or no one picked up his calls at all. Anant would always wait in vain for the results.

He looked at the clock. It was 7:40 now.

His improbable future prospects were fast becoming a constant source of anxiety for Anant. He was eagerly waiting for—and at the same time terribly afraid of—the day when he was to be kicked out from his job. Thanks to his exceptionally poor performance at work, he couldn't completely rule out the possibility. He received constant threats pertaining to it leading him to believe that the day was not far when he would be getting the axe. But, for reasons not known to him, that day seemed very slow to come, and he continued uninterruptedly with his humiliating existence.

7:42

Nevertheless, when he gave it another thought, his life didn't seem so bad. At least not when compared to those of many others around him. It was solely in comparison to his own glorious past

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that his current situation looked particularly miserable. When he recalled his former days, Anant used to think of his younger self as a mighty force of nature. Back then, no job was good enough to contain him for long. He used to spend his entire salary within a few days of receiving it. He lived by the day. Had he received a job offer back then where he was to be paid twice as much as what he was getting now, he would have casually declined it. Work bores me, he used to say.

It still does!

How life has changed, he thought. This change had come slowly with time, and it all started on that one unfateful day—3rd March 2007—the day Anant's father passed away. The date was etched permanently in his memory.

7:45, and he was still in bed.

Can't bathe today. Did you bathe yesterday? Yes, I did. So you can skip it today. Just brush your teeth and leave. And as far as taking a dump is concerned, that can be done in the office.

Once again, Anant tried figuring out the relationship between his father's death and the many changes that had happened around him since then. Not only his mother and sister had changed, but the rest of the world too was hardly the same. Everyone except him was swept away by the tides of change, which would have also engulfed him, had he not stood his ground against it. He had vowed long ago never to let change invade his life—no matter what the cost. He had vowed that he would stay the same. He felt, especially after his father's death, that he was the last one left, and if he lost himself to change, everything would've been lost.

Okay. But the main question is, how was his father's death related to the change?

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Many times, in deep thought, Anant seemed to have worked out the solution to this problem. Once, he compared his father's death to an earthquake—its center being his home and the waves spreading all throughout the world from there. At some other time, he concluded that in the shape of his father, the world had lost a great ideal that it aspired to. That's why, everybody was running aimlessly in the light of vague hopes now. They no longer had any solid ideals to guide them.

Although these solutions provided temporary relief to Anant, they failed to satisfy him, and more often than not, left him with the feeling that he had still not figured out the exact relationship between his father's death and the forces of change.

Oh my God! Anant received a shock when he looked at the alarm clock. It's 7:50 already! I'm late! I'm late! I'm late!

Without wasting any further time, he sprang from his bed straight onto his slippers below. From there, he made it to the bathroom in two seconds flat. His ablutions, which merely consisted of a brief splashing of his dull bearded face with water followed by a ten-second mouthwash gargle, didn't cost him more than a minute. Once again, he wore the same black pants and dark blue shirt, which would have looked quite dirty had they been of a lighter color. And finally, while putting his not-so-black shoes on, he glanced at the alarm clock for one last time. It wasn't 7:55 yet. He was going to make it. He took his spectacles, stuffed his wallet and phone inside his pants' pockets and left the room. As usual, in the hall, his mother was lying in wait for him. Anant quickly went past her and said, without looking back, "I'm late. Can't eat breakfast today. Bye." He quickened his pace, trying not to give his mother the opportunity to call him back. But this didn't stop her from calling him back.

"Wait," she said, "you will never be late as long as your mother is alive."

Anant stopped there. This wasn't the first time he was hearing these words. He knew very well what they meant.

Feeling disgusted at his stupidity, he put on his spectacles and checked the time on his phone. Near the center of its screen, it displayed in tiny black numerals 7:39. Anant heaved a sigh of relief. Thank God, it isn't much this time. He felt like rebuking his mother for sneaking into his room every night and changing the time on his clock.

“Okay, go sleep. I'll serve myself,” he said in a futile attempt to get rid of her. But she simply stood there looking at him with wide imploring eyes, never narrowing them down. Her blank and somewhat unconcentrated face had started reminding Anant of an extinguished candle.

She has clearly lost her light of reason, he thought.

“May God bless me with a son like this in all my future lives,” she said. “You take so much care of your mother. Can't I do this much for you?”

She sauntered into the kitchen and swiftly came back with a few chapattis and a dry vegetable dish, all neatly placed on a white circular plastic plate. Anant, trying hard to make her leave, deftly took the plate from her hand, went silently away from her, and sat on the sofa in the opposite corner of the hall. His mother followed and sat right next to him, still looking at his face imploringly. Although Anant disliked eating anything dry first thing in the morning, yet, from his mother's gaze he could discern that she wouldn't be satisfied unless he ate everything she had brought. So, he tore a tiny portion of a chapatti, rolled it around a piece of potato, and put it inside his unwilling mouth. One bite into it, and a strong dark flavor invaded his senses. “Oh! What is this?” He called out. “Water! Bring me water!”

His mother rushed into the kitchen to fetch water. What could it be? He thought. What is it that smells so weird? Then the image of his mother holding an old Tantra book flashed by him. Is she practicing black magic now? Wasn't nailing a horseshoe on the main door and putting a rusted knife under my mattress good enough? What is this? What does she want from me now? Is she afraid that something might...

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Holding out a glass of water, she did look more afraid than usual.

“Mom,” said Anant, “I can’t eat it. It tastes horrible.”

“What!” She shrieked, “I have tasted it! It tastes perfectly fine to me! Come on! Eat it! Stop throwing tantrums like a five-year-old!”

“Okay,” said Anant, and in three large consecutive bites, he swooped the entire dish clean with two chapattis and swallowed everything down painfully without chewing. “I can’t eat more now,” he said, “I’m full.”

He got up to leave. “Okay, I’m leaving.”

“Wait”, his mother interrupted. “I forgot to tell you. I got a call from your sister today.”

“How is she?” Asked Anant (indifferently).

“She wanted to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to her.”

“Listen! I told her that we aren’t left with much money here. She told me it’s fine; she’ll take care of everything. She even said that she’d try to get you a job there. Won’t it be great for you to work in Canada? Imagine for a second. She said that she already has a plan and she simply needs to talk to you. She’ll explain everything to you on the phone.”

“There’s no need for that,” Anant retorted. “I already happen to know what her plan is. What else can she possibly think of? She wants us to sell this house so that she can take her share of money out of it. That’s all.”

“But...”

“The next time you talk to that daughter of yours, tell her that if she needs money for her son’s treatment, then it’d be better if she gets it by cancelling her next World Tour. She left that very son of hers, whom she pretends to care so much, alone at home while she was having the time of her life in Europe. How can someone be such a hypocrite? Tell her that I would never let her sell this house. Never. And if...”

His mother, with her head held low, started sobbing piteously.

“Oh, come on!” Yelled Anant. He went close to her and tried bucking her up by wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “You know how much we are struggling here to save every single penny. And there, rather than helping us out, she is squandering money like anything while asking us to give her more by selling her share of bonds and shares. I don’t say it’s wrong, but it doesn’t make us feel like she’s a part of our family anymore. Doesn’t she know what we are going through here?”

“She does! She does!” His mother shouted, suddenly at the crescendo of her shrill voice. “You don’t know her! I know her! I gave birth to her! I brought her up! You don’t know her at all! She loves us!”

After this tirade, she broke into a fit of hysterical weeping. “Why don’t you understand!” She shouted. Her eyes swelled, her face became red, and amidst her shrieks of sorrow, she drew, not more than a few, brief but heavy painful breaths. Within about half a minute, she was completely spent.

Anant had been caressing her head all this while and telling her to calm down, but only now was she able to hear what he was saying.

“Relax, mom. Calm down. Take deep breaths. Don’t over-exert yourself. You are already exhausted. Don’t worry. I understand now. I’ll talk to her, and together we’ll see what we can do. You shouldn’t worry. Don’t stress yourself. Everything would be fine. (Would it be? Really?) Okay, go to bed. Sleep. Here, drink this.” He made her drink the water that he had left in his glass. “Do you feel better now? (He knew she didn’t) Okay, I’m leaving. If there’s anything important, call me up, okay? And I’ll talk to sister, so don’t worry about that, okay? Just sleep, okay?” He knew that she wouldn’t and that most probably, when he came back in the evening, he would find her sitting on her bed, holding her head between her hands, too tired even to weep.

I shouldn’t have talked to her like that, he thought. When did you start behaving like this Anant? With your own mother? Since when?

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I don't know. I was not in my senses.

Okay, what was it then?

Change!

It wasn't the first time, or the second. It was happening more and more frequently now. He was beginning to lose himself. The powers of change were up against him. I won't lose it. I'm not going to lose it, he said to himself. But how was he supposed to stop something that wasn't even under his control?

Heena, he remembered all of a sudden. Heena. Cheerful little woman with sad saintly eyes and a dimpled childish face. Heena. The first time he became acquainted with the powers of change was when he went out on a date with her. It wasn't long after his father's death. How tired he was back then of performing the endless funeral rites and of listening to the wailings of his mother and his relatives. Everyone who came to him offered him their condolences. They wanted him to know how sad they were because of his father's death. Had they really been sad, it might have actually comforted him a bit. But they merely pretended to be so, and listening to their same old eulogies again and again irritated Anant. To avoid them, he preferred staying away from home till late at night. No one understood him. Not a single person. Only Heena appeared to do so. So much so that on their third meeting, he told her all about his father's death and how he couldn't get over it. Anant hadn't discussed the matter with any of his friends before. Most of them didn't even know that his father had died recently. He had recently switched jobs, and at his new office, he pretended to be a happy person. It was impossible for anyone to judge from his looks that he was going through a personal tragedy. Heena too, to Anant's disappointment, couldn't see through him. They worked at different offices in the same building, lived nearby, and happened to catch the taxi back home from the same taxi stand. The first time he saw her there, she smiled at him unwittingly, so, awkwardly, and after much thinking, he went towards her and started a conversation by asking her if she'd like to share the taxi with him. She was so approachable.

Too late to catch a bus. Too early to catch a taxi. But what if there is a traffic jam ahead? Okay, I'll take the taxi then.

Gandhi Square! Anant shouted at the first taxi crossing his way. It stopped, and he got inside it. As usual, without looking back or saying anything, the driver started the meter.

Long ago, in taxis like this, they used to return home together. What was it that she used to say?

Lots of things. Nothing in particular. Something about her younger brother, her father or her mother. He simply liked being there with her, absorbing her presence. Whatever she said was of the least importance to him. On their first two meetings, she did most of the talking. But once he told her about his recent misfortune, she switched roles and became more of a listener, the most patient listener Anant had ever come across. He could talk about pretty much everything with her—never in the least afraid that he was being judged. She adored whatever he said even though she rarely understood what he actually meant. It was after meeting her that he realized how great and important a person he was...

Anant could see from afar that there was a long queue at the bus stop. How unreliable public transport has become nowadays, he thought. Even if I had come earlier, I would've been still standing there waiting for the bus. His taxi went slowly past the bus stop. Amidst the multiple rows of restless commuters, he managed to catch the sight of a tall, dark and dejected young woman.

Is it her? He looked closely. Yes, it was the same sad-looking bespectacled girl that he noticed every now and then on the bus. She liked him; he could say that by the way she looked at him. But she was too young. Too young for him. He was about to turn thirty-three. And how old was she? Sixteen or seventeen maybe. Half his age in any case. Girls, they usually like older men. The next time I see her, I would....

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He knew he wouldn't do anything. Heena was the first and the last.

Was she? Really?

...

And more importantly, was it love then?

He had always tried to convince himself that it wasn't. But was it? Had he never felt so strongly for anyone? Never? And assuming that it was actually true love, how could it change so all of a sudden? How? Is love as fragile as that?

One blow. Their love couldn't stand a single blow. They wanted to bring it back. To be in love again. He even went forward and confessed that he loved her, and a few weeks later, she too did the same. But all that was fruitless, as nothing changed. The feeling itself had disappeared, never to return again.

Feelings. Feelings. Anant chewed on the word while he felt his pockets for something. Feelings. Feelings. He didn't know what exactly he was looking for until he realized that something was missing. Feelings. Feelings. Damn! Neither one thing nor the other. He had forgotten to buy both the cigarettes and the match, and the taxi had already reached the highway. Damn! He felt like asking the cab driver for a cigarette. I could give him a tip for that. Or maybe I should wait.

Feelings. Feelings. He wished he never had them. If only he was like one of those reckless fellows who can snatch from the world whatever it is that they want from it. He couldn't even... Couldn't even do it with a whore. That filthy fucking whore in that cramped, dirty windowless godforsaken hole. He couldn't do it with her. It was only because he had already paid for it that he didn't turn back, despite knowing all the shame and disgust that the act entailed.

No! No! Don't think about it!

Without looking at her or saying anything, he switched off the lights, thinking that it would be more bearable to do it in the dark. She started complaining—her voice her tone even coarser than

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her looks. He endured, took off his trousers, and—while groping for her in the dark—felt for the first time the flesh of a naked woman. Though her body was flabby and rough, touching it sent strange sensations through him. He couldn't stop himself from feeling her.

“Do it and be done!” She shouted. And Anant—as if obeying this as a command of hers—placed his body between her legs, placed his hands upon her breasts, and suddenly, it went off.

Fuck! No! Don't think about it!

Anant was ashamed. He quickly turned on the lights and put on his trousers—wishing to fly away from the spot at that exact moment. If only she had laughed at him instead of chiding him like that. It wasn't even his unmanliness that concerned her but the fact that he had dirtied her sheets—as if they were not dirty already. And finally, while rushing back, he saw her face. Her dry lifeless form folded over the sheets scrubbing them with a crumpled newspaper and her face...

“Don't think about it! Don't think about it! Stop! Stop! Stop!” Anant exclaimed loudly.

The taxi driver looked back. They were already in the middle of a traffic jam.

“What's the matter?” He asked.

“Nothing nothing”, said Anant, trembling nervously, “it was just...”

He took a deep breath in and exhaled.

“Do you happen to have a cigarette on you?”

The taxi driver calmly pulled out one from his shirt's pocket and gave it to Anant.

“And also a lighter?”

He tossed a match towards him.

“Thanks. Thanks. I'll pay you for that,” he said.

“Don't bother,” replied the other.

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Anant felt as if he was getting lost in himself. He was sweating badly. He desperately needed something to pull him out of the abyss in which he was sinking. He lit up the cigarette, thinking that a slow thoughtful smoke might be of some help. But....

What is it...It isn't...

It tasted horrible. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, rolled it in his fingers and looked at it. What brand is it? It looked the same yellow and the same white, and yet, it was not. Not what he was used to.

Pathetic things people sell nowadays. How could someone smoke it and not be sick? Anant savored every last bit of it and threw the butt out of the window. Pathetic!

He was too timid to ask the cab driver for a mouth freshener even though he desperately wanted to get that foul taste out of his mouth. He put on his spectacles and looked at his phone. It was 8:35, and the traffic was hardly moving.

They are honking as if, by the weight of the noise, they can push everyone away, he thought. Can't they stay silent for a moment?

They didn't.

O Gosh! I'm in hell!

All of a sudden, Anant had become acutely aware of all the noise around him. He could even sense the hatred inside it. The hatred that the world was full of. The hatred that far outweighed overpowered and outscored the little bit of love that was there.

Why do people choose to live, Anant asked himself, when life sucks so much?

At that moment, he felt like he needed one more. That was not enough. That was certainly not enough. The foul taste on top of it. It had made the matter worse. He needed one more. Just one more. A good one.

The traffic stood absolutely still.

II

The Date

On 27th August 2007, while returning home in a taxi, Heena asked Anant something, which he didn't hear, so she asked him again. This time, he seemed to have heard what she said, but nevertheless, he didn't reply. He stared at her instead. She asked him if something was wrong. He didn't know what exactly was wrong. He wasn't feeling that well, he said. Then she asked him about the things he was going to do at night when he reached home. He couldn't answer. She asked him if there was a TV show that he was going to watch. He didn't like TV, he said, nor did he like going home. He was going to do what he did almost every day now. He was going to sit beside the lake till late at night, and then he was going to catch a bus back home, but not until he felt like sleeping. Why did he take the taxi back home, she asked, when he was actually going to the lake? He didn't know what to say to that, so he stared at her again. She asked him, after a pause, if she could come to the lake with him. Well...

After wandering on the planet for approximately twenty-two years, two months, ten days, eight hours, and twenty-one minutes, Anant Brihaspati was finally where he wanted to be. Sitting beside Heena, looking at the lake, he couldn't remember a single moment in his life when he felt happier. Everything was how it was supposed to be. Everything. Even his father's death—the memory of which was still green—seemed to Anant like an inseparable part of his life.

If it weren't for that, how could a girl like Heena ever come along with him? How could she, at such a public place, ever let him come so close to her? Would she? Ever? Even if he didn't start talking about his father? His sad sad father who died a sad sad death? Leaving him, Anant Brihaspati, all alone?

"What about your mother?" She asked. "And your sister? Don't they love you?"

Anant—who for the first time was embracing her soft soft waist in his soft soft embrace—whispered softly in her ear. "If anyone would ask them, yes. They'd say, yes, they love me. That's what they tell me. That's what they tell themselves. But..."

"But what?" She asked.

"But...I don't know," he suspired. "They make me feel so sad. I just don't want to be with them."

"Who is it that you want to be with then?"

"Alone," he said. "Or..."

He was about to add her name, but then suddenly, he became painfully aware of how she was looking at him. She wanted. It seemed to him as if she wanted something. But what? What exactly? That he could not guess. A kiss? A hug? Or maybe... maybe something else?

"Why have you become so quiet all of a sudden?" He asked.

"Look," she said. "Look. Look there behind you. Isn't that beautiful?" He turned his head around and looked but was unable to see what she wanted him to see.

"What is it?" He asked.

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“Can’t you see it?” She bent towards him and pointed in the direction of some distant streetlights. “There. Can’t you see?”

He couldn’t see, but he could surely feel, as his hand was touching her... He could feel it.

“I can’t see anything,” he said, and clumsily, with a bashfulness unknown even to himself, began caressing her... while searching her face for signs of approval.

On it though, he could hardly find anything to reassure him. To make matters worse, she steered her eyes away from him and was now staring nervously at the lake.

“Okay, let it go then,” she said finally, with a look of feigned indifference, and sat back the way she was sitting earlier.

Was it a yes or a no? Anant didn’t quite know. So, to probe her with this question, he brought his mouth close to hers, which, unbeknownst to him, was immediately transfixed by something. Something that, at first, he mistook for an octopus.

It surprised him. He wanted to break free from it, to throw it away. But before he decided to do so, he came to his senses and realized the truth. It was no octopus. It was worse. It was Heena. The woman that he loved so much. Her eyes were closed, and her body contracted. Her lips had clasped his tongue and were fervently moving up and down up and down over it, sucking it instinctively with a consciousness similar to that of an animal or a pre-programmed machine. Anant found it very hard to believe that he was kissing yet another human being.

Did she intend to love him, or, with that gentle force, did she intend to tear his tongue away?

Either way, there’s one thing that she successfully achieved. She made Anant very conscious of himself. Too conscious to even enjoy anything, even though his most intimate desires were manifesting right in front of him.

Were they? Really?

It was the moment that he had been waiting for, that he had been wishing for, and it was slipping away, without him participating in it. She was having the time of her life sucking on his

tongue while he was simply there, like a mute spectator is, of an uninteresting play, who, on top of everything, is far too aware of the acting in the acting for him to take anything seriously, and who just waits for things to be over, so that he can go home after that, where he would be assured of at least a good night's sleep if not anything else. However, in that situation, his main dilemma was...

How come she was enjoying herself while he wasn't?

And why the hell was she taking so long?

Is that how love is?

Anant felt extremely jealous of Heena. For like her, he too wanted to forget himself, and to dissolve and disappear. Until all that remained was. The moment and nothing else. Not even himself. Anant wanted that. Desperately. But it didn't happen. Instead, it was his awareness that prevailed. And his indifference. In fact, they didn't just prevail; they intensified further and further as time went along, proliferating into anger and disgust. It got to the point where the situation became so unpleasant that, in order to deal with it—and to possibly get some pleasure out of her body—Anant had to let go of being a spectator and had to act. Boldly. Which he did.

He slid his hand inside her bra and began squeezing her breasts aggressively, even though, to his immense dismay, they too turned out to be cold and tight, like the rest of her body, which simply added to his disgust, making him lose even the least bit of hope that he had of getting any pleasure from her body, although the fact remained, she was getting enough from his, which, as Anant concluded, was tantamount to her preying upon him, especially if he also considered his apparent inability to do anything. Anything except for waiting, that is. For things to stop. For Heena to stop. So that maybe he could go home someday. And maybe catch some sleep.

Maybe. But when was that day supposed to come?

...

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Finally, convinced of the futility of his efforts, and as if deliberately trying to transfer his share of sufferings to her, Anant decided to take control of the very tongue that she had been sucking on all this while, thrusting it even deeper inside of what he believed to be her throat. That vanquished her. She gave up all her efforts. Her neck arched back, and her head was knocked unconscious by pleasure. It was as if she had become an object of his desire, and all she wanted was for him to do whatever he wanted to do.

Not knowing how to capitalize on this moment, Anant concentrated all his efforts and thrusted his tongue even deeper. And, with his hand, which was roaming freely all over her breasts, he grabbed one of her nipples and pinched it as tightly as he could. At that moment, he knew that it was his limit, and he could not go any farther than that.

Fortunately though, he didn't have to.

As within a few seconds, like a machine working on principles unknown to him, Heena's body contracted itself to such a high degree that Anant almost felt as if it was going to burst. But, to his relief, after reaching a certain peak of contraction, it twitched a couple of times and relaxed immediately afterwards.

Everything came back to normal.

Once again, Heena became the woman that Anant had known till about a few minutes ago. There was one significant difference though, that Anant, despite his disinterest, couldn't help noticing. It was as if by the force of his efforts he had successfully lifted away the burdens, which, though previously weighed down Heena's spirits, had now become the very reason for her happiness, now that they were no more there. Also, there was another strange thing about this newly found happiness of hers that particularly irritated Anant. This time, it wasn't confined to her mouth as usual, as even her eyes also seemed to be smiling now. There was no trace of her former sorrow in them. She was now, by all the definitions of the word, happy. It was the first time that Anant had seen her that way.

“Strange,” he mumbled to himself.

“What’s strange?” She asked.

“Nothing,” he said, “It was my first time. Feels strange. Didn’t think it’d feel this way?”

“First time?” She giggled. “Go kid someone else! I know you’ve done it before. How could you be so good at it then? You are not as innocent as you look.”

“Do I look innocent?” Asked Anant while unwittingly he brought his mouth close to hers again, and since there was no barrier of shame separating them now, they united almost effortlessly. But, like the last time, this time too, Heena transfixed his mouth only to start sucking on his tongue. Once again, she turned into this machine—this animal that had already disgusted Anant. In fact, it wasn’t just the pressure of her lips that he despised; much more disgusting for him was the smell of her mouth. It smelt like cheap cigarettes, dried spit, and damp water. He didn’t know how he had ignored it for so long, but now, with each passing second, it was becoming more and more intense. This whole thing was turning into torture for him. He no longer saw Heena as a beautiful woman but as some devious animalistic creature. A creature that feeds solely on body and pleasure. One that he had to get away from as soon as possible without in any way offending the woman who seemed to be lost somewhere inside it. So, as the first part of his retreat, Anant slowly withdrew his tongue from her mouth and started kissing her neck. “You have a beautiful neck,” he said. She too, as if repaying the compliment, gave his neck a brief kiss, but was clearly not satisfied with it, as she immediately changed her position. Now she sat astride over him—over his penis, to be exact, which hadn’t moved a muscle throughout this whole ordeal—and, with a gleeful look in her eyes, she started moving her bottom first up into the air and then down onto his penis in what seemed to Anant like a pathetic imitation of the real sexual act.

What the hell is she doing? He asked himself while trying in vain to remember the name of the position.

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Is it supposed to make me feel good?

It didn't. But it did make him feel awkward and embarrassed.

There were people around who were staring at them.

Can't she see them? He looked into her eyes to find out. In them, all he could see was, the concern for her own pleasure. Nothing else.

So be it! He thought. To hell with everything! She is the one who is supposed to feel embarrassed anyway.

But she didn't. No matter how hard he wished for it, it just wasn't enough, so he decided to take some bold actions to the same effect. Something that would have shifted even his share of embarrassment to her.

But what could he do?

Brutal fantasies invaded his mind. At one time, he was stripping her naked in front of everyone; at another, he was undoing his trousers and stuffing his limp dick forcefully down her throat. These, however, were mere fantasies, and for any of them to happen, Anant had to make a move first—which he immediately did. He sat up straight, embracing her tightly, and, with one of his hands, reluctantly, made way for her crotch. It was as if, by the mere reluctance of his approach, he betrayed a certain lack of confidence in what he was doing.

“Not there,” she said.

“Okay,” said Anant.

He wasn't half as bold as he thought he was. Nevertheless, he was bold still, which he tried to prove to himself by his very next move. Without any reluctance this time, he lifted her T-shirt and bra at once, bringing to view one of her tiny brown nipples. Although Anant had little interest in this new guest, with a gentle lick, he paid quick service to it, moments before Heena brought her T-shirt down. She must have been embarrassed, he thought, seems like I won the round. But, contrary to what he had expected, this brief success of his didn't stop Heena. Far from giving up, she was, in fact, happier now. She was reacting as if Anant wasn't an adult but one of those naughty kids whose

innocent transgressions simply add up to their attractiveness. If only she knew that Anant was the youngest in his house, and he disliked being treated like a child. But that is how everybody had always treated him, like a child, like how she was doing right now. And what could he do to complain? Nothing! If he showed anger at such treatment, it made others doubly suspicious of his childishness, which was something he wanted to hide. In reality, ever since he was a child, he had always wanted to become a man. And although his time had long come, and every boy his age had long turned into one, he still felt like he was missing something. Earlier, he had thought that maybe loving a woman could be the key to the puzzle, but now that he was at it, he found it to be such a tiresome business. Something that he wanted to put an end to as soon as possible. But what could he do to make that happen?

...

In his desperation, Anant started moving his hands all over her body. He grabbed her arse from above her jeans and squeezed it as tightly as he could but without any positive outcome. She was still moving up and down up and down over him like before. So now, more tired than angry, as his last attempt, he stretched his hand from behind her arse and tried to approach the forbidden region from behind. There, over her jeans, he started rubbing with his fingers the spot where he thought her clitoris might be. Surprisingly, this worked. Like a machine that even Heena couldn't control, the up-and-down motion of her body suddenly became vigorous before ceasing altogether.

Once again, there was that calm.

It was the moment that Anant had been waiting for. In it, he decided that he was going to leave the place at once, even though it was clear to him that Heena wasn't satisfied at all. All of this had merely served as an appetizer for her, which only whetted her appetite. And now, with her legs wide apart, she was looking at Anant as if he was the cuisine that she had been waiting for (didn't she have enough already?).

The hunger with which she looked at Anant filled him up

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with fear and anxiety. It seemed impossible to him that she was ever going to let him go. Only a violent reaction on his part could have saved his skin, but the problem with that too was, he didn't know how to be violent, and it was too late in his life to learn something like that. He could, at best, offer some petty excuse, but about that too, he was sure that it wasn't going to work. He was no good at lying. No good at anything at all. So he simply lit up a cigarette, thinking that a slow thoughtful smoke might buy him some time. But what was he going to do after that?

...

Heena, in the meantime, was more excited than Anant had ever seen her before. She could hardly wait. So, what she was unable to do with her body, she tried doing that with her words.

“Do you think my left boob is bigger than my right?”

“Yes, I did watch porn once, but I only liked it when she took him in her mouth.”

“Oh yes, we used to shower together at the hostel. All of us in the same bathroom. It was fun.”

“I never had sex, but I did take him in my mouth. My ex, I mean. We used to be at it for weeks on end and would lose the track of time.”

“I wasn't into porn, bathing together and everything. I used to be such a good girl, but my friend at the hostel, Geeta, she got me into all this.”

“There was this teacher at our school. Such a pervert. Slept around with young girls.”

“As for my part, I wouldn't even let him touch the tip of my hair, but he seduced Geeta.”

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“My ex, he was mad about me. He said that he had never met a girl who was half as good at sucking it as I am. And boy, he was no joke either; he had hundreds of girls before me.”

“Geeta once got a blister on her pussy. It hurt her like mad.”

“The first time I sucked it, he let it out on my belly. It was so gross.”

“Yes, that’s a fact. Girls like it big.”

“I’m not kidding. I can eat a dozen bananas in one go.”

“That bastard! He would wake me up in the middle of the night with his dick in front of my mouth. He was so stubborn! He wouldn’t let it flow even after two hours of continuous sucking.”

When Anant was done with his cigarette, Heena grabbed his hand and placed it gently over her bare waist.

“See? I’m so hot. Even though I want to pee so bad right now, I would hold it in for you.”

“What? You don’t have to.”

“It’s no big deal,” she said. “Holding your pee isn’t as difficult as holding out when you want to have sex.”

“Do you want to have sex?”

“Don’t you?” She laughed. She was still sitting open-legged. Probably to make Anant imagine how she would appear to him when the two of them would be having sex.

“I want to do it,” she said, “I want to do it so bad. But I’ve promised myself I would only do it with the that man I love. That’s why I never let my ex do it. I would take him in my mouth, of course, but sex? No! Never!”

After hearing this, for some reason, Anant’s penis shrank even further. Was it because she... that her mouth smelt so bad?

Impossible!

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Anant felt like he was going to puke there and then.
That was it—the limit.
He withdrew his hand without saying anything.
He was tired and disgusted.

Shortly afterwards, without saying much, both of them left.

Never after this could he talk the same way to Heena again. The memory of what had happened that night haunted both of them. So much that it became nearly impossible to have a conversation that didn't allude to it. Heena never talked about it. Directly. But she resorted to complaining instead—her complaints always being about something concerning Anant. Something that he did or didn't do, said or didn't say (most of the times, something insignificant). And Anant, who felt like he had to atone for what he did that night, would always be too ready to apologize—no matter how baseless her complaints seemed. To him, what had happened that night was his personal failing, and he had to make up for it, no matter the cost. He didn't care if he had to set himself down. He was ready for anything and everything. Be it saying that he loved her—a thing he never did for anyone, before or after—or asking her to come to the lake with him, or to some random hotel, or to his house—whenever his mother and sister weren't there. He did all that without any success, as she would always agree but would never come, giving him a different excuse every time. On top of that, their regular conversations were no fun either, as she would never let go of an opportunity to talk about her ex-boyfriend.

How she lied to her family to stay with him.
How she cooked food for him.
How she sucked his dick for hours, days, weeks on end.
How she still loved him.

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All of which
Made Anant feel like
He wasn't worth anything.

It was around this time that Anant became acquainted with the powers of change. It wasn't Heena alone (she stopped talking to him three months after that night) but everybody else too. From his sister, mother, and boss to his friends and colleagues, everybody was suddenly dissatisfied with him. To himself, Anant was the same, but to them, all of a sudden, he had become this selfish, lazy and unkempt fellow. It was as if he had lost not only most of his hair during this time but something else too. Something that everybody wanted from him, but now (like Heena) since they also knew that he didn't have that in him, they begrudged him for it. Moreover, they never had to talk to Anant to find out about it. His dull and meekly bent face narrated his entire story, which went something like:

He was not man enough, and he knew that.

I

The taxi had reached its destination, but although its driver was shouting at Anant, he could neither get up nor move.

Was he asleep?

No, his eyes were wide open.

Was he dead?

Not yet, but he wanted to die.

Anant knew that he had to pay the driver the fare plus what he owed him for the cigarette, and then he had to call Omar—his best friend and colleague—to tell him that he was drowning. But, caught up in the labyrinth of dreams and memories, nothing came so easy to him. Before he could make even the slightest of movements, he had to relive some of the most embarrassing moments of his past. Moments that he never told another soul. Moments like...

When kids in the hood told him that they saw his mother without any clothes on.

And when he shitted himself at school when he was eight.

And when Heena told him that she would never want to be alone with him ever again.

And when, in reply to his declarations of love, she simply said, 'Friends?'

He had to get over all of them, not once and forever, but for the time being, although it seemed impossible to do even that much on his own. He needed support. Omar's support.

And where was he?

One phone call away.

But first, he had to get out of the taxi.

And for that, he had to pay.

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The money, it was in his wallet.

The wallet, it was in his pocket.

“Drive on,” said Anant, “I’ll pay you double.”

“I can’t,” said the driver, “unless you pay me first.”

These words hurt Anant like anything. They were like swords thrusted inside his heart. The driver also hated him. Like everybody else. You don’t deserve to live Anant. That’s what he meant to say. That’s what everybody had been telling him. For so many years now. ‘You don’t deserve to live Anant.’

He had to call Omar asap.

“Take it,” said Anant, “The money is in my pocket. I can’t move (He really couldn’t).”

“Whatever,” said the driver, “Like you got some.”

“No cigarettes. No money.”

“Must be my bad day.”

“Don’t bother.”

The next thing Anant knew was, he was sitting all alone on the curb outside his office.

I must have passed out, he thought, but how come I’m sitting then?

Anant got up. His office was on the other side of the road. Then he remembered that he had to call Omar. But he soon realized that, in his current condition, it was impossible for him to do so. As his hands, his feet, his legs, although he could see them, he couldn’t actually feel them. At all. And maybe that’s the reason why, right then and there, at that place, he fell on his face, without feeling it.

It was funny.

He couldn’t say that he was numb. No. He simply didn’t feel. Like he was not. Is it a dream? He thought. It could have been. It was slow. Like that movie. The one that he liked. What was its name? He couldn’t remember. But he didn’t need to. As right then, he saw. All of a sudden, he saw.

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It

Contracting

Everything

Contracting

Until

It couldn't

Until

It faded

Into

An explosion

First red

Then black

And then?

Darkness

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I

And there was light. Bright light. Anant could feel it. Not on his skin like he used to, as it was penetrating him now through and through. He was awake. So wide awake that for this waking up of his, he couldn't imagine any sleep. And he saw. Perceived. So much. It was as if he was a hole. A hollow and empty hole. Thoughts, feelings, and impressions all poured into him unceasingly. From every possible direction. It was too much. Too much to remember. Even the memories of his past that he hitherto carried like a burden on his soul had lost all their weight. He would have laughed at everything that was bothering him just now. If only he could laugh at all. He couldn't. As there was nothing to laugh from. No mouth. No body. Nothing.

At least I can think, he thought.

Of course, he could. Although it was hard to distinguish whose thoughts he was thinking, as so many of them were coming to him now. In his current state, it was almost impossible for Anant to think independently, as whenever he tried doing so, it almost always resulted in him landing upon thoughts that weren't his to begin with. It's like the barrier that was supposed to separate who he was from who he was not was no longer in place, resulting not only in a barrage of thoughts but of thinkers too. Thinkers who were as much a part of Anant as he was a part of

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himself. He was like the conscious space in which they were floating. Sometimes with each other. At other times, by themselves. But they were there. Always.

Unlike Anant. Who wasn't.

Although he still managed to somehow conjure up an identity prominent enough for him to be afraid of losing it.

I am, he kept on repeating to himself, I am. I am. I am...

Trying hard to be.

Soon enough though, this fear of losing his identity began losing itself, and all the thoughts and thinkers, overwhelming as they might've been, could no longer stop Anant from gaining a mastery over them. It was by no means a small feat, and without effort, it would've been impossible to achieve. Looking back at his life, Anant couldn't remember doing anything half as big. It was like combing a head full of hair, one hair at a time. Moreover, he also had to remember the location of each combed hair, so that he didn't end up combing it again. And all that was still easy, compared to what the main task was, as it wasn't static and lifeless hair that he was dealing with, but with active and ever-changing thoughts. One look away, and all his progress would've been lost. One look away.

But that didn't happen. For there was no away. Only thoughts. And their thinkers. That formed a huge web, of which, Anant could have easily become the spider, if only he figured out all the threads.

Which he did.

Eventually.

Although once he was done with them, he didn't know what to do. As within minutes he was done with what he had thought would be the main purpose of his life. Now he had eternity in front of him and nothing to do. So he waited. Waited for something to happen. Waited like a lonely spider sitting on an empty web. And thus, time went by, and nothing worthwhile came. But since Anant couldn't resign himself to doing nothing out of a mere restlessness of some sort, he started randomly

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picking up streams of thoughts in order to observe them more carefully. He didn't apply himself to this new task as industrially as he did to the former one because he knew that if he did so, he would be done with it in no time, and then he would have to bear the burden of nothingness again. To him, what he was doing right now was more like browsing through channels on a television without being able to find anything interesting. As in the end everything turned out to be the same incomprehensible gibberish. Thingless words, blurred images, incoherent sounds, and nothing else. Yet they were all different in ways Anant could tell. And while browsing through them like that, he finally stumbled upon something substantial. His own name, to be exact. A fairly common one, but the thoughts that were surrounding it were strikingly familiar. It seemed like Omar. It was Omar. The moment this dawned upon Anant, he let go of everything he was holding on to. His entire web of thoughts. So that he could concentrate solely on his friend (A task he carried out to such a level of perfection, that at one point, he almost felt like he himself was Omar. Although the sole difference was, he wasn't). He began rummaging through Omar's thoughts in an attempt to discover why his best friend was thinking of him.

Omar was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling of his room.

A post-mortem? No! Fuck no! They tear open your body and do God knows what with it. To find out the reason they say. The reason behind... I don't want to know it! Lying on the road they said. He was. Sleeping so peacefully. It didn't look like... Maybe all this is a dream, and I need to sleep some more, or maybe... I need to wake up. Had a bad dream, Anant. Don't remember what it was. Don't remember having a dream as bad as this. My worst nightmare, I'd say, and I don't remember it. Who likes remembering bad things anyway? Wish we could forget them all... The money. Where would I get it?

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Fifteen thousand. For what? Taking a dead body to the hospital? And now the post-mortem. Would they charge for that too? Milking it dry they are. The corpse. I'd tell his mother not to consent to it. Then they have to burn it too, and who would pay for that? Wish his father was here. His sister, yes. I should ask her for it, but not right now. She lives in Canada. Would she come? He says that she hasn't come here ever since she got married. Would she come now? Or should I ask his mother for it? And what about the twelve thousand he owed me? Better not bring that up now. Later, maybe. Or never. Wish his father was alive. To see his son die like that? What the hell am I thinking?

Omar looked at his phone.

11:58. I still have time. 12:30 they said. The ambulance would reach his home. And when they say 12:30 they mean 1. At least 1. Won't be there before 12:40 in any case. Then again, there must be others too to handle the situation.

Omar got up, locked his room, drew the curtains, and plopped down on his bed again.

Which episode did I finish last night? 6 or 7?

He held his phone horizontally in front of his face and typed 'Fantasies of a Lonely Housewife episode 7'

Pathetic things people see nowadays, thought Anant. I'd rather watch porn.

A soft, plump, big-breasted, broad-arsed, young-looking, middle-aged woman appeared on the screen. Omar, who was

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holding his phone in one of his hands, snuck the other inside his pants.

Doesn't look that bad, thought Anant, as he left Omar. He never told me about this one.

Anyways, It's too late now.

I'm dead.

His own death seemed to Anant like the death of somebody else. It could've been the death of someone he knew or the death of the main character of one of the movies that he saw, but as far as his own death was concerned, even the idea of it seemed more distant to him than it ever had, and yet, he knew that he was dead indeed. It was a fact that he had to constantly remind himself to believe it. Despite that, he couldn't help forgetting it again and again. Enveloped as he found himself by darkness from all around, he kept trying to figure out what exactly does death mean (having experienced it not too long ago), but the answer to this question somehow seemed to evade him. What he came across instead was a startling noise—a shrill high-pitched cry of some sort that shook him to the very core of his being.

Was it God answering his plea?

Did God sound like that?

Maybe... Maybe not... In either case... the noise... didn't stop. Not for a single second. It filled him up completely, drowning his senses. Anant never knew that he was capable of hearing something as loud as that. But he was. Not only hearing it, but feeling it too, in every possible way. And it didn't matter whether it was the voice of God or not. As even if it was, Anant still wanted to get away from it, as soon as possible.

But how could he? Get away?

For there was no way. The noise, it was extremely loud, and it wasn't only coming from one side. Anant was surrounded by it. And the harder he tried to get away from it, the louder it got. Which somehow made him think of a way out. Maybe, if he didn't move at all and stood absolutely still, the noise would have

disappeared by itself. Anant wasn't sure how this was going to work, but it was well worth a try.

And so, he tried.

And, he failed.

Every single time. Until he finally figured out that, in his present condition, it was impossible for him to stand still, and the harder he tried to do so, the more conscious that made him of his helplessness. He realized that he wasn't even moving by himself. It was actually the noise that was pushing him towards its source, continuously, because of which, it was also becoming increasingly louder with each passing moment, leaving Anant with no other option no other choice than to helplessly surrender to it, to this noise, which was long past what he would have deemed bearable, and was, in fact, so loud that he could no longer differentiate himself from it. It was as if they had somehow become one.

But, he thought, had I really been one with it, any increase in the loudness of the noise wouldn't have changed anything for me. Which it did—albeit at a much slower rate now. So this oneness, it might have also been true, as Anant too, despite the surging turbulence, soon felt that he was slowly stumbling onto some sort of a stability, and was beginning to be able to see through the chaos. It wasn't God as he had earlier imagined. It was a boy. A boy without a body. A boy without a face. He was the source of it all—the noise. Anant couldn't help approaching him. And as he did so, the shrill high-pitched noise coming from him got even louder and translated itself into myriad painful memories. Memories where that boy should've been but wasn't and in his place, there was nothing, except for noise, coming out of the memories like of the time when with bright shining silver cups he was playing in the sand and was making something out of it... and when he was leaning over a ditch with his friends and looking at a snake that was in it... and when he was flinging sticks at a tree on which a shoe was stuck... and when he was at his birthday party sitting with all of his gifts around him... and when he was brushing his teeth and trying hard to raise himself before the

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washbasin mirror... and when he was eating something hurriedly with his schoolbag next to him... and when he was jumping over the stairs and onto the landing... and when he was lying on his bed and watching television... and... and... and... There were millions of memories. Anant passed them by without being able to concentrate fully on any one of them. In fact, had it not been for the emptiness in place of the boy, along with that overbearing noise, these memories would have seemed perfectly normal to Anant. There was nothing special about them, or at least so he thought at first. But soon, he became aware of his misconception, as despite being overwhelmingly normal, some of these memories seemed surprisingly familiar. They seemed to be taken out from some movie that he had seen not too long ago (but had somehow forgotten), and only the characters remained familiar now. Moreover, there was another more peculiar thing about these memories, which Anant hadn't noticed earlier. Along with the boy, his father too had emptiness in place of him. An emptiness, which, unlike the boy's, was not all that prominent, as it didn't emanate any noise. In addition, the boy's father was there in only a few memories. Fewer even when compared to most of the others, who appeared much more frequently. These (for the most part) were the boy's sister, friends, relatives, and colleagues, and there were a lot of other people too, whom Anant couldn't recognize. And as far as the boy's mother was concerned, her presence was the most enigmatic of them all. She was there. Always there. But never visible. Not even as emptiness. She was like someone in the background; more like the director of a movie or its narrator, or she could have also been someone from the audience, someone who was constantly watching everything. Either way, it wasn't who she was that mattered the most. It was how Anant felt about her. And indeed, he felt her presence with utmost intensity.

Mother! Mother! Were the words were going through his mind. He wanted to turn around and take a look at her. But he couldn't. Even try. As going against the current was impossible.

And the current, where was it taking him?

He didn't know. There were memories. Fewer of them now emanating much more noise. That was all he knew. Maybe they were taking him towards their source. But hadn't he discovered that already? What was the point then? It was his mother. He knew that now. And the boy who wasn't there was him, Anant Brihaspati. And these were his mother's memories about him. Moreover, the noise also belonged to her. In fact, it wasn't actually noise. It was pain (her pain not his) that had translated itself into all this.

That's fine.

But why was he there then? Why was he suffering alongside his mother? He who wasn't even alive? Hadn't he suffered enough already? Even she knew that he had suffered. Her memories, the final ones, were about the same—the last decade or so of his life. Which Anant now experienced once again through her eyes.

It was painful. Painful to see him like that. She knew that he did it. Every night. Was alone. Lonely. Missed his father. Cried. Too much. She wanted to help him. But she couldn't, as she knew that she was the reason behind his suffering.

Her son. Poor child. Would never hurt anybody. And hurting him was all she ever did. Always. Even today. Even now.

Once again, Anant's mother was binding him to her sufferings. She knew how to do that. Or was it him? Could it be possible that it wasn't his mother but Anant who was still attaching himself to her? Like he always did?

No! He wanted to tear himself away. For his suffering, it had simply become hellish by now. He was taking everything in without letting it out. He wanted to scream. Shout. But how could he? Without a mouth?

Impossible!

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Like a bubble, Anant felt himself expand. He was straining beyond his limit. Feeling that he was about to burst. Wanting to burst. To die. Disappear. Annihilate. But now that he was dead already, was that still an option?

...

His apparent immortality was enough of a proof to Anant that the worst was yet to come. An insurmountable pain awaited him. His mother's pain (not his). And yet, he was suffering much more than her.

Why?

There was no answer.

The suffering, it might have already lasted for as long as Anant could remember, as like there was no end to it, it also lacked a beginning. It had something of the eternal about it. Eternal and inevitable. Something that the mightiest of the spirits would bow down to. And so, in the face of it, convinced of his own insignificance, Anant felt helpless. To him, nothing seemed mightier in the world now. Mightier than pain and suffering, which appeared like gods that direct the flow of the entire universe.

Had it not been for them, who in this world would've chosen to be a mortal?

Now life appeared to Anant as an escape. From the eternal pain and suffering, and also from fear, which was nothing but the fear of eternity and immortality. And although in and by itself, to be alive was a stupid state to be in, at least it had an end to it. There was death, destruction and chaos to always help you out. Thankfully, they spared no one.

I am always going to get back to where I am right now, thought Anant. There's nothing to lose.

The moment he realized that, Anant felt a deep desire. All of a sudden, he wanted to live once again. To live once again and then to die once again. And then to live once again. And then to die once again. And then to live. And then to die. Again and again.

When he looked at it—at this living and dying—it all appeared to be pointless and tiresome. But at least it was better than the eternal suffering that one experienced on the other side. At least it had an end to it. A beginning and an end. Like a movie. That was there to make you forget about eternity (at least for a little while). A movie called life.

MOTHER

Glimpses of this movie, like its first titles, rolled by, and started mixing with the last and the most painful of all the memories.

These memories—one of which was Anant holding a white circular plastic plate in front of him—finally merged into the singular vision of a human body (probably Anant's) wrapped clumsily in a white cloth. And once Anant had moved past that vision, there was nothing. It was the movie that should've been there, but it wasn't. Nor was there any noise or light. It was more like... bedtime. Sweet and slumbering darkness enveloped Anant. And two whispering voices came. To lull him to sleep. One belonged to a man. And the other to a woman. Both were saying something to themselves, surprisingly, at the same time.

Maybe they were having sex.

Why is she still thinking? Thinking when I'm so deep inside of her? Deeper than anyone else has ever been. Or maybe not?

No!

I'll fuck her! Fuck her brains out! Fuck her bad! Fuck her mad! Fuck her the way no one has ever fucked her before! Give her the fuck of her life! Fucking fuck her! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fucking harder! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! She's still not fucking feeling it! Fuck! Must fuck deeper! Fuck! I can't! Fuck! I fucking can't! Fuck! I just fucking can't! Fuck... Fuck... Fuck... Noo...

“I just came. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

This is all you get. Not worth wasting a condom. Can't even pull it out. Fucker! Would have to take a pill again. Or later maybe. Within 72 hours. Would make him pay

for that. For the pill at least. You should pay for that, if not for anything else. Merely for the sake of... For not being able to... O God! I can't take it! You look forward to it the whole week and... This is all you get. This! Must wash it before I... or it'd stink or... Ah! Let it all go to hell.

“Could you please sleep in the other room tonight?”

“Okay, but why?”

“I just...” (can't stand when someone thinks that I stink) “feel like sleeping alone tonight.”

“No problem” (Not good enough. Certainly not good enough.)

“I'll leave then.”

“Thanks.”

Phew! What a prick! Why do I always find pricks like him? The good guys, they'd say. The good guys? If that's what you call good, may the lord save us from the bad. Good guys... bad guys... don't they all disappoint you in their own unique way? Don't they? O God! Send me one guy. One guy who doesn't disappoint, and I'll be settled for life. Or am I too unlucky? Wait. Let's count. How many guys have I been with? Aashish... one. Vicky... two. Remy... three. Haider... four. And him... five. Only five. And such disappointments all five of them were. One bigger than the other. In bed too. Never satisfied me in the least. Not a single time. I can't recall a day when I was so satisfied with myself that I could say, oh God, I was so satisfied today. Never! Those wretched pricks! Damn them and their whole kind who know nothing beyond their own pleasure! Fools! All of them! They'd pay you thousands upon thousands to stick it in you for a while. They never care how it is that you feel inside. How sad and lonely you are. Sad... alone... lonely... O God!

MOTHER

O God! If only...I wasn't a woman... if only. I wasn't a man... if only. I wasn't... anything... nothing... you'd see then... you'd see... if I had jumped... if I jump... you'd see then... you'd see... how life turns out to be... without me...

O God... O God...

Asleep?

Heena... Heena...

Where are you?

I must talk to you.

Heena... Heena...

I have something very important to tell you.

Heena...

Is she dreaming?

II

The Dream

Anant was with Heena

Again?

God knows how he got there

God knows where they were

The one thing he was sure of was

They were together

At last

He wasn't going to let her go this time

He had decided

He would never let her go

And so

He began talking to her

Even though

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

She seemed silent and indifferent

Maybe she wasn't even listening

Who knows?

But that didn't stop Anant

"Heena," he said "Heena... Heena... Heena..."

Without any response from her

"Why do you compare them to me? Why?"

"Haven't you figured it out already? How different I am from them? Haven't you?"

Heena was silent

"I... You see... I'm not like them. Like those other guys that you've been with. I'm different. So, if you compare me to them, then you, my dear, you judge me wrong. You judge me wrong like everybody else, without giving me a chance to prove myself. When all I need is. A chance."

Heena was still silent.

"Heena, my dear, why don't you say something?"

She didn't say anything.

"Ah! I can see why you are silent. You must be thinking, how am I different? Isn't it? Yes?"

She didn't reply.

MOTHER

“Well, I’m different because I’m different. It’s because I don’t want from you what every other guy wants from you. I haven’t come here to ask you for that.”

Imitating Heena’s voice, he added, “What do you want from me then, if not that? Don’t you also want to get inside me?”

“Haha. I think I can read your thoughts.”

“Anyways, if that’s what you are thinking. This is my answer.”

“I do, my dear, yes. I do want to get inside you. More desperately so than any other guy out there. But I don’t want to do that solely for fun. I don’t want to get in there and then come out and go away. No! I want to stay there, inside you. I want to be with you more intimately than any other guy has ever been, or would ever be. I want to become one with you. Not only with your body but with you, your whole being. I want to think what you think, to feel what you feel. I want to be a part of you, of your most intimate self. I want to be one of your kind. I want to be... I want to be... You... Mother.”

Heena was still silent.

“Life, you see, it is so tiring. It takes so much of hard work, patience, effort, so much of will, simply to be able to live.”

“And, in the end, it’s not worth it at all. There are too many sacrifices.”

Anant paused for a while

“But despite that, despite all that hard work, pain and trouble, live you must... live you must... for death, my dear, as I know it, it’s the worst.”

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

“Haha... See, I just rhymed there.”

Heena smiled.

“Heena... Heena... On a serious note, I’ve finally realized that it’s all such a big trap. Life, death, and all the rest of it. It is an inescapable trap. The worst part about which is, if you start seeing it as one, that doesn’t help either, as merely knowing that you are in a cage doesn’t take you out of it. At best, it just fills you with fear. Of what might lie beyond. There could be a world, unknown and eternal, and maybe even hostile that lies outside your cage... Oh Heena! I don’t want to think about it! There’s nothing for me there! Please! Save me! I’m so tired and alone! I’ve been so tired for so long! I need a place to rest. That’s safe and warm. Where I have nothing to worry about, and where I can forget. Everything. Including myself. Where darkness abides, where there is no time, and where I can sleep a long, dreamless sleep. That’s all I need, Heena. That’s all I need. A long, dreamless sleep to forget everything. So... Help me! Please... Heena... Help me!”

“Okay,” she said and was silent for a while.

“Look, the sun is rising,” she finally added.

“What sun?” Exclaimed Anant, and a sudden awareness dawned upon him. Why hadn’t he noticed it earlier? Was he under some spell all this time? For there was no way. That he could’ve ignored it.

Ignored what?

THE LIGHT

A light so blindingly bright that Anant couldn’t even say whether it was because of a single sun shining too close or whether there were thousands of them up in the sky.

MOTHER

The sky? Was it even there?

There was the light, of course, and the light, the light, and nothing except the light.

But the sun? The sky? Heena?

Were they there?

Was he supposed to look for them?

If yes, then where?

As everywhere he looked, it was the same

The same light.

To the point that

He couldn't be sure of

Where he was looking

He couldn't be sure of

Anything

Except the light.

And whatever he thought about

And all that he endeavored

He knew that

Sooner or later

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

He had to give it up

To the light.

For he had no other option

No other choice

Only one

The light.

And so he gave himself to it

Finally

He had to give himself to it

To what?

To light. To life.

I

But this light too. It soon faded away. The sun had somehow set, and it was darkness once again. And in this darkness, Anant could hear whispering voices. Not one or two this time. But thousands of them. Some were louder than the others and appeared to be coming from nearby, and one of these voices belonged to Heena.

Anant. Why did I think of him today? All of a sudden? After so many years? Why? Am I still in love with him? What a stupid thought! I never was! That wasn't... You can't call it... He made me happy though. Despite being such a... such a... kid? Must be having kids of his own by now, who knows? A thirty-something guy. He was older than me, and I'm going to be thirty this year. Will I ever get married? Me, the old maid? I don't think he would marry me. I let him do it last night. And once you let them do it, they lose their interest in you. In you, in marriage, and in... O Lord! It's so fucking tiring. Starting over with a new guy. Telling secrets. Giving your body away. Falling all over again. Only to be rejected like that. So tiring. And every time, it's the same old story. First, they'd say it's love. Then they'd call it fun. So convenient! They just don't know anything. Except for condoms and pills. They've forgotten why we do it in the first place. If only they knew how much it hurts. When you are going to have a kid, and you... How much it hurts. Yes! Pills are bad. Everyone knows that. But I'd rather stuff ten of those and suffer all the side effects. It's nothing when compared to... O God! I can't even imagine...

Heena... Heena... Thought Anant.

Why are you so sad?

Anant wanted to comfort her. If he could, he would have held her in his arms and told her that 'I understand you' and that 'Everything is going to be okay' like he did with his mother. But unlike her, Heena had never wanted him in the first place—neither as a man nor as a child. For her, he was an absolute nobody, as she could only get herself to care about the guys who had hurt her at some point. Unfortunately, Anant wasn't one of them. Throughout their relationship, he had been the one with the short end of the stick. In short, he was the loser.

Yes, the loser.

This—as soon as he realized it—came as a big revelation to Anant. It was like a great chasm had opened up. On one side of it were the victorious, the winners, and on the other side of it were the defeated, the losers. No one would have ever won anything if it weren't for someone losing something. Everybody wanted to be the winner. Nobody wanted to be a loser. But without a loser, there would have never been a winner. Anant, even though he had known this for long, was unable to bear this fact. It was akin to saying that the sole thing one can laugh at is someone else's misery. Heena had laughed at him, the way those other guys must have laughed at her. Heena would have readily married any of those other guys, like Anant was ready to marry her. All of it was unfair and unjust, so much so that injustice seemed to Anant the very basis of humanity. And although this was too big a conclusion to draw, when he pondered over the other whispering voices, he started becoming more and more certain that such was the case.

MOTHER

Those other voices—they were all doing it (sex). Doing it for one reason or another. For any reason except love. Among them, there was too much talk about love. Talk like 'I love you', 'we are lovers', 'love at first sight', 'power of love', 'true love', 'love this', 'love that', and so on. There was too much talk like that. But love itself was nowhere to be found. People mostly used the word to justify their desires. In reality, they simply found pleasure in it (in sex), or it gave them power or excitement or relief, but more often than not, even these feelings were absent. And yet, people were still doing it. Doing it for the sake of doing it, while whispering something or the other to themselves. And it was these whispering voices that Anant was surrounded by. It was as if they were all beckoning him to choose any one out of them. And Anant would have gladly done so if he had found in them the slightest trace of the love that he was so desperately looking for. But not only did he not find it, the voices too, after whispering for a little while, disappeared imperceptibly, as the new ones rose up and took their places. These too must have disappeared soon afterwards. As for Anant, he didn't know whether they did or not, as he wasn't paying any attention to them anymore. Disillusioned by what he found out, he had already retreated so deep within himself (and so far away from any of those whispering voices) that all he was left with were his own thoughts and the world that was born out of them. In this world, whatever he imagined turned into reality, but, as he knew that it was the reality he himself had created, Anant had no interest in it either. So he left it too and remained with the source of it, which was also the source of everything and which in itself was nothing. Anant stayed with it for a very long time. Till he couldn't stay no more. Till even his feelings disappeared, and like their source, he too became nothing.

HIM (PART-1)

Someone must have deliberately changed the world around Anant, as when he came back to himself, everything that had surrounded him till then was nowhere to be seen. There were no whispering voices, no pain, no noise, no thoughts; even the light and the darkness that had been there alternatively were not there. What was left in their place was something entirely artificial, much like Anant's new body, which was a fully grown, completely naked male one, and one that looked and felt entirely different (especially when compared to his previous body). It was muscular, flexible, symmetrical, and it had an abundance of hair on it, although there were none on his face. And this face, as soon as Anant began touching it, also somehow assured him of his good looks, despite there being no external way to confirm the same. There was, to be exact, no mirror or any such thing at that place. Only four white walls, attached to one another, extending into infinity. Compared to Anant, these walls were magnanimous, and since they were illuminated from within, it seemed impossible to him to catch his reflection in them. Still, somewhat subconsciously, and without actually knowing why, he kept on searching for it. For his own reflection. Which he couldn't find in the wall below him, so he walked towards the one that was in front of him, although it looked exactly the same. And—as it eventually turned out—the same it was, but in more ways than Anant had initially imagined. For in the same way as the wall that was below him just now, he could walk on this other wall too, without the slightest of

adjustments. The same must have also been true for the remaining two walls. But, for some reason, Anant didn't feel curious enough to go and try them out. As, at best, they would have yielded the same results anyway. The ceiling would have become the floor, or a wall would have become the ceiling, or the floor would have become a wall, or something like that. It was too complicated, and yet it looked so simple. One of the simplest designs that you could imagine. Four walls. That's all.

Who could have constructed it? Thought Anant.

"I don't know," came the reply. From inside his head? Didn't seem like that. But who could have replied then? For not only was nobody there, Anant hadn't even verbalised his thoughts for someone to be able to hear them. Till now, he wasn't even sure of his voice, about what it would sound like, or if it existed at all. The fear of what he might find out kept him from trying to speak. That's why, when he finally decided to probe into the matter, he did so not by speaking out loud but by concentrating all his thoughts and moulding them into a single question.

"Is anyone there?"

"Yes," came the reply. Immediately. Anant was on the watch for it this time, still he couldn't figure out where exactly it came from. He hadn't willed this 'Yes' that much he was sure of, and also that the voice behind this 'Yes' was familiar, maybe similar to the voice of his own thoughts (who knows?). Apart from that, Anant wasn't sure of anything else. Facts like whether it was a man's voice or a woman's voice, or if it was soft or coarse or sharp or low, escaped him completely. He knew that, if he wanted to be more certain about it, he would've had to probe further. Which he did.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"I am ME," said the voice.

"What type of an answer is that?"

There was silence.

"Okay, why don't you show yourself?"

"You didn't ask me to."

“Now I do. Show yourself.”

“As you wish.”

Anant had no idea where and who to look for. The person (he still had little clue about HIM), if HE was about to appear, could have appeared from anywhere. HE was as likely to emerge from the wall above him as HE was to sprout on the one before him. There were infinite possibilities, and since Anant didn't want to miss out on any of them, he looked for HIM everywhere, up and down, left and right, but without any success. He wondered if the voice that he had heard was real or if it was some uncontrollable or alienated part of his head that was creating it.

If that's the case, I must go and see a doctor, thought Anant while inwardly smiling to himself. He imagined how puzzled all the doctors would be when they would get to see this wonderful specimen of divine health. At least there wouldn't be that deriding look in their eyes. The look that's so intent on proving its superiority that it declares everything that comes under its scrutiny as diseased or disordered. Being a sickly little child, Anant had so often tolerated the harassment of that look, along with the judgment that it would inevitably pass on him. Now, if he were to encounter it again, what a great twist of fate that would be. Him, with his tall, muscular, flexible, and symmetrical body standing like a demigod (in front of those pale and nerdy doctors) doing flips, somersaults, cartwheels, and whatnot, defying everything that they consider human, every limit, as a simple act of will. Anant felt overjoyed by the mere prospect of it. But this wasn't enough for him. He wanted to do something more. Something unthinkable. He wanted to move mountains, to lift elephants, to outrun bullets, to swim across the oceans, and, while doing so, to show it to everyone who had ever doubted his greatness. To Heena, to his mother, to his bosses and colleagues, to the women who had rejected him in the past. But, most of all, to all those doctors, those proud and insentient beings who embodied every quality that Anant had ever hated in anyone. Their presence itself was enough to make him feel sick, which—since it was something he

couldn't afford to risk—also prompted Anant to decide against allowing any of them anywhere around him. They didn't deserve that honour anyway. He could've easily accomplished this and all the rest that he wanted by simply climbing the highest mountain out there, with everyone watching him, every single inhabitant of the planet Earth, and then by shouting at them from above.

“I am Anant Brihaspati”

“I am Anant Brihaspati”

Anant was so engulfed by this fantasy of his that he totally forgot about where he was and what he was doing. Ultimately, it was an explosion of some sort that brought him out of his reverie and back into reality. This explosion (Anant didn't know what else to call it) was most probably his own thundering voice, but it was so unlike anything that he had heard before that he was more likely to mistake it for a lion's roar than he was to do it for a man's voice. Maybe that's why, to confirm if it actually was what he thought it was, he shouted once more

“I am Anant Brihaspati”

And the same hoarse and heavy voice clanged again. But this time, at least the words were understandable.

Could it be that his ears were growing accustomed to this voice? Or did he speak much more carefully this time?

These questions didn't bother him as much as another one did.

Why was there no echo at all?

“I don't know,” was the reply once again.

But this time, it wasn't one without a body or a voice. It had both, although it also seemed as if it had neither. For there was so much more to HIM that body and voice seemed to be the most rudimentary elements of HIS existence. No wonder, Anant was intimidated and overwhelmed. He had all the good reasons for it.

As it was impossible

To even vaguely describe who HE was

And yet HE was

There

Standing in front of Anant

Alone aloof

As if under the gloom of HIS own shaded existence

HIS spirit

As dark and hollow as a bottomless pit

Devoured the least bit of lustre that HIS whole being was ever in the hope of possessing

Yet HE seemed indifferent

While facing HIM for the first time, the only words that came to Anant's mind were

It's HIM

Anant couldn't understand how he had come to this conclusion. All he knew was. He had. And there was no escaping that. He felt like he knew HIM from before. Or maybe... from after?

No! How could he? Know someone from the future? For time flows in only one direction, doesn't it? Yes! But what if... what if everything is already determined, and time is merely a joke? A burden loaded upon all the lesser mortals for them to suffer from? But something that's merely a laughing matter for the gods above? Anant shook his head.

What the hell am I thinking? Where are these thoughts coming from?

Maybe they were coming from HIM.

Now he vaguely remembered. In the moment that he first saw HIM (when was it?), something very strange had happened. For that moment, Anant felt like he knew everything. Everything that had happened till then, and everything that was going to happen. He felt like he was a witness to all of it. Like someone who was far beyond, and who saw it, free from any restrictions of past, present, or future. He could see it all happening in the now, without himself being a part of it. But, as soon as that moment passed away, Anant slowly came back to himself with a vague feeling of having experienced something timeless. The memory of what had happened just now was gone completely, as it was simply beyond the capacity of his poor mortal self to be able to contain it. Strangely enough, the one thing that he seemed to remember was

It's HIM

But what does that mean?

To find that out, Anant looked at HIM once again, and was immediately disillusioned by what he saw. It's a guy, he thought. Only a guy. What the hell was I thinking?

...

The first impression could sure be deceptive sometimes. HE looks perfectly normal now.

But normal? What's normal?

Anant felt stung by his own question; as try as he might, he couldn't remember another face about which he could say that 'It looks so normal'.

Do normal faces even exist? Thought Anant.

And suddenly, out of the blue, and in a calm and gentle voice, HE began speaking again.

"Everyone looks weird if you pay a lot of attention to them. It is only when you've been with someone for so long that you've stopped paying attention to their looks that they start appearing normal to you. Take the trends for example. The type of clothes that are trending right now would mostly look normal to you, as

you've looked at them so many times that you've already gotten used to them. On the other hand, you can never look at those long-gone trends of the past without experiencing at least a mild feeling of disgust. In fact, habit is what makes things appear normal to you.”

“But,” shouted Anant, “Why do you look so normal then? That's my question here!”

“It's complicated,” HE replied, without raising his voice. “If you don't know already, there's no way I can tell you.”

“Okay, tell me this much then.”

“What's normal? What's the most normal face in the world?”

Without hesitating for a second, HE, in turn, asked Anant, “Do you remember looking at your face in the mirror for the umpteenth time in a day?”

“Of course, I don't.”

“Because that was the most normal face that you had ever seen.”

“Do you mean to say that you look like me?” Asked Anant.

“To be exact, no,” HE said. “But it's up to you to decide that. You are free to believe whether I look like you or not. Either way, I won't challenge your claim.”

“Why? Don't you want to tell me the truth?”

“The truth,” HE said, “Is a vague word. If you'd tell me what exactly you mean by it, then I'll let you know whether what I told you was the truth or not. Generally speaking, what most people mean by the word 'truth' is their genuine personal biases. And since my job doesn't allow me to have one, the so-called truths don't exist for me. So, for my part, I am not entitled to have any personal opinions at all.”

“You got to be kidding me,” said Anant. “What were those then? The advices that you gave me. Wasn't that your personal opinion?”

“No,” HE said, “If providing water to the thirsty or giving food to the hungry means having an opinion, then you can say that what I told you was my personal opinion. In reality, the main

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purpose of it was to simply calm your doubts. It had little or nothing to do with how things really are.”

“Really? Then why tell me that instead of ‘how things really are?’”

“It’s because things—if you look at them the way they are—usually tend to become pretty complicated, and it’s not like they make that much of a sense to begin with. That’s why, reality is something to be experienced. You can’t just talk about it. Language is too intelligent for that. Just like intelligent people, it too has its own personal biases.”

“Yeah, whatever buddy,” said Anant, feigning disinterest. “I’d suggest you now that you better keep your knowledge to yourself. I had my doubts, but I didn’t ask you for help.”

HE didn’t reply to this or even blink HIS eyes. HE simply stood there stock still like a mannequin.

Isn’t HE like a machine? Thought Anant. If I don’t ask HIM anything, HE won’t tell me anything. So convenient.

Anant decided to use this opportunity to inspect everything about HIM. Closely (Where is its switch?). From HIS tiny gaunt figure, HIS pale, wrinkled, bloodless and almost grey face, to HIS wig-like fluffy white hair, worn-out old-school tennis shoes, dark blue unevenly stitched baggy jeans, and HIS wrinkled and oversized lab coat. All of which conjured up an image of an old and crumpled newspaper. And yet, for some reason, HIS looks didn’t seem to matter at all. They were as unimportant as the barely visible reflections of something on a clean glass window. Whenever he looked at HIM, Anant would always end up looking beyond HIS appearance and into HIS empty and endlessly deep self. It is there that his identity would begin to break.

Who am I?

But before he could lose himself—like the last time to HIS abysmal depths—something occurred to Anant that somehow pulled him back.

The reason why HE looks so normal, he thought, is that HE is how HE is supposed to be. HE's not trying to be different or even trying to be himself. HE's simply not trying. HE is.

Wait a minute, what?

Once again, thoughts with which Anant had no affinity at all were invading his mind. But, as soon as he became aware of them, he began counter-thinking.

It doesn't matter how great HE might be; compared to me, HE is not even half a man. I might as well dig my fangs down HIS throat and tear HIM into pieces if I wanted. Or maybe I could squash HIM like vermin. But I am not doing it, and HE should be thankful to me for that. For sparing HIS life.

“Thank you,” he said, without any change of expression, “for sparing my life.”

“Stop reading my thoughts!” Shouted Anant.

“I am not reading them,” HE said. “It’s the quality of this space. You can’t conceal your thoughts here.”

“Why can’t I see yours then?” Asked Anant.

“It’s because I don’t have any.”

“Liar! You can’t speak without thinking!”

“I know it’s complicated,” HE replied. “You can think of it as a play that I’ve acted in so many times that I don’t have to think now to remember my lines.”

“No!” Protested Anant. “If it is what you say it is, how come I don’t know my lines?”

“It’s because you don’t have any,” HE replied calmly. “You are a puppet. Puppets don’t have any lines. Their lines are fed into them”.

Anant got deeply enraged when he heard this. A boundless anger enveloped him. “You are a liar!” He bellowed at the top of his voice. “I know! You want me to be your puppet! Don’t you? But I think you forgot who I am! I am Anant Brihaspati! I am nobody’s puppet! And nobody can make me one! Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

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“What?”

“That you don’t want to be a puppet.”

“Yes!”

“But what is it that you want then?”

This was the first time that HE had asked something of HIS own free will. It wasn’t anything special, but it did surprisingly cool down Anant’s anger.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“Your mind tells you, you don’t know. But deep inside the depths of your heart, you know, and have always known, that there’s something you’ve been desperately looking for.”

“And what could that be?” Asked Anant.

“Love,” HE replied.

“What? Love?”

“Yes! Love.”

Anant let out a thunderous laugh as soon as he heard this and laughingly shouted. “It’s a myth! Don’t you know?”

He tried hard to suppress his laughter, but something within him seems to have gone off. Even though he wanted to speak, he couldn’t help giggling at the same time. It took him a while before he could utter another sentence.

“Nothing of the sort exists in this world!” He said, immediately bursting into laughter. Suppressing it somehow, he added, “I’m not saying this for myself. I’ve seen people. You know, the world is full of people. All wanting to believe in love, when, in reality, what they need is an excuse. They just want to rub their bodies against each other without feeling guilty about it.”

Once again, Anant was unable to restrain his emotions and lost himself to another fit of hysterical laughter. “You fool!” He laughingly shouted.

“Sorry,” HE replied, as dryly as ever. “I’m not talking about the world or the people here. I’m asking you. Don’t you have this same hope? Even now when you are talking about it?”

“What? Hope?” Anant was crying from laughter by now. “No! No! I don’t have anything of the sort. Please! After all, what

am I supposed to hope for? For love? Naaah! That's such an empty word. You can fill it with all your fantasies if you like, but the more you fill it, the more disappointed you'd be in the end."

"In the end, you say?" HE cut him short.

"Yes! My lord! Yes!" Howled Anant.

"But it's not the end yet, is it?"

Anant shrugged his shoulders. He was dumbfounded.

"And this word too might not be as empty as you think it is. At least not in your case. As you aren't one of those who are looking for something new. You only want back what you once had, without knowing what it actually is, without realizing that it's not in your destiny to get it back."

"I don't quite understand what you are talking about," said Anant, now beginning to regain his composure.

"I know you don't," HE replied.

"Why are you talking then?"

"That," HE said, "you will eventually find out. What I've said is enough. Now think hard and try to remember, what was it that you loved so dearly?"

"Loved? Dearly?"

From what Anant could remember, he must've always had too much of longing for love. But was there love too? On top of that? He didn't quite know. He might have already wondered about the same. Many many times. That's why he knew that. It was futile to try to find out. Why.

About one thing he was pretty sure though. Something had happened. In his way way past. But what exactly was it? That he could not tell. As it happened too long ago for him to be sure about whether he couldn't remember it, whether he didn't want to remember it, or whether he wasn't trying hard enough to remember it.

In any case, the result was the same.

Anant felt blank.

Was HE controlling him?

...

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“It seems like you don’t remember anything at all,” HE said.
“Do you want me to help you out?”

“Of course not!” Said Anant indignantly. “What do you take me for? You might pretend otherwise, but I know that you are trying to control me. And I won’t let you.”

“No,” HE said, “I’m not ‘trying’ to control you as you say. At least not for my own pleasure. As a matter of fact, I don’t know any pleasure. Duty is all I know.”

“And what does it tell you to do, this duty of yours?”

“Well, it tells me to give some life to this little puppet here,” HE said, pointing at Anant.

Anant was enraged again, but this time, he was somehow able to suppress his anger. “Okay, tell me,” He roared. “What is it that I don’t remember? I’m listening.”

“If I tell you, would you believe me?” HE asked.

“To be honest, no,” said Anant, “because I don’t trust you in the least.”

“Who is it that you trust then? Yourself? Your sensations? Can’t it be possible that I control them too? Like when I’d say the word ‘puppet’, you’d become angry, and when I’d say the word ‘love’, you’d start laughing. Isn’t that how it is?”

“No!” Said Anant. “It isn’t. You don’t control me. Nobody does. And as far as these words are concerned, you said them just now, but as you can see, I’m neither angry nor laughing.”

“Hmm, I see,” HE said. “Then what if I made you experience something? Would that satisfy you? Something that you might like to call... ‘the truth?’”

“Really? Can you do that?”

“I can always try,” HE said.

“You can?”

“Yes.”

“If that’s the case,” said Anant with a smirk, “then I dare you! I dare you! Try your best!”

“Okay. I will.”

HIM (PART-1)

“But before we begin,” he added, “I’d like you to know something first, in case you don’t know. I’m not someone who gets convinced very easily.”

“Hmm, we’ll see that,” HE said. “Okay. Now, whenever you are ready, close your eyes.”

“Sure. Let the ride begin,” said Anant, and he closed his eyes.

Feeling himself drift away

Slowly into the darkness

Soon, the slightest trace of his surroundings disappeared as if they never existed in the first place.

Was their sole purpose simply to beguile him?

Anant felt cheated for some reason.

I shouldn’t have left reality, he thought

I shouldn’t have closed my eyes

But...

Why am I not opening them now?

And more importantly

Where am I?

Am I dead or alive?

Am I awake or dreaming?

I should have asked HIM these questions first

Before...

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But why didn't I?

Was HE really controlling me?

Maybe

Maybe HE was

LOVE

I

She must be a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. Won't she give it to me? Her precious jewel? And be mine forever? Yes! Yes! Yes! Why wouldn't she? She wants it too. More than me. And I've heard about those girls. Those pure ones. They do not do anything for fun. All I have to do is to enjoy her once. Then she would surrender herself completely to me. Ah! She would beg me to enjoy her again and again. Ah! She'd do anything. Any dirty little thing just to- Ah! She'd even- Ah! – Without protection- Ah! And-

...

Wow!

That does it!

Wow!

He was about to have sex with a virgin.

Who was? Anant?

No! Not him exactly.

Although deep inside he knew that he was Anant, his memories told him otherwise. They pointed towards another name

Aseem

His memories?

Yes. His memories. As Anant wasn't solely himself now. He was somebody else too, apart from that. A real person.

What? But how could someone be two people at the same time?

Indeed! Anant was also surprised by it. He had never imagined that something like that could ever happen to him, especially after he got this new body. For to get one—a new body—isn't that big a deal, as long as the body doesn't have its own memories to begin with. And memories, what strange memories it had—this muscular, flexible, and symmetrical body.

What were they about? These memories?

For the most part, they were about women, and there were so many of them, all merging into one another to the point where their faces weren't visible at all. What remained of them, and what separated one from the other was the outline of their bodies. It was either the well-defined curve of their arses, or their sizeable, round and plumpy breasts, or the barely noticeable shape of their genitals—as these appeared through their tight clothing—or the weighty weightness of their broad and fleshy thighs, or their tiny

protruding lips, or the back of their necks, or simply their feet. All in all, it was just Meat! Meat! Meat! And Aseem was hungry for it. Or was it Anant? It was hard to say, as Anant was there too. He could see what Aseem saw. He could feel what he felt. The only difference was, it was Anant's choice whether he wanted to act or not. And as long as he didn't make that choice, the body acted on its own wild impulses. Impulses which were as strong and restless as those of an untamed horse.

Okay. That might be. It's not the main question though. The main question is, where was he (Anant or Aseem or whatever)? And what was he doing?

He was half asleep somewhere lying on some bed, fantasizing about whoever that popped into his head while pleasuring himself in the dark.

Virgin! Virgin! Virgin! Was the only word going through his mind. I'm going to have sex with a virgin!

Okay. Fine. But this virgin that Anant was talking about (or Aseem or whatever) Who was she? What was she like?

Well...

He didn't seem to know much about her. All he knew was...

She was a real easy catch. An upcoming slut. Her name was...

He didn't remember it. Or didn't care to remember it. For who would anyway? He had seen her plenty of times before. Enough to know that she was down for it, as if her eyes were always yelling that all she wanted was for someone to pop her cherry as soon as possible. Aseem wasn't fool enough not to recognize the shy lust in the eyes of a woman who doesn't know what she desperately wants. He would have violated her years ago. The reason why he didn't was, she had nothing to offer. No meat.

A thighless assless titless freak she was. Even raping her would've meant doing service to her. And he would have never gone down on her, even when she fucking paid him for it. She was so fucking insufficient!

But that bitch! That horny slutty bitch! She realized that she wouldn't get her hands on his fat cock unless she stooped down to the very depths of sluttiness and begged for it. And fuck! How she fucking begged for it!

How?

She had literally nothing to show off. Except maybe her lips and her mouth. And boy did she make a pussy out of them! With her lips horny red and her mouth pretty pink! She really knew how to turn a man on. How to show him what he had always been looking for. And what else could he be looking for? But pussy! Virgin pussy!

Oh! How sluttish those virgins can get!

Anant felt like laughing when he heard himself thinking like that. Or was it Aseem? It was hard to set a boundary where one ended and the other began. Anant—who had always believed that he knew himself—had barely any idea who he was now. Was he sitting deep inside Aseem enjoying himself (like he had earlier imagined) or was he also the one who was doing everything?

He didn't know.

He could have been either of them, or both, or neither. About one thing he was pretty sure though, he wasn't the one in full control (maybe even Aseem wasn't), as it was the body that was doing everything, that was giving rise to its own string of restless thoughts and also acting on them. And this body, it neither belonged to Aseem nor to Anant. It belonged to itself. Like a wild and untamed beast that no one can master. All it wanted was to...

LOVE

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! For who in their right mind wouldn't want to fuck? Who is it that doesn't like a good fucking? Nobody! She too is simply being honest when she admits it. That her body wants to get penetrated. That it longs for a good hard penetration. By someone like him. Someone who is big, strong, who has lots of experience, and who can last a long long time.

Ahhh! Those virgins! They could drive you crazy!

Enough! Thought Anant, enough of this! It's not funny anymore! Let's find this virgin and nail her asap if that's all it takes. I can't stand being like this anymore. It's as if I've got this disease, and she's my medicine. Or is she also the disease?

Who cares! I don't give a damn one way or the other! Was HE talking about this when HE mentioned...

What exactly did HE mention?

The love of my life... or something like that.

Whatever it might be, I don't think HE was talking about this. It's neither my love nor my life. Instead it is... What?... Lust? Of my life?... No!... Violent something of my...? Nope!... Hunger maybe?... What the hell!... Am I mad?... Damn! What else could it possibly be then? So strong and violent. I don't think that merely fucking her would do. I probably would have to eat her to satisfy myself, or to crush her into pieces, or at least to decimate her

But what if none of that suffices? What do I do then? Would I have to get out then?

Get out of what? This body?

Yes! I would have no other choice. For it's indeed a prison. No! Not just a prison. It's the torture cell! Yes! The torture cell indeed! Where you get tortured and tortured. And where the sole hope for salvation is to become the torture yourself instead of the tortured, that is, to forget yourself in the act and to go with the flow. As when all that's inside comes out, there's nothing in

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between. It is the truth of the moment that you are faced with, and in it you are lost, in it you are nobody, it's God that acts through you spontaneous and pure, and as soon as he acts, he disappears. He disappears, but the torture doesn't. It continues, demanding more and more sacrifices, hoping to reach God one day.

“Virgin! Virgin! Virgin! The gods demand that we sacrifice a virgin!” Shouted Anant (or was it Aseem?) at the top of his voice and began laughing.

What am I doing?

Anant wondered whether he had actually gone insane or if he was simply acting that way.

It was hard to tell.

Isn't reality too an act? He thought. Don't we make it up too?

It was the limit. Anant felt like he was about to break down. He got up (or was it Aseem?) to smash his head against a wall, but stopped when he saw a silhouette there. It seemed like a woman. It was a woman. Anant could barely see her face in the dark. Still, whatever little he could make out of it reminded him of someone. So he went closer, and as he did so, the silhouette began to transform into an actual person.

Soon, Anant had no room for doubt regarding who she was.

But what was she doing there? And was it because of the dark, or had she actually become young again?

Within a second, the situation became clear as day to Anant, which got him in a fix.

Was his mother the virgin that Aseem (or he himself?) was raving about?

Probably

What do you mean probably?

Although in one way she was. In another more realistic way, she wasn't. His mother or anybody else's for that matter. At least not yet. For she was still a virgin (as Aseem rightly proclaimed) and except for her maiden name and looks, she shared very little with the woman that Anant would later identify as his mother. She was young, innocent, pure, and even though, like his mother (or Heena?), she too had something deeply sad about herself, still, her sadness hadn't reached the depressingly low level yet, from which—as far as Anant could remember—he had always tried to extract himself. It had, on the other hand, a strange calmness to it. The calmness of the womb as Anant imagined. Something that he would have willingly surrendered himself to without knowing what it actually was had it not been for that one pressing question.

How come she was there with a man like Aseem who had anything but good intentions towards her?

Before Anant could proceed any further, he needed an answer to this question. Which he tried to get by analyzing all that he knew about his mother's past in the light of Aseem's memories.

What he found out was. Pretty startling.

II

The Past and The Past's Past

At a very young age, Aseem developed the extraordinary ability of seeing through the apparent and into the real, making him the only person in the entire history of the universe with that ability (among many others), although it was not by a mere coincidence that he had it. He was, in fact, The Chosen One. The highest manifestation of God. The First, The Last, and The Only to have been born in this universe with an otherworldly intelligence, and an insight into the very nature of things, the likes of which humanity had never seen (and was never to see).

O what a tragedy!

Many a night had Aseem stayed awake thinking about this greatness of his. He knew that he had to make every single person in the world acknowledge it as well. So, on the trillionth anniversary of his Godhood, he created The One True Path—or The Path of The Lion as he liked calling it—in his own image. Ever since the birth of creation, Aseem was destined to take everyone on that path so that they could also realize how small they were, and how great he was.

Wow!

Anything noteworthy that he had achieved in his life, Aseem owed it to this path. And it was solely because of it that he could proudly call himself a gigolo today, which, in itself, wasn't that big an achievement (at least not in the eyes of the others around him),

but it was one that brought him extremely close to his dream. His dream of becoming not just any other pimp. But The Pimp.

What the fuck?

The clothed society (as Aseem liked to call the so-called civilized people) could never understand the truth of his endeavor. They were too evolved in the wrong direction for that. Too evolved to behold The One True Messiah, The Greatest Prophet. The God's Very Own. Whose sole task in this universe was to acquaint mankind with its true face. Aseem knew and had truly believed that mankind had descended from animals. And like there's a king among the animals in the shape of a lion, humans too had their king. It was no one other than Aseem himself.

What a surprise!

To deprive him of this title and to take all his women away from him, humanity had created everything (from buildings, books, social orders and relationships to jobs and music) while knowing perfectly well that it's all a sham. A cover-up. Like the great human cover-up which happened millions and billions of years ago when clothes were first invented. From then on, it all went downhill, as (because of it) the realness in reality was lost. In the lust to fashion himself in the image of gods (that never actually existed) the human forgot who he truly is. For who else could he possibly be, the human? Who else could he be other than a shitting fucking pissing animal? One who is at his happiest and blissful best when he shits, fucks, and pisses all at the same time? To Aseem, this was an established fact, and having a deep understanding of it was the only way towards God (all the other ways being mere LIES), making it his prime duty (the biggest duty any human being has ever had) to get his fellow human beings to understand this as well, so that he could initiate them into The One Holy Path. As at the end of it, he was The One. Destined to rip everything apart that had so far clothed the so-called civilized

society: their buildings, books, knowledge, technologies, religions, or literally anything that had separated them from their real animal nature and had stopped them from proclaiming Aseem as their One True King.

But why was he The King? Why no one else?

Good question! He was The King because he had everything. Looks, body, strength, and vitality, all coupled with an enormous package that'd make even the holiest of women drool. He was truly. The One. The One True Lion.

What reasoning!

It's easy to mistake Aseem for someone who is in the habit of blowing his own trumpet. But beware! He wasn't such a person. Quite far from it, he was as humble and modest as the greatest scientists and philosophers that ever lived. All his observations, decisions, and conclusions were based on fact and nothing but the solid fact. There was strong reasoning behind all that he did, said, or thought. Even the fact that he considered himself The One True Lion wasn't without its scientific basis. He was The Lion because all the women in the world were his whores (what logic?). They all wanted to have sex with him. In their husbands, boyfriends, lovers, crushes, they were looking solely for him. That's the reason why all of them were doomed to be dissatisfied, both in bed and in life. Lucky were the ones who had partially realized this and had opted for a divorce or a breakup. For how could they claim to be satisfied when Aseem was their only salvation? When, apart from him, there was no satisfaction in the world? How could they? They certainly could not. That's why, ultimately, they were bound to follow The One True Path. If not now, then later. If not willingly, then through force. But they were bound to follow it, for it was their destiny to follow, as it was Aseem's destiny to be The King.

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This was his realization and also his message. It was as scientific as it was intuitive.

Meh!

But O it's such a pity that all the men in the world had already anticipated this a long time ago. They had worked ceaselessly for generations, for ages, for God knows how long, simply to create this false order. Their religions, history, science, knowledge, clothing; everything was artificial. Its only purpose was to distract the women, so that when their One True Messiah comes in front of them, they all fail to recognize him. And—as Aseem's misfortune would have it—that's what they did. No woman saw him for who he truly was. They all mistook him for the clothes that he wore, the language that he spoke, the words that he used; nothing of which was the truth. As the truth (the truly truthful one) was inside his pants (Aseem never wore any undies by the way), and until and unless he had inserted this truth inside each and every one of them, there was no possibility that they would have ever found out who he truly was.

Really?

Yes!

It's a lion's job, Aseem would say to himself.

Duh!

To even the bravest and the most capable of all the mortals, this would've been more than enough to dissuade them. But with Aseem, this wasn't the case. He was The Messiah. The One True Lion. The angels too (had they existed), would've bowed down before him. Needless to say, humanity could never measure up to his stature, or that of his little toe for that matter. As he was destined to achieve what he wanted to achieve. The era of Aseem

was about to begin. He was already on the path to becoming the most successful gigolo ever, and such was his control over the women that he fucked, that had he asked them to become his whores, they would've gladly agreed to it. In fact, that is what he was destined to do. To make whores out of all the women in the world. That way, he would have controlled them all, and, with their help, all the men as well. Thus fulfilling his destiny, which was to both rule the world as well as to become its king and conqueror. And then to usher it into The Great Era, which was set to begin soon but was meant to last forever and ever.

What a realistic plan!

The first step towards it was to fuck as many women as possible, that is to become the most successful gigolo ever. As of now, Aseem preferred going after the so-called fat, ugly, and older women, as these appeared to be the least enmeshed within the false order. There, slowly and steadily, he was gaining ground, and it was simply a matter of time before he began his move towards the women who were a bit more enmeshed, that is the so-called beautiful and sexy. And, after conquering them, he would've moved towards the most hopelessly trapped ones, that is, the supermodels, actresses, celebrities, and their likes. And once he was done with them as well (or once he was done with the whole conquest part), he would've begun with the second phase of his plan, which was to control, enslave and exploit, or rather to coax, manipulate and force, each and every woman on this planet into becoming his whore. So that he could proudly call himself The Pimp one day.

Wait a minute!

Aseem's eyes would light up whenever he would associate this title with himself, The Pimp. He repeated it day and night, The Pimp. Repeated it loud and clear, The Pimp.

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Aaaahhhhhhhh..... Feels like heaven.

Okay, that pretty much sums it up for him. But what about Mommy? (Didn't he used to call her mother?) How did she get there?

Well...

It's a long story.

Let's keep it short for now.

Okay.

So...

In some aspects, Anant's mother's married life mirrored that of his elder sister. She too (like her daughter) got married pretty early, left her home, and hardly visited her family thereafter.

About her life before her marriage though, Anant knew very little—literally nothing except that she didn't like her family that much. But now that he tried recalling it once again, it strangely came back to him in the minutest of details (all of her memories). It's as if Anant had been there since the beginning, and his mother had experienced her life through him.

Her life?

How was it?

It was miserable to say the least, thanks to her mother, her father, her brother, her neighbors, her schoolmates, and pretty much everyone that she knew. They all wanted to trap her within the cage of their expectations. To make her dress the way they liked, talk the way they liked, behave the way they liked, even though she didn't give two farthings for all of their opinions, as she was young, indifferent and free (free to go out with whoever

she liked, free to do with them whatever she liked, free to be her real independent self). The fact that her society and law didn't approve of this freedom was none of her concern. They couldn't stop her anyway. No one could. Except her own self.

And this self, what did it want?

It wanted to find someone. To get into a relationship. To get married. Not because it needed companionship. Or sex (it could get them easily or would get them eventually). What it wanted instead was power. Legitimate power. Power that belongs to. Power that the world ascribes to. The man. And not just any other man. The man among the men. The hero. As he's the only one who can make the world admire him for his freedom and independence. From her experience, Anant's mother had learnt that the world never cares for the independent and the free. It actually hates them. It seeks to crush them (whenever it can). To suppress them. Unless they happen to be backed up by raw masculine power. Which only comes from down there. You know, from an erect penis (from what?). So maybe if she could get hold of one and control it, make it obey all her whims and wishes, it might have lent some of its power to her. And maybe then, the same society that had despised her so far would have probably started admiring her for who she was.

But until that happened, she had to wait.

Which she did.

Impatiently.

What a match made in hell they are! She and Aseem. Thought Anant.

Wait a minute! She's my mother.

What!

No Mommy no!

Mommy?

Yes, child

Tell me another story please

Okay

Here's how it goes

Mommy was a princess. She lived on the top of a high tower, which was guarded by her father the king, her mother the queen, their son the prince, and the huge army of their empire, whose sole purpose was to not let anyone enter Mommy's chamber (even with her permission). So that one day, when she finally got married (with her family's permission, of course), her husband is the first one to enter it. The first, the last and the only (as it was for the princesses of her time). Until then, she was supposed to stay there, alone, in her spacious little room, where she had all the luxuries of the world, like food, clothes, jewelry, gadgets or anything that could give her the illusion that she wasn't living inside a cage. Which she actually was (isn't that obvious?). The same would have never occurred to her had she not looked outside her window on that fine summer day.

Outside her window? What did she see? Daddy?

No! There was no daddy in sight. No papa, no father or anyone like that. Just a playboy. A gigolo. A wanna-be pimp.

And Mommy fell for him.

What a tragedy!

LOVE

What did she do then? Did she let down her hair?

No, she didn't! For she was no real princess, and there was no real tower. It's merely a metaphor. In reality, she was an ordinary girl living an ordinary life. A boring one to be exact. Full of trifling little details. Small everyday disappointments. Which wouldn't have been that bad honestly, had she also not been to the movies too much. As along with the miseries of her slow and mundane life (if it wasn't pitiful enough the way it was), now she also began to suffer from fantasies, which mostly centered around the advent of a hero who would approach her out of the blue one day and would gradually fall in love with her, and, in due course of time, fight against the world on her behalf, rescue her, and take her far far away to the glamorous life that she saw in the movies.

Sounds familiar!

She also knew that there's only one requirement for it—both to be rescued and to get into the movies. She had to look beautiful. That's all. Then her hero (who could see her true self) would automatically find her and take her away to a life full of happiness.

Happiness?

Yes. One that lasts forever and ever. One that is so great that it makes you feel like you've lived an entire life within an hour and a half.

Please, Mommy! Don't! I beg you!

And it so happened that, one day, after watching her favorite movie for the umpteenth time, Mommy bumped into a guy who looked, dressed and even acted like its main character. His name—as she later found out—was Aseem. He was tall, dark and handsome, and it seemed like there was nothing that he couldn't do. As Mommy beheld him for the first time, her entire world

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faded into the background (the way it did when she saw her favorite movies), which was evidence enough to dispel all her doubts, and make reality shine so clear that she saw no two ways about it. It's as if the truth itself was set in stone before her.

And? What was that?

The truth? It went something like

'He was the one and the only. The hero that she had been waiting for.'

Hero my ass! I know very well who he is and what he wants!

But didn't Mommy want the same thing too?

No! No! No! That can't be true!

Well...

She didn't want that thing but...

Phew!

She was okay with it.

Fuck you!

As long as it was him, she had no issues.

But why! Mommy! Why!

Because there were feelings involved

And some feelings can't be expressed

In any way other than the...

The what?

The physical.

I give up!

So she...

No more of it please!

...decided to seduce him...

Goddammit! I can't stop it! Help!

...and dressed as provocatively as she could.

La lala lala lala lala!

This worked! Aseem gave her the key to his hotel room.

A luxury suite?

Yes! Though a pretty drab one. Aseem had to give his services to the owner's wife for it. It didn't seem worth the effort though. To avoid being disgusted by it, he had to roll down the curtains and turn off the lights, which wasn't nearly enough, as something still seemed amiss.

Something? What was it?

Aseem had no idea. It wasn't like he was seducing a minor for the first time. Then why did he have this strange premonition? As if something was about to go dreadfully wrong. He couldn't imagine anything worse than being discovered by the police. But since when was he, Aseem (The Pimp), afraid of the police?

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He wasn't

It's only since this Anant showed up that things had started going downhill.

But this Anant, who was he anyway?

A bundle of false memories?

Of a guy from the future?

Who took a virgin to be his mother?

A guy? He was definitely a lie. Any white coat could have figured as much. For wasn't it him all along? Aseem? And wasn't this his own conscience rebelling against him?

Conscience?

Throughout his life, so many people had advised Aseem to listen to it, but before today, he didn't believe that something like that could actually exist.

Was Anant his conscience then?

If yes, why was he bothering him now all of a sudden?

Didn't he have anything better to do?

No! Anant is Anant! He is nobody's conscience! Just because he was thinking about himself from another's perspective doesn't mean he could blot out his existence.

His existence?

Wasn't that a lie too?

LOVE

In the more conventional sense of the word?

As no matter how hard he tried, Aseem would've never believed in it. Nor could Anant convince anyone else about it, let alone his own mother.

How could he call it the truth then?

Is the truth still the truth when nobody apart from you believes in it?

Isn't it... madness?

What else was he supposed to do then?

Watch helplessly as that fiend raped his mother?

What? Watch?

How could he watch it when he himself was doing it?

For wasn't he the fiend himself?

And how was this rape?

Although a minor, she was all up for it. Anant had to simply sit back and relax (like someone's conscience?), and everything would have happened by itself. It was all so natural. The most natural thing in the world (like eating). In fact, as he was reflecting on all this, his body (or Aseem's?) had already sprung into action. Like a machine following its standard procedure, it undressed her (unhooked her bra, undid her panties), and after kissing her neck aggressively it started sucking on her earlobes and her tiny underdeveloped nipples, hardly enjoying it (himself?), while also being indifferent to how she felt about it, as if she were an object.

Was she?

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Who cares!

As for him, it was plain mechanical work (no joy). More like eating a not-very-tasty morsel of food, that too when you aren't really hungry for it. Aseem's intentions were clear from the beginning. He wasn't doing this for fun. It was strictly business. He wanted to make a whore out of her.

A whore out of my Mommy? How could I ever let him do that?

No! No! No!

Anant punched and slapped (himself?). Without any effect. Hurting himself in the act.

Wasn't that obvious?

It was.

Now the choice was all his. To fight and to suffer. Or to relent and to... and to... He couldn't imagine the consequences. The one thing he could be sure of was, he wouldn't have suffered that way.

And mom? What about her?

No!

“Stop!” He shouted. “Stop! Run away, mom! Run away!”

She didn't budge at all.

Why is she being so passive? He thought. Like a corpse.

Maybe she wasn't.

LOVE

In either case, there was no way that Anant could tell, as he had her (or was it Aseem?) completely in his thrall. He had pinned her tiny body under his magnanimous one, had twisted it into submission, and was now mercilessly exerting all his brute force on her. To make sure that her voice didn't escape her mouth, he gripped her neck so tightly that she could barely breathe enough to stay alive.

Wasn't that painful for her?

It must've been.

Couldn't he feel her pain?

He could indeed.

It wasn't as strong a feeling though. Hardly anything in comparison to the throbbing in his head, the euphoric feeling of blood violently coursing through his veins, his overly destructive thoughts, and...

There was so much.

Anant didn't want any of it. Instead, he wanted to feel how his mother felt. Which he couldn't. She seemed so far away. From him. His thoughts. His feelings.

He tried to control them.

How?

By controlling his breath. Holding it.

Which worked for a minute. But before he could think about doing something else, this control too faded away, and his body resumed its former action.

Which was?

Licking the nether regions of her body now. Her hairy armpits and her hairy...

Yuck!

“Can anyone help?” He wailed. “A man is raping my mum here!”

“Shut up!” He outshouted himself. And after laughing hysterically for a while, he added. “Who do you think that man is? You! You are that man! I am that man!”

“But I am not you!” He answered himself.

“Really? What makes you so sure about that? If you weren’t, you’d already be dead by now.”

“That I am!” He said. “So stop it!”

“I won’t (said who?), and I have one friendly piece of advice for you, whoever the fuck you are. Don’t ever come between a man and his meal.” Saying this, in a renewed fit of rage, Aseem dug his teeth deep inside one of her nipples. Her body squirmed and writhed in pain. Under his choking vice-like grip, there was hardly a part of it that she could move at all, except maybe her hands and her feet, which too, because of excruciating pain, had now contorted terribly into strange inhuman shapes.

After whispering the word ‘Help’ in a very muffled voice, she passed out.

Was she dead?

No! Not yet!

Maybe to confirm the same, Aseem brutally inserted several of his fingers inside her... at once, and after violently thrusting them in and out in and out, he joyfully exclaimed, "Look, how she is gushing down there. If there's one person that's really enjoying all this, it's her. Look how wet she is."

Was she?

Yes. But something was wrong. She wasn't actually... It wasn't...

Anant snapped.

"What the hell are you talking about! She's bleeding! Can't you see! My God! Help!"

"Must be on her monthlies," he laughingly added.

Enjoying his own remark, Aseem became much more vigorous not only with the brutal in and out in and out motion of his fingers, but also with his high-sounding chest-pounding laughter, which he exhibited simultaneously.

Meanwhile, blood spattered all around. His fingers his mouth, her chest her thighs, the bed the clothes, they all looked alike (in the dark).

Black

And it didn't stop there. The blood, it kept on spilling, and spilling, and spilling.

"Is it a river?" Aseem mockingly remarked. "Or a fountain? No! It's a leak. And what do we do with it? With a leak? We plug it. Plug it! Plug it! Plug it! And who is going to plug it?"

....

Fuck you!

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“Aseem the plugger! Who else? Plugging holes since nineteen sixty-nine! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Plugging holes? Does he mean...?

“No! No! No! No! No!”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Realizing how futile his efforts to hold his body were, Anant held his breath. He wanted to blot out what he was about to experience. To stop the inevitable. As the writing was on the wall now. His body was too powerful. He was too powerless.

“No! Not that!” He begged. “Please! Anything but that! Please! Please!”

“Here we go!”

Anant closed his eyes (or was it Aseem?), which made him feel it all the more intensely, the moment when his... slipped inside her... and her blood spluttered bubbly out.

“It’s in! I win!” He said.

Although he encountered strong physical resistance while he was at it, Aseem didn’t show the least sign of mercy. He invaded her body forcefully by thrusting his... all the way in.

For a moment, his mind went blank (from pleasure?) as her unconscious body, twitching at first, squeezed and squeezed and squeezed till he was fully inside her. And when he pulled out, it shuddered and relaxed.

“Look, how much she is enjoying this,” he said.

“No! She isn’t!”

He laughed.

“At least you are, why don’t you admit it?”

“I’ll eat you alive you motherfuc...!”

What was all this? Why wasn’t he feeling bad about this? He wanted to, but why wasn’t he?

Anant screamed at the top of his voice. He screamed his heart out. Screamed till he couldn’t scream no more.

But...

To no effect.

For the next couple of thrusts, her body behaved like it did earlier, squeezing then relaxing, squeezing then relaxing, as more and more blood spluttered out of it. But all this happened only until there seemed to be that impenetrable barrier that Aseem was thrusting against. Once this barrier was gone, there was nothing (except blood). No motion. Her body stopped reacting altogether. No matter how hard he thrusted, it wouldn’t budge at all. It was as good as dead, which disgusted Aseem in the extreme. For if there was one thing that he did not like, it was screwing the dead. No wonder he was beginning to lose his erection, which made it impossible to keep doing it. So, disappointed and dissatisfied, he pulled out, exclaiming, “What a worthless piece of cold meat she is!” And, with the back of his hand, restlessly smote her lank lifeless thighs till they turned black like her blood.

“Wake up, bitch! Wake up!” He yelled right next to her ear as loudly as he could. “Time to fuck!”

She didn’t respond.

Stop it already!

Aseem was enraged. He felt cheated. For all that he had done for her, she owed him an orgasm at least, if not anything else. She was his whore after all. If this was the way she was going to behave with him (the gentleman), how could he expect her to deal with those other brutes (called customers?)? And this wasn't half the story. The worst part was, he hadn't even put it in her arse yet, or her mouth. If she had a problem with any of that, he could understand. Of course, he didn't expect her to be a good fuck to begin with, as it was a purely professional matter for him, but this attitude of hers was absolutely intolerable.

Die! Bastard! Die!

For the time being though, her attitude wasn't the main issue. The main issue was, he had to do something about it. He couldn't let her go like that, without settling the score. He had to punish her for the insolent way she had behaved with him.

And how was he going to do that?

Good question!

If only she were a pig or a goat, he would have skinned her alive, butchered her, and then sold her raw flesh in the market.

But there too no one would have paid a single penny for her. For the mere heap of bones as she was. A worthless disgusting stubborn piece of shit!

And what are you? You fuck!

But since she didn't seem to be going nowhere, and since he had plenty of time to think about how he could later deal with her, there was another much more pressing matter at hand that he could attend to, namely the placation of his thick insatiable dick.

Considering there wasn't any way of bringing her back to her senses anytime soon, he had no other option than to take the

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matter (or his penis to be exact) in his own hand, which he did without any delay, and began moving it (his hand) up and down up and down over it (his penis) in this sort of rhythmic motion—that continued in the background like the most natural thing in the world—while he paid attention to his thoughts.

Which were about?

What he would do to her when she woke up.

What would he?

Well... He was... He was going to...

Press her, grab her, caress her. Her soft breasts, her soft ass, her soft soft body. Unbridled. Without any shame. He was going to. Put it everywhere. To use her. Abuse her. Make her cry. Make her beg. Humiliate her. Shatter her ego.

!!!

And, with that, make her realize her real self. What she really in reality was.

She was?

No human. Not a human. Not a human being at all.

But an object. Just an object. An object of his desire, nothing more.

This was the truth that she was yet to realize, and there was no other way to realize it. He was the only one who could help her. It was her last chance. Her one and only chance. She had to surrender herself. Surrender to him. Accept him unconditionally as her Lord, her God, her everything.

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Little more! Can't go cold now!

She was too young and inexperienced. She didn't understand her own feelings yet. Otherwise, she would have known. In reality, she was actually longing to get fucked, praying to get fucked. All women, as Aseem had realized long ago, were always dying to get fucked. Some knew this, knew themselves, while others didn't; that was the sole difference. That's why, now it was his responsibility to impart this knowledge to her. Like he had already imparted it to so many other girls before.

Yes! Yes! Yes! Almost there! Almost there!

What else? What else?

She was open. All open for him. Willing to accept gladly anything and everything he wanted to offer. She wouldn't have complained, no matter how gross or dirty that thing turned out to be. The smallest bit of his pleasure was a blessing for her. A blessing of love. A blessing from God above. It was the only reason why God had created her. The reason why he had given her this body. Without it, she was nothing.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I'm cumming!

He came a little over her belly.

Is that all?

Aseem wanted more, but he was all spent.

And Anant?

He had been there all along—his voice lost somewhere.

It's only now that Aseem had calmed down was he able to listen to what Anant had to say.

And, what did he say?

“Look!” He said. “Look! Look what you’ve done to her!”

Aseem didn’t look. “I’ve done worse,” he said (without looking). “In fact, I was being pretty gentle today, as she happened to be a virgin. And you!” He mockingly added. “You pitiful indistinguishable rotten piece of... you haven’t had the tiniest of glimpse yet of what I’m capable of. In case you don’t know, this wasn’t my first time. I’ve been with thousands and thousands of women who still treat me like their God. Even if I told them to eat my... or to lick my... they’d be at it like hungry dogs.”

“Liar! Liar! Liar!” Anant budged in with all his might. “You can’t see beyond yourself! But I can see through you! This was the first time that a woman ever loved you. First time since your mother. And look what you’ve done to her! (Aseem didn’t look) I don’t understand why. Why do you have to do all this?”

“Why not?” Replied Aseem. Very reluctantly.

“Would you have done the same with someone you love? Someone like your sister, your daughter, or your mother?”

“I never had any of those,” said Aseem, his voice waning, making him sound as if he were a child.

“No?” Inquired Anant like a concerned parent. “Not even... a mother?”

Aseem was stunned when he heard this.

He desperately wanted to say no to it, but his voice failed him (it failed to come out). His throat seemed to be choked with tears.

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“No,” he managed to utter somehow (after a long pause), though his voice was so soft and shaky that, had they not been sharing the same body, Anant wouldn’t have been able to hear him.

“Really?” he laughed (Anant was miraculously unaffected by everything that was going on inside his body). “But what if I told you otherwise? You know, I know all about you.”

“No!” Aseem groaned like some scared hunted animal. “You don’t know me! Nobody does!”

“It’s you,” said Anant, “who doesn’t know himself. Who doesn’t want to know himself. Literally everything that you do; all your lies, your stupid plans, all the violence, they are merely means to distract yourself from looking within and from knowing what you already know.”

“There’s nothing that I need to know!” Retorted Aseem.

“Yes,” said Anant, “I agree. You know everything... that I am about to tell you.”

What has gotten into me? Thought Anant. I never used to speak like that. Is it the lust for vengeance or... have I finally...

Changed?

It was impossible to say. There seemed to be some divine power at work. As if Anant was doing what he was destined to do, and there was no way around it. He was inevitable. Like the wrath of God. And compared to him, Aseem, though a vicious brute, was as helpless as a bull is when in the ring with a murderous matador. His fate was sealed.

“Stop it!” Aseem bellowed mournfully. “I’ll rip your eyes out if you don’t.”

“Would you? Really?” Laughed Anant. “Mine or your own? It’s not like I need them for anything.”

“We’ll see that!”

“Oh yeah! Yeah! We’ll see. We’ll see. We’ll gouge our eyes out and see. How real is reality. Let me tell you all about it.”

“I would never let you!” Yelled Aseem. “You don’t know me yet! I bow down to nobody! I am the king! The God! The messiah! Nobody can ever control me!”

“You think so?” Laughed Anant. “Why are you so scared then?”

“I’m not scared,” shouted Aseem. “I don’t fear anyone. Not even death. I’ll show you what I mean.” Saying this, he began moving towards the only window in the room.

“Wait a minute,” said Anant with a smirk, “Are you planning to kill yourself by jumping off? Seriously? There are better options available. I’ll tell you all about them. After some time. Why don’t we listen to a story first? About your mother?”

Aseem didn’t want to. He closed his eyes and charged towards the window, well aware that he might bang into something there.

He didn’t though, as there was nothing to impede him. No glass. No grills. Nothing. Only the curtains. Which too did not. So he went straight out. Like a bird. Head first. Body afterwards. And before he could open his eyes, he had already hit the ground (it wasn’t even two floors) flat on his naked legs after a brief and somewhat unfinished summersault.

“See! I told you!”

Everything stood silent for a second.

There was no pain the way Aseem had anticipated. Maybe that's why he imagined it to be a nightmare for a second. One that he was about to wake up from. Soon. But then, it all rushed into him. The consciousness. Of both the pain and the surroundings. All at once. Indistinguishable from one another. Like fire stabbing at every inch of his lower body. He could only call it that, as he no longer felt his feet or even his legs. They had all merged into a big blob of pain. Aseem felt more like a snail that has been slithering over a bed of red-hot coals.

He wasn't though, for there was no coal. Only muck. As far as he could see.

Muck! Muck! Muck!

Hot, stinking, fresh from the factory, sun-drenched, semi-molten muck. Desolate hotel, the road leading to it, an ordinary factory, and infinite muck.

“By the way,” said Anant, savoring every bit of the pain, “I forgot to tell you one thing. You can’t kill me. I’m dead already. Or not born yet. Whichever one you prefer.”

“Why the hell are you haunting me then?” Whined Aseem.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Why. The ‘why’ behind everything. The cause of it all. Your mother. But you won’t listen to me.”

“I won’t,” said Aseem. “I can’t.”

“You can’t?”

“Yes!”

Aseem knew what Anant was hinting at. He had always known that. Something is there within him. An abyss called mother. About whom, all he knew was, she existed long ago. She, who gave birth to him, once upon a time, she was there. That's all he remembered. Anything beyond that was an abyss. That he had never reflected upon. Maybe due to his lack of ability. Maybe because of his lack of desire. He didn't know which, as it was all prohibited for him. Even thinking about the thought of it. About who prohibited it and why they prohibited it. It was all. Strictly prohibited. Maybe that's why, for Aseem, his mother stopped existing altogether. Instead, she transformed into this dark force within him. And ever since he could remember, he had been on the run from this force, which he also saw within all the women out there. Initially, he was so scared of it that any face-to-face interaction with a woman would invariably break him down. But slowly, he gathered courage, and after years of trial and error, he learnt how to defeat it (this force within the women). There was only one way to do so. He had to conquer them (the women) in every way possible. As once he had completely extinguished his desire for a woman, the dark force within her would also disappear, and once it did, he could move on to the other targets. As a rule, the bigger the dark force within a woman, the more Aseem had to conquer her, and the more he conquered, the more powerful he became. At the rate with which he was growing, it was only a matter of time before he had conquered all the women in the world (thus defeating the dark force completely) and had finally become its undisputed king. Or this is what he logically concluded. If only it wasn't for this ghost, he thought, this Anant, who had suddenly cast a shadow over him, and had discovered a way of pushing him into it. Into this abyss called 'Mother' (that existed between dream and reality). This abyss that he wasn't fully unaware of, having encountered it far too many times before. He'd usually come across it while falling asleep or when he was about to wake up. Sometimes it'd randomly pop up during one of his nightmares. In any case, one thing was certain. This abyss. It

was always there. Had always been there. Everywhere. Like God. Even right now. It was there. He could feel it. Like fear. In his chest. His heart. His soul. Was it the fear of falling? No. It was the fear of jumping. As Aseem wasn't fully unaware of what reposed there. Within the depths of his consciousness. He just. Didn't want to. Jump.

Why don't you forget about it?

I can't!

There must be some way, he pondered, to kill him, to stop him, before he... There must be some way.

Was there?

...

An experienced exorcist might have done it. Then why couldn't he? He who could do so many things?

Could he? Really? Even move right now? Weren't his legs all jelly?

Yes, they were... So how could he...

Wait a minute! He could! (it occurred to him all of a sudden) The mouth. Yes, the mouth. All he had to do was to stop him from speaking. That's all.

Why only the mouth then? Why not the ears? He thought. He could simply plug his ears. That was easier. But then again, how long could he keep them plugged? 10 minutes? An hour? A day? How about cutting his tongue off? Yes. But with what? That was the question. There wasn't a single stone in sight.

“Why not simply bite it off then?” Suggested Anant. “It's easier said than done. You coward!”

LOVE

Impossible! Aseem felt like a helpless rat that's being swallowed alive by a snake. Nothing was safe anymore. His thoughts. His secrets. This ghost had swallowed them all. And whatever that was left of him (his body, his ego), it was stretching its jaws to gulp that down as well. Soon, he would have lost his identity to the very beast that was devouring him.

I can't let that happen!

Aseem summoned all his strength, drew his tongue out of his mouth, extending it as far as he could, and, with a single bite, clenched it with his teeth and bit it off.

Ahhhhhhh!

It was pure agony. Blood rushed to his face. His tongue (or what was left of it) swelled to twice its size and began bleeding.

“That hurts!” Said Anant.

He was still there.

Aseem could still hear him.

How! How!

Not knowing what to do, Aseem decided to make his body so painful to live in that Anant would've had no choice but to leave.

I can do it! He resolved. I'll drive him out! Let's see if you can stand this!

Aseem grabbed his hair with both hands and pulled them off at once (ripping off the skin that they were attached to in the process), making him feel hot scalding nettles on his skull.

He broke into a sweat. Blood started dripping over his eyes.

“Is that what you were planning to do?” Asked Anant, while resiliently putting up with the pain. “If yes, it obviously didn’t work. You know, you have only one option left now. Die!”

“You don’t have to tell me!” said Aseem. “I know that!”

He did. What he didn’t know was, how? He was still in possession of his hands and arms. That was pretty much it though, as far as killing himself was concerned. In theory, it was still possible. So, as a last attempt, Aseem stretched his hands high up in the air, made fists with them, and rained those down with full force on his chest, his face, his shoulders, on whatever he chanced to hit with them till he was drenched in blood and crying from pain.

But Anant was still there. He kept on being there.

When he was too tired of hurting himself, Aseem tried chanting the names of gods.

If only they heard him out.

They did not.

“God,” said Anant, “doesn’t listen to those who don’t listen to themselves.”

Aseem could still hear him.

He had lost both his eyes. Several of his teeth. His tongue. His hair. He couldn’t make out what was left of his face. His hands were all swollen and numb.

Still, he could hear him. Why?

...

Anant too felt the pain of it, the immense pain. Despite that, he kept on repeating what he had said earlier (let me tell you about

your mother now) as there was nothing else that he could do. For better or for worse, he too was in it, in this hell, without knowing why. Only one thing was clear to him (and maybe to Aseem too) that their battle had entered its last phase. Aseem had nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. Death wasn't an option anymore. Total damnation was. Imminent.

“Don’t!” Cried Aseem, “For God’s sake! Don’t! Haven’t I suffered enough?”

“No, not yet. You haven’t listened to what I have to say about your mother.”

“I don’t want to,” wailed Aseem, and like a little child assailed by hopelessness, with trembling hands, he made a tiny pile of muck before himself, buried his face deep within it, and started crying. A strong and extremely unpleasant chemical odor invaded his senses, bringing to his mind words like Sodium Phosphate, Potassium Nitrate, Ammonium Acetate...

I want to die.

“Don’t worry,” said Anant, “You’ll die eventually. Everybody does. I did too.”

“But,” shouted Aseem, “I want to die a winner!”

“Winner? (Laughed Anant?) Do you still think that life is some kind of a game? (Why did he sound like HIM?) Well, if you still consider it a game, then you can take it for granted that it’s one where everyone loses everything. The only way of escaping it untouched is through surrender. Offer the things before they are taken away from you. Lose them before you lose yourself. Remember, one can’t hide dead bodies underwater. No matter how much you tie them down, they eventually pop up one day.”

“That’s what you’d say,” asserted Aseem. “And I know why. You too want to win like everybody else, and on top of that, you also want me to make it easier for you by giving up.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I do,” said Anant. “It’ll be easier for both of us that way. If you give up.”

“That I won’t,” said Aseem. “If there’s one thing that I’ve learnt from my life, it’s to never give up, never.”

While saying this, (in his mind) Aseem had already hatched another plan.

Which was?

The muck.

With his mouth open wide, he began eagerly devouring it, slurping it down without chewing, paying no heed to what it was doing to him. All he knew was, he had to keep swallowing it, as that’s the one thing that he could do. Swallow the muck. And his own vomit too. Which too kept on rising like the deluge. Out of his thundering stomach. It was impossible to gulp it all down. There was so much of it. Of what he swallowed. That was coming out. And so much of it. Of what was coming out. That he swallowed. That he couldn’t be sure of what it was that he swallowed. Whether it was the muck, the vomit, the vomited muck, the mucky vomit, or his own shit. Which too he was letting out by the way. All out. There must’ve been piles of it by now. In case he hadn’t swallowed it at all. He didn’t know. He could have. It all tasted alike anyway. Like nothing. Without his tongue. It was only the smell. That was. The worst in the world. The strongest and the worst. One didn’t necessarily need a nose to smell it. The pores on the skin were enough. As they were. Not only letting it all out. But also letting it all in. Like his mouth. His anus. His everything. Aseem. He was no longer Aseem. He was an

earthworm, a sponge, a bacterium, among many other things. The thoughts of which he thought. At the end of it though, he was. That's all he knew. He existed. Like a lost ship in the middle of an ocean. Surrounded by waves of feelings and thoughts. Waves that would rise and then fall. On him. Drowning him deeper and deeper within himself. So deep that his body and mind seemed to be the surface of a limitless ocean. Within the depths of which, there were memories and ideas that he had accumulated throughout his life. The sheer weight of them was. Insufferable. There was so much pain enclosed in them. Most of it didn't arise from them though. Or the surface of the ocean. It was arising from the bottom. Where there was a huge whirlpool. Centered around a tiny black hole. Which had bent the entire ocean within itself. And had distorted everything. By giving enormous weight to whatever that surrounded it. To the tiniest of Aseem's experiences. Making them painful. Giving them pain. Pain that didn't belong to them. That belonged to it. The hole. Aseem knew, at once, what it was. This hole.

It was his mother.

“Mommy, where are you?” He asked.

“Your Mommy is dead,” replied a voice.

“Dead?”

“Yes, you killed her.”

“I?”

“Now tell me, what happened?”

“What happened?”

“As if you don't know. How can anyone do that! Let alone a child of your age.”

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“What did I do?”

“You killed your mom.”

“No, I didn’t. They did it.”

“Who?”

“Those men. Big men.”

“What did they do?”

“They stabbed her.”

“Where?”

“There, between her legs.”

“Do you know your mother was a prostitute?”

“What’s a prostitute?”

“Oh, I forgot, you are a child”.

“What’s a prostitute?”

“Your mother was one. Now tell me, what happened on that day?”

“That day?”

“Yes. On that day.”

III

That Day

Mommy didn't pick me up from school that day. She rarely did. I went back home all alone. There was nobody there. With Mommy. Then others came. More nobodies.

“Woman,” said one nobody to another.

“Where?”

“Here,” he said.

“Will she?”

“Yes,” he said.

Mommy got naked. All the nobodies got naked. They had big bodies. Those nobodies. And big big big. They scared me. I was afraid. Dirty stinky they were. Pissy shitty snotty. And they killed her. My Mommy. My naked Mommy. With their big big big. Between her legs. Killed her. One by one. More and more. Killed her. My sweet Mommy. Again and again. She shouted. I screamed. They shut her up. Shut me up. And killed her. With their big big big. Drilled her. And made a hole between her legs. I was afraid. They'd kill me too. They were big. I was small. They could. I could not. I wanted to kill them. I wanted to cut their big big big. And kill them. So I grabbed my cutter. But I could not. They were big. I was small. They could kill me. Like they killed my Mommy, my sweet Mommy, and left. They left and more came. More nobodies. To kill her again. More nobodies with big bodies. Don't kill my Mommy, I said. They shut me up. Shut her up. And killed

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her with their big big big. And left. Nobodies left. Nobodies came. To kill Mommy. I wanted to kill them too. I tried with my cutter. I could not. They were big. I was small. I tried again. I wanted to kill. To kill everyone. Those nobodies. They were big. I wanted to be bigger and kill them. I tried. Mommy shouted. Don't. And they killed her. My Mommy. My sweet Mommy. They killed her and left.

And then I asked Mommy, “Aren't you dead?”

“I'm not dead,” she said.

“Didn't they kill you?”

“No, they didn't.”

“They did,” I said. “Don't lie Mommy. I saw the hole. You are a ghost.”

“They didn't make it,” she said. “It's there.”

“What were they doing then?”

“They were doing something,” she said.

“I want to do it too.”

“You'll do it someday.”

“Can I do it tomorrow?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “you can't. So, get lost and let me sleep.”

Mommy didn't know. I could do it too. I could kill her. Better than them. Those big men. They didn't have what I have. A knife. Big one. Bigger than their big big big. It could cut better. Kill better. They didn't know about it. Mommy didn't know. So, I

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went to her. With my knife. To show her that I can. And I saw it. The hole. It wasn't bigger than my knife. I was scared. It's hard to kill Mommy. Those big men. They did it. They weren't scared. If I wanted to be bigger. I didn't have to be scared. I had to do it. I had to kill Mommy. And so I... I... I...

I KILLED HER!

IV

Aseem regained consciousness. He was laying on his back. The pain that he had felt was ebbing away. Life was leaving him. His muscular, flexible, and symmetrical body had already relaxed. All except for his penis, which (he felt) was erect. Defying everything. Aseem wanted to put it down. But his hands were all numb. He wanted to bite it off and swallow it the way he had done with his tongue. But he could not.

I'm sorry Mommy, he said.

Don't worry, child. Good night.

HIM (PART-2)

Anant came back to where he was. Within the same white walls extending to infinity. Aseem was gone. His body was gone. Whatever else that was there was gone. Instead, only a head remained; senseless, motionless, lifeless, which perceived everything around itself without reflecting on it, and which would've stayed the way it was, thoughtless, had Anant not forced it to think.

Think, he thought to himself, think.

But in the state that he was in, thoughts weren't that easy to come. Anant didn't even know where to put in the effort for them, as there wasn't a muscle on the head that he could move. Its eyelids remained open; its pupils pointed upwards. Everything about it was still, both within and without. It was HIM who acted through me, Anant finally thought, not before putting in a great deal of effort for it. But this effort, he was unable to keep it up for long, as just like ripples on a quiet lake, his thoughts too began to die down, until eventually, there was nothing. Not even an emptiness. Neither Anant nor his thoughts. Nothing except an indistinguishable, unconscious, inert, non-being.

HE is there!

‘HE is there’ was the next thought that came into Anant’s mind, maybe after a long time. Although he couldn’t see anything (except a small patch of the brightly lit wall directly above the head), yet his mind was all over the place, from infinity to infinity, completely free from the spatial limitations of the tiny petrified head. And it was somewhere between this infinity and the head that Anant felt HIS presence.

HE is there, he thought again.

“Yes, I am.” HE replied, and came and stood beside the head with HIS monstrously huge legs towering above it (the head), eclipsing the bright lights above, and HIS wrinkled and blurred face the size of a tennis ball somewhere near the roof. To Anant, only one thing was clear.

HE could still hear his thoughts.

Thankfully.

The moment this awareness dawned on him, of its own accord, another thing happened. A question rose from within (the head?).

Why have you come?

“I’ve come to tell you something,” HE said.

What?

“About Aseem… In case you don’t know—which I know you don’t—he passed away right after… you know, the event that

you... which, by the way, happened a long time ago... Anyways, long story short, after that, all that was left of him in your mortal world was just this.” HE waved some paper cuttings above the head. “Just a few newspaper reports. But it’s more than what most of you achieve there. For example, if you were to consider the case of someone like Anant Brihaspati, he didn’t even achieve that (Isn’t that me? Thought Anant). He only marginally existed in some people’s memories for a decade or two after his death. Past that, there isn’t any record, either physical or mental that could affirm his existence. Still, that doesn’t amount to saying that he was any different in these respects from the others. On the contrary, Anant Brihaspati was a fairly ordinary person. Billions upon billions like him have already come into the world, and they have died. Yet, like all those billions who came before him, or those who came after him, Anant was special. If not for anybody else, at least for himself. It’s a pity that during his lifetime he didn’t recognize this. However, that doesn’t make him any different either; because one day, like everybody else, he will. If not in this life, then in another. If not by himself, then maybe with somebody’s help, but he will. I assure you. Everybody does. They have no other option. For it’s in the nature of existence (which is eternal) to move ahead and evolve. And pain and ignorance—the two biggest barriers to one’s ascent—do not last forever. They could mar one lifetime, or even millions of lifetimes for that matter, but they can never mar existence. Nothing can.”

I don’t get it, thought Anant.

“You will,” HE replied, “One day. It’s destined.”

After saying this, HE stopped completely—the way HE did the last time Anant saw HIM—and once again, there was silence for what might’ve been a very long duration, during which, Anant, despite the best of his efforts, couldn’t bring himself to think about anything.

Nothing, he thought finally.

Taking this as some sort of a cue, HE stooped down towards the newspaper cuttings—which HE had been holding tightly with both hands near HIS breast—bringing them within an inch of HIS face, and, in the same bland, emotionless, almost robotic voice of HIS, began reading them aloud.

A 17-year-old girl was abducted from her home in ____ and was taken to a shady motel on the outskirts of the city, where she was repeatedly raped and tortured by her captors.

According to an eyewitness, the blood-stained body of the girl was discovered by the motel staff who raised the alarm and immediately rushed her to the nearest hospital.

The girl's parents, who had already filed a report for her disappearance, are in a state of complete shock.

Although her condition is being described as stable by the doctors, the girl has yet to regain consciousness.

While investigating the case, the police also discovered the severely mutilated dead body of Aseem (35) outside the motel, who is believed to be the prime suspect in the case.

Keeping this new development in mind, the police have taken four suspects into their custody, including the owners of the motel, and they are trying to establish a connection between the two events.

“This was the second newspaper report.” With a barely noticeable movement of HIS fingers, HE switched the newspaper cuttings while being fixed like a statue in HIS former posture. “The first one is this,” HE said. “It dates back to around thirty years before the second. I'll read it.”

In what might be the most shocking news of the year, a five-year-old boy brutally murdered his mother with a kitchen knife.

The woman, aged twenty-nine, had recently started working as a prostitute in the famous red-light district of the city.

The boy's resentment over his mother's profession is being speculated as the primary motive behind the crime. Although what forced him to take the final step is still unclear.

As the boy was too young to be legally tried for his crime, he was sent to The Psychiatric Department of _____ to undergo a bio-psychosocial evaluation.

Speaking to our correspondent, the Head of The Psychiatric Department clarified the reasons behind this decision.

'In cases such as this,' he said, 'most of the times, the criminal himself is a victim. The juvenile has been sent for a psychiatric evaluation to determine the exact motivations behind the crime. The evaluation would involve studying the juvenile's personal life as well as his socio-economic background.'

"Well," HE said, putting the newspaper cuttings inside HIS wrinkled lab coat, "there's more to it, but this pretty much sums it up for now." And, with a single jerk, HE straightened HIMSELF, making HIS head—which seemed nearer to the roof than it was before—resemble a golf ball now.

Either HE has grown taller, thought Anant, or, in the meantime, I have shrunk.

Anyways

"Those newspaper reports missed a lot," HE pointed out. "Apart from failing to find a link between the two cases—as the identity of the juvenile was never revealed—they were unable to consider some key aspects about the perpetrator's life, which could have proved to be highly relevant. First of all, they didn't mention that the girl and the woman in the two cases were the same person; that is, the girl raped in the second case was the woman murdered in the first. This seemingly wonderful sequence of events was made possible by something known as the transmigration of souls. In fact, the girl's falling in love with the perpetrator (of both the cases) was no coincidence. She was tied

to him the way two stars are that orbit around the same center of mass. Similar to those stars, she and the perpetrator were destined to devour each other, which they had already been doing over the course of many lifetimes (It's funny, isn't it? You so easily devour the people that you love), and to continue this vicious cycle, the perpetrator or Aseem (if you like to call him by his first name), was born again as the victim's only son, Anant Brihaspati, the ordinary man of our previous example."

"We'll come back to him some other time."

"The second and relatively deeper link that everyone failed to discover was another strange similarity between the two cases. Apart from them involving the same two people spiritually, there's also a similarity in what actually happened. To throw some more light onto it, let us delve a little deeper into the perpetrator's background first."

"The perpetrator or Aseem (as we agreed to call him), who had experienced severe childhood trauma in the first case, had to undergo a rigorous psychiatric treatment after that, which included his involuntary subjection to excessive hypnosis (something he was highly receptive to) in order to forget about what had happened or what he did. Partly owing to his enormous guilt, the treatment proved to be so successful that apart from enabling Aseem to forget about what had happened, it also helped him to become oblivious of the very fact that he once had a mother. Unfortunately, this big achievement of the medical craft (the way it seemed then) wasn't without its tragic consequences, both for the perpetrator as well as for the people that he later associated with. Since I don't need to get into the details of the individual cases or trace the progression of the perpetrator's descent in order to convince you of the same, I'd simply conclude that he ended up developing several violent and abusive tendencies directed excessively (if not exclusively) towards women. His last victim (also his mother of past and future) like most of the last victims, bore the worst of him. Unbeknownst to himself, he was deeply in love with her, but due to decades of unrestrained lust,

cruelty, and apathy (which had completely destroyed any possibility that a human expression of such a feeling could arise in him) this feeling of love further aggravated his behavior towards her. Putting it in one way you could say that, now that he finally found someone who truly loved him, the perpetrator wanted to take revenge on her for all the love that he thought that he deserved but didn't get. Or you could also conclude this in a more radical way by saying that, as years of debauchery had left him fairly insensitive to any kind of tenderness, the perpetrator couldn't help grossly misinterpreting his own finer feelings towards the victim, deluding himself into thinking that all a woman craves for is a big penis, and the ultimate satisfaction she can have in this world is by indulging in violent sex with him (which, as you might know, is quite far from the truth)."

"Whichever way you look at it, the result is the same, and it could be summed up in a single sentence."

"The perpetrator violently raped the victim."

"Now, coming back to the central point, that is the similarity between the two cases. The one big similarity (which anyone who happened to visit both the scenes of crime could've easily pointed out) was the similarity of the state in which the bodies were found. In both the cases, the body of the naked victim (the woman or the girl) was found lying on a bed that was decked with such an enormous amount of blood (coming out of their vaginas) that it ended up dripping out of the bed sheets and onto the floor. This, when considered in connection with the striking physical resemblance of the victims, created an illusion that was so striking that any detective present at both the scenes of crime who didn't have much experience with their craft could have easily come to the swift conclusion that this was the work of the same serial killer. That's the impression anyone would have gotten who placed too high a value on what it was that met their eyes. Such detectives (or people), amateurs as they might've been, probably wouldn't have considered as significantly the less obvious aspects of the two

cases, aspects like the similarity in the events that actually took place, especially if we look at them from the perpetrator's perspective (which is what we would do now).”

Didn't that happen already? Thought Anant.

“While many experts, including the perpetrator's own twisted confessions, might contradict this, there's no denying the fact that he was deeply in love with both the victims (or the one victim, depending upon how you look at it) and his initial intention was to satisfy them (the very thing that he failed to achieve, thanks to his childish stupidity in the first case, and his inability, in the second, to differentiate his own selfish pleasure from that of the other person). What he did instead was, he inflicted immeasurable pain upon them, misinterpreting, at the same time, their sincerest cries of pain as indubitable signs of joy.”

“Although, in the second case, there was no way for the perpetrator to have known the consequences of what he did (as he died shortly afterwards), in the first case, he was thoroughly acquainted with them. If not initially, at least later at the institute, where, despite his young age, he was told everything about what his brutal actions did to his mother. His guilt that followed this revelation was so overwhelming that it led to his eventual breakdown, which—despite being an expected outcome of the interrogation—created a huge problem, as even after multiple attempts, the psychiatrists at the institute failed to bring him back to a state of emotional regulation. Ultimately, they had no other option than to change the course of the entire treatment. So, instead of reinforcing his guilt, they began focusing on his earlier denial of it, telling him that he didn't do anything, that nothing happened, and—when even that didn't work out—that he never had a mother. This last suggestion seems to have worked out wonderfully, as after carefully building upon it, within two years, the psychiatrists made an entirely new person out of the perpetrator. To say, however, that this new person was fit to live in the society would be quite an overstatement. Because he wasn't (fit to live in

general), but he had to (be rehabilitated), as the state could no longer bear his expenses. This resulted in the obvious. First, at the orphanage, and later out into the world, the perpetrator didn't turn out to be the way any civilized person would have wanted him to be. In short, he became a gigolo, a profession where all that his clients cared about was the size of his penis (thus validating his overt sexual and violent tendencies to such an extent that Aseem began to see it as his true calling). Predictably, this had an extremely negative impact on his already declining mental health (something that becomes particularly more evident when we consider his conception of women as mere sex objects), and it also proved to be one of the instrumental (if not detrimental) steps that led him to believe that pimping is the ultimate career choice (apart from being illegal that is).”

“Now, coming back to the second case, if we look at it in the light of all this, what the perpetrator did to the victim was in no way an exceptional behavior for him, and most probably it wouldn't have resulted in his death (even if he was ultimately apprehended by the police for it). What actually happened was much worse. Nature delivered a significantly harsher punishment than any law could have. In fact, when everybody found out that Aseem was the main culprit, they simply smiled at his dismal fate, calling it justice well served (everybody except the victim that is, who went on to love him for the rest of her life). Nobody even cared to find out that all his injuries were self-inflicted. The world was rid of a vermin, and it was all the more glad for it. What they forgot instead was, this vermin, this perpetrator, this Aseem, he wasn't born the day before he died. He was as much of a victim as he was a culprit. A victim of chain of events, a victim of cause and effect, a victim of life. Just like everybody else. He too had no other choice.”

HE paused for a while.

Why are you telling me all this? Asked Anant.

“Later,” HE said, resuming HIS monologue. “I’m not done yet. I have one more point that’s left. But before that, there is one small disclaimer that I would like to insert. It goes as follows”

“How things happen, nobody knows. While talking about them, what we can do best is we can describe them in a way that makes them look comprehensible; that is, by desperately placing them within the bounds of language and logic, and by distancing them as far as possible from their prejudices, we can create an island of interconnected facts and call it reality.”

“Although the main question still remains. This reality of ours, is it really real?”

....

“For once, let us assume that it is not. In which case, to make it even remotely so, the best thing we can do is we can approach it from multiple perspectives and then search for that one common ground where all these perspectives seem to meet. Like in Aseem’s case, the most obvious of all explanations behind his death is of course the similarity between the two cases. While we have thoroughly considered many different aspects of it, we have yet to acknowledge that one point where they all happen to coincide. That is the point in space and time, or the point in Aseem’s (or Anant’s?) life, where everything (past, present, and future) was fused into one. Where the inhibitions of his memory were lifted, and he finally realized that he had raped his mother, and that—it wasn’t just then—all his life he had been doing so, in order to distance himself from her as well as from the guilt of his past actions that had been gnawing him at the deepest core of his being.”

Here, HE stopped abruptly, and said, after a brief pause. “Okay, I’m finished. Is there anything that you wanted to ask?”

Plenty of things, thought Anant, without actually wanting to, as the head, which had been quiet until then, was now filled up to the brim with thoughts. Anant wanted to ask hundreds of questions, all at once, with such restlessness that, before he could

finish thinking about one, he would start thinking about another, too afraid that HE might begin answering the first question at length while Anant might have to wait an eternity before he could think about all the others.

Yes, Anant resolved finally, I do want to ask you something. A lot of things in fact, as you might very well know. But before we get to those, there's one thing in particular that I'm very curious about.

“What is it?” HE asked.

It's the event, replied Anant. Didn't I experience it a little while ago?

“Yes, you did.”

But I don't understand. Why would you make me experience all that?

“You have,” HE said, “the answers to all your questions. I could point them out for you if you like, but they would do you no good. You are simply not in the right state of mind to reflect.”

This confused Anant. Right state of mind? He wondered. Does it even exist?

“Maybe,” HE said.

Would it ever dawn on me?

“Probably”

Anant was disappointed. I get it, he said, vainly attempting to shout out his thoughts. I get the whole point of what you've been trying to prove. That I'm your puppet. You said the same earlier, and you've proved it now.

“Yes, it’s true,” HE said, “it’s true that you’re a puppet with an illusion of free will. Something that’d be better for you to give up—the illusion I mean. But, to be precise, you’re not just my puppet. You’re the puppet of anyone who knows where your strings are—how you’d behave in a certain type of situation, or how you’d react to certain type of stimulus. Once anyone has that figured out, they become your masters and can direct you wherever they wish. But those who’d do that, you can take it for granted that they too are controlled by something that sits high above them. They can’t be free themselves. Because it’s in the nature of freedom to set free whatever that comes in contact with it, while bondage only seeks to bind itself. Control cannot exist without bondage, the way puppets cannot exist without strings. And when you control something fully, you become that. In your overwhelming desire to control, you become the one that’s being controlled.”

But who is it that controls you then? Asked Anant, unable to control his curiosity. I mean, control the one who is controlling?

“It could be anything,” HE said. “A feeling. A desire. A compulsion. You never know what exactly it is. Because the moment you do, you’re free from the cycle.”

What cycle? Asked Anant.

“Every cycle there is,” HE replied.

How many are there?

“Many,” HE replied. “Life and death, cause and effect, pain and pleasure, attraction and repulsion, victory and defeat, pride and shame, and millions of others. Each of these tends to form a twofold layer over your being, plunging it deeper and deeper till you reach the point where you are so lost within yourself that you can’t help acting like a puppet—or like a sophisticated machine at

best—that moves one way or the other depending upon the input that you feed. Those who know this input (and are depraved enough to want to control) ultimately become your masters.”

Aren’t you my master too? Asked Anant. Didn’t you know how I’d react in the situation that you put me in?

“No,” HE said, “I simply made you relive some of the strongest impressions of your past life. You were unable to completely immerse in them because you no longer identify as Aseem. And yet, since he is something that you’ve lost, deep in your mind you’ve always had the desire to become like him. But you can’t do that anymore because you have to choose one, either Aseem or Anant. You can’t be both of them at the same time. Aseem chose to be like Anant, and if you choose to be like him again, you’re in yet another cycle.”

Doesn’t that mean, asked Anant, that I am what I am because of my own choice? And in the future too, I can be what I want to be?

“Yes and no.” HE said. “You have the choice indeed (in fact, desire is what propagates existence). But you have to make that choice with your entire being. Right now, what you think of as yourself is merely a tiny and insignificant part of the real you. It can’t make that choice, although it can certainly influence it to some degree.”

Am I that helpless then? Asked Anant.

“Unfortunately, yes.” HE said. “But then again, who isn’t? All of you are trapped in existence the way lost ships are in the middle of an ocean. You’ve been helpless for so long that most of you have even begun doubting the existence of a shore. If only you believed in this helplessness of yours, things would’ve been so much better.”

“For what you call life is built upon so many uncertainties that every moment you live is nothing less than a wonder. But that’s something you only realize when you are truly helpless and face to face with the truths of life the way little children are. Because once you grow up, you start thinking of existence as a merit you’ve earned when all of it is a gift from the beginning till the end.”

Couldn’t it be a curse too? Asked Anant.

“Yes, it could be.” HE said. “The boon or the bane. Depending upon how you wish to look at it.”

Really? Wondered Anant. Does it mean that if I were to think of it as a boon, it’d free me ultimately?

“It can do that, yes!” HE asserted. “Ideally that is. Depending upon the depth that the thoughts are coming from. You know, humans have the ability (or the disability in most cases) to say one thing while meaning another (not to mention the feelings, which reside on a different plane altogether) so much so that in time, their words lose both their value and meaning, ultimately becoming like the howling wind that restlessly blows around without really moving anything. If your thoughts too are of that quality, you can rest assured, they won’t move anything either.”

There’s no point in asking you, thought Anant enraged. You are confused yourself, and you confuse me in turn.

“I don’t blame you.” HE said. “You have a lot of questions that you want to ask, and there’s no one except me here. Someone you don’t trust at all. Despite that, you are so restless that you can’t help asking me, even though rather than allaying your restlessness, my words provoke it. But, if you consider them again, you’d see that there’s nothing wrong in them. It’s just that, if you were to believe in what I’m saying then, according to you, it’d prove that I know everything that you don’t, and it’d give me an

authority over you that you are not ready to grant.

Yes, affirmed Anant, you want to make me your puppet. I'm absolutely certain of that.

“No,” HE said, “it’s not about what I want. Here, it’s more about what you want. And fun fact, I happen to know what that is, and I would do that for you”.

“So, would you like to talk to someone that you trust?”

No, said Anant, because I never trusted anyone.

“That’s a lie.” HE retorted. “How do you know the word then? How do you know what it means to trust?”

“I admit that you don’t trust anyone now, but you must’ve trusted someone before. That’s why you know the meaning of the word. ‘Trust’.”

Maybe, I did, said Anant. Who knows?

“Do you want to? Again?” HE asked.

No.

“What do you want then?”

Nothing.

“Okay, then nothing shall happen.”

Anant was still feeling restless.

Fuck it, he thought, do whatever the fuck you want. I don’t care.

“You don’t?”

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

No

“Okay,” HE said, “I could carry on with this conversation for eternity without ever arriving at a conclusion. I know you want to talk to someone that you trust, but you’d never ask me for help, as that’d make you my puppet. So, I’ll return the favor to you, I’ll make it happen, or, if you don’t like my assertion, I’d simply say that it’s bound to happen or has already happened (whichever way you like to put it) and you don’t have to close your eyes for it (I know you can’t). Simply imagine that in this room (or tunnel) there’s darkness instead of light.”

Anant didn’t want to imagine anything, yet his resistance to this suggestion made it all the more potent, and without the lights turning off or him closing his eyes, there was darkness all around. The transition from the one to the other was so seamless that it seemed to Anant as if there never was anything to begin with, the darkness and the light being mere modulations of his mind, over which he had little control. In fact, he didn’t disappear or melt in the dark the way he previously did. Instead, he simply thought and thought and thought for what might’ve been days or months or years, and although he thought through everything many many times, he couldn’t stop until a strange tiredness came over him, or slumber, something akin to the darkness he was enveloped by, which transformed his thoughts into dreams that intertwined everything going through his mind, making it too complex to reflect on. Soon, Anant felt lost within the fabric of his own creation. There seemed to be no way out of it, and all his efforts to come out (of this dream?) merely brought forth uncalled-for changes in it that made Anant all the more conscious about his lack of control. Finally, he decided to wait until somebody pulled him out of this labyrinth.

FATHER

Time has stretched itself

Months and years

Hours and Minutes

All have become alike

They all pass by

No gain no sorrow

Yesterday or tomorrow

Only time is there

Time

Slowly rushing towards its end

He was the most famous astronaut on the planet; people called him Astronaut Brihaspati, and this had been his most ambitious journey to date. It began when he was selected as one of the three astronauts for Earth's first human mission to Mars, and it ended when due to a faulty landing his spacecraft was shattered into pieces. So now he (Astronaut Brihaspati) found himself on a planet other than his own, counting his final days while fearlessly awaiting his fate. And, as his misfortune would have it, even in that he was all alone, as his two fellow astronauts had already died before him, not because they made a mistake or were proven to be incompetent, they merely happened to be on board, that's all. Had more people been there with them, they too would've met the same fate. For who could survive the devastation of the greatest rocketship crash in the whole of human history? It must've been his supernatural skills that made Astronaut Brihaspati survive the disastrous fall, and thus bestow upon himself the honour of being the first human ever in the entire history of humanity to set foot on Mars, even though setting foot was all he did, as along with the crew and the spaceship, he had lost all the instruments and equipment too. So, there was absolutely nothing that he could do except wait for his oxygen supply to run out. The date and time of his departure were already etched in stone.

3rd of March 2007 1:56 pm

If anyone would have asked him in his final moments what his greatest regret was, Astronaut Brihaspati would've calmly replied

His greatest regret was

There was nobody to ask him this question

Nobody

FATHER

As he was all alone

Far away from home

Presumed dead by everyone

Which too by far wasn't the worst. The worst thing being, no one would have ever known the truth about him. The truth that he was the first human ever to set foot on Mars.

It was his tragedy

The greatest tragedy never written

Of a genius unrecognised

Of a love unrequited

And today, he was going to shout it all

To the stones, if they cared to listen

“Don't worry, Papa. I'm there!” Said who?

It was a voice resembling his son's.

Astronaut Brihaspati couldn't believe his ears.

How could it reach him?

Was the atmosphere on the planet thick enough for sound to travel?

Maybe it was

But where was it coming from?

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

This voice

There was no way to know

So...

“Who’s there?” He asked.

“Anant? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Said Anant. “Didn’t you die like long ago?”

“What? Me?” Astronaut Brihaspati looked at himself in wonder. “I think I’m alive. I think, that’s why I’m alive. What about you?”

“I’m dead, Papa.”

“What?” Astronaut Brihaspati’s heart skipped a beat. “Is this your ghost then?” He asked, bewildered. “I can’t see you.”

“I don’t know, Papa.” His son replied. “You are more likely to be a ghost than I am. You died eleven years before me.”

“I did?” Astronaut Brihaspati was astonished. “But how?”

“Don’t you remember?”

He could not.

“Okay,” said Anant, “I’ll tell you all about it then. It was a Saturday night. You were coming back home from a party with two of your friends in your car and then you...”

Astronaut Brihaspati had dim recollections of the event.

Maybe that was no rocketship crash after all. I must’ve been terribly drunk. “What the hell am I doing on Mars then!” He grumbled so loudly that his son stopped in the middle of a sentence. “Do people go to Mars after they die?”

“What?” Exclaimed Anant, “I can’t quite follow what you are trying to say.”

“Nothing,” his father said. “What happened after the accident?”

FATHER

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“Gosh!” Said Anant. “It was such a tragedy. Your friends survived with minor injuries. You suffered brain damage, went into a coma, and died after two months.”

“This is it!” Something within Anant’s father clicked. “I’m in a coma and about to die. It makes perfect sense.”

“It doesn’t” Anant retorted. “Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Did I ask you?” His father growled. “Anyway, why have you come here?”

“I said I don’t know,” wailed Anant. “How many times do I have to tell you? It’s a long story anyway.”

“Shut it kid!” His father growled again. “I thought you’d be glad to see me after all this time.”

“Eleven years!” Affirmed Anant, the way he used to long ago.

And then, there and then, he felt a feeling

A feeling he hadn’t felt in a long long time

A normal different from the normal that he had slowly grown accustomed to

But a normal nevertheless

Without any trace of that long-lost feeling of sanctity, which Anant had often imagined that such a meeting would bring back. Maybe he had lost it with his youth and had undeservedly put the blame for it on his father’s death, as it so easily divided one part of his life from another. Or maybe he no longer shared the same relationship with his father, who belonged to a different generation altogether and—from the point of view that Anant had acquired over the last eleven years—looked a bit old and almost stupid now, much more like his wife or any other person of their generation.

Maybe I did change after all, thought Anant despondently. For change is the law. And I seem to be no exception.

“Where are you?” His father asked. “I can’t see you.”

“I’m everywhere Papa,” he replied. “And you are inside of me.”

“What?”

Anant knew that this explanation wouldn’t be enough for his father, who had a knack for the details. And yet, precisely because of this tendency of his, Anant had long ago developed a pesky habit of giving vague replies to him (and to pretty much everybody else).

“Never mind,” he said. “Maybe it’s all a dream. Have you ever had one of those dreams where you know that it’s a dream, but you still can’t wake up? Maybe it’s one of those.”

“Maybe,” his father replied with a giggle.

“What are you laughing at?” Asked Anant.

“Myself,” his father replied. “You wouldn’t believe son. I had this feeling many times when I was alive. That life is merely a dream. And now that I’m out of it, it doesn’t fail to strike me how right I was. It was indeed a dream. But I could do as much about it then as I can do now. Maybe I should have waited for it to be over. Come to think of it, you only believe it to be a dream once it’s all over.”

“Over?” Whined Anant. “But when? You died. I died. But when the hell is it going to be over? Doesn’t it always begin again? Like last time? Back from the beginning? Once again, to end and begin again?”

“I don’t know son,” his father replied pensively. “I hope it doesn’t.”

“I wish I could hope like you,” he said.

“You can’t?”

“No”

“Why?”

FATHER

“I don’t know,” wailed Anant. “Must be a part of growing up, I guess. When I was a child, life had no limits. I could see the whole eternity in front of me and believe in anything. Everything was true. But I don’t know when did it start happening? When did I trade in all the wonder in life? Who made me do that? And for what? For this handful of meaning? These narrow boundaries? And so little of life lying outside of them? I am this. I am that. You are this. You are that. People this. People that. Life this. Life that. Can I give it all back in exchange for all the wonder in life? For my childhood? When I was everything I could believe in? I know that if I’m born again, I might get it back. But what’s the use? I would lose it again. As at the end of the day, that’s what life is. A journey from eternity to damnation. While death, with all its nothingness, is merely a longing for life, which invariably ends up in death again. Now that I know it, what hope can you expect me to have?”

Anant’s father was deeply touched by these words. But if someone would have asked him what exactly his son was raving about, he would have been at a loss for an answer, as he didn’t actually understand anything of what he was saying. The emotions behind his son’s words weighed so heavy that they would have had the same effect on him, even if, rather than saying what he said, Anant had simply babbled out in gibberish. They reminded him of the time when Anant was still a baby and when wailings like these meant that something was wrong with him.

Back then, he and his wife used to rack their brains over in an attempt to find out what is wrong with baby Anant, whether he is hungry or whether he is feeling irritated because of lack of sleep.

In time though, they learnt how to decode most of these signals. Their experiences with Anant’s sister helped them greatly with this. In fact, it might’ve been the result of all their care that even later in life Anant used to confide a lot in them, and what he did not, his father could guess that pretty easily. He knew darn well about the things that Anant didn’t share with him, and he would take hints pertaining to them by discreetly bringing them

up in the conversation and noticing how Anant reacted to them. Since his son was a terrible liar, he never used this ability to confront or embarrass him. It was simply his way of letting him know that he knew what was up with him.

But did he? Even now?

Of course, he did. If not, what type of a father was he? He didn't know the exact details but... it was clear to him that Anant had been lonely all this time. And if there's one thing that has ever made a man unhappy, then that's loneliness.

It's a fact!

Still, why do so many people fantasise about being alone nowadays? About going to the top of a mountain and sitting by the campfire or something like that? If they have ever been alone, they'd know, this doesn't work for more than a day or two. The reason behind it is pretty obvious. It's because we are made that way. To stick together. And there's no happiness in this world when you don't have someone to share it with. If only the new generation understood this, things would've been so much easier for them, without all that loneliness.

“I can't help you,” Anant's father said. “You weren't like this before. You were happy. It must've been all those years that made you this way. Who knows, had I been there, things might've turned out differently. By that I don't mean to say that they can't get any better now. If they can get worse, they can surely get better. And whenever they do, you'd start looking at them differently. As if all this were some sort of a phase that you had to go through in order to better understand life.”

“Oh shut up!” Said Anant. “There you go again with your usual crap about understanding life. I've heard it so many times that hearing it again makes me want to throw up. It never helped me in the least. And by God! Even if it did, what help is it now?

FATHER

You're dead. I'm dead. Life as we knew it is over. There's nothing left to understand."

"What!" Anant's father asked rebukingly. "What did you say?"

"I said it's over! Goddammit! Can't you hear me?"

"I can! Very well!" He said. "You don't have to shout! The thing is... wait a minute."

Anant's father sensed a deep contradiction somewhere. He couldn't exactly point out where it was. It didn't lie in Anant's words. That much he was sure of. It went much deeper. Closer to the speaker than to the speech. Something wrong. Something twisted. That twisted everything along with it. Everything. Not only what went out, but also what went in. Something that was integral to Anant's perception of life and yet so ethereal that one could not talk or even think about it, particularly Anant, since what he thought of as himself included that twist. The others though, they most probably saw the situation a little differently. From their perspective, the existence of this twist must've been quite apparent, at least subconsciously. But since they themselves didn't contain it, they must've thought of it as something alien not only to themselves but to Anant too, and whenever they could even vaguely allude to it, they would've encouraged Anant to get rid of it. What they didn't know was, although a disease, this twist was a fundamental part of Anant's personality, and whenever they spoke against it, he must've felt their antagonism directed towards himself.

They hate me, he must've thought. Poor fellow. If only he knew that, deep inside, he was no different from the others. Like them, he too wanted love, even though he didn't know how to get it. He must've tried at one point or another, and was hurt by it. Again and again. To the point where he lost his faith, built walls around himself and said, 'This is me, and that is the world,' while inwardly praying for the day when somebody broke these walls down so that he could finally be himself again.

But could he? Really?

“It’s good if it’s over,” Anant’s father began in an authoritative tone. “Now we can start anew. You know what the problem with you is? With you and with your whole damn generation? You all don’t know anything, while you think that there isn’t anything that you don’t know. Your problems. They are always there. Staring at you. Right in the face. But instead of looking back and doing something about them, you start pretending like they don’t exist. Like you’re somebody special. Someone deep and complex who’s impossible to understand. In reality though, it’s not that you or your problems are any harder to understand; you simply don’t want them to be that way. Why would you anyway? Give up the last shred of vanity that your pride is latching on to? You know that nobody (including you) has any idea about who you are. So instead of finding that out, you start pretending to be what you think is grand and unreal. The more your shortcomings bother you, the more you blow yourself up. And although you don’t actually believe in what you end up with (nor does anybody else, for that matter), the one thing that it gives you, this unreal projection of yours, is a fake consolation. Your guilt, your longings, your petty desires and weaknesses, it makes you think that you can hide them forever. But you don’t know. On a much deeper level, everyone knows everyone else. The reason why nobody bothers is, like you, they too are preoccupied with themselves. If only they cared to find out; your tone, your words, your actions, everything would give you away. What you are so carefully trying to hide, the mere fact that you are trying to hide it, would make it all the more obvious.”

“What?” Shuddered Anant. “Was it that obvious?”

He stopped there.

He was too bewildered by what he heard, too afraid that any subsequent word would reveal the deepest of his secrets. His father had handed him the final piece of the puzzle. It was never about the world. It was Anant’s failure with Heena, his first (love?), and the memory of it that he couldn’t wipe out, which had

FATHER

manifested itself into something physical, something tangible, that everyone around Anant could see. But how could he? His father, who couldn't see him, how could he?

Anant imagined himself standing before his father, all withdrawn like a curled leaf, his face red with embarrassment. He remembered how, in situations like these, his father used to look at him from the corner of his eyes, which, in tandem with his lips, would then curl into an imperceptible smile.

Was that affection or mockery? Anant could never guess, despite being certain about one thing, his father could sure-as-hell see through him, which might've been the reason why, back in the days, Anant lived an exceptionally moral life, apart from being irresponsible and carefree that is, which lies on the other side. Of the same coin. The coin called father. Anant's personal God.

What? God?

Yes (Anant affirmed the conclusion after dimly reflecting upon it), his father was indeed The God, who was always there in his mind, taking care of him, protecting him, nurturing his conscience, but at the same time, who judged and controlled him.

Like God?

...

Coincidentally, after Anant's father passed away, he never bothered about God or conscience. Even on the day when he was at the lake with Heena, he was almost glad that his father wasn't there to stare into his soul. Now he could do whatever he liked, be as selfish as he wanted. Yet inwardly, he felt like he was stealing something. Like some sort of an eternal judgement was in store for him.

Was he right? Was this the final judgment?

It did seem like it.

To be sure of himself, Anant asked his father.

“Are you here to judge me?”

“What?”

His father couldn’t believe what he heard. He paused for a moment, and then he asked Anant.

“Do you think that I’m judging you?”

“You always have,” replied Anant.

“But didn’t you want me to?”

“Why would I?” Asked Anant.

“Because you never told the same to me when I was, as you said, judging you. But now, after years of living without my judgment, you’ve suddenly become tired of it. I can see why you think like that.”

“Why?” Asked Anant.

“Because you are unhappy, dummy. That’s why. You rarely question yourself when you are having a good time. No matter how things are, you simply feel grateful. It’s when you are unhappy that you start looking for reasons, and since there are so many in your life, you are bound to stumble onto the wrong ones. These are the ones that justify your unhappiness. You know what the best way is? To be sad all the time? It’s blaming someone else for your own shortcomings. It’s like saying that ‘I’m in a ditch because someone else pushed me into it.’ Okay, I admit it, that’s unfair. But just open your eyes and see goddamnit! That someone has been gone for quite a long time now. You said that they pushed you into a ditch. Fine! But did they ever stop you from climbing out of it? Did they? You simply decided to sit there and call it your fate. And ultimately, that’s what it became. Your fate.”

“No!” Said Anant. “You’re wrong! It didn’t! I’m sorry to say this, but you have no idea what’s happening right now! You’ve been dead for eleven years! The Anant that you knew was another person from another world, and I’m certainly not that. Sorry. The world has changed, and so have I. Things aren’t as simple as they used to be when you were alive. They’ve become complicated now, and this serious and naïve attitude of yours that you can’t see through, we call it stupidity nowadays.”

FATHER

“Okay, I admit it!” Anant’s father shouted. “I’m wrong! I’m stupid! I’m old-fashioned if you like! Is there more? I’ll admit that too! I’ll say everything that you want me to say! But honestly, my son, I don’t want it to be a battle of our egos. For once, just for once, ask yourself and tell me, are you happy?”

“Are you?” Asked Anant in turn.

“I’m not,” his father replied spontaneously, “not in the least. And you know who makes me unhappy? It’s you, Anant. It’s you. I can’t bear to see you like this. I just can’t. It breaks my heart.”

“Breaks your what?” Asked Anant indignantly. “You’re talking to me as if you could really see me.”

“I can!” His father asserted. “You know it too! I can see you!”

Anant was taken aback when he heard this.

“But how can you!” He wailed.

Could his father see his thoughts too?

Was there no escape from the eternal judgement?

“I just can!” Anant’s father said.

“Then tell me,” asked Anant in the earnest, “how do I look now?”

“Unhappy,” his father replied, “and I can’t bear to see you like this.”

“But why can’t you?” Asked Anant. “Why? Why the hell does it matter to you anyway? Can’t you be like everybody else?”

“No!” His father shouted. “I can’t! I can’t be like them! And you know why?”

“Why?” Asked Anant.

“It’s because I love you dummy! That’s why!”

To this, Anant couldn’t reply.

He was shell-shocked by his father’s honesty.

It was the truth. He knew.

ANANT BRIHASPATI & FAMILY

It left nothing to be said.

Anant's father loved him.

Even though he was...

Dead?

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Was this the love that HE was talking about?

Maybe

Maybe yes

It was

Love

It was

There

And had always been

Like the sun after the sunset

Giving him warmth

Keeping him alive

All through those eleven years

That cold cold night

It was

FATHER

There

Hiding somewhere

Where?

That's not important

Not now at least

As it wasn't

Hiding anymore

It had arisen

Finally

From the dark

Sweeping away

All the traces of doubts

Unravelling

A feeling

So unrelentingly strong

That all of Anant's thoughts

Simply faded in its wake

They gave way

Like a lie would do

When faced with

The ultimate truth

Which is?

Love

Love, thought Anant, is there.

Like the sun. Like the truth. Like God.

It's always there.

Why didn't I realise this earlier?

"I'm sorry papa," he said.

"Sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry for everything. So please forgive me."

"No need," his father replied. "It's not up to me anyway. I never blamed you in the first place. And even if I did, I'm not doing that right now. So you shouldn't ask me for forgiveness. Instead, you should look for it within yourself. Now that you are alone and you have no hope of seeing anyone you ever knew, do you forgive them for all the wrong that they might have done? And not just them, more importantly, do you forgive yourself Anant? Do you..."

Anant was triggered when he heard this.

"Self-forgiveness, you say?" He interrupted.

"Yes."

"Honestly," he began, "I never heard of such a thing. I think you can forgive anyone except yourself. And if I'd tell you everything that I'm responsible for, you won't be able to forgive me either. In fact, I'm the one person who..."

FATHER

“I know,” Anant’s father cut him short, “your mother told me.”

“Told you what exactly?” He wondered.

“That you are like him, despite being my son.”

“I am like who?” Asked Anant, and when his father didn’t respond, “Aseem do you mean?” He added.

“Yes,” his father affirmed.

“And you’re okay with that?”

“Yes”

“Why?”

“I have no other choice son,” Anant’s father replied. “You know, when you are stranded alone on an alien planet with nothing to do. Nobody to talk to. No person. No life. No nothing. All that brings you joy and all that brings you pain are your own thoughts. Your own memories. And once you’ve stayed with them long enough, you start figuring them out. Instead of thinking about them within the context of yourself and others, you start looking at them objectively. As facts or happenings. That will always stay the same, irrespective of how you feel about them. In short, what has happened has happened. Although you can’t change it, it’s also hard not to reflect on it, and to end up feeling sad, guilty, or angry because of that. But, as time goes on, even these feelings slowly disappear (the way oceans did on Mars). You know, you can’t be sad thinking about the same thing for days on end. You need new stuff every day. So when nothing new happens to you for years and years, your feelings run out of fuel, and what you thought of as an important event in your life, feels more like the same old line in the same old book.”

“Okay,” admitted Anant, “I seem to get what you are trying to say, but, at the end of the day, that’s like your point of view, isn’t it? Don’t get me wrong or anything, all I want is to know what exactly you expect me to do by telling me all this? Do you want me to wait like you did for years and years only to later find out that my experience was completely different from yours? Honestly, I could still give it a shot. But didn’t you just say that

your feelings ran out of fuel? What if mine don't? What do I do then?"

"Hmm..." Anant's father hmmd. "You got a point there," he said. "Anyways, let me ask you a simple question—and please give me an honest reply. How many times in your life did things turn out to be the way you expected them to?"

"Rarely," said Anant.

"Yes, they rarely do," his father affirmed. "Despite that, why do you still keep expecting all the time, knowing very well that your expectations won't be fulfilled?"

"I don't know," said Anant. "Old habits die hard I guess."

"Correct!"

"And you know what the main reason is? Behind those habits?"

"What?" Asked Anant.

"It's activity," his father replied. "You know, things happen. And they keep happening all the time. So it's only natural for you to expect a certain outcome from them. Because things, they also lead to outcomes. At least that's how it happened in the world that we lived in. Here though, it's different. Here, you can successfully predict what's going to happen—even in the distant future—so accurately that it makes you want to not predict at all."

"I don't believe it," said Anant disapprovingly.

"Okay, tell me then, what's going to happen here, an year from now?"

"That far into the future?"

"Yes," said Anant.

"Are you ready for it?"

"Yes"

"Well," his father said, "let me calculate then."

"One, two, three, four..."

"Nothing new," he blurted out with a smirk.

"That's what's going to happen here. An year from now, or even a million years from now for that matter."

"So?" Wondered Anant. "If that's the case, what do you

expect me to do? Do you want me to just sit here with you, waiting for nothing to happen?” He asked jokingly.

“Exactly!” His father was out of himself from joy. “That’s the whole point, my son! You have to learn how to wait for nothing to happen. Because if you do, you’ll be happy all the time. As nothing, it’s happening as we speak.”

Anant was bamboozled. He had asked that question for giggles. But the reaction that he got from his father pointed towards something much more serious.

What exactly was it?

That he didn’t know.

To get some clarity on the situation, he asked his father once again. “But aren’t we always supposed to wait for ‘something’ to happen? How can you wait for ‘nothing’ to happen? Especially when it’s happening all the time. Doesn’t that contradict the whole purpose of waiting?”

“It does,” Anant’s father smilingly agreed. “You have grown into quite an intelligent child, I must say.”

Anant had expected a more elaborate response this time. When he didn’t get that, it irritated him.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” he said. “If waiting is pointless, why do it anyway?”

“Exactly!” His father joyfully exclaimed. “That’s what you need to ask yourself: if waiting is pointless, why do it anyway?”

“Okay,” said Anant (trying a different approach this time), “then I’d rather not do it.”

“Yes,” his father agreed. “Don’t do it.”

He was beginning to get on his son’s nerves now.

“What do I do then?” Asked Anant impatiently.

“The answer to that, my son, is pretty obvious.”

“What is it?”

“You can’t guess?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you then,” his father said. “It’s simple. Don’t do anything.”

There was silence once again.

Then, maybe to mock him, very slowly and emphatically, Anant enunciated every single word of his father’s conclusion.

“Don’t. Do. Anything.” He said.

“Is that what you mean?”

“Yes,” his father confirmed.

“Well,” said Anant, “I’m speechless.”

And that he became (at least for some time), although inwardly he was waiting for his father to respond, which, once again, his father did not. So he waited. Waited, waited and waited, and when his father still didn’t respond, Anant ultimately gave up. Unable to control himself, he burst forth with all the energy that he could muster, shouting, “But how the hell do you do that! I want to learn that too!”

“Hmmm...” his father said after pondering calmly for a while, “I can’t teach that. You don’t wait because you want to. You wait because you can’t help it. It’s a human thing. Everybody is like that. We all wait. For the future. For what’s going to happen. It’s a habit that’s deeply ingrained within us. Because if nothing worthwhile is happening right now, there’s the future, at least. It has always been there for us to look forward to. In fact, I used to wait for it too. Despite knowing perfectly well that nothing is going to happen. I mean, what the hell can happen here anyway? This place has been literally the same since like forever. It has a past, I admit, which is etched in its stones and its surface. And a future too that’s waiting for it. It will die one day. Like everything else. But in between them, between its distant past and its far

FATHER

future, there lies the present, where nothing worthwhile ever happens. Which has been the same for God knows how many millions of years, and in all probability, which would be pretty much the same if not for billions at least for the next hundreds of millions of years to come. What's there to wait then?"

"You have a point there," said Anant thoughtfully.

"I understand," his father went on (disregarding him completely), "if even after hearing this, you can't help waiting. Till about recently, I was like that too. I used to wait for so many things to happen. About most of them, I knew that they weren't going to. But some could have. Like someone could have rescued me, for example. It never happened; that's another story, but it could have. And for all that I care, you too, my son, might as well be a voice in my head."

"I'm not," protested Anant.

"I'm not saying that you are," his father corrected himself, "I'm saying, I don't mind even if you are. What difference does it make anyway? It's not like I can see you or anything. I've repeated this lesson far too often. I don't mind repeating it once again. Okay, where was I?"

"I don't know," said Anant, "sorry for the interruption."

"Well, I wasn't asking you either."

After staring into the space for a while, Anant's father began again.

"Okay, so gradually I realised that, it isn't going to happen. The rescue, I mean. And not only that, nothing's going to happen. And then, since I didn't have anything else to do, like a fool, I too made a game of it. I started waiting for the most obvious of things. Like the rising and setting of the big star, which people on the earth call the sun, but which looks a lot less impressive from here—more like your full moon in my opinion. Still, I watched it all day through the reddish clouds of dust. Tracing its path, noting its position, trying to capture the ebb and flow of time with it, which I then proceeded to divide and distribute in the form of months and years, days and weeks as you do on earth. It was fun."

“And then?” Asked Anant.

“What then?” His father laughed aloud. “You know the spoilers. Nothing happens. Don’t worry, we’ll get to that soon.”

“Now, continuing the story, I stared at the sun, and that’s pretty much it. It’s kind of funny, isn’t it? Staring at the sun? Staring for the sake of staring? Without any ulterior motive? Back then, it was all I could do, as neither was there someone to talk to, nor was there anything that I felt interested in. Moreover, I knew perfectly well about the one thing worthy of my attention: the sun that is. I knew where exactly it would rise, where exactly it would set, how exactly it would make its course through the day. It’s because that’s how it behaves—for it is the sun after all, and not some freaking cloud of dust or anything. It has moved the same way for billions of years and will continue to move the same way for billions of years to come.”

“Considering this—and how it’s impossible to make out anything else in the sky here—I was so content with my knowledge that there seemed nothing left for me to know. Maybe that’s why, I began relinquishing what I had learnt over time, little by little. You know, facts like, what year it is, what day it is, what time it is, etcetera etcetera. Instead of busying myself with them, I simply stared at the sun. It’s not like I wanted to know any of those facts to begin with. I ended up learning them just for fun, and when they didn’t offer me any, I couldn’t hold on to them any longer, as such concepts don’t exist in reality. They are simply the creations of our minds. They give us the illusion that there’s something that lies behind us and something that lies ahead of us when all that is there in the world is within the here and the now. What we think lies behind us is that which is no more, and what we think lies ahead is that which isn’t there yet. In reality, they are all illusions. There’s no past or future really, only the present. The ever-present present. Which might as well be a single ethereal moment continuing itself eternally. All that exists, exists in that moment. All that happens, happens in that moment. It is the fundamental condition of existence”.

FATHER

“Wow!” said Anant. “Heavy words there.”

For some reason, all the while when he was listening to them, he couldn’t help feeling overwhelmed. There was an honesty in his father’s words that he couldn’t deny. They appealed to the part of himself which he felt was free from thoughts and judgements. But once his father was done talking, the usual scruples set in. It was very hard for Anant to point out what they were about. As although his father sounded right, there must’ve been a logical fallacy in what he said, as it didn’t sound a lot like what Anant was used to hearing. Not knowing what to do, Anant became quiet. He could neither affirm nor reject anything. A single word could sum up his state of mind.

Doubt

Regarding what exactly?

That’s what he was trying to figure out. Without any success though. As in the pursuit of clarity, his mind would always end up reaching a dead end, which, for him, wasn’t only the inability to find answers, as the questions too seemed to escape him. Words like you, me, time, mind, which he used to take for granted earlier, had lost all their meaning by now and appeared to be merely a bunch of letters stringed together into sounds that pointed towards something.

What exactly?

Nobody knew.

Everyone thought that they did as if those were the most obvious things in the world, even though they had no idea about them. They would just talk talk talk talk. But...

They never saw

They never listened

And

Most importantly

They never felt

Because if they did

They would have known by now

What existence is

It's something that you can never understand

And yet

It's the one thing worthy of understanding.

Unable to contain his joy at this revelation, Anant shouted, “Show me papa! I want to see. Tell me! I want to hear. What is it? What's everything? Who am I? Why do I exist? On what stage is the movie called life played out? What is it that we call time if not the movement of the present from the past to the future?”

Anant's father, who was done narrating his story, barely showed any interest in his son's renewed curiosity.

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” He uttered with a scowl. “Didn't I tell you, I can't perceive those concepts anymore? They are more like deep dark wells to me, from which I have already drawn as much as I could. Now I've reached a point with them where I can safely say that I've had my fill.”

“Come to think of it, it's only when you look at them carefully—at those concepts—that you begin to discover how much whiff of a meaning they have. Like time, about which you ask, is

one such concept. It's there all the while. The most obvious thing in the world. You can divide it into as many bits as you like and it still won't disappear. All you can say about it is, it's there. Now. Not just now. It's there right now. Right now. Right now. You can't catch it. It flows. And in it, everything flows. It's infinite, no matter which way you stretch it. A moment is infinite, and so is time in all its entirety. You can hold it. Slow it down. Break one moment into a million billion moments. Yet you can't stop it. Unless you stop everything that flows in it."

"Okay, I get that," Anant chimed in, "but do you mean to say that that's all there's to it?"

"No," his father said, "not in the least. There's much more like..."

Anant's father couldn't think of anything to add.

Mainly because he had already forgotten what he said.

Forgotten? Why?

It didn't take him long to discover the answer.

Which was quite evident.

He forgot what he had said simply because it wasn't something important. Although that didn't disprove the fact that, at the time when he said it, he had to say it (there was no other way around). His son wanted to hear him talk, and he too, on his part, could not get himself to stop. He had this irrepressible urge to keep on sharing. To keep on lying.

Lying?

Yes. Those were all lies.

Lies that aspired to reach the truth.

What's the truth then?

...

“Honestly, my son,” he said, “I don’t know what time is. I simply told you what occurred to me at that moment. It most certainly wasn’t the truth. If I talk about it again, I might tell you something different. Maybe something that completely contradicts my former account.”

“That’s impossible!” Refuted Anant.

“No, it’s not!” His father continued. “Why do you think it should be? Why am I supposed to stick with only one when there are so many ways of looking at things? You know, even what we call the objective reality happens to be a point of view. One of many out there. Maybe not the best one to judge everything all the time.”

“Maybe,” said Anant, “that remains to be seen though. Anyway, I’d be lying if I say that I believe in everything that you assert.”

“You don’t?”

“No”

“Hmm...” Anant’s father said, “what is it that you believe then?”

“Nothing,” said Anant.

“Liar!” His father exclaimed. “You say that you believe in nothing, and yet you ask questions. Why?”

“I can’t help it,” he said.

“It’s like, right now, I happen to believe in nothing. But if something better comes along, I’ll believe in that.”

“That’s good. But that belief wouldn’t be a permanent one, would it?”

“No”

“I thought likewise. Beliefs are good. Concepts are good. But if you hold on to them too tightly, you tend to forget that there are others too, which—although somewhat different from yours—are literally the same in the sense that they are all just beliefs.”

FATHER

“Yes, I agree. A belief is a state of mind, but I’m quite sure that it isn’t the most fundamental one.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s yet another ripple.”

“In the lake called mind?”

“Yes.”

“I think then the most natural state of that lake must be that of stillness, isn’t it? One without any ripples? It’s because all those ripples, or, as you say, all those states of mind would be contained in the stillness as a possibility.”

“That’s right! If we talk about the mind as a lake, then hatred is a ripple; so is anger, jealousy, lust, greed, fear...”

“Wait a minute! What about love and joy, peace and contentment? Are those ripples too? Or are they born out of stillness?”

“Everything is born out of stillness.”

“Either way, they are just possibilities.”

“Yes, stillness is as much of a possibility as ripples are.”

“And yet the two are different.”

“Like us?”

“Exactly. Different and yet the same.”

“The ripples are contained in the stillness as a possibility. When you dream and you doubt, you become different people with different points of views. But when you realize that all those beliefs and point of views are merely ripples in the lake called mind, those ripples die down and merge into the stillness. You realize that it was you, the dreamer, all along. And it was your doubts (the ripples) that made you feel like there are others and you are different from them, even when, deep inside, you are all the same.”

“Merely ripples in a quiet lake.”

“Oh my God,” Astronaut Anant shook his head in surprise. “I get it! I finally get it! It was me. Me and me all along. How come I never noticed? Everyone that I ever loved was me; that I ever hated was me. Even the people that I was indifferent to. They were all me. Trapped in different bodies, whirled in space

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and time, but deep inside, they were all me. That's what they call themselves. That's what I call myself. Me. We are all the same. Merely ripples in a quiet lake. And when these die down, and we experience the stillness within, that's when love, peace and contentment dawn upon us. That's when we come face to face with the truth.”

Which is?

I am me, and so is everyone else.

We are the same.

“I get it!” Astronaut Anant shouted with joy. “I finally get it! It's a dream, and I have been dreaming all this time!”

All this time?

Which time?

When did it all begin?

Am I still alive?

You only believe it to be a dream once it's all over, was what he said.

Is it over then?

And more importantly, who said it?

Papa?

Did Papa Say it?

But where is he now?

FATHER

Where is Papa?

“Papa. Papa. Papa.”

“Where are you?”

“I miss you. I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I never got a chance to say these words to you.”

“I’m saying them now.”

“So please come back.”

“I miss you so much.”

“Papa.”

There was no answer.

HIM (PART-3)

And Anant woke up

Again? From what?

He remembered it all too clearly this time

The dream?

It's funny, isn't it? He thought. Sometimes you just don't know what the dream is. The one that you woke up from, or the one that you are in.

This time though, something was...

Different? Or the same?

Maybe one

Maybe the other

In short, it was just normal

The normal normal that is

Anant was himself again (For the hundred and umpteenth time in his life). There was the usual (Anant Brihaspati-an) body

of his, and, with his mind's eyes, he could also sense the outlines of the pitch-black room where he was reposing peacefully. It was his room. About that much he was certain. He could feel its narrow and all too familiar confines impressing upon his mind. It's as if the thoughts that left his head got back into it once they were reflected by his surroundings, and these thoughts—when Anant received them—brought back with themselves a sweet and slumberous peace. The kind which immediately triggered a sense of nostalgia within him. He felt like he was finally back. In his body. In his room. In himself.

Then why? Why? He wondered. Why do I have to remember all of it? Is that what happens when you wake up in the middle of the night? Or is my dream not over yet?

“It's obvious, isn't it?” Someone said.

“What?”

“Whatever it is, it isn't over yet.”

“No?”

“Yes”

“There's one more story that's left”

“Really? Hmm... let's see”

“Can you turn on the lights please?”

“Sure!”

“Lights!” He said

And there was light

And he was HIM

“Man! I could have done that myself,” said Anant

“Yes, you could have.” HE affirmed. “But I don't think that would have made any difference.”

“How?” Wondered Anant

“Don't you know?”

Anant shook his head.

“It's simple,” HE said. “It's because we are all the same. The 'me' inside me is the 'me' inside you (I'd be damned if I didn't think about this earlier, thought Anant) which is the same as the

‘me’ inside everyone. So, if you look from a broader perspective, it doesn’t matter who is like what or what it is that they do. We are all the same.”

“Yeah,” agreed Anant, “fundamentally, that is. Not otherwise.”

“How not?” HE questioned. “Isn’t everything built around the self? With ‘me’ as the centre, ‘my’ and ‘mine’ lying next to it, followed closely by ‘us’ and ‘our’, leading to ‘you’ at the boundary, far away from which lie ‘they’ and ‘them’, sometimes at such a distance that it’s hard for you to imagine that ‘they’ could also be ‘me’. That’s why, instead of trying to understand ‘them’, you just say.”

“They are different. From ‘me’, from ‘us’. They are ‘they’.”

“I guess I know what you mean,” said Anant. “You mean to say, I would have been like them had I been in their place instead of mine.”

“No!” HE stressed. “Open your eyes and see my friend! You are already in there! In their place as much as you are in your own! It’s you! You and you alone! On your journey to yourself. There’s no one else out there. The multiplicity that you see around is an illusion. Everyone is you. Everyone. Distributed as you all are throughout space and time. Dreaming your selves to be different, and yet, always on the lookout for a deeper connection. For the oneness that lies underneath all these facades. And I tell you, it’s there. The oneness. It’s there both within and without. But as long as you continue being swayed by things that are liable to change, you keep missing it, you keep mistaking other things for it; things which, once latched on to, might appear to be quite permanent, but are simply there to make you oblivious of the very fact that, life itself—let alone all the myriad things that are contained in it—is pretty transitory.”

“As if I didn’t know that,” blurted out Anant almost instinctively, without much forethought, although with plenty of afterthought, after which, in an attempt to maintain continuity, he continued.

“Wouldn’t it be stupid,” he said (starting from where he left) “to not know it after all that I’ve been through? First, I was Anant. I remember being Anant throughout the entire course of (what one might call) my life. Although in that too sometimes I used to become someone else in my dreams, only to wake up as Anant again. The dreams I mostly forgot. The Anant that I was, remained. Not for very long though. As he too had to change. Into what? If only I knew. Come to think of it, this change in itself was hardly something new, as this Anant, to begin with, wasn’t a constant quantity either; transitioned as he did from being one person at one point of his life to a bunch of different people at other points later on, some of them not even remotely like the first. Still, all were Anant. All were me. And I guess it was this synonymity between the two—Me and Anant—which must’ve been the reason why, even long after he died, I couldn’t stop identifying myself as him (I still can’t). Not even when I became... Damn! I don’t know what I became! Before ending up in Aseem’s body and thinking about Anant as him, or him as Anant? I forgot which. Well, it’s not that it matters now anyway, as, not long afterwards, I became this dreaming head—maybe that of Anant’s father on his deathbed, who knows?—this dreaming head that dreamt a dream. And in that dream, I was the dream. I felt both Anant and his father as me. They were so close that it was hard being one without the other. Especially later, when the barriers that separated them began to melt, and their closeness grew to such an extent, that it was nearly impossible to differentiate them. It’s as if they—along with whatever else that was there in the dream—had merged into one, just before I, the dreamer, found myself, here, in the most familiar of all places, waking up as Anant.”

“Strange, isn’t it?”

HE didn’t reply

“Even though it’s not the first time that this has happened. Many times, in what I should call my life, have I woken up from strange experiences only to find myself here: in this body, in this bed, in this room. This happened so so frequently that I ultimately got used to it. To the point where I started believing that what I experience when I’m asleep is the dream and what I experience when I wake up is the reality, and not the other way around.”

“Reality is real, true, and something that’s supposed to matter, whereas dreams are dreams. They are said to be meaningless, illusive, and unimportant. They come and they go away. And yet, while they last, you take them seriously, as if they were real. Except maybe for those few times when (like now?), being in the twilight of your consciousness, you don’t really care whether you are dreaming or not.”

With these words, Anant, who was beside himself from joy, finished his monologue. And, as soon as he could, he took a triumphant look at HIM, expecting to see HIM surprised by how knowledgeable he had finally become. But, to his own surprise, Anant was the one who got surprised, as—no matter how great he thought he was—his greatness wasn’t enough to evince a single blink from HIS eyes. Throughout his monologue, HE, in all probability, didn’t move at all. HE simply stood there (like now) at the foot of Anant’s bed, HIS eyes wide open, HIS face expressionless.

This expressionlessness, however, was unlike any other. It was full and intense. Extremely intense. Every inexpressible human emotion seemed to be contained in it (that too in a highly amplified form). HE was as likely to have been listening intently as HE was to be staring into space. Still, one thing about HIM was quite certain. This look on HIS face, it wouldn’t have changed even if Anant went on for ages and ages with his monologue.

And why would it? Thought Anant—well aware that HE is aware of his thoughts. There’s no reason for it to change. HE is patient after all. That too in the more real sense of the word. HE is not interested in anything that I have to say to HIM, yet, HE

neither waits for me to stop nor for HIS turn to speak (like everyone almost invariably does). HE is patient. Simply. Patient.

Once again, in the same matter-of-fact manner of HIS, HE began.

“You talk, my friend, as if you already know what dream and reality mean.”

“Yes,” said Anant, “I’m aware. Maybe it’s because I know what they mean.”

“I see,” HE retorted in a somewhat lawyer-like way. “Then I’m sure you must also know that, before anything else, ‘dream’ and ‘reality’ are two words...”

“Of course I know!”

“And like all the other words, their meanings too are relative. Almost complementary, you can say. That is, one doesn’t make that much of a sense without the other. Although there’s this one crucial thing that always separates them.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Anant. “It’s called sleep.”

“No,” HE rebutted. “Of course, you can say that about sleep without being completely wrong, but then again, you would be talking about things in a very general sense, which, unfortunately, you are not in a position to do right now, since you are not alive in a very general sense of the word. That’s why, you have to look at things from a more fundamental perspective. One that goes beyond life and death.”

Which is? Thought Anant.

“It goes as follows,” HE said. “Sleep isn’t the most fundamental distinction between dream and reality—if you take into account all your recent experiences, I’m sure you would come to the same conclusion. It’s like you said. When you are asleep, the dream becomes your reality and your reality becomes the dream. It’s when you wake up that you realize, things are actually the other way around. And it isn’t until you ponder over this fact carefully that you become aware of the paradox. Sleep—instead of defining what dream and reality are—only blurs the line between the two.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes”, HE said.

“But didn’t you say that there’s a thing that’s supposed to separate the dream from the reality?”

“That there is,” HE said, “although I must add that, it’s not sleep. The one thing that actually separates the dream from the reality is the moment. The now.”

“Is it?”

“Yes,” HE said. “Now is what is. The rest is the dream.”

“When you think about it,” added Anant, after thinking about it, “that’s an intelligent way of putting things. But then again, there are times too when you know—or at least feel—that it isn’t only the past that was the dream; the present too is no different. What would you say about that?”

“Those are the moments,” HE said, “when you are truly awake. Because in those moments you don’t confuse yourself with your perception of things or with your thoughts, which, fun fact, are all liable to change. It’s you who always remains. Who you are. Yourself. Real and changeless. And it’s because of it—this real and changeless self—that you think you’ve consistently been this one person all your life, this ‘I’.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” HE said. “Moreover, this ‘I’, this eternal self of yours, you can only discover it in the moment. Not in the past or the future. As these—I guess you know by now—exist solely in your thoughts. They are more like dreams that lie far far away from all that’s real, which they—along with the other tendencies of the mind—tend to cover like dust. But when you realise that this dust (your little identity) is totally made up like a dream, you wake up to the diamond that you are.”

Anant was astonished when he heard this. It was the first time that HE had complimented him. I wish, thought Anant, HE had said something cruel instead, I would’ve believed it as if it were the gospel truth. But this? He simply could not. Especially considering how good it made him feel.

What does HE want from me?

Anant had to strive consciously against the overwhelming emotions that HIS words evoked. He could remember being swayed like that many times in his life, but more often than not, this swaying, this seduction was quickly followed by deceit. Either of the kind which occasionally led him into doing things he should never have done, or of the kind which at least made him buy things that he didn't really need.

Maybe that's why, because of all the negative associations he had formed, whenever Anant experienced this emotion, it was rarely without an accompanying recoil.

And yet...

Yet...

Why couldn't he let it go this time?

“Am I? Really?” He asked HIM finally. “A diamond in the rough?”

“Obviously,” HE said. “You are. Pure, blissful, infinite and untouched, and infinitely more valuable than any diamond in the rough. But until you realise that—your own true nature—you simply lumber on. You change forms. And you lumber on. Hopelessly in that dark tunnel of yours. Running after your own shadow. Or the spark of light that you saw long ago. If only, my friend, you knew where this spark came from, you wouldn't have struggled so much. It's not from the other end of the tunnel like you might have imagined.”

“Where does it come from then?”

“The spark? It's everywhere,” HE said. “And it has been there since the beginning. The reason you could not see it lies with you. You never opened your eyes. At least not fully. You just imagined for yourself this dark tunnel; something that could give you the

illusion that, there's somewhere that you came from, and somewhere else that you are going to, while, in reality, stuck in your own dark cell of thoughts, going around in circles is all you ever did. Trapped as you were in the loop of cause and effect. Doing the same things again and again to suffer the same consequences. If only, my friend, you opened your eyes.”

“But how could I?” Asked Anant earnestly.

“It's simple,” HE said, unaffected. “You could not. That's why you did not.”

What type of an answer is that?

“Can I now then?” Asked Anant reluctantly.

“Of course, you can,” HE replied. “It's up to you to decide.”

“Is it?” Laughed Anant, “Then I choose to open my eyes.”

As if they are not open already

“They are,” HE said, “in a way that allows you to see things. Outside of yourself, that is. And those too very selectively. You can only see light. Or, to be exact, you can only see a small range of vibrations, which you call light. But in comparison to the ones that you cannot see, these vibrations are merely a drop in the ocean. The same goes for sound—which is another type of vibration”.

“Nevertheless, from all the vibrations that you are actually able to perceive, your mind can solely focus on a tiny portion at once. And when—like most of the times—the mind is focused on something else—another thought or another sense—it doesn't even notice that little portion. It's merely in a fraction of cases that it does. Although in those too, the reality that you end up experiencing is not the reality that is. It is, for the most part, your brain's interpretation—or should I say misinterpretation?—of the minuscule data that it receives. Furthermore, this interpretation (or misinterpretation) in its turn is also heavily influenced. Not

only by all the things that have already happened in your past but also by the countless reinterpretations of the same based on all the thoughts and experiences that you accumulated later on, which, in their turn, were acted on by their own past, and obviously by your former interpretations and reinterpretations of it.”

“Wow!” Said Anant.

“Simple, isn’t it?”

“Yes”

“If only that was entirely the case. But, as you very well might know, we have yet to add the main catalyst here, which underlies the whole process and is primarily responsible for the selectiveness as well as the intensity of the experience—apart from governing the interpretations and reinterpretations that is. This catalyst is called emotion, and it is also a very strong derivative of the past. That is, you are more likely to experience the emotions that you have experienced already. Much more likely to experience the emotions which you have experienced frequently. And much much more likely to experience the emotions which you have experienced intensely.”

“And, you might ask...”

“Why do some perceptions trigger emotions while others do not? Why do we experience some emotions more intensely, while others we do not?”

“Exactly!”

“This brings us to the third level of the experiencer—the disposition that is. It underlies both perception and emotion, influences them, and is also influenced by them. Here’s how it goes. First, perceptions lead to emotions. Emotions then give rise to thoughts. These, in their turn, trigger more emotions, which subsequently give rise to more thoughts. These thoughts once again lead to more emotions and then to some more thoughts, which lead to more emotions and also to more thoughts, and then to some more emotions and to some more thoughts, and so on and so forth.”

That makes sense

“Together these two—thoughts and emotions—form this eternal reservoir or ocean from which they trickle down and make their way through the landscape known as disposition, leaving tracks in their wake. The more intense the thought or emotion is, the broader these tracks would be. And, once they are broad enough, they become tendencies for thoughts and emotions to fall in. Tendencies that get more and more prominent with each repetition. Until there comes a time when the tracks are so broad that you can’t call them tracks anymore. They become banks. Of continuously flowing rivers called beliefs, and periodically flowing rivers called habits.”

“And, you might ask...”

“Is it our thoughts and feelings that determine this disposition then?”

“Yes and no.” HE said. “They do in the sense that the patterns that thoughts and emotions hold over a period of time consolidate to form the part of the disposition, which, when it interacts with the environment, is very likely to lead you to the thoughts and emotions that are quite similar to—but never the same as—the thoughts and emotions that initially manifested themselves as the said part of the disposition.”

“I see,” said Anant thoughtfully. “That’s a complete circle there. Or at least it would have been, had you said ‘same’ instead of ‘similar’. I wonder why you did not.”

“Because they never are,” HE replied. “As a matter of fact, nothing is. The moment—in which everything is contained—is eternally new like a river, and so is everything that’s contained in it. Although the same moment is also constant in the sense that. It is. Was. And has always been.”

“And so is everything that’s contained in it?”

“Yes,” HE affirmed, “that’s constant too. A constant that constantly rearranges itself to look new all the time. On the whole though, just like the moment, it’s also the same. What is. Is what was. Is what has always been. Everything is in the moment. Everything is everything. And every thing in this everything, the

way it stands in relationship with one another, ultimately determines the moment. It's like, things when they are too concentrated hold on to the moment around them, the way a trench holds water. They hold it, and yet it flows. Similarly, the same things, when they move really fast, they begin catching up with the moment. The moment stretches for them. And yet, it still flows. Strange, isn't it?"

Anant nodded.

"Don't worry," HE said, "it'd get more so when you put your mind into the mix. This moment right here," HE snapped HIS fingers, "could be endless or fleeting depending upon how your state of mind is."

"Wow!" Exclaimed Anant. "Is that how it is?"

"Yes," HE said.

"I have a question then."

"Many, in fact."

"Ask," HE said.

"Okay, so what you say is, there's the same moment and the same everything that's contained in it. Correct?"

"Yes," HE said.

"And that same everything constantly rearranges itself, right?"

"Yes," HE said.

"Is this rearrangement what results in time?"

"Yes and no," HE said (again?). "It results in an illusion called time. The moment is what's there. In it, everything keeps changing. Time can never hold on to it, as time solely moves on from the past onto the future. The moment, however, when it stretches itself infinitely, it could swallow all time."

"Swallow all time?"

Anant could vaguely remember experiencing something along the same lines. As to what it was, he could not put his finger on it. All he could say was...

"That's strangely relatable."

"So it might be," HE said.

Trying hard to remember what it was, Anant felt like asking HIM something.

But...

He was unable to.

It was almost impossible to put his thoughts into words.

Still HE—as if HE could read Anant’s mind—smiled (for the first time?).

At least HE is not a robot, thought Anant, so that’s a win.

“Now,” HE said, “coming back to our former discussion. As I was saying, thoughts and emotions or even the patterns among them do not completely determine the disposition. They merely determine a tiny fraction of it. Disposition, on the contrary, as it works in tandem with the environment, is primarily responsible for all the thoughts and emotions. In other words, it’s basically the disposition that’s always working on itself, in response to, and with the help of, an immensely random environment. Thoughts and emotions merely happen to be two of the mediums that it utilises.”

“I see,” said Anant. “So what you mean to say is, thoughts and emotions are literally determined by the disposition, right?”

“Yes”

“What is it that determines this disposition then?”

“Apart from thoughts and emotions?”

“Yeah”

“Well,” HE said, “there are trillions of other things that determine it—or innumerable would be the right word since trillion too is a number. These could be anything ranging from the tiniest of the experiences that you’ve had—especially during your life’s earliest phases—to your relationship with the people around you (your parents and your environment), to the food that you eat

and have eaten in the past, the places where you live and have lived in, the times you were and are in; to the stock that you derive from, your ancestors, the way their lives were and the knowledge that they accumulated throughout (ever since the inception of life) which they passed down to you in the form of instinct and instructions; down to how life has evolved, from that simplest of beings (barely distinguishable from matter) that couldn't help deciding to live, to every living being ever, all the microbes, plants, insects and animals, all of them inheriting (among other things) the same helpless desire (to live, to evolve and to multiply); to how the sun, the moon, all the planets in the solar system, their moons, all the asteroids and comets, how they stand in relationship with each other, with your planet, and with just about every heavenly body that's out there, both within the galaxy and without, all the stars, black holes, nebulae, clusters, down to the tiniest of tiny that exists, how they are, were, and how all of them came into being through myriad clouds of dust and gas that were created and scattered by some dying primordial monster; to how even those monsters came into being, leading upto the cause of all causes, where everything was decided, as to what is and what isn't, what can or cannot be; where, through a mountain of chaos, the river called the moment (which was frozen until then) first emerged, with everything in it, everything that persists to this very moment, everything that'd still be there when this river finally merges into the ocean that it came from, and the illusion that the moment and all that's in it are different from each other disappears finally.”

Anant was flabbergasted when he heard this. “That's too much!” He exclaimed.

“Is it?” HE wondered. “That's not even a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of what actually is.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

“No,” HE said. “Of course, I'm not.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” HE affirmed. “It’s the entire universe—stretching from the cause of all causes to this very moment—that determines everyone’s disposition.”

“Wow!”

“And you know what the biggest irony is?”

“What?”

“Despite all this, despite all the complexity that everything entails, people still think that they know things. Themselves. Others. The world. They think that they know it all.”

“And, you might ask...”

“What harm is it in believing that you know something? Since it’s obvious how impossible it is for our intellects to comprehend the reality in all its realness.”

“True,” HE said. “I agree. One cannot comprehend it. For what’s reality anyway if not a word, with more meanings to it than there are beings in this universe? And, on top of that, if anyone says ‘I know it’, ‘I know how things are’, then that’s just them literally acknowledging their ignorance of their own ignorance. Which wouldn’t be so bad honestly, if most of what they think they know does any good to them (or to anyone else).”

“Does it not?” Asked Anant.

“Mostly not,” HE replied. “Knowledge like beliefs is simply a network of different pathways meant for thoughts and emotions to flow on the landscape known as disposition. These pathways could lead you anywhere, and it’s very easy to mistake them for the truth, which, in themselves, they never contain, since they are merely paths (connecting one end to the other) that are as likely to lead you closer to the truth as they are to lead you far away from it. And, if you are not conscious enough, if you simply let them be, falling under the weight of your emotions, under the weight of your cravings and aversions, these pathways, they gravitate unto themselves, buckling and morphing into forms that conform to anything from your fears and your doubts to your lust and your egotism. Thus, making you believe in what you want to believe in—your delusions—instead of what you need to believe in.”

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“The truth?”

“No, not necessarily.”

“Then what is it?” Asked Anant. “What do I need to believe in? And (more importantly) why? Am I not good enough?”

There was silence

HE did not reply

Maybe I am not, thought Anant

Not good enough?

Yes

In fact...

I have never been good enough

I can never be good enough

But why am I not...

Good enough?

Yes!

I am...

...not good enough.

That's all

End of the story.

Every single one of these. Of these endless...

NOT GOOD ENOUGHs

Made Anant lose more and more faith in himself, in what he formerly thought he could do. Thus, shrinking his identity to the point where he felt so small that existence itself appeared to be huge in comparison, and doing the simplest of tasks, be it breathing or lifting one of his fingers, seemed to require an enormous amount of energy that he was no longer willing to expend. In short, Anant was tired. Of existing.

“That’s it,” he said, “I don’t want to be.”

And, with all his strength gone, forgetting about all the questions he had propounded upon, he laid down on his bed, lifeless, with a single desire. To die.

And then, HE began.

“Words, you must understand, my friend, words can never contain the truth. They can lead you to it, pretend that they have it, but in themselves they never contain it, as they are mere empty vessels that you fill up with experiences to conjure up a fantasy. A fantasy that is far far away from everything that exists, based mainly on thoughts, sounds, images, or anything that you can experience with your senses, all of which—being a normal human being—you tend to think of as your reality. But, if you could only see them for what they are, you would realise that, things as you call them, or experiences as you experience them, are nothing more than tiny and minuscule clumps of matter in the infinite ocean known as emptiness, or tiny and insignificant bunch of waves in the infinity called silence.”

Upon hearing this, Anant—who was in an abysmally low mood—felt a surge of energy so strong and sudden that he could not stop himself from exclaiming.

“Voilà! Eureka! I’ve figured it out finally! The truth! It’s so simple! I know it now! It is what you say it is! Emptiness! Empty space! Silence!”

Saying this, Anant looked at HIM, radiantly, in the eyes.

And HE?

HE smiled.

For the hundred and umpteenth time.

And Anant?

He closed his eyes

Ears

His body, his breath, his thoughts.

And he could hear it

Finally

The silence that everything is made of

Loud and clear

Silence

Silence

Silence

Silence

Silence

Silence

Anant wanted to get hold of it

To keep it to himself

But the moment he became aware

The silence

It was no longer there

“Damn!” He said laughingly. “I’m back to square one.”

“But then again...”

Who could have thought that

Silence could be so silent?

Who could?

For even thoughts

They are so loud

How can they ever convey

Something as silent as silence

How can they?

Hearing this, HE smiled

Once again

For the n plus one-th time

Spreading silence all around

Both inside and out

SISTER

A thought occurred

Amidst the silence

I had promised to call her

Why haven't I then?

Is it because

I'm dead?

No

It has nothing to do with

Dying

Or being dead

I simply didn't think about her

Until now that is

Now of all the times

Why so?

I don't know

Come to think of it

Mom Dad Heena

Everyone else

They seem so

Distant now

Like characters in a story

Once read

Long forgotten

Like words

Sentences

Paragraphs

Which

Although present

Are all filled with

Empty space

Empty space between them

Empty space around them

Empty space that expands

Exponentially

As time goes on

Empty space

Silence

And nothing to disrupt it

Nothing except

Maybe

A little babble sometimes

Here and there

Trying to fill it all up

With mental noise

But

Isn't it just

Fear?

Fear? Of what?

Of naught?

And losing yourself to it?

For once and forever?

Don't be afraid Anant

Said a voice

Just be

Okii?

Okii

Wait a minute!

Exclaimed Anant

That didn't sound like...

HIM!

Nice observation!

I certainly don't sound like HIM

And you know why?

Why?

It's because I'm not HIM

What!

Who are you then

If not HIM?

I am HER! SHE said

Mr. Brihaspati

Your mother's daughter

And your one and only...

Sister?

Correct!

And I have come here to tell you something

That I might not have told you before

What is it? Asked Anant

I am a woman, SHE said

What!

Yes! A woman! You heard it right!

And?

And what!

There's nothing else to it!

You are a man

I am a woman

We are

Like every other bit of existence

Similar in some ways

Different in others

If only

We did not need each other

Things would've been so simple

But alas

Here we are

After billions of years of evolution

Still longing for each other

Long ago though

Long long ago

Before evolution drove us apart

Before space between us started expanding

This longing wasn't there

This or any other

For we were all together

Not just you and me

Brother

Or the rest of our nefarious species

But all of us

The plants the animals

The mountains the rivers

The stars the space

The time the temperature

We were all together

Forever (and never?)

In the heart of hearts

Undifferentiated

Like energy

And like energy

We didn't stand still

For what's being together

If you have never been apart

So, my brother

After God knows how many years

Here we are

Alone

With memories of togetherness

At the base of our being

Driving us towards life

And binding us

Into forms

That want to be bound

So that we can be

Big Big Big

As big as the universe

And

Possess everything

That is there

That can be there

And be together

Forever

And never

That's all good

Said Anant

But this forever

And never

Of us being together

Is it ever supposed to happen?

Will we ever get back

To how we were

And be fulfilled again?

Maybe

SHE said

Maybe not

Who knows

It doesn't matter either way

It doesn't?

Wondered Anant

A little excited

What does then?

Only one thing

SHE said

As there's only one thing

Other than you

That exists

In this world

Which is?

Your relationship

That's all

My relationship?

Wondered Anant

A little more excited

But

With what?

With everything that is there, SHE said

The moment

And what's contained in it

When you know that

They are one

And you become one

With their oneness

That's when you are

Fulfilled

Here and now

Interesting!

Said Anant

All except for one thing

This relationship

That you are talking about

Why does it have to be

With everything

Instead of something?

Isn't that

Too much?

Aren't they

Too many?

And

On top of that

You say

Become one with it?

How's that possible?

How?

It is

SHE said

Not just possible

It is

Inevitable

All it requires of you is

That you relax

Be still

And do nothing at all

Don't move

Don't sense

Don't think

Don't try

Don't resist

Don't judge

Don't do anything at all

As all doing is

Identifying

But your being is

Beyond identification

That's why

Before you start

Abiding in this being

You have to learn

How to

Let go of everything

As then and only then

Can you realise

Who you are

Recognise

What you are not

Are you the body?

Are you the thoughts?

There's a difference between

Who and what

When you recognise it

Realise it

The many

Become two

The what

And the who

Okay

Said Anant

But what are they?

The first one

She said

The what

Is an ever-changing object

It's everything that exists

From the smallest of the small

To the largest of the large

Even your own body

Your own thoughts

Or whatever you identify as you

The second one (Or the who)

On the other hand

Is the experiencer

The identifier

The perceiver

It might seem inert sometimes

But it isn't

It's the subtlest of all fabrics

On which

The existence plays out

And

It isn't just in you

It's everywhere

Behind all the whatness

Causing it

Making it dance

Before quenching it

Ultimately

Thus

Goaded everything

Into an eternal cycle

That has three attributes

At all times

Creation

Sustenance

Transformation

Beyond these attributes though

And behind all the whatness

There is

The who

You

The moment you realise it

Recognise it

The many the multiple

Or even the two

They all merge

Into one

And this one

This who

Is the same one

That's you

So recognise it

Realise it

Abide in it

Right now

Woah!

Said Anant

Why was all that so relatable?

Why do I agree

With what you said

From the deepest core of my being?

Instead of just

Thinking about it

As yet another concept?

In fact

What I formerly thought of as me

Seems more like a concept

In comparison

A concept

Which was disproved

Again and again

And yet

I held on to it

As I had nothing else

To hold on to

Nothing except

Nothing

For who am I

If I am not the body?

Who am I

If I am not the ideas that I identified with?

Who am I?

It's only now that I'm beginning to wonder

Impressive!

SHE said

You can't be more right!

It indeed is

Something to wonder about

Or

To put it more accurately

It's the wonder behind all the wonders

And yet

Searching for it

Or even trying to understand it

Is futile

The best thing you can do is

You can keep the following

In mind

If it's something that you can perceive

It's not you

If it's something that you can conjure

It's not you

No matter

Whether you look within

Or whether you look without

Whatever you find

Is not you

So look deeper

Beyond the appearance

And ask yourself

What is it

That this appearance appears upon?

Is it the space

Or your own mind?

Hmmmm....

Nice question

Said Anant

I'll give it a shot

And

Saying this

He began looking

At whatever that was there

Right in front of him

He looked

He looked

He looked

It might as well have been

Nothing

That he was looking at

And yet

He was looking

At whatever that was there

Right in front of him

He looked

He looked

He looked

No longer was he

Looking for something

Be it

An answer to a question

Or a solution to a problem

Or simply

Meaning

He wasn't looking for anything

And yet

He was

Looking

At whatever that was there

Right in front of him

He looked

He looked

He looked

At what exactly?

That he could not tell

For that too

Is a thought, isn't it?

A thought about

What's in front of him

A thought like

Many others

One that we call

Sight?

You stop paying attention to it

And it disappears

That's all good

Thought Anant

But if sight is a thought

Senses are thoughts

Then who thinks them?

Is the thinker a thought as well?

A thought that thinks itself?

Hmmmm...

Nice question

SHE said

With a giggle

Now

Stop thinking

And

As if HER words were a command

That Anant's whole being

Could not disobey

He stopped thinking

And

Soon enough

He had no thoughts

No thoughts

Even though

Despite the thoughtlessness

He was

He was

He was

Who was?

And where?

And how?

He had no idea

No knowledge

Not even a sense of

Knowingness

For all these

They are all

In the mind

But he

Was not

Instead

He was

He was

He was

What?

Free?

Finally?

Had the strings?

Really?

Come off?

There was freedom

Love

Awareness

All

In

The moment

All

In

The truth that

He was

He was

He was

Awake

What time is it?

Anant looked at his alarm clock

It had no hands

Only a big dot in the center

Along with all the numbers on the dial

5, 10, 15...

And what do you call them?

Lines?

Nevermind

Should I get ready for work?

He took a look outside the window

It was dusk

Or dawn

The twilight hours in any case

Very relaxing

Especially after that long dreamless sleep

But how come he

Felt

So awake

Even though

He just woke up?

No idea

He said to himself

It was just

The right kind of a mood

For the right kind of a time

Maybe that's why

Even though

There must've been a lot

That needed to be done

He chose not to think about it

I'll do it later

He said to himself

Let me relax for now

And so

He relaxed

He relaxed

Until he heard

Someone at the door

Knocking

Just give me a minute

Outside the window

It was still

Twilight

Anant opened the door

And of all the people in the world

Guess who showed up?

His sister

And?

HIMblabla, my friend, she said

Him-what?

Himalaya, my friend

Oh! Nice to meet you Himalaya

Said Anant

Nice to meet you too

Please come in

Have a seat

So...

Anant began by asking his sister

What brings you here?

It has been a while

Since you last came here

I wanted to see you

She said

What!

I've been wanting to see you too

Said Anant

For a very long time now

I know

She said

You don't like talking on the phone

No I don't

Anyways

I hope I'm not too late

I know you get your mind made up sometimes

No

He said

You are fine

You arrived at the right time

Now speak

Oh c'mon!

How can you tell that I came here to say something!

I can tell

He said

So speak

You're making me nervous

She said

So here's what I'll do

I'll go and use the restroom

And

In the meantime

Mr. Himalaya would explain everything to you

Would you, Mr. Himalaya?

Yeah, sure

Okay then

Bye boys

Byyyeaaa

Once she was out of sight

Looking sternly at Himalaya

Anant began

Now

Tell me

Does she want more money again?

No

He said

It's all paid for

What's all paid for?

The workshop

He said

Handing Anant the form

Without his specs

The sole words that Anant could make out were

Part-1

Meditation

Happiness

Sky?

Do I have a choice?

Ask your sister

Where do I sign?

Here

Okay

That's all

That was easy

Anant flipped the form over

What's this here?

He asked

Pointing towards the childlike scribbles at the back of the form

Nothing

Came the reply

Just stuff that I wrote today

Want me to read it out?

Sure

Said Anant

Okay

I will

One by one

First of all

There's this joke

Not just any joke

It's like the opening lines of a standup comedy act

Sounds interesting

Said Anant

Read it out

Okay

Here it is

Does anyone know what enlightenment is?

No

Says everyone in the crowd

You know what

I know what enlightenment is

What!!

And I'm going to tell you today

I'm going to reveal the secret

Once and forever

That has been kept hidden from you

For ages

So get ready

Ladies and gentlemen

As the revelation of the century

Is about to be made

Could I first have some drum rolls please?

(Drums rolling)

Nice

So enlightenment

My friends

Is a word

What!!

An eight-letter word

That starts with an 'e' ends with a 't'

Clever

Said Anant

Is it eight letters though?

I don't know

He said

I don't care

It's a joke anyway

Right

Now moving on to the second one

It's a quote

A creative one

Read it out

Said Anant

Okay

Here's how it goes

The present always present is a present to present

Nice

Said Anant

What does it mean?

I don't know

He said with a smirk

Just wordplay I guess

Anant wasn't amused

I know

He said

It means something

So why don't you tell me?

I would

He replied

If it was that easy

That's why I wrote it like that you know

C'mon!

Said Anant

Don't be a hater

Okay

He said

Since you are my friend's brother

I'll give you a hint

A riddle

A riddle?

Wondered Anant

I never liked them

Is it going to be a tough one?

Even better

He said

It's impossible

Oh!

Then it's no problem

I only dislike the tough ones

That's good to know

Okay

Here's how it goes

What's happening right now if all that you see, all that you hear, all that you think, feel, or sense is all in the past?

Before you ask me anything

I'll give you some context around this

Light and sound take time to reach our eyes and ears

That's why we only see and hear the past

Moreover

Information travels in our body through neurons

So literally anything that we are conscious of right now has already happened, and we became conscious of it after the fact

That's why

It's also in the past

Is that all?

Yes

Well

I think I know the answer

Said Anant

After thinking a little

It's me who is in the present moment

And the act of seeing thinking and hearing is what's happening right now

A smile appeared on Himalaya's face

He stood up from his seat and clapped for Anant

I didn't know that you had such big brains on you

He said

Sadly though

Even that isn't the correct answer

You want to know why?

Of course I do

Said Anant

I'm surprised

The thing is

He explained

By the time you were aware of it

Of the act of seeing hearing thinking etcetera

It has already happened

So it's not happening right now

Damn!

I guess I'd need more time to think on that one

Said Anant

Take all the time in the world

He said

There's no hurry

Anyways

Now moving on to the last thing that I wrote

It's my favorite out of the three

And a quote from a scripture

That I've been trying to translate for a while

I haven't achieved perfection yet

But this is how far I have come

I'd like to hear it

Said Anant

Okay

Here it is

From untruths to truth

From darkness to light

From death

To an eternal life

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaditya Balouria is an Indian writer and poet who seeks to bridge the gap between the rational and the spiritual through his works. Born and raised in the suburban parts of Punjab, Aaditya is an experienced meditator, and his journey as a storyteller is deeply rooted in mindfulness and spirituality.

With over seven years of experience as a writer, editor, and strategist in content, he has developed a voice that balances depth with relatability. Beyond fiction, Aaditya occasionally shares poetic musings on mindfulness and spirituality on his blog, encouraging readers to connect with their inner selves.

Anant Brihaspati & Family is his first novel. Like his poetry, it also aims to unite philosophical insight and spiritual exploration through artistic expression.