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# The Blotter

magazine

The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

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G. M. Somers .....Editor-in-Chief  
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Marilyn Fontenot.....Director of Development  
Laine Cunningham.....Publishing Consultant  
Brace Boone III.....Marketing Advisor  
Richard Hess.....Programs Director  
T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

Subscriptions Contact:  
Martin K. Smith  
M\_K\_Smith@yahoo.com  
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:  
Martin K. Smith  
M\_K\_Smith@yahoo.com  
919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:  
Jenny Haniver  
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief  
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you may  
call for information about snail-mail submis-  
sions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:  
Marilyn Fontenot  
marilyng\_fontenot@gmail.com

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## “Belaboring the Mundane”

I have walked seventy miles in August. Every bit of that effort has been in the circle from the dining-room which is my office, through the kitchen to the living room, around and down the short hall to my office again. A circle-lap of thirty paces of two and a half feet each, 75 “laps” per mile and usually about 225 laps per day. A darkly lunatic behavior by any normal measure, except for the idea that I am choosing to remain in tight lockdown during this pandemic. And I’m getting exercise. And I apologize in advance for using the word “normal,” because that word’s logic-ship has sailed. Normal? What exactly do I mean? We don’t got no stinking normal....

In the book *Papillon*, Henri Charriere explains in detail the events of his time in solitary confinement on the islands off French Guiana. He used pacing in his tiny concrete cell to...virtually... release him from his punishment, as a tool for daydreaming, as entertainment, as exercise. Mental health. Physical health. Well, up until the scene where he had to eat cockroaches to get calories, of course. So I walk in small circles around the house. Thinking about the books I’m reading. The work-in-progress. What happens next, both in my story and in *my story*? Who can I call and when is a good time for that possible conversation? Lacking answers, I take a drink of water. Eat a handful of goldfish crackers. Try not to talk to myself so much, or quite so loudly. Does it work? Time will tell.

Or will it? There’s a “thought a day” calendar on my desk that says “time is sacred. Each minute you waste is costing you progress and momentum.” The recommendation is to be effective with your time. Holy crap. Come over here so I can give you a slap. Do you understand how many hours there are in a day? How many minutes? And each one of them just goes on and on and on, while we try to see past the current mess into some future mess. No, honestly it is very good advice. I recently spent a number of hours trying to fix six pages of a work in progress, only to finally conclude that the problem was in trying to fix them. Somehow, by being there those pages had gained some kind of reality, credibility, import, bias, that they didn’t deserve. More sensible by far to pitch them into the trash file and move on. Any normal person would have done this sooner than I.

Tangent: perhaps it’s the word “normal” that gets in our way, forces our thinking to stumble, looking back to see what it was that threw us. It’s poor word choice, bordering on incorrect usage. What is normal? Something different for each of us. Going out when we want, where we want. That may feel “normal,” but is it? Perhaps the word we should be looking for is “optimal.” Roughly defined as the best we can hope for, under the circumstances. What we seek is an understanding of what things are going to be like and how long. Will we still be home? Physically away from friends and family, work and school, recreation? OK, then. How to deal with this change: I understand that many people are trying to make the best of what is to them a

bad situation by learning something new, baking goods they've never baked before, trying out a new hobby, dancing in front of the camera, sitting for hours in front of some sort of screen. I submit that while this is amusing in the near-term, it doesn't feed the bulldog. If things don't get better, then what happens? More screen-time? One handed push-ups? A newer hobby? *Get more fast-rise yeast at the store, honey, we're gonna need a bigger oven.*

As I see it, the way to deal with this sort of change is to improve what you already do. Fix you. Make you better. Easier said than done. I mean, if you're reading this, you're online. We haven't printed a Blotter in five months. It feels like a shame to us, to me, because being a print magazine was a point of pride for us. Coming out every month was...something, and who we are. And we had cool plans – February was our 200<sup>th</sup> issue, and we were going to do something special this spring to celebrate, and what that something special was I cannot for the life of me remember. We want to improve, want to fix, but we can't even get to the coffee shops to put down a couple dozen copies for folks to read.

So we're cooling our heels, waiting for the next turn of the screw. No, that's not right. The next turn of the crank? Anyway, turn of...something.

Speaking of which, in a recent moment of pensiveness I found out that "cooling your heels" is the same thing as "kicking your heels" – waiting for something with nothing else to do. On the other hand, "kicking up your heels" means both dancing about in jovial festivities and relaxing and lounging with your feet up, which is probably part and parcel of the confusion in the cooling and kicking heels department. These revelations are vaguely troubling to me. Idioms shouldn't mean stand up and sit down at the same time. The very idea sets me back on my heels.

For reasons defying explanation, my classical radio station is playing an excerpt of The Nutcracker. In August. Oh, well. What are you gonna do?

**Garry - [chief@blotterrag.com](mailto:chief@blotterrag.com)**

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

*My friend, and we'll keep on*

## “The Watering Hole’

by Eryn Fekete

So, a friend and I are at their pool last night around 1am, just floating in the water quietly and cooling off. This pool has woods directly backed up to two sides of the fence around it and no pool lights on the back end, so the deep end side of the pool is pretty well shrouded in shadows, especially with the moon waning like it is now, so we usually stay up near the front where there’s still a bit of light to be had.

We hear a noise from the opposite side and look over. Right around the pool ladder in the deep end, there’s a massive dark shape with several ghastly faces with glowing red eyes. It takes my brain a few moments to make sense of what I’m looking at.

Possums. Four or five of them, at least. They were grouped around the pool ladder, one was halfway down it, and one was already paddling around in the pool.

They definitely knew we were there and didn’t seem to mind at all. I, however, was not quite so chill about it. I like possums, I know they’re cool bros and aren’t aggressive, and I’m certain they weren’t trying to fuck with us, but in the dim light they looked like small demons ready to swarm and devour us and my base instincts screamed at me immediately to get the fuck out. So we hop out of the pool, as quietly but also as quickly as possible, and start gathering our things.

The possums notice our sudden flight and all of them freeze and look at us totally confused and suddenly alarmed like “yo buddy, what’s wrong? I thought we were just chilling here taking a dip, did you see something?” And they start climbing out of the pool and huddling together looking around for danger, like not at us like we’re the danger, but looking to try to find what spooked us. As they huddle up in the darkness, their shadowy forms all mesh together to form one hellish mass of pure writhing black with multiple glowing red eyes darting around, you can’t tell where one possum stopped and another began, just one beast from the nightmare realm, the kind that haunts your dreams.

We noped all the way the fuck outta there and will definitely be bringing a flashlight or a lamp of some kind if and when we ever brave that pool for a midnight dip again. ❖

# "ME - Blue Magic"

by Srinivasan G. Chari

*Who Am I?*

'You know you're a geek if you think you know everything' is what I always got to hear from the world, yet they wanted me. My omnipresence and omnipotence are undisputed... not 'the preferred one' anymore, though. Since the time I was invented, I have overwhelmed the world. I have suffused nothingness with everything. I used to be loved for my pages, the smell, the solid sturdily bound lovely blue cover, the content, for which people don't pay these days, yet invaluable and indispensable.

Today my groaning is going unheard! I am still the source of the technologies that have reformed for different purposes on different sources. However, I am disappearing. Every one of us wants to go back in time...as if our heart were some emissary of a time machine, riding on the broom, back to the prehistoric ages. So do I!

Just reminiscing the past...Of course, we love to dwell on our past. It is also unquestionable that our past shapes our future. Most of us are familiar with the ways of beckoning the past.

It's easier to recognize me, refer me, gift me to someone, pore over me, read me and cram over while preparing notes or examinations or speeches or discourses, lectures; for transcendence, developments, technological innovations, growth - may it be material, intellectual, philosophical, theological or spiritual, theism & atheism, truism or altruism.

*The universe is in me - the cos-*

*moses, microcosms, celestials, living, non-living, mortal, immortal, realities, illusions, prophecies, fallacies, schisms, convergences, progenies - I am primeval; I am today and the future and whatnot. I am inevitable. Yes, boasting away!*

*What if knowledge giving books go on a perpetual strike? End of a lungful of air required for breathing and surviving? Perhaps, yes; the whole conundrum starts from subsistence, and books blow the required life into us, with much or humongous knowledge and information essential for us to exist in this world.*

*Naiveté can be erased by the precepts of the previous generations, ancestors, and people around us. Obviously, all came from one source or the other attributed to zillions of pages of bridled, unbridled, organized and unorganized; compiled and uncompiled, scampering information all over. Swarming across to energize minds and nourish brains to exist and flourish. They unlock minds captivated by ignorance and arrogance. They surpass any figment of overeager imagination, fructifying them to pragmatic conclusions. Naturally collating rational clusters of ideas, definitely not mere utopia!*

*More compellingly, the painful experience of all that getting thwarted; nothing can be as dreadful and vacuuming as that! A pure nightmare to death! As fateful as that, or more!*

*Yes, I am "ME (Mini Encyclopaedia)", that saved the world from emptiness. Without me, it's like venturing into a void. Buoyancy is the usual upshot of every enterprise of*

*mine, as the growth and ceaseless pre-eminence of the universe and the fact of its pervasiveness, is testimony to it.*

*ME - I am narrating how life unfolded and poignancies endeavored hard to trample convictions, but as grits have it, always triumphed.*

## 1 - 'ME' Calls it "Unfeeling"

*I am at the corner of a busy street at Jubu, a high-born suburb in the tinsel city of Mumbai, held tightly by Vishesh in his left hand, while he answers a phone call, saying, "Okay. I am waiting at the gate to the church."*

*In some 5 minutes, a car arrives, and we hop into the back seat. There's already a good-looking woman, draped in a bright lemon-yellow saree, probably in her mid-forties, seated on the right side of the back seat, and we (Vishesh & Me) accompany her on the left side. The car - a costly luxury sedan, is driven by Jaikanth, the owner of the vehicle, in his 50 plus, also the person who is hiring Vishesh for some Audio/Visual script and a voice-over. Jaikanth's pillion is Amrit, who is Vishesh's good friend and also a common friend of Jaikanth and Vishesh, and has arranged for the activity, hence all this.*

*Jaikanth greets, "Hi, Vishesh, how have you been? I recall we're meeting almost after three years. The first meeting was in my office, for some articles that you were to do for us, which never took off."*

*"Nice to see you after a long time," replies Vishesh.*

*"By the way, Vishesh, meet Vaishnavi. She is my neighbor, wanted*

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to do some shopping at Bandra Linking road, so I offered her a lift; we'll just drop her on the way since we shall be going via Bandra anyway," says Jaikanth.

"Hi, Vaishnavi," greets Vishesh.

"Hello," replies Vaishnavi, while Jaikanth glances at her through the rearview mirror on the windshield.

Yeah, I am here, witnessing every conversation. You must also know I am always there with Vishesh; at least most of the time, except when he attends to his nature calls.

Vishesh - in short, Vish - admires me, for I am a handy help for him whenever he needs me; to refer just about anything on earth, mars, galaxy, and whatnot - A replacement for a handy encyclopaedia. My gilded cover reflects my aesthetic supremacy, while my pages brim with knowledge. Yeah, yeah, I know that's too much of self-admiration. We can have it at length some other time. Back to where we were.

Jaikanth spurts out saying, "My gosh! What humidity these days; luckily this car's A/C is powerful." Amrit nods saying, "Yes, it is."

"This was from the limited edition, Amrit. I had to pay a premium price to get early delivery," adds Jaikanth.

"Is it?" exclaims Amrit. Vish looks on, as it was his first time in this car, snooping around at the interiors with amazement, though for a moment. The interior was sumptuously glitzy and with the fragrance of jasmine spread all around.

The dashboard laden with an array of several soup-ups, cluttered with too much stuff to reflect his taste for fashion. It was embellished with phony wooden finish and chrome, with built-in fixtures of car holders, speakers, switches, cigarette holders, mobile phone charger, and a lot more. An exclusive air freshener fitted to the

A/C vent in the center and so on. It also included a tiny effigy of Ganesha (the elephant-headed Hindu deity) mounted on top, in the center space; laughing Buddha - a symbol of plenitude, a transmitter of auspice and windfall of prosperity - a typical inclusion these days. His roving eyes on the car also spotted two very expensive mobile phones of Jaikanth's placed on the desk next to the gear.

Vish must have had some profane views about Jaikanth's bragging of grandiosity through his possessions, as far as I know Vish.

Vaishnavi chips in, "My hubby was thinking of this last year, when we were about to buy our second car, then opted for an SUV."

"But Vaishnavi, you have a dedicated car for yourself, why don't you drive that?" asks Jaikanth.

"Yeah, but Rahul has taken it; you know the typical college life swanking" replies Vaishnavi, with a grin. (Rahul - Vaishnavi's son)

The car halts at the Jubu junction stopped by the automatically operated traffic signals; just half a kilometer away from the place they picked us up, and they have yet another 25 to 27 km run to reach where they are headed to.

Vish and I spotted a nice dark-looking young boy of some 15 years of age, hurriedly sprinting towards the halting cars, with a load of books with interesting known and unknown titles, held so close to his chest and abdomen as even air couldn't pass through, starting from his navel, craned up to his chin edge, very adroitly balancing them between in his palms. But one can't imagine the tension of the load, his hands have to put up with throughout the day, in the nearly roasting heat, with jarring and raucous sounds of vehicles in the middle of the roads of the suburbs of

Mumbai that is irksomely congested, with suspended particles, polluted air and carbon emissions emanating from numberless, endlessly swarming vehicles to infinity that add up to his adversity.

Adding to the plight is the cocktail of stench and odors he inhales; he might be reeking his nose to irritation, but he stays aplomb and in exceedingly lofty exuberance, though for the most part, unyielding. But as immunity has it, he looks seasoned by all means.

Flinty enough of the extraterrestrials, it's an ordeal he weathers through, day in and day out, with no respite in sight. The dangers, by the very locus of its definition, are more exasperating; as he may be vulnerable to road accidents, the actual hardships can't be predicted. The load of books may not be as burdensome as the economic predicament he trudges through to make ends meet, as he ventures out to battle with, every single day.

Precisely, the boy must be a regular salesman of books at the traffic signal junctions, as his expertise is evident in his nimble of having all of it in his control. The load seemed very heavy, and he was managing to hold them tightly, leaning back, slightly tilted backward, to cope with the load.

Vaishnavi looks at the books interestedly and says "Cool. He's got quite a collection."

Jaikanth looks back, as there is still some time for the signal light to turn green. He looks intrigued as well. The boy captures their interest from their expressions. Rushes across to the window glass pane, trying to convince them to buy some books; first, towards Vaishnavi and then moves back to Jaikanth. Jaikanth rolls down the glass pane and

enquires about a book. Jaikanth asks him the price of the book. The boy replies "Rs. 250." (in Indian currency)

Jaikanth grimaces, probably pretentiously, saying, "Friend, that's a bit too much for the book. I'd have got the original version from a book shop for the same price." The boy's excitement to make Jaikanth buy is held over for a moment. But he isn't discouraged at all. He is a true stoic, which reflects in his face.

I watch Vish's expression; he is more concerned for the boy as he is sweating profusely all over yet managed to smile all the while. I also notice Vish is unswervingly looking at him and his in-shreds clothes. Several areas of the shirt he wears are torn; some small and some big in size, left unstitched. His back and rib bones are partially visible, as most of the buttons of the shirt were missing; therefore, it was bow-knotted at the bottom-end. His accent also reflects that he was a migrant from a different state. All of this is happening while Jaikanth and Vaishnavi are persistently baggling on the price for the book. It seems as if they both were serious about buying it.

Jaikanth shouts out saying "Rs. 100 is the best I can pay; take it or leave it."

The boy, in almost a pleading tone, says: "Sir, give me 110, I'll get at least 15 rupees if I sell this book for that price."

Jaikanth again still unrelenting and inconsiderate, says, "No, no! 100 is the last word. Take it or leave it."

The moment he finishes saying it, the signal light turns green, and he starts the car and moves forward; the boy comes running after the vehicle, literally beseeching, "Sir, please" then, finally concedes saying: "Okay, Sir", while the car is already on the move, catching up speed. Jaikanth signals

him to come to the other end of the junction, on the right. And rushes fast, across the junction, as it is already 50 foot some in this part of the road, then he has to go past the junction to make it where the car would have to halt, which is yet another 100 feet; the boy comes rushing to the crossing, behind the car that paced up hurriedly. Stubbing his knee on the divider on the right side, as he walks clinging to it while trying to desperately make it to the other end of the junction from the crossing, chasing the car that had already sped up too far from him, eluding the array of vehicles rushing up right around and behind him; yet tries to make it, and reaches to the end where Jaikanth asks him to reach, as he'd already reached there: he halts there and waits barely for a few seconds, and then starts the vehicle when the boy has eventually made it; and the boy gives up the chase, dejectedly, with the load of books, as he realizes perhaps the entire bargain was a game or a ruse of amusement for Jaikanth.

He is perspiring profusely, drops pouring down his face, which glistens brightly in the sunlight even from far off; he is gasping heavily as he dashes across frantically. He looks horrified and flustered. And radically trounced! Even a kid could guess that instantly.

All heads in the car are turned back with surprise except Jaikanth's, and Vish was aghast, noticing Jaikanth's pokerfaced recklessness, and looking at the boy's baffled face again. It was highly ridiculous of Jaikanth to do that, that's what Vish's immediate silent reaction was; at least that's what I could make out from Vish's face. I probably knew what may have wafted into Vish's mind. He now almost hates Jaikanth. There was complete ear-plugging

silence for a few moments. The earth-shattering shocker of the day swallowed up all around in the car.

Just for the sake of 10 rupees, he made the boy run desperately, in the scorching heat, and then trick him; also, making him injure himself, with his knee bleeding. Was it a sport of pretense Jaikanth and Vaishnavi were playing? Dodging him to no bounds, and finally make him crave for it, and leave him in distress. Why these high jinks with someone who's prepared to shed sweat, doing the right thing, to earn his livelihood? Does Jaikanth even have the foresight of the plight of the people on the breadline; many mouths to feed, many grappling hard to make a living that is their right, too? Had he, then he wouldn't have indulged in this prank, perhaps!

I can also foretell what else may have ferociously drifted through Vish's mind while he glimpsed at Amrit as all of that was happening. One of the reasons why there's social unrest; why people take up guns when there are injustice and deceit happening to them all the time. Yet Vish, mutely resentful though, sat back because of Amrit. Vish might curse Jaikanth for his typical shenanigan conduct or the gesture of deceit, reasoning it unparadonable.

Although the incident was a little heart-rending, the deed was viciously sneaky in all perception, but the journey continues.

Vaishnavi asks Jaikanth, "Where have you planned your vacation this year?" (With a leer look)

It appeared all was normal for them. Maybe they are inveterate in such gruesome pastimes.

He replies, "Not decided yet. We're just a bit confused - either Srilanka or Austria. We haven't been there yet. We have been to almost every country across the world." (With a gushy

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glance at her through the rearview mirror).

It seemed he was making some subtle advances, as looks were speaking with looks and responding, which they thought they alone could comprehend. Vish noticed the exchange of glances, as I did.

Vaishnavi responds to it, saying: "We have not been to Austria either. We have been to Srilanka twice."

Exasperated Vish looks at them, and then gives a scornful stare and turns to Amrit in a tick. Amrit looks terribly helpless after the grisly episode, looking crestfallen, anguished yet silent with all the happenings. Amrit is relatively practical, unlike Vish, who is immeasurably compassionate and beholds poignancy to anything of this sort.

### 2 - Jaikanth's Self-gratification

The brief drive ends at Worli, at Justin's office, which is also a studio for multiple tasks, right from model shoots, videography, and also serves as an interim recording space with some primitive systems put in place, to provide handy resources to such clients. Jaikanth is more a friend to Justin than a client.

The studio typically resembles an aesthetic haven, with decorative pieces of painted bamboos, natural murals, painstakingly collected by Justin, to boast class and elegance; also hands out as camouflage, concealing switchboards, wires, a tiny portable fridge, borders of the wall-mounted flat-screen television, the telephone and a lot more. The creatively crafted wooden furniture strewn around the spacious room to accommodate not more than 5 to 6 people at a time, reflects Justin's artistic taste; also unleashing his meticulous trait to get the best and ethnics

to suit. He has corporate clients, as he also does corporate events; besides just being a professional photographer. He has several *métiers*.

All gather in this Justin's mystically created office cum studio with aesthetic pieces assembled to astonish clients, friends, and folks. Jaikanth, Amrit, and Vish occupy in those heavenly consoling sofa and seats crafted to comfort with thick cushion-work to bump in to recline. And of course, I was placed on a side table lying next to the sofa; although my presence is impalpable for others except for Vish.

The very first look overwhelmed both, Amrit and Vish, as much as it did to me. As I used to dwell in dust crusted places with cobwebs shackling me to death until I was emancipated by a bookseller at the streets of South Mumbai and freed to bliss by Vish some 2 years ago. My plight is no-going, so let's see what happens at Justin's studio.

Justin, an immensely practical individual with bright and breezy, good-humored demeanor - a self-critiquing individual, with receded hair and a round face, with a dusky complexion, dressed in always-ready-to-go attire and body language.

The studio had some mesmerism in itself, for its elegant redolence and the very look and feel that may soothe senses to deep snooze. It seemed like a quintessential escapade from the busily cacophonous streets of Mumbai, to unwind for a while won't seem amiss.

Though angst-ridden, Vish, was relatively professional and was trying hard to muddle through with the sight and situation. He realized the purpose he was there for. He guzzled down the ire and evaluated the resources there for the task they have taken up. He thoroughly meant busi-

ness.

Are we forgetting something? Where's Vaishnavi in the scene? She got dropped at Bandra, which was on the way to the studio. But the journey from where we were picked up and to reach the studio could have been barely an hour and slightly more. But we reached there almost 3 hours later.

Now I fathomed why Vish was still bearing the fury, actually, it got added up to his erstwhile rage after they saw Jaikanth not just dropping Vaishnavi on the way, which was said by Jaikanth at the beginning of the journey, but he physically went out to do some shopping for her, and we could see 2 big bags full of, probably, packages of some imitation jewelry, cosmetics, and I guess, a latest mobile phone, besides some clothes, indecipherable about exactly what they were though, and we all noticed him handing out a credit card to pay for the things, through the glass panes of the shop they were in. The innuendoes could be, he was, in a way, gifting her things. Definitely not rocket science to guess why!

Justin, an immensely hospitable character, asked out, "Yeah, friends, here have some water, and tell me what would you like; some coffee, tea, or some chilled soft drinks or something to eat? We get good sandwiches here."

Jaikanth immediately walloped in - "How about some chilled beer or rum. Justin?" (With a sly smile, winking at Amrit)

Justin replied with a wry smirk, "All that after 7, as this middle afternoon is work time for me and I don't want to waddle around in a stupor, then my senses will ask for more decadence." (With heavy hyena-like laughter)

Vish, somebody with completely

sober traits and no-nonsense demeanor looked bewildered and shared a glance with Amrit, who was grinning at the talks. Amrit then asserts, "Yes, yes, work first!" (Maybe he took a clue from Vish's glance, with a little simper though)

Amrit and Vish had already discussed the concept and project over the phone early that morning, which Vish and I were privy to, largely.

Amrit leads with the discussion, "We would need images, with a mix of videos and still pictures for the products that Jaikanth would want in the Audio/Visual presentation to be projected in Africa at the exhibition and seminar in November, as we are already in the middle of October now, we have very little time for production and execution. What's your take, Vish?" asks Amrit.

Vish confirms, "Yes, Let's rush out right away to a departmental store or a shopping mall where you can find some ideal visuals and images for the concept."

Justin: "Brilliant, then let's go to Crossroads, which is just a kilometer away from here and try to finish as much as possible by the end of this afternoon."

All seated in Jaikanth's car, including me in Vish's band, as usual, reached the mall, which is a before-time kind of a happening place with all novices flocking in, getting accustomed to the new-fangled 'shopping mall-culture' then. The mall was swarmed by people like bees on a hive. The footfalls were countless and the noises exceeded the permissible bearing decibels, almost charring the ear-drums apart, making it difficult for people to hear their own voices.

Vish is at work already, spotting purposeful images and videos, based on a cue sheet made while they were on the way to the mall - while

Jaikanth, on a pleasure spree is indulging himself in window shopping, trying to soothe his acquisitive tendencies.

All of a sudden, Vish, Amrit, and Justin hear a loud call – "Hey guys! Come over here, I want to show you something," yells Jaikanth, as the other three were a little away trying to capture images. All respond to Jaikanth's third shriek, by rushing to the shop where Jaikanth was waiting with bated breath for us.

"See, what we've got here; look at the display shelf", yells Jaikanth, in excitement. Justin, Vish and Amrit are overwhelmed to see an exclusive, exorbitantly priced wristwatch, priced at Rs. 1 Lac and some a piece, in Indian currency. "Isn't it elegant, smart, and full of a lure, Justin?" asks Jaikanth, with a swaggering glee.

"Of course, marvelous! It's an exclusive Rolex, Jaikanth; a perfectly crafted masterpiece. Buy it out, 1 lac plus is nothing for you!" responds Justin. Justin knows how to flatter Jaikanth with his blarney, which seems quite intermittent and is very much visible on occasions.

Jaikanth gushes, smiling, shammed to pretension of no humility- "Eh, yeah, but..., maybe! But it's supremely elegant! Hope someday, I will buy it!"

### 3 - Jaikanth's Extravagance – Disaster for Others

After returning from the mall, all seemed a little drained, yet trying to muster the required energy to put things into perspective with the collected visuals.

Vish says, "Though tiring, but the expedition to the mall was indeed worthwhile, as we were able to capture some very relevant and ideal visuals for the video presentation." "Yes, it was" seconds Amrit.

"Wasn't it an exquisite watch, Justin?" Jaikanth throws in. Vish and Amrit gave a silent look of infuriation and snickered at his excessiveness. Yet again, Justin plys in flattery towards Jaikanth, saying "Absolutely, and it will match your class and taste, Jaikanth; take it from me." Vish's silent look of excoriation intensifies but he is guzzling it all down due to Amrit, as they both have been good friends for over 10 years now.

Justin continues, "Jaikanth, now focus, as the project is yours and you're going to present at the seminar in Africa. Mind you! We haven't got enough time. All those can be discussed later anyway."

Jaikanth averred, "Yes, yes, Vish, Amrit, come on, get back to work, let's not waste time!" Vish almost lost it! He griped: "Jaikanth. Look there's a mirror around the corner; just step ahead and look into it and repeat what you said just now." Justin and Amrit laughed out. Although Jaikanth isn't delighted with the way Vish chided him suavely; he pretends as if he took in good spirits and walked away to make a call to his wife and got busy on the phone. Hours passed into dusk and all were completely engrossed with brainstorming while watching the visuals captured for the video on the big flat television fixed on the wall in the studio, except Jaikanth, who he was constantly on the phone, ambling in and out of the studio. Only the spirits of goblins knew who he was talking to, so incessantly.

As it was already late evening, all began to wind up after compiling the visuals in Amrit's laptop, for the next day's activity to follow up. All left with a morose sounding bye for the day with a knackered look and drooping enthusiasm. Frail voices and waning vigor took toll of the bunch. Jaikanth drove back dropping

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*me and Vish from where we were picked up and confirmed to meet tomorrow at the same time at the same place to get picked up, saying, "Bye, Vish. See you tomorrow morning, same time. I shall pick you as I did today from your place for tomorrow's work. I know tomorrow is going to be terribly busy for all of us. Good night!" Amrit was to be dropped at his place almost 8 km away from our place, so he was still with Jaikanth.*

*After a tiring day, just while unwinding in his bed, Vish lounged on a pillow, flipping my pages, pecked a page between his left thumb and index finger, and pored over, to read about the biggest sieges of the Twentieth Century, The Siege of Leningrad, and brooded over relational transgressions. Immediately the scene of treachery from the morning episode flitted in front of him, imagining the plight of the proletariats and mendicants. He was perhaps trying to correlate the occurrence. I was actually appraising him with the treasons to happen soon, thus I took control over his mind to select the subject for reading. I am notorious for doing that quite often.*

*I am a clairvoyant at times. But for humans to have pre-recognizance of things isn't possible. They have to endure it to learn from it. There's no tip-off or a signpost to forewarn humans.*

*Later, the same night, Amrit calls Vish, informing him: "Vish, tomorrow we'll have to manage on our own to make it to the studio tomorrow, as Jaikanth is busy in the first half and will be turning up directly at Justin's, supposedly, after 3, tomorrow afternoon. He just called me to inform me about this change in the program."*

*Vish sensed something shady about this sudden change of the arrange-*

*ment. "This is absurd! Amrit, you know the to-do-list is long and his presence is crucial to comprehend and devise the flow of the content. Now, for his part, we'll have to wait till he comes, which means criminal wastage of some very decisive hours. I feel something is in the dark, Vish." Anguished Vish garbled out. It was immediate fallout of his thoughts, as his mind was preoccupied with the way Jaikanth turned out to be in his perception.*

*"Relax, Vish, don't be over-perceptive and overreact; it's just a small change. We can manage. I'll pick you up from your place in a cab and we'll anyway add the expenses we incur to our final costing and make him reimburse," confirms Amrit.*

*"Okay then! See you tomorrow, Good Night, Amrit!" And Vish hangs up the phone.*

*The next day, as decided, Amrit and Vish reach Justin's studio. At the entrance of the studio, they discover that the door to the studio is open by some 6 inches from the sill frame. They assumed that Justin must have left it open for feeding a cat outside, which, I presume is a part of his daily routine. The room was completely open, and anyone could barge in. I think Justin forgot to close the door after feeding the cat, as we saw she had just left after sipping in all the milk from the bowl.*

*Vish and Amrit entered without speaking anything and they could hear a voice emanating from the mezzanine that just got discovered by them, which was camouflaged with a curtain, and went unnoticed by Me, Amrit, Vish the previous day. As usual, Vish was holding me in his right hand, as he is habitually a left-hander for all essential tasks.*

*Eavesdropped by us, inadvertent*

*though, Justin was busy talking to someone on the phone from the mezzanine platform, facing the other side, opposite to the entrance, hence unaware of our entry. He was loud and clear, and totally audible to us.*

*"I knew you must have got busy with her; I pretty much discerned it when you told me about the shopping binge with her yesterday. Jaikanth, you're such a dandy Casanova, dude! Was the hotel room you both parked yourselves in overnight comfortable? (with pauses for response). By the way, where's her husband?" (A pause for the reply).*

*You're such a lucky chaser; her husband is out of town most of the time." Justin laughed wickedly while talking to Jaikanth.*

*"Of course, I had to sin lying to your wife that you are at my studio, busy recording for the video and will be working all night and might return home by tomorrow afternoon, since your phone was inaccessible to her. I have been piling up sins because of you every time, but now you must revise your excuses, buddy. Let me tell you; her husband is going to catch you red-handed someday! (Again with a pause)*

*"Aha! So you're taking the fullest advantage of he being a bigger lecher, you first-rate coquette, the carnal aficionado. That won't make you free of your felonies, buddy! This will backfire sooner or later!" (After a little pause)*

*"What surprise? (Pauses with curiosity; eyelids gaping full, snoopily)*

*"Okay! I'll wait for the surprise. I know the wait is till this afternoon." He continues.*

*Amrit, Vish and a video editor hired for the day were exhausted cueing up the images according to the script to be stitched together in the*

*flow decided for the voice over, which will be merged with the video later. They had almost completed most of the compilation by around 4 PM and were having their lunch when Jaikanth arrives, with bottles and cans of liquor, mostly rum, whiskey, and beer, stacked up in his arms supported by his massively ballooned belly protruding out to everyone's effortless gaze. His big round face, puffed up cheeks, sagged and banging chin, popping eyes were bellowing out his exhilaration of having achieved some prodigious feat of life.*

*Vish's eyes spotted the reason for his ecstatic temper and nudged Amrit who was sitting next to him and was just about to push in a morsel of roti (Indian bread) into his mouth with curry. Amrit, with muffled eagerness, looks around Jaikanth and his roving eyeballs got arrested at his right-hand wrist, and guess what? The watch that he had spotted at the mall was garrishing his black and grey-haired wrist; from the display shelf to Jaikanth's wrist today. Yes, the same exquisite, and exorbitantly priced Rolex. He finally purchased it. For a moment, it seemed Vish's and Amrit's ears were deafened by the bombshell, while Jaikanth was showily exulting his so-called pride possession to all of us. The scene was dialogue-less to us, and Justin and others including Justin's car driver who had just walked in were all delighted to see and got busy congratulating him.*

*"So guys, for this achievement, it calls for a celebration this evening, and the dinner is on me" hollered Jaikanth, in ecstasy. It seemed he was gliding in seventh heaven.*

*Vish interjected politely, "I am afraid, Jaikanth, I won't be able to stay that long, I'll wind this up and leave by 6. It's already 4 and just had my lunch as you can see. So you'll have to*

*excuse me and count me out of the celebration. I am sorry."*

*Amrit joined him, saying, "Yes, Jaikanth! I won't be able to stay either."*

*"Oh! Come on guys, let's celebrate. Don't worry, I'll drop you both back home." Jaikanth, in a persuading tone.*

*But Vish and Amrit were firm in their stance. We left by six, leaving Jaikanth to revel the evening, with others.*

*The entire task took almost a week to complete, and the piece was ready with the script, but Vish refused to lend his voice for the video.*

*At the end of the month, one evening, yet again, when I made Vish read about 'The Famous Gunpowder' plot and 'High Treasons of 17<sup>th</sup> Century,' he got a shocker on the phone from Amrit.*

*"Vish, our efforts are a total waste, as Jaikanth refused to make our payment for the task we did for his presentation. He is out of town and not reachable on the phone anymore. He replied through the mail in response to our consolidated invoice, refusing to accept the costing and finally refusing to pay anything, by giving an excuse that the video and the script have been completely changed and it was done by someone else, which I know is a lie and I could make out from his tone and pauses during our conversation.*

*"I am told by his office that he's leaving for Africa tomorrow and will be returning at the end of the month." Said Amrit, of the outcome, remorsefully.*

*"This is our last conversation about Jaikanth, and we shan't talk about him ever," responded Vish, in his baritone voice, in a brusque tone. "Honestly, I regret to have known him in the first place. I am not shocked as I anticipat-*

*ed something like this. I am disappointed with myself that I continued with work despite knowing his misdemeanors," he added.*

*A few years passed and Vish got busy with work, besides contributing his little bit to society in his own way. He got associated with a school to realize the purpose of life and his existentialism.*

#### 4 - Meet Nadira

*It's a bright sunny afternoon and the beam of light squinting my eyes; with me, hoists a fleet of visions of the past, fluttered by my mind screen, as I loll myself on the wooden log, on which I was placed.*

*At the side of a stench permeated corner, along the alley, in a rural, up north, old craggy hands of Sundara, 85 years old, with wrinkled face and arms, was working laboriously, scooping human excreta, with a spade, filling a wheelbarrow to dump it in a sewage duct almost a km and a half away, in the scorching heat. Sundara's job fetches her measly Rs. 25 a day. Manual scavenging may perhaps be the term for her job.*

*Nadira, a 15-year-old girl, pale and frail, talking to her granny, Sundara, while feeding Himmatlal, her dog, named by Nadira. Himmatlal, supposedly, a mix of a Labrador and a stray, has been with Nadira for a while.*

*Unnati comes calling: "Nadira, What are you doing here with your granny? I was looking for you all over."*

*Nadira, in her wheelchair, looks on with a smile, replies: "Amma (Unnati), I am ready with my books in my bag," (Picking and putting me into her bag to accompany other books) "I just came here to ask Granny if she wants anything, I can get it on the way back from school."*

*Unnati says: "You know she hardly*

pays attention when she is at work.”

*Nadira continues asking: “Amma, Why did you stop giving me lunch box? Although my school provides me lunch now, but can’t match your Roti and Sabji. And yes, Amma, the frock you brought yesterday is a bit loose and long for me. I don’t look nice in it. Please get me one that fits me well.” (Gaily smiling)*

*Unnati replies sternly, “We can’t be choosers. We’ll have to adjust to whatever we get. Anyway, we shall see it during Eid or Diwali. Now come on, let’s go to school.” (Mending Nadira’s uniform properly and holding her bag by her shoulder and shoving down the wheelchair)*

*“You always say that” replies Nadira, frowningly.*

*“Oh, come on, we’ll be late for school.” chides Unnati (Carrying Nadira’s bag on her shoulder and shoving down the wheelchair)*

*Surprised? Yes, I too was.*

*Nadira was found by Unnati 12 years ago at a bus stand, crying helplessly, desolated and frail of starvation, and not being able to move an inch. Unnati is a middle-aged widow; her husband Ramji died of liver failure due to heavy alcoholism 10 years ago; her son died at the age of 18, two years ago in a busy populous city. He had gone there to look for a livelihood to support his mother and granny. It is said that he was killed by a raging car, along with two of his folks.*

*It is often said that Nadira’s mother died of Tuberculosis and later Nadira was abandoned by her father due to her disability, also being a girl, and due to abject poverty; Nadira was just 3 years old then. Perhaps she escaped foeticide. The story was discovered when they enquired about the local authorities but they could never*

*trace her father. No one ever returned looking for her.*

*Nadira, as they say these days, is physically challenged. It is probably due to Spina Bifida, going by the technical definition. After a medical diagnosis, the symptoms were deformity of the spinal cord, orthopedic defects, which no one is aware of; her legs are paralyzed and frequent complaints of incontinence of her bladder; bowel problems due to constipation and sorts. She is often rushed to the hospital for seizures, in the nearby town, which is almost 10 km away from her place, which has adequate medical facilities for emergency medical intervention. This, for sure, has been strenuous for Unnati, emotionally, physically, and financially.*

### 5 - How I Met Nadira

*Some 5 years ago, during the Foundation Day celebration of Nadira’s school, Vish – a well-wisher of the school, who was among the guests, spoke out on the podium saying that books may replace dinosaurs sooner or later; they are disappearing; so are the habits of poring over books.*

*I was placed on the table on the dais, and Vishesh was effective at the podium delivering a speech, impressive and mesmerizing. He recounted DeWitt Wallace’s belief – the founder of ‘Reader’s Digest’ that “Memory Can’t Replace Records”, in the context of how memory can be prolific yet information stored can be temporary; and recorded material, published and unpublished, stay forever.*

*I was taking pride in my existence; he was narrating things from several pages of Me. The best was yet to come; at least that’s what I was expecting, as he was immensely inspirational. Of course, he didn’t let me down; he*

*quoted Martin Luther King, Jr. – ‘In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.’ The metaphor intended was ‘knowledge’ by saying ‘silence of our friends’, referring to books as ‘friends’; although Martin may have used it in a different context.*

*The school was being run for the underprivileged. The principal, a physically challenged passionate middle-aged man, a stoic, was nodding his head with assent. Looked like the whole crowd of school students in uniforms were enjoying his speech, except for a few – scratching their heads, busy in a mutual wordplay and jibes; some playfully busy with pranks on others, while some gaping and grimacing away. However, for the most part, the speech was being listened to and lauded.*

*While the speech was beating up, a strong wind gusted across, flipping my pages, regardless of my heavy and strong bound body. Amidst all that, a boy in the front row was gaping heavily, as if he was not among them listening, which Vish noticed, and called upon the boy to come over to the dais. Spotting him to be uninterested, Vish asked the little boy to step on the stage. It was to divert the attention of the children.*

*Perhaps, the vigor of the wind was the inciting cause for the whole crowd getting distracted. At first, the boy was scared, but Vish comforted him and summoned him on to the stage. He eventually walked on. Vish asked the boy, “What’s your name?” “Chandresh”, replied the boy. Vish asked “which class, friend?” He said, “Class 4.” “That’s good!” Vish responded; further asking – “Have you heard of Martin Luther King Jr., Chandresh?”*

*All eyes were filled with curiosity,*

including the principal. All were unwaveringly looking at Chandresh. Although the nervous Chandresh slurred out, saying "Yes", the orator exclaimed saying, "Don't be afraid - just say it loudly, dear." He replied "Yes" in a bit louder tone, Vish said "I am impressed! What do you know about him?" he asked.

"Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education", the boy immediately uttered - Martin's yet another quote - leaving all stunned, impressing each one of them present there, which obviously was not expected by anyone there. Elated Vish asked him, "Where did you learn that from?" He said, "my mother taught me." He was full of curiosity, so asked away, "Is your mother a teacher?" Chandresh innocently replied, "Yes, she teaches me and my elder brother, looking at the crowd with naive glances. Vish grinned, loving his innocence, and said addressing the crowd, "You can be innocent and still be knowledgeable." "That's the magic of books." Said Vish.

Exhilarated by Chandresh's innocence, Vish picked Me and gifted him, saying, "The whole world may shun you, but this will never, and this is a small token of appreciation," and handed Me to him and hugged him. Perchance, an emotional flare to the event; "there couldn't have been a more enlightening culmination to the occasion", said the principal during his vote of thanks.

Back home, Chandresh, excited and exulting away, calling upon his mother and his father, in the photo frame on the wall, garlanded with synthetic flowers. His younger brother, Vignesh, comes running, excited, and curious to know why Chandresh, over 9 years old then, was yelling away. Vignesh, is 12 years old and they both lost their parents 3 years ago and are

at their uncle's.

Vignesh congratulates him, learning about the incident, and browses the pages of the book. He, with a delightful look, says, "Hey, Chandru (endearingly short for Chandresh), this is a book that has information about everything. So, we can always use it whenever we want to know about anything." Chandresh drags it back from Vignesh, saying I will share the book with my friend at school, Nadira.

Chandresh rushes to her house in the evening, to give it to her. Nadira's granny informs that she is not at home; her mother has taken her to the hospital, as she wasn't feeling well. She needs to go to the hospital frequently for convulsions; also, when she faints due to incontinence and stress.

Chandresh reaches the hospital, meets Nadira. Nadira, in the hospital that looks depressing and pitiable, has been given saline and some treatment and is better now.

Nadira was happy for Chandresh and congratulates him. Chandresh tells her, "We'll share this book for knowledge and information as and when we need, so let this be with you, Nadira." Nadira refuses, saying, "You must never give away things that have been gifted to you by someone." Chandresh adds, "it'll be mine and yours, but it'll be with you, is that okay? Nadira is overjoyed, and assented: "Okay!"

I have been with Nadira for a while now. I have witnessed - despite her sickness and physical shortcomings, she still manages to keep her attendance immaculate, absolutely cent percent, even though, she lives almost 3 km away from the school and Unnati used to carry her on her arms, as her body is lifeless below her waist, and legs don't function. She is

in the squatting position all the while.

Nadira, with tears in her eyes, receiving the book, tells Chandresh, "Do you know the best gifts of my life?" it's my mother, my granny, my brother, who is no more now, and you - my best friend; and of course, the teachers at school that has been very supportive. They have been smilingly bearing with my problems of incontinence during class, and always took good care of me."

"Further," she recalls: "You know, the other day, two of our teachers were discussing that Amma almost fought with our principal for my admission. Although the admissions were nearly full; also, keeping my problems of not being able to commute easily, in mind, which might impede my progress in studies, our principal was a bit hesitant to admit. But Amma was determined to get me educated. She said to him that she'll carry me in her arms and take back every day, and frantically requested him to admit me, and he had to consider it.

"They said although I am a Muslim and she is Hindu, yet she was persistent in doing everything for my education and providing a good life; although she works hard doing menial jobs and makes ends meet besides my granny doing her bit, to get the best for me.

"Chandru, you know I am very lucky to have found such a family."

Nadira further continues saying: "Now Amma will not have to carry me all the way to school anymore; our school has gifted me a wheelchair. I am so happy."

Immediately, Unnati reacts to it, saying: "And I know you'll get wings, and you can fly high and surely achieve everything you deserve. Also, it's me who is lucky because you have lived up to my expectations. Yesterday,

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the teachers were also saying that Nadira is a brilliant student and has been consistently performing well in her studies.”

### 6 - Himmatlal Defies Fate

*Nature always takes its toll. It was 3 years back when the village almost submerged in floodwater. It was ravaging; that gloomy day, everything was inundating in darkness; the scene looked abysmally nerve-racking. Everything seemed isolated, and the temper was hemmed in deep anxiety all over.*

*That day was a dreadful one. The wind was completely on a rampage, as if it ran amok, absolutely demented, at the blink of the eyes, blew down all the greens and the grown. The rage seemed intemperate and a horrific onset was palpable all over. Every existence and co-existence scuttled speedily, panic-stricken, dreading the end of life. All were running across for life, to a safer ground if they could find.*

*Restlessness and desperation roused the adrenaline beyond count. The darkening day was getting denser and scarier, with the savagely pouring rainwater gathered as a riverbed and holding the village afloat. It seemed it was in an abyss and the wind immeasurably wrecked everything to a zilch. The wrath was evident and certainly drummed it out through unbearable thunder beats and bedazzling thunder lights. It was all an unbridled shadow of sheer fear. All was an emblematic saturnalia of the fury of nature's belligerence.*

*Nadira was alone at home, Unnati had gone out on errands, and Sundara, typically at work, away from home. Nadira was trapped inside the house by the floodwaters. All must have cursed the happening and pitied her immobility. I longed I*  
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*could row her down to a safer place. Her dusky skin browned off and she ogled with anxiety and was obviously exasperated. Her immediate resolve looked lithe and she decided to tread through the severe watery warpath somehow or the other. Although her disability would hinder; her indomitable grit was at its peak, and she wouldn't be restrained by anything on earth then!*

*Even though she couldn't do much, she started wielding against the water current that was frenetically surging into her house. She was crawling and slithering, holding the pillars and the walls, to reach to the small table that was lying at the corner, in the tiny thatched hut, she lived in.*

*At a point, when she started to muddle through and was struggling, Himmatlal promptly sensed the danger. His extra-sensory was quick to react and he rushed athwart to rescue her. He swam across from the front step of the house. He deliriously splattered away the water in the way, reaching out to Nadira. He nudged her to let her cling on to him by putting her arms around his neck, from the side.*

*Before she hung on to him, she tied me up as a sash to her body from the shoulder with a rubber belt that was lying close to her, from where Himmatlal picked her up. Her tenacity was manifest in her approach, as she clung onto Himmatlal, tightly clenched around his neck while Himmatlal waded her through the floodwater.*

*He practically sailed her down to the village crossroads, which had a tall platform, where all had gathered, almost 50 meters away from her place.*

*The disconcerting scene was egregiously frightening as much as trau-*

*matic to the villagers. The villagers mumbled that it was, for sure, a curse or an imprecation of the infuriated gods due to human's iniquities or as they say 'nature's perdition', which is why gods opened the floodgates on them, to drown them for their bad karma. The flood marooned the village in no time, with its massive deluge, as it was a low-lying land, close to a mountain that has numerous inhabitants at its foot.*

*Nadira's moist, innocent eyes were groping and looking around for Unnati and Sundara desperately. It was a second life bestowed upon her. She was almost in the abominably wide open mouth of death that was bellowing with a whetted appetite to gulp her down and Himmatlal scoured her away from it by whiskers.*

*Nadira, with voice choked of emotions, and tears slid down her cheeks ceaselessly, cuddled Himmatlal for saving her life. Unnati and Sundara could reach the next day when the deluge receded, as they were also caught in a maze of inundation. Unnati and Sundara bugged Nadira boundlessly, thanking the Almighty.*

*"I have heard many such instances wherein dogs have saved numerous lives", said a neighbor. Nadira also added: "I too have read many such stories, but I witnessed only today, and Himmatlal is my darling."*

*The aftermath needs no crude presumption or description by a long way. The devastation was visibly the residue of the village stranded by a catastrophe. Now, the village is gradually lumbering hard to get on to its feet. It took longer than assumed to resurrect itself.*

*Nadira was also gaining strength, resurrected me having my pages dried up, and had my cover bound well. But the damage left Unnati and her*

*family completely mendicant and disembarked, adding to their usual plight and struggle. The distress may have destroyed her financially, but it couldn't dent her unconquerable determination.*

*While the urban life swaggered limitlessly, in movies flicks, pools, clubs, salons, indulging in restaurants, and people drank to their heart's content, with high-raised toast, being indifferent and apathetic about the trenchant blows of the nature on the rural side, the world seemed absolutely annulled.*

*Nadira always endeared me as her alma mater. She was trying to cope with the vicissitudes, and was determined to have a resurgent life-building and upbringing. She was staggered by the upheavals though, but she frantically mended her ways to the legion of the brilliants. All she needed was a life full of certitude and thimbleful of caressing and pampering, which she got from Unnati and Sundara.*

### 7 - Nadira "Emerging Stronger"

*Today, at 15, Nadira, is far mature than a normal child of her age would probably be. She's been invited at an "All School Convention", for cultural exchange, and is expected to deliver a speech.*

*Amidst a severe and intimidating crowd and effective speeches already delivered by students from various elite schools, Nadira feels the trepidation, yet holds her ground and starts her speech at a snail's pace but confidently.*

"I come from a small village, where there's still a dearth of basic facilities. Having lived in this glittery city full of life, for a few days now, I am overwhelmed with the experience, yet happy to be here.

"All I have to say - Whilst beholding

the nation to be supposedly progressive, with initiatives to explore the Moon and Mars, also, to match the competencies of the global players being one of the countries producing maximum scientists, software programmers, and several other feats, with numerous advents and discoveries, are we really sailing on the waves of success, or is it just disillusionment, which is contravened by the current unsocial happenings in the country?"

*Now, gained a little pace as she saw a few faces concurring with a smile.*

"Perhaps it's more to say that we like to dwell on select euphoria such as glorifying and deifying film personalities and reality show hosts and cricket icons more than appreciating our armed soldiers and the martyrs, laying their lives during insurgencies, law and order crises, and mostly to the severe and inclement weather conditions at the altitudes of over 18000 feet and to the bullets fired by some of our neighbors that breach our trust by flouting the ceasefire pacts.

"Not surprisingly, even today, many walk miles from one town to another city to celebrate film stars' birthdays, and spend hours together cooling their heels for just a glimpse of their favorite stars, which I learned from some of my friends that I made here recently. The irony balloons with the groping eyes and faces trying to recall their own parents' birthday or anniversaries when asked about, as far as I have known.

"Not a prejudice though, but there's life beyond pampering actors, celebrities, and cricket players, which is often ignored.

"I was asked - what's my definition of patriotism? Honestly, I was confused.

"Patriotism is selectively and conveniently used, which gets evoked dur-

ing a cricket match played against foreign teams; mainly, neighboring countries. Actual patriotism goes to rest during the Republic Day or Independence Day, which, if fall around the weekend, is usually used for reveling or weekend pleasures out of town or at leisure homes or farmhouses. Needless to emphasize, many have yet to learn the significance of the Republic Day.

"Hankering for reforms and change in the outlook in the behavior and political will has been a utopia that has been eluding us for ages. Amidst traditions, thoughts, beliefs, rituals, and practices such as veiling women for dignity and honor have gained a proclaimed status of pride and culture; yet contravening the traditions have been making them clamor in the queues for virginity tests, and also suffer due to lack of intent in providing private sanitation facilities, or being inconsiderate towards their voices for change. The reasons for this insecurity are egregious; progressiveness may shake the thrones of political hegemony of several who jump into the arena, who, election after election gallop on the backs of ignorance, illiteracy and fear. The agrarian reforms for development and education are in a shambles; they are the nectar of clout for emissaries of federalism of the country.

"Upon analyzing all of those, we are bound to fall in a labyrinth, if they are issues of social maladies, political vendettas, or people's sycophancies, lack of literacy and exposure in general, or poverty? Or perhaps we're immune to endure every absurd, obnoxious and joyful thing alike, letting all "Machiavellians" deceive us every time.

"Talking about corruption, people have failed to helplessness fighting it, and have gone to the extent of talking about legalizing it to a large extent, yet

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it would seem difficult where to draw the line to characterize and define corruption and limits of the beginning and end, to determine where will the legalization element actually get realized. More than that, what one has yet to know is - is it the demand that starts first or the supply gives birth to that demand. It's a perfect chicken and egg equation at play, making the task more challenging.

"Or are we talking about the laws that are broken flagrantly by public nuisances and habitual offenders, and the lawmakers and law-keepers are barely relented, witnessing the human rights being openly violated?

"In my village, I have known of a creepy man who disrobes his wife and locks her back in the house, hides her clothes somewhere unknown to anyone every day, before leaving for work, and returns it to her when he is back after the day's work? You know why- because she wants to work and earn and support him financially, and he ridicules the intent with an awful thought. He doesn't trust her.

"Are we talking about obscurantisms like babies offered as sacrifices or chucked away, in the name of rituals, or a dim-witted oath taken by the elders in the family? Or imagine the woes due to the representatives of political parties across-the-board that keep rupturing the foundation of the federal structure and plunder the populace, to triumph in their race to power, and subsequently deprive them when the goal is achieved? In that case, are the plebeians and proletariats wise and conscientious enough to realize that?

"Are we talking about their ignorance of their power that propels the fiscal proportions and economy of the whole country? Are we talking of the lapses of healthcare and apathy of health avenues and hospitals that dis-

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possess the common man of the benefits that he/she is entitled to, which, most often, reaches the elite to be called as overly privileged? Do we have to keep bewailing on the delusions due to the widening chasm between social justice and economic developments all the time?" She triumphed.

*She spoke a lot more, and her grit and determination were evident in her voice.*

*When asked, despite coming from a small village, how she managed to raise the issues so well, she replied: "I always have blue magic with me that*

enlightened me and inculcated the habit of reading a lot. Every morning when I wake up, the first thing I do is peer at that proudly! Thank you!"

*There she ended her speech.*

*No points for guessing; she was referring to me as the 'Blue Magic'*

Nadira's past reinforced that, our past shapes our future; a fact never to be lost in oblivion!

*ME: That pretty much tells about my predilection of sharing the past with everyone. ❖*



Bruce Baldwin

# “The Lift”

by Keith Perkins

Her cell phone vibrates.

“Jesus!” Mirriam whispers irritably. “Seriously?”

It’s the sixth call since her arrival at work. Undeterred, she finishes her email to staff about new magazine subscriptions.

“I see a control issue here. You’re all she has,” her therapist offered during a recent session.

“I’m all she’s ever had,” Mirriam countered sharply. “Even when my Dad was alive.”

“I understand, but this is a power play Mirriam. She’s still trying to control your life. At this point, you really need to establish and maintain some clear boundaries.”

“So that she can violate them? I mean, she’s a pro at that,” Mirriam said, shaking her head dejectedly.

“I get it,” Rachel said.

“At night, she sits strategically in her little recliner directly across from me. Don’t let her age fool you. At 89, she still knows exactly what she’s doing. Always has,” Mirriam said.

“There may be a component of frustration in all this too. Aging can be a bitch,” Rachel said.

“She thinks I’m at a book club meeting tonight. If I told her I’m in psychotherapy—and she’s the reason—it would be the final nail in the old, uh,” Mirriam said, dropping her eyes towards the plush office carpeting.

“Not that that would be a bad thing.”

“Ok Mirriam, now let’s not...”

“I know. I’m just worn down,” she interrupted. “I used to be a helluva lot nicer.”

“You need to spread your wings a little. Have a bit of fun. Take a few

risks.”

“You want me to hop trains like Jack London?”

“No, not exactly. Meeting some new people though may be a good start.”

And then, one morning, in the spacious, high school library she micromanaged down to the most distant aisle of unread fiction, it happened. Word spread swiftly. One English teacher called it “audacious”. “Long overdue” was the assessment of a Math Department colleague. Others simply mustered a “Get outta here!”, “No way!”, or “You gotta be kidding me!” When the news leaked to a veteran member of the custodial staff, he smiled, slowly shook his head, and said gruffly: “Hey, good for her. Maybe she’ll finally get laid.”

The culprit—an open laptop. Mirriam’s laptop. While she answered nature’s call, a young science teacher slipped behind the desk to retrieve a DVD. For Mirriam, the queen of meticulous, it was a rare lapse. It took seconds. “Loves cats, books, hiking, knitting, a good chardonnay, lives alone.” The original version, which she deleted immediately, broached the thorny subject of her mother head on.

“Live with my Mom. Prepare her meals. Endure her hellish night-time snoring. Escort her to her stair lift. Each morning, empty her...”

With her inbox ringing up zeroes, an array of ominous date scenarios began to strike indiscriminately.

“So, just you in this big house, huh?”

“Just me, my cats, and my books.”

“Maybe it’s all that Chardonnay, but that kinda sounds like muffled snoring upstairs.”

“Asthma. Poor little Simba. She’s on meds, but she can really let loose, particularly after a bit of catnip.”

They taunted, teased, humiliated. At home. At church. While shopping. Even during her long morning commute, the barrage of unsettling dates continued.

“Not a bad spread for a single librarian.”

“Yeah, I suppose, but the extra space helps when my mother flies in occasionally from, uh, Florida.”

“No way! My parents winter there. Whereabouts?”

“Phoenix.”

“Isn’t that...”

“I mean Tampa.”

“And that stair lift?”

“Yea. brutal colitis.”

“You?”

“Uh, no, my mother.”

“Isn’t that something to do with...”

“I mean arthritis.”

“Sorry to...”

“It’s ok. Had it installed last year. Just got tired of carrying her up those stairs every single...time she visits. More chardonnay?”

In her early 20s, Mirriam knew her predicament would be more palatable to suitors. College debt. Still hustling for a job. Just trying to figure things out. Yet, this was now her unavoidable and unenviable fix. A 58-year-old life-long introvert, living with her mother and trolling for a match online.

This new assignment, as her ther-

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apist called it, was further compromised by Mirriam's lifelong propensity for solitude. In high school, she read Donne's *No Man is an Island*. Despite his eloquent argument against isolationism, she willfully challenged his premise. She felt just fine alone. There was never an urge to be a "part of the main." Instead of cursing this trait, she accepted it serenely as part of her unique wiring.

As her teenage peers raucously jostled over beer pong in some nearby basement, she quietly consumed a steady tonic of Eliot, Bombeck, Wilde, and Woolf in her modest bedroom adjacent to her parents. And while she did bend her eyes towards a few boys, no first love—or even flavor of the month—ever materialized. She went to school in the morning. Returned in the afternoon. After a spiritless dinner with her parents, it was back to her room for the night, where she remained marooned until morning.

When she hinted at leaving home for college, her mother promptly balked at the idea.

"Why go to Boston when there's a perfectly fine program in Wilkes Barre?"

"I don't know Mom, I just..."

"With your Dad's heart condition and all, we could use you nearby."

"I know Mom, but..."

"And we'll save on room and board. And with us both getting older, it would just really help."

"Yeah, but Boston..."

"So Wilkes-Barre it is then!"

As a 20-something librarian, Mirriam floated the idea of finding her own place. Her mother dredged up the same guilt-laden narrative. She felt powerless and paralyzed by her mother's iron will. Her resentment grew and festered for years until finally, as a greying, frustrated, middle-aged librarian, she secretly sought relief in

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Rachel's cozy, second floor office.

Mirriam fiercely resisted her therapist's scheme. She held to a belief that online dating was forced and artificial. It screamed desperation. Maniacs lurked there. Men on the prowl. She refused to be a convenient target. It took two sessions before she relented. Rachel finally convinced her that she was paying for professional advice. If she didn't heed it, what was the point of it all?

The profile took a half hour to complete. One evening, after her usual wordless dinner with her mother, she sat in the den and got to work. Her mother stared at her gravely from her recliner, legs covered in a knitted blanket.

"You still working on that computer?" she asked irritably.

"Yea Mom, end of the month is always busy, library inventory, magazine subscriptions, staff emails."

"I wouldn't know the last damn thing," she muttered groggily. "Your father, may he rest in peace, wouldn't have either," she added.

"I know Mom."

Her mother managed a barely audible "hmpff" and turned towards the TV.

Mirriam was deciding between "average" body type and "a few extra pounds" on the site's drop-down menu when her mother issued her nightly directive.

"I'm tired, please help me to the lift."

"Yes Mom."

"I'm not the warmest soul who ever lived," her mother confessed, as Mirriam secured the harness across her waist. This unexpected and rare admission broke their normally silent, pre-bedtime ritual. Mirriam braced herself for a dose of painful, awkward intimacy.

"In fact, I probably took some

years off your father's life," she said. "But I loved him. Maybe someday you'll have someone to ease the loneliness in this big house."

"Maybe," she said curtly.

"What about that clean-cut Bruce fellow from church? You know he's a respected physician, right?"

Mirriam quickly hit the "up" button, beginning her mother's slow, steady ascent of the stairs.

She received her first promising email a few weeks after activating her profile. Ralph. 60. Widowed. No children. Lives alone. His message held more hope than her two opening salvos. No mention of "hey sweetheart" and this greying lothario was actually fully clothed.

"Saw that you enjoyed reading and hiking. Perhaps we could chat over coffee?"

Innocent enough, she thought. She probed further: 'Likes red wines, reading, and the outdoors.' No obvious red flags. So, with her mother's v8 engine at full throttle upstairs, she responded.

"Sounds good. Let me know a day that works."

She felt a faint hint of adrenaline. At 58, perhaps this was a more subdued, middle-aged variation of what London felt jumping those trains.

Ralph responded.

"Hi Mirriam! Are you free Saturday evening, say 7pm?"

She slammed her laptop shut. Why such a quick response? How many other dates was he arranging? The questions came fast and furious, pushing her close to abandoning her 'assignment' altogether. She felt vulnerable. Every instinct urged her to sleep on it. Yet, with a slow, deliberate hand, she eased her laptop slightly open only to shut it again with equal vehemence.

Smoke billowed from her coffee

as the pre-dawn blackness lingered out the large kitchen windows. Her laptop lay next to her toast. She glanced at the microwave clock.

5:30am.

By the sound of it, her mother was still sound asleep. She nibbled languidly at the toast, then opened her laptop. Ralph again.

"If Saturday doesn't work, I could meet you Tuesday or Thursday of next week."

She placed her toast on the napkin.

"Saturday evening is great. How's 7pm?"

She took another bite. Ralph responded. She glanced at the microwave.

5:32am.

He confirmed their date for Saturday at a local cafe.

Later that morning, Mirriam entered the faculty lounge tucked conveniently behind the library.

"She likes..." was all she picked up before a trio of teachers hastily dispersed in unison into the adjacent hallway.

She continued to the refrigerator in the corner of the room.

In recent days, Mirriam's paranoia spiked. She noticed random, mischievous glances from colleagues, as well as a few abrupt ends to conversations. She knew of two instances, once at work and at home, when she left her profile briefly unattended. Even though it made her shudder, she doubted her mother could make much sense of a screen littered with images and small font. Such a revelation at work would be equally awkward. She remembered Rachel's advice against jumping to rash conclusions.

"She watches me every second. I swear she's plotting something."

"Mirriam, she's an 89 year-old, frail arthritic who uses a stair lift.

There's no plotting."

And so she did her best to dismiss her suspicions.

"What's his name?" Rachel asked at their Wednesday evening book club session prior to her Saturday date.

"Ralph. He seems like a nice guy. Messages appear normal and all. No half naked profile pics or creepy winks."

"Oh, ok. Promising start."

"Yea, I guess, but he responded immediately to my messages."

"And?"

"Even one morning at 5:30am when I messaged him. Who the hell is on a dating site at that hour?"

"Um, you."

"He could be a knife-wielding Ted Bundy. A deranged Don Juan."

"And your 89-year old, arthritic mother is fiendishly plotting all this, right?" Rachel said, smiling.

"You know, I could actually see her behind this," Mirriam responded sternly.

"Just enjoy your date."

Mirriam's cell phone vibrated.

"Sorry, it's usually off."

She looked down.

"Let me guess," Rachel said, smiling.

On Saturday, she spent a couple of idle hours before her date driving the bucolic country lanes that gently undulate beyond the village limits. Occasionally, she stopped to browse at an antique store or farmers market. By late afternoon, she fed her mother the usual book club line and was seated at the cafe at 7pm.

She sipped coffee at a small window table.

7:15pm

"Oh ok. Promising start."

7:30pm

One other patron, a 20-something student, picked at a muffin and sipped a cappuccino. When she was

not texting, she occasionally highlighted pages in an oversized textbook.

She texted Ralph.

*I'm at the coffee shop. All ok?*

At 7:45, she finished cup two and watched as the college girl rose, tucked her book into her shoulder bag, and left.

"Spread your wings. See what's out there," Rachel suggested just weeks ago.

"Brilliant advice," she whispered softly, shaking her head.

From her square table, she began to admire wistfully the gentle, steady human current on Main Street. People strolled the quaint, ordered sidewalk, pausing only to briefly contemplate window displays. This soothing reverie was suddenly broken by jarring cafe chimes. The door swung open and a burly, thinly bearded, middle aged man entered. He was wearing a faded grey t-shirt, ripped jeans, and owned an unruly mop of grey hair. He had a square, forceful jaw, with deep blue eyes and broad shoulders. He smiled at the barista and scanned the menu board for a few moments before settling on a coffee and a blueberry scone.

Mirriam's phone vibrated. It was her mother.

She ignored it and continued to study the broad contours of this vaguely familiar man's masculine face. If it was Ralph, he had some explaining to do.

With his coffee and scone in hand, he turned slightly, noticed Mirriam, and headed towards her.

"Hey, I'm Bruce from church. How's it going?"

"Um, well, thanks," she stammered. Her eyes darted to the entrance and then to her phone.

8pm.

"I've chatted with your mother a few times during coffee hour. She's

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lovely by the way.”

Mirriam’s phone vibrated again.

“Yes, um, thanks.”

Gone was the clean-shaven, smartly dressed, bespectacled physician. In his place stood a man who bore more resemblance to Hemingway following an afternoon bender. His disheveled hair, tired eyes, and mildly sloping posture imparted an air of imperfection that Mirriam found enticing.

“Can I get you another cup of coffee?”

Her eyes darted to the entrance and then returned to Bruce’s unshaven face. It was her first real date and already mired in complications.

“Uh, yea, that’d be great.”

An hour passed before Mirriam checked her phone.

It was dead.

In that time, she learned that Bruce lost his wife to cancer 15 years earlier. With no children or close family to help him grieve, he sought therapy and took up refurbishing wooden furniture as a hobby. He claimed to live alone with his locally bred black lab. Medical school was more his parent’s dream than his. And while they both died only months apart several years ago, he still harbors a nagging resentment for their swift dismissal of his engineering dreams.

“It can’t be easy caring for your mother,” he said.

“It’s challenging.”

“Well, you’re going to a better place than I am.”

“You think so? You help people for a living. I can barely look after my mother.”

“I sometimes put a shot of Bourbon in my coffee before a procedure. Probably lingering spite for landing where I did.”

Mirriam scrambled for a tangible

parallel to soften this daring revelation.

“Um, well, didn’t Joyce write *Ulysses* drunk?” she asked.

“If he did, he wasn’t wearing scrubs and holding a scalpel over an unconscious patient.”

“True. But I’m no angel either. Speaking of which, I should probably get home and put my mother to bed.”

“So, how about another coffee sometime?” he asked.

As she pulled into her dark driveway, lined by tall, forbidding pines, Mirriam was smiling. She unplugged her phone, retrieved her purse and headed for the door.

She switched on the foyer lights and sauntered buoyantly down the long, quiet hall towards the den. No decibel-shattering rattle. No hypnotic hum from the TV. All was still. The room was awash in a gentle glow from a side lamp. Her mother lay motionless, head back and eyes shut, a quilt draped over her legs. Her cell phone rested on the carpet, inches from her limp, outstretched arm. Mirriam approached, lingered several seconds, then very cautiously backed away and headed for the couch.

She surrendered herself completely to its pliable cushions. Her arms dropped like dead weight beside her. She leaned her head back and emitted the deepest of sighs.

“Mirriam!” her mother suddenly barked.

“What? Mom?”

Her mother, head barely lifted, glared at her from the recliner.

Her phone vibrated. It was Ralph. *So Sorry. Emergency came up. Can we reschedule for next week?*

“What’d you discuss all of *War and Peace*?” her mom asked.

“No. Just nice conversation is all,” Mirriam said.

“It must have been some book.”

“It was actually. Not done discussing it.”

“What’s it called?”

“*Train Wreck*.”

“I see. Well, in any case, I’m tired now, please help me to the lift.” ❖

# "The Buried Alive Man"

by Ron Cooper

No shoots pushed through  
The drought-choked May fields  
That rushed past the Fairlane on our way to  
Fresh Air Pentecostal Church and Drive In Theater.

Cool Hand Luke had failed to communicate  
On the big screen the night before.  
A tongues-speaking preacher had danced atop  
The concession building that morning.

That Sunday afternoon my father  
Paid the five dollars for our carload  
To see the Buried Alive Man  
Dig himself out of the ground.

We sat on the hood in the fourth row and  
Could see, towards the screen, the canopy  
And mound where some filed past to bend,  
Touch the warm earth, mumble a prayer.

A voice from the window-hung speaker called,  
"Attention, the Buried Alive Man is coming up,  
Please return to your cars."  
Assistants crowded beneath the canopy,

And we strained, not quite seeing,  
But somehow he emerged, khaki with dirt, shook,  
Climbed to the top of the concession building  
As all horns honked and headlights flashed.

"Friends," came the voice through the speaker,  
"I have been below and have come back  
To tell you. I am here to tell you  
About descending and arising.

"Friends, the Earth what held me in its bowels  
Turned me loose a new man.  
You seen me crawl up from the very ground  
Where I laid for three days like a root.

"Friends, I am here to tell you  
That I have been planted deep,  
But again I walk the Earth just like you.  
In this time of need, I am here to tell you."

We rode home with the windows down.  
The dry May air filled the Fairlane  
And hit our faces like gnats.  
On that cloudless day I smelled

The parched dirt in the plowed fields  
Like ours, where beans, corn lay buried,  
And saw my father driving, worrying  
About what the Earth would give up.

two by Taylor Gaede

## “Memories Are a Mass of Knots, Detangling”

when she lays her head down,  
she can hear his clock-heart  
through mattress springs,  
memories whispering  
in between:

the tack of tape  
unsticking from a box  
as he takes it apart  
while she traces his knuckles  
with permanent ink.

the crinkle of his brow  
when he asked,  
what are you doing?  
and she answered,  
looking at you.

a car idling beneath them  
and a radio singing  
pop  
while lips are chewed  
raw.

clang  
midnight strikes,  
a broken clock  
kissing time.

## “Optional”

I've never heard him say love.

maybe once, talking about a film—  
where two lovers have a  
passionate summer fling  
before parting:  
one marrying,  
the other crying clinging tears.

and I think,  
he does not know the word love  
in any language—  
only moments of

calling at 1 a.m.,  
or stealing touches,  
or murmuring safe nothings  
miles away.

love is not in his vocabulary,  
his vernacular inflexible.

and I wonder what I have heard  
over the clamor of  
nothing, nothing, nothing.

two by John Grey

## “Ben Explains Why He Woke Up This Morning In A Strange Place”

last night  
I got so drunk  
with a strange woman –

around one a.m.  
she helped me to my feet  
onto that moving platform  
of a barroom floor

and though I at first  
rejected her arm,  
the window glass caught fire,  
swelled with streetlamp red

and I grabbed her elbow  
like the top rung of a fireman's ladder,  
stumbled out the door  
as if stepping down,  
with the gutter ahead of me  
the open arms  
of all who love me –

she gave me a choice:  
a cab home  
or a block or two  
stagger to her house –

one  
I'd never been to before

and, last night,  
one was the extent  
of my counting

## “An Ode To Body-Cam”

The other guys, in blue uniform, were the law.  
One said “Lie face down on the ground with  
your hands behind your head.” You obeyed  
but just not quick enough for their liking.  
You left the house though you were warned.  
You had no papers. Just the face you were  
born with. But how many days can a guy  
be cooped up? You needed to breathe. You  
were unaware that it wasn’t your air. And  
you despise being fearful. You preferred  
to follow their commands deliberately,  
proudly, not skittish as a jackrabbit.  
Once again, you’d been warned. Deliberation,  
pride, are luxuries. If you’re seen with them,  
people figure they’ve been stolen. That’s  
why the boot went in and a fist broke half  
your jaw. The cops took back what wasn’t yours.  
They gave you something else as a replacement.

# The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them.  
We won't publish your whole name.

First day at work at the new job. Rental car, parked carefully. I don't know why I rented a car when I have a perfectly good vehicle. Am I in a different town?

Entering through heavy glass doors that test your arm strength, sign in at a tall front desk that makes you feel like it's your first day at school, security check with the big up-and-down look. All things I've done before. Where is classroom for new employees? No classroom. Go upstairs and see one of the call-center managers. What? OK...

The call-center is an enormous expanse of beige – desks, chairs, four-foot tall cloth-covered dividing walls that separate nothing but give the illusion of privacy. The phones are beige, with hand-and-headsets to match. Scanning the vast room – there are some people working – heads down, listening to someone or something, writing, flipping pages on their desks. Computer images shudder with refresh rates that are too slow to be invisible.

No one comes to see me, to find out why I'm just standing there. There is no one I can see who is obviously a manager, so I don't know what to do next. It is quiet, muffled, in the room like I'm hearing everything through earplugs.

There is a door to my left, closed, with a name-plate on the door. It is a number and a name. 201 – Chiang. Is this one of the managers? I don't do anything at first, but then I decide that no one is going to help me and that figuring it out is part of the hiring process – like a personality test. I knock quietly on the door. It opens and inside is Madame Chiang – the wife of the Nationalist Chinese generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek. I don't know how I know this, but it is immediately apparent to me that this is she and that she has taken a job in this call-center because of the Communist revolution and losing China to Chairman Mao.

Madame Chiang asks me for my papers. I have no papers, I tell her. That's not good, she says softly. You must have papers. I will have to call security.

Security! I exclaim. They're the ones who told me to come upstairs because there is no classroom for new employees.

Oh, she says. In that case, please sit down. Her office has a window to the outside, and it is a sunny morning and there is a jar of multi-colored hard candy on her desk. I desperately want to try it, but do not know what the protocol is for asking to have a piece of candy. Madame Chiang asks me what is the matter? I tell her that I want a piece of candy, but don't know how to say so. I chuckle at the irony of saying such a thing, then say somehow we lose our ability as adults to just ask politely for something we want, which is the first thing we are taught as children.

Well done, Madame Chiang says to me, leaning over and offering me some candy from the jar. You have passed the employment test. Her smile is very friendly.

WP - Freehold, NJ

## Contributors

**Eryn Fekete** is a part time writer, artist, and underground cage fighter who draws her inspiration from swimming with possums and other exciting activities. She hopes to open a "swim with the possums" exhibit at SeaWorld in 2021.

**Srinivasan Chari**, of Mumbai, India, comprises over a decade and a half of the far-reaching exposure in content areas, writing from features and editorials to the humongous world of corporate communications tools. He has been consummate with crafting Advertorials, Press Releases, Presentations, Authored Articles, Business Writing, Content Writing and Development, and so on. He has been proactive towards contributing to Corporate Organizations and Publications; besides, his involvement in Public Relations, Press & Media Communication, and Co-ordinations, and so on, for NGOs and Institutions.

**Ron Cooper** is a professor of Philosophy at the College of Central Florida in Ocala, FL. He is the author of the novels *Hume's Fork*, *Purple Jesus* and *The Gospel of the Twin* (all by Bancroft Press) and many poems and stories.

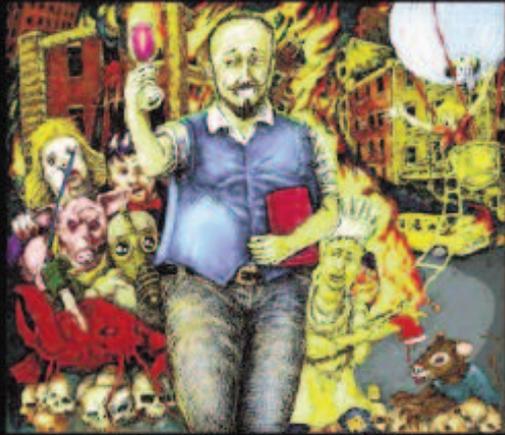
**Taylor Gaede** writes, "I am a freelance writer currently living in South Florida. I have been previously published in *Living Waters Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Freshwater Literary Journal*, and *The Stray Branch*."

**Keith Perkins** is a high school English teacher in Verona, New Jersey. His work has appeared in *The Irish Post*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *The Avalon Literary Review*, and *Adelaide Magazine*. A father of twin toddlers, Keith enjoys travelling, writing, reading, hiking, skiing, and naps.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Sin Fronteras*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Qwerty* with work upcoming in *West Trade Review*, *Willard and Maple* and *Connecticut River Review*.

Artist **Bruce Baldwin** of Cary, NC, writes, "have folks visit my Etsy site at [FromBrucesArtStudio](#), or my Instagram site at [brucebaldwin798](#)"

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to be part of - by any means necessary...

Two visitors, whose own music has been muted by regrets over  
long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student,  
who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn't  
face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in  
danger almost destroyed another woman's life...

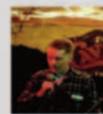
A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...



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by Marty Smith



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