



The Fourier Transform

THE FOURIER TRANSFORM

...with a little help from my friends

June 8, 2000

...come play in uncle john's band

last night i put on my silver wings,
strapped on my whiffle parachute,
to navigate an uncharted course,
ride down a more scenic route.

so i flew through an extant pipeline
my toes trifling with the crowds,
sorting out the burnt out peggers,
from the raucous cheering shrouds.

i saw myself amidst the masses,
a schizophrenic with a twist of lime,
running in and out the spinning blades,
running and running out of time.

i thought i was in complete control,
of this giant lifelike video game,
i thought i had a life to spare,
when the system crashed or called my name.

then i was dodging spinning blades,
my other self the controls fiddling,
he had ten thumbs, i had but one,
mine was up and his were twiddling.

i learned how to bend rules,
bend and break them on the run,
the hardest rule by far to break,
to break rules when there are none.

as i hit a cruising height,
above the blades, out of control,
the sign said "end of the line",
and it said "slow down, pay toll".

sometimes when the winds blow east,
and the mood rides a rocking horse,
i still put on my silver wings,
follow signs to an uncharted course.

Contents

INPUT	v
1 THE RAT RACE	3
2 THE AFTERMATH	11
3 A FRIENDLY CHAT OVER A CUP OF TEA	19
4 ANOTHER FRIENDLY CHAT	25
5 KAAT	31
6 STEPPING IN	39
7 JEEVES	45
8 HOSTEL DAY	49
9 BOOTS	53
10 ALF	57
11 FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS	65
12 JACKED	71
13 ERRORMALAI	75
14 A MISSIVE FOR MISS	79
15 NO QUARTER	83
16 LONGWATER	89
17 A RED LETTER DAY	93
18 A NIGHT OUT	97

19	WHERE FART THOU ROMEO	101
20	RELEASE	107
21	THE WHISTLER	115
22	ANOTHER ROUND	121
23	AID	125
24	SPY VS. SPY	131
25	THE KEY FUNDA	135
26	THE DREAM JOB	139
27	A FRIENDLY CHAT OVER A CUP OF TEA	143
	OUTPUT	147
	WHO ARE YOU?	149
	WHAT WAS THAT?	151
	WHERE ARE WE?	155

INPUT

”Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch entrate”!

It’s unnerving to read the first sentence of a book and have to flip back to the cover to ensure it’s in the right language. The purpose of this quote, however, was neither to intimidate, nor to showcase the author’s remarkable linguistic abilities (abilities? ...all the Latin I know came out of Asterix¹ and this quote is not even in Latin. It’s Italian). In fact I may as well have pulled this out of your dime a dozen ”Quotations for every occasion”. Nevertheless, it signifies the beginning of my tale, something I did not realize at the time I embarked upon this journey.

Returning to my linguistic abilities, yes, I know many languages. My native language is C but me and my friends, we speak a mixture of C, Pascal, and a UNIX dialect of Fortran. I can even swear in Lisp. These are languages that some humans understand most of the time and most computers understand some of the time. Yet I have chosen to chronicle the trials and tribulations of a bunch of some 2,000 odd `/* schmux */` in a language as mundane as English. Schmucks, I thought was a bit pompous and having misspelt it too, I was about to cross it out when better counsel prevailed. If you care to look closely you would notice that the word that yours truly did not obliterate on account of better sense prevailing is enshrined within a pair of `/* ... */`. To the fortunate few who have not encountered the seemingly obscure combination of symbols, suffice it to know that it indicates a C comment `/* text that is ignored by a computer and is of vital importance to nobody I know */`.

So much for all this pompous and seemingly computer literate claptrap. Its main purpose is to set up the luxuriant technological ambience that embeds this narrative and to provide a rich medium to illustrate things that seem unrelated on the surface.

...and so much for C and its comments. Suffice it to say that in the many years that I have been subjected to programming in C, the comment has been my saviour and sole link to sanity. In its redundancy lies its power, which is why I never delete anything `/* I simply comment it out */`. `/* I shall, therefore, use comments freely, when and where I please, with utter disregard for whats contained within and in the spirit of a true rebel I shall even employ /* nested`

¹The adventures of Asterix, an indomitable gaulish warrior by Goscinny-Uderzo. Set in 50 BC, the comic strip is the story of a little Gaulish village holding out against the Roman invansion.

comments /* which are syntactically illegal */ */ for a comment does not affect semantics, unless I desire it to. A lot of what is written inside comments is shit, which of course says virtually nothing of whats outside. Years of self analysis and soul searching have left me still searching and analysing. It has made me aware though, that I seek not necessarily with the aim to find but for the experience that lies therein. The point that I am trying to make in a really contorted manner here is that my comments don't always provide an explanation or the anticipated answer. Sometimes they are feeble attempts at being witty or clever. Sometimes, just a refreshing alternative to other symbols of punctuation. */

Anyway, back to that Lasciate ... business. That misleading starter that had you ranking this opus up there with "Far from the Madding Crowd". Far from it, this is all about the Madding Crowd though more in the "Stuff the Brassiere Olearse" category as far as books go.

I shall now put you out of your misery by explaining that first sentence.

/* Perhaps you

(a) are one of those smart alecky types who revel in knowing the meaning of such obscure trivia

(b) keep the dime a dozen book of quotations handy and wear spectacles

(c) were cheeky enough to peek ahead, knowing I'd explain it sometime

(d) were never in any misery because you are an Italian that bought this book by mistake without glancing at a second sentence and are in misery now

(e) are a moron who is holding this book upside down to whom all these squiggles are equally intelligible

(f) all of the above

(g) none of the above

(h) some of the above

/* The publishers of this book are conducting a survey of the readers of this book. Kindly mail a copy of this page in triplicate with the appropriate category (a)..(h) marked and a slogan in less than one or more than a million words as to why you love this book. /* This must be the effect of all the MAD magazines I've read. I shall, however, take care to curb this tendency to digress in the future. */ */ */

Lasciate... in simple English is "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" and is allegedly inscribed on the gates of hell in Dante's "Inferno". "Abandon hope all ye who enter here" would do very nicely on the hallowed portals of the Institute I was to inhabit for four years and acquire among other things a well-rounded education.

I

1

Chapter 1

THE RAT RACE

Flowing out in a file,
With my nose to the grindstone,
I stop to think a while,
A fight to win, a rat race,
Stark reality face to face.

The Catcher in the Rye opens... "I am not going to tell you where I was born or how and where I was bred and all that sort of David Copperfieldish crap." The point in opening this book with a quote from another book is solely the following. Imagine ten years from when this book makes it big, you are a finalist in a most prestigious quiz competition. The tie-breaking question on which the winner is going to be decided is:

"What is the connection between The Fourier Transform and The Catcher in the Rye?"

Your senses are in overdrive and through the adrenalin buzz a sequence of neurons fire signalling your sweaty palms to the buzzer that waits patiently. Your parched mouth involuntarily forms the sentence,

"The Fourier Transforms opens by quoting the opening from The Catcher in the Rye".

The quizmaster smiles and with the briefest of pauses declares you the winner. Your rival complains vociferously and screams,

"The Fourier Transform opens with the quote from Hell's gates."

The quizmaster holds a quick emergency conference with his organizers to avoid embarrassment. The profoundly intellectual audience is split down the middle over which quote is truly the opening to the "The Fourier Transform". The tension in the air is stifling. Some guy called Alf shouts out from the back of the audience that you're all a bunch of idiots because the real connection is that The Fourier Transform opens with the Lasciate quote which relates to Dante's Inferno, the writings of which strongly influenced the rock group Uriah Heep that took their name from a character in David Copperfield which is part of the opening sentence of the Catcher in the Rye. Everyone has their definitive

opinions that will remain unmuted by the quizmasters verdict. If you're lucky you will win. Either way you will have experienced first hand what I refer to as The Rat Race.

Getting back to me I may as well pile on the David Copperfield spiel. I was born into an average middle class family in urban India. My birth was not marked by the appearance of a comet or any other celestial incongruity. I was simply one of those Steppenwolfish characters that the author Hermann Hesse had described to perfection long before I was even born. Suffice it to know /* I really love this suffice it to know. It gives my otherwise sloppy writing style that scientific precision */ that I was an average kind of guy. Like all average guys I was average. I was average till I got into high school and then I became worse. I became your average guy in high school with aspirations to make it in life.

A defining feature of the Indian middle class is the desire to rise, not with a flourish in leaps and bounds but usually in small incremental amounts of one-upmanship. Nothing unusual, you might say, since this is a phenomenon observed in almost every known social group. The sheer passion, though, with which this goal is pursued has to be experienced to be believed. The intensity towards achieving the end more than often makes people lose sight of it as they focus their efforts on acquiring the means to the end. The Indian middle class is thus embroiled, not so much in keeping up with the Kumar's as in a one-upmanship battle on the means and devices that would keep them up and ahead of the Kumar's.

Another defining feature of this populace is that everyone is more sensitive to what others think than what they themselves believe. As far as I was concerned people cared less about what my career should be or where I was headed. I was judged simply on what I was visibly doing for my career. I had to make sure that I did all I could to try to get into one of two professions that were deemed respectable and at the top of the professional totem pole. Engineering and Medicine. Nowadays I am told that there is more variety at the top and about time too. The rationale for these professions being much sought after was generally that they were noble intellectual pursuits, no doubt, but more importantly in demand and lucrative. The basis for middle class thinking was the word "average". If you were the best in your line of work any line would be quite acceptable. The odds though favoured mediocrity and the bottom line was that one was better off being a mediocre engineer than a mediocre artist, from a financial and social standpoint. Thus, if one did not make it into one of these professions, there was the serious danger of being thought of as being completely ordinary. One may have to spend the rest of one's life as an ordinary person with nothing particular to differentiate one from the other ordinary people and what could be more frightening than that.

Paying one's way through college, though acceptable to the middle class, was deemed decidedly inferior to having the government pay for one's education. These government run professional colleges invariably chose their students by conducting entrance exams. Professional colleges that did not have their own entrance exams were viewed with suspicion. Such colleges invariably ad-

mitted students by considering their marks in the high school public exams. Some others admitted students who could fork out hefty sums of money that were donations to the college's educational fund. There were a million boards that organized these high school exams in nearly as many regional languages inevitably in a mutually inconsistent fashion. There were of course notable exceptions and it was not as much of a mess as it may appear but the public high school exams were considered by many pundits as entering the sweepstakes. Rather than leave my future to a roll of this academic dice, I aspired to clear a specific entrance examination. IIT-JEE they called it. In Hindi the suffix "ji" is added as a mark of respect. Years before making it in life was the central theme of my adolescent existence, I thought the JEE was indeed out of reverence. Turned out it was an acronym for Joint Entrance Examination. You saw it in advertisements of various sorts in newspapers, magazines, billboards.... To even the mildly observant eye it was everywhere. As the words indicate it was a joint examination to the Bachelor of Technology (BTech) program held by 6 institutes that were all called IIT or Indian Institute of Technology. These venerable establishments were located in the three metropolises Delhi, Bombay and Madras, the holy city of Benaras and the two K'purs - Kharag and Kan. Geographically they had the subcontinent covered pretty well.

One of the bizarre consequences of the intense competition was that there was competition to get admission into the tutorial classes that helped people prepare for these exams. Tutorial classes, in public opinion, were meant for students who were having difficulty with their academics. When it came to preparing for the goliath JEE, however, everyone needed help. I decided to try to cover all bases by enrolling into the Gupta Correspondence Program in Delhi, Mishra's Study Circle in Bombay and VelMuruga's classes in Madras. One needed an aggregate of 75 percent in the tenth standard public exam /* better known as the tenth boards */ to become eligible to receive the material from Mishra's. I barely made it having eked out a measly 76 percent in my public exams. My mother was worried sick about me. To make matters worse, I did not write the standard National Talent Search Examination /* NTSE */ administered to students in 10th standard. The students who did well in this examination received a scholarship through their college years. The stipend was not much but it was prestigious and a preview of the competition to come. Therefore, parents were anxious to have their kids take such exams so that they could gauge where their child stood relative to the competition. I missed taking the exam on account of a bureaucratic hiccup on the part of my high school. I was miserable. It was like losing the war because you were not allowed to fight. It really was war. There were these little battles here and there to hone your skills. I even took the exam for entering the armed forces training college, not because I had any intentions of becoming an ace fighter pilot, or a submarine commander but because I wanted experience in competitive exams.

Experience and confidence. Nobody ever told me that I was average or mediocre. Peoples thoughts and actions, however, seemed to take the possibility that this was the case into strong consideration. If the results of your most recent exam were not up there, mediocrity was almost an implicit assumption that was

hard to surmount. Teachers thought they were being considerate and wise by telling some of us that we would be better off lowering our sights. It was hard enough dealing with the pressures of adolescence. I found myself clawing my way up through a hole of confusion and lowered self-esteem. A hole I never dug. I had friends who did not have the spirit or good fortune and lapsed into this hole that spiralled down for no fault of their own. The hand I held out in support was only half-hearted. I needed it to try and claw my own way out and to keep clawing so as not to fall back in. My poor friend Vinay had a real climb. He had scored 72 percent in the tenth boards and did not qualify for Mishra's Study Circle. He wrote them an apologetic letter pleading to be given a chance but they drew a hard line. He was forced to beg and borrow material from those of us that qualified.

Getting material from tutorial classes was an interesting experience in itself. Mishra had clearly been in the business longer and had very professional looking course material. The way it worked was that Mishra's sent you material every month that contained problems that you had to solve and return by some due date. If you didn't return them on time, you would not get full credit for them. VelMuruga's on the other hand, had been founded by an ex-cartoonist, and it was as if he had hired characters from his comic strip as professors to teach students. The primary case in point was VelMuruga's in-house mathematician, Vellaithambi, who was a wizard. Twice a year, VelMuruga would send his dream team of teachers to the major cities. Everyone eagerly looked forward to attending Vellaithambi's mathematics classes for precious pearls of wisdom. Rumor had it that he had invented a totally new barrage of problem solving techniques and that he was going to write a book to replace George Polya's classic "How to Solve it". He had a way of demystifying complex concepts. He said, "There is nothing complex about complex numbers. In fact, they are more real than real numbers". At that point, all of us felt as if the answer to the most important question in the universe had been revealed to us. We felt as if we understood the grand unified theory that had been kept from us by others. Vellaithambi also bestowed on us his deep insight into the philosophy of mathematics that he succinctly paraphrased, "Mathematics is another name for manipulation and manipulation is another name for simplification". Someone said he was most definitely a constructivist from the Brouwer school of intuitionistic logic. I don't really know what that means but it is stuck in my head and so I thought I should put it down in case you should find it to be of relevance. What I knew at that point was that we were learning from a true master as the legendary mathematician Gauss himself had recommended.

It still makes me want to hurl when I think of what a holy piece of shit I was back then. Of course it is easy to blow chunks looking back in retrospect but when you are well entrenched in the system, when you are the veritable system itself, it is kind of hard to step back and get a measure of yourself. Also when the rest of your friends and peers are all like that and when your parents expect you to be like that there is really not much you can do. I remember how we used to avidly discuss the relative merits of Mishra vs VelMuruga or Sears & Zemansky vs Resnick & Halliday or IIT(Kanpur) vs IIT(Madras). We used

to be really cutthroat about it all. We felt like we could not afford to give a quarter or lose an inch as it would be the end of us in the ruddy rat race.

We used to be really crummy about the competition. Guys would meet and one would say "You know, I couldn't mug for the whole of last week because my mother's sister's great aunt had a boil on her little toe and I had to keep going and visiting all the time" And the others would think "This chap must have mugged his balls off last week". Nevertheless they couldn't help but feel secretly happy that perhaps there was one guy less.

...and guys would swear that even 5 marks made all the difference between coming first and not getting in at all.

...and guys would swear that "We are sure to get in, because I knew a guy that was a moron if ever there was one and he got in and lets face it, you know, how many guys come from English speaking backgrounds, are basically quite intelligent and have enrolled for all these tutorials. Not all that many, so we are all sure to get in, you know".

...and guys swore that "All I am interested in is astronomy, I am mugging chemistry and stuff only because I know that the IITs are the best place in which to do Physics and ultimately I want to become an astronomer so it makes sense to try for the JEE though, of course, if I don't get in, it really doesn't matter at all, because I can become an equally great astronomer after doing a BSc in Physics in some local college". On the face of it, a random person had a 2% chance of success at the JEE. As with anything else with such a low success rate, people either came up with various arguments that apparently improved their chances or defense mechanisms in case of failure.

I was one of those guys that had convinced myself I had an aptitude for Mathematics. Pferdesheise¹! I had as much of an aptitude for Maths as I had for Physics or for beating Ho Chi Minh at Jan Ken Pon². I was told I had an aptitude. I wish somebody had told me I could have been a chef or a masseuse, a joker or a thief. Life may have been more interesting. You might have been enjoying one of my ratatouille-kebab ala carbonara creations, or winding down at my onsen in the alps, laughing at my stupidity or laughing at your own after I had robbed you blind. I, however, had an aptitude for Mathematics, I was told by my aunt. My aunt who was also astonished that schools these days taught calculus in the day and age of the pocket calculator. Maybe our society is such that we only produce people with aptitudes for scientific pursuits geared to be useful as an engineer or a doctor. Vinay was a tennis player. Ranked second in the nation at one point of time but of course his real aptitude lay in Physics. He just happened to be able to apply Newtons equations in real-time to propel and redirect a tennis ball with the scientific precision of a mechanical engineer. So Vinay traded in his overhead smash for a long shot at the grand prize. The JEE! It is ironic and unfortunate that I should say this now, with biting sarcasm but it hurts. At the time I was completely supportive and maybe even partly responsible in gently reorienting Vinay to join the race, lest he get trampled in

¹Horseshit.

²Rock Paper Scissors.

the stampede.

Then came the day of the great exam. It was just another day like any other. Once again singularly unmarked by anything natural or man-made. Nine hours /* twelve actually, including the English paper, which did not count towards computing the rank */ would make or break my life, and the lives of all the others who appeared. ...and guys from near and afar, all the rats in the rat race went and wrote the exam /* quote from Pied Piper of Hamelin suitably paraphrased */ All desired intensely to get in but since the best laid plans o'mice'n'men gang aft agley, some got in with the ranks they desired, some got in and some didn't get in at all, for there were but a little over 2000 seats in "the hallowed institutions of higher learning" and much over 200,000 aspirants. For those that got in and this fortunate /* or unfortunate */ number included me, it was strictly the best of times.

People came and congratulated us and we felt that we'd done something great. I come by note to give and receive, Like one of two contending in a prize; That thinks he hath done well in people's eyes; Hearing applause and universal shout, Giddy in spirit, still gazing in a doubt, Whether those peals of praise be his or no... /* gratuitous quote from the Merchant of Venice */ Hah, even old Bill could not shake a spear at that. Not by any yardstick or tadpole could he, yelped, Joseph Cockersnook, author of the famous beer bible "Taming of the Brew". It was a time for mad rambling and wild celebration alright.

A time of great euphoria. My sister put a big JEE conqueror banner up on my door. Friends and people we knew only barely came and congratulated my parents. Suddenly, people from near and far came to me for advice. I guess people felt that if I could make it into the top 100, their progeny had a pretty good chance of making it too. Our social standing seemed to have jumped by leaps and bounds. My parents felt that the years of perspiration and sacrifice that they had put into my upbringing were well worth the effort. My father had his own theory about my success. To those people who came and asked about the secret of my success, my old man said it was quite expected given my good genes and my capacity for hard work. In fact, fearing for my health he had had to force me to sleep, so engrossed in solving complex problems I was. Cantaloupe Cojones³! For the most part it was just hard work, substitution of values in formulae or at most a little manipulation of the same. The rest of the time I was cramming the same formulae, some standard methods of manipulation and in some cases just simply memorising the printed solutions provided by the tutorials. It really was child's play.

Twinkle, twinkle little star,
Power equals I square R.
Up above the sky so high,
Power equals V I.

Its just that I felt sorry for the children. Children who had just lost two or more prime years to a haze of rehashed tutorials, recycled problems, xeroxed

³Melon balls.

sample tests, alphanumeric strings symbolising obscure formulae and chemical reactions. I felt sorry for my friends, sorry for myself. The race had been run. The race that qualified the children as big rats to run with the other champion rodents in a longer and tougher race.

Of course at the time such thoughts occupied no part of either my dreams or my waking conscience.

Chapter 2

THE AFTERMATH

Before getting in I had sworn I would do Maths. After all even my omniscient aunt had told me I had an aptitude for it. Now I had a sneaking suspicion that research level Mathematics was a different ballgame. I thus found myself gently cajoled by parents, peers and most of all the system into the "highest" branch that my rank permitted me to take, namely Computer Science. That was the one good decision I made or rather the one good decision that was made for me.

Computer Science is the cutting edge, the fine honed scimitar of technology that prods on, with its cute buzzwords and catchphrases that go out of date quicker than they are invented. People in the know or those who know that they do not know, people whose minds are a Karnaugh map full of X's /* those who dont care */ sometimes call it Cock Science. There is a lot of hype and hot air in trying to teach a dumb old machine to perform new tricks. It is indeed easier and infinitely more interesting to learn to tango on a tightrope with Taramani Nair. /* Taramani Nair was our guiding spirit, an apparition that was passed down to us by our seniors. The reference may seem quite anachronistic here but then concepts like Taramani Nair obey no temporal laws. */ Anyway, whoever said that hot air and hype never changed the course of mankind. There is also a whole lot of really cool stuff that is often lost in the backdraft of a fast evolving stream of thought, only to be resurrected eons later. It really takes a true cockster to be able to tell the chalk from the cheese and eat the chalk.

People tell me that it is the same in other fields of study, varying from the history of renaissance art to basic accounting. For my own part, I can only speak with any semblance of feigned authority on my area of expertise, but I believe them. I believe them not because I am an antiestablishmentarian. If I question the establishment I do equally question those who doubt the establishment. I believe them not because I am ignorant of the difference between epistemology and ontology or because I am content in my ignorance. I believe them because I believe in the system. I believe that though the system has been perturbed on numerous occasions by people who have shaken its very foundations, it has yet been broken. The laws of entropy just do not seem to apply.

Anyway there I was having chosen Computer Science as my field of study

for the next four years. At the time I was really thrilled about making it to the top 100 of the IIT-JEE. My father went around finding out which was the best IIT to join and which the best branch. Some said Electrical Engineering at Kanpur was the best and others were certain that Mechy at Madras offered the greatest scope after graduation. Ultimately my rank determined my branch and location. I was really kicked. I felt that I had achieved what I had sweated for. It had been two long years coming. I felt a little sorry for my less fortunate classmates who had to make do with other local engineering colleges but life was tough, especially at age 17. I went around pretending to be nonchalant and all and when people came up and said, "You must be very brilliant, you know, coming in the top 100. It is the top 100 in the whole country". I would reply, "Oh I don't think I deserve it at all, must just have been lucky". Then it was most gratifying to hear "Come on, don't be so modest, it can't all be luck". At this point with a hint of embarrassment I would add, "Well, frankly I never thought I'd get in at all, you know, the Maths paper was real hard and I got into time trouble towards the end". The other person would react as though I'd just divulged some major secret about Maths papers in the IIT-JEE. If the person was a relative, an uncle or aunt, they would say "...and now we expect you to come first in IIT and go to MIT in USA and win a Nobel Prize". Some relatives would add "You must do as well as your father". They were either plain sarcastic. My father was generally too pleased to detect any sarcasm and was busy talking about the amount of money these boys make once they graduated. "You know, all the top companies make a beeline to the IITs and pay the most lucrative salaries to get the best. They call them the creme de la creme. In fact, though I shouldn't say it in these modern times but these boys get very good dowries too. I think, though, that he is interested in research and that sort of thing. There is no money there but then he could become very famous. Also there is nothing like the job satisfaction you get from research. Actually, I wanted to become a nuclear physicist myself. Anyway, I have told him he should do what he wants to do, what he enjoys doing, like research". At the time I used to scoff at my father's words because I was a cynic even then.

In fact, as far back as I can remember I have been a cynic. The only difference being the degree of cynicism. At no stage was there any doubt in my mind about what kind of a person I was. I was always a cynic and I secretly felt superior to all people I considered guileless and innocent for I considered naivete a form of stupidity. As I grew older I always used to be amazed by my earlier simplicity. ...and this process has not stopped. I still consider myself the hardest boiled cynic and continue to amaze myself as I grow older. Strangely though I seem to have developed this healthy respect for those who can see things without the convoluted filters of logic, apathy and deviousness that sometimes cloud my eyes. Maybe its just a manifestation of the grass being greener on the other side. At least I am not a skeptic. Those who call themselves skeptics are cynics of the worst sort. They are cynical about their cynicism and attempt to mask it behind the guise of a milder word.

I knew my dad would have liked me to go into research and get a doctorate,

but I felt or rather feared that I may not be good enough so I thought I'd most likely end up going the usual route of IIT, then an MBA from one of the IIM's /* Indian Institute of Management. Four of these comprise the hallowed portals of financial wisdom */ , to be followed by a distinguished career selling soap or peddling powder as an executive in some multinational firm. I felt my father was being unusually naive in dreaming of a research career for me. Though I was consciously a cynic, I was secretly seduced by the glamour and aura of high-level research. I imagined myself in some high security lab deep in the bowels of NASA or IBM sitting in front of futuristic computing machinery cracking open problem after open problem by applying deep and abstruse theorems from the theory of chaos to the cobordisms of multidimensional grassmanian spaces or some such thing. Though outwardly blase, secretly I determined to be the ultimate computer scientist. I had heard of the dangers of overspecialization and how Henri Poincare must be the last person to have a real wide field of interests. I decided that I would have a well-rounded knowledge of computers, though I did not have the foggiest idea of what the study of computers entailed. I devoured all the popular and pompously crass articles on computers in magazines and newspapers and endeavoured to become as knowledgeable about bits and bytes and modems and mice, as I could. I also tried to find out about my teachers to be. I learnt that one of them was an expert in expert systems. Another was artificial intelligence personified while yet another was world famous in India for his work in the theory of algorithms. All this inspired me no end. I felt I was entering education's hall of fame.

In between all this came a most interesting ritual called counselling. The purpose of counselling was supposedly to help the students make the choice of place and discipline of study. One calls it a ritual because one's rank pretty much predetermined the course of study one would undertake. The place where one studied was secondary. I received elaborate documents from the guidance and counselling unit which professed to clear all doubts that the students to be and their parents could possibly have. They detailed the routes that one could take to get to the institute. There were vignettes about a typical day in a typical student's life which started off with an hour of study in his /* the students were by default male */ room. Classes in the various departments followed, accompanied by practicals in the most advanced technical laboratories. Then a period of leisure during which games and fitness exercises were to be indulged in, to be rounded off by the daily pilgrimage to the library.

...one of the biggest in the country and computerised to boot, which was de rigeur. Reading such literature was positively energizing and I could not wait to get to the place. In addition of course there were a whole lot of forms and stuff which had to be filled out in quadruplicate. My mother insisted that I take the utmost care in filling such important documents. She was right. One mistake and you never get a chance to rue it for you spend the rest of your life running from pillar to post in a bureaucratic labyrinth trying to get the error rectified. Then with all forms filled I went to the sanitized building in which they were conducting counselling. At the time I had not yet got over my shame of being seen in public with my parents and insisted that they not

accompany me. My parents interpreted this as yet another manifestation of the touchiness of their eldest offspring while my grandparents reassured them that it was just an indication of my growing need for self esteem and independence from parental fetters.

The students had been bunched together according to rank. On the day I went for counselling the first 700 ranks had been called. The sign at the campus main gate read

“Dedicated to the service of the nation”.

My dad, who was dropping me off, quipped, “Which nation? I am told most of these boys rush off abroad as soon as they are done, never to return. You must come back.”

It seemed that rushing off abroad, like my discipline of study was a forgone conclusion. It sounded like I would probably possess some kind of freedom and control over my future after that. That did not really comfort me. I could not see that far and besides I did not need comforting. I was pretty happy with my present scenario as it was. There was this big hall into which we all were shepherded. There were half a dozen tables at which men with professional demeanours were seated. We went to these tables and received counsel regarding our choice. For most of us, the decisions had already been made and we just submitted the forms at the appropriate counter. Most of the students were male, there being but a handful of females. Roughly about half the students were escorted by parents and it was the parents that seemed most concerned about the whole procedure. They kept hounding the men seated at the tables with persistent questions about the difference between EP /* Electrical and Power */ and EE /* Electrical and Electronics */ and EC /* Electronics and Communication */ and whether there was any ragging at Kharagpur. Some wanted to know whether their offspring would have to wear seatbelts in class if he took Aeronautical Engineering. A concerned matriarch said her son really wanted to take Naval Architecture but that he used to get seasick as a child, which of course had been cured now by this homeopathic medication that he had been taking and that hopefully this fact would not be a problem with whoever it may potentially have been a problem with. After submitting the forms I went and paid up my fees.

On the way I met Vinay and some other guys I knew from tutorial classes and similar entrance examinations, all the so-called regulars. I too was a regular. One of these guys was R. Govardhan. In a realm of regulars he was an extra large, both in size and stature for he was AIR 1 /* All India Rank */. They never came any better. He had a head the size of a watermelon. He was also a lakh of rupees richer. VelMuruga tutorials had awarded him with a lakh of rupees in exchange for huge advertisements, where R. Govardhan endorsed VelMuruga as being solely responsible for his success. Even though the passport size photograph in the papers had clipped large portions of R. Govardhan's oversized mug, he was instantly recognized by one and all. I knew him from before as we had compared notes on a few occasions. In a small way it was like knowing a star before he became famous, which was cool. Five hundred of R. Govardhan's lakh of rupees were proffered as fees. Even the clerk accepting his

fees knew that Govardhan was AIR 1.

We then proceeded to the medical check-up which was fairly cursory. Many of the chaps were worried because their eyesight was pretty terrible. In fact at a glance one could make out that the population was primarily composed of bespectacled nerds. What spectacles, soda glasses with a million uses from burning paper to making rainbow reflections. We all had to strip and then while a gloved attendant held our balls we had to cough. R. Govardhan had jewels that rivalled his head in size. He could not keep his eyes off them. Periodically his head would tilt down and do a pan from one jewel to the other and then back. They were like lifers in Alcatraz. This reminds me about the origin of the word testify. It seems in ancient Rome people testified while holding onto their testicles thus giving rise to the word testify. I don't know whether this is true since I was given this piece of information by Vinay who was notorious for fabricating the most plausible concoctions. He also said that Testicles was the lesser known twin of Hercules, which leads me to believe that the origin of testify may be genuine. If you are one of those specimens that notes down all pieces of trivia in a diary in the hope of being asked the same in one of those quizzes which are so much a feature of the young Indian's intellectual life, you better check it up. As All India Ranks would have it, Vinay and I were to spend another four years together.

Incidentally, Vinay nearly ended the Jha clan during the course of counselling. Jha was another regular. Those from the second set of 700 ranks, which included Jha, were painfully full of questions about what to expect, from the forms to the physical and such. Vinay had known Jha off and on from these tutorial classes. The guy asked too many questions. So Vinay said that the physical was real cool except that you had to strip in public, deftly draw back on the left ball and release. The very observant medical officer kept precise count on an abacus like device of the number of times the family jewels knocked each other back and forth. Four was the passing count. Vinay had made it with one to spare but then he had cheated with an extra long swing, had seen a couple of guys falter and one bugger with rather equine equipment touch six. The institution did not want burn-outs and planned to weed out all those who had already mugged their balls off /* the inconsistency regarding women that got in was carefully glossed over */. It was best that Jha go practice for the big day. Jha came back lamenting a day later that it was impossible to get beyond two no matter what he did. Vinay suggested he buy a metronome for inspiration.

The ritual of stripping was strangely demeaning. All of us avoided looking at each other and there was no conversation at all /* the girls were in a separate room and I wondered what part of their body was held onto while they coughed or whether women never got hernia */. Finally, we put on our clothes and headed home. On the way back I felt a sense of belonging. The sprawling campus with its departments housed in futuristic buildings and its residents in squat dowdy blocks was home. I was really proud at that moment to be an IITian and as I went home on the bus I felt that people were looking at me with new respect.

In a few days I had packed most of my belongings and was back escorted by my folks and sister for what was to be a four year stay. The drive in seemed to take forever. The well kept road snaked its way through this forest spotted with deer. My father commented that in such sylvan surroundings one could really think. When he was in college he used to take long walks in the neighbouring forests while solving differential equations in his head. I bit my nails in agony hoping my father wouldn't make an ass of himself by opening his mouth when we reached the hostel. My mother beamed at my father's imagined brilliance, while in the back seat my sister was bugging the hell out of me. I burst out with muttered expletives. My mother looked shocked and my father started on one of those important lectures of his. From where I had learned such words he didn't know. Had he not always said that one should treat one's sister with respect. Just because I had gotten into IIT was no reason for me to forget my manners. blah, blah, blah... I guess it was just nerves on my part.

We finally stopped in front of the hostel. On the way we had passed many boys who seemed to stare at us in a most offensive fashion. One of them looked like he was drooling. The fact that my sister seemed so contented made it all the worse. I wondered what the reaction of 200 odd boys would be when I walked in with my family. One more time I wished I had been born an orphan. Anyway we were there. I went in search of the hostel office, found out my room number and returned to find my family standing plum in the centre of the hostel holding various pieces of my stuff. One a bucket, one a table lamp, one a mattress and a diaper with a big safety pin.

The hostel was a 3-storeyed affair, a rectangular structure built around a large quadrangle. Narrow corridors ran the length of the building. A stairwell on either side of the quadrangle opened out in the middle of the corridors on each floor. The corridors were lined one one side, with doors to hostel rooms and a low wall with a ledge overlooking the quadrangle, on the other. A row of 16 rooms ended in a bathroom in the corner of the building in each of the 12 well-defined wings. Along the breadth on either side of the quadrangle was the mess and the common room.

At that point of time it seemed to me as though the whole hostel was out in the corridors lounging on the walls and viewing my entry with unbridled amusement. From some rooms came loud music of the hard rock sort. I quickly hustled my kin in the direction of my room, took my stuff, chucked it into the room and started wishing them goodbye. My mother insisted on setting out my room but I lied to her that I had to go for some orientation programme immediately and so would have to lock my room. Then my mother said they would wait till I came back but I said I didn't know when I'd be back. My sister came to my rescue and said that perhaps I was ashamed of them and wanted to be rid of them. My mother pretended not to hear and wanted to go to the mess to find out whether they served milk at night. I convinced them that there would be nobody in the mess at that time and that I would come home soon and inform her about the food they were serving. As it turned out, Govardhan's parents had also just arrived in the Hostel. Our parents immediately struck a conversation and in a matter of a few minutes, they came to the conclusion

that Govardhan's greatgrandfather's sister's husband's sister's greatgrandson was me. That was the last straw. I had hoped that leaving home and joining a hostel would mean that I was away from an extended family of any kind. That was not to be. Not only was Govardhan, related to me, our marriage number was a paltry 1. Just like mathematicians have the *Erdos number*, south Indian brahmins define the notion of a marriage number as the least number of hops across marital unions to relate you by blood. These numbers as with Govardhan and me is typically small. Us brahmins, we're a pretty incestuous little cabal. I was dying to get out of there but I could not trust leaving them alone with Govardhan's parents. Govardhan's mother might suggest that they all go check out the sanitary conditions in the bathrooms or the quality of reading material in the common room. Finally, with much trouble and embarrassment on my part I saw them to the car and made sure they drove away.

Meanwhile, next door my other self sauntered in, having crossed the length of the sub-continent alone. Alone, like a high plains drifter in a hostile town, with a single suitcase in contrast to my multiple little boxes and bundles. My schizophrenic friend, whom I refer to as my other self is actually quite real. Names, places, backgrounds all different, yet we were united in experience. Sometimes I narrate what I saw through his eyes, at other times I have used my own. On the odd occasion I have used his left eye, my right one and vice versa. Sometimes he does the narration along similar lines. I apologise for any confusion you may experience on account of this dual existence but that's just me. I am a dreamer. My visions come portrayed through two sets of eyes, stereo images of a higher dimension. There we were, face to face, the high plains drifter and me. We met, introduced ourselves, exchanged pleasantries and then split into the two neighbouring rooms.

I closed the door and sat down on the metal sheet resting on four concrete blocks that served as a bed. It complained with such ferocity that I jumped high enough to evict a spider from his abode on the ceiling. Then another clang, this time from the door. It seemed as though somebody had just kicked the door with intent to break it down since it nearly caved in. "Freshie fall out" boomed a voice.

Chapter 3

A FRIENDLY CHAT OVER A CUP OF TEA

The shock of the door half being taken off its hinges threw me into a state of panic. I felt at that moment much as Captain Richard Smith would have when the Titanic hit the iceberg. My heart leapt into my mouth and it was with some difficulty that I dislodged it and cajoled it into its rightful place, doing upwards of a squillion /* to use Anna's word */ beats a second /* Note all these loose juicy bits of trivia placed to give the triviamongers their moneys worth. Its amazing how one can contrive pretty much anything into a given scenario. For those of you who don't give a flying frijole for these titbits, suffice it to know that I shall in due course cut out the bits */.

I had been dozing along in a gentle reverie, a daydream in which I was being felicitated for having won my second Nobel prize, all this on my way down after bulldozing the arachnid. This was a recurring theme in my daydreams though not my most frequent, nor my favourite. I landed awkwardly. "Fuck", I cursed. The ease and facility with which one used words that are indelibly stamped all over bathroom walls on this planet was not acquired at birth but through years of dedicated devotion and committed application to the cause of furthering one's vocabulary. Pick up a bestseller and play a variant of book-cricket¹ where a page with a sex related description is a sixer and even you can hit 36 runs an over on a regular basis. Most folks I knew devoured these without paying a whit of attention to the matter on either side of these salacious sections. We were all equally adept at using profanity as punctuation. Over the years this has given rise to a tremendous vocabulary as far as 4-letter and other kindred words go. I do not make an idle boast when I claim that I can churn out passages and passages of purple prose containing the most lurid sex, even if /* or rather specially if */ I am woken up in the middle of the night and asked to do so

¹Version of cricket played by repeatedly opening a book. The last significant digit on the open even numbered page determines the number of runs scored on the play (with two exceptions: an 8 is a single and a 0 is out).

blindfolded. Someday I shall pen it all down and win the Lulu /* the Pulitzer equivalent for lascivious literature */. I once dreamt that too.

I got myself up off the bed and made my way to the door. It must have befriended me as it complained with the same ferocity it had the first time around. It then made little noises of pain as it resettled itself. It was the beginning of a love-hate relationship with an uncharacteristically passionate piece of rusty iron that would last through the next four years. To me, at that point of time, it seemed as though it played a dirge lamenting the fate that was to befall me. To put it mildly I was thunderstruck. My fears were further compounded by the fact that I knew I was going to get ragged. At least Captain Richard Smith had the comfort of knowing the Titanic was unsinkable. But I, to quote Flaturtha the Numidian, had a very real sinking feeling. If you have ever read an Asterix comic you may remember the frequently seen ill-fated pirate ship with the good natured Numidian in the crow's nest. That was Flaturtha. From his perch on the corsair he was the soothsayer of his own imminent doom. That's exactly how I felt. I reluctantly opened the door just enough to see two fellows standing in the narrow corridor and looking at me in a most threatening fashion. I put on a smile like a prisoner greeting his executioner on the morn of his execution and croaked a "Yes" with a "?" at the end of it.

They were of medium height and were both wearing the mandatory IIT T-shirt. The T-shirts must have originally been white but to look at them now you would be hard put to determine not just the original colour but even the current colour for they had obviously been through a couple of Holi's. They both wore chappals and while one had on the lower half of a tracksuit the other looked as though he wore no piece of apparel other than the T-shirt. I later found out that he always wore shorts so short that they were completely covered by his untucked T-shirt giving him an air of partial nudity. Through the fear-tinted lenses of my eyes they seemed like the ghastliest pair of ruffians I had ever seen. One of them said, "Ok boss, move arse". I gazed at him with a total and utter look of incomprehension. What he said sounded like gibberish and bounced right off my tympani. Now in fact I am an expert at IIT speak and have contributed much to the IITian lingo in terms of the generation of new words and phrases of a most originally imaginative and colourful turn. I have also attended to the unearthing of the deep and abstruse etymological origins of many words which were buried in mists within mists of legend and campus folklore. At the time, however, I had been but familiar with the English language as it is spoken by Indians outside of the IITs. A phrase like "move arse" and a salutation like "Ok boss", well, as Casca said of Cicero's remarks about Caesar refusing the crown thrice, "For mine own part, it was all Greek to me" /* In fact Casca, the envious Casca, was not far from wrong, for Cicero did actually speak in Greek to ensure that the passers-by did not understand him. */. As I ambled off with them down the corridor I must have looked like a man being marched off to the gallows.

As we walked I noted the ease with which the two moved. The total comfort and complacency bred by years of familiarity. They had a look which was a mixture of aplomb and composure combined with a certain unreservedness, the

nonchalance and insouciance which accompanies a master in his home, a lion in his lair /* or even a liar in his loin */. A feeling of utter relaxedness. This was in total contrast to the commotion and confusion in my cranium. I looked as much at sea as they must have seemed at home. I walked or rather slouched as though I expected the floor to crumble under my feet any moment as I dragged my leaden feet along. I had been expecting to get ragged but nothing compares to the real McCoy.

All the stories and rumours of what they did. They forced you to take drugs, coerced you into vices such as drinking and smoking until you were rendered a slave to the practice. They compelled you into homosexual relations, animals and other sexual perversities. How some boys had committed suicide on having been forced to participate in sodomy. All these stories and more came flooding into my head. Mingled with the fear was the feeling that somehow nothing could happen to me. After all I had not even expected to get into IIT. Had I come this far just to lose it all?

...and just looking at the seniors around, I could not help but feel that this was a happy place. They had an air of quiet and easy companionship. A feeling of fraternal fellowship pervaded the place. You could see guys lounging here and there in groups of two and three indulging in chats and discussions involving movies and girls and studies. Some fellows were playing cricket with a tennis ball in a corridor, while two others were trying to dismantle somebody's bike and hang up the pieces on somebody else's clothesline. Most of the rooms were open and through the doorways wafted strains of the most diverse variety. You could hear music from Madonna to M.S. Subbalakshmi, U2 to Ustad Alla Rakha. Through open doors one could see the inmates sleeping, reading, listening to Walkmen and even one chap painting his ceiling after the fashion of Michaelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. I was herded into the painter's room. I was glad to see that I was not the only freshie. There were two others looking equally green about the gills.

"Ok now you buggers stand against the wall".

So we went and stood against the wall. There were three seniors in the room. Two of them were the guys who had escorted me and the third was the painter. The room was like any of the 191 other rooms in the hostel. A table, a chair, a bed and some shelves left little place for the six of us. The painter was perched on top of the cupboard and was painting the ceiling using a candle. He moved the lighted candle in slow spirals close to the ceiling, depositing soot in varying patterns. Sometimes circular, sometimes helical and ever so often a random dab to gently disturb the symmetry. The overall effect was mesmerizing. From time to time the artist would step back and gaze with a look of wonderment at the finished portion as if to say, "Is it possible, such creation is the work of man?"

During one such period of prolonged veneration the stub of the candle broke and fell on the guy with the very short shorts. He gave a howl of pain as the molten wax stung his skin and promptly picked up a paper knife and threatened to tar and feather the painter after having disembowelled him first and would the painter get his butt off the cupboard immediately. The painter, however, said he was quite comfortable where he was, thank you very much and though he

had no intention of coming down in the near future, could you please be a little more mature in front of freshmen and after all it was only an accident. Short shorts, however, was not appeased and refused to relax until he had repaid the painter, who he claimed had dropped the molten wax with malice aforethought. He switched on the ceiling fan rendering the continued existence of the painter atop the cupboard infeasible. If he had stayed there any longer the fan blades might have beheaded him. So the painter got down and was rewarded by jabs in the backside with the paper knife for his pains. In the meantime the guy in the tracksuit bottom had been finding the proceedings singularly boring. He turned to us and said, "Morons, putts intro".

The three of us just kept quiet. What the hell was an intro?

"Ok tell us your names, your hawaas², the last time you had your mothers' cunts around your neck, your frequencies and any other piece of info about yourselves that we should know."

Not wanting to displease them all three of us started simultaneously, "My name is R. Govardhan..." "My name is Manoj Patwardhan..." "My name is XYZ..." "Hey relax, You buggers go at it one at a time" said tracksuit bottom.

In the meantime the painter and short shorts after a brief and violent engagement, during which time the painter had rammed his rival amidst while short shorts had succeeded in holing the painter's particoloured raiments, had temporarily called a truce to enable them to join their companion in his verbal molestation of us.

"My name is R. Govardhan..."

"Cut it, cut it" said the painter.

"Hey Moss", this to the short shorts, "Why the fuck don't you teach these ill-mannered louts some etiquette".

Now Moss takes over in a real drawled nasal voice. Something like Bob Dylan would have sounded, had he been raised in Texas with the ability to speak Tamil.

"Okay you mawtherfawking bawstawrds, you're gonna have to say Sir when you address us, got it?, I said GOT IT?"

"Yes sir", "Yes sir", "Yes sir", returned three subdued voices. Then silence reigned once again. At this moment two guys came in and looked into the room. One of them addressed the painter.

"Bheema can we borrow one of them. After all you got three of them."

Bheema said, "Othaa³, Pballs, wait ra⁴. Right now we are teaching them manners. After we have potty-trained the puntars⁵ and had a little fun, we'll send them over. Of course we expect you to reciprocate. How many friendly interactions have you had so far?"

"Not a one, da" said a crestfallen Pballs shaking his head sadly. "Not a one, I am bereft, barren and desolate, make haste and send them quickly." To us,

²AIR (All India Rank). Ranking given to the candidates who pass the IIT-JEE in order of performance.

³Fucker.

⁴Colloquial usage for "friend" (like pal, dude or bud).

⁵Colloquial usage for "people" (like guys, chaps or fellows).

"You guys come to Room #123 when you're finished here, got it Room #123 and if you are not there I'll personally bugger you. I promise I'll bugger you and don't think you can escape, got it Room #123." Then turning around, "Shit, Flask I thought you were coming a week late. Got pained of Bangalore aahh". Another name to be committed to memory. I figured tracksuit bottom must be Flask. Flask, Moss, Bheema, Pballs I repeated in my head. Then Moss, the guy with short shorts said, "Fuck you man, Bangalore is far better than Madras any day. I dont know what the hell I am doing here".

Confusion. "Sir, is your name Moss or Flask?", I asked short shorts gingerly trying to clear things up.

Pballs retorted "As long as he has not told you what his name is, he is Sir to you, understand. ...and its none of your goddamn business what we call him." Then turning to Moss, "Othaa, Flask we should take this Sherlock fucker to Tarams" and he departed along with his companion.

Once again an uneasy silence held sway. Then Moss or Flask whatever his name was, turned to tracksuit bottom.

"Oiye Haraami, lets get things moving, these guys are standing around like dead ducks. We didn't get them here to adorn the room. They better do something to entertain us. I am going to get real angry, man I am going to get angry".

"Ok lets have that intro again".

"My name is R. Govardhan..."

"Look here bugger, you forget Sir once again and there's no escaping the third degree for you".

"Sir my name is R. Govardhan and I did my schoo..".

"Look boss, either you is Gobewhatever or you are Gobes, you cant be is are Gobes. So make up your mind."

A slight titter ran across the room /* not to be confused with Dolly Parton streaking in the vicinity */.

"Oiye, whats the laughter for. Nobody laughs in this room but us, got it. Now wipe that smirk and give it a decent burial".

So we wiped the smirks off our faces with our hands, threw the smirks to the floor and crushed them like cigarette butts.

"You Gobes continue, and cut out all that schooling crap. Lets get down to the brass tacks. Whats your frequency?"

"Sir I don't know my frequency, I don't know what a frequency is".

"You mean to tell me you got into this godforsaken joint without knowing what frequency is? I can't believe it. What has the JEE come to or are you a GOIN candidate⁶?"

"No".

"SIR!".

"Sir".

"Ok then what's your frequency?"

"I don't know".

⁶The Government of India had a small quota for students, who could bypass the JEE in gaining admission to the IIT. They were usually considered inferior as they had not qualified through open competition.

"Hey come on man, you are beginning to pain me, at least take a guess".

"Sir 50".

"50 what?"

"Sir 50 Hz".

This was received with hoots of laughter.

"Boss you'll be the death of me. You must be really virile, 50 fucking times in one second and just with your hand. You must really spank that simian black and blue. Why you should be perpetually priapic or permanently exhausted"!

Meanwhile, one door down the hall the high plains drifter was being welcomed.

Chapter 4

ANOTHER FRIENDLY CHAT

It had been quite a decision for me, this trip down to a city I had never laid eyes on. The trip had been long, almost like a pilgrimage and I was bushed. I had never done a train ride this long. Thirty six hours in a compartment with a garrulous woman, her two whiny children and a man whose snores cut through the already earsplitting decibel levels. How I wished I had carried my walkman with me. At the time it seemed that if someone did not steal it on the train, some senior might see it as a sign of snobbery and take it away from me while giving me a hard time about it. I had decided it was probably better to stick with the bare necessities. I had not felt like reading. It was impossible to concentrate on any one thing. Every five minutes like clockwork my hand would go to the money vest under my shirt and reaffirm that it was zipped tight and that the contents whose form could be felt through the fabric were intact. The contents, just like the rest of my belongings, were minimal. A cheque for 2500 Rs. to cover the fees and living expenses for the first term, the official papers of acceptance and identity, 500 Rs. in cash and some change. I did not get off at the stations along the way. After what had seemed like eternity, I was there. It had been a giant leap of independence. I really did feel like a drifter and imagined the rolled up and half chewed piece of paper /* a bus ticket */ in my mouth to be a cigarette, whose curling smoke guided my senses.

”Inne da¹, why you come all the way from so far, what da, total stud and all”. ”Ok deesh² that, come lets go have some gaffee”.

I was only able to decipher the word coffee in that last sentence. A cup of gaffee, sure, what the hell. These guys talked kind of funny but it was interesting and being the parrot I was, it would not be long before my own speech acquired some colour. One of these guys reminded me of a Don Martinesque character /* Fester Bestertester */ with his toes pointing gently up to the heavens, one was

¹What ho old chap! Colloquial usage for “friend”.

²Ditch, forget.

a fair youth with dimples and the third was huge. He seemed quite tame though and said "Hi, I am Bheema" to which I replied, "Hi, I am Ghatotkaccha". The immediate consequence of that statement from a mind that was both weary and wary was that I was reproached by the man in-between and that I was christened "Tote" for the rest of my stay. After a severe roaching, where I was informed in no small words that the smart alecky attitude would get me into big trouble, a cup of coffee at Tarams, the local watering hole, was proffered. The coffee was great, fresh and strong, it soon overcame the pervading odour of cows and dogs who were locally employed in the capacity of dishwashers.

Then Bheema, with his heavy lids and glazed look, reached into his pocket. "Take" he said with a hand that had some kind of a white powder in it. I was petrified. Feverishly I weighed my options. If I refused they would have won. More than likely it was just a prank and the stuff was sugar or salt. If it was arsenic I would be dead but these guys would never murder me with all these witnesses around. Or would they. Even though the place seemed quite alive the witnesses were largely bovine. Then it could be what they wanted me to think it was. Some sort of dope that would enslave me for life. I was too tired to think and they loved it. "I am painter machaan³. Believe me, it helps.", prodded Bheema. I took a pinch, put it on my tongue closed my eyes, swallowed and gulped down some coffee. It tasted like chalk and going by the fact that I felt no different, I guess it was.

It was almost anticlimactic but they seemed quite impressed. "Abhey ek joke maar yaar"⁴, went Fester Bestertester.

"...and don't forget to say ding-dong when you are finished".

I searched through my arsenal for the best darn joke I knew and told it as best I could. "...so the bear wiped his arse with the rabbit", I finished. Bheema sniggered but the other two seemed apathetic so I said ding-dong. They were pretty friendly in general and Helen, the fair guy in-between who refused to divulge his name even gave me some books that would come in handy in my first semester. I was appropriately grateful. At the end of the session as they split up Fester Bestertester said, "Hi, I am Choprax. If you need anything you can ask me."

I went back to my little room and relaxed, but not for long as word spread that Tote was a major stud types northie who thought that idli was a Shao-lin monk. It is amazing how statements you never made can get ascribed to you and then after a while even you actually believe you made them. Thus it came to pass that Tote had to be broken in, and he was too, in little fragments scattered over multiple hostel rooms. At the end of the day though, Tote had made many acquaintances and hopefully a few friends. Choprax, had been particularly effusive. I was exhausted and had just about befriended my new bed when it was show time yet again. Some friends of Choprax were just dying to meet me. It was a real exercise in humility. I almost felt like I was trying to crawl out of a hole all over again. Some of these guys seemed so crude. Thankfully I

³ Colloquial usage for "friend" (like pal, dude or bud).

⁴Crack a joke, pal.

never understood half of what they said. A lot of what I did understand stung and was hard to swallow. My emotions ran the gamut from anger and breaking down to absolute delight at even the slightest friendly gesture. I guess you could have thrown in a touch of homesickness too. On my way back from yet another interaction I saw a bunch of batchmates, as fresh as myself, sitting yakking on the steps of the hostel mess. My buddy Vinay was already there, so I joined the spirit of camaraderie.

Notes on the day's interaction, and other pleasantries or unpleasantries were exchanged but inevitably the conversation veered technical. I found myself sizing these guys up just as they were sizing me. At the time I remember feeling that I was being written off as a nice try. A pretty accurate estimation too but I had no plans of hanging up my boots. In retrospect I think most of us threw in the towel somewhere along the line. It was just a matter of time. In fact those who threw it in early on got it back laundered and starched in time for the final stretch. Me, I don't recall having ever thrown it in. It used to hang around my neck like a garland that transformed into a noose. By the time it tightened it was too threadbare to hold on to.

Of the twenty odd people sitting, all but a couple had been rechristened. Most of us were still pretty uncomfortable with these names that pinched like a pair of new shoes.

"So, Rajesh, have you gotten a new name yet".

"I don't know man, that guy Moss said I was trying to put too many fundas in greek mythology because I said Socrates was my football idol. Then he asked me my date of birth and I said January eighth and he said Ok boss, your name as of now is Janus-with-a-german-accent".

Then a guy shook my hand and said, "Myself Patwardhan, Aeronautical".

"Hi, I'm Tote".

What a dumb name I had gone and gotten myself saddled with. It was all my fault. Me and my big mouth. Then I met Load, Gobes and Diro and couldn't help but snigger.

"You think that's funny this guy is called Horny", said Rajesh pointing at Vinay. Vinay had a pained expression on his face.

"Vinay, what happened man?"

It was the last time I ever called him Vinay. Vinay said he had been mothered by a Naval Architecture guy who said, "Laude, you chooth buggers, you think you are studs just because you are in comp-seeee, maadarchod, even if you all add up your Hawa's you won't equal mine. What are you looking at that Bo Derek poster for. Horny bugger!"

Here amongst their kin all the cats around could not help but smirk and stroke their whiskers. Rajesh kept saying it was all peaceful now that we had "made it". We had all "made it" and in style. It was time to relax. Everyone seemed to agree. I agreed too. It made me happy that everyone seemed to feel they could relax. It would give me an edge for I had no such plans. On the other hand I knew for a fact that the very sentiment was making its way through the other heads nodding in agreement that night. They knew that too.

Slowly people broke in ones and twos to turn in for what was left of the

night. I made my way back with a funny feeling in my stomach. Soon it was a painful gripe and I broke into a sweat. It went through a miserable few hours feeling weak and helpless. By the time it was six in the morning, I could not take it any longer. Not knowing what to do I knocked on Choprax door. There was no answer but it was open so I tried to rouse him which I did with a lot of effort. “Can you tell me how to get to the hospital.”

“Paagal hai⁵, dont ever voluntarily go to the hospital.”

He fumbled for a box on the shelf above his bed, handed me two green pills and went back to sleep. Damn! There was no way I could have gone to the hospital after that. I should never have asked in the first place. White powder, green pills, I was scared shitless. I made my way to the bogs.

If you have never stepped into an communal hostel bathroom in India, there is no point my even trying to describe it as being dirty or dysfunctional. You will try and compare it relative to what you have at home or a bad experience at some restaurant and what I refer to does not even rank on that scale. It took me almost five minutes as I carefully tiptoed my way over what could be seen of the bathroom floor to the nearest toilet cubicle. Soon the smell took my mind off the ache and all that had transpired since I had got here. I had to be careful, I had to survive. The bogs provided release as I flushed down the paranoia, gripes and two little green pills. A new day had begun.

We were given a big spiel on the kind of stuff one could do, the myriad of clubs and the big choice between NSO and NCC. There was this film of NCC guys being trained into the know-it-all machines who could scale a peak, swim a creek, fly a plane, stop a train, ride a horse, chart a course, drive a tank, rob a bank, sail a boat, stay afloat, fire a gun and have lotsa fun. NSO was just learning the rules of and attempting to play some silly sport. Poor NCC buggers in their uniforms and boots that weighed more and were significantly warmer than eskimoid standard issue, spent a year marching up and down the courtyard. The only things they learnt were the magic words “ice-rate” and “ice-trait”. They would, however, get a free Frooty /* mango drink */ to keep their morale up at the end of each marching session. Sometimes if they were good the NCC Captain would mix in with the Frootys an Appy /* apple drink */ that was presented to the cadet of the month. Patwardhan broke a long standing campus record by being cadet of the month twice in a row.

I managed to get into NSO ball-badminton. After marbles it was the most keenly contested sport even though the rules evolved with each game. Having been warned off by Bheema I was desperate to avoid the clutches of the NCC captain, so I took what I could get. The game itself was a cross between badminton /* which on campus was called shuttal */ and volleyball. It was played with approximately five people a side holding badminton racquets, tossing a fuzzy yellow ball /* that looked like it had fallen off Angus McFrugal’s tam’o’shanter */ back and forth. I was probably one of the star players despite my sporting prowess being limited to making consistent contact between racquet and ball. We were all pretty cut-throat about sports too.

⁵Are you crazy?

By now the interactions were indeed getting friendlier and I had amassed a pile of junk, books, old shoes and other welcome presents passed down the years. I even got a cobweb from Bheema's room. It was pretty intricate and he handled it like he had woven it personally. He said he had inherited it from Zeke, somewhat before my time and was glad to give it a new home. I felt honoured. Moss on the other hand, sold a spanking new ceiling fan to Janus who moved into the hostel room Moss was vacating to move to another floor. Moss said he was sad to leave it and reluctantly flogged it for a song out of the kindness of his heart. Moss settled into his new room with a satisfied grin just as the hostel authorities finished installing spanking new ceiling fans as part of the new renovation plan.

Tossed and turned like blindfolded kids and ready to pin the donkey's tail, we were out to poke each other in the butt. I suppose you could say the orientation was over.

Chapter 5

KAAT

A striving for education, A paper chase,
Stark reality face to face.

The dust was settling. It was our first week within the hallowed portals of this premier institute of national importance /* a term so trite it really rankles the conscience */. To many of us those were formative days. Quite a bunch, we were, with our pocketful of dreams, mouthful of ambitions, awaiting the challenges of the future with Quixotic zeal. For adventurous souls like me it had signified the big bad world beyond our sheltered wombs for we had crossed a Rubicon of sorts, traversing the lengths of the sub-continent, transforming a blot on the map into reality. On the other hand I was already there. This schizophrenic bent of mine keeps me perpetually confused and wonderfully inconsistent. The inconsistency is largely in the fact that I often take trips where my physical and spiritual self are headed in opposite directions.

Classes were cherished as those precious moments when the omniscient doyens of technology would enlighten us eager neophytes. They were the dancing days of the hesitation waltz, tentatively reaching out, feeling, groping, people, objects, ideologies and all the necessary ingredients comprising a modern socio-intellectual existence. Those were the days when I hung around with Janus, Gobes and Diro for we attended the same classes.

Gobes is/was/are/were Govardhan. He was AIR 1. That aside he was an easygoing guy who was hailed as a rising star and was being trained for the intra-hostel sporting events, given his endurance at a quiescent rate of 50Hz. Moss first started calling him Gobes. Then he changed his mind and called him Globes. Janus, who followed basketball almost as closely as football then started calling him Trotter, which led to the obvious variants of Trotsky, Trottington, Trotterdam, Trotation and Troteshwari.

Diro was Diro. He was called Diro like about 20 other guys who happened to share a name with the Director of the Institute. He had worked his ass off to get in and it was time to reap the rewards. He was one of those guys who came in and hung his boots high enough to ensure that he did not put them on

accidentally. He was the ultimate in scraping through, which is to say he managed to get on the right side of things while expending the least effort. He was of the opinion that if an electron can do it, a moron can do it. The eight fold path of least resistance he called it. The first tenet was to unconditionally surrender in the face of impending disaster. The second tenet was the Uparwala¹. The third was the Neechaywala². The fourth was the Beech ka Bandar³. The remaining four tenets were user defined and could be personally configured. He was so far removed from reality it was scary.

Janus or Rajesh Subramaniam was a funda-seeker. He was curious with capital "Q". Janus and I hit it off instantly. He was a local guy from Besant Nagar and knew the area really well. I had plenty to learn. The trip to the Besant Nagar beach was a mere 15 minutes by bicycle from the hostels. In yet another piddly assertion of independence I invested in a shiny red bicycle with sporty handlebars. It was to serve me well for a year after which it formed the foundations of luxury condominiums for white collar spiders who had day jobs with the bureaucratic folks in the Administrative block. For the moment though, I zipped to and from classes, made trips out to the beach and even took guys riding doubles and on one occasion triples. We even rode abreast with complete disregard to the signs all over campus. Porky loved riding abreast. It gave him some kind of wierd thrill. It was also necessary because he never quite learnt how to pedal. He was perfectly capable of being towed along, one hand on somebody's shoulder. On his own, he would be restricted to standing on one pedal and persistently pushing off the ground with his other foot. Mostly he just liked to say "Othaa macchees, lets ride abreast". A couple of years down the line one of these signs changed overnight to

DO NOT RIDE ABREAST

...lest you cry over spilt milk.

Horny had some enamel paint leftover from the painting of the hostel common room furniture.

Porky was another local. If Janus was curious with a capital "Q", Porky was excitable with a "XXX". A hyper guy who wanted to have an appendage in every pie that he was evenly remotely aware of. He was a cute looking fellow with a small simian face, big round eyes and the perpetual expression of a naughty boy who has just been caught peeking up his kindergarten teacher's saree. V. Kudiharasan had been called Porky in school itself. Janus who had gone to school with Porky said it was because Porky would always squeal when excited which was quite often. Janus said being in the same class with Porky was very frustrating. He was always the darling of teachers who would have a completely different set of rules to judge him by. He was the Headboy in his last year of school and was the paragon for generations of students to come.

Janus said that once Porky had been surprised on a Chemistry exam by some reactions he had not memorised. Towards the end of the exam a suddenly frantic Porky was hunting high and low for two missing sheets from his examination

¹Man above. God.

²Man below. Devil.

³Monkey in the middle.

paper. Soon the invigilator and a bunch of teachers had joined the frantic quest. Each student's desk and person was searched. Nothing. The chemistry teacher was down on her knees searching under Poriky's table. Poriky was also searching through his crocodile tears, his gaze glued to the cleft six inches below the cleft in the teachers chin. Poriky said he had written all his reactions on these two sheets of paper that had disappeared. The teachers had looked everywhere. Poriky suggested they may have flown out the window. He was seated in the center of the classroom. From where he was, even if he had made paper planes out of the sheets and propelled them at the window using a rubber band, the odds of them navigating their way out were pretty slim. Still the teachers went and searched outside the building under the window among old newspapers, banana leaves and other garbage. Nothing. Poriky suggested they may have flown into the Buckingham Canal. The Buckingham Canal is the armpit of Madras that runs a good kilometer from the classroom in which Poriky sat. The teachers were clever enough not to go frolicking in the sewage for Poriky's elusive answer sheets. Nevertheless, Poriky got full marks for all the work he claimed was on the answer sheets that were purportedly surfing down the Buckingham Canal. Then that was school. This was the IIT said Janus. None of that shit worked with the professionals here. Poriky's tricks would get him nowhere. Not that Janus really cared anymore because Janus had after all "made it".

There was also a guy called Manoj Patwardhan, who had been unimaginatively called Seedha. He was the kind of guy who comes in straight and four years later goes out straight. There were times though when even the arrow straight Seedha had to bend over and be accomodating. Seedha was into astronomy and rockets and planes and wanted to reach out and touch the stars /* so did Poriky but he only got to see them on film */. Seedha had thus signed up for Aeronautical Engineering.

Classes were fresh and invigourating. On one such bright morn I sat next to Kadaveru Karthik. The technological doyen in front of the class was unable to monopolize my maverick mind, a phenomenon whose frequency over the years made the exception the rule. It was not long before I got Karthik to share my point of view. Karthik alias Kaat was an anomaly of sorts as far as Golt nomenclature was concerned. Over the years I have become quite an exponent of golt recognition. A technique slowly mastered over the years with oodles of personal experience and a simple thumb rule, 4 or more initials and a last name ending in "U". Names such as P.O.R.K. Vindalu and K.O.M.A. Gatamaru are functional prototypes. Kaat was thus sufficient appellation for half of him.

I could spend pages of verbose recherche imagery describing Kaat without doing his persona justice. To keep matters brief, Kaat could well be deemed as the epitome of the "Mera Jeevan Kora Kaagaz"⁴ look. There were a number of second attempters among our ranks, persevering fellows, who having failed to gain admission the first time around had a second shot. To speak of Kaat's perseverance it suffices to say he was a third timer. Interesting, here was the fact that "first shot Kaat" had turned up a rank where the norms of society

⁴My life is a blank page.

and peer pressure would have landed him in Chemical Engineering, the most exalted of branches within the institute. Not good enough, was Kaat's personal verdict, the bird in hand policy obviously furthest from his mind. Next year, unfortunately it was a crash landing for our high flying zealot. Determined to make it he had a third shot and make it he did, to the exalted Chem Engineering department, which he gratefully accepted. Superficially it was so absurd that you almost immediately held it against the guy, something to which I too must plead guilty. On one of those days when the brutish facade of tomfoolery admits some finer emotions we had a long talk. It is often frightening to see just how much external influences can condition a chap academically and personally till he is knee deep in shit on a boat without oars, flowing like Porky's Chemistry paper down the Buckingham Canal. His gall at having a third shot and making it was admirable. I for one would have never had the balls or the spirit. He was a man to be reckoned with.

As the week's went by, I got to know Kaat better as we often sat at the back of the class solving crossword clippings he had assiduously saved from the back page of the Times of India. Kaat was a buff in the fullest sense of the word padded with a lot of f's to stress just how much of a buff he really was. In those days he was a crossword buff. Later he was to gain fame and notoriety as a quiz buff. His name was immortalized as the founder of "Kadaveru's Kwiz Kirkle", which for all you buffs out there derives its name from the sound that accompanies the firing of a human cannonball. This is not to be confused with the cocking of a rifle, which has something to do, I believe, with the name of a comparatively lesser known organisation whose name eludes me.

For the first year of our tenure at the institute, though, this dormant quizzing craze was overridden by the lure of the grid. I would while away the hours revelling in my demigod status as I brought forth my extensive vocabulary and worked wonders drawn from the creative recesses of my mind. "The 2-minute crosswords" I used to call them cracking clues more rapidly than I could write them down as Kaat looked on in awed reverence. The best part about daily crosswords is that solutions can be found the next day. While I've never been one to make confessions, it is only fair that I mention the furtive glances at succeeding clippings, which formed the keystone of my crossword cracking strategy.

In most matters, Kaat's self confidence and esteem as viewed from the outside was like a voluptuous belle in the institute, a figment of a frustrated imagination. In a realm where every cat had his whiskers permed, his shiny aegis of inscrutability portraying a bright young intellectual, Kadaveru was a conspicuous anomaly. In retrospect we were all that way for the most part. We just had our shields up. Kaat was courageous enough to leave himself open to attack. This complete openness caught us all by surprise. Most of us had a problem getting to grips with it. It seems to have been the only way to be as far as productivity was concerned. His pathetic look of despair and mumbled pleas would have penetrated fallout shelters. The thick skinned individuals, alluded to thus far as us were no match. Many a time did I help file down his mutilated metal model in the fitting workshop, suck in the precise 10ml of some

vile chemical that had the aftertaste of a barnacle in the Buckingham Canal. Janus, so often condescended to put all the fundas, so to speak, that Kaat had a higher attendance at Janus's lectures on Physics and other assorted academic vignettes than he had in the official class hours. Guys competed to have the honour of pedal powering Kaat to and from classes.

Among the necessary evils encountered by a fresher was a subject that went by the inconspicuous and rather frivolous name of Engineering Drawing. Often exalted as the primeval tool of communication for precise scientific minds, to a large number of us it was a prolonged nightmare. ED, its two syllable equivalent was a cruel joke perpetrated by the Mechanical Engineering Department to deprive unsuspecting first year students the bliss of an afternoon nap on a sultry day. We would sally forth, as reluctantly conscripted warriors, armed to the teeth with a bagful of appurtenances which I am sure could have been put to better use in a medieval militant society. As far as the heart ruling over head was concerned, the 55% attendance rule loomed large over our heads and that was that. The speed with which our bicycles approached the destination though, was by no means that of Sir Lancelot at full tilt, mini-drafter in hand.

The mini-drafter is a strange weapon. The conclusion of a naive analysis is that it is a cross between a shotgun and a wooden-snake. Another theory expostulates it's vice-like grip's use as an extremely understated but lethal weapon, "the testicle crusher". Experience says that even though the "one at a time please policy" must be employed to fit snugly in the vice, the results are smashing. It is a very potent device and may lead to a loss of the same, as far as the victim is concerned. Alas, the versatility of this exquisite instrument was stifled by the heartless kafirs of the Mechy Dept. as we whiled away agonising afternoons drawing parallel lines. ...and Kaat hated it.

Necessity they say is the mother of invention. The status of the poor bastard's father though is dubious as far as the ingenious practice of cogging ED sheets went. Kaat, however, was a strong contender. He was one of the greatest critics of the laborious lamp in the bucket process, where the translucent properties of a drawing sheet were exploited to transfer the work to another sheet. The method was awkward, depended on an unreliable electric supply but despite its disadvantages left no traces of the vile deed. Kaat was a hole puncher. He invented hole punching. His approach was quite simply to punch a hole at every intersection of lines on a sheet. That done, ED sheet replication boiled down to a simple join the dots problem. His efforts had led to the resurrection of the divider. The divider was an otherwise obsolete instrument that sat and caught rust in your instrument box, if you had one. If you didn't it made its presence felt every now and then by poking you in the butt. In Kaat's dextrous hands it was a magic wand. His infallible logic was that two holes at a time got the job done twice as fast.

It is ironical but in retrospect one can't but look back on all this with a degree of fondness. It is amusing to see academia clinging on to shreds of a defunct educational system with such fervour. It seems such a waste to enact out an elaborate charade day in and day out. Everyone knew the goddamn sheets are cogged. Even the conscientious buggers who used a random number

generator to assign marks. At the workshop devious dudes like Porky got their models done at the local market while those who played clean like Seedha got jacked for their diligence. The same went for the labs where if you did not cog or fabricate readings you were stupid because you were expected to. If only this unspoken hypocrisy had been explicit, we may have better channeled our thespian talents. I suppose this manifests itself in all facets of society under the respectable guise of the word diplomacy. On the other hand it was a learning experience in its own right. An integral part of that well-rounded education.

Coming back to Kaat it was exam time, the end of the semester. An otherwise harmless Kaat became a menace of sorts around exam time. The proximity of tests drove us assiduous freshies to desperation. It was then that Janus would shift his mugging base to Trotter's room or just about as far as he could from his own, so that a monstrous 5-lever lock would greet the eager funda hunter. Other tactics used were, passing the buck, which had its limitations. There were 3 of us Kaat knew well, Janus, Gobes and I and the buck had to stop somewhere. Any sneaky attempts of slipping it to Seedha, who was also in our batch and as aloof as ever, were subverted by an alarmed and intimidated, "Aye no ra! If I have a specific doubt I can ask him. How can I just go and ask Seedha to put all the fundas?"

The ED test promised to be a killer. As it turned out Kaat was seated beside Janus and Gobes.

"Janus showax ra, please, I'll flunk otherwise. I don't know a shit ra, I am in trouble."

"Ok! United we stand, divided we fall!" Janus had this penchant for making pseudo-philosophical sweeping statements that sort of explained why Socrates was his favourite football player.

"Gobes don't cover the sheet ra and keep the instruments on the other side" said Kaat, half pleading, half informing Gobes as he adjusted his view point. Halfway through the exam the highly intricate nature of the structures rendered fleeting glances around the place, of little use. His voice heavy with desperation, Kaat hushed, "Janus just pass the first part, ra, I can't see anything here."

"No way, see it from here if you can", said Janus as he obligingly turned his first completed sheet giving Kaat a fuller view.

"Please ra, I can't understand anything, please pass it ra, only 5 minutes, Save me ra."

"No da, if you want to cog from here its Ok. I'm not giving you my sheet."

"Please ra!"

"No da."

"Please ra."

"No da!"

"Please ra?"

"No", said Janus as he picked up his sheet and put it at the far corner of his table, bringing the tete-a-tete to an abrupt end, just in time for it had drawn the invigilator's attention.

Ten minutes later Gobes drew back from his hunched stature and gazed in

satisfaction at the problem he'd just finished. He had just one measurement to check off from the scale on his first sheet. First sheet? Minute scrutiny of Gobes' desk would have revealed just the solitary sheet he was currently working on. A broader perspective showed that the elusive first sheet was also being currently worked on, as Gobes learned to his dismay, by Kaat.

Kaat sat hunched over Gobes' sheet perfectly superposed over his own punching holes as if his life depended on it. It took about a minute for Gobes to activate his vocal chords into an ugly hoarse whisper.

"Bastard give back my sheet."

"5 minutes ra", said Kaat his head gesturing in a vain attempt to placate an agitated and psyched Gobes.

"No I want it now."

"I'll give you a treat ra."

"If you're caught..."

"One milkshake ra."

"If you get caught then what..."

"Two milkshakes ra"

"If you get caught then what, you give it back or I complain."

"Relax ra, I'll take full responsibility. Don't worry!"

Kaat continued his task and Gobes in turmoil looked helplessly on, his fingers crossed, his heart in his mouth. True to his word Kaat returned the sheet in 5 minutes, a trifle perforated but otherwise intact.

It is now very much a part of institute legend, the kind of things that are never written down, but passed down from batch to batch by word of mouth with every exaggeration making the feat all the more remarkable. In the end there was not much to say except that Trotter got a B and Kaat an A.

Chapter 6

STEPPING IN

A semester had passed. Seemed like we'd been here forever. The honeymoon was over. The grades were not the rude awakening that one might have expected. All except for Trotter and his ED exam result relative to Kaat.

I remember the first train ride back at the end of the semester in contrast to the ride down. My suitcase was filled with little gifts and trinkets I had bought and collected for family and friends from the money left over from my first semester's cheque. I felt like I had bought these from my own hard earned money. Contrary to the trip down, this was a fun trip. Horny and I travelled together. We were four compartments apart since I had only managed to get a reservation the night before I left. The second class railway compartments always magnified the extremes of weather and the thirty six hour journey literally took you through all four seasons. I soon found my favourite spot for each kind of weather. The middle bunk provided the best insulation when it was cold. The top one was closest to a fan for the height of summer. This particular time it rained. A persistent patter almost in time to the clicking of the wheels. For the longest time I stood mesmerized at the door to my compartment. Most of the people hanging around the door were either travelling unreserved, ticketless, or were waiting for the bathroom to free up. The wind and water whipped by. The sporadic pylons, an occasional railway crossing, a squatter by the side of the tracks, the odd bullock cart in the middle of nowhere. I carefully sat down on the doorstep, gripping the handles by the side of the doorway tighter. It was the closest I have ever felt to what to me was the heart and soul of our nation. My fleeting brush with a rural existence. I wont get into my feelings at the time. Thoughts whipped through my head in tune with the train and the rain. I dont think I could do them justice and would rather avoid describing them than come up with something that seems mushy and trite. Maybe thats what they were, mushy and trite thoughts. Horny and I, we got off at every station. Ate the food, drank the water, did everything we had been told not to do. We would wait until the train was literally pulling out of the station before hopping on to it. Horny struck up a conversation with this guy in my compartment who was in the merchant navy. He had some wild tales to tell. All the places he had

been. The storms he had weathered. I was in on it for a while and then turned away to a book I was reading on this prize pig called the Empress of Blandings. The navy guy had of course been very impressed when we told him where and what we were studying but something had bothered me. It had irked me that the merchant navy had never even been a potential career option for me. It sounded like something I would have enjoyed. Even been good at. Why had it been off bounds? Why? Before long the train rolled in to the station and the question remained for the moment, unanswered. I was glad to be home. The vacation passed quickly and it was time to head back for another round. This time I took my walkman.

We were stepping in, getting to know and understand the system. Soon we picked up on the subtle indicators of continuous evaluation. Grades were given based on two minor tests, a mid-term exam and a big one at the end of the semester. Grades for a course were given on a scale that was relative to the performance of the others in the class. If you followed trends, it was often possible to predict a grade in a course even before attending the first class. Some had a suspicion that it was about the time they were assigned anyway. The freshness and general euphoria though, was steadily diluted by our crusty seniors. The fine edge of competition was being dulled by mild disillusionment.

Some of us were taking longer to adjust. Such was the plight of Thonflakes. Thonflakes had come from Cochin. He had never been away from home and yet seemed most unlike any Thon one knew. He could say rhododendron just like anyone else, had no apparent obsession with coconuts and for a land that produced the most imposing derrieres, was a buttless wonder. That first semester he went home every other weekend. He got special permission to join late and so was barely ragged or even known. We all carried our own little additives to make the mess food more bearable but on the rare occasions that he ate in the mess he had a parallel kitchen going. Most mornings you could see him in a corner with with a big box of undoubtedly imported Kelloggs corn-flakes. Moss walked into the mess one day and yelled "Oiye Cornflakes, pass the milk" across the table. My name is Menon was the reply. So Moss started calling him Thonflakes. Thonflakes had no friends. The fact that he was never around on weekends or other times when we were not actively involved in acquiring a well-rounded education did not help. He was also in attendance trouble. His first semester grades reflected and only exacerbated his turmoil. Strangely it was Moss who came to him one evening.

"Look boss, dont take life so seriously. Its all once in a chance. If we buggers ragged you or gave you kundi names it was for your own good. It happened to us ok. Its the only way we know. Back in our days it used to be much worse. Othaa, I cried the first two nights I was here. So you got lucky. So no one really ragged you, but no one even knows you or gives a shit. You better believe you need a serious fucking support structure to get you through this joint. How long can you keep running home. Ok deesh, you know how to play bridge?"

"No Sir."

"Othaa, you dont even know my name, do you! Hi, I am Moss and you can quit calling me Sir. That finished about 4 months back but how would you know

that. Do you know Coatpiece?"

"Yes, but not very well."

"Cool, we are one short. Come lets puteets."

It was through Moss that I came to know Thonflakes, whom he had taken under his wing. I had started, like many seniors staying up late into the night playing cards. On an intellectual or inebriated night it was bridge, sometimes it was flash or blackjack, we didn't care. Whatever Moss, Pballs and their final year cronies decided was fine by us. It seemed cool to hang out with these guys who strangely had a much more "to each his own" kind of attitude than the seniors sandwiched in-between. The third year gumbal was almost manic depressive and the second year guys were full of scorn for just about anything. Moss and his buddies were positively relaxed and seemingly wiser. Sometimes they would get drunk and senti. Other times they would get drunk and reinvent bidding conventions. Pballs had this friend, a day scholar in naval architecture called Twospade who they would call to come and play. The game was invariably called "who is going to take Twospade's arse tonight". Us freshies were restricted to spectatorial rights. Twospade would always win. Once Moss bet and lost his wife to Twospade. So he borrowed Pball's, bet and lost her too. Pballs was really sharp. He would always pretend to be really distracted or disinterested and make seemingly inane bids and plays that people would fall for. Then he would have the last laugh. Pballs laugh sounded like a motorcycle engine sputtering to life. A motorcycle with a faulty silencer and an exhaust that had just sucked helium. Twospade would treat us all to coffee at Tarams on the nights he won. Coffee, cards and Cauliflower synchronised my clock with most of the hostel's to a more nocturnal one. Cauliflower was another name Trotter picked up as a cheap Hindi translation off Gobi, the more affectionate form of Gobes. You may wonder what Cauliflower had to do with the clock synchronisation. Trotteradiergummi would join the proceedings with great enthusiasm but before long would provide Pballs' stereo with bass support in four time. The stereo could be unplugged. Gobes, unfortunately, could not be plugged.

It had been one such night, a long flash session ending in the customary Twospade treat at Tarams. It was almost 6 and I had just drifted off, when the lilting strains of Parshad's "Hurry Om" made me wish he would do just that. Parshad was one of those down regular religious souls who functioned diligently as the makers morning alarm. Actually being an Iyer, I guess he was the destroyers morning alarm. Bleary eyed at 6 in the morning I had often wished that the destroyer would work his magic on Parshad. Meanwhile Parshad got ready for his ablutions and all that crap, a carefully detailed description of which may be found in those Malgudi Days type of books. I tossed and turned on my bed which creaked and clanged in a manner similar to Parshad.

Parshad was either dumb or plain unlucky and at the time my analysis was leaning to the former. He worked like a machine, precisely adhering to instructions. He had no need for friends, never had a good or bad word for anybody. He just hung out with his maker. He was a year senior to me but was still in the same wing as us freshies. He had been unable to assert his

seniority and move a floor up. Some said it was the luck of the draw. He was always covered from head to toe in enough vibhuti to make clothing redundant. Education and a cynical bent had pushed many of us to the fringes of atheism. The fringe was usually broad enough to understand and tolerate Parshad and his metaphysical monologues /* at any time but six in the morning */. Parshad bore no malice against the philistines. The philistines bore no malice against Parshad. Parshad was sad that these creatures of the dark were dealing their lives away. I was always too lazy to deal. I was a joker in the pack. ...and I did love mornings.

Mornings on campus were great. Cool and fresh they gave you the feeling of starting over. It was an amazing trick this, starting over. It was a state of sanity preserving selective amnesia. I dragged my started over self to the bogs.

The day augured well, as on my way I saw Helen. Helen was the fairest of them all. He passed me with his big white choppers sparkling from a thorough brushing. Helen had the hugest coal black eyes staring out blankly and a cherubic smile to complement his Kashmiri red cheeks /* which were quite visible through pyjamas that had seen a few generations */. I really liked Helen. He was a simple guy with a laxative for a face and a Mona-Lisa-esque smile. Which was why he was called Helen anyway, for his was after all "The face that launched a thousand shits". It was always a pleasure meeting Helen, especially so in the mornings.

Usually there was a queue waiting for cubicles to free up and you would be forced to listen to some schmuck gleefully bleating "We're just two aresholes in the same shithole, year after year. Wish you were here!"

... at least thats what it sounded like. All the while he belted out the beat on his makeshift bongo mugs. Dumping a satisfying load induced this amazing urge to break out in song. Even Porky who was of the firm opinion that "stereo and all is all balls, da", would let out a series of squeals. The right honorable Ian Anderson would have certainly written this song, had been able to tune his guitar out of tune, an ode to aahh hummm...

The minstrel in the lavatory,
looked down upon the smiling faeces.

The 4 S's /* shit, shave, shag, shower */ dealt with I made my way still half awake to the mess. Parshad was there as usual all chirpy and fresh with his disgustingly amicable smile and his well creased trousers. As were the other regular souls who wanted to catch their quota of Monday's special treat of 26-and-a-half corn flakes, before they got soggy. Breakfast, with it's choice of a blob of butter or jam on week old bread would have inspired Dickens. Porky, would make the most of these meager resources by trading and scrounging a respectable meal. The guy could teach corporate raiders a thing or two about divide and conquer and marginal utility. On matters foodwise, undoubtedly it was Porky who took the cake. The morning's cynicism washed down by many cups of coffee, I was finally ready to do battle.

The morning session of classes was typically long. Four hours in a row. It was like a bowling spell by Madan Lal /* Madan Lal was a warhorse of Indian cricket. An allrounder, a great trier. Undoubtedly the worlds fastest off-spinner, idolized with intense sarcasm by one and all. Anyone who tried to do too much at once was an allrounder and instantly christened Madan Lal. During our time Madan Lal had passed the mantle on to one Rogers Binny. */. I will spare you the typical morning session of classes and just pick up action around noon during lunch. There was always a scramble for seating during lunch as the entire hostel descended to consume mass quantities of the gourmet fare. The day was Monday and that meant channas¹ and the green stuff. Channas were lethal, both as projectiles and then of course if accidentally ingested. They came not in a magazine cartridge as one would expect but floating blissfully in a bucket of unmentionable liquid happily smiling and playing with the onions and other random chunks. The green stuff was my favourite. It was recycling at its finest, a delectable blend of assorted leaves and grass with suitably aged leftovers regurgitated by a cow and boiled to an inconsistent glop. One must not forget the chef's personal touch, little black balls that garnished and decorated all dishes. Nobody was ever brave enough to enquire what those were. Not even Janus.

As always there were chappatis², which made great frisbees. The aeronautical engineers used them in their hobby shop in place of balsa wood. The mechanical engineering bunch had prototyped a go-cart that was used to transport pondees³ across the wing. It rolled up and down the corridor on four chappatis with holes drilled through them. A fifth chappati was fixed to the back of the mobile as a spare. Moss and Pballs believed in playing with their food. They would break the chappatis into little playing chips for the evening's card game. All chips would invariably come to rest in Twospade's pockets. It is rumoured that Twospade's mother, once accidentally rummaged through his pockets and gave him a spanking for insulting her cooking. The hostelites always thought these day scholars were wimps. Anyway, that was the basic fare. The rule was that anything edible was to be an extra, which was to be paid for using colourful scraps of paper called coupons.

This particular day the mess had been graced by Prof. Cherian who was known for inviting himself over to hostels for lunch. This of course spoke volumes for his wife's cooking. He had often said, that the woman in you house need not be the woman in your home. No zen master could have produced a more enigmatic koan. The grapevine had it though that the key lay in the words, "need not be the woman", and it was purported that the gentleman had a special affinity for Velachery boys. In his subtle way he had inquired what we young boys /* always with emphasis on boys */ were planning on doing for lunch /* I'm sorry Sir, but we have plans this noon. We were going to nip over to the rather quaint yet unassuming La merde de la vie in Montpellier for some cuisse de granouile avec le jus de vivre before the afternoon classes */. So we had him

¹Garbanzo beans.

² Whole wheat Indian bread resembling a Mexican tortilla or a Greek Pita.

³Pornographic material.

over for lunch and he told us how good the food used to be back in his time and how expensive things were these days /* No shit Sherlock, and that will be Rs. 3.50 for the meal */. What was worse was that we nodded in agreement and complained about the food appropriately. Cherian would always look at me funny and ask me if Muslims really abstained from alcohol. The reply as always would be, yes. He would then look upwards and blink his eyes, sort of to say, forgive them lord for they know not what they do! Stranger still was the fact that he always called me Anwar and that I was not Muslim. At any rate the yes rolled off my tongue with complete disregard to the previous nights carousal. The carousal from my part had involved a sip and a half out of Moss's flask but at the time it qualified me as a bacchanalian.

Other than these pleasantries the meal was uneventful up until the last mouthfuls of the surrogate dessert, when the reserved Seedha suddenly rose and said that he wished to be no part of this charade and who the hell did Cherian think he was to just impose himself on us for lunch. The words spoken Seedha was quick to depart. Which saved Cherian the trouble of having to say anything. He just finished eating and quietly took leave off us. The sheer simplicity with which the situation just diffused itself was overwhelming. Seedha wanted to do everything right and was willing to endure any amount of pain for this. I admired but did not envy him for that.

Another lunch, another string of classes. The afternoon sessions were typically more laboratory oriented. They were far more enjoyable. It was around tea time that the real process of acquiring an education would begin. Pballs was trying painstakingly to teach me to sing. He said it would make me popular with the girls at college cultural festivals and ours was coming up so we had our work cut out. Mostly he wanted to repay Parshad for a year that he had spent living next door to him. One learnt to take philanthropy with a grain of salt, to watch for and understand the motives behind motives. I for one, was an eager pupil.

Chapter 7

JEEVES

An Indian collegiate cultural festival was many things to many people, the least of which could be loosely termed as culture. The first thing of significance in a culfest was its name. These varied from the catchy Nexus, Rendezvous, Oasis, Crossroads... symbolising a communion of souls, to the ethnic strains of Kashiyatra, to the simple no nonsense Culfest. The appellation dealt with one returned to that stuff about culture. It was not clear what culture it was that one endeavoured to promote or celebrate. ...An ethnic renaissance, a mimicry of the moonwalk or a resurgence of flower power? To an extent it was something of everything and it was even portrayed that way at times. I can safely say, though that it held no such significance to the majority of us. Most of us dangled somewhere in the middle, seduced by the lure of the west and pulled back by shreds of traditional values, which was a pretty nice situation to be in as long as you accepted it. Dancers /* with apologies to Dumas */ thrived on such festivals. Ours was called Mardi Gras and it was that time of the year. Colleges from far and near all came to partake of our cultural fare. It was a time when any guy worth his salt had a helmet in hand even if he did not have the means of transport to justify it. Those who had the transport zipped about with the wind in their hair. Diro had borrowed some MTech guy's moped and provided rides to the fairer sex around campus. Porky and Gobes had their eyes open. Porky and Gobes were like Laurel and Hardy, Ren and Stimpy, inseparable. The institute bustled with activity. Classes came to a standstill. Everyone had their own reasons for looking forward to Mardi Gras.

It was during my first festival that I got to know Jeeves. Not that I had not heard of him, for he was news on campus. Anyone wearing pertly polished sandals among well worn rubber chappal clad junta was bound to be news. Until then, aside from the occasional Hi!, however, Jeeves to me was Sanjib Bhattacharya, a face in the crowd. He was an aristocratic looking Bong, the image marred only by a perpetual 5 o'clock shadow that festooned the underside of his chin. It was aptly termed in his own words as a sparse undergrowth. He was also famous for maintaining that his presence down south was the result of a minor clerical error that had added another significant digit to his All India

Rank. The geographical impact of this bureaucratic mishap was that he was here instead of in Cawnpore.

The Bongs on campus were an enigmatic lot. While the average Bong, true to form was a phiss, phag, phuck, phooter man /* not necessarily in that order *//, the rest formed a formidable bastion of extra-curricular knowledge. Jeeves belonged quite vehemently to the latter category.

These cultural festivals had a little something for everyone. Not having the retentive power to hold amazing amounts of trivia in my head, I veered away from quizzing. Diro's eight fold path kept me from debating. I always ended up surrendering and joining the other side. The inability to disconnect my tongue from my brain stopped me from JAMming. The only poem I knew by heart was "Thick as a brick", the elocution of which, though dramatic, lacked literary punch, in the opinion of judges fed on ye olde English. Jeeves, he did it all. He won it all. He would even win the raffles and lucky drawings consistently. He would enter the same competition under three different names so he could win all three prizes. He once spoke for the motion and stumbled back 5 minutes later with a turban and false beard on and spoke against the motion. The judges gave a joint first prize to Sanjib Bhattacharya and Harinder Singh. When I met Jeeves he was desperately looking for a second person to make up his two member team for a movie quiz. It was like being hired as a mannequin for an hour. Jeeves and I got along just fine and so we started entering other competitions together and sometimes I would even contribute to the proceedings.

Horny had found his forte at painting. He learned the basics from Bheema and then forged a style of his own. At his very first Mardi Gras he picked up the first prize for a painting that resembled a stain on a piece of paper out in the rain with a subtle blending of color depicting a lurid landscape, symbolising a ravaged Tokyo on which Godzilla had subsequently whacked off. The piece was achieved over a night of blue riband gin influenced inspiration, which the nights drizzle had finished off. Diro had been under the influence and Horny had been inspired as he swished about with an old toothbrush.. The title filched off a Moody Blues album was suitably surreal, "On The Threshold Of A Dream". The effect was brilliant as it sat enshrined behind a glass case next to an incredibly lifelike portrait of a sad eyed old farmer, who looked like he was thinking "What has the world come to, that I should be hanging here, a poor second to this THING, this dreamy threshold stuff". Later he started entering multiple paintings with Jeeves name on them. Jeeves reciprocated by entering into contests with and as Horny. Sometimes this left me in the cold but its not like I was in a position to complain. For the moment, however, let us shift the focus back to Jeeves, who was trying to learn to play guitar in those days and insisted on being called Jeevie Ray Vaughan.

Knowing Jeeves through the years has only made it harder for me to place him. Not that this is imperative but it gives me a Poirotish satisfaction to have things in place. Whenever I take him like a piece and try to fit him into the jigsaw of an era of fact or fiction, the old procrustean problem looms large. As such Jeeves to me is a fine example of the parts dont make the whole syndrome.

The parts in his case are characters in their own right and the more you tesserate him, the harder it becomes to fit the pieces. He's basically a gallimaufry, to pick a word from his dictionary, where all words have, either under 5 or over 10 letters /* the ones under 5 having no vowels, or only vowels */.

At most times he was the prototype Wodehousian character. Prim and propah, the Queens English flowing glibly like the Thames, the stiff upper lip starched to perfection, curious eyes peering through a pair of polished spectacles and a mannerism that indicated he was potty, totally potty, absabloominlutely potty without a doubt and could be as potty as he liked and nobody /* mound */ minded. Stepping into a stuffy auditorium in the midst of a fiery debate he would quip "Trifle toasty, what" instead of something a little more earthy. It is admittedly a bit odd to address a bloke as a "Jolly good sport" or an "I say, old chap" or even "Tell me, my good man" in a land where "Abhey chootiye"¹ and "Othaa Baaastard" are the more affectionate forms of greeting.

Then there were times when he reminded me of a character out of Dickens with a name like Pickwick Papers. No sooner was my mind adjusted to this Victorian setting when Mr. Papers would break out into "Amar Sonar Bangla" or some maudlin Hindi dirge with the nasal twang of Saigal that would make him look like Devadas. At still other times Dumas would have sworn that he was a foilless D'Artagan, sallying forth with his forefinger to touch a pawn with a curt "jadoub", implying that he was simply testing a move, or thrusting ahead to cut off an offending knight with a nonchalant "touche". His soulful renditions from T.S. Eliots book of practical cats still ring in my ears. His voice squeaking to shrill peaks that transcended the human ear would emote, "McCavity, McCavity, there's no one like McCavity".

...and it would set you thinking.

...and deep down in the nether recesses of your soul you would feel it.

...and you'd think maybe, maybe it was true. Maybe, just maybe, there really was no one like McCavity. From that point on this feline monster of depravity would be enshrined in your subconscious for eternity. Such was the urgency of Jeeves deliveries.

Speaking of transformations, which is what this is all about, a guy like Jeeves never changes. He just adds a facet to his persona. I sometimes wonder, whether a few decades back, a doctor, on whacking a seemingly ordinary bong butt, was greeted with a "Friends, romans, countrymen..." instead of the primeval cry of life.

The Electrical Engineering Dept. here was notorious in the extreme. Some poor sufferer went and scrawled "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here", on the Head of Department's office door. Nobody owned up and the whole branch was royally screwed. The Head's odious offers of better grades to prospective Judii /* plural of Judas? */ was not taken up. Usually the Head would bugger a snitch anyway, claiming he lacked integrity. Rumour has it, the Head engraved it himself, just so that he could screw the branch and enhance his already ominous reputation. The rumour was founded on the simple fact that under the hellish

¹Hello there, fornicator.

quote was the Heads signature. Embroiled in his bureaucratic duties the Head diligently signed everything. This oversight did not faze the imaginative Head in the slightest. He simply screwed the branch twice over for forging his signature.

The prize of the department was, however, Deodhar Anantharaman, affectionately called Dead Ant. Guys struggled into double figures on 100 point exams. His entries and exits were marked by the hushed chants of

"Dead Ant", "Dead Ant"!

"Dead Ant", "Dead Ant", "Dead Ant"!

rendered Pink Pantheresquely. The man had a sense of humour. It was quite frustrating though, when you found yourself as the perpetual joke with the inability to retaliate. The worst part was that the guy was a genius and he knew it. He was respected for his mastery over anything that involved an electric circuit of some sort and vast knowledge on just about anything else. He was both awed and feared simultaneously.

Dead Ant's favourite student was Jeeves. He used to call him Bhorte Bhooster and just loved taking his arse. "Now bheel the Bhongalee Bhorte Bhooster Baaboomoshai phleess ansoor dheess quoschen", he would holler in his highly affected accent which was terrible, as it had not lost its Tamil twang. An agonizing moment would pass witnessing the raised eyebrow of an unfazed Jeeves, before Dead Ant embarked upon the fulfilling process of humiliating Jeeves.

Dead Ant had shaken stalwarts like Diro who had hung his boots high. Dead Ant had reached out and cut the laces causing them to come crashing on Diro's head. Diro tried. He climbed up three steps and fell back two but he tried. He worked like his life depended on it and some say he even learnt a thing or two. An old warhorse of the department, Singh, battle scarred through a B.Tech that took him six years was brimming with anecdotes of classic department buggers. He would sit way into the wee hours of the morning over multiple cups of coffee regaling us with years of folklore. Once in a pensive mood he had said, "After four years in the Electrical Engineering Department you find yourself a little older and a little wider".

Any man who could withstand such an onslaught was either a real tough motherfucker or just too far gone. Jeeves was neither. He was simply the inimitable Sanjib Bhattacharya.

Chapter 8

HOSTEL DAY

The year had drawn to a close. My first Mardi Gras was over. It had been another learning experience. I had picked up a lot just by being around Jeeves. Janus and I still rode bikes to the beach every now and then but I had been drawn to more mental pursuits. The fourth year bunch were on their way out. Moss had gotten into Purdue. It was not his top university, but MIT, even with a perfect GRE score was a long shot with his grades. Pballs had posted up all his rejection letters over his door and when he fell short of space, started thulping them on Parshad's door so they may be blessed. Parshad would tear them off just about as quick as Pballs would put them up. He would then cut the university logo out of the letterhead and stick them on his notebooks. He was the only guy I knew who still covered his notebooks with brown paper. Horny used to cover his with Debonair centerfolds. He never took notes but he diligently bought a notebook every month. Guys had started moving out. Lots were being drawn for the vacant rooms. There was the impending feeling of a chapter's completion.

The end of the year was marked by a hostel day /* O' othaa dey */. The food on such days was allegedly half decent /* it was catered */. There was some tepid entertainment, typically to be provided by freshmen. They were helped out on this particular hostel day by Twospade, who Pballs had invited. The enthu guys in the hostel and the freshmen who compulsorily volunteered, would decorate the hostel with streamers and candles. The rusty jungle of bikes in the corridors would disappear temporarily.

Horny was an enthu bugger for such stuff. He was an organizer and loved responsibility. He also had enough drive to do a good job. He had started from humble beginnings being appointed on his arrival as the ground floor bogs sec. Within six months he had poondaxed into the position of the hostel garden sec when the existing sec Parshad, was impeached at the hostel general body meeting. Parshad had suggested moving the footer goals in by two feet so he could plant some laburnams. Laburnams? Guys wanted to laburnam at the stake. All that was planted was a firm hostel boot in his posterior. Horny had a vision. He bought beer on the garden sec budget and put it down as fertilizer.

Which is exactly what it was after it had been through refineries like Moss and Choprax. Horny was a really resourceful guy to know. Through the years he was to climb the rungs to hostel mess sec and then to institute cultural sec. Horny redefined the cul of cultural festivals on campus. Mardi Gras that final year was one to be remembered. Even Jeeves admitted that that the L. Shankar concert Horny organized was unlike any he had seen. The big thing about Horny was that he was flexible. If Diro's catchword was "surrender", Horny's was "adjust". To be able to be completely synonymous with either of those words is not human. Horny lived on the anthropomorphic edge. His Achilles heel were his pillows Anabel, Clarabel and Ashok. Horny could not sleep without his pillows, Ashok under his head, Anabel in his arms and Clarabel between his legs. Once we disguised Anabel as Clarabel and vice versa by switching pillow covers. Horny caught it immediately and the entire hostel paid dearly. Mess sec Horny ordained a week of commod-tod sambhar. At the same time he used his contacts as ex-bogs sec to bring in hostel maintainence and shut down the bogs for repainting. It was war and many paid for the acts of a few. Nobody messed with Horny or his pillows again. It was all very macabre. Why the trio were called Anabel, Clarabel and Ashok is a secret Horny will take to his grave. For four years we tried. There was no vice or device we did not try. Horny never yielded.

In his formative freshman days though, Horny was less assertive and ready to please. He had taken on the responsibility of organizing the hostel day and did a great job. The hostel had a chief guest, usually some big wig or someone who one was able to pass off as a big wig. This year Horny had invited a professor in Computer Science called Rotesan. There were also personal guests and guests invited by groups of people. Janus, Trotter and I had invited Kaat. More appropriately Kaat had somehow been invited by us. The entire branch usually invited any female batchmates. We had two women in our branch and so were considered incredibly lucky since many branches did not even have one. One was as cutthroat as the rest of us. The other was called Rasp. She had taken recourse to Diro's eight fold path and was leaving our fold for Naval Architecture, which purportedly was a more laid back stream to navigate. So we were down to one and the cutthroat one at that. The freshmen would invite some of their professors in anticipation of grades and the third years would invite professors in anticipation of recos. The second year's had too much disdain for the system to bother with guests, especially of a pedagogic ilk and the graduating batch were on their way out. They concerned themselves with liquid refreshments.

There were souvenirs handed out, kutti¹ prizes for hostel competitions and services rendered to the hostel. As was the tradition the outgoing batch would have a little show on the side where our hostel dhobhi² was given a bottle of rum as a small token of appreciation. Our hostel dhobhi was called Errormalai. It seemed a little strange to me at the time that Errormalai was held in such high esteem. He left much to be desired as far as the quality of his washing

¹Small.

²Washerman.

was concerned. I had also learned to wait and watch rather than question some of the idiosyncratic practices of my seniors. We were all changing, growing rapidly. Priorities generally dealt with a permutation of food, booze, fags, friends, females, fondées and froffs. Choprax said that Errormalai could be any or all the above at a given time. He said the last three had sort of faded out through the final stretch. He then raced through the solid nourishment and started the parallel rooftop celebrations. The cuthroat female in the branch was quite intimidating. She was busy trying to seduce Choprax. Choprax appeared singularly uninterested and in this particular case it may have been so but you could tell he was tickled pink at the very idea of being seduced by anyone. He was playing the genial host. He asked her if she would like some beer. She said yes and cleaned out a bottle of Guru in 5 minutes flat. Choprax figured she was more than he was capable of handling.

I had some beer for the first time. I said it was bitter. I pretended to be drunk and though I didn't know it I probably was.

"Othaa karadikundi³, dont try and put pill⁴ da. Laude⁵ first you are enthused to put tanni⁶ and then you try and act outaxed", went Choprax and I broke into hysterics. Even Gobes bellowed without quite knowing why. It suddenly came to me how a year back the syntactically simple "Ok boss, move arse" had seemed incomprehensible. I had acquired a new language. Looking down at my well worn Mardi Gras T-shirt of a multitalented octopus and mismatched rubber chappals, I had also acquired a new wardrobe. My ego had been muddied and bloodied, shrunk in the laundry by the dhobhi Errormalai, burnt by a physics prof and inflated by others. I had a new attitude. Most of all though I knew the system. Oh yes, I knew it quite well. We all knew the system, which is why we were there in the first place. Now that we were on first name terms with the pegger, we could slide into cruise control.

³Bear's arsehole.

⁴To fib or lie.

⁵Penis.

⁶Water.

II

Chapter 9

BOOTS

Kick off your boots, don't trip on the lace,
Stark reality face to face.

Boots lived next door to me. Actually I moved in next door to Boots, not out of choice for I would have rather been in the wing that functioned as our second year ghetto. Lots were drawn for rooms being vacated and I got Haraami's, which his goldness had painted a bilious blue after being bumped by 5 american univs in succession. His job interviews had not been going too well either and to make matters worse for himself he had started going to the remaining ones in his striped pyjamas. He was well tutored though, and at the Citicorp interview he had said that his switch to software from naval architecture was due to the sheer excitement of programming he had experienced while hacking away long nights on fluid dynamics equations. The sheer sight of a PC screen and the sensuous feel of a mouse set his fingertips tingling. Of course, he had no intentions of going or even planning to go abroad and it all stemmed from a patriotic urge to return to his country all that it had given him. The suited gentlemen across the desk had told him it was all a load of bullshit.

He got the job. I guess he was well qualified. Anyway graduation came and so Haraami moved on to debug COBOL programs which tingled his fingertips about as much as those fluid dynamics equations which he had dealt with in the bogs or in a tumbler laced with Rasna.

Thus I inherited Haraami's legacy, room number 124 with its blue walls, creaky bed and a stained rag that had wiped up after Haraami's moments of pleasure. Just above the bed was this ingenious little two sided poster which could be flipped from a calender impression of Saraswati Ma to a well stacked and bared Bo Derek. They were after all both goddesses. Haraami had always complained about his damn local guardian who used to frequently invade his privacy unannounced with an entourage of wife and kids. His kids looked up to Haraami like an idol, who with his combination of family connections and the big engineering stamp was set to be a mega grosser marriagewise. Haraami would get livid if the subject was ever brought up. He was a proud gold who was

embarrassed by these archaic values that people hung on to. He never mentioned this to anybody, though. As far as family was concerned he was always the blue eyed boy with the pink pyjamas. Kaat, who was remotely related to Haraami told us a couple of years later that Haraami did in fact gross big time.

I did not know Boots very well as he kept to himself. He attended classes regularly but seldom ate at the mess and never partook of what little the hostel had to offer in the way of entertainment. I do remember being amazed though, at the number of guests he had at the hostel day. I guess he had a lot of friends, which surprised me. He did not know many juniors as he never ragged us. There seemed to be something quite enigmatic about him and so I was quite excited in a way, of moving in next door to him. His door was always open and so the first chance I got, I went in and said something quite superfluous and conversational. He replied politely and went right back to what he was doing. He was trying to staple his broken rubber chappal back together, but it wasn't working well. As I was going to leave, he said he planned to go to the computer center and trade his chappals in for a newer pair. We had to leave our footwear outside most computing facilities. The computer center always had a sea of slippers outside. Going to the computer center with a relatively new pair of slippers was like buying footwear for someone else to wear. Some poor unsuspecting soul busy playing pacman was going to end up going home with Boots' excuse for footwear. Boots was very considerate though and wanted to leave behind a pair that was at least temporarily functional. There followed an uncomfortable silence, we stared at each other, he went back to stapling and I left.

Boots was the cleanest person I knew. He dressed like a slob but that was more a case of his clothes being threadbare from overly frequent washing. He was not one of the high flying urbanite types but apparently came from an affluent background. He even kept a bottle of black label under his bed. It must have contained scotch at some point of time but was now frequently refilled with Tiger rum or whatever Rs. 20 a quart could buy. Boots drank like a fish and it never affected him in the least. He drank virtually everyday and at all hours, not out of celebration or sorrow or habit. He just drank.

The evening after the slipper stapling, I was on my way back from my favourite dinner of eggs and bread in the mess. It was something even the mess cooks couldn't screw up. They tried. The bread was often stale but it could be toasted. The omlettes were patched up scrambled eggs, the scrambled eggs, hacked omlettes but an egg, was an egg, was an egg. The queue that awaited the services of Walrus, the eggman used to be so long that guys standing in line would start shaking the eggs to give them a preliminary beating. Horny had recently taken over as mess sec and aside from the unsavoury revenge for switching Anabel and Clarabel, the food was much better.

Passing by Boots room my head turned to peek in as it often did when I passed half open doors in the corridor. Boots was in his usual place on the bed, propped up against the wall. On a chair in the corner sat this vision, an oasis in the desert. Boots called me in and asked me to close the door to keep out the kamikazi moths that were piling up around the solitary bulb in his room. Two things hit me straight away. The smell of cheap rum and the fact

that the oasis was in fact a mirage. It was Chiknaa, the lead guitarist of the campus group "poached salmon in a white wine sauce", a name they poached off an overplayed monty python tape. With his shoulder length hair, spotless complexion and falsetto voice he was a good mirage too and was an adequate surrogate for most. Chiknaa was drunk and was doing all the talking while Boots sat there like a sponge absorbing through all his orifices with equal ease. Shortly it was refill time and Boots pushed a shiny steel tumbler my way. No offer or anything just a silent gesture.

It was with mixed sentiments that I took a swig. It was a sign of acceptance from a senior which was all very exciting. At the same time the fear of vice loomed large. The stuff was vile. It tasted bad and burnt my throat. By the time I had worked my way to the bottom, there was Boots the sponge just sitting there. Chiknaa had at some point of time paid his homage and tottered off. "So, do all you third year guys have these hassles with your batchmates and professors and screwing one another", I said, consciously trying not to slur, holding my glass loosely as though I was completely unfazed and cool. Chiknaa had been lamenting about how the one decent university he had a chance at getting a scholarship from with his 7.2 had been sneakily applied to by three other bastards with better grades who just wanted to be triply sure they got in somewhere.

"Many do". Boots was a Chemical bugger, the one branch where there were enough schols to go around, or so people said. This whole subversion thing just seemed very alien to me. The only guy I could see aargeeing junta left, right and center in our batch was Porky. Competition had always been cutthroat but it was clean. Relatively, you did well either of your own accord or if others did badly. Guys would work hard but resources such as notes were always pooled and there was no misguiding or treachery. "What a bunch of schmucks", I thought. "Integrity", that was the difference between us and these guys. "What the fuck is integrity, anyway", retorted Boots, for I must have been thinking out loud. Meanwhile my cup had been refilled.

So I told him what I thought and he smiled and said I was probably right and that guys who came in with better ranks probably had more scruples than the rest. There seemed to be a hint of sarcasm there. I did not question him but didnt really believe what he said either. I for one had always considered myself devoid of any scruples. Economically unfeasible is what I liked to say. It stemmed from the dreams of making millions. Pipe dreams were an integral part of all us. I would find out through the years that they often became peace pipe dreams. The peace pipe, Boots said, gave one an ephemeral realization of ones dreams and that I should try it some time. It was two in the morning and the second glassful had converted my haziness to slumber accelerated by this classical Indian flutish sound that was emanating from Boots hookup of a walkman connected to an amp he had assembled and rigged to two old radio speakers. I awoke next morning curled up on the rug in Boots room with a stiff neck. Boots was in the same place frozen in time as though playing nightwatchman.

As months passed Boots worn out tape of the flutish sound, the cheap rum

and discontentment, the stiff neck and the fact that all pipes left a coating of soot and that the passage blocked long enough was liable to explode, became things I got to know well. Boots himself, however, remained an enigma.

Chapter 10

ALF

Aaaahhhh Alf! That brings out the religious side of me. If ever there is an ultimate or eternal question anywhere in this universe or some biverse containing this universe ad infinitum the poser, posee, answer and answee would all be Alf. /* 42 is just another alias for Alphonso de Rodrigueztortilla aka Son of the Soil 1989-1990 aka Q.W.E.R.T.Y. Sekhar aka Alf */. This chapter unlike the rest of my tale shuttles through time transporting you back and forth through the years into the past and future in celebration of Alf, who defies logic, continuity and indeed defiance itself.

The first year had been common for all of us and we were divided up not by our future discipline of choice but alphabetically by name into batches A through F. I was in batch B. I knew most of the guys in my batch or in the hostel and all the primadonnas who were quick to announce their arrival academically or otherwise. Still there were others whom I could not recognize from Taramani Nair /* To our seniors if ever there was an ultimate or eternal question anywhere in this universe or some biverse containing this universe ad infinitum the poser, posee, answer and answee were all Taramani Nair */. A year had passed and we started to take our first classes restricted to our chosen disciplines.

My first real recollections of Alf go back to my first Computer Science class. Seated up front in the class was the cuthroat young lady in our class /* usually referred to as the branch female */. Not all disciplines had branch females and so I guess we were lucky. Every branch, however, had the concept of a branch female and in the absence of one, the title was bestowed upon one of the guys. Sometimes, a particularly promising guy would covet the title even in the presence of a young lady who would be relegated to being one of the guys. Helen had dethroned two women to be crowned branch female of his class. A quick look around me and none of the guys looked like they might even feign to be challengers. It was also the first time I actually got a close look at the branch female, though I was well aware of her existence. The only other time I had seen her was at the hostel day when I was too busy kolting¹ the special grub and she

¹Consuming.

was supposedly busy seducing Choprax. She was doing quite well and had all the branch guys shitting bricks. Next to the branch female up front sat Sekhar. "Sekhar" called the professor taking attendance to familiarize himself with the names of guys he was going to be stuck with for the next 3 years. It was good, for now I knew who Sekhar was as he mildly raised his hand. A cursory glance revealed him to be your dime a dozen bespectacled IITian. A second glance revealed him to be your dime a dozen bespectacled IITian. In fact, to begin with, he probably was your dime a dozen bespectacled IITian. He always sat up front and diligently took notes, never asked any questions and kept to himself. He dressed in outrageous pink like any self respecting golt ...and was called Sekhar by anyone who called him anything. He was reserved and stayed away from vice. Even Kaat had remarked at the pinkness of Sekhar's shirts. Kaat, who was quite protective of the affinity that his kind had to colours with an uncharacteristically high saturation and contrast value. A year had gotten by but no one really knew Sekhar well. Unlike Thonflakes it was not that he had an adjustment problem. Maybe it was the opposite, that despite his striking apparel he fit in almost too smoothly.

It was summer. The heat was playing tricks on ones mind. The drought cracked dirt paths were lined with beckoning blondes in bathing suits that transformed to the omnipresent and leering Taramani Nair. Mirages would pop up everywhere. Horny and the warden had had a fight and Horny had temporarily resigned. The mess food had hit an all time low. Hot, hungry, dehydrated zombies wandering aimlessly on a perpetual high from the most natural of hallucinogens. Just a week back I had seen Diro streak across the stadium to the sheer horror of the many faculty and their families out on their evening strolls. The visions this state of being conjured up were truly bizarre. What was worse was that this time around proximity did not bring about that phantasmagoric morph to the omnipresent and leering Taramani Nair. It was still Diro and he was very much in the buff. He was, however, 5 Cadbury milk chocolates richer. This mingling of reality and fantasy was most disconcerting. Dealing with the metaphysical perspectives resulting from living next door to Boots was adding to the madness. I would sweat through nights with dreams of water, lots of it, swimming in seas of clear cool water, drowning in pools of molten milk chocolate, raining buckets of mangoes, a 21 gun salute of watermelons.... but water, there was always water. In reality there was a water shortage. People were hoarding bucketfuls in their rooms. The colour of drinking water after passing through multiple aqua-filters was a sickly yellow. A whole new interpretation was attached to the old Rolling Stones anthem which went

you cant always wet what you want,
you cant always wet what you want,
you cant always wet what you want...
but if you try sometimes, you find, you wet where you peed.

Jeeves and I used to sing this all the time back then. He would strum away on his newly acquired 12 string guitar with 9 strings, on which he could play exactly two chords but in the case of this song's chorus, the right two.

Sitting through lunch one day, contemplating the relative merits of starvation and cannibalism we were busy identifying the potentially tastiest morsels in our midst. Trotter was winning hands down, his being replaced by these visions of an enormous porker roasting on a spit with us drooling in anticipation. It was truly bizarre considering that the majority of guys at the table were vegetarian. Thonflakes with his large food reserves had suddenly soared in popularity ratings. The conditions were appalling. I think it must have been these dreams at play in my subconscious but every time I looked at Sekhar all I could see was this ripe juicy bespectacled mango. Then almost telepathically, someone made a remark about it /* I will not accompany this moment of great importance with thunder and lightning, as it would contradict the drought scenario. Understatement they say is a neon highlighter in the guise of a rabbi dressed as a playboy centerfold */. Thus was christened Alphonso de Rodrigueztortilla. The next week Alphonso de Rodrigueztortilla now affectionately called Alf by one and all /* which he hated */ moved in 3 rooms down the hall from me. All of a sudden everyone wanted to know who this new guy Alf was.

Weeks passed and I got to know Alf better. He had this annoying habit of always beating me to the good cane chair in the corridor /* the one without the protruding nails */. He would just sit there with this smug, constipated expression, countenance writ with concentration. Every now and then he would whistle. It was easy as his lips were naturally puckered but other than the outtake of air and an occasional tweet, there was no sound in the frequency range audible to the human ear. I think he was really impressed by the old wild west as he started reading these Louis L'Amour westerns. You could almost imagine him saddled in the good wicker of the wing, rockin' back and forth, whistlin' an ultrasonic ditty, the mango bobbin' to the easy beat, turnin' page after page, just passin' thru'. One saturday in the wing, the second year posse sat around talking about whether the weekly movie on campus Mackenna's Gold, would be any fun the third time around. Alf suddenly, like a golt from the blue, redefined the concept of a six-shooter.

"Macchan, these westerners are funda ra, with the six gun. You just cant chumma² tell them to stick 'em up. Just puteets two on the waist, two in the armpits and two on the hat and if they tell you to stickeets just blast em from the hat".

Alf's star was on the rise. Soon he was to regale us with tales from the beginning of time when the earth was roamed and ruled by Deeno Sawyers, a remarkable likeness of which, painted on the back of an autorickshaw, had evoked this latent font of information. The Deeno Sawyers were these huge animals that romped wild and free till they suddenly disappeared 500 years ago. In fact the only living remnant of the Sawyer clan was Tom Sawyer who was fictional and was born when the last of the deeno's captured a beautiful women and compromised her. This was added by me with a dead pan face. Alf of course saw right through my dead pan face.

"Othaa Tote, dont put pill ra.", he would say.

²For no particular reason.

“Its the truth man, ask Boots.”. That son of a bitch Boots would never back me up. He would just stand around and smile condescendingly. I think Boots had some kind of platonic fondness for Alf. I have always looked out at the world through the eyes of an epicure. To me life is like an idli. It can be used as a flyswatter, tastes like shit by itself and you can survive on it, but spice it up some and it can be whatever you want /* even a Shao-lin monk and an old one at that */. Alf brought new zing to life.

Diwal³ was approaching and the wars began. Seemed like all of a sudden everybody was on the same side and against each other simultaneously. There were interhostel wars, interbatch wars, interbranch wars, interwing wars and interpersonal wars. Then there were intrahostel wars, intrabatch wars, intra-branch wars, intrawing wars and intrapersonal wars. It was a true apocalypse. Gorilla warfare it was, with everyone a potential Hanuman⁴. Any open hostel room had rockets ventilating it and all unmanned buckets housed atom-bombs set with a slow fuse tied to an agarbatti⁵. Come evening and rockets would start flying across the hostel and sometimes sneakily down the wings. An old trick was to imitate sicrotee⁶ shouting cone-fall shortly after leaving a cracker outside an unsuspecting door. Nobody answered phone calls during these days. Singh would start having nightmares of a flaming beard. I started having nightmares of what would happen to me if his beard was lit. The only person whose face spelt guilty better than mine was Porky, but he was too busy having nightmares of being bugged by the campus sicrotee chief for riding abreast. If there was anybody who could ride a breast it was Porky. The sicrotee chief, however, had big Shaan-e-Panjab moustachios and exceptional equestro-lactic skills cut no ice with him.

The only person who slept through hells fire was Alf. He could not be fooled. Janus said you could fool some of the people all of the time and be a fool most of the time and even play the fool if you could tune it in the key of G but you could not pull one past Alf. I had just been caught crouching trying to slip a pink, blue and white striped cracker under Alf’s door, by an ambulatory mango that had quietly slinked up on me from behind. I could have sworn he was inside. “What ra?” was the straightforward question put to a figure that was quite close to beating the world standing high-jump record. One of the first things one learnt at this institute was to think on ones feet, which is what I proceeded to do the moment I was back on them. “Nothing da, I was just picking up a piece of your pyjama”, I said sheepishly handing him the cracker, whose colour pattern bore a remarkable resemblance to what he had on. “Laudaaaa”, he retorted starting the first syllable really low and musically working his way up an octave with an extended “aaaaaa”. “...and what was this being then?”

He pointed at the telltale white wick at one end. I was unflappable.

³The festival of lights.

⁴Son of the wind god. A god in his own right, in the form of an ape.

⁵Odourless incense stick.

⁶Security.

”Othaa, thats part of the naadaa⁷ da”.

It was a good day when all those things you wish you had said come to you just a little quicker. It is difficult to reckon, however, with a naadaa that is an intertwined red and yellow and frayed at one end from frequent chewing.

My only other recollections of that Diwali were being seared by a rocket that whizzed past my ear and that the branch female 2 years senior who was the pride of the campus had a birthday party in one of the hostel rooms that was romantically lit. There were drinks and dancing as her many suitors had been taking dancing lessons. Boney M’s “Daddy Cool” rocked the joint. The dancemaster was a guy called M. Adams, who had been recommended by the hostel dhobhi Errormalai. Errormalai had been tipped to change the music in a carefully chosen sequence for the evening. Up on the roof Trotter made his 5th bottle rocket get within 30 feet of the romantically lit room. At the same time some guy from a hostel roof 3 times the distance away, hit Alf squarely on the chest. ”What force, ra”, was all he said as the ash was nonchalantly brushed away, leaving a gaping hole with a burnt fringe in the front of his shirt.

Gobes wound up to launch another rocket. He would run up with the motion of a javelin thrower and hurl the rocket just as it was going off in his hand. He did admit lacking the power to augment his flawless technique. That explained why this latest rocket nose dived into Bheema a floor directly below. It was a strange night with fireworks of all kinds. One of the suitors scored. There were jubilations in the mess the next morning and Frootys on the house. It was very rare that a hostelite scored on matters of the heart. The next week Adams had more students than he could handle.

In those days there was strong competition over who the biggest wheeler dealer around was. Some people had put their money on Horny. Most of us backed Binny. Binny had come in a year before us but was taking courses all over the place. It seemed like he was in three different batches and four different branches all at the same time. Rogers Binny was a true allrounder. He had started with Metallurgical engineering and worked his way through two branch changes to Computer Science. He had three rooms of his own in three different hostels. If that was not enough one of the hostels was the girls hostel. The girls hostel was a fortress, a good kilometer from the nearest boys hostel, with access restricted to the female sex. Sicrotee was tight. Even Chiknaa dressed in drag was caught once by the warden who had been nicknamed Bandersnatch the Flycatcher. Binny was on first name terms with the warden. He called her Bandy in private. Even Binny had professed his deference to Alf on all matters allrounderlike which meant that Alf was in a league of his own.

It was a scorching day and the airconditioned PC lab was crowded with three batches of computer scientists in various stages of making. Alf sauntered in and temporarily displaced a senior testdriving a Ferrari with a ”just need to copy a floppy, ra”.

He hit the ESC key with a splonk and inserted a floppy with panache. The cursor flashed neon green in excitement and anticipation as Alf flicked the prompt from

⁷Length of string threaded through a pair of pyjamas to keep them up at the waist.

"C:" to "A:" with a couple of deft keystrokes. He always liked working with a monogrammed prompt. All eyes were slowly turning to Alf. The cursor flashed faster. He began to type "COPY A" and then changing his mind erased it in a shot. The cursor was going wild with anticipation. Instead he typed "DISCOPY". There were muffled sounds of mingled pleasure and pain from the drive, before the screen lit up with some kind of an error message followed by an "(Abort/Retry/Ignore)?". He looked thoughtful for a minute weighing his choices and hit "I", flicked open the drive and pulled out two floppies, with a puzzled look. He bobbed his head and sauntered out. Junta was flabberghasted. To a bunch of 30 odd world wary comen in various stages of atheistic cynicism, it was more convincing than Jesus's aquatic stroll, better than Draupadi's impromptu textile mill and more bizarre than Taramani Nair, who had made a cameo appearance as a blonde with thagudd honkers in the last campus movie "Police Academy 42".

Two years later Alf had established himself as a god. He had at one point of time been crossword king. He had written chartbusters like "O' I just can't say I love you", that Stevie Wonder covered and "Let me take you down to eat strawberries", a remake of the Beatles smash. It was this resourcefulness that made Thonflakes eager to have Alf on his side for some poppycock project for an electronics lab. Thonflakes had this amazing idea that was going to protect all PC's from the this awful thing called a computer virus. Diro was lucky to be along for the ride. Time went by and as usual none of them had done a damn. The semester was over and a report was due. Diro was off on vacation and Alf took off for his village, Ongol, leaving Thonflakes to hold fort. Alf while putting the light booze before leaving had promised to return to take over the reins soon. Two weeks overdue and no sign of the Son of the Soil. Thonflakes in a state of panic desperately dispatched telegrams of a missing Alf, hoping Diro would work some miracle. Alf had taken all the specifications and the report with him. There was precious little Diro could do other than send his condolences. So he sent back a standard Rs.2.50 greeting telegram that said "Congratulations on the new arrival". Two weeks later and still no Alf but the report looking like the Dead Sea Scrolls, came in the mail. With it was a letter in a barely legible scrawl from Alf that read as follows.

Dear Thonflakes,

Sorry saar for not being able to come. There are floods in Ongol. I am writing this letter from the roof of my house with my toes in water. So I am sending you the report with this letter. I had to swim with one arm to the post office /* the other being used alternately hold the report above water level and to scratch my balls */ battling the waves and falling debris. It was very difficult but I did my best for the project. I hope now you will do yours. Othaa, leper futs fight! I have to get an A in this course.

Wishing well,
Alf

Thonflakes surrendered and by some miracle they all got A's. The instructor was a good guy and saw the real promise behind their half-baked design. When the Son of the Soil returned the day vacations ended, the floods too miraculously disappeared. Then as the four years passed, so did Alf. No legacy just a name and a legend but not everybody gets that lucky.

One day in the not so distant past I get a cone-fall and the voice says, "Yo dude, this is Shaker speaking".

I are putting an unconditional surrender as Alf is putting fundas in crisp modulated tones. Alf says, "I am coming to the Boston area, please to arrange housing".

So I say, "Alf I can't possibly fix up your housing, why don't you comeax, camp with me and put the house search".

Alf says "Ok" then silence.

The line goes dead. No Alf for the next few weeks. Suddenly out of the blue another cone-fall. Alf says, "Saar, I are in Boston, I are having new car, new apartment, I am coming for grub tonight".

So I say I am honored and waiting to see you. Come evening, but no Alf. I wait for a long while and then I go down and what do I see but a red two-seater sports coupe parked perpendicular to the kerb, with one cool dude sitting inside wearing Ray-ban glasses. Passing babes are all giving Alf the kanda eye but Alf does not notice them. I go up and say, "Alf what is the fundu, why are you parked this way".

Alf just says, "Hop in".

I am totally in awe of the new look Alf and without a word I get in. Alf pulls away with a roar, wheels spinning, golt music playing from a mega ghettoblaster as Alf says, "So whats up with you".

I say, "Not much, what took you so long to get here."

No reply. Alf has one hand out the window, one hand on the steering wheel and his head buried in a map. Other junta on the road are totally psyched by the apparition of a sports car with a headless body in the drivers street. Alf continues to navigate by sense of smell ala Tommy, without looking at the road. I have totally surrendered at this point. Then muffled tones of "O' I just can't say", emerge from the wrinkled recesses of the map. All of a sudden Alf lets out a bellow "Othaa, this is Cambridge aah, I have been using Waltham map."

Alf continues to navigate through life with the panache of one.

One?

...with the panache of the one.

Chapter 11

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

First pull trumps, then play the ace,
Stark reality face to face.

The end semester exams were approaching again. Signalled in by the spreading wave of uneasiness that affected one and all. Even if you tried to avoid it there were infallible symptoms you recognised which ensured this infectious desperation. There was the general decline in the exuberance that pervaded all spheres of the IITian's tepid existence. There were the voices of our conscience rising in rebellion against squandering precious time. Above all there was Porky.

As of now I have said little as regards the degrees to which we were infected by this academic plague. There were those such as Diro who were protected by an aegis of apathy and lunacy. The likes of me, our usually impervious shell of complacency shattered would indulge in what can best be termed as contemplation. For a majority of us contemplation was a way of life. We spent days of deep thought chalking out strategies, drawing schedules, setting deadlines and working out logistics to the minutest details. This intricate planning was richly interspersed with gripe sessions where we would wallow in the nostalgia of the days of yore when time was abundant and work scarce, discussing the futility of existence and most importantly the paucity of time. And then there were the despos who frantically plunged headlong into intense lucubration. Finally, there was Porky.

It was the evening before the Electric Technology exam. Janus and I sat on the ledge of his wing, legs dangling, kicking imaginary footballs, converting wayward passes into breathtaking goals. Jeeves and Horny contemplated the adverse effects of the Electronics exam preponement on their schedules and Gobes added "Gobes" to the decrepit, graffiti strewn corridor wall in front of us. There was an uncanny silence except for Horny's hushed murmurs and the incessant scraping on the wall arising out of the difficulty in etching the 'O' in Gobes. I had just scored the winning shot in our sudden death shoot-out

when my jubilation was interrupted by the urgency of the footsteps down the corridor. Our wary eyes caught a fleeting glimpse of Porky as he disappeared into his hole with the customary click of the latch.

"Othaa!", bellowed Gobes, "The bastard's getting despoer by the day!"

"He's too despo da!" piped up Horny, "How about lepering the leper."

"Lets burn his books", suggested Janus.

"Deesh, he'll parkeets in the lib and mug his balls off!"

"As if he has any left!"

"You can't afford to talk"

"Othaa tevdey, cock up, sooth" ...

Yet another brilliant plan was lost in a babel of 4-letter words. "Ok! so what do we do" I said in a "cut the crap" tone, passing the buck with impeccable ease. The rest were equally good at it and it soon degenerated to the vulture's predicament in Kipling's Jungle Book. There were 4 of us too, for Gobes was now engrossed in giving the 'S' final touches.

Then as the cliché goes, came this flash of inspiration out of nowhere. I can't seem to remember who was responsible for it. I almost wish it had been me.

"Lets setax Porky's alarm. The leper will put fight till midnight and crash. We'll seteets for one in the morning."

...and if that wasn't odious enough, for Porky treasured his few hours of sleep, we decided to set Janus and Horny's alarm clocks too, for 3 and 5 in the morning respectively and dump them in Porky's room.

The operation was planned to perfection. Porky stepped out of his lair for a drink of water. Gobes, Janus and Horny rushed in. The alarms were set, two of the clocks concealed effectively under Porky's mattress and in his dust-bin. Jeeves and I played lookouts. Jeeves engaged Porky in some transistor biasing gibberish, successfully buying the required time.

"Passax Millman da", said Porky in a conversational fashion referring to the 600 paged five pounder that comprised the local electronics Bible.

"Ssssss no da!", I said with a drawn out intake of air as though making up my mind only to come to a decision with a forceful "No da." "Don't have one. Its against my principles to buy course books."

"Peaceful!" Porky didn't seem bothered in the slightest, for he probably already had one and just wanted to ensure he hadn't missed anything between editions.

The extended "sssssnoda" which was now an integral part of hostel lingo had been the hallmark and now legacy of Choprax, who among other things had the rare distinction of being the only inmate ever to walk straight on the second floor corridor ledge, dead drunk chanting "I am Choprax, I am outax" and vice versa, but I digress.

"Got Malvino fundas?" continued Porky undaunted, this time directed at Horny.

"First part is peaceful but rest is hajjar shady, fourth section I am deeshing"

"What about the three pages from the Motorola manual?"

"That doesn't ring a bell."

Jeeves was trying to be funny. The others seemed to catch on.

"Deesh Motorola da, Its nothing to get alarmed about"

"You mean it is totolly useless?"

"I tolled you so to begin with."

Even Trotter made some asinine comment about banana peals. "Banana Peals" he said with such a variation in emphasis so as to make the pun obvious in even the crassest among us. I made my own contrived contribution about Janus being such an alarmist that he clocked his door whenever he went out. All this merriment and jest was accompanied by controlled sniggers, poker faces that were too pokerish to be normal, and Trotter's boisterous laugh. Porky just looked pleasantly bewildered but his beaving brain was working overtime.

"Inne da, whats the funda?", was as good a parting note as any. Porky scurried off in much the same fashion as Carroll had intended of the March Hare. To say that Porky had noticed something amiss would be a gross understatement. The mitigated and muffled sounds emanating through the crevices of his closed door were those of a room being turned turtle. The three distinct spells of silence were probably the culmination of the fruits of his labour. Janus, Gobes and Horny had gone down to the water cooler for a taste of triumph and Jeeves and I walked away towards my room cursing each other for our big mouths, Porky for his findings and just about everything that came to mind for posterity's sake. With the kind of timing that Ian Fleming used so effectively to enthrall audiences over decades Porky glanced down the corridor and was in Horny's room in a flash. Jeeves, off to take a leak saw him with a clock in his hand on his way out of Horny's room. This he deposited in Gobes' room. A silent gesture from Jeeves had brought me out enough to view the last motions of this vile act. Not just me but Janus and Horny saw Porky leave Gobes' room on their way up. Gobes who was bringing up the rear whistling a massacred version of Col. Bogey's tune was sublimely unaware of the perpetration of Act II, so to speak.

Jeeves and I had a quick conference to discuss the latest developments as Janus and Porky came our way.

"Deesh, don't say anything", I whispered to Jeeves fighting a losing battle to keep a straight face. It was Horny who spoke. "The despo's found one clock..."

"Yup, he left it in Gobes' room. Anyway, the other two are still in his room, peace! Gobes doesn't know about it, so cock up", I cut in urgently.

After Gobes came we bellowed like brutes over this gem of an idea till our sides ached. As usual Gobes laughed loudest. At quarter to twelve we split. Porky had gone to Tarams for tea after making sure he had locked his room. Four of us regrouped hastily for another session of mirth, this time targeted at Gobes.

"What a maraaan!" /* round of laughter */

"The bastard snores so loudly he won't even wake up" /* another round */

"Coming to the serious side, Porky has to be roached for this da. He's not there but his room is locked."

A flood of ideas burst forth from the broken dam of devious minds in full flow, most of them infeasible, cooked up on the heat of the moment. But then again there was this pearl on the pile of shit, uttered by Horny who was about as

devious as they come.

"Lets hang a fucking clock outside his window."

Jeeves clock was procured, alarm set, his pile of laundry on the floor as the nylon cord holding it up had other duties to perform /* all this before you could say Taramani Nair */.

An intimidated freshie from his room, directly below Porky's, watched with awe, harbouring grave suspicions as regards the sanity of his seniors. Janus and I signalled each other with torches while Horny positioned the clock and tied the knot. As Porky returned the celebrations were renewed.

"This time when it rings he can't even shut it off!"

"Serve him right."

Janus, the enthusiast, was all the more inspired as he had seen the possibility of climbing the ground floor window and placing yet another timepiece on Porky's window's ledge and he set about the task. Horny and Jeeves went off to Horny's room and you could tell by the whoops of joy that Jeeves was up to some tricks.

"What a soothax bugger"

Horny squealed beating his bed with delight.

"Janus is a total marine, da, bugger is putting more clocks outside Porky's room and laughing like a brute at Gobes."

The point was simple. Jeeves had told Horny the truth or most of it anyway. Horny said Porky had found two clocks and had put the second one in Janus's room. Horny's exuberant flagellation of his bed unfortunately led to the discovery of a round hard object under Clarabel, where Porky had placed it. Grimacing with pain and the anger of having been double-crossed he bawled "Machaan, no wonder the Janus is freaking out. He must have found it and is trying to aargee me. I'll show him."

Horny was off in a trice, the clock now under Janus's dirty linen.

Meanwhile Janus was hauling his arse over the ledge. As he began to straighten up a hand was held out for support. The hand was Porky's. He had seen Janus lurking below his window on the way to his room from Tarams and that had been enough to signal his brain that something was up. Indeed there was. Janus, who happened to come tumbling down out of sheer surprise. Our spirited mountaineer, however, was far from ruffled. Unfazed he set forth in conquest of an adjacent peak, Gobes' window, a feat accomplished with professional alacrity. On returning to his room, the discovery of the clock Horny hid had him screaming at Gobes for having found the clock that he saw Porky place in Gobes room. Gobes was trying to screw him. How exactly Janus unveiled the clock remains a mystery. What is of relevance, though, was that the very clock was shortly laid to rest in Gobes' desk drawer.

Something I have no clue about is where Gobes was throughout this. Needless to say he missed the entire proceedings. When he did finally, descend on the wing, he went straight to his room and crashed. It was 12:30. Porky went and had the suspended clock pulled in and crashed. We waited. The alarms in Gobes' room went off at 1,3 and then the one on the ledge went off at 5. They rang their guts out till the springs wound down to an extreme. Gobes crashed like a brute. The hushed silence around his room was interrupted only by his

occasional stentorian rumbles. At 5:30 we all crashed.

Gobes awoke at 8:00 all fresh for the morning session of classes. I met Gobes at tea in the evening which could well have been morning tea for me.

"Why didn't you come to class today, da? Cut the whole day, Aah. I gave you proxy first hour"

"Thanks. Generally, was feeling shitty. Did you hear anything last night?"

"Ya, I heard the alarms go off in Porky's room, one was very loud. I think I even smiled in my sleep."

Chapter 12

JACKED

Have you ever been jacked? I have. Confucious say "when jack is inevitable, may as well sit back and jill". Confucious also say many other things that were actually said by other people who were too chicken to take credit for it. Like me. ...and my old Chemistry professor who persistently attributed his discrepencies and contradictions to the fact that "...different, different books mein different, different hota hai". In retrospect the guy was a wise old man much like old Confucious but the fish eyed lens of proximity and cynicism distorts such virtues.

Having been jacked in school so often, I had figured out that attack was the best form of defense. I figured that a good way of protecting myself was do divert attention elsewhere. It had become almost automatic. At times it was hard and I would have to consciously work to let down my guard. I think it was his openness that drew me towards Kaat. It was something I never had. Fortunately, the longing for vulnerability rarely arose. Apart from the minor attitude problem it caused that persistently rebelled against authority, my mask of aggression worked rather well. Gorilla warfare once again, the classic tale of the monkey and the engineer.

Things had been going rather well in general. Courses were going okay. I had survived that first Electrical Engineering course with a B. Porky, had of course cashed in no small terms. Janus almost slept through the exam. As for Horny, an unexpected lack of choice in the long descriptive type questions section of the exam had left him with little choice but to describe in detail the A..Z of a squirrel-cage motor. He had dished out a half decent sketch of a chipmunk machan behind the wheel of a spiffy V12 italian convertible, all this ensconsed in a cross hatched meshing that was meticulously labeled cage, among other pointers and notes. It must be said to Dead Ant's credit that he had a sense of humour. He made a point of carefully avoiding the artwork with his rather flamboyant red X, 5 marks on 20 for brightening his morning and the remark "Are you trying to drive me nuts?" underneath. Dead Ant was a good fair prof. who had his fundas straight and even managed to straighten some of ours. He was the prof. you could bum fags off as opposed to the fag you could proffer bums to.

All in all the semester had gone well, except that I was unwell. The rabies I had picked up from the mutt that was employed as dishwasher at Tarams I could handle. the real reason for my illness was that I had accompanied Thonflakes, the hypochondriac supreme, to the hospital. An injection was shoved with brutal force up my arse by a mami who was refered to as nurse. Reeling under the influence of the shot that was supposd to rid Thonflakes off his cold, I was handed some green pills that would cure my constipation. The green pills ended up in the diswasher mutt, leading to an unprecedented boost in the sale of Muthuvel's masala dosais.

The hospi should have had "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch entrate" scrawled in large outside it. My mind went back to Choprax's advice over a year ago. One learnt to learn from others mistakes with each mistake of ones own. We were no pioneers here. This was a pretty damn well tread path and it was Quixotic to believe any different. I must have been thinking I was Francis Drake, going to the hospi. I recovered. The week long nightmares of Jack Nicholson, the mami and me in a menage a trois, caught in the loony bin section of the hospi were subsiding. We all lived vicariously through the silver screen. Thonflakes made another trip to the hospi and was told that his cold was simply a leaky faucet which he could fix effectively by relieving himself at regular intervals. Thonflakes bought a pair of nose-clips and took up residence in the hostel bogs.

On the subject of the silver screen, every saturday a film used to be screened at an open air theatre on campus for faculty, students and staff. The film was almost always in English. It was ironically the one common language that would not offend any radical regional elements on campus. The saturday night movie was a rain or shine affair, something we looked forward to all week. The theater had concrete steps where the students sat or lay depending on the number of people packed in, on the given night. Cushions, air pillows, umbrellas, apples, the odd mickeyful, it was quite a variety of accessories we carried to make the experience that much more enjoyable. Everybody had their own little moviegoing cliques. For the romantically inclined, the darkness and teeming masses provided tantalizing opportunities. Horny was Film Club Sec in those days. Horny had been climbing steadily and did a great job with whatever he took on. Reflections of Horny's secretarial power and accomplishment, however, always went back to the aftermath of the Anabel-Clarabel switch. Horny was right on the money with everything. The films this season were picked to perfection. Their common theme was titties. There were at least a couple of pairs in each screening and the audience would go wild. The films invariably had sufficient intellectual, artistic and cultural content to justify the basis for their selection. Like "Police Academy 42". The nudity was incidental and almost of a platonic bent.

The last movie of the season "The Graduate" was rumoured to have a couple of steamy scenes in it apart from being an allround excellent flick. Simon and Garfunkel was a very popular group, especially with the females so a large cultural festival like turnout was to be expected. Those who had seen the film were likening Mrs. Robinson to the hostel Wardy's wife, whom nobody had seen. Proof of her existence lay solely in the two toddlers the wardy toted

around claiming as his own. Porky of course claimed that if you stood up on the water tank just behind the wardens quarters in the evenings you could glimpse the luscious local Mrs. Robinson, reflected in full glory in the mirror that was just about visible through a tear in the curtain that covered the window of the wardy's bogs.

So with a wager of three banana milkshakes on the line, Porky and Gobes climbed up and stood patiently in wait on the water tank that had clearly seen better days. It was a huge rusty monster, built to last. The lid on top had been opened to catch the cyclonic rains that were finally pouring down. There seemed to be some general movement in the direction of the window. Porky swore he saw a swish of blue sari and detected instantly from the blur characteristic that it was in the process of being taken off. Gobes saw nothing. "Othaa, Porky stop pilling". Gobes edged in closer to get a better look. Then all of a sudden he saw it. The elusive blue garb. Once again it was swishing. Then it was gone from view. Then again a swish. All of a sudden it started swaying. Porky and Gobes drooled. They were doing their bit, filling up the water tank. Again it swayed appetizingly. Porky and Gobes looked ready to charge before you could say 'Ole. Then it stopped. Despite the distance and the level of indirection suffered as a consequence of the mirror, Porky's eyes picked up a gold paisley. "Othaa just take it off". Then there was another swish. Lots of motion that Porky's eyes adeptly lapped up. Gobes, however, lacking such ocular athleticism had to run about Porky to keep up. Still no flesh. Porky who had always sympathized with Dushyasana was feeling a sense of deja-vu. Then at last a blur and Porky let out a squeal. Gobes turned on his heel and planted his foot securely where the tank lid would have been. Porky let out another squeal. This was out of annoyance at being distracted by Gobes grunt. Before him in the blackness of the tank was a being with limbs that flagellated with a random urgency often seen prior to a drowning.

Gobes could'nt swim. Porky yelled. He could swim but had no intentions of jumping in to save his friend. He was afraid of the dark. Fortunately it was getting around movie time and folks were slowly making their way to the theater with their pillows and dessicated pieces of fruit. The water tank was right on the road connecting the hostel zone to the open air theater. Crowd formation is an art Indians specialize in. If there are more than two looking animatedly at something it is sufficient cause to be there. A thuggadd crowd gathered in no time wardee and kids included. Gobes still flailed and gulped water. Given Gobes bulk if he had only stayed still he would have floated. Gobes brain, however, was in panic mode. You could tell he was'nt thinking Archimedes or screaming "Eureka". What he was yelling even with the guling water and reverb of the tank walls sounded quite simply like "Help". Gobes yelled shaking his head vigourously. The wardee had a flashlight. From the reflections in the tank you could see Gobes clearly. His partially submerged orb going left and right caused ripples that made pretty diffraction patterns on the walls of the tank. Little bubbles formed around his nostrils and complex eddy current systems were set up by nose hair drag as they skimmed the water surface.

The wardee who was a Naval Architecture professor, suggested he might

consider extending his legs out under him. Sure enough, Gobes found himself on terra firma with his nose above water much to the merriment of the crowd. Porky surrendered. A fire engine was summoned and it came at leisure with bells ringing and a half dozen hostelites hanging off the back, enjoying the ride. The fire chief was pissed when he found out there was no fire to be put out. Furthermore, the ladder on the fire truck was designed specifically to go up rendering it useless in this case. The fire chief suggested they could pull Gobes up by throwing him a hose. Gobes thought they were planning to flood the tank with the hose so he would float to the top. He kept throwing the hose back out of the tank, much to the fire chief's frustration. The wardee explained patiently that it was not the fire chief's intent to drown Gobes. Finally the hose was accepted by Gobes and it took at least six people risking back spasms /* and other ailments resulting from lifting heavy objects */ to hoist Gobes from the tank. The crowds momentarily squatted so they could give Gobes a standing ovation when he emerged.

The movie started an hour late. Junta had parked around the water tank. It was far more entertaining. The wardee wanted to know what Gobes was doing on the water tank. Gobes maintained a solemn silence with a talk-to-my-lawyer attitude. Porky said he was just coming back from the department and saw Gobes drowning and not knowing how to swim yelled for help. He had no clue what Gobes might want to do on the water tank. Junta chattered incessantly and half the buggers doubled over on their own kaat jokes. Porky was pained. He had missed it all. The movie was fun if you could actually see it. Almost everybody was talking about Gobes and how he may have landed in the water tank. Then those who were still interested in the film would shout "Cock up" and "Volume" and it would set off another chain of cacophony. During intermission there were the usual slides about events on campus. There were a few odd ones that evening. One of them said "Tank you Trotter!".

Another went...

"Water Splash... Chief wants to know hose in the tank!
maybe he come get you ladder."

The wardee would not let Gobes go without some answers. Gobes' silence worried him. He was sure the traumatic experience had caused Gobes to lose his power of speech. The wardee fired up his scooter and took Gobes to the hospi. The first sound Gobes uttered was a mingled bellow of pleasure and pain, that continued into boisterous mirth at the sight of an equine portion of serum making a back door entry into the wardee. A miracle cure.

Chapter 13

ERRORMALAI

Speaking of miracles, Errormalai was our local Houdini. Errormalai was the hostel dhobi. I may have mentioned him earlier but it took over a year to get to know the man well enough to talk about him. He was one of the first people I met, largely because he provided an essential service. It was the first time most of us had been away from home and many of us could barely wash our own underwear. As dhobi's go Errormalai was optimally efficient. He always returned clothes on time. For the meticulous few who kept an inventory of the apparel dished out, it would check out just fine too.

"Oru Shutsu"

"Oru Pant"

"Nal T-Shutsu"

"Rendu Bett-Sheet"

"Rendu Aff-Pant"

"Yettu Yankee"

...he would rattle off from his own scrawl. The meticulous few would check off the same precisely. The checking off business dealt with, Errormalai would proceed to hand you a bundle of clothes that had little correlation to the precisely ticked off inventory. If you were lucky you would find an item that once matched your precisely ticked off inventory. If you were even luckier you would find that the item still bore a remote resemblance to the one on your precisely ticked off inventory. The superserendipitous sometimes even got back stuff that was cleaner than what had been handed out.

Errormalai's logic was quite simple. In his honest opinion the king of all garments was a "Yankee". It was simple to wash and easy to iron. It was devoid of buttons, hooks, zippers or other accessories that spelt trouble, in more ways than one. In its simplicity and generality lay its superiority. Any garment that Errormalai found difficult to accommodate into his small range of cloth categories was immediately promoted to the status of "Yankee". In Errormalai's able hands all garments evolved into "Yankees". Frequently, Errormalai, benevolent as ever, would give you in return for your one decent shirt, not one, not two, but two "Yankees" and one "Aff-Yankee". The "Aff-Yankee" would be cut

suspiciously in the shape of a breast pocket /* someday he will start a line of designer Yankees in Paris called "Euromalai". */.

Seniors always held Errormalai in high esteem and would not tolerate any complaints as regards his laundering capability. I still remember being quite surprised at the fondness with which each graduating class would give him a big bottle of premium rum as part of the hostel day celebrations.

Errormalai was a distant cousin of Taramani Nair, once removed, I had been told. He was a short skinny guy with spindly legs that protruded from a checked lungi that was at best an oversized "Yankee". His curly hair was perpetually oiled and the oil and sweat formed little immiscible droplets at the base of his neck peeping over a checked Yankee knotted around his neck. Between the two checked Yankees one often saw a bright orange T-shirt that boldly said "Hawaii" in neon green. Complexionwise he was so black that he would absorb the surrounding light, leaving a perpetual realm of darkness around him, within which the animated neon "Hawaii" realized its fullest potential. That aside he had a very luxuriant pair of bugger grips that ominously threatened to meet right in front of his face.

He used to work at the neighbouring Velachery toddy shop before the owner realized that he consumed way in excess to what he sold. He also realized that he was in cahoots with the local milkman. Every evening they would imbibe and then do a rain dance for the precious liquid with which to dilute their respective beverages. It was thus that Errormalai was forced to enter the laundry profession where his experience with water held him in good stead.

In the hostel he would walk around with oversized women's sunglasses on. He was so cool he would not even take them off at night. The sunglasses fooled many people into thinking he was blind. The philanthropic Seedha even offered to read to him in Braille. He would also wear a pair of walkman headphones with the lead securely plugged into the knot of his lower Yankee. He had the most bizarre walk I have ever seen. Picture being faced with the problem of carrying seven beer bottles wherever you go. You are barely able to carry three in each hand between your fingers spread and curled a foot in front of your face. You could hold the last brew between your teeth like a dog but that's not an option. It's not an option because you can't sing "Kaaadal, Kaadal, Kaadal" at the same time and the latter clearly takes priority. So you are forced to plug an alternate orifice. Now walk. Once you have the rhythm, just pretend like the bottles are not there. That was the Errormalai walk. He was so groovy that Alf wrote a song in his honour. This, Alf said, was a take off on the BeeGees smash hit "Staying Alive". It essentially went "Errormalai, Errormalai, aah aahh aaahh aaaahhh.... Errormalaaaaaiiii...".

If all this was not enough, he had two other talents. The first and most important was that he was a provider. There was nothing he could not provide. In this respect he was worshipped like Sai Baba on campus. His wares, being largely of the illegal kind, were always wrapped in Yankees of different sizes and colours that were coded to inform the cognizant of the contents without

opening them. Depending on the nature of the goods one would often find Yankess within Yankees.

His other amazing talent was the ability to bury his head between his legs to the point where he would partition space and alter his own topology. This allowed him to disappear instantaneously when collectors or unhappy patrons came to hunt him down. Errormalai was truly a man of many talents. Legend has it that he spent time between his boozing and snoozing as the musician and dancemaster for hire known as M. Adams. There were flyers all over campus advertising the services of M. Adams who could teach you to breakdance while playing the bagpipes. Ever since last Diwali, Adams was very much in demand. M. Adams was capable of some remarkable gymnastic feats that he would patiently try to impart to his rigid and uncoordinated pupils. He would also show up in the common room whenever the sign on the hostel notice board said "Movies Tonight" with a blue marker. He claimed it was to watch Haraami. A few minutes through the feature Haraami would always attain yogic bunchdom by performing a mayuraasan without his hands. Haraami was gone but Adams would still show up.

M. Adams looked like Errormalai's twin. They only dressed different. Adams always wore white shatsu and white pants. The pocket on his shatsu was always on the verge of asserting its independence as a Yankee but it never quite made it. Errormalai said that Adams was his "Good Friend" and he would get guys a "Aff-off discount" from Adams, of course at a minimal charge, which he claimed he needed to buy soap.

Still another legend has it that he doubles as Assistant Professor Rotesan in the Computer Science Department and triples as Rotesan's Project Associate Valsamma. The only thing common across the three characters are the omnipresent bugger grips. Errormalai was truly a master of disguise. The signs, however, were always there. While other Professors' exams were sold for peanuts at Errormalai's, Rotesan's commanded a premium. Though, Valsamma and Rotesan had been seen around the same time in the department frequently, they had never been sighted together. Every now and then Porky would swear that he had seen a trousered leg peek from under the hem of Valsamma's saree. The saree itself had a checked pattern that bore a marked resemblance to Errormalai's lower Yankee. The income of an Asst. Professor, a Project Associate, a launderer, dancemaster and provider put together is a very respectable sum but ambitious people move on. Someday Rotesan shall be promoted to Head of Dept. and Valsamma will find her niche as an Asst. Professor. Errormalai, he will always be just the hostel dhobi.

Chapter 14

A MISSIVE FOR MISS

She was a beauty. Before you go barking up the wrong tree let me clarify that I am not talking about Valsamma anymore, that would be stretching Errormalai's talents too far. Anyway, she evoked the finest of emotions in Jha. Jha had spent his entire first year being evoked. He had breezed through the workshop classes that were an exercise in learning the skills of primitive anthropomorphic toolmakers. As a blacksmith he had hammered the fear of Taramani Nair into metals that a fifty pound pneumatic power hammer could not dent. Once in carpentry class, his vigorous sawing had made its way through the workbench. These were the physical manifestations of Jha's evoked finer sentiments. Her very presence would exhilarate and frustrate him at the same time. He just could not summon up the nerve to speak to her. As a surrogate he would pursue his task at hand with a vigour fueled by his obsession for Rasp. Jha, if you remember was the intense guy who had hounded the hell out of Horny during counselling. Behind his back we used to call him Mr. Metronome. We saw him every now and then through my first year, since we took a lot of common classes. He had lost faith in Horny and by association seemed to doubt anything I would say as well. I once saw him on my way to Tarams and informed him that I had heard the NCC class that Saturday had been cancelled because the commandant's wife was having a baby. "...and I am the baby's father", was the reply. He may not have forgiven Horny but he was a believer. Unlike Parshad, religion and spirituality were not palpable enough for his beliefs. His idols, gods and demons were real. He believed in people. He believed of all people in Diro. Diro was his sounding board and guiding hand. Diro was happy to oblige, for he loved to pontificate and genuinely interested ears were hard to find. Most of us thought of ourselves as thinkers leaving little room for swamis and gurus.

Anyway, Rasp was very much a beauty. People may argue that she fell short when compared to visions like Helen and Chiknaa but on an absolute scale she was quite vehemently on the positive side. She was a doe eyed Sri Lankan girl who had joined the institute as a Government of India candidate. It appeared that she had had little idea what she was getting herself into at the time. Her father was a diplomat who felt it would be just the place for a daughter who was

intrigued by the wonders of modern science. I don't know whether my cynicism left much room for intrigue but it appears to me on a regular basis that I had little idea what I was getting myself into as well. Anyway she was there and making the most of it.

The only other GOIN guy I knew was Abdul Aziz. He was a big studly Palestinian guy whom your olfactory senses would classify from a mile as a big moving scented eraser. His refugee status landed him with twelve dollars a day. Keeping track of such a royal income utilised his mathematical skills to their fullest. He was a friendly guy, a good footer player and spent most of his day taking people around campus on his Yamaha 350cc.

He also had the hots for Rasp. Unlike Jha he approached her the very first day he saw her. With a hug that he had borrowed off Yasser Arafat's televised NAM¹ appearances, in his best and most humourous English he said "You wanta ride a on my camel". She seared him with a remark in the foulest Tamil I had ever heard. It was not what she said but how she said it. What a turn on. I am inclined to think that she had the husky voice of a real seductress. I am also inclined to think that everybody else thought so but none of us guys in batch B, other than Jha had the balls to admit it. Instead we seemed to concur that she had a hoarse, dry masculine voice and thus that she should be named Rasp.

It had been over a year now and Jha's frustration had multiplied in leaps and bounds. The batches had split up and Rasp made her move through the sieve down to Naval Architecture where she hoped to cruise through with the least pain. It had been almost a month now since Jha had seen her. All this with the constant reminder from Diro that if Jha did not act he would miss the boat.

Diro also stated with authority which was as questionable as his sanity, that the females on campus were so frustrated that they would take recourse to lesbianism and that even the kaatest guy with even an iota of interest just had to begin to push the right buttons to make things happen. Diro himself followed the eight fold path. Among his four user-defined tenets those days, was the exercise of stringent self-control to expand his mind. Besides Diro respected women. They were the Uparwala's finest creation. He idolized his mother and sister. Most of all he was grateful to Indu Puri for her tenacity in being a subconsciously inspiring force through his formative years. After all she had singlehandedly taken Indian women's pingpong to heights where a Table-Tennis ball explodes due to the severe reduction in external atmospheric pressure. Of all Diro's idiosyncracies this was the most wacko.

Jha decided it was time to act. He was now in search of that elusive button to push. It was pretty obvious that he was incapable of coming up with anything intelligible when confronted with the lady. The next best thing would be a letter. Even if Jha were to neaten his disjoint scrawl to a romatic cursive hand, the contents posed an insurmountable problem. What the hell would he write. Once again Diro persevered. The next morning a sheet of paper neatly creased down the middle and pinned between the handlebar and brake of her bike greeted

¹Non-Aligned Movement.

Rasp. It was written in red ink in a consistent well-rounded running hand, using 4 equispaced guide rules that had been pencilled and then carefully erased. The contents were those of a random pick from the letters to the Editor in an issue of the Penthouse magazine.

You can pretty much imagine the effect it had on Rasp. In fact you may as well do so, since I have no clue. I even find it hard to fathom the effect it was intended to have. There was no name at the bottom, just a PS saying that she should respond with a message in two days time on the bike parked three bikes to her left. The old green one with a ripped yellow seat. Two days later there was a sheet of paper neatly creased down the middle and pinned between the handlebar and brake of the old green bike with the ripped yellow seat. This one unlike its predecessor was blank. Waiting patiently at a safe distance behind a tree was Dean Doraiswamy /* The Dean who wanted to be Director instead of the Director */.

The wait was not long. The session before lunch ended and students filed out. Among the first out and around the old green bike with the ripped yellow seat was Boots. Boots snapped the lock on the bike claiming ownership and sealing his fate as the Dean pounced. Boots not one to be fazed told the Dean he would be happy to take him doubles but he was quite low on air in the back tire. The Dean escorted Boots to his office where he had him take a seat. Boots was given a pencil and paper and the Dean dictated the contents of the letter to the Editor. Boots wrote. He had no clue what this was all about. He checked his watch. Feb. 5 was too far from early April for even the most zealous pranksters. Anyway, this was turning out to be a lot of fun. He crossed out "restraunt" and rewrote "restaurant". Other than that he was fairly neat. Things became clearer when he reached the PS bit. There were probably not that many old green bikes with a ripped yellow seat on campus. None that he knew of anyway, other than his own. It seemed unlikely that anyone would want to get even with him. Not that he was a true angel among us fallen folk. It was more the fact that it was so hard to rattle the guy that most efforts against him would be in vain. Then what was this all about.

Dean Doraiswamy looked long and hard at the two sheets of paper. There was little similarity other than the text itself. The handwriting was different but then the original hand had been cleverly disguised by using a copybook running hand, so evident from the telltale pencil marks. There had to be something he was missing. Some characteristic. Some glaring inconsistency. Something....

He saw it. The word colour in three different places was missing the "u". He saw it in the original. He saw it in Boots writing. He checked each "color" twice and then asked Boots to write the word colour again. Boots wrote "color".

In a calm and professional voice the Dean said, "My friend, you do realize that with that word you just wrote you have pleaded guilty".

"Guilty to what, Sir".

"When did you write this filthy letter... I will see to it that we have no more students like you to tarnish the purity of this campus. I dont think you realize the gravity of the situation you are in young man. Whatever made you think

you could get away with it..."

"Maybe the simple truth that I did not do it", Boots finally got a word in as the calm professional tone was beginning to hit a crescendo.

"...Just because you were clever enough to disguise your handwriting. You know there are handwriting experts that can even trace a deliberately changed style to its source. Let me tell you, I have seen people twice as smart as you fall".

He then showed Boots the consistently missing "u"'s. Boots equally on the ball showed him that he had spelt "delicious" as "delishuss" and "tongue" as "tung". In fact "color" /* the american spelling */, "restaurant" and the articles were probably the only words that Boots had spelt correctly. The Dean was embarrassed. Boots then brought to light the fact that the Dean may have picked on the wrong old green bike with the ripped yellow seat.

The Dean let Boots go after swearing him to secrecy in the matter. He then launched a hostel to hostel search of all old green bikes with ripped yellow seats. Despite his best efforts, word of the Rasp letter, the Boots questioning and the reason for the bike hunt spread like wildfire. It was hilarious watching wardens walk up and down the corridors, scouring the bike sheds of their respective hostels for that elusive old green bike with a ripped yellow seat. The closest they came was a bike with a fairly new yellowish seat, with a scratch that may have been construed as a rip. It belonged to the mess superintendant of our hostel. The inquiry subsided. The Dean notched it up as an example of his quick action program in his fresh new approach to cutting through university bureaucracy. This was a program that faculty and students alike, disliked intensely. Red tape was not essentially a bad thing. Rasp used it to her advantage. She was permitted to leapfrog the attendance rule and cut classes officially in fear of being harrassed. Boots singularly lacked the curiosity to find out what or who was behind this and what his own role in the play was.

The romance, however, had died. Jha was disappointed by more than one person in more ways than one. Diro tried to put things in the right perspective. No credibility had been lost. In a way Rasp had been flattered and then she always did smile her sweetest smile for Jha. Diro made up for the fiasco with a bun omelette treat at Tarams. The old green bike creaked as it carried Diro and Jha back from Tarams. It was a creak of joy and appreciation.

Appreciation for its newest acquisition.

A shiny new bright red seat cover.

Chapter 15

NO QUARTER

I woke up happy. I could not for the life of me remember what the dream was about but it was happy. I had an idea that it had something to do with Rasp. She really was a beauty. At least Jha could claim that he had made an attempt towards a romantic involvement. He had failed but at least he had given it a shot. I would just play games in my mind. I thought about her a lot but there was always the fear of rejection. More importantly, even if I succeeded, I would be laying myself bare for ridicule in front of the other guys. It was much safer in these matters to be average, right in the middle with the rest of the pack. Conditioning took care of these extraneous thoughts, quite well. So maybe it was not about Rasp. Maybe the dream was about something equally wonderful. The Six-A-Side.

I was lying with my head on Boots' bed and my legs on the sawed off desk. Next to me lay Porky who was definitely having a happy dream. He had a smile sandwiched between the air pillow under his head and the little puddle of dribble that had defied gravity and found a resting place in the dimple of his left cheek. I was sure Rasp was in his dream. Rasp and the wardee's wife, in a gondola cruising down the Buckingham Canal. My own dream was a complete blank. I was looking forward to the end of the semester, the end of the year. It had been a long haul.

The exams were through, the results were nigh. I still had a victors' buzz from the night before. We had just won the Six-A-Side /* 8 out of the last 9 years I might add */. Life was good. The Six-A-Side was our soccer world cup, our personal "fin du monde". Everybody even remotely related to happenings on campus actively participated. As the name might suggest, the sport was football with the usual rules played on a field roughly three-fourths the size with proportionally shrunk goals and six players a side on the field. There was no restriction on the number of teams that a hostel or other campus affiliated organization could enter. The tournament was based on simple elimination at each stage, given that there were at least two hundred teams to begin with. A seeding system was also used to prevent the better teams from clashing in the early stages of the tournament. The matches were played under floodlights,

one after another, starting in the evenings and finishing up around three in the morning.

Teams that crossed hostel boundaries could also enter but that was rare. Hostels zones around this time became strongly partisan battlegrounds. To keep a degree of fairness in the competition, hostels were not allowed to put all their big eggs in a single basket. No team was allowed to have more than three institute calibre players. The definition of an institute calibre player was a guy who had at any point in time been a part of the institute football team in any capacity. The ambiguous definition of the word “capacity” was heavily exploited by many loophole seeking hostel teams. The competitive edge aside, everybody played. Hostels would field teams with suffixes from A..Z in order of skill. Some hostels even reverted to an extended alphabet to accomodate the universal desire to play. The attire and attitude ran the gamut from the latest in kleats and shin pads to rubber chappals and bare feet. Shorts, trousers, lungis, it was all quite colourful. One mess worker even played in his undees. There were usually huge upsets as latent talents for kicking a ball would crop up in the most unlikely people.

This year the most colourful team was “Bootleg Bongs” with Jeeves as the captain. Jeeves who after every kick would rub his perty polished sandals against the back of his trousers. There were four other Bongs on the team, whose genes uncharacteristically lacked any working knowledge of the game. Then there was the honorary Bong, Errormalai. As a special case ruling, Errormalai had originally been allowed to play on two different teams. As the luck of the draw would have it, these teams met in the first round itself. Errormalai was caught in a tug of war situation, baled out of both teams and joint forces with Jeeves, whose team was a player short. Errormalai was the coolest damn football player I have ever seen. He was dressed in his usual attire with the exception of a bright new pair of Adidas kleats. The opposing team complained that his sunglasses made it hard to tell where he was aiming to kick the ball and so he had to take them off. They found out the hard way that they would have been better off with no clue than to try and anticipate Errormalai’s moves. Errormalai scored thrice for the Bootleg Bongs as they won their first match 2-1. They got by the second round on account of a forfeit from the Taramani Tigers. The goalie for the Taramani Tigers, M. Adams, did not show. By this time the Bootleg Bongs had acquired a rabid fan following. Their third round opponents, a much better team, were made to feel like underdogs. The crowds went wild as Jeeves and his men took the field.

”Errormalai, Errormalai, aah aahh aaahh aaaahhh....
Errormalaaaaiiii...”.

rang through the night. Errormalai did not score but was largely responsible for the solitary goal in the game. Harried by defenders and close to scoring, his lungi unfolded on the ball just as a sprinting Jeeves kicked it through the fabric and the unsighted goalie’s legs. The next game was against the A-team from our hostel. We cheered our lungs out for the Bootleg Bongs while they were politely blanked 14-0. There was no question that this A-team was a winner. After all, the members of the team had shaved their heads for no particular

reason other than to look cool and maybe reduce aerodynamic drag.

It was a bright morning. Thonflakes was lifting weights on the terrace above the common room. One, two, five, ten... muttered Thonflakes under his breath and then picked up a larger and rustier cast iron barbell. One, two... he decided he was not quite ready to move into a different weight category. I slid down to water pipe to the common room to work on the crossword in the morning paper. Boots was already there and halfway through the crossword. I turned on the AC-DC album "Back in Black", that was already on the turntable /* wholesome morning music */. "Hells Bells" started to chime. Boots and I relived play by play, how Inne-da /* one of the greatest forwards the Institute had seen */ had chased the ball down the line in overtime, beating 7 defenders, before scoring the lone goal in a nailbiter that we should have won easily. The team this year had a tendency to choke and if it had not been for that brilliant run by Inne-da we would have had to go to penalties. With the loser for a goalie we had this year we may as well have surrendered. Beating 7 defenders in a 6-a-side match might strike you as odd but its not. Inne-da had actually dribbled past one guy twice. Hostel rivalries were intense and the opponents had made up in tenacity what they lacked in skill. We had been lucky to have Inne-da on our team. He was a year junior to me and had originally been sent to another hostel due to some clerical error. We had gotten it rectified with all speed. Jeeves sauntered by and there was little point in hovering over the crossword. We just handed it to him and he filled in the remaining blanks without so much as having to read a clue twice.

My voice was hoarse from cheering. Inne-da had gotten hopelessly drunk that night. He had been dipped, like a young Obelix, into a tub full of rum and orange rasna. The brew suitably doctored after multiple teabaggish dippings was filled into the trophy and communally passed around. There was much rejoicing and the "Back in Black" album was played loud and long. The partying had gone late into the night after which Porky and I had just crashed in Boots room.

There were no classes that morning, just some results that were handed out. They were pretty good. I seemed to be coasting and reasonably in control. The morning was marred by Janus whining that he had been cheated out of 10 marks on a paper because that schmuck Horny had told him some stuff was not in the syllabus. It was probably a simple misunderstanding. Horny was not the kind of guy to do something like that intentionally.

Lunch as usual was crap made bearable by a postprandial visit to the hostel tuck-shop. The hour after lunch turned out to be a rude awakening. The Electronic Circuits paper was handed back. I had scored 25/50. That was right about what I expected. A shade on the lower side but I only needed 23 for a B grade, which was good enough. People had done pretty badly in the mid-term and so the averages were low. 32 would have gotten me an A. I was secretly hoping that some oversight on the instructors part might just get me there but this was not bad. I started to leaf through the paper to look for avenues that might push my score up by seven points to the next rung. I had scored abysmally in the first few questions. There was some play in those first

few zero's though. Looked like I could argue those for one or two points. Six more to go. More zeroes followed. The big essay type questions had zero's with comments that basically pointed out in no small measure that my circuits did not address the question asked.

I had scored 25 on the last question. A multiple choice question. A multiple choice question worth one mark. A multiple choice question with 4 parts three of which I had gotten wrong. It was funny. I was forced to notice the reasonably clear decimal point that I had dismissed before. It was .25. I was not quite prepared for this. Would 2.25 be worth arguing for. I had no idea what grade a .25 would land me with. I figured it would not be a good one and definitely not a B. I explained at length to an unsympathetic Dead Ant that I had all the ingredients in the monolithic circuit questions and deserved some form of partial credit.

The assertions and explanations turned to obsequious pleas. Finally, as if to get me out his thinning hair Dead Ant threw up his hands and moved the decimal point one place to the right. 2.5. It was better than .25 but this was no time to give in. I persisted at the risk of losing what I had but who gives a shit about the mockingbird in hand when you are after an albatross. An albatross of good fortune. Dead Ant walked away. I followed. He cursed. I cringed. He pulled the paper out of my hand and pushed the decimal back to its original resting place. I stood my ground. I had been so generous with my use of resistors, capacitors and those cool 3 pronged transistor things with a circle around them. I deserved marks. Dead Ant capitulated. He gave me 10 points and told me quite plainly never to take another course under him. 10/50 seemed fair. It was probably quite unjustified but I took it like a grateful beggar and scampered off before he could change his mind. I was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. I rode back to the hostel went straight to my room and dropped on the bed.

Then I really woke up. It was early evening. I was still zonked. I felt the remnants of an adrenalin buzz. A paper with 10 scrawled in disgust on it lay beside me. A 10 that just might scrounge a C grade. It glared at me with such intensity that I knew this was no dream. Outside the footer team was warming up. Junta down the corridor were collecting together with pots, pans, whistles and other assorted noisemakers. This was the night. The final. If the hostel won, it would be eight out of the past nine years. The crowd pulled me in and we headed out to the field 3/4 the size of a soccer field, floodlit and surrounded by hostels. The battleground. The game began and I found the .25 being coaxed out of my mind by the rising decibels. The first half was scoreless. I was going through a strong sense of deja-vu.

Five minutes through the second half, the deja-vu feeling was rectified. We were scored against off a great shot from the left flank that sneaked its way in through the far post. The partisan hostel crowds swamped the field, flanking the flanker who had scored. He was busy flying an aeroplane. We booed and then cheered when the refs cleared the field. Almost immediately we equalized off a corner kick that Inne-da's head made contact with. Another couple of reasonably close calls and Bheema was brought down in the penalty box with

an open goal ahead. Bheema scored off the resulting penalty. The pots and pans realized their fullest potential. The remainder of the match was spent in solid defense, though everybody kept shouting that this was the last thing the team should be doing. They were trying to hold onto a one goal lead. They did.

Firecrackers erupted. The result was sort of expected and so it was all quite amicable. A few flying tempers but not the war that one often witnessed, stemming from fierce hostel patriotism and to a larger extent from letting off steam at the end of the year. Inne-da was hoisted back to the hostel. Bheema was lifted and subsequently dropped just like Thonflakes had done with the dumbbells. The fraternal revelry balmed my feelings of mediocrity and personal failure. Any sorrows were ball-and-chained by the shouts of "Who won the Six-A-Side" and subsequently drowned by the euphoric "We won the Six-A-Side"!

In the hostel a tub of rum and orange rasna awaited catharsis.

III

Chapter 16

LONGWATER

Junta deeshes da, why stay in des,
Stark reality face to face.

An important aspect of the well-rounded education provided by the Institute were the humanities courses. The selection pot contained topics as mundane as "English-1,2,3" and as mundane as the "Science of Appreciative Fiction". The former was a study of English and the latter dealt with the analysis of long term investments in backing paperbacks. Then one semester there was an obscure offering that exploded in your face.

Epistemological Cybernetics in Science and Technology :

sifting the sambhar from the rasam

The very title exuded positive vibes. It was an eye-catcher no doubt, linking the notion of a fearless gaul in not one but two foreign lands, to the rather trivial decantation process of hostel fare. What caught my eye though was the name below the title...

Dr. Milton Longwater (*Oxon*).

Practically the entire third year signed up for the class, with a single driving goal... RECO. The line of reasoning was straightforward. Prof. from abroad comes visiting. Prof. has contacts. If Prof. writes a good reco, with such contacts it is liable to carry much weight. If Prof. is shamelessly soaped and suitably impressed he is liable to write a good reco. If student takes Prof.'s course, student is in the ideal position to accomplish a good soap impression. Porky was already discussing his term paper in clipped British tones.

Milton Longwater was idolized as a professor. He insisted on being addressed Milt, as he had yet to attain knighthood. He would saunter in late to class on a regular basis. The very first day of class he brought a journal that had abstracts of abstracts of research papers in organic chemistry. He gave us each a copy and instructed us to burn this cornucopia of carbon, while he proceeded to tear his copy. Most of the class followed his cue and ripped diligently.

"In the days of ancient Greece, aural input took precedence over the visual senses", he said. "Tell me gentlemen, would you rather watch a close-captioned

pornographic film than fool around in the dark in surround sound. The eyes will only tell you lies. The ears, they shed no tears.”

The assignment of the week, which would account for a third of the final grade was to stick the ripped journals back together and subsequently burn them. The ashes were to be given a burial in a shady spot on campus with a befitting epitaph to mark the spot. The rest of the class was to be spent with our eyes closed and our ears open chattering incessantly, with the attempt to absorb as much of the cacophony as possible. As soon as the sea of eyelids came together Milt disappeared. Porky knew this. In addition to his telescopic peepers, Porky had a third eye on his buddy Richard /* it served as the archetypical peniscope */. Anyway, here we were, the Surdas commune, concentrating on white noise, acquiring among other things a well-rounded education. Mostly we were concentrating on the sound of the bell that would signal the end of class. Milt showed up shortly before the bell, saying that this would have been an enlightening experience for his students at Oxford and what had we, the cream of the ex-crown-jewel, learned.

With some hesitation a couple of hands rose.

Janus said, ”It shows that technology atrophies human faculties and the very science that strives to enhance human conscience ends up destroying it”.

Kaat said that according to ancient Vedic scriptures /* Ripley’s Believe It or Not */ the range of frequencies audible to the human ear was actually greater than that audible to a dog. It was just that the dogs brain used a superior FFT /* Fast Fourier Transform /* sometimes synonymous with an M.Tech */ /* algorithm and was thus able to decipher higher frequencies. Thus through the ages the human ear’s perception had reduced to whatever the brain was capable of handling.

”If degradation from lack of use is a fundamental epistemological axiom, will it not contradict Schroedinger’s cat in a box paradox” said Kaat, who had just learned this primordial foxtrot from the ”Dancing Wu Li Masters”. The wise Prof. Longwater thought a minute and then retorted,

”Lordaah” with an overemphasized dental ”D” sound as if to say, ”Bollocks Cart, and I can very well say Laudaa but must mutilate the word to keep up with my Imperial image”.

Porky who wished to subtly assert his ocular superiority said ”In the land of the blind, the one-eyed is king”.

Way in the back a bored Thonflakes scribbled....

In an ethereal realm,
Transcending the mind.
Where the mute cannot see,
And the speechless are blind.
Where the quest for knowledge,
Is the root of all fears.
And the sharps of a chord,
Fall flat on deaf ears.

He had read a poem once and there was something about it that was wrong.

Something he couldn't quite put his finger on but this little ditty seemed to put things very succinctly. He was happy. He tried in vain to hide his maudlin doodles as I peered over. Even though I took his trip for putting psued-senti fundas, I have to admit it sounded quite impressive. Thonflakes never put any of his work to use. The next two-bit cultural festival had me, the environment conscious recycler, plugging the verse to the title "Searching" and hauling in the poetry prize. The beauty of Thonflakes's work was that it could have fit any of the other title choices... "Dreams", "Dear Mr. Fantasy" and "For Your Eyes Only" equally well.

Milton Longwater was a poet too and he would wax eloquent on Edward Lear. He had even written a piece on the piece known as Mrs. Longwater.

The once voluptuous Mrs. Milt,
Is no longer remarkably built,
For in Madras heat,
Even the choicest of meat,
Is gradually known to wilt.

Mid-way through the semester came Holi and a fun Holi it was. The colourful catharsis at the Besant Nagar beach was replaced this year by the Holi bash at Milt's. The dunkings in coloured water brought back memories of rum and orange rasna farts. Milt had a pad rivalling the Diro's bungalow, a result no doubt of his exalted Oxonian status. He had beaten the unpopular Dean Doraiswamy to it, so everybody else seemed happy with the arrangement. Most professor types liked the unassuming Milt, who was quite the wise easygoing academic, everwilling to be schmoozed. Virtually the entire student body had shown up at Milt's. Milt was very much at home sitting on the ground in his once white kurta mixing thandai by firing it back and forth between two steel jugs /* not to be confused with Jugs of Steel, part of a series on muscle development */. Boots and I sat down on either side of him strategically positioned to absorb the spillage from the crossfire.

Somewhere in the middle of the proceedings, apparently disgusted that Porky had been greasing him relentlessly, he sort of shook his head. "Will you Indians never get over your reverence to the foreign. The Raj is dead man. Why must you resurrect it. It aint Jesus man. You chaps are supposed to be the cream, learn from your illiterate masses. They dont give a shit about epistemology. Existence to them is the next meal".

On the last two accounts he was very wrong. They were just as applicable to us and probably more so. The thandai and the festivities had Milt even more laid back then usual. His crisp English had almost slipped to a Cockney vernacular. It was a fun Holi. As we were leaving he pulled Porky to one side and whispered in his ear.

"Would you like me to write you a recommendation."

Porky, who had given up hope after the afternoon's reproach had to pop his eyeballs back.

The next morning Porky showed up with a list of 15 univs he was planning on applying to. Milt was apologetic that he was not too familiar with the

system on the far side of the Atlantic. His only contact at Berkeley was a Prof. Jerome Garcia with whom he had travelled extensively. His area of expertise, unfortunately was not Software Engineering. He suggested that Porky might apply to Harvard, whose Computer Science program he was well acquainted with. He also had a friend in a Dr. Timothy Leary, who was into cognition and mental reprogramming techniques. The program at Oxford was more theoretical, which though interesting was not very lucrative. Porky, however, was eager like everybody else to get his foot into as many doors as possible and so Milt scribbled out a bunch of recommendations.

Dear Jerry,

I would like to introduce you to V. Kudiharasan. We have explored the foundations of Science and the very reasons for existence together. It has been a pleasure knowing him both personally and professionally. He has a keen analytic mind and a sharp nose for new ideas. In accordance with the rest of his complexion it is also very brown. Despite his strong orthodox foundations, he is like a seasoned artist, improvisational and creative. He is also persevering in the extreme. In my opinion he would be a tremendous asset to any establishment. Consider this a very strong recommendation.

Regards,
Milt.

PS: It was great seeing you and the boys last spring. It was a truly extraordinary trip.

The next week there was a line of people out to get recommendations. There were so many that Milt was essentially signing autographs. The course was a blast. We all got what we wanted, including excellent grades. Milt said it was the most enthusiastic class he had ever taught. It had been a very profitable sabbatical. Then in a puff of smoke he was gone. No forwarding address, not a trace.

Chapter 17

A RED LETTER DAY

A desperate lunge, no second place,
Stark reality face to face.

The whole application process was picking up instensity. First applications for application forms were filled. The application forms began to arrive. If somebody's form came a few day's later than another's the guy who got it late would begin to suspect that he may have been screened out even before the application process began. The first with the form hoped both that the former was true and that the fact that he had a form meant he had a good chance. As the forms arrived professors both obscure and known from those universities were picked out. Trips were then made to the library to dig up anything remotely technical these professors may have produced through the years. The keywords from the piece of literature were culled and freely used in an ode to the professor, professing the student's undying love for the particular area of research and his lifelong goal of working closely with the professor at the cutting edge of technology. Some of these letters received replies. Most were format letters, some were encouraging, few were frank. Then went out letters requesting a waiver of the application fee. Again some of these letters received replies. Most were format letters, some requests were denied, few were granted.

It was around this time that Porky came up with an ingenious idea. He started writing letters to himself. Letters written on high quality bond with university letterheads. Letters that were laser printed with signatures of academic giants. Letters in reply to Porky's, indicating that it was as much the lifelong goal of the professor to work closely with Porky at the cutting edge of technology. Nobody seemed to want to apply to a university Porky was even considering. This caused all kind of problems since there were few universities that he was not considering. Most of those universities did not even have a Computer Science department. Some of the guys figured they would be better off applying in Mathematics or Physics. Gobes, however, was still planning on applying to the top places on Porky's list. He had better grades and was related, albeit remotely to the Dean of Engineering at some community college in

Nebraska. Then one afternoon Gobes got two letters.

The first was from Stanford. It was from the Dept. of Robotics. It went...

Dear Mr. Govardhan,

I just received your vitae from our sister Computer Science Department. Your uncle Krishnamurthy is a dear friend of mine. Judging by your credentials and your family background, I would go so far as to say that you would be much sought after here with the Department of Robotics. Robotics is a hot area in which a keen young mind like yours would excel. Your pathbreaking work in Computer Networks would hold you in good stead here. I have a large group of students working under me and there is always room for more. Stanford is an excellent university that provides a well-rounded education. I strongly urge you to apply here and consider us over your other offers.

Best Regards,

M.R. (Steve) Raghunath
Professor,
Department of Robotics,
Stanford University.

Other offers? The application process was yet to begin. Gobes had upto this point no intentions of applying to Stanford. It was out of his league. He looked up Raghunath on the faculty roster. He was there under Engineering but there was no Department of Robotics. He did not have an uncle Krishnamurthy but the Dean in Nebraska was Krishnaswamy. It was all very confusing. Then there was another letter. It was from the Graduate Admissions Chair at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It went...

Dear Mr. Govardhan,

This is in response to your inquiries as to your chances of admission for Fall '91. Frankly I am surprised that you would even consider applying to this university. Though your credentials are potentially adequate, the match between your interests and those of our Department are poor. It would save you both time and money to look elsewhere.

Good Luck...

"It must be a con da", said Porky who was around when the letters arrived. People were split on the authenticity of the letters. They looked quite real right down to the postmark on the american stamps on the envelopes. Janus told Gobes, "You've made it man, you've made it. Leave the other universities to us boss. Just keef Stanford and take it easy."

Silently Gobes decided to withdraw from Chapel Hill leaving Porky at the top of the list there. He then fired off a reply to Prof. Raghunath with a myriad of questions and concerns, taking care not reveal any evidence of doubts as to the veracity of Prof. Steve Raghunath's identity. A month later there was a reply that corroborated the confidence in Gobes' candidacy and clarified that Dean Krishnaswamy was not the gentleman he had referred to but it was indeed a Krishnamurthy who had in the recent past spoken highly of his nephew Govardhan. The Department of Robotics was unlisted as it was a relatively new offshoot of the Computer Science Dept. The letter provided the necessary department codes that were to be filled with the application paperwork. Gobes had all the toppers shitting bricks. The second in line withdrew from Stanford entirely, applied elsewhere and got a domino effect going.

Janus was worried. "I thought I had made it man, when I got into this joint. My older sis was brilliant and it was hard enough growing up in her shadow. She got into medicine so I did my bit by making it here. Then she went and got a scholarship to England to do pediatrics so now the spotlight is on me again. She is getting married next month and my brother-in-law to be is a brain surgeon from London. I can't seem to explain to the folks why I am not applying to M.I.T. What can I say... We have a totem pole here and for the happiness of all we try and stick by it. I was close to the top until the last Six-A-Side, when I shaved my head and puts booze every other night. So I slipped a few notches but we won the Six-A-Side and I won best defender. They have not even heard of the universities I am applying to. My mom wants to know why I am not applying to Oxford. I told her we had a Prof. Longwater from Oxford here and he said the Computer Science program there was all shit. Anyway that was a good place for their generation when the imperial connection stood for something. These days the States is where its at."

"I have a younger sister in a similar scenario. I dont think she has quite these pressures. I think you may be overreacting a kutti bit."

"She is a girl. Anything they do is a plus."

"Thats pretty chauvinistic."

"Sure, but its also true. My sister had it good. There were few expectations of her being a girl and when she made it, she jacked me twice over."

"Not in my family. We were always treated equal."

"Ladaa. You say that. Ask your sis sometime."

"So, you think if Rasp had a younger brother he would be in trouble because she made it."

"I think there would be only one thing for him worse than not making it. It would be making it here while she was still around. Thankfully my sis was five years older than me so it was not an issue. Sometimes I think we behave like real schmucks the way we talk about girls."

“Yeah, anyway fuck that, lets go revise that wordlist, Boniface-Chimera.”

That was the GRE. Yet another exam that required attaining the vocabulary commanded by Jeeves for half a day. We studied hard from books, guides, sample tests, flash cards and other proprietary material. The less said on this topic the better. The halcyon dwindled as the rodents limbered and laced up.

Chapter 18

A NIGHT OUT

Concentration spans were getting shorter. GRE wordlists had this saturating effect on your brain in a way that you seemed to block other things out. We needed the distractions. There were all kinds of clubs on campus catering to a variety of hobbies and pastimes. There was a fair deal of synergy and communal bootstrapping. There were so many clubs for people with common interests and pursuits that it was only fair that there be one for those who just wanted to be, as far as being was concerned. It struck at the root of these busy little cliques. It was called COTTAI /* Club Of Totalitarian Tooling And Intrigue */ and was resurrected from the infamous Pillowfighters Anonymous Inc., which had to be disbanded after the Anabel-Clarabel switching fiasco. I was an Assistant-Under-Secretary of the club and also President on full moon nights, for the duration that the moon was full.

Seedha was part of an astronomy club that had access to a big telescope. It was a night like any another, interesting yet singularly unmarked by the celestial shenanigans that rule many Indians lives. The stars had nothing to say so Seedha and I left the telescope early. If you believe that something is the cause of everything then it becomes difficult to argue about anything. I never cared much for the scientific theories of why we were where and what we were. We had a few famous physics professors on campus. Most eminent physicists, unlike mathematicians, for some reason, are excellent speakers. Seedha and I went to this late night lecture on “The Unknown and the Unknowable”. Seedha even took notes that amounted to a plethora of Greek alphabet. The talk was a little more technical than I had hoped. All I wanted from Physics and Aerospace technology was advancement to a point where I might hitch a ride to the moon. I wanted to ride out to the beach but the heat was building up. There were assignments to be done, projects to be completed.

So on yet another beautiful night I found my way instinctively through the dark corridors of the department. There is something quite eerie but almost beautiful about deserted old Indian academic buildings. Unlike other office buildings they are spartan and completely open. Long corridors, unlocked classrooms with nothing but open windows, geriatric furniture and half erased

wisdom on the blackboards. Generations of dust and decrepitude. Unlit stairwells, seldom used or cleaned bathrooms. An uncanny silence.

Our department building was one of the oldest on campus and was a space we shared with Civil Engineering. On the second floor there was a door which you were apt to miss unless you knew where it was or were looking down where a dozen odd pieces of assorted footwear lay. Stepping inside, the place was alive. Brightly lit, a number of IBM PC compatibles crunching away. A chill would run down your spine. This, from the cranked up airconditioning that would instantly freeze the film of sweat and humidity on you, the temperature gradient making you aware of your controlled environment. It was Las Vegas on campus.

Thonflakes was practicing his finesse play against the computer. Alf was playing “Leisure suit Larry in the land of lounge lizards”. He was literally jumping on the keyboard and going ballistic with the mouse trying to get past the pimp on the ground floor. Through the din Gobes was trying to write a compiler compiler. Porky was sending email to some professor of Artificial Intelligence somewhere in Idaho from Rotesan’s email account. Rotesan’s password was a well published secret that Porky and Gobes had compromised independently. Gobes had written a watchdog program that monitored information packets over the network. Gobes had a list of four faculty email passwords and the root password to the new, watertight cluster of Sun workstations in the department. For this accomplishment and a chocolate milkshake treat I made him an adjunct member of COTTAI, on one of the nights I was president. Porky had just looked over Rotesan’s shoulder. Rotesan was a two finger typist and it took no great skill to watch him hunt and peck one character at a time. Interestingly enough his password was “asdf”. I had two assignments to finish. They were done for the most part. Seedha had finished them the night before and I had repayed him by accompanying him to potentially see the stars. I suitably altered the comments and used the magical CTRL-A key sequence /* a global find and replace on program variables */. I then ran it through a script that permuted the use of FOR, WHILE and REPEAT loops to convert Seedhas dilligence into a syntactically original piece of software. The assignments dealt with it was time to help Alf get past the pimp. Finally we were able to divert the pimps attention by switching channels to female mud wrestling on the telly.

Pulling all-nighters was a strange experience. It was not always related to meeting project deadlines or beating the highest score at a given computer game. The airconditioned environment on a sultry night was reason enough. Still there were times when just the vicinity of the lab was information overload. Thonflakes was having a bad run of luck with the bridge program, so I went back to the hostel with him. There was not too much happening. Some Fridays were like that. A lot of the localites would go home for the weekend. You would be lucky and happy to see a familiar face. Any familiar face. Even Parshad. We went to the common room and I picked up an issue of Filmfare. Somebody had “Dark Side of the Moon” on the turntable. It was one of the most heavily played albums on campus. Given that we received so little gratification from any of the other senses, music was a panacea to many.

“The lyrics on this album are fundoo, da.”

I think most of us thought that. Thonflakes felt they were something he could identify with. You could tell it was a popular album. The grooves on either side were actually acquainted with each other on the “Us and Them” track, where the needle had made it through the vinyl. The record would egoistically go, “Me, Me, Me...” ad infinitum unless you got up and jittered the needle.

“Saar, you know we should puteets a trip to the moon.”

Thonflakes must have had the supposed sixth sense. “Who wants to go there, da, especially the dark side. Its barren, purely academic...”, I trailed off. I was bored. Thonflakes was starting to doodle. I turned my attention to the Filmfare. Amjad Khan had died. I already knew that. It must have been an old issue. I put it down and picked up Stardust. There was no mention of Amjad Khan. The issue must have been a bit more current. I flipped through the pictures. It struck me that we spent too much of our time thinking. Its not like it paid off or that we were any wiser or better people for it. Thonflakes had been saying something all this while. I nodded my head and thankfully it was an appropriate and acceptable response. Anyway, I did not particularly feel like thinking about what or why I was thinking. So I started staring at a spider on the wall. He was spinning a web which of course was quite intricate and the kind of thing that would intrigue an intellectual so I looked away, at the wicker chair my feet rested on. Most hostel furniture was either made of wicker or cheap sheet metal. Even the wicker seemed to have an intricate weave pattern if you looked closely enough. Why was everything so complex?

I went in search of Diro who was always equipped to take care of this very ailment. Diro slowed us down. It was a reprieve not a cure. Not even much of a reprieve for Thonflakes who threw it into a higher gear. Glazed look, voice lowered to a growl, body swaying...

metamorphosis, i'm beginning to change,
my eyes out of focus, my thoughts out of range.

Thonflakes was like poetry in loose motion. Suddenly he stopped. “Shit, shit. I can feel my face, da. I must be outax. I can feel my face. Can you feel your face?”

I pulled my cheek. He was right. I could actually feel myself feeling it. Usually, if you tug on your cheek it is a singular sense of yanking your face. I felt two independent sensations of the yanker and yankee. They were simultaneous but undoubtedly separate. I was outaxed too. Just to check we pulled each others cheeks, first in sequence and then in parallel. Thonflakes was right. Diro was ecstatic. The meaning of life had just dawned on him. He went, “Abhey, sahee hai¹, sahee hai...” and nearly pulled Thonflakes cheeks clear off his face. We celebrated this discovery with bun omlettes at Tarams. There was barely enough darkness left to fool my senses into believing that the round object served on a flat object was a bun omlette. It was a night out.

¹Its true.

Chapter 19

WHERE FART THOU ROMEO

Contrary to what I may have lead you to believe we were not all a bunch of crude and frustrated adolescents devoid of any social skills. We were worse. The impression many people on the outside had was one of these profoundly intelligent beings who did not lack social skills but were unable to relate to the lesser intellect of the common junta. Half of these people disregarded us as snobs. The other half held us in awe. The truly intelligent among us used these generalized perceptions to significant advantage. We were quick to dismount our fictitious pedestals of superiority thus endearing us to both sets of people on the outside. Maintaining silence in the light of ignorance was observed as the sign of a humble omniscient. Jha had made a mistake. He should have gone to Binny for advice, instead of listening to Diro.

Binny was a ladies man. Every Mardi Gras he had an ever increasing entourage of girls from different colleges following him around. He had a face out of a Greek sculpture and a body out of a Greek sculpture but not the same sculpture. I pilfered and suitably doctored that from Woody Allen's "Without Feathers" but it captured Binny better than anything I could think of. To put it another way, he was perfect in a piecewise fashion but the overall proportions were off. Most of the women who came out to these college festivals were more impressed by the alleged mental prowess of guys anyway. Binny sitting on his mobike to hide the oddity of proportions was a double whammy. Jha on the other hand looked a few generations retarded in the evolutionary process. Binny was also magnanimous. Having more women than he could handle he would set them up with us guys in exchange for favours that involved everything from grub treats, booze and cigarettes, to polishing his mobike.

He really knew how to play us up too. He once introduced me to this girl Jyothi as the institute chess champion. I have played the game exactly twice in my life. Once as black and the second time as white, just to check that playing first did not elevate my game to grandmasteresque heights. Jyothi who was

quite knowledgeable about the game wanted to know what my favourite opening was. I was tempted to say “Etes vous libre so soir”, being utterly ignorant of chess openings. Binny came to my rescue saying that it was forbidden to use documented openings in the institute and that we invented our own. Mine was a violently deceptive one called the “Kundi Knight Opening” but lets not talk shop, since we did enough of that anyway. Binny was so relaxed in the presence of Jyothi, it was amazing. He had only recently met her and his new lady love, Bhavana, through a cousin of his. He had kept the better looking one for himself but who was I to complain. One evening we all went out together. It was fun and as the evening wore on I became more comfortable with Binny’s style and found myself aping it. We rode out to the Besant Nagar beach Binny with Bhavana on his bike and me behind Jyothi on her Kinetic Honda. Binny even arranged the wheels. When collection time came it would be a big one.

I saw Jyothi a few more times until Binny tired of Bhavana. Without Binny’s impetus I was unable to keep my end going. It just fizzled out. I remember being depressed for a day, then I figured I really disliked chess so it was for the best. I had actually started taking chess lessons from Jeeves who played it like a musketeer. I was over Jyothi. Besides, the holidays were coming up. We were all to go on an industrial tour around the country, looking at our indigenous production lines with an eager and critical eye.

The industrial tour was another fossil of the educational system that students over the years had resurrected into a thing of beauty. It was an institute paid two week junket around the country scoping out the cutting edge of the Indian engineering industry. All part of the well-rounded education. We put Horny in charge of plotting our course. True to form he picked hill station, pub town, hill resort, brewery, steel mill, big city, Goa, big city and back. The first hill station had no industry at all. It was justified essentially as being on the way. A break of journey. A mere eight hour detour of a train ride. Pub town was Bangalore, which also being the silicon valley of India had to be on the list. Needless to say three appointments with software giants had been made with the honest intention of keeping one. The next resort was enroute to the Shaw Wallace distilleries where we were to study the use of computing machinery in closely monitoring the fermentation of barley. The incongruous steel mills up north and near Calcutta was the tax levied by Horny for wangling this spectacular route. He wanted to meet up with his cousins and so veered us all out east for a couple of days. Some of us had never seen Delhi or Bombay so those were essential. Also they had plenty of industry. The largest chunk of time, however, was to be spent in Goa. Goa, the land of food, wine, nude beaches and most importantly a one man shop called Mendez Electronics, which is why we would be there.

I had started visiting the tea shop in Velachery /* another watering hole off campus */ more often since it was closer to the department than Tarams. It was ten in the evening and I bumped into Kaat. I never saw much of Kaat anymore now that we had drifted along our respective fields of study. Whenever we met though it was with the warmth of those who have shared something special in the past. We had little left in common but the sights and sounds of Kaat

perched over Gobes E.D. sheet were stamped on my well tattooed brain. Kaat said he had just received a package from home, that his uncle's friend had condescendingly carried from Hyderabad. It was just after Diwali and many of us got confectionary funneled in from various family related sources. We went back to his room to partake. It was a huge box of assorted goodies one better than the other. We cleaned out about half the box before the smell of food brought in scavengers from neighbouring rooms. The box was ripped to shreds and licked clean. It was only then that someone noticed the note attached to the box that was now three notes. The scavengers disappeared almost as fast as the contents of the box. Meanwhile Kaat pieced the stained and sticky pieces together. His jaw dropped and his face underwent a transformation from the "Mera Jeevan Kora Kaagaz" look to a "Whiter shade of pale". My great grandmother had passed away a few days back and it had been very hard to listen to my grieving folks inform me about it. I felt a sense of extreme hopelessness and isolation. I wanted to say something to Kaat but whatever came to mind rang very hollow. I was not about to ask what had happened. Looking at my own solemnly questioning expression he said, "I am engaged".

Not knowing what to do or say I suggested we go back to Velachery, more for the walk there than for the cup of tea at the end of it. We walked halfway in silence and then he exploded,

"I wish I had been born an orphan, ra. At least I could do what I wanted. First they take three years to get me here and now they want me back."

"Do you know the girl."

"What ra, ever since class seven I have been the obedient child. Even in class six when I did badly it was not because I did not study. Someday I will be a great Engineer. Bulla, I will be what I would have been if I came here two years ago."

"I thought you did not want to do Chemical Engineering." "They did not want me to do Chemical Engineering. I did not want to do Engineering at all. I did not particularly want to do anything then. I had a hard enough time dealing with the pressures through school. I burnt out five years ago ra. I just wanted to chumma relax and see what happened. I did not want to have to see the inside of a book again. My grandmother said maybe they should get me married. I was all for it at the time but my father said it was out of the question. These were not the days to marry off a boy of seventeen. He had no family business to pass on to me. I must stand on my own two feet. I must study engineering or medicine but since he was a civil engineer, I must have an aptitude for the same and so should continue the family profession by studying Engineering. I must study electronics or computers. I worked. I worked under a gun, I put to my own head and I got in ra. If it was going to be engineering what the fuck did I care, which kind. My father agreed but my mother did not want me to go live in a hostel. So weighed in a balance all things considered it was not worth sending the prodeejal son away for lowly chemical engineering. Instead I slogged another year for them. It did not work out. I had not given any importance to my local college examinations so I burnt my bridges there. My father was pissed I did not get in. My mother was pissed I fared badly in the college annual

exams. My grandmother said maybe they should get me married. I slogged another year with increasing desperation. I think even my parents have learnt to deal with compromises. My father acted like I had conquered mount Everest when I got chemical engineering. My mother had turned her attention to my younger brother and so was less reticent about my living away from home. I wish my brother had demanded attention earlier but he was worse than me. He had no spine, no individuality. Then he started exchanging letters to my aunts neighbour's daughter in Bombay. My mother found one in his history book. Othaa, when I think that that's largely how I got here. I was so institutionalized at home I had a hard time my first year. You guys really helped me out ra."

"Othaa, bugger its not like you gave us much choice. I can still taste that potassium solution I sucked into that leaky pipette for you. You got the most accurate results and your testube was more than half saliva."

Kaat laughed weakly. "Thanks."

"So whats the funda, da. Have your folks just found somebody for you and just let you know."

"I wish they had done this five years ago. Five years. Now I want to study. Even though we get grilled here, I love it. I love the independence, the personal freedom."

"Same for me. I think here entrenched in the system, we can among ourselves think outside of its confines."

"Last hols when I went to Hyderabad they introduced me to this girl who is the daughter of my fathers office colleague. Othaa, she is tooms, ra. She looks levaal and very mature for her age. She is in her first year in English Honours. Othaa, she knew that the bugger who assassinated the bugger who assassinated JFK was Jack Ruby. She tries to put fight with the Hindu crossword which I know is kundi and all but how many people other than us do crosswords ra. Five years ago I would have jumped in joy. Its ironic, she is all I could have imagined. Maybe five years from now I would jump for joy. I need time. For the first time in my life I actually feel in the driver seat. How can they just engage me ra."

I could not quite understand Kaat. He seemed to be contradicting himself all over the place. Nevertheless, I felt bad for him. Have you ever played one of those arcade car racing video games. Its frustrating while you are trying to get a hang of it and then just as you are doing well your time runs out and the system takes over. That was Kaat's plight. My own perspective was a little different. I would just pretend like nothing had happened and keep playing. If you tried hard enough it actually felt like you were the one who was in control. You would not crash anymore, you did not have to insert any more coins. It was a rush that was cheaper and endured.

"Sorry da, Kaat. I dont think I can bail you out on this one. I mean I would gladly put proxy for you in this engagement and all but this is your family. I think they would notice."

That made him laugh as intended and the subject very quickly shifted to the philosophy of life. Kaat loved to talk about the philosophy of life. Boots told

me he was talking straight out of Ayn Rand. I have never read Ayn Rand but either Kaat's interpretation was lousy or I am probably better off not reading Ayn Rand. This particular discourse, I was hearing for the third time with a minor variation. Kaat was far more moving just talking about his own life than some abstract form of existence he had read in a book.

On my way back I peeped into Boots room to see if I could borrow a Pink Floyd tape from him. He was not there but there was a postcard at the base of his bed. I tried to curb my curiosity but it was there, face up. It was in Boots handwriting.

another year.
there are no excuses for mortality,
it takes no prisoners, it leaves no trace,
the fragments that comprise our thoughts dont count,
they transcend time, they need no space.
let mine be with you.

Got your letter this morning. When

Thats about as far as he had gotten. The postcard was a picture of the Qutab Minar. Boots was really into Indian history. I put back the card exactly as it had been lying. Not that Boots would have noticed. Othaa, I did not know Boots had a lady love. I heard an approaching whistle down the corridor. It was Boots. I sat down at the far end of the room away from the postcard. Boots came in, assumed a supine position and put his arms behind his head.

"Kaat just found out he is engaged."

Boots smiled. "Thats excellent. When is the wedding?"

"Oh, I dont think even Kaat knows that. The priest that matched his and his fiancees horoscopes, will probably find some day with a favourable stellar configuration. Boots, do you think you will get to choose whom you marry."

"If it ever happens, ya."

I borrowed the tape and left.

Chapter 20

RELEASE

Was'nt the system pal, you set the pace,
Stark reality face to face.

It had been another rooftop job getting party. Some senior of Diro's I didn't know had just got a dream of a job in some company I didn't know. I had gone to get my tapes back from Diro after Binny told me that the bugger hung his undees to dry on borrowed tapes. I was worried. One of the tapes Diro had borrowed from me belonged to Boots. Binny was very bitter after his wonderful CD recording of Pink Floyd's Wall on this super expensive metal tape /* that actually enhanced the quality of digital sound, or so Binny said */ had been apologetically returned by Diro as a ball of tape. All it had needed was some sambhar and it would have made a delicious alternative to the canteen's masala noodles.

Diro's hostel was the furthest from mine in a long line of these nondescript buildings that housed us. What a place! The hostels were named after rivers and the buses after mountains. Apparently this was the kind of a place where mountains moved and rivers stood still. I remember this as being a major statement that added to the Xanadu mystic this place was exuding, when I had just joined. Later of course when pounding feet on the floor above brought chunks of plaster raining down and you stood for hours on a scorching day for the bus that never came... it sort of set the record straight.

Thankfully the tapes were in order. Diro had dug them up from under piles of laundry, books, magazines, sports equipment... Diro's room was the local junkyard. If you had lost something and waited long enough it would turn up in Diro's room. This perpetual flow of stuff in out from Diro's room prevented it from bursting at the seams. There was no bed or furniture in there. Just stuff! Which was okay since the one room that Diro had not crashed in was his own.

On one side of Diro lived Vivek Jha. On the other side was the Sengupto gap, which meant that Diro's room was right next to the one functional bogs that serviced 64 rooms. It used to be 16 per bog in the good old days I was told

but these were hard times. Water was scarce and so the other bogs on the floor had been shut down. A mugfull was to be used for the shit and shave neither of which could be accomplished satisfactorily. The bogs were also natural preserves and supported many forms of life. Frogs, lizards and assorted insects were the most common. A sign above one of the toilets read "Beware! Snake in the arse". Every now and then a squatting inmate would be in for a slimy surprise, which was okay in a way, as it scared the shit out of him.

The bog walls were a local showcase of creativity and I sometimes think that's probably how the "Louvre" started out, adding a "vre" to hide its unsavoury origins somewhere along the way. Above the urinals was this solid red line that said "If you can squirt above this line you qualify for the fire dept". Six inches below it was a dashed red line that said "For SC/ST¹ candidates only" /* This just reminded me of the time Horny told Alf that the squatting equivalent of a urinal was an arsenal */. Anyway there was tons more stuff scrawled all over, most of which was probably filched from elsewhere. It made for interesting reading, if you could read at all, as the bogs were poorly lit and with little ventilation. Which brings me back to that paragon of architectural and scientific innovation: the Sengupto Gap.

The Sengupto Gap manifests its existence as the absence of wall about 2 feet across, starting from the waist up to the ceiling in the corridor between each bog and its adjacent room. On either side the building widens gradually from this narrow passage. The laws of physics claim that such an arrangement leads to a kind of air pressure imbalance that brings a steady breeze into the Gap. To the best of my knowledge it's called the Venturi effect /* like Newton and his apple I wonder whether Venturi, discovered this effect after a satisfying meal of baked beans */. A draught it did bring all right, ventilating the bogs and gently redirecting the results of the ventilation down the corridor. Nevertheless, the Gap was great. Standing out under the Sengupto Gap was like beckoning the rain gods. Often when the bogs were full, the Gap provided release. This feat was usually performed only by trained inebriated professionals. The pressure had to be strong enough to keep the incoming Venturi wind from giving you a shower in the process. Haraami held the institute distance record from the top floor. During my first year, the "Sengupto Spray" had been an integral part of the fresher decathlon for the coveted "Prachand Lund-dhari" title. These days the event had been condensed to a puny triathlon due to Dean Doraiswamy's draconian anti-ragging laws. This gap was truly a marvel, the legacy of one Dr. Sengupto, who had been the Director here at some point of time.

So it was another booze party and the Gaps were priming up for the evening. It was going to be a big one because it was a dream job and some guys had actually come up from Pondicherry where booze was half the price. Diro was all excited and had his arm around this guy who he kept calling "Abhey Chootiye" and was drooling on his vest and spilling rum on his chappals. Mr. Abhey was having a good time too and was hardly bothered with the rum trickling down his legs and chappals. He would lick that off later when the stuff in the bottle

¹ Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe. The Indian program of affirmative action.

was gone. Over in a corner I saw Boots, prone on the roof, tumbler in hand as if Scotty had just beamed him off his bed without his knowledge. He was just staring into space. Except there was no space. The place was packed. There were guys everywhere, in various states of inebriation and deshabille. There were abstainers, first timers, social drinkers, regulars, minglers and veterans. Binny had brought one of the second year girls who was half decent to look at and quite friendly, with him. He was now torn between trying to make the lady feel comfortable and appearing cool in the eyes of his peers. It was an unenviable task. Binny was regretting he had done this and was taking flak from all sides. He was not the ultimate all-rounder for nothing.

The Eagles were belting out Hotel California from a tinny 2-in-1 in the corner, where a fresher had been volunteered to the exalted DJ status. These rooftop parties were great. If you walked out of the localized haze of cigarette and occasional peace pipe smoke, the air was fresh and the night sky often quite interesting. Seedha, the astronomer, attended parties for this very reason. Sometimes he would tell you things about stars and moons and the primordial soup, not the way the trendy books that link science and mysticism do but the way he thought about it all. It was usually quite scientific and one would lose him after a couple of minutes, but he enjoyed talking about his work and hobbies. I would listen, just like Boots, sitting there with his toes directed at the pole star listening to Abdul Aziz, who was wishing he could find a horny babe and go get laid. Most folks around here just talked about it. Abdul Aziz was seriously contemplating it.

It was a long night. The crowd had thinned, the freshies departed, some had crashed. Boots was still there. Somebody was refilling his glass. It was Jha, Diro's neighbour and devotee. Diro had just returned from a leak and was trying to shake Binny by the hand. Abdul Aziz was giving Binny a hard time for having brought a babe to the party. Binny was calling Abdul Aziz a lech and there was general chaos. Some Thon bugger was valiantly defending allegations that all these Malayali buggers made were pondees. He was diligently digging names of award winning films that were falling on deaf ears.

"Adoor Gopala..."

"Adoor Laudekabaala."

"Adoor Gopalakrishnan. He made..."

"Othaa, just keef. Its all coconut rice and pondees. Its good da, you dont have to be defensive. In fact its fundoo. Except for coconut rice."

"Its all pondees machee. Explicit scenes depicting the lower part of the upper half violating the upper part of the lower half."

Mr. Abhey, the guy with the dream job was nowhere to be seen. He had either crashed or passed out or gone to Tarams for a bun omlette. Diro took off, trying to shake someone else's hand. I was trying to convince Singh that Ali Akbar Khan was not married to Sharmila Tagore and played the sarod instead of cricket. Madhuri Dixit had just counted to nine on the blaring 2-in-1 when she was cut short by Diro as he tripped over the extension cord and scraped his knee quite nicely. Not that he noticed, he was far gone. He was just happy that the damn bitch had shut up. He was happy to see her wiggle about out screen

but these Bollywood composers, man they had to get some real talent, like the Booze Blothers.

Singh, the old electrical engineering warhorse remarked as he picked up the disconnected plug, "You know, all these electrons that flow through this wire, they move really fast". I thought he was going to come up with one of those Ajit phattas that he was famous for but he just stopped midway and kept looking at the plug. Then Jha who always had this pained expression on his face joined him. Diro charged in to see what the fuss was all about and Boots hollered for a refill. At length Singh said, "I've always wondered, if you pull this plug out real quick won't inertia cause the electrons to keep going and fall to the floor"? Then turning to Jha, "You are a Mechi bugger, boss, so tell me, what kind of brakes do these electron peggers have. Sometimes you can see a spark maybe from the friction but why dont I here a screeching sound". Jha was flummoxed. He took pride in his technical knowledge and quite clearly had no clue. "Its because your'e bloody deaf", I retorted, "and anyway you should go ask the profs. in your dept., they dont even teach you electrical buggers to fix a fused light bulb". Then Diro that insufferable son of a bitch had been just dying to add "They are power brakes that come on when the power breaks". By now everyone remaining, had gathered round. Even Boots had moved his butt in the general direction and bivouaced right by the electrons, that were squirming on the ground, like fish out of water.

"Be careful, you might step on the poor electrons", said Singh as he shielded the holy spot below the plug point. Diro picked up an electron and started cuddling it. He passed it on to Jha with an "Oiye, Jha-nt ke aulad, iss ko sambhaal ke rakh", who clumsily dropped the hapless subatomic particle. "Othaa, Sooth" yelled Diro, the overexertion causing him to go tumbling over Jha. Jha was very quiet and strangely for a third year bugger sober. "Kya bihari hai re, daroo bhi nahi piyela, hum koodi ka baal thackeray ko bolenga", slurred Diro in his Bombay Hindi. So the ever obliging Boots offered his cup and Jha obediently gulped it. Singh looked out sadly through his wise old eyes, grudgingly shrugged his shoulders, and shook his head. Singh was a sad old man /* he was 22 */. He looked aged and haggard and resigned to his fate. He had spent 5 years here and now enrolled into the graduate program, he would probably spend 5 more. Morons came, morons went. Singh was as permanent as the monolithic psychedelic elephant statues with their juxtaposed butts at the focal point of the institute. Or was he?

A while later Diro passed out on the roof, some poor schmuck puked down the Gap and the freshie took back his tinny 2-in-1 effectively breaking the party up. Binny condescendingly took Boots and me back triples on his Hero Honda 100cc, which he claimed, due to exceptional riding and maintainance skills and superior knowledge of motorcycle technology actually gave him 150cc. Thankfully the distance of 4 hostel lengths did not warrant this additional 50cc of power.

The next day I cut the first 2 class hours. The next 2 were free and then at lunch Porky said that he heard some guys talking at Tarams that some poor bugger down the road had copped it. He did not know who, where or why but something about a suicide deal. Then Janus had heard that some chap had

been electrocuted accidentally. A bunch of us walked out of the hostel. There was a huge crowd outside. The site of the previous night's carousing had been cordoned off. There was the campus sicrotee, the cops and the bloody press. We sneaked in from the back of the hostel mess. The scene inside was as chaotic as it was outside. I saw a very solemn looking Binny sitting on the steps outside the mess.

"The guy electrocuted himself with copper wires wound around his wrist".

"Who"?

"Jha".

"Shit..."

"Diro found him this morning. He was still quite zonked and had gone to get his electron back".

"When"?

"The hospi guys say between 3 and 8 in the morning. Diro found him around 10. He was very sick. Puked, and screamed the hostel down. They took him to the hospi. He was really fucked up".

"Is the body still there, in the room".

"Fuck, I dont know man, I did'nt see it. I think they took him away under a white sheet. He was all charred I heard".

I felt a little ill. Janus who had been talking to some other mechanical guys from Jha's wing came and joined us.

"What do the guys say"?

"They are psyched. The bugger had a decent GPA, 8.2 or so and was doing decent in the branch. These guys are surprised. Apparently he was just generally depressed. Somebody was saying the he went to get some psycho type counseling at the hospi".

"That must have been the reason", I said, trying to be flip. My own form of release. I never new Jha that well. I knew him best as Diro's neighbour. I knew who he was, what he was doing and where he was coming from.... obviously not where he was going! Twelve hours ago, at the party, I could never have even in my wildest nightmares have imagined this guy deliberately electrocuting himself. This was a madhouse in many ways, years of mingled pleasure and pain and we all sought release, but for most it was "Apnaa haath Jaganath". This was unbelievable. You read about it in the papers, shit, I had actually indulged in a fair deal of backslapping with BhiBhek Jha last night. Was it guilt? Balls, I hardly knew the guy, he was some poor soul who could'nt take the heat. Man, the system sure got to him and he could'nt take the heat. I wondered if he ever found out that we used to call him Mr. Metronome. It could not have been that. I mean pranks like that happen all the time and this was over three years old. Was it Rasp? Diro had told me Jha was over Rasp. Diro could be such an asshole at times. The uneasy feeling remained. It was just too damn wierd.

Porky, who would have made one hell of a mole came bursting with the details. Jha had wired his wrist up good and pulled a switch. He had been fried. He had been depressed for quite a while and his folks who were on their way knew that. Nobody expected it to be this serious. I wondered whether anybody

had told Singh. ...and Boots. Boots had made Jha down that Old Cask rum shit. Surely that could'nt have been it. Jha was no teetotaler. Admittedly a social drinker and hence a blot on the escutcheon of his Bihari brotherhood, but a swig of booze was not about to mess up his mind /* I hoped his folks would not bring this up. It would just screw our trip */. Then why?

There were more details and more rumours and enquiries, the cops interviewed us guys at the party. The Dean interrogated us. The Dean's arse was definitely being roasted. The guy was clutching at straws. He spent an hour trying to unravel what exactly Diro meant when he said that he had gone to get his electron back from Jha. He even wanted to know whether the electron had a name and so Diro said it was Albert Pinto. He was shattered and angry and hungover and it was the first thing that came to his head. The Dean thought Diro was plain loco. He had the hospi pschoanalyst talk to Diro. Diro filled him with so much bullshit that he surrendered and that was EOE /* end of enquiry */.

I did not see Diro for days. I bumped into him more than a week later at Tarams fussing over a dosai. He was plastered and with what he had been through he needed it. I just sat next to him and drank my coffee while he ate and then we just quietly parted. He refused to go back to his room for a month /* which actually was nothing unusual */. He did not even make it out to the special gathering where the real Diro along with Jha's close branchmates immortalized one Vivek Jha on campus with an engraved stone and a little stripling that the deer could piss on. There was much speculation for some time over causes and consequences. Slowly, things died down and the mill started to turn again, picking up momentum. It was back to the grindstone, back to the churning out of those B.Tech. thingies.

A month had passed since the suicide and I was gorging away at this local restaurant, Sea Rock, with Janus, my hedonistic soulmate. "I was just wondering", I said between mouthfulls of scrumptious palak paneer and hot naan that was dripping with butter trickling down my arms,

"That bugger Jha was a tot asshole. If I was going to die I would have robbed a bank or laid a couple of babes and definitely at least kolted at the Sheraton like my life depended on it and refused to pay the bill. That way, if you were successful, damn, you just postpone the demise and do it again."

"Key fonda da", went Janus barely intelligibly, his mouth crammed with paneer. The schmuck was just making sure that I did'nt consume more than him. "Levaal idea da, can also jack all the psued buggers, then just puteets the light booj and drown in the Buckingham canal".

"Lauda", I went, "you could'nt drown a mouse in the canal. The only way you could die in there is by the smell or laughing, if you were to come across Porky's exam sheets from his school poonding days".

Janus motherfucker was rolling on the floor in mirth, and all I needed was that moment of weakness to beat him to the last piece of paneer.

"Jha was really an idiot", I said the last piece of paneer putting the elastic in my shorts to the test. "Electrocution is kind of dicey these days, dont you think. I mean with all these power cuts and all it would have been a wee bit

messy if he was half way through and then had to chill till the damn power came back on”.

Chapter 21

THE WHISTLER

It was 2 am. I lay back, my head propped between Binny's knee and the wall. Thonflakes was doing his very best to get five important differences /* between some two comparable entites, I think */ into my oversaturated head. My left leg played pillow to Gobes oversized head who was attempting a one-way Vulcan mind-weld with me via simple osmosis. My right leg was squished between the corner of a desk with sawed off legs and a candle whose molten wax was threateningly close to searing my kneecap. The electricity had been out for quite a few hours but the night breeze was at its balmiest. I was at at my barmiest. Tomorrow's exam loomed large and there was way too much material left. The volume of information to be assimilated had rendered mnemonics and other memory aids useless. There had been very little to be gained from the few COBOL classes that even fewer had attended. The damn vestige had gotten even like an inflamed appendix. There was little mercy to be expected from the professor who had done the best he could in light of our almost hostile insouciance. It was impossible to concentrate in my own room. A moment's silence and my head would drop into this archaic COBOL bible that was best used for building upper body strength. Music for the first time was distracting. The sheet of paper in front of me had nothing but two seemingly useful points and a bunch of dark doodles. I was sleepy, scared and burned out.

Seedha was probably the only one in a position of some comfort having scrupulously done the 4 mundane assignments that most people had been too lazy to even cog. The rest huddled desperately in two's and three's with candles hovering over the COBOL megatome. Going solo required guts and stamina that few among us had. There were no notes worth the mention to be communally photocopied. In this particular case there really were no worthwhile notes, period. In general the pressures of the system had worn the communal fabric thin. Where self-induced friction had not left it threadbare, personal differences had pulled it apart at the seams.

It was the last semester whose grades were important as far as admissions abroad were concerned. I was out of juice. It was time for a break. Another few hours and it would be light. Another exam. There had been so many. I

had become an examination taking machine that was in dire need of a tune-up. Another exam. Then the ordeal would start again. The one after this was going to be worse. Today was a nightmare I did not want to wake from, for that would mean facing tomorrow.

The lights came back on and then went out again. It reminded me of Jha. I silently apologised for having ever called him Mr. Metronome. The last thing I needed now were superfluous thoughts bogging my brain. Every few hours we would go down to the mess for water. There was no real thirst being quenched. It was just a much needed break. Porky was there with Janus. Some contrived pleasantries and remarks about the impending armageddon were exchanged. The hostility between Gobes and Porky was quite evident. Near equality in grades and other academic credentials had created these little pockets of unhealthy competitive rivalry. The best of friends were busy stepping over each other's toes, fighting over who was going to apply to that one famous or obscure university where they both had a chance.

Back in Boots room I was able to regurgitate three of the five important differences that Thonflakes knew so well. The bastard must have mugged sneakily over the weekend. I had been no saint in these matters in the past but this was now. Boots and Binny were past it all. They just hung around with relaxed and tolerantly amused looks. They took off with Boots whistling some famous classical piece, which, for lack of a discerning ear I shall attribute to Mozart. Boots was the only guy I knew who could whistle almost continuously. He could control the inhale and exhale through his puckered lips equally well /* Alf could do it too but what resulted was audible to his ears alone. Us mortals had to make do with subtitles */.

We were past concentrating. Gobes started lambasting Porky for his lack of integrity. I snapped back. I was sick of hearing the same shit. I moved to Boots bed and drifted away. Porky and Gobes irate chatter faded. There was a black and white portrait of a guy who looked like a mughal ruler with a poem underneath it on the wall by Boots' bedside. The picture was probably a photostat of a poor reproduction in print of an old lithograph. A history bookish legend identified the regal machan to be Mohammed-Bin-Tughlaq. The poem went:

whistler in the dark

he who commands with either hand,
says he read a book by ayn rand.
one he called "the figurehead",
was his own biography instead.

who digs his image in a lake,
a facade he claims is a fake.
a countenance sharp, a monocle's glint,
the strikingly svelte, "our man flint".

adjusting the target, to hit the mark,
another whistler in the dark!

he who dances to no ones tune,
he who reads the herald tribune.
blissfully oblivious of his life,
with his musket and his fife.

he who takes the lion's share,
says he saw scarborough fair.

but not the concert at central park,
another whistler in the dark!

he who's fiery convictions,
lead himself to contradictions.

claiming a bite worse than his bark,
another whistler in the dark!

he who avoids the dark occult,
adding injury to insult.
who seldom sings in his bath,
trudging down a well tread path.

who's never the first to disembark,
another whistler in the dark!

...and you and i, who face reality stark,
we're all, all just whistlers in the dark!

-Anonymous

I was beyond feigning confidence. I was sending out applications too. Out to universities I had never seen, in towns I had never been. I wanted out but I knew that another week and the immediate crisis would be over. The long term effects I was not so sure about. Where was Taramani Nair when you needed him the most. I tried to get back to the subject at hand. Then I started thinking of how it did not really matter. If you stepped back far enough and looked at things in perspective you realized how petty every little thing was and how insignificant you really were. At the moment I would have had to step so far back to get that galactic perspective that I would have just gone over the edge. So I just tried again and came up one short on the five important differences. It started to drizzle and if not for the overcast sky it would have been turning light. I felt like shit.

A cold bath, a couple of tumblerfulls of caffeine and it was time. No real surprises. The elusive important difference managed to slip away. Overall it was not as bad as I expected. Then Rotesan came by and handed out grades that were downright embarrassing. A year back I would have fought for the additional 5 marks I felt I deserved. Today I did not even take a second look. On the way back some deer came by and gratefully took up the offer to chew on my efforts. Janus had closed on this exam. I remembered him saying that he was going to hit an all time low with this paper. The guy still had the gall to say he had been lucky. Lucky... lucky to have known a six year old reference

in the Journal of Algorithms off the top of his head. Thonflakes was ecstatic. He had scored a very round figure. He went about hollering in the best Bihari he could manage "Ram Parshhaaad! issschool se cipherr le ke aaya". We were scared the guy had really lost it. He went off for a long walk in the rain. I went after him concerned that he may do something stupid. He did'nt. He just went out to this swampy sewage dump near the stadium, made a little junk out of the paper with the outstanding round figure, cast it adrift and sang...

Another league, a different class,
Paper boats on a rainy day,
Monochrome rainbows in coloured glass,
Shit happens, what can I say.

Then he turned to me and said "What do you think, I am fucking loony". We walked back together soaked to the bone, laughing and happy. That afternoon Thonflakes hit the books with a new determination that lasted until tea. All one could do was hope for the light at the end of the tunnel. The same hope that had been sitting abandoned for three years at the IN gate to the institute.

IV

Chapter 22

ANOTHER ROUND

The immediate crisis did lift. The academic year ended and along came the holidays. A large part of the summer vacations were spent by most studying for the GRE or the CAT /* the entrance exam administered by the Indian Institute of Management */. I had lost one of my links to sanity. Boots was gone. He was off to Duke University. Boots promised to take care of the application fees on two of my university applications. This piggyback phenomenon between batches had become quite common. I furnished four applications when my time came. I had Boots' bottle of Black Label that contained some gin at the time. Janus emptied it one night and that was the last I saw of the bottle. Janus, who had been an insistent abstainer had taken to vice with a vengeance. It had started with the rum and rasna dunking after the Six-A-Side. The industrial tour was blast for the most part. Gobes, who had a new found fear of water spent all his time on the sand in Goa. He claimed he had seen a guy there who looked just like Longwater. Gobes was a moron. All foreigners looked the same to him and there were quite a few of those on Goa beaches. Kaat did not go on any industrial tour. Kaat never went home that summer with the fear of impending wedlock looming over his head. He never answered phone calls or replied to telegrams. He fueled his own paranoia by spending large parts of his days in his cubby hole with the door locked, pouring over a decades worth of trivia almanacs. Jeeves gladly took on the mantle of the crusty old resident expert on any questions related to the English language. Thonflakes and Porky were the only people with any juice left.

Singh got a step ahead in his quest. He became a senior project associate. When I asked him what he was looking for, he said, "Nothing."

"The point, Tote, is to appear that you are a focussed intellectual. I am basically lazy and can find all I need right here."

"Thats hard to believe man. I cant wait to get the hell out of here."

"Dont push it, yaar. Maybe someday you will feel the same way. You guys have ambition. I realized some years back that I had no ambition and basically wanted to go through life peacefully and for the most part not piss too many people off. You remind me of Zeke."

“You know, I have his cobweb.”

“Oh yeah, I thought Bheema had that.”

“Bheema gave it to me after he ragged me.”

“Oh. You can have all of these too if you want.”

The cobwebs in Singh’s room descended like stalactites and covered everything in sight. The spiders here built their stuff to last, which was good because they did a great job of trapping mosquitoes and other assorted bugs. Singh’s room was an entomologists dream. “My philosophy is simple. The thought that dominates is where the next meal is coming from.”

“Thats what that Prof. Milton Longwater said.”

“Ya, anyway. Once this is taken care of I am a free bird. I don’t care what I do or what I don’t do as long as it is one of tooling, visiting places, seeing movies, listening to music and if it is not too painful doing something so that some other guys around me also become happy. So, the food thing is not an issue, even though it really is here. I like it here. I can tool. I am sure I won’t get bored without a regular job. I think I can make more people happy over here. Anyway, it doesn’t matter what I do or don’t do as long as the first worry is taken care of. I don’t care what other people think of me, which is pretty evident, or my position or the purpose of my life and all that shit. So this is my reality. Are you set for the GRE?”

“Pretty much. I have always had a problem with time pressure exams. So we’ll see.”

Before long it was time.

I shall simply reiterate that guys from near and afar, all the rats in the rat race went and wrote the exam. Jeeves as a matter of fact fared miserably. He seemed to find all kinds of inconsistencies in the choices offered and ended up leaving them all blank in defiance. He wrote a strong letter to ETS, the body that conducted this exam, regarding the myriad of mistakes that his keen eye was able to recognize. Surprisingly he received no reply.

Another set of freshmen rolled in, another semester rolled out. This year the antiragging laws were so strict that we steered clear of the freshmen class. A word regarding any form harrasment from a freshie translated to expulsion. Dean Doraiswamy was out to finish his tenure with a splash. He attributed Jha’s demise in no small measure to the mental scars he suffered being ragged by uncouth seniors. Mental scars that may have surfaced three years later. The fact that Jha had been quite active breaking in his juniors, was irrelevant. That was just revenge on unsuspecting innocents who would then do the same. It was unfortunate, we were really looking to letting off some steam. Since we could not rag the freshies we decided to have some fun with the authorities. We started ragging each other. One night, in Gobes’ room we kicked up quite racket. Then we got an inconspicuous second year bugger to start screaming. The space-invader-calculator-stopwatch on Inne-da’s watch showed 94.7 seconds between the second scream and authoritative rap on the door. The hostel warden barged in. We had the best psyched faces in the room. Porky’s mug was like a neon flashing “GUILTY”, “GUILTY”. “Okay, who’s the freshie!”, barked the warden. You would have thought, after more than a couple of years, that he

would recognize faces. Further, common sense would tell you that it was quite unlikely that a freshie would be wearing a three year old Mardi Gras T-shirt or a threadbare shirt with an Aff-Yankee dangling out front. The wardee had common sense. So he started to methodically search the room for the elusive freshie. He looked behind the door. Nothing. Under the desk. Mouldy socks. He looked in the desk drawers. Nix. He drew back the already parted curtain in front of the shelves. Some clothes, Diro, a bottle of pickle. He looked behind Gobes and there he was. The young inconspicuous second year with a white shirt and black trousers looking quite uneasy. "Are you okay?"

The second year maintained a shocked silence. Gobes said, "Maybe you should take him to the hospital, Sir."

The warden was not amused.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes Sir", went the second year quietly.

"What is your name, boy?"

"Kundi, Sir".

"These guys made you say that, right. What branch are you in?"

"Electrical Engineering, Sir."

"What are you doing here. You are not in this hostel!"

"I am Sir."

"You have it wrong. The first year here is metallurgy. Did these guys tell you this was your hostel."

"The second year here is Electrical, Sir."

"Show me your ID?"

Sure enough, it was a year old. "You boys watch it. Trying to be funny."

It wasn't that funny. It was quite a drag actually. Thankfully the GRE results came soon. Applications were filled out and sent. Life began to focus back on the closing semester. The deadlines passed and everyone breathed a little easier. The intrigue was over. The spirit of camaraderie returned. It was all a matter of time and patience.

Then one day all hell broke loose. The ever efficient Indian Postal service returned to Gobes, the letter he had written, addressed to a Prof. Raghunath at a Dept. of Robotics address in Palo Alto, California, undelivered.

Chapter 23

AID

Porky spent two weeks at home, waiting for Gobes to cool off. He then spent two days locked in his hostel room waiting for Gobes to cool off. Gobes had locked him in as a form of revenge. Gobes cooled off. Porky then spent another day in his room waiting for Gobes to find the key he had used to lock Porky in. Gobes had conveniently lost it. Finally, Horny let Porky out with his own key.

Horny had recently started shoving his room key into locks of all shapes and sizes. As luck would have it, this key did a pretty good job at opening most of them. So we all came and went from Porky's room at will and actually opened a lending library with all the pondees that emerged from under his mattress. Every now and then we would leave little marks to make it appear that a monkey had come in through the window. The real con was trying to convince him that some frustrated monkey were stealing his pondees. The damn monkeys would come in through the windows and romp about in his shoes and undees and replace his toothpaste in the tube with shaving cream.

Even before this key insertion craze Horny had this habit of trying to fill any orifice he saw /* hence the imaginative name */. This urge came from a desire to keep out all evil, he had told Boots during a moment of truth. Kind of like the deaf, dumb and blind pinball champ, Tommy. Boots said it was all bollocks and that he was just trying to rid himself of his infamous reputation and appear intellectual and cognizant of the 60's rock music scene that was considered quite cool at the time. I believed Boots. I missed having him around. He was a basic guy and looked at things very simply, something which I could not do. At the same time he was not a psued basher as most of us were. In our community it was cool to be trendy to a point after which you were deemed a psued. The dividing line was thin and once you crossed it there was no coming back. Jeeves, had picked up his psued label in record time when after a couple of visits to the local canteen he would with a subtle motion of a finger ask the tamba for "the usual, on the rocks", to be handed a glassful orange rasna, with ice and a straw.

None of us really cared anymore. The masks were pretty much off, the guards were lower. It was a time for patience. Anticipation. Everyday we would sit, after lunch on the hostel entrance steps, waiting for the postman with news

from across the seas. The day after Porky regained his freedom, he received two letters in the mail. The first was from the graduate applications chair UC Berkeley.

Dear Mr. V:

We are pleased to offer you admission to the PhD. program in EECS at the University of California at Berkeley. We would also like to offer you a Research Assitantship stipend of 1200\\$ pm. The offer is based on your excellent credentials, scores,

blah blah...

A very small percentage of applications are accepted each year

blah, blah blah...

Sincerely,
Robert Hunter

PS: We would also like to inform you that Prof. Garcia has at no time been a part of the faculty of this Department. Many among us are, however, acquainted with his work and the recommendation did have a very positive influence on your candidacy. It was the one bright spot in a week of wading through scores of stereotypical applications. In other words
"We laughed our asses off!".

The second was a brief postcard from Anjuna beach in Goa.

hi kudi,
could never quite stand english weather, mate...
hope your applications worked out. swing by, if you're ever in the vicinity... it's the third shack from the left behind de'souza's fish 'n feni dump.
cheers,
milt.
ps: coming up for sabbatical soon.

It had indeed been a very profitable sabbatical.

The volume of mail was increasing daily. The very next day Horny ran screaming into the hostel. The postman had brought a piece of mail from the University of Hawaii that bore his name on it. He had not even opened it. The very size of the package indicated that he had been accepted. He did not bother to open it but instead ran up to his room, locked it and emerged 5 minutes later with a contented look on his face. It was indeed a letter of acceptance. He tore off the three letters of rejection from other universities that were pasted to his door and placed them close to his bedside. They would serve another purpose. There were two other schols that day, taking the count in the hostel to eleven. Four of the schols, however, were for Porky. He had been gracious enough to send prompt letters of rejection to the three lesser universities, so other guys who had applied there would have a chance. Unfortunately, people had steered clear from universities that Porky was applying to.

Not that Horny cared anymore. In his moment of triumph he even apologised to Porky for being responsible for extra foamy, lemon fresh toothpaste. Then there was a party in the evening much like the one Jha had attended before he decided to cash his chips in. Later, four of us with scholarships rode down to the beach on random bikes, that Horny and his key were able to unlock.

It was great. Horny danced on the sand with one hand waving free /* the other in his pocket */. Visions of grass skirts and hula hoops soaked his neurons. Honolulu to a golt was like Valhalla to the vikings. I was on my way as well, to another blot on the map, another set of hallowed portals. For some reason I wished I had applied to the University of Hawaii. So what if it did not rank as high. Then Janus starting talking about Porky and the top notch universities. Envious thoughts of the University of Hawaii stopped there. It was far more important to be respected and even feared by ones peers than to have fun. Fun and nice were loser words. I would be pushing the state of the art, be it in boony geekville. The best of the best had made their sacrifices. Of course Janus went on to say that the ivy league was a football league and just because a university was ivy league did not mean it was good. In fact those schools were in the ivy league because their football teams were all crap and no one else wanted to play with them. Horny didn't give a shit. He was just happy playing with himself. Even Janus was quite content since he had made it, yet again. I was going through another spell of deja-vu.

Thankfully the talk of comparing universities and scholarship stipends lifted, drowned out by the surf and the water which was warm and slimy. Just as it was getting to be fun something aquatic took a bite out of Seedha's posterior. Just as well. Fun was for losers. Anyway it did not look very bad so we hung out some more, talking at length about Hawaiian beaches even though none of us had been there. Then Horny got dead serious. "Saars, I just want to score once in my life before I get married."

"Othaa tevdey, you know its not going to happen. You'd stand a better chance scoring by playing footer."

"I think us desi's are the least sought after specimens on this planet".

"Lauda, we have the Eastern mystical aura about us".

"Yeah, right... you have the Eastern mystical lauda, and its mysticism lies in

its virtual nonexistence”.

Seedha was staring off at Ganymede. ”Look its Ganymede”.

”No, its Phobos”, I retorted, even though I knew no better.

”Ya, Pele used to play for that club. I saw them play against Mohan Bagan. It was a rigged match”, went Janus. His attention was still fixed on the pitiful plight of desi men. Seedha pulled out a soggy pack of cards from his back pocket and we played bridge. It was my lucky night. I bid and made 6 hearts the first game. I would have gone for 7 hearts except that Horny was holding the Ace of Hearts. The Ace of Hearts had a corner missing which the aquatic muncher had taken along with a piece of Seedha. The next game I went four under on a 2 diamond bid. The point is that it was my lucky night. I got the Jack of all trades every hand we dealt. It was around 6 in the morning that we got back.

I was just surfacing when Porky came screaming into the hostel. Visions of Parshad and his maker flashed through my head but Parshad was gone. No, this was the inimitable Porky squeal. It was schol number five. A scholarship from M.I.T. Even Porky was not expecting this. He had hit the jackpot big time. We all urged him to reject his best offer thus far so that Gobes would have a chance there. He said okay. All of a sudden Gobes got all remorseful and said that the letter was a con that he had perpetrated so Porky would bump the university he already had aid at giving Gobes a chance. It was a gesture of the utmost decency. It made me wonder what the hell was going on. Gobes was not the kind to give up on a con out of any sense of remorse. He had as many scruples and as much tact as a bull in heat. It was not like he was going to get into Porky’s good books either. He had nothing to gain. Porky had screwed him out of applying to both Stanford and Chapel Hill. The con was understandable. The recant utterly perplexing. I was truly stumped. I was stumped even more because it was Horny who had been jobless enough to mail Porky the con letter from M.I.T. Gobes had stolen Horny’s thunder twice over. I would have to vote for him at the next general body meeting of COTTAI.

This is what my devious mind was able to iron out of the confusion at the time. Like the rest of us barring me, Gobes actually believed in the schol. He believed that Porky had really hit the jackpot. Given Porky’s success rate with all the universities he had applied to it was not that far-fetched. Here was Gobes chance to get even. Gobes had quickly contended that, given the circumstances, if he owned up to the letter being a con, the veracity of the letter being a dud would not be questioned. He was right. Porky was so relieved that he had not gone and rejected his existing offer. He quietly tossed the M.I.T. letter away. He was happy.

Gobes had taught Porky a lesson. If only the poor bugger knew that he had thrown away a scholarship from the university he was dreaming to get into. Gobes was happy too.

Later that week a bunch of us had gone out for a dinner treat when Horny spilled the beans. He cracked us up. It was almost mass homicide unaided by nitrous oxide. We were all happy. It had been just as intended. One of those things that hurt no one and spread universal sweetness and light.

Porky did eventually get into M.I.T. on their third list. By that time he had

long accepted his offer from Stanford and it did not matter anymore.

Chapter 24

SPY VS. SPY

Splubaak, Chhaaak, Kacching,
Splubaak, Chhaaaaaak,
Splubaak, Chhaaak, Kacching,
Splubaak, Chhaaaaaak...

came the sound down the corridor of the top floor of the Building Sciences Block, the upper half of which served as the Computer Science Dept. I could not believe my ears as I sat precariously perched on the ledge with my feet wedged behind an iron railing for safety. A live rendition of Pink Floyd's "Money", an audiophile's dream come true. The noise drew closer, a corner was turned and the musician came into view. Up went the left foot causing inertia and the taut rubber strap of a hawaai chappal to make it slap back against the heel "Splubaak". The foot then lazily dragged along the gritty concrete floor and came down "Chhhaaak", the impact of which caused the keychain half dangling out of the left pocket to go "Kacching". The routine then repeated with the left foot that was a little lazier. The right pocket had a hole in it and was empty. This was not a consequence of the hole but because it was reserved for playing pocket billiards, an excess of which had caused the hole. It took great skill to play both music and billiards at the same. The owner of this remarkable capability was Prof. Bondairaman. He ambled up and each impending step made it clearer that I was the intended destination.

My mind jumped the starting gun. Was it the fudging of an algorithm on the mid-sem or the fact that I was aware of the well publicised password to his account. One of the passwords that Gobes had compromised. Maybe it was the suspension of his Kinetic Honda from the taproots of the banyan at the bottom of the building. I would know soon enough.

"Have you seen Kudiharasan?"

What a relief. Bondairaman had campaigned hard and long to have Porky as a student for his final BTech. project.

"We will be on the cutting edge of technology. Together we shall expand the frontiers of research. We shall churn out papers like newsprint. You won't have

to worry about grades”.

Finally, Porky had succumbed.

The grade business taken care of Porky had gone into hibernation.

”No sir. I think he was here yesterday, but had to go to the temple this morning as his grandmother is unwell”, I blurted, my mind swiftly changing gears and racing in yet another direction. Having come through hell’s fire together we looked out for each other.

”What a worthy grandson”, Bondai said and briefly folded his hands in a prayer that would piggy back on Porky’s, giving it more punch.

Meanwhile Porky was having a rotten day. The damn carrom board pockets seemed way too small for the coins. Suddenly they would expand to engulf the striker whenever it was in the neighbourhood. Taramani Nair was not on his side, unlike the night before when he had smashed the striker head on into the queen jammed against the middle of the opposing side of board. Decripitude and the sheer force of the shot had caused the queen to split down the middle and the two halves to shoot down the edge in opposing directions into the two front pockets.

Porky’s sharp ears heard the smooth purr of a Kinetic Honda pull up just outside the hostel. The carrom room was right beside the hostel entrance. He darted to the window and lifted the tear in the computer printout pasted across it. It served as a functional peephole. The Kinetic Honda stood shiny and red at the periphery of the peephole. Wrong Colour! False alarm! He went back to his game and played even worse. Porky had done his bit. He had written his two papers which had been submitted for review to prestigious journals in the field. They were not papers that would change the course of mankind but neither were most of the papers that were published in those journals. He had been offered admission from all the top schools with fellowships to boot. With gold medal prospects in his pocket, he relaxed with an eye on the pocket. The other eye was on the constant lookout for Bondairaman with whom he was involved in an intense cat and mouse game. In this rare circumstance he was not the cat.

It had started in the department. The sound of unmistakable footsteps down the corridor would send Porky scurrying behind the heavy curtains of the PC lab. It was around this time that everybody stopped calling him Porky. This was quite unprecedented since as a rule people never lost their names. They only picked up newer ones. This was an opportunity too good to pass up, though. Whenever Bondairaman came asking ”Where is Kudiharasan?”, which was an average of 5.4 times a day, the instant questioning reply would be ”Kudi be here?”. Soon Porky stopped coming to the department altogether and since Mohammed did not come to the mountain...

Bondairaman forayed into the hostel zone. At first he would make telephone calls but the sicrotee guard had been tipped off to redirect the call to another room number of the guards choosing. The first time he actually came out to the hostel, Inne-da let the air out of his scooter tires. Everytime he came around Porky would lock up his room and go hide in some junior’s room. Soon the whole hostel was involved in the charade. Guys would put a keychain in their pocket and drag their feet just to tease Porky. He would be alert and on the

edge at all times. It was almost like training him for the Olympics.

It was a lazy afternoon like so many others. Half the hostel was crashing. This time there was no warning. No scooter pulled up in front of the hostel. Just the introduction to Pink Floyd's money with the volume turned down. Bondai made his way to Porky's room. Janus ran to rouse Porky's postprandial reverie. Porky's room, like Diro's bordered a Sengupto Gap. Porky who had taken his time waking up was faced with two choices that would elude the approaching Bondai's field of view. The first, jumping one floor down, from the Sengupto Gap with an umbrella as Janus suggested, was a bit extreme even to the sleepy Porky.

"You can open the umbrella da", went Janus. "It will protect you da, both from the fall and if someone decides to take a leak from the second floor while you are in flight".

The second option, which Porky figured would allow him to continue his siesta, was to have Janus lock him in. Janus did so just as Bondai ambled up escorted by some freshie. I was just on my way out of the bogs after washing a bucketful of underwear and socks. The depletion of these dictated the laundry cycle for clothes that I did not wish to see evolve into Yankees. Alf was outside the bogs trying to grab the hostel cat by its tail. My best guess is it had something to do with a Groucho Marx remark about swinging a cat in a recent campus movie. Alf was so committed to his task that he ran right into Bondai almost headbutting him down the Sengupto Gap.

"Easy, easy, I say. What are you doing?"

"Sorry Sir. this is my pet cat."

"Where's Kudiharasan?"

"Kudi be here?", went Janus with practised ease.

Alf and I sniggered with equally practised ease at the joke that had given much more mileage than it deserved. A lot of the stuff we laughed at was quite ridiculous. Bondai had no clue as usual as to what it was all about but was quite used to having silly students like us sniggering around him. Janus silently poked a finger in the general direction of Porky's door which instantly made Alf and I aware as to where it was that Porky was.

Dhobigiri on a warm lazy afternoon always left me feeling like a naughty boy. "Sir, Porky has just gone to the post office to mail a request for a reprint of the pathbreaking paper on Geodesics you were suggesting we look into." I made a point of raising my voice so it would be picked up by the pair of ears on the other side of Porky's door. "I think Janus has Porky's spare key so why dont you just wait for him in his room". Janus and Alf must have gnawed their lower lips off trying to keep a straight face. Seeing their contortions made me gnaw the hell out of my lip to avoid hysterics myself. Alf was slapping his thigh like an epileptic. Bondai thought that was an excellent idea. Janus said as loudly as he could, "Here Sir, I'll open the door for you". Off came the lock and the door opened.

The room was empty and Porky's umbrella was still there. There was nothing magical, though. There are but a few places in a locked room of 8 square feet with barred windows that a man can hide. A look at the most obvious,

the bed, revealed nothing. Bondairaman successfully negotiated the washing line stretched across the room to trip him up. He made his way towards the bed and sat down, much to its dislike, for it complained vociferously. We had all learnt to communicate with our beds. Porky's bed had a most colourful timbre. The upper left region near the pillow had a lower pitch and the quality of sound was quite muted. That spot between the mattress and the metal was Porky's pondee repository. The middle had a big dip which used to be quite noisy till Porky put a lot computer packing junk under his bed to muffle it. From there on the metal made a smooth continuous transition spanning an octave and a half. Bondairaman had of course planted himself smack dab in the middle. I dropped the bar of detegent in my hand intentionally. Bending down to pick it up, I peered inbetween Bondai's legs straight into a pair of eyes that unequivocally said "Every dog has his day, buddy, and mine starts as soon as this nightmare is over". The styrofoam stuffing had probably been jettisoned through the hostel window.

This was the situation for the next 15 minutes. Porky lay contorted under the bed with his eyes glued to the twitching and shaking legs in front. His fingers plugged his ears, attempting to muffle the amplified metal noise caused by the movement above. Bondairaman picked up the Alistair MacLean on the bed and leafed through it uninterestedly. He put it down and started to hum a Carnatic raga. He picked up the book again and read the reviews at the back. He looked at Porky's clock, checked it against his own. Finally he got up and headed out after locking the door behind him.

He headed down the corridor and found Janus, Alf and me, lurking at a safe distance. He was about to hand Janus the key saying, "Tell Kudiharasan I came", when he changed his mind and said it would be more personal if he left him a note. He did not trust Janus to deliver the message. Porky swears that what followed was orchestrated by us. Janus I spent a day maliciously incarcerated in his room paying for it. The truth in the matter, however, is that before Janus, Alf or I could even begin to raise a voice in protest Bondai was off and fumbling with the lock on Porky's door. The door opened and a voice from inside bellowed... "Motherfuckers! Has that bastard Bondai gone!"

Chapter 25

THE KEY FUNDA

The final stretch, lap eight brought new freedom which seemed a bit hard to deal with at first. For one, you could not cut classes anymore as they were none to begin with. What a sleazy trick to play, just to deprive students the immense satisfaction of cutting classes and the even greater pleasure that came from inventing techniques for getting attendance for being absent. Something was needed to prevent the minds that the system had so carefully mixed into this contorted and scheming spaghetti, from straightening out and going bland. It was system withdrawal symptoms.

For it was the system that had lured us here. It was imposing and overwhelming at first but offered that fighting chance. One grew to know the system and indeed to beat the sonofabitch. ...And then somewhere along the line the intense familiarity made you one with the system and there was no way out! Anything you did to the system was sadomasochistic. The bugger had sneaked up on you while you had your eye on it all the while, and all the while it was sneaking up you still had your eye on it. Whats more your attention continued to be transfixed on the gentlething as it grabbed you by the collar and kicked you in the balls, just as you had done to it. For you were the system. So while you nursed your bruised notions and egos and all those psychically related concepts, the system gracefully withdrew. You realized as it slid away that there was no battle and you did not have to put fight and you stood there like a sheepish "Donkey Hote" armed to the teeth but naked and isolated, with the grim realization that the enemy had retreated and whats more there probably never was an enemy. It just left a void.

Like the tide that comes in washing and titilating a cliff, then pounding the shit out of it till it surrenders and just when its epitaph time, it slips away. But nothing remains the same. It adds, subtracts but mostly it just rearranges. As far as I was concerned the rearrangement, as the system withdrew had brought me full circle. I could now look at the system again from a detached perspective, not with awe or reverence or hatred but like you would stare at your partially distorted image in a crappy mirror. You'd look at it with mild amusement for a bit, then say "Big Deal" and turn away. That void though was just like the

after effects of a long addiction, and one craved entertainment. Of course now that "Sancho Panza" was again your friend and as jobless as you, you could take his arse. Alf was working overtime but being the butt of all the jokes wears it down a bit.

Attentions had begun to focus on Gobes who in the joblessness of his vacations had built a beast of a machine. It was everything you could have asked for. A perpetual motion machine that could serve as a ball scratcher and Steely Dan simultaneously. It could chop onions, solve tut sheets, mix drinks and even fart at intruders. All this in the guise of a crappy but functional cassette player. It was called Osho and also provided spiritual guidance in times of need. The one thing it could not do was transport Gobes large frame from Gobistan to the department. He had recently inherited a TVS Champ from his brother, who had graduated to a Bajaj. This TVS was quite a machine. Battered out of shape it withstood the onslaught of Gobes obesity with creaks and groans. Sometimes it also moved. Not that this was important as Gobes was quite happy just to mount it, rev up on the stand and go brrrrrr... and eeeeeennn.... when he wanted to brake. It was cheaper on gas and he could still wear his shiny black Studs helmet. Sometimes he would wear the helmet when he rode his bicycle but that made him self conscious. This was far more inconspicuous. The TVS was his pride and joy and was kept out of our hands by an ignition key and a 7-lever mother of a lock, locking the handlebar at an acute angle.

So it was a lazy scorching afternoon, and we had just returned from a monthly splurge of resources at this chinese dump called Waldees, just off campus. Waldees had become specially popular with the vegetarian brahmins among us with scholarships abroad. Many became adventurous and forayed into the world of carnivores. It was preparation time. Preparation for the wild west where it was not sacrilage to eat beef, since those were not Indian cows. We were lying in the corridor, shorts unbuttoned to create more space, intensely content, relaxed and jobless. Our only worry in those days was that we may die on an empty stomach and that would have been cruel. There were those damn B.Tech thesis reports that were due and of course, I had just bet Horny a pineapple milkshake that I could beat his high score in pacman, playing with my feet. Horny had little coordination between his hands and eyes. A simple manifestation of the problem was that his hands would just about graze each other when he clapped.

There was now the transportation to the department problem. Pedal power or even walking was too much of a pain. Janus was quick to suggest that one of us could impersonate sicrotee and shout "vun hundrade tauntee jeero phone call" luring the Gobe out of Gobistan and taking his vandee keys. It sounded good and so Horny and I went down to the hostel entrance and I yelled "vun hundrade tauntee jeero phone call", while Janus waited in the wings for Gobes to emerge. He must be have been crashing at the time as my yells were not making much of an effect on the quiescent ennui of the hostel.

Meanwhile Horny, was busy jumping up and down on the Gobemobile commenting on how springy it was. The very first squeak brought Gobes' sleepy head to the window, bellowing "Hey just leave my bike, da". Now he started

hump it. More random expletives from Gobes. It seemed like fun so Janus and I joined Horny. Horny told Gobes he had swiped the key off Gobe's desk and inserted his own room key in, and pretended to start the bike up. A worried Gobes scrambled to his desk only to come back laughing like a brute. The only thing louder than Gobes laugh was the sound of his TVS as it sputtered to life. We were as surprised as Gobes, who started yelling again. Off came the stand and three of us took of in a very Jerome K. Jerome style. Horny's room key was amazing.

We did the rounds, quite literally as the handlebar 7-lever lock restricted the motion to circles of a fairly small radius. Every now and then Horny would do a wheelie and I would fall off and Janus would be temporarily unsandwiched. This added variety to the circular contours. Gobes bellowed but was quite smug and content in the fact that one could not go far and would eventually tire and give up. Which is what we were about to do, except that Horny had another orifice to fill. It filled and clicked, all 7 levers falling into place.

He held the lock aloft and that brought Gobes running down only to see us ride out /* into the horizon... */. /* sorry about that, there was no damn horizon or sylvan setting, we just scrambled down the hostel dirt road, pushing with our feet, for the weight of 3 had reduced the TVS's already pathetic acceleration */. Horny's key had temporarily filled our system withdrawl void.

Chapter 26

THE DREAM JOB

These are your roots, this is your base,
Stark reality face to face.

It was summer again and Boots had come back for a holiday. He helped fill our voids some more with tales from the other side. Those who had not applied abroad or had not had much luck with their applications were getting picked up through the local career placement office. Diro had just gotten a job with Shaw Wallace. They had asked him why he was not applying to the States and he said he wanted to give back to his country some of what he had gotten from it. Diro had impressed them with his honest demeanour. It was a dream job. The day he got this job offer he also got a rejection from the last of the three universities he had applied to. It was party time.

The first toast Diro made was to his buddy Jha. Actually he made several toasts to Jha through the course of the evening but the first one was memorable. That's the one he remembered making. Boots was there. The only visible effect the States seemed to have had on Boots was to replace his chappals with Reeboks. Diro wanted to know how many amru females he had had, so he indulged us for a while. Porky wanted to know how much of the stipend one could save a month and what were good things to carry with us. What apartment rents were like and whether buggers played footer or cricket there. It was almost strange to see Boots at the talking end of a conversation. It was a fun reunion. Haraami had come back to see Boots. He had been married briefly but had left his wife and his job and was just kind of travelling around. He had asked me if I would let him shack up in his old room. I did, after giving him shit for having saddled me with the electric blue walls that he had left behind. Seedha wanted to know if Boots had any plans to come back.

“Why? Are you struggling to decide whether or not to leave the country? I mean you can weigh all the stuff about poverty and corruption and nepotism and patriotism till you are blue in the face. The bottom line is you are not responsible for the way the world is. If you feel strongly enough that you can change it, quit thinking about it and do it. The fact that you are contemplating

all this stuff means that you dont quite know. We never knew when we came into this joint, right. Thats one thing that remains the same. Frankly, its no great shakes there.”

This seemed to irk Haraami who had been waiting to get a word in. “Othaa, you should see the work environment here. I was never a big one for challenges or anything but this place just kills the mind. I have been maintaining obsolete COBOL programs that I could rewrite quicker, if I knew what they were supposed to accomplish. On the salaries we get paid here, if you are not living at home you are fucked. Things you have always taken for granted are inaccessible luxuries. Fridge, T.V., gas, even a telephone. Specially a telephone. Even if you are willing to forgo that, there is no job satisfaction. We were superfluously qualified the day we set foot here. What really bothers me in life is I have never done what I want and thats changed now but there is still the discontentment.”

“Othaa, Haraami, did you at least sirosh your wife before you left her”, went Diro.

“Fuck you, man, thats all you buggers can think of. Get out into the real world, then you will know.”

“So, did you?”

“Yeah, and you know it was not that great.”

Boots hollered for a refill.

“You know Bacardi and all is not a patch on Old Monk. This is the real stuff. I am going to take back a couple of bottles this time. Luxuries and all are fine but over here I feel more in touch with reality. There is more meaning to life here. Hangama hota hai. There is a lot besides the job and your emotions. I am aware of all the drawbacks of the Indian society. I know there is discrimination, but it will loosen up yaar, the people have to get educated. There is corruption all over. Fine, abroad they call it a processing fee, here they call it a bribe. If you want something done faster there you pay more and call it priority service. Here you tap a higher and more expensive source. At higher levels maybe its the mentality or greed. Maybe its the overpopulation and proximity that instills insecurities, I dont know. When a guy says Hi here he means it. If a girl passing you in the States says “Hello”, dont get excited, she probably means “I know you are staring at me, bastard”. You think a job in the States is a challenge. You stay alive upto the next day only to go to work the next day. And I dont even have a job yet. Everybody is quite self-centered. Its the pace of life and price of civilization. I guess I have to wait until I explore the limits of my adventures there before I can say whether I will change my mind. All these senti fundas and so many angles and views confuse me. So, I try not to think about them. Tote, get me refill dude. Othaa, you fuckers want to know about life, ask Singh.”

On one hand there was the brain drain. We were all kicked to go, though. There was no question on that front and nothing Boots or Haraami could say was about to change anybody’s mind. There was a general paranoia about returning home. At the time it was strange that we should even think that far

but it was all conditioning. One did at least appear to look one step ahead. I thought I was going to return. What I was scared of was that my opinions may change in time. The general set plan was to finish up studies, work for a while and wind one's way home. The standard phenomenon was that after that while inertia would take over. As you grow older and your responsibilities grow, you are most likely to remain in the state you are in. Let me visualise a typical scenario. Our average age was about 21. Most of us wanted to split after an MS. So we would finish our MS by the time we were 23. Then say one decided to work, for at least 5 years, for it to seem worthwhile. By the time one was finished with working we'd be hitting 30. Unless one decided not to, most would be married by then. Many then feel its worthwhile to have epsilons on american soil so they would not have to jump through the hoops we did. Indians do in fact like to think ahead. Unfortunately, few project the present into the future as part of their thought process. They merely look at the future in the context of the present. Once there are epsilons in your life, your your inertia grows exponentially. You will want your epsilon to go to a good school, and you know the scene in India as regards good schools. Most of us of course would like to bring up epsilons in an Indian environment with Indian values and traditions that we may scoff at ourselves. Such are the pressures that typically boggle a potentially drained brain. The worst part is that these issues only barely begin to apply to him, as an individual.

Thankfully, at the time we were all too kicked to bother with dealing with all this. Boots said a number of guys abroad were appeasing their conscience by making donations to voluntary agencies that did social good in India. That was a good thing. I wondered how long that would last. No matter how indelible a stamp Taramani masala dosais left on you it would be washed away by Coca Cola in time.

"You know what happened to Helen right", went Haraami. "One year in Indiana and he could not take it anymore. Right from the time he landed, he was uncomfortable. Moss told me he drove out from Purdue to see him and it was a different Helen. The smile, the radiance was gone. First he thought it was just homesickness or maladjustment to life in the fast lane. Chiknaa on the other hand was rocking, right. He was living in a commune in an artsy and mildly seedy part of campus in Ohio. Moss says he was living life in the fast lane, running from being mugged or mothered. He was having a blast though, screwing anything that was remotely feminine and moved. Anyway Helen went retro and started listening to old Hindi film songs. He said they were different. Not the music but the whole approach to life. Even though they talked about trivial things, a sort of connectedness was expressed. Things about nature and flowers and clouds. Even inanimate objects had conciousness and thought."

"Ya, dont give all that bull. Othaa, you think fuckers like Bappi Lahiri endow their songs with conciousness and thought. Give me a break. Alf writes more moving lyrics than anything these machaans produce. You guys just go abroad and get senti. I mean it will probably happen to me also but why throw all this philosophical shit into it. Only buggers who are getting lepered in life philosophize. If you are on a roll you have neither the time nor the inclination.

Oiye, Diro, dum irka?"

"Othaa, why are you taking my arse. I have not even been abroad. I am just telling you what Moss told me Helen told him. Maybe thats the funda what the bugger was trying to put, ra. In the US it is the price of success. The question of the purpose of life is really not addressed there because there is an implicit assumption that there is none. There is no sacredness in anything. Life is a dispensible commodity."

"What about kundiness? Othaa, Boots you have to come for a ride on Gobes vandi, man. Remember when Binny told us his vandi gave 150cc of power. Gobes vandi is 1.5 sero cc, da."

"So what is Helen doing now?"

"Dont know man. I think what he meant was that people after staying abroad for some time lose a feeling of purpose and wonder. However rational we might be or claim to be, the environment unconsciously nourishes this feeling in us. Similarly, the setup out there projects a very bare and deterministic impression of the wrold. You can argue ad infinitum about which is the truth. How much ever we may claim that life has no meaning and that all the universe is a collection of molecules whose fate was decided at the beginning of time, I am sure that none of us can accept that at heart. Agreed that the fact that it's difficult to accept doesn't mean that it's false, but it doesn't make it true either. What is logical need not be what is true. There can be infinite theories about what the truth is, all equally coherent and plausible. The very fact that makes us question the nature of life and things, is an indication that deep down we feel that there must be something more to all this, even if it be nothing, and we seek something more than an explanation. You cannot say, Oh, from now on I will not bother about the purpose of life. Nor will you be satisfied if someone says this is what the universe is all about. In some book I remember reading..."

"Abhey chootiye, Haraami. Saale Helen ka puchhaa tha, khamakha lecture jhadela hai. Dont give this guy any more to drink. Its my party and the next fucker that puts a psued funda gets to bring up the bottle of gin that is buried at the bottom of the Sengupto Gap."

Alf had just finished examining his tumbler for traces of liquid.

"I can get it if it was being pink gin, Ra".

Chapter 27

A FRIENDLY CHAT OVER A CUP OF TEA

Pick up the pieces, leave no trace,
Stark reality face to face.

The projects were done, the farewells through, finally it was time to pack it in. Porky in a benevolent mood donated half his pondee collection to the hostel common room. The next night it disappeared. The ground floor buggers came swarming like ants to scout out the rooms that were soon to be vacated. I had arrived with a suitcase and left with two. One of them held kinck knacks... my inherited cobweb, for which I had found no worthy successor, a failed attempt at an indigenous amplifier, my 0.25/50 exam paper, stuff that I could not bare to leave behind but was very quick to lose subsequently.

There was some serious hullabaloo coming from Alf's room. It was a freshie. ...and what a freshie too. Alf was calling him cowboy.

"What ra cowboy, how many cowgirls you have ra?"

The gentleman was by no means green to the gills. He had slicked back hair a Guns and Roses T-shirt, a pair of Levi's which other than the tear above the right knee were brand spanking new. The remarkable aspect of his attire was, however, below the knees, where the jeans disappeared into two shiny black boots.

"How's it hanging dude, whats your name?" , drawled Horny much in the same way a guy called Moss would have done four years back.

"Kumar", "Kumar Kishore, Sir!" was the reply.

Janus went theatrical on the two greener freshie's he was toting...

"Aur inhe dekhiye... yeh hain zamindaar Raghubir Singh ke bete Kumar. Padne likhne mein to jero hain par balaatkaar mein numbar vun. Yeh banengen hamare jooay ke addhe ke naye maalik." "Hello, Kumar. Welcome home, welcome. Aaj se karobaar tum chalaogey. Vaise karobaar chhodo, tum siraf bar chhalao, car hum khud sambhal lenge".

Needless to say Kumar was an affluent dude. Marxism was the call of the day,

that evening anyway, and Kumar more than happily tended bar. The next morning I saw a pair of boots outside a shower cubicle just begging, literally beseeching that some mischief be perpetrated on the footwear and its owner behind the cubicle door. It is a bad omen when you go looking for a black cat to recreate a fairytale, are willing to compromise on the colour and still get no pussy. Maybe it was just that it was time to move on.

Nah... I went downstairs and pounded on some random door to get the mornings fresh catch. It was 6:30am. I got lucky the second and third door I rapped on. The first door was an M.Tech who almost conned me into thinking he was a freshie. Two prime specimens. With a new Dean came new anti-ragging policies, or the lack of them as was the case.

They were of medium height and neither wore the mandatory IIT T-shirt. Neither wore chappals. One had a new night-suit with monogrammed initials CK /* Turned out it was not Choothi Krishnan as I half expected but some designer label */ and the other wore a vest, pants and polished black shoes. "Ok machaans, move arse". They gazed at me with a total and utter look of incomprehension. They waddled behind me like men being marched off to the gallows. As we walked I noted the ease with which I moved, the nonchalance and insouciance which accompanies a master in his home, a lion in his lair. A feeling of utter relaxedness. This was in total contrast to the commotion and confusion in their craniae.

I asked them if they would like me to force them to take drugs. They said no. I asked them if they would commit suicide if I forced them to participate in sodomy. One claimed not to know what Sodomy was. The other one sniggered. So I asked him if he knew what Sodomy was. He knew. I asked them if they had ever done weed. One said when he was little he had smoked a half smoked weede that was lying on the road. I asked them if they would like to smoke one now. They said no.

You could hear music from Madonna to M.S. Subbalakshmi, U2 to Ustad Alla Rakha. Gobes all-purpose cassette player used catch a bunch of pretty diverse radio stations simultaneously. Horny was busy cleaning cobwebs off his ceiling. I herded them into his room. There was one other freshie looking equally green about the gills.

"Ok now you buggers stand against the wall."

So they went and stood against the wall. There were three of us in the room. Horny, Porky and me. The room was like any of the 191 other rooms in the hostel. A table, a chair, a bed and some shelves left little place for the six of us. Horny was perched on top of the cupboard and was destroying spider colonies using a broom. Porky turned to the freshies and said "Morons putts intro".

The three just kept quiet. What the hell was an intro?

"Ok tell us your names, your hawaas, the last time you had your mothers' cunts around your neck, your frequencies and any other piece of info about yourselves that we should know."

Not wanting to displease us all three of them started simultaneously,

"My name is V.V. Vaidyanathan..." "My name is Kant Kamalkant..." "My name is XYZ..."

"Hey relax, You buggers go at it one at a time" I said.

"My name is Kant Kamalkant..."

"Cut it, cut it", said Horny.

"Lets have some respect here shall we, you're gonna have to say Sir when you address us, got it?, I said GOT IT?"

"Yes sir" came three syncopated voices. Then silence reigned once again.

"Ok lets have that intro again".

"My name is Kant Kamalkant..."

"Look here bugger, you forget Sir once again and there's no escaping the third degree for you".

"Sir my name is Kant Kamalkant and I did my schoo.."

"Man this fucker's thinks he is 007. Is that what your rank was?"

The other two freshies suppressed smiles.

"My name is Kant, Sir, and my last name is Kamalkant".

"You mean kamaal ka kant hai. Ok, whats your frequency?"

"Sir I don't know my frequency, I don't know what a frequency is."

"You mean to tell me you got into this godforsaken joint without knowing what frequency is? I can't believe it. What has the JEE come to or are you a GOIN candidate?"

"No SIR! I am general category", went Kamalkant almost offended at the thought that he may be a GOIN candidate.

"Ok then what's your frequency?"

"I don't know"

"Hey come on man, you are beginning to pain me, at least take a guess."

"Sir 17."

"17 what?"

"Sir 17 years."

"Come on boss, year is not a unit of frequency. What is the SI unit of frequency?"

"Hertz!", was the razor sharp reply followed by a hesitant "17 Hz?"

... Porky cracked up.

"Boss you'll be the death of me. You must be really virile, 17 fucking times in one second and just with your hand. You must really spank that simian black and blue. Why you should be perpetually priapic or permanently exhausted!"

I moved on one door down the hall where another freshie was being welcomed.

OUTPUT

"Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch entrate"! ...indeed

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here". Big deal! Just pick up old buddy "Hope" on your way out, where he lies waiting patiently. Unless, like Singh, you have no intention of leaving. It was kind of like leaving your chappals outside at the computer center. When you got back you could choose from a wide range, that varied in appearance, functionality and comfort based on where they had been and their extent of use. It was also highly unlikely that you would find the pair you had left behind but if you did not have a problem with change, you would find one that was more than satisfying.

What or who was this "Hope" machaan anyway that you were coerced into leaving behind. If you played your cards right, "Hope" became one of those abstract concepts like a God or a Demon, somewhere between a snake and a ladder /* a Taramani and a Nair */. If you rolled the dice right you sailed right through without making its acquaintance. Those who hoped to land on ladders and avoid snakes were hoping without "Hope". To these unfortunate holy rollers or lucky at cards folk like Twospade, "Hope" was not abstract at all, but the very palpable thread that they hung from. /* And you may say, "You sacreligious philistine, you compare Hope to a God. Are you daring to suggest I abandon my God, when I enter these hallowed portals." The answer to that my friend, is blowing in the wind, that this book has just broken. */

So much for all this pompous and seemingly philosophical claptrap. It is all pretty superfluous other than providing a streamlined closure to this narrative and leaving you feeling "What the fuck was that?"

Essentially we had come round circle in a very Hofstadterly fashion. Janus in an analytic mood said that this eternal triangle of a transform was a vicious circle where you found yourself back at square one. Janus liked to make statements but indeed the transform was subtle. Like all batches that came in we had believed that we were cool. Like all batches that went out we believed that coolness of batches had hit a peak with us and degraded substantially following our departure. What cannot be denied was that we did get a well-rounded education.

Sampling a continuous function discretely /* as opposed to sneaking up on the critter and sampling it discreetly */ is widely used in a number of digital applications, especially signal processing and issues related to it are deeply rooted in Fourier theory.

Consider the sampling of a continuous function $I(x)$ at some discrete interval. The sampling theorem states that a continuous bandlimited function of a single variable may be completely represented by a discrete equi-spaced sampling, the frequency of which must be greater than twice the maximum frequency of the function. This snapshot over four years is thus in no way a complete representation of the characters in this book, especially Gobes who at 50Hz is virtually impossible to represent. For the more stable folk, however, it is reasonably accurate. The above can be seen from the fact that the spatial sampling impulse function $s(x)$ with period $1/f$ is an impulse function $s'(u)$ of period f in the frequency domain. The transition from the spatial domain to the frequency domain involves a tricky maneuver through the Sengupto Gap, with serious applications in fluid dynamics. Now sampling $I(x)$ results in the function $I(x) * s(x)$ which is represented by $convolution(I'(u), s(u))$ in the frequency domain. Thus there will be no overlap of information if f_{max} , the maximum frequency of $I(x)$ satisfies $2 * f_{max} \leq f$. Frequencies greater than $f/2$ spill over to the next sample and appear impersonating low frequencies. That's when guys like Alf put on their Elvis disguises and pretend to be someone called Shaker. This is known as aliasing. For most digital applications $I(x)$ may not be bandlimited or the limit may be very high. Further, once a sampling rate is fixed all frequencies above the Nyquist limit must be removed prior to sampling to avoid aliasing. This can be done with a low-pass filter that cuts off at the limit. This does not allow all the information to be represented but ensures no misrepresentation. This book of course is totally raw and filterless. It is a true story about fictitious characters that are often ridiculously misrepresented. The similarity it bears to some of our experiences though, is very real.

I felt it was only worthwhile to take leave of you with a flavour of the technical balderdash that immersed our beings, the cornerstone of our well-rounded education. It was a roller coaster ride that ought to scare the living pyjamas off you every time you take it but keeps you coming back for more. It was a roller coaster ride that tossed you around, used, abused, diffused, refused and confused but mostly amused you and then brought you right back where you started. It was, it was like...

drinking hooch out of a Klein bottle!

WHO ARE YOU?

At the inception I had tried to figure out who this was all for. To begin with, it was for me. I had to chronicle the experience as it was lived and felt, since time and life in general dulls sharp edges. The personal angle dealt with, who else might read this book and why? What would they take from it and what did I want them to take from it. I guess I am also trying to convey different things to different people. I figure that rather than leave a certain set of readers with gross misconceptions and potentially damage any overzealous souls that may elevate this tome to religious proportions, I might as well reveal my mind-set at the time this baby was conceived.

These were my unexpurgated target audience notes at the time...

1. Anyone who went through the system like us. ...and that is not just IIT-M or IIT's, but all other engineering institutions, and for that matter medical colleges, downright regular colleges, trade schools, whatever, spotted all over our subcontinent. Remove the specifics of geography and field of study and it could be, would be, them. For them it should really hit home. So while you will notice that though the preponderance of lingo is Tamil based... so that there is no doubt as to where the story is set, there should be a fair sprinkling of terms, Hindi, English and regional that others who never ventured down south could identify with. It is for these people that I also have to try and stay as true as possible, so the exaggerations dont start making the experience seem something unreal written by an outsider...
2. Young aspirants... those who wish to go through the system. The class 9-12 of Indian intellectuals today. These guys I dont have to do anything sepcial to cater to. They will devour it, whatever it is... think about it... we were at that age once. I know I would have. The only thing to be careful about here is not to distort the system too much, not to push it to any extreme. It was not extreme... and I do not want to skew someones thinking irrevocably before they have a chance to experience something like this for themselves. At the very least to give them a reasonably unbiased shot at figuring out if they want to take that chance. On the other hand the system is self-sustaining ...as long as there are parents, pedagogues and peers.

3. The critics. The non-techno-dweebs. the pseud-dudes who will either put this book on a pedestal or piss on it. I think one will be in good shape there. The ingredients are there in abundance. I have heard people discuss contemporary literature in bookstores, at tea stalls, during theatrical performances and classical music concerts. I think its a winner. I think most self-respecting jholas hanging from the shoulders of bearded men in kurtas or women in mojaris with bulls-eye bindas will house this baby. That aside, most importantly, unlike the first two categories I dont owe them anything. If they like it thats great, if not fuck 'em.
4. You would be surprised as to how similar rat races in other little microcosms all over the world are. I have quite a few friends from other countries that can identify with it. Also there are a lot of curious people out there hungry for portrayls of life of different sorts in alien cultures. This is also a salute to them. It is these wandering souls that make the world turn. For their collective sakes it is only fair that one tries to keep personal anecdotes and inside jokes from obscuring the central message. I will also try and unravel the vernacular to a point that approaches intelligible comprehensability of some sort.

A short while back I met this middle aged man at a wild party, who quite vehemently violated any of the above categorizies. Yet in the brief conversation I had with him, it struck me that the contents of these pages was as much about him as anyone else. I asked him what he did and he said, "My father is a halwai. I help run the family business". Its for him too, with an apology for insulting the individuality of any audience for attempting to classify them into even loosely defined categories. The long-term conditioning effects of academic pigeon-holing are hard to overcome.

WHAT WAS THAT?

- Abhey Chootiye : *Hindi m* (salutation) Hello there, fornicator. (*pl* -yon).
- Apna Haath Jagannath : *Hindi m* “One’s hand is the lords command”. masturbate.
- Appy : *n* mid-80s apple juice drink marketed in India, in a cute tetra-pack format along with its mango flavoured sibling Frooty.
- Aargee : *v* to back-stab.
- Beech ka Bandar : *Hindi n* “Monkey in the middle”. Neither here nor there.
- Bihari : *n* Indian originating from Bihar.
- Bogs : *n* Lavatory.
- Bong : *n* Indian originating from Bengal.
- Book-Cricket : *n* Version of cricket played by repeatedly opening a book. The last significant digit on the open even numbered page determines the number of runs scored on the play (with two exceptions: an 8 is a single and a 0 is out).
- Cat : *n* Resident expert on a given subject.
- Channas : *Hindi n,pl* Chick-peas, Garbanzo beans.
- Chappatis : *Hindi n,pl* Whole wheat Indian bread resembling a Mexican tortilla or a Greek Pita.
- Chooth Bugger : *Hindi-Eng. n* Dulcet combination of random multilingual expletives. Frequently used to refer to someone varying from an idiot to just mildly irritating.
- Chumma : *Tamil* For no particular reason.
- Comp See : *abbr* Computer Science.
- Da : *Tamil* Colloquial usage for “friend” (like pal, dude or bud).

- Divider : *n* a mechanical instrument for measuring or marking.
- Diwali : *Hindi n* Festival of lights. Indian festival signifying like most other Indian festivals the triumph of good over evil.
- Dhobhi : *Hindi n* Washerman (*fem.* -bhan) -giri: Act of washing.
- Enthu : *abbr.* Enthusiastic
- Frooty : *n* Mango flavoured drink pioneering the introduction of tetrapacks to the Indian market.
- Funda : *abbr* Fundamental.
- Golt : *n* Indian originating from Andhra Pradesh.
- Gumbal : *n* Group of people.
- Hanuman : *Indian myth.* Son of the wind god. A god in his own right, in the form of an ape. Was singlehandedly responsible for burning Lanka to the ground in the Ramayan by romping about with his tail set on fire.
- Hari Om : *Hindi n* (pronounced “Hurry Ohm”) Hindi equivalent of a Hail Mary.
- Hawaa (AIR) : *abbr.* All India Rank. Ranking given to the candidates who pass the IIT-JEE in order of performance.
- Holi : *Hindi n* Festival of colour. Indian festival signifying like most other Indian festivals the triumph of good over evil.
- Ice Rate : NCC marching command. (better pronounced as “Eyes Right”).
- Ice Trait : NCC marching command. (better pronounced as “Eyes Straight”).
- IIT : *abbr.* Indian Institute of Technology.
- Idli : *Tamil n* Spongy white disc-shaped rice cake.
- Iyengar : *n* Subcaste of Tamilian brahmins that worship Vishnu, the preserver.
- Iyer : *n* Subcaste of Tamilian brahmins that worship Shiva, the destroyer.
- (JAM) Just A Minute : *n* Game that combines lightning reflexes, absolute command of a language and the gift of the gab. The aim of the game, for the speaker is essentially to talk impromptu for a minute on an arbitrarily obscure topic without the hint of a pause or significant repetition of thought. The other participants attempt to catch any mistakes the speaker makes, thereby scoring points and taking over the role of speaker. It is a fixture at most collegiate cultural festivals.

- Karadi : *Tamil* *n* Bear.
- Kutti : *Tamil* *adj* Small.
- Kundi : *Tamil* *n* Arsehole.
- Lauda : *Hindi* *n* Penis.
- Leper : *adj* 1. Person infected with leprosy. 2. Colloquial term encompassing the entire range of attributes from strongly derogatory to mildly complimentary, depending on intonation and context.
- Levaal : *adj* Of excellent quality (better pronounced and stemming from “Level” -of a certain level).
- Maadarchod : *Hindi* *n* Motherfucker.
- Machaan : *Tamil* (also machee) 1. Brother-in-law 2. Colloquial usage for “friend” (like pal, dude or bud).
- Madan Lal : Indian Cricketer (An all-rounder of lesser calibre). Colloquial usage for someone who likes to be involved in everything.
- Maraan : *n* (also mareen) Idiot. (better pronounced and stemming from “Moron”).
- Angus McFrugal : Gratuituous Scottish reference.
- Mechy : *n* Mechanical Engineer.
- Mera Jeevan Kora Kaagaz : *Hindi* “My life is a blank sheet of paper”. Classic Hindidi film used to signify a down and out persona and attitude.
- Mishra, Velamurga Classes : Tutorial classes for getting into the I.I.T. and other such institutions. A dozen different programs varying from classroom intensive to correspondence, catered to the building of system cracking machines.
- M.Tech : *n* Person studying towards a Master of Technology degree.
- Mug : *Hindi* *n* Commit to memory for the purpose of an impending examination. (*syn* Cram, Ghoti, Ratta).
- NCC : *abbr.* National Cadet Corps.
- NSO : *abbr.* National Sports Organization.
- Naadaa : *Hindi* Length of string threaded through a pair of pyjamas to keep them up at the waist.
- Neechaywala : *Hindi* “The man below”. Sometimes used to refer to the devil.

- Old Monk : Popular brand of Indian rum.
- Oru : *Tamil* One.
- Othaa : *Tamil* Fucker.
- PACMAN : Video game.
- Phiss, Phag, Phuck, Phooter : “Fish, Fag, Fuck, Football”. The phour cornerstones of life phor many Bongs, who phind “F” phonetically problematic.
- Pondee : *col* Pornographic material.
- Poondax : *col* Manage to be a part of, Get a foot in the door usually in a subversive fashion.
- Prachand Lund Dhaari : *Hindi* “Attainer of phallic supremacy”.
- Puntar : *col* Person, Bloke.
- Ra : *Telugu* Colloquial usage for “friend” (like pal, dude or bud).
- Ragging : Hazing, Initiation.
- Rasna : Popular Indian drink mix powder.
- Rendu : *Tamil* Two.
- Sicrotee : *n* Sentry, Security. (better pronounced and stemming from “Security”).
- Sirosh : *col v* Bugger.
- Sooth : *Tamil n* Buttocks.
- Tevdey : *Tamil* Prostitute.
- Thaggudd : *col* Gargantuan.
- Thulp : *col v* Beat, Defeat.
- Uparwala : *Hindi* “The man above”. God.
- Ustad : *Hindi* Expert, Teacher.
- Vandī : *Tamil* Motorized vehicle.
- Vibhuti : *Hindi* Paste applied to the skin, often accompanying religious rites.
- Yaar : *Hindi* Colloquial usage for “friend” (like pal, dude or bud).

WHERE ARE WE?

- Taramani Nair : Taramani Nair will be born on April 1, 2001. Currently he is an apparition, an entity of infinite resourcefulness. Some people call him Errormalai, some Alf. Taramani Nair, is for lack of a better word the “hope” that lies abandoned at the hallowed portals of most exalted institutions.
- Zeke : Who was Zeke? All I know is that he was a legend and I have his legacy... his four-leaved clover... a cobweb in a nonagonal shape. Those who had known Zeke, when questioned about Zeke, would go “Oh man, what a bugger. They just dont make 'em like that anymore”. Then they would look at each other, shake their heads and go into a reverie lasting as long as a long drawn out “Otthaaaaaaa”. Where is he now?
- Singh : There is a restaurant in Adyar called Runs. They claim that any relationship between the food and their name is purely coincidental. Go to the booth right next to the gigantic mural of a computer monitor and keyboard on a monday evening. The gentleman in the midst of devouring a plate of chicken curry is Singh. Unless the menu has changed, monday evenings in the mess is coconut rice. Singh hates coconut rice. Singh recently got his Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering so thats Dr. Singh to you. He knows where Zeke is but will never tell.
- Moss : Some guys called him Flask. He was called Moss because he was really excited about joining the HAM radio club and told his seniors that he already knew “maws code”. Some idiots erroneously figured his name was shortened from the word “Thermos”. Moss got his Masters in Mechanical Engineering from Purdue University and then worked for a subsidiary of General Motors in Kokomo, Indiana, for two years. He then did an MBA in marketing from Wharton. He acquired a wife on his trip home to Bangalore before his move to Philadelphia. Moss now has a green card and a highly paid executive job. He lives in a suburb of Detroit with his wife and year old daughter and drives a white Toyota Camry.
- Pballs : P. Balaji got a job with Citicorp Software Ltd. in Bombay, after graduation. After three years of projects that had him island hopping South East Asia, he landed a job in Tokyo writing financial software.

His program, which provided a revolutionarily complex user interface to a random number generator made a string of insightful recommendations that made him and his company very rich. He now lives in the lap of luxury in a 6 tatami mansion close to work, a mere 45 minutes on the subway.

- Choprax : Choprax figured very early on that he was in the wrong line. The pace of the system, however, carried him through before he could really look back. The only times he looked back it was with double vision on the verge of a blackout. In his last year he took recourse to writing and is now a respected journalist working for The Hindu newspaper. Some of his writings can still be found scrawled on the odd hostel room wall.
- Twospade : Twospade joined his family business of manufacturing steel after he finished his degree in Naval Architecture. Shortly afterwards he was married to the daughter of a home electronic appliance magnate. He is currently on the board of directors of both companies. You can often find Twospade within the pages of Business India. He has even made the eyecatchers column at the back of the India Today alongside his prize racehorse. His love for gambling has endured and the stakes are higher but as usual he always wins.
- Bheema : Bheema took a year off after he graduated and worked part time as a project associate on campus. He continued to paint the tortured visions that came to him during his psychedelic journeys. His favourite medium was candle on paper. The trick was to get as close to the paper without getting too close for too long. Sometimes if the inspiration was right he would deliberately burn it in bits. Bheema always liked living on the edge and during some masochistic moments even straddling it. During the Six-A-Side he would give us all coronaries by dribbling the ball in front of the goal with three offenders buzzing around him. Two years down the road he took his hallucinogenic fantasies too far. He could not control it anymore. Fortunately for Bheema his folks were wise and understanding. He went through a year of rehabilitation and now gets his thrills on an Enfield. He tried having an exhibition of his artwork that was not too successful. I have one of his pieces. I think its pretty good. Anyway, so he is still a project associate.
- Haraami : Haraami went the Pballs route. He landed the Citicorp Software job but more importantly landed a hefty dowry. Six months into his job and marriage his disillusionment with life and the system finally surfaced. He quit them both and left Bombay for Pune where he joined the followers of Osho, looking not for spiritual guidance but sexual gratification. One guru led him to another as he drifted from Krishnamurthy ashrams to the Aurobindo mission in Pondicherry. He has since settled down south and occasionally works towards the upliftment of abused women when not uplifting himself. Through all his travails one thing stands out.

- Helen : No one I know really knows where fair Helen is these days. One hopes that he is well and smiling.
- Boots : Boots got his Masters from Duke University and then worked at a small private research lab in Darmstadt for a year. He now spends six months in the year working on different contracts in various parts of the world and travels the other six. Every year he spends a month in some relatively unexplored part of India. He is still single as far as I know. Boots is also working on a book. It is set in a hypothetical view of the Indian sub-continent today, as if the events of the 20th century leading to Indian independence had never happened. The central character is a homeless lunatic called Tughlaq.
- Rogers Binny : Binny got a masters in Biomechanics from Berkeley. He works for a company in the bay area and moonlights as a bartender on Haight St. He also has a consulting firm which he operates on the side called “Biotech Stuffer”. Binny married on his trip back to India after moving to Berkeley and has two children.
- Chiknaa : Chiknaa started a masters in Chemical Engineering from the Ohio State University about 8 years ago. He still claims to be working on it, even though his name has long been struck off the academic rosters. The first thing he did after landing on American soil was to get his ears pierced. Within a month he had a band that did a goulash of Hindi, English and Tamil songs called AC-Desi. Band members come, graduate, move on, new ones join... Chiknaa is still holding fort. On any given night he can be found on either side of the bar counter at a local watering hole called Larry’s. Another two years and he will attain political asylum.
- Parshad : Parshad works in Madras for TI cycles. He lives in a small flat within five minutes from work and any one of three temples.
- Gobes : R. Govardhan completed his Masters in Computer Science from the University of Wisconsin at Madison and was immediately swallowed up by Microsoft. He is an avid basketball fan and claims to have the technique but not the height to dunk. He divides his time off work between watching the Seattle Sonics and his bursting stock portfolio grow.
- Porky : V. Kudiharasan recently finished his Ph.D. in Computer Science from Stanford University and has accepted a tenure track position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill after juggling five different academic offers most people only dream of. He says he will be sad to leave his girl friend Heather who was his student in an introductory computer class. A vegetarian brahmin who turned to seafood with a vengeance he also says “There are many fish in the sea”.
- Janus : Rajesh Subramaniam realized a year through graduate school at SUNY Stony Brook, that he did after all want to study quantum physics.

It took him a year to edge his way from one Department to another taking care to cause as little bad blood as possible. He did graduate with a pathbreaking piece of work on a variant of the Schroedinger stumper, “The big fox in a box paradox”. He is currently a post-doc at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa and well on his way to going from being a PIG /* Poor Indian Graduate */ to a being a Poor Indian Male Professor.

- **Diro** : Diro took up a job with the Shaw Wallace distillery in Bangalore after graduation. He is still there, at peace with himself and the world, inching his way up the corporate ladder at his own pace. He more than anyone else, misses his four years and feels he is ready to go back through the system. The system, unfortunately, has no use for him anymore. To begin with he is over the artificial age limits that most institutions set, to qualify for admission. He is also too jaded. What he does not realize is that it could never give him the same highs. Even the swill that he helps create in his small way is more potent. Then again that's just nostalgia. Deep inside Diro is aware of his insignificance in a galactic scheme of things and to put it simply “he don't give a shit”.
- **Kaat** : Karthik has disappeared. There are rumours that having had such success with Kadaveru's Kwiz Kirkle he now heads the multi-racial wing of yet another KKK and is distinguishable only by the fact that his suit with the pointy hat is golt pink with the infamous fractal stripes.
- **Jeeves** : Jeeves followed his GRE debacle with a closeout on the CAT entrance exam to the Indian Institute of Management. After having got past preliminaries he completely dominated the interviews and group discussions that comprised the next hurdle to admission. Interviewers and other candidates came through it mesmerized and weak at the knees. One member of the interview panel was spotted walking around in a daze muttering “McCavity, McCavity. There is no one like McCavity...”. Jeeves got through his two years at the institute in Ahmedabad with relative ease and was lapped up by Johnson and Johnson India Ltd. Within months he shocked all marketing pundits by targeting the new improved Johnsons baby shampoo at an adult audience. At a subsequent press conference he fastidiously straightened the CEO's tie and called his son a buffoon and was fired the next morning. He now seeks out new markets for reels of coloured cotton thread.
- **Alf** : After graduation Alf disappeared for four years. Nobody knows where he was and his lips as usual are pursed. Suddenly he appeared in the United States under the identity “Shaker” and made it big. He now zips through life in a red Porsche Boxster flashing cards of various colours looking at the world from a Ray-Ban tinted employers perspective.
- **Seedha** : Manoj Patwardhan is currently working on his Ph.D. in complexity theory at MIT. It has been a long road for Seedha changing three advisors and two areas of research. His integrity through it all has been

unquestionable. He has been applying back to his alma mater for academic positions after his graduation but the response has been very lame. He is adamant to return anyway and possibly start something along the lines of the Free Software Foundation in India.

- Jha : Vivek Jha is right here, smiling through the cynicism, the desperation, the frustration and joy of its irony. May this be the anchor he never had.
- Rasp : Rasp was quite relieved to finish her degree in Naval Architecture and get the hell out of the joint. She got herself a job with the U.N. through her fathers connections, and was married into an old landed family in Colombo six months after she graduated. She quit he job soon after and is now a proud mother of two.
- Horny : Vinay finished his Ph.D. in a near record 3 years from the University of Hawaii and took up a tenure track position there itself. He gives tennis lessons in exchange for favours of various kinds. He is quite the man about town. They should call the place Hornalulu. Horny fulfilled his NCC dreams. He has a pilots license, a deep sea divers permit and a sailboat in his backyard. His sailboat has a quaint cabin below deck with a functional kitchen, a bar and a cozy bunk bed with three little pillows.
- Thonflakes : Thonflakes joint the Inidian Institute of Managment in Bangalore. Disillusioned with marketing Kentucky Fried Chicken in the predominantly vegetarian south of India, he sat for the Indian Administrative Service examination and is now an officer with the Indian Foreign Service stationed in New Delhi.
- Abdul Aziz : Abdul Aziz dropped out in his second year for all practical purposes. He remained in the institute records, thereby maintaining his refugee student status that paid 12 dollars a day. His dream is to make it to Bollywood and be just as big as “Amitabaachan”. He married some woman he met during our second year Mardi Gras and now has three boys Amar, Akbar and Anthony. Last year his student status ran out. His wife works and he keeps the home fires burning. He recently got enrolled to the Loyola medical college for a course in physiotherapy reinstating him as the chief breadwinner.
- Kumar Kishore : Kumar landed up in SUNY Stony Brook the day Janus put forth his dissertation proposal. They shared an apartment for a year before Janus graduated. Kumar is just getting into a research area having decided after much debate and a lukewarm job market, to go through with a Ph.D. after all.
- Inne-da : Inne-da scored many goals in life. He had an uncle who was the chair of some major Indian educational body and was thus blessed with a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, where he was an instant hit with his soccer

skills. He had applied to some kind of theoretical electronics department but managed to move to economics. He grew his hair and beard and went through a string of women like Rasputin. Unfortunately he says none of them has been a natural blonde. He says the day he finds a natural blonde will be the day he graduates. His uncle in the meantime has replaced his expired Rhodes scholarship by one sponsored by the International Rotary Club of India.

- Dean Doraiswamy : The Dean who wanted to be Diro instead of the Diro. I hear he did make it, as Diro of one of the K'pur institutes. God bless their collective souls.
- Cherian : Cherian retired the year after we left. He was one of the few faculty ever to hold a joint appointment to the physics and chemistry departments. He still claims that the last super-nova exploded more than 10 million years ago... more than 10 million lightyears ago to be precise.
- Bondairaman : Bondairaman is now a full professor and may well be the next head of department. He still gets the lions share of students who work diligently with him at the cutting edge of technology.
- Errormalai : Errormalai is still the hostel dhobhi.
- M. Adams : Adams hit a pinnacle in his career during our stay. He has been in a slump since and drinks his sorrows away, courtesy his good friend Errormalai. These days he can teach you play the mridangam while doing the macarena but there are few takers.
- Rotesan : Rotesan is a smart man. He is the serving head of the Computer Science department.
- Valsamma : Valsamma finished her Ph.D. under Rotesan and with a glowing recommendation from him was immediately hired as a Lecturer in the Computer Science Department. She just made Assistant Professor.
- Dead Ant : Dead Ant retired recently. Strangely, it was much to the woe of the student body who despite the abuse quite liked the guy. He was a product of the system himself. I think the system was quite a bit different in his days though. He was offered a position as the Dean of Academic Affairs but he declined. He still shows up for local quiz shows and other cultural events. This mellower incarnation of Dead Ant is one of the most popular personalities on campus.
- Longwater : Third shack from the left behind de'Souza's Fish 'n Feni dump as far as I know.