

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – SISTERHOOD OF THE PINES by Edward N. McConnell Mr. McConnell and his wife, Cindy, own McConnell Publishing, LLC. Their first book project in 2022 was to publish a short story anthology, *Where Harry's Buried*. The short story *Where Harry's Buried* was selected for inclusion in *The Best of Mad Swirl v2021*. His flash fiction, *Store Policy* appears in the year-end anthology; *The Best of Mad Swirl v2024* and "Dust-Up at Aunt Mille's Diner" appeared in *The Best of Mad Swirl v2025*. In 2023 he published *Disappearances at Dr. Snow's* and a third short story anthology, *Sisterhood of the Pines* in 2024. His debut novel, *Radio Free Pittsburgh* was published in 2025. His work has also appeared in many literary magazines. All his books are available on Amazon Books, Beaverdale Books and Wandering Raccoon Books. Ed, a retired lawyer, lives in West Des Moines, Iowa with Cindy.

Page 12 – CUSTOMER SERVICE by Frederick Charles Melancon. The author lives in Mississippi with his wife and daughter.

Page 17 – BABY MUMTAZ, GAMA AND THE LITTLE BOY WITH HIS PET LAMB by Subramani Mani. Subramani started writing after journeys through Medicine and Artificial Intelligence. During the pandemic he felt the creative urge to share memories of his life experiences and perceptions of the world around him. He believes that honest storytelling can have a desirable impact on us and the world we live in. His stories and articles have been published/forthcoming in *Saranac Review*, *Apricity Magazine*, and *Fiction on the Web*, among others. He is a second-year MFA fiction candidate at Texas State University, San Marcos and the nonfiction editor of *Porter House Review*.



“SISTERHOOD OF THE PINES”

by EDWARD N. MCCONNELL

Last Night

The three most important women in my life were very sick, probably dying. I didn't know what was wrong, but I was positive the cause was Irij Becic and his “homemade ink.” He had infected each of them when he scratched those pine tree tattoos into their skin. Finding him meant life or death for my family. I needed to know how he concocted his ink and anything else he could tell me, but would he? There was no time to waste.

As we headed west on the interstate, the light pollution from Des Moines receded in my rear view mirror. It got darker and darker. A cold fog covering the interstate created the illusion of a tunnel surrounded by gloomy darkness. The glare from my headlights, bouncing off the haze, was blinding. I worried my passengers, forced to lay in the bed of the pickup, would be cold. I was on pins and needles as I drove down the highway.

Given the conditions, the safest place was the middle of the road. I straddled the broken white lines separating the lanes. Catching my headlights, the painted white lines flashed up from the road surface like strobe lights, their pulsating rhythm giving me a headache. That, and the swirling murkiness to the side of the road, made driving exhausting, but I pressed on. The lives of my family depended on it.

One Month Ago

This all started for me at a New Year's Eve party. I was singing along to some karaoke song lyrics on the TV screen when I heard my daughter, Samantha say to my wife, Claire, “So you're okay to get a tattoo early next month..?”

Claire, noticing I heard the comment, had that look like, “Sam, shut up.” Before she could respond I asked, “Okay with what?”

The open secret in our family is Sam can't keep a secret. She always says the quiet part out loud. That's how I found out she, my granddaughter Hannah and Claire were going for matching tattoos.

Sam, seeing Claire was reluctant to answer me, jumped in and said, “Why our tattoos, of course.”

Looking directly at Claire, I said, “What tattoos?” From the look on her face, one of those “oh shit” looks, I knew they had cooked up something I wasn't supposed to know about, at least, not yet.

Flashing an angry look at Claire, I said, “Why didn't you tell me?” There was no reply.

Sam, realizing she let the cat out of the bag, spent the rest of the evening trying to smooth things over. “Oh Dad, we're just trying to have a little fun. It's a bonding thing.”

To be fair, I had heard some loose talk before between Hannah and Sam about getting the same tattoo as a ‘bonding thing.’ Sam called

it the “Sisterhood of the Pines.” I didn’t pay much attention until they got Claire involved.

Why these three needed to mark up their bodies to prove how close they were to each other was a mystery to me. Because I had been blindsided by this, at first I wasn’t going to have anything to do with what I thought was a hair-brained idea.

After considering things, I realized they would do it with or without me. Changing my mind, I thought, *People have a right to expression and control over their own bodies.* I told Claire I would support her in any way she wanted. With that, they got busy making arrangements.

A few days later, wanting to get up to speed, I had a chat with Hannah.

“Do you have the tattoo parlor picked out?”

“Yes, I found a guy who specializes in tree tattoos. His name is Irj Becic.”

“Okay, tell me again about this guy. First thing, how do you pronounce this clown’s name.”

“Really, Pop, you can’t sound it out. It’s easy. Look at the letters, I-R-J, they sound like the word, ‘urge.’ It’s simple. See?”

“What the hell kind of name is that?” Hannah didn’t know, but at least I knew what to call him, if I ever met him.

“This guy does really great pine tree tattoos and that’s what the three of us want. We all love pine trees and that’s what we’re gonna get.”

“Okay Hannah, but tell me, how’d you find this guy?”

“I was surfing the dark web for tattoo artists and his name popped up.”

“Wait, you found this guy on the dark web? If some business is advertising there, something fishy is probably going on. How do you know he’s legit?”

When she ducked answering the question

I knew right then, getting involved in this ‘little adventure’ was the right thing to do.

Hannah, trying to make me feel more at ease, said, “His site promotes his use of ‘personally formulated inks made from all natural products. His designs, done in the privacy of a country setting, are reasonably priced. Satisfaction guaranteed.’”

Later, when I tried to find his website on the “normal” internet, there was nothing. Given my computer skills, there was no chance I could surf the dark web to see what this guy had out there. I wanted more information, so, after some thought, I decided to do two things.

Three Weeks Ago

First, I offered to drive them to this place out in the country to make sure they were safe. The girls thought that was a great idea because I could be part of the adventure.

Second, I asked Tandy Garilovic, a tattoo artist who runs Tantric Tattoos and Piercings, in Des Moines about this tattoo artist, Irj Becic.

In my law practice, from time to time, I take court appointed cases. That’s how we met. She’s a former client I once got off on a small pot possession charge.

Hers was a simple case, but she might have lost her license with a conviction. When it was over, she offered to give me a free tattoo. I declined but told her, “someday she would owe me a favor.” Now was my time to collect by getting some information.

Tandy is a sight to behold. I am pretty sure there are a few open patches of skin left on her body to place another tantric symbol or pose, but I’d be at a loss to tell you where. She’s without a doubt, the most illustrated woman I have ever encountered. There’s something about her that puts me at ease, which is unusual, since I

am not comfortable around people with a lot of tattoos.

We met up at a coffee shop near her parlor. When I told her I was after information about Irj Becic, I got one of those eye rolls only Tandy can toss your way. It shook me a little but then again Tandy was more than a bit of a drama queen.

“Jimmy, I know about him, sorta, never met him though. He’s from Serbia. He showed up on the radar here in Iowa a few years ago. Since I came from Serbia when I was a child, I like to keep track of other tattooists from the old country.

His parlor is out by Troublesome Creek about fifty miles west of here. It’s a little hard to find. I hear he likes it that way. He seems to specialize in doing tree tattoos, especially pine trees, of all things.”

That comment caught my ear. Hannah said the three of them were going to have a pine tree tattoo put on their ankles. Claire later confirmed it. Tandy then took a drag off her vape and let out a huge cloud of aerosol smoke. The barista working the counter gave her a dirty look. I suppose it was because Tandy was leaning her chair back against the wall under a ‘No Smoking’ sign. He didn’t say anything. I think he could tell she was not the sort of person who took criticism well plus she didn’t give a rip about what he thought anyway.

“Dude works alone,” she said. “Big guy I hear, and strange. He mixes his own ink. Why, I don’t know. It is so much easier to buy it commercially. Most people who meet him say he’s a little off. Are you sure they want to go out there? Have the girls come to see me. I’ll do them a good job.”

“Sorry, they seem set on him.”

She smiled, grabbed her coffee cup and got

up to leave. Half joking, she said. “Make sure they have their shots.” Then she got serious, “You make sure you watch that guy the whole time. Rumor has it he likes the ladies, if you know what I mean, especially the younger ones. That’s probably why he’s out in the sticks; it gives him a chance to take a crack at female clients and maybe get lucky. Hey, given Claire’s looks, he’d probably want a crack at her, too. Hell, I’d like a crack at her myself.”

“Thanks Tandy, I’ll let her know.”

As she was leaving she said, “I’ll do some more digging on him. If I hear anything that seems interesting, I’ll let you know.”

After she left, I thought, *Quite a character. I like her.* Still, I was uneasy. What she said about where his business was and that he mixed his own ink set off an alarm. I hoped I’d get a better read when I visited his shop. Ignored my misgivings, I put them out of my mind. I should have listened.

Two Weeks Ago -The Trip to and Arrival at Becic Tattooing

It was the day of the appointment, and I sat behind the wheel waiting to drive the girls. I figured they could finalize their plans on the tattoo location and size on the way over.

Taking my pickup with the extended cab, I made sure to put a baseball bat in the bed under a tarp. Given Tandy’s description that Irj was a large man, if there was trouble, I might need an equalizer.

As we drove on, it seemed they couldn’t decide where they wanted to put their tattoos. This was their adventure and I tried to stay out of the conversation, but thought I’d offer an opinion, so I jumped in.

“Since you’re getting the same tattoo, who cares where it goes?” No one said anything so I

shut up after that since I felt lucky they let me come along. Where they put their tattoos didn't matter to me. What was important was to see this tattoo place for myself and meet Irj Becic. Plus, if this guy was as sketchy as I thought he might be, I'd be there to get the girls away quickly.

The further we got into rural Iowa, I thought about what Tandy said, that Irj's place was 'a little hard to find.' There had to be a reason, but I couldn't figure out what, yet.

To get there takes about an hour. The first forty miles is mostly interstate or hard top roads, after that, it's all gravel. When I say gravel, I mean dirt roads with lots of potholes. It was slow going but we got there on time.

The girls were excited to be there. When I first saw the building I thought, *It looks like a good spot for a murder, not a place to get a tattoo.*

Irj operates out of a ramshackle building nestled in an eerie stand of pines near Troublesome Creek. The sign above the door was hand painted, chipped and faded. It read, *Becic Tattooing*. At least it matched the condition of his building.

There were no other houses or commercial buildings close by. I assumed this location discouraged visits from inspectors. Having never liked dumpy places where there are few people around, I was uncomfortable.

It had been raining but it let up as we arrived. We couldn't go in together because I had to let the girls out by the front door since it was the only dry spot I could find in the parking area. As they got out of the truck I watched as the three most important women in my life walked into Irj Becic's tattoo parlor.

Pulling around the back I spotted a patch of gravel without puddles and pulled the pickup onto it. Once I got out, I intended to get inside

quickly, but a guard dog named Vince blocked my way. I only knew his name because I saw the tag on his collar.

Vince was an Old English Bulldog. He had a huge head and eyes. I was sure he was part Mastiff. Having never encountered such an animal, I moved slowly. His eyes followed me while the rest of him sat motionless by the front door. He looked downright nasty, but his eyes told me he wasn't.

My read of him was he was lazy, not cut out for guard dog duties. Acting on my hunch, I stepped past him and open the parlor's front door. He watched me go by, not moving a muscle.

Irj Becic's Tattoo Parlor

When I came in, there were no other customers but us. His irons were on the table next to the bench where he'd work on the girls. I hoped he had sprayed it down after his last customer, knowing they wanted tattoos, not rashes.

The girls were already discussing their plans with a hulking, dark eyed man who I assumed was Irj. As he spoke to my wife, daughter and granddaughter, he smiled wide and treated them warmly. Then he saw me.

"Hey, you, fella, if you want tattoo, sit on the couch and wait. I am working with these ladies. If you don't like it, come back later. Anyway, you look like a cop. I don't do cops. Maybe you shouldn't come back."

"I'm no cop. These ladies are my family and I drove them here."

I could tell right away I was not going to get along with this hump. Tandy said he was from Serbia and his thick accent sounded like it. I tried to ignore him, but he kept talking at me. Actually, it was more like yelling.

"I'm doing the girls. I like these girls. If

you're family, okay. You sit there and be quiet. You sure you're not a cop."

"I'm a lawyer."

"Oh, okay, well that's no better. I hate lawyers too. Go wait in the car." Remembering Tandy's warning about him and young women, I said, "I'm staying or they're leaving, your choice."

Hannah tried to get me to focus on anything besides Irj. "Pop, look at his artwork. He's great."

I scanned the walls of his parlor, looking at his paintings, mostly of pine trees. I thought, "He's no Rembrandt, but his stuff isn't bad."

There was something else in the far corner that caught my eye. It was a rack of brightly colored glass ink jars. On a tabletop under the rack was an old leather-bound book. While he was busy talking to the girls, using my phone, I snapped a couple of photos of the ink and the book.

Making sure he wasn't looking, I opened the book and saw the contents, handwritten in Cyrillic. Because I didn't want to draw attention to my snooping, I didn't ask what the book was for.

When I could get a word in I said, "Hey, Irj, why's this building in the middle of a stand of pines?"

Turning to look at me, he said, "I love pines, they smell great, stay green all year. I live for pines. I can do best pine tree tattoos."

Claire jumped into the conversation. "I love pines too. If I could be a tree, I'd be a pine."

Irj got a wide grin. I didn't like it.

"Why are you smiling, Irj."

"It's nothing. Like I said, I can do great pine tree tattoos for the lovely ladies, wherever they want. Of course, I need to look at their skin."

I thought, "Tandy was right, here we go."

Samantha said, "I want my tattoo to be on the right foot."

Hannah pointed at the back of her upper right arm and said, "I'll have mine here."

Irj thought those were great spots. When it came to Claire, he hesitated. She said, "Can you put mine on my ankle?"

Doing a quick look, he said "No. Better on place like your shoulder above breast." He smiled again and said, "Lift up your shirt. Let me see if that's a good spot."

Knowing what he was after and remembering Tandy's warning, I said, "Hon, just pull your tee shirt down over your shoulder. That should be enough."

Irj shot a dirty look my way then turned back to Claire and said, "Nice, but not good spot, the skin on front of shoulder, too thin, needle too thick. Let's try back of shoulder."

She turned around. Lifting her shirt, she revealed her whole back. Claire wasn't wearing a bra. Into this tattoo experience all the way, she'd show what she had to get the right spot.

I needed to shut down this 'skin search' before it got out of hand. "Let's go with the back of the shoulder," I said.

Irj got right up to her shoulder to look. He was closer than I was comfortable with, then agreed the tattoo should go on the back of Claire's shoulder. When she pulled her shirt back down, I relaxed a little.

He then walked over to the corner holding the rack of inks I had spied earlier. He first showed them to Claire. "These are inks I make myself. None better around. Pick one. I color pine tree tattoo for you all."

The girls gathered around and looked at the colors for a minute or two, then decided to have a medium shade of green incorporated into each tattoo.

Selecting the color they wanted, Irj smiled but said, “Really, you want that green, not this green.” He held up a glass container with a different, darker green, saying, “I make this myself, all natural. This is best color. You will live long time and stand tall and strong, like pine trees.”

Looking at Irj, I said, “What the hell does that mean?”

“You will see, Papa.” Irj must have heard Hannah call me Pop and garbled it, thinking Papa was my name. By now, I was long time tired of this weirdo. Turning to the girls, I said, “Just do the pine trees and let’s go. You don’t need any color.”

Irj jumping in, said, “I throw in the color for free. It will make tattoos pretty.”

I still didn’t like it, but the girls went for it. Before Irj got to work, he opened the leather book on the table near the ink pots, turned to a particular page, then said something under his breath. I was sure the girls didn’t see or hear it, but I did. I wondered what he was doing but didn’t ask.

Then, working quickly, he put the pine tree tattoos in the places they chose, adding the green pine needles color as he went. First he did Samantha’s foot. Then the back of Claire’s right shoulder. He finished with the back of Hannah’s right arm.

The old leather book was open to the page I saw him reading from under his breath before he started. While he was doing the tattoos, I snapped a photo on my cell. I went back and stood close to my family to watch Irj work. I hoped he didn’t notice.

When it was over, we paid and left. The girls fell asleep almost immediately after getting in the pickup. That was normal for Sam and Hannah, but, as a rule, Claire did not sleep in a moving vehicle. I was a bit concerned as to why,

worried maybe Irj had done something. Again, I dismissed any uneasy feelings.

As we headed back up the dirt road to the highway, an eerie fog drifted over the road making the drive in the dark unsettling. I figured once we got to the interstate, things would clear off. It didn’t, the fog got thicker.

I hated having no one to talk to on the way back home. I also could not shake the feeling that Irj had been up to something when he read from that old leather book. All the way home, I wondered why he pushed the girls to use that particular shade of green ink. I had no answers ... then.

After Getting the Tattoos

In the following two weeks Claire’s tattoo started healing. At first, there was nothing unusual except for some redness and bumpiness of the skin. I applied the moisturizer to her back three times a day as Hannah told me to do. As the tattoo started to darken, the redness faded and the green of the pine needles stood out against the contrasting dark tree colors, I had to admit, Irj wasn’t a bad artist.

By day ten of the healing process Claire’s skin at the tattoo site seemed to be bumpier than it had been. It was almost like little needles were starting to poke out from the tattoo. I called Samantha.

“How’s your tattoo healing?”

She said, “At first I thought my foot hurt because I wear shoes all day. Then I noticed the skin on my foot seems really bumpy like needles are growing out of the tattoo.” “The color is still good. Also, my joints seem to be stiffening up.”

I then asked, “How’s Hannah?”

“She’s not feeling well, kinda stiff like me. The back of her arm is bumpy. It’s the same thing I’m having.”

"Maybe we should get you guys to a doctor in case something is infected."

She said, "No. I'm going to contact Irj first and see if this reaction has happened before and what he recommends."

"Why talk to that guy? He's no doctor. He probably caused this."

"Don't be ridiculous, Dad. I figure he's run into this reaction before. If he hasn't, I'll call a doctor and let you know later in the day how we are feeling. If I hear from Irj, I'll let you know."

I left it at that. I shouldn't have.

The Spell

Later that evening, at bedtime, I noticed Claire seemed to be moving with some difficulty. I asked, "Are you okay? Trouble with your knees?"

She said, "They have been stiff all day and so has my back. Maybe a good night's sleep will help." We left it at that and turned off the TV.

When I awoke in the morning, I noticed Claire sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark. She had pulled the blanket and top sheet on her side of the bed down. It was unusual for her to be up before me and even more unusual for her to just sit on the bed after getting up.

She asked me to turn on the lights. When I did, I noticed long, thin green pieces covering the sheets on her side of the bed. They were like pine needles. Looking closer, that's exactly what they were.

I still didn't believe what I saw, "Are those pine needles? How did they get in the bed?"

It was then she lifted up her shirt. From the tattoo site green pine needles were sticking out of her skin. Worse, they seemed to be spreading down her back and up over her shoulder. It was almost like I could see them moving, like worms

crawling up and down.

"Claire, what the hell happened?"

All she could do was moan. Then, she said, "They really hurt. What is it? Get them off me."

Reaching over, I tried to sweep the needles off the surface of her skin. When that didn't work, I tried to pull one out. Claire screamed in pain.

Before my eyes, her back and torso were turning green with little needles. It was then I noticed the skin on her arms seemed to be a rough grayish brown, almost like the bark on a branch of a pine tree. As the afternoon wore on, I noticed more of Claire's skin changing. The rest of her body was darkening and becoming a grayish brown, the surface rough, like tree bark.

I realized, if Claire was going through this, Samantha and Hannah must be experiencing the same thing. Panicking, I called Samantha and told her what was happening.

"Me and Hannah have the same thing and feel awful, stiff and feverish."

I asked Sam, "Can you put some of the needles that came out of you and Hannah in plastic bags. I did the same with Claire who was by now sprouting green needles from her neck. Not knowing what else to do. I called Tandy.

Tandy's Revelation

At first, she didn't pick up. I tried again and again, my panic growing because Claire was sicker now and I suspected Sam and Hannah were feeling the same. A short time later Tandy did call back.

I said, "The girls are sick. I know it was something Irj did. Have you heard anything?"

"Jesus, Jimmy, I was just about to call you. Irj is involved in some Serbian/Slavic mystical tattooing group. From what I hear, they like to

make their own ink and recite spells before they tattoo clients. It's weird, but probably harmless."

"Tandy, didn't you hear what I just said, my family is sick. Needles are growing out of their pine tree tattoos and their joints are stiff."

"Do you mean like real pine needles? Christ, you didn't let Irj use his homemade ink on them did you? There is no telling what's in that crap. Get them back out there. Find out what he used. I can't believe this is the first time this has happened."

"To hell with Irj, I'm taking the girls to the hospital!"

"Don't do that. They won't know what to do and they'll waste time calling the health department who won't do anything. You gotta get him to tell you what he used and how to counteract it. Get samples of the ink."

"Tandy, I heard him read some words out of an old leather bound book before he used the green colored ink on the girls. Do you know why he would do that? I have a photo of the page with the words but it's in Cyrillic."

She said, "I don't, but no doubt they believe it gives them some kind of magical power."

I said, "I'm sending it to your cell now."

When the photo arrived, Tandy said, "I'll get this to my Serbian tattooists friends. Maybe one of them will know what this says." She then said, "There was a gal in here not long ago who said she had been out to his parlor. When he insisted on using some colored ink she didn't want, she bolted. She said he was reading from an old book right before she took off."

"Maybe that book has something to do with what's going on. You have to get it. Let's hope one of the people I know can read it and understand those words, but Jimmy, that's a long shot."

Based on what I was seeing, I worried that the spells Irj cast were real and no matter what I did, there was no going back. Still, I had to try. I was going to get some of the ink and that old leather book, even if I had to kill Irj to do it.

Our Return to Irj's Tattoo Parlor

My attention turned back to Claire. A grayish, the rough brown bark-like substance was spreading. It was then I noticed she seemed to be dripping something from her tattoo site. When I touched it, it was a thick, sticky substance, like pine tree sap.

I got her dressed. When I tried to help her into the pickup she was too stiff to sit in the cab. I had to lay her down in the bed of the truck. Before we left, I got some blankets and pillows for her. I headed to Sam's house. When I got there she had talked to Irj. "He said to come out right away, without you."

"He can go to hell; I'm not letting you go alone. Anyway none of you look well enough to drive." Sam and Hannah were also too stiff to get into the cab, so I had them lay down with Claire in the bed of the truck. I gave them blankets.

It took about an hour to get to Irj's parlor.

I was livid this was happening. Making a promise to myself, I thought, "If that weirdo has poisoned my family, I'm gonna beat him to death and burn his place down."

Once we got close to Irj's parlor, I had to go slower because the dirt road was bumpy, and it would bounce the girls around. When we did arrive, I could see Irj in the pine grove digging three holes. They weren't large, only wide and deep enough to plant a tree in each. I didn't see any saplings close to where he was working. I found that strange.

When I got out of the truck he saw me and

ran into the back door of his building. It was like he didn't expect me and wanted to avoid dealing with me. I was sure he was going for a weapon or trying to hide something, probably his book. Besides the baseball bat already in the bed of the pickup, I brought a handgun. I was set on using it if I had to. By this time, the girls pain and stiffness had increased to the point of intolerable. They complained how much their tattoos hurt and that they felt like their joints were locking in place. The green needles were now covering most of their bodies.

The Confrontation

When I pushed the front door of his parlor open, he was standing by the ink rack and the table with the old leather book.

As I entered, I said, "What did you do to my family?"

Irj smirked then said, "I give them what your wife wanted. She wanted to be a pine tree. My magic green ink works; I can grant wishes. I know the spell."

"I saw you reading out of that old book before you did their tattoos, what were you reading?"

"It's an old Slavic magic spell. You can't read it, it's in Serbian."

Pointing the gun at Irj, I said, "I don't need to read it. You read the words that reverse this curse you placed on them, or I'll blow your ugly head off."

"Go ahead, shoot. They become pine trees anyway. There is no way back now. I can't stop this, and I don't want to. How do you think I got so many pine trees. I use magic ink and ancient spells from book when I do pine tree tattoos.

The people all come back as they turn into trees, looking for the cure. When they finish

changing, I plant them in the grove outside. I love them and care for them, like I'll do for your girls. I have their holes dug. They will go there. Live long time."

"Make them better or you die," I said.

I could tell this pigheaded Serb wasn't going to help me. My anger was so overwhelming that I hadn't noticed that he was inching closer. He lunged at me, trying to knock the gun from my hand. Slipping as he came forward, he fell and hit his head on the table where he tattooed my family, knocking himself out.

I didn't know what to do next, then I got an idea.

Reaching over to the table where he kept his irons and needles, I found some pots of black and a light brown homemade colored ink on his "magic ink" rack. I filled two irons with the different colored ink.

Prior to being a lawyer, I was a graphic artist and not too bad of one. I figured to turn him into a plant since he did that to my family by using his own ink and magic.

Before I started, I noticed the old book on the table was open to a page. I wasn't sure it was the page he used to curse Claire, Sam and Hannah but I tried to read it. Of course I couldn't. Then I realized my phone had a scanner and translator program. I can set it to read aloud the Cyrillic words in English."

Setting the voice feature to read the picture of the page I had taken, the phone read out words in English. The translation was choppy, but it was all I had. Ripping open his shirt, and with Irj still out cold, I tattooed a tumbleweed on his chest, a big one using the magic ink.

When done, I grabbed that book, and the green ink jar he used to tattoo my girls and then set his building on fire. At the last moment, I pulled Irj outside. As livid as I was, I could not

have let him burn to death in that creepy junk shop he called a tattoo parlor.

He was lying to me. I was sure there was a cure. Irj, tattooed with his own “magic ink” and facing a transformation, would tell me what the cure was.

Once, back outside, I looked in the bed of the pickup. Pulling back the blankets covering them, the girls were gone. They should have been there, but they weren’t. What I saw in their place made my blood run cold. Not waiting for Irj to come to, I left him on the ground. Taking the green ink and old leather book and jumping in the pickup, I hotfooted it back home.

It didn’t take much to turn Irj’s place into a roaring conflagration. As I drove away, I could see the sky glow yellow and red in my rearview mirror as his tattoo parlor burned. I figured Irj would be okay once he came to but didn’t check to make sure. I had to get the girls back home, right away.

An All Night Task

When I got home, after the events at Irj’s parlor, I had a task to perform. If my neighbors looked out their windows, I bet they thought I was crazy, but I didn’t care.

All through the night, I used my garden shovel to dig three holes near the back of my lot. I was pretty sure where the underground power lines were located, so I was able to avoid electrocuting myself. Right as the sun rose I completed my task, the planting of three new pine trees next to one another. Each tree has the pleasure of the company of the other two. I put them like that because I knew that’s how they’d want to be.

Next Morning □ News About the Fire at Irj’s

Exhausted from my overnight efforts, I came in the house and brewed a cup of coffee. Sitting at the kitchen table, I read a story online in the Des Moines newspaper about a fire near Troublesome Creek.

It read: “The Audubon Volunteer Fire Department responded to the scene of a fire at a tattoo parlor near Troublesome Creek last night. During the efforts to control the blaze a large tumbleweed blew across the parking lot, almost knocking a firefighter into the burning building. The errant vegetation burned along with the structure.

A stand of pines next to the building also caught fire. Firefighters on the scene quickly controlled the blaze. The structure was a total loss. The cause of the fire is unknown. There were no deaths or injuries. The State Fire Marshall’s Office investigation continues.”

At first, I wondered if the Fire Marshall’s investigation would lead them back to me. It never did and there were no further reports about Irj Becic or the fire.

Sisterhood of the Pines

Now, I get up every morning and visit those three pines. I tell them what I’ve been doing. Sometimes I swear I hear them talking to me but it’s probably the wind passing through their needles and branches.

When I return to the house, I make a cup of coffee and sit at the kitchen table. Looking out the picture window, I think of the three most important women in my life as I stare at the Sisterhood of the Pines. Even my neighbors have commented on how strong, tall and robust those three pines look now that they have taken root. They think the trees are beautiful. So do I, but for different reasons.

Irj took something from me he could not give back, my family. I returned the favor. By tattooing him with his own “homemade magic ink” and playing the incantation from that old leather book on my phone’s translator, he turned into a tumbleweed, which seemed to be appropriate.

I had no idea he’d burn in the fire, but I have zero regrets he did. I keep the ink and the old leather book in the event I can reverse this

curse someday.

Irj was right about one thing though; my girls “will live long time and stand tall and strong.” To me, that’s no consolation. Every time I cast my gaze out the window and see the Sisterhood of the Pines, I marvel at how beautiful they were and are. Then, it hits me, my penalty for failing to protect them is perpetual loneliness. ❖



“CUSTOMER SERVICE”

by FREDERICK CHARLES MELANCON

The whole thing was just a mess. All the conveyors squeaked to a stop and never started again, and T13 was trapped on the assembly line. Apparently, production ceased just after T13's service and usage data uploaded to his processor but not before the final cosmetic and clothing touches were completed, so while he fully functioned, he was naked and stuck in place. Worse, the plastic covering the exit kept his cameras from seeing outside this section of the assembly line to know what was going on in the factory. A shadow of the robot in front of him hopping off the line suggested that if T13 was going to get out of this predicament, he'd have to do it himself.

The robot behind him definitely wasn't going to help. It remained dormant with its circuitry still jutting out the back of its head. As a humanoid model, T13 was built for customer service, not for crawling out the production end of a machine. Covered in white and silver panels that were inherent in the latest fashion designs, he could only imagine the damage getting off the assembly could cause. The face reflected in the dull metal of the uploader was the bald shape of a human head with cameras for eyes and a thin speaker for a mouth. Well, he wasn't expending the rest of his power looking at that.

T13 cut himself loose and squeezed out the plastic-covered opening. He didn't hop off the line. Caught in a plastic tendril, he fell face first

into the concrete. When the floor smacked against his head, a piece of programming jumbled in his processor, maybe even deleted, and a scuff mark marred his chest plate, but he still functioned, and the mark buffed out while he reassembled a few components of his construction. Luckily, another of his models helped with the final few adjustments and then disappeared into the factory. T13 ignored the other bot abandoning him like he ignored the mess of the factory around him because he was focused on his moment of glory, putting on a tuxedo jacket. As a service robot destined for men's apparel in several clothing stores, he now felt complete.

In the stillness of the production machines, T13 calculated his good fortune. None of the bots after him moved on the line, and he guessed he was the last to receive the transfer of programming that allowed him to know which vest went with which jacket. He picked a silver and black number that accented the brushed nickel of his humanoid-shaped plating. The vest almost seemed to shimmer under the 44 long jacket that his programming required. The coat was traditional, but its lines radiated a tight form, which would look flattering on most men. Just off to his right, multiple accessories waited for him, and he spent an inordinate amount of time analyzing which pair of cufflinks would shine under the sleeves of his

jacket. While he knew he should go white, the shirt was already that color, so he decided on an electric blue similar to the communication lights around his ocular cameras.

When done he stood in the warehouse before a chrome pillar that reflected his image, the debris of the kill-all-human command behind him in darkening red splotches. None of that registered. He looked good. Now, it was time to stop worrying about himself and help humanity with their fashion.

A continual pinging in T13's inbox alerted him that there was a problem, but his processing was too busy analyzing all those splotches around him. He knew red was a bold color choice, but too much never worked the way some people hoped. Then, the analysis completed. As a bot in control of needle and thread, blood fixed high in his database. The robots had done this, and there were possibly no more humans to clothe. Well, this really was a mess.

The outside world wasn't any better. There was even a jacket around a human's neck, and while red and black did go together, blood went with nothing. The worst part was how one of the other robots in his line could do this to that poor jacket. T13 carefully unwound it from the human's neck. His metal fingers tried to smooth out the wrinkles that an iron might not even fix. Final analysis of the stitching proved the coat was unsalvageable. T13 still carried it around until a bit of the blood started to flake off on his clothes, which forced him to discard it. He thought about performing a funeral. The jacket was nice, but he wasn't about to get his clothes any dirtier than they already were. So he left it in a dumpster that rumbled to life and consumed the coat.

T13 had to give it to his metal compatriots.

They were thorough because the several days he spent searching produced not a single living human. When the first button popped off the jacket, T13 held it in his electronic hand. What sort of shoddy construction was this? Looking like this, a robot could not fulfill its sole purpose of enlightening the humans on the best attire available to them. T13 was pretty sure the dumpster jacket still had its buttons.

After the last button came off, T13 located a store that still had power and sold clothes. He didn't know who would buy clothes in there, but the door still operated on solar-powered sensors, and he walked in without a problem. His shoes creaked on the floor, and he took them off and replaced them with a black pair that clicked as if their bottoms were coated in metal. He tried to find a governing AI, but this was apparently one of the old buildings that hadn't been upgraded yet or lived in a wonderful world of AI free nostalgia. The line of tailed jackets proved this point. In the end, he found an eggshell white mandarin collar jacket with a pair of jet-black pants to contrast. He went with silver cufflinks. While he thought about at least trying on one of the jackets with the tails, he knew, even if the humans were alive, no one would want one, so he went back to selecting the final touches of his current look. But the real find was the same silver vest he once wore the first time he touched the floor of the factory. And it matched the cufflinks.

With nothing else to do, he brought out the mannequins to practice some of his customer service programming. "Sir," his voice box crackled the first time he ever used it. "This outfit will work wonders for your waist."

The mannequins always agreed with him, but they never bought anything. They were bums, yet his protocols required that he be

polite. T13 did try. He only ever had to put one mannequin outside for its conduct, which wasn't recorded for everyone's privacy and dignity.

But when he went to bring the mannequin back in, he saw the human. Not much to look at really. The coat could've come from a thrift store, and he was pretty sure, no, he was certain, that duct tape was keeping the right shoe together.

And probably chasing the man down the street was a bad idea. The attempted genocide of the entire human race worked against T13, whether he was personally involved or not. But if the man was going to die, didn't he at least want to look good when it happened? Of course, T13's processing system was sophisticated enough to know in reality the human wouldn't care, but still.

It really wasn't a fair race. T13 came with antitheft measures, all for the clothes of course. And yes, the robot had stun guns and all that, but he didn't deploy any of those. He didn't even consider the option of physically stopping the man. T13 didn't need to. A parking lot encircled with a chain link fence with rusting barbwire at the top cornered the man easily enough.

T13 darted towards the man, and the human knew what the robot did. He was trapped. So he turned and pulled out a revolver. He hit T13 right in the chest. And it did stop T13 instantly, but not because he was hurt. His service models had an exterior that could take a shot like that at close range without damaging his systems. Oh no, he stopped because of the hole in the fabric that smoked as the left-over bullet pinged off of the concrete.

"Really? This is a Vaventi." He held the coat panel with the hole out for the man to

see the damage. "Even the under shirt is 100 percent Egyptian cotton." T13 stuck a whole finger through the hole. "I don't even know if the designer is alive anymore to make another."

This was true enough. T13 tried several times to see what had happened to the names catalogued around the store, but Vaventi was a family brand. There was no telling what happened to all of them.

"I was just trying to get you some nice shoes."

The man was shorter than T13 and seemed a little dodgy. He fired another round into the robot's head. And as that bullet pinged harmlessly off the ground, T13 waved away the human. "Stop that." He analyzed the size of the hole. "Look. I can't patch that without it being noticeable."

T13 threw the jacket in front of him, and the man said, "Sorry."

Despite being upset, T13's programming told him that customers shouldn't have to apologize for anything even if they really should.

"Come on. Let me get you those shoes now."

T13 walked off, and if the human hadn't followed, he wouldn't have been too sad. This was far more trouble than it was worth. But as he made his way out the parking lot, the broke sound of failing rubber creaked behind him.

Once on, the shoes really did look nice. He had the perfect pair in stock, and they were from the same fashion house that produced Vaventi's work. The man had taken the damaged jacket from off the ground. Maybe, he liked it.

"Do you want the jacket to match?"

"No, no, I don't want to be any trouble." The man craned his neck to look around the building. "You the only one here?"

T13 knew the concern. He had it himself. How was he ever going to get customers here with the other robots trying to kill them? “No one’s coming to end you.”

“Are you sure?”

The robot had to refresh his processor because he wanted to give the man the honest answer. Well, sir, because humanity’s abuse of the synthetic wasn’t as smart and all-encompassing as they thought, I can’t guarantee anything just like I couldn’t guarantee getting shot in the chest a half hour ago. Of course, T13 didn’t need his customer service programming to know that those words weren’t the right response.

“I disabled any that would harm customers.”

He slumped to a changing table. “Can I stay?”

T13 was all in. He could only help the mannequins for so long before they just repeated the same stupid problems in the data bank. None of them did anything as fun as shooting him.

While not one of T13’s favorite designs for short people, the man really did look good in a double-breasted jacket with matching tie. Of course, the man never wore the thing inside. He always ripped it off when the doors swooshed closed, but if he’d kept it on, it would’ve looked really good, at least by the robot’s standards.

Okay, the fit still wasn’t perfect. The jacket did ride up in the back when he crouched around corners, but T13 never would’ve known. It wasn’t until the man started to drag the robot out on his food salvaging runs that these details became evident. At first, he argued with the man. There was no trust in this relationship. T13 still didn’t know the man’s name, which

the man never even attempted to give to the robot. And what if other customers came?

To which the man asked, “And what if something happened to me?” This type of question just scared the robot. He couldn’t go back to the mannequins. So T13 followed along, keeping the human out of places that other robots might be.

The trouble actually was shoddy construction. It happened in clothing, and apparently as the second floor collapsed in the mall they were scavenging in, it could happen in buildings too. The man stepped out the way, but plaster peppered the poor double-breasted suit. T13 didn’t know if there was a replacement for this grey color in the store. And surely none of the other jackets that were left could bring out the man’s eyes like this one did.

But bigger problems crawled out of the new hole in the ceiling. A business robot slid down the pile of rubble. It wore the tattered remains of a business suit, cheap and off brand. As the bot stumbled over the terrain, it was clear that the thing was really built for calculations and not much else. Still, when the bot locked onto T13’s arms, it was clear T13 was in trouble, and T13’s antitheft programming was useless against the business bot because all the algorithms dealt with humans not other robots. The two machines struggled as the man inched back behind a vacant buffet, and on seeing the human get away, the business robot lunged at the man but ended up with T13’s jacket. The bot ripped T13’s sleeve clean off, which was completely uncalled for, and in return, T13 gripped the bot’s shoulders and ripped its arms off while kicking him through a wall.

On the other side of the wall, the business bot hummed to silence. T13 stood alone in a silent mall. The human had left him.

There were rules about tracking customers. As he scanned the mall for life, T13 ignored all of them, but in the end, the man found T13 sitting on the road outside the mall.

The man placed a hand on the torn fabric. “I know how to sew.”

“Really.”

“Well, not well.”

T13 took off the jacket. It was the last one in stock in the robot’s size, and no amount of thread would fix the damage.

“It’s just a mess,” the man said.

Of course, T13 wasn’t programmed to disagree with a customer. ❖



“BABY MUMTAZ, GAMA AND THE LITTLE BOY WITH HIS PET LAMB”

by SUBRAMANI MANI

“Pramod?” It was a greeting and a question blended together. He looked at me for a few seconds, and then I saw an expression of recognition dawning on his face. “Hello Pritish”, he said, extending his hand. “Loong time no seee.”

Placing his carry-on bag in the overhead rack Pramod took the vacant window seat across from me. “So, what’s up? It has been probably ten years since we last met,” I added.

“I’ve extended family, and a few old friends from high school here in Alleppey. Now, headed back to Trivandrum. Hardly one more week there, and then I would have to get back to England.”

Pramod and I had been attached to the same clinical units as medical students; when we first met, he was in final year, and I was a third-year student. The last time we saw each other, Pramod had just finished a newborn medicine fellowship in a teaching hospital in London, and was attached to a hospital in the big city. “Are you still based in London?” I asked him.

“We moved to Manchester soon after. I am a consultant there.”

: Great. Are you a fan of ManU or City, Pramod?

Pramod: City, you bet. They’re just amazing.

I: If I recall right, they’ve won all the championships that league soccer has to offer, multiple times, I believe.

Pramod: City is probably the best soccer club in human history.

I: Or soccer club history, perhaps. But I am more a fan of Cups—World Cup, Euro Cup, Asia Cup, Africa Cup—where countries play each other. However, I may have to concede, reluctantly though, that the leagues showcase the best soccer games of our times.

The train was signaling to the passengers its imminent departure out of the Quilon train station. We saw a couple hurriedly walking into our compartment, pushing a stroller. The little one was sleeping peacefully amongst all the din and noise of the station. The family occupied the seats near the far window across from us.

Looking at the woman Pramod asked— “It seems the baby is about two weeks old. Am I right about it?”

Woman: You’re exactly correct. She was born just fifteen days ago. Are you a doc? Just at that time the baby opened her eyes, looked around with a puzzled expression without moving her head, and again went back to sleep. “Such large and beautiful brown eyes”, I thought. I looked at the faces of her mom and dad. The mom also had large brown eyes. “Yes, he is a doc; it turns out he is a pediatrician”. And I continued, “the baby has got your large brown eyes; boy or girl?”.

Woman: (With a smile on her face) Girl, and I hope she got her dad's brain. He is a mathematician.

I: Wow. Great. In high school, even simple math got my head spinning. Math and Physics always go beyond my brain, tangential to my cortex, never striking it; they seem to have work-arounds; they orbit my brain like satellites, always failing to find a spot to land there. Unfortunately, the architect forgot to provide runways and dedicated parking spots to those two guys on the surface of my brain.

Pramod: Me too. That's why both of us probably picked medicine. As my medicine professor used to say—"medicine is not for the smart ones, snobs thrive better in our environment; medicine is the final destination of the donkey-brained."

The train was picking up speed. Pramod's attention turned fully towards me, and he continued.

Pramod: It was the first day of our posting in the newborn nursery. Four new residents had gathered there with our professor. About a dozen newborn babies were under dim lights in small cribs keeping warm, and cozy on blankets. The professor turned towards us, and asked, "What do you notice in general about these newborns?" Want to take a shot, Pritish?

I: Sure. To me newborns have always looked alike. Unless I can identify some special characteristics—large eyes, lots of hair, or some congenital defect per se such as a cleft lip—I couldn't tell them apart. We had fun with our Cardiology professor in clinics with him. Dr. Chandra was a six-foot giant who was very strict and morose. For some reason, he always thought students were trying to be "clever" without putting in the hard work. A few infants would be brought to him for discussion. He would diagnose the condition as VSD, PDA, or some other congenital heart condition. Most of the time the trainee's diagnosis and the professor's take would be in agreement. If not, we were in for trouble. He would start admonishing us. "If you folks continue to diagnose like this, the country would get depopulated quickly." On some days we would have the last laugh. We would bring back the same baby he had diagnosed earlier; He would now offer a completely different diagnosis and start discussing the new one. He couldn't tell the babies apart. We students would exchange knowing looks and roll our eyes but never laughed in front of him.

Pramod: That's funny. Now coming to my professor's question—Yes and no. This was a major hospital in London. We had a mix of white, Black, brown, and Asian babies; some would have blue or green eyes.

I: What did you folks come up with?

Pramod: I believe I said, "Some have lots of hair, some less, and a few are full bald". One female resident said, "a couple of them have long necks"; it drew a chuckle from the prof, but when I checked closely, it turned out to be true. Another resident said, "they all seem to be sleeping peacefully, unlike us; I am really jealous". And everyone laughed.

I: What was the professor's take on the students' responses?

Pramod: She said, "you are all mostly on the mark. But there is one important thing you all missed—*innocence*. It holds good for children in general, but especially so for newborns. You can never blame them for anything. Keep that always in mind. Take care of them gently with all the compassion

and empathy, even love, you can muster; never show your frustration with them. Always remember, they didn't ask to be created. Be patient with them, and give them their time to make their own sense of the world. Give them their best chance first to survive, then to imagine, to dream, to play and to dance in this world; they deserve it. Do you get that?" We all murmured in agreement.

I: That's a nice child-friendly world view.

Pramod: Yes, it is. We were all newborns once. It definitely helps to keep that in mind. Newbies of this world are mostly fun. You can keep on observing them like fish in an aquarium, birds in a bird sanctuary, or butterflies in a butterfly garden. But it can turn out to be depressing when you are dealing with premature and extremely low birthweight babies. There are good and bad days.

I: Well, that comes with the profession we all signed up for. Can't complain too much; it holds good for internal medicine, and many other specialties too.

We had gathered at a beach resort in the periphery of Trivandrum city to celebrate and take stock of our professional and personal lives. Our count was about one hundred and fifty according to the organizers—a hundred of the "survivors" from our medical school entering class of 1984; the rest were family members including some teenagers, but mostly spouses.

Our classmate-extended-family had been meeting somewhat regularly over the years and decades, with the participation numbers ranging between fifty and one hundred. The current gathering, to mark and celebrate the fortieth anniversary of our entry to the Trivandrum Medical College, was the largest to-date. About half the participants were residents of the state of Kerala, a state stretched out north to south along the west coast of South India. The other half had come from different parts of India, and also from various countries of the world. A few of us had retired, while some others were on the verge of calling it quits to medical practice; pretty much everyone from the class, and their spouses were clustered around the sixty-year age-post, an age where you have more memories than new experiences to look forward to; long tracks of trodden paths than unexplored new trails.

Our entering class was one hundred and eighty students. Over the years our batch had lost about a sixth of the class strength; the biological clockwork does apply to the medical professionals also. The attrition and loss were unfortunate, but somewhat expected. I looked forward to first meeting, and then catching up with many of my old friends I hadn't been in touch with over the decades.

The function started late afternoon with a toast to the "survivors"—those who had gathered, and the folks who couldn't make it to the meeting. Then we all stood up to observe a minute-long silence in memory of the twenty-eight departed souls of our batch. Soon the self-introductions began. Age had been kind to a fortunate few, just four or five amongst us; I wasn't one of them. They looked the same, like the first time I had seen them forty years ago. For the rest it was a different story, the mundane repetitive ballgame of life, like the oscillating grandfather clock's pendulum, had aged and changed them almost beyond recognition. Some classmates who had been very handsome in those early days now looked older beyond their years. 'The erratic and somewhat random wear and tear of the trajectories and tributaries of a lived life; their faces and bodies looking like the worn-out sneakers of long-distance runners', I thought.

Soon it was song-time. Rendering of old songs, the lyrics and music we grew up with, is a

mainstay of such meetings. It creates a time travel mood, taking us back to our old cheery times. A mix of Bollywood and Mollywood, Hindi, and Malayalam film songs, some solo, many duets, and a few group songs quickly flooded the hall in sequence. Sowmya started with “Bol re papihara¹..”. Then Jayan sang “Suruma ezhuthiya mizhikale²..”. A group of teens then *performed* a new movie song with some dancing mixed in. I was hearing that song for the first time.

I had intended specifically to meet with a few of my old friends whom I hadn’t seen in many years. During a break in the music jam, I went around the hall and gathered a few of them. Dinesh and Remya, married to each other, Rahman, Gaya, Thomas, and I headed down to the hotel restaurant for an early dinner. I noticed Pramod and Priya walking in the same direction. “I didn’t realize you were headed to our class get-together when we met on the train”, I said with a surprised look. “This is my first appearance in your class meet. You probably don’t know I am married to Priya. She had been pestering me for a long time to attend, and finally I am here Prithish”, remarked Pramod, taking note of my bewilderment. “Why don’t you both join us for dinner?” Pramod looked at Priya. I saw Priya nod, and we all moved in unison towards the entrance. We sat around a circular table adjacent to a large window overlooking the backwaters. The Sun had set, and the sky had darkened with a few silvery streaks, and some scattered grayish-white patchy clouds were left dancing around. The dark backwater stretched out nice and quiet into the turbulent waters of the sea on the far side at one end. Rahman was seated to my left, and Thomas took a seat to my right. Gaya sat straight across the table from me; Dinesh and Remya were also seated across from the table facing me at an angle to my right. The newcomers Pramod and Priya found places between Rahman and Gaya. On our way in we noticed that the restaurant had a nice buffet spread. Being a vegan, I had specifically noted the vegan options and choices—potato and bell pepper fry, *avial*³, *kaju karela*⁴, and a few other dishes including desserts, labeled vegan. The waiter came to our table, greeted us and pointed to the buffet spread. He offered to bring some fresh hot soup and appetizers to get us started. That is when I told the waiter, “I am a vegan”.

Rahman looked surprised. “You used to enjoy beef, mutton, and fish during your medical school days. I specifically remember a retreat where you just ate a stack of *karimeen*⁵ fries for dinner like a wide-eyed high school kid after playing a football match.”

I: Yes, good old memorable days. Man, I was a teenager then. After getting married, and going out of the country, I first became a vegetarian, and then gradually turned into a vegan.

Gaya: I am also a vegetarian.

Priya: Me too!

Then all the others chimed in a chorus. “We will also be vegetarians for the evening in solidarity with the plant lovers”.

Thomas: As a mark of respect to the birds and animals. Let’s give them a break. Long life to them. Live and let live.

1 Sing oh cuckoo bird

2 Oh your painted eyes

3 A mixed vegetable dish

4 Bitter gourd with cashew nut curry

5 Pearl Spot fish, exclusive to the backwaters of Kerala, both salt and freshwaters

Thomas, Rahman, Pramod, and I settled on tomato soup and *vazhapoo*⁶ cutlets; Priya, Gaya, Dinesh and Remya picked mushroom soup and *bonda*⁷.

Dinesh was a consultant cardiologist in a major hospital in Trivandrum, and Remya was a radiologist. I remembered Dinesh as quite outspoken and opinionated. Remya came across as a quiet and unassuming girl. Dinesh had voiced his strong support for *Operation Bluestar*, launched by the then prime minister Indira Gandhi by sending in the Indian army to flush out the Sikh separatist leaders and fighters who had sought refuge in the Golden temple in Amritsar. The military operation inside the temple, considered sacred by the Sikh community, had been highly controversial, and resulted in hundreds of deaths inside and outside the temple precincts in 1984.

I just knew Pramod as a newborn medicine specialist. Priya had been flying under the radar without drawing much attention to herself through the medical school years. Moreover, she had transferred from Alleppey medical school to Trivandrum in her third year, and joined our class. I was surprised to see Priya announce herself— “a geriatrician in between two newborn specialists. We’re all getting older, remember who will be in demand.” Gaya stared at her; Pramod was quiet, and everybody laughed.

Dinesh: It seems we are all past our prime in terms of career and position, even though many of us are still working. I also feel the class of 84 has converged in a certain way after passing through various life stations. Our differences in outlook are not as palpable as they used to be, at least not yet. Remya: But deep divisions have emerged in society. Kerala, with its diversity of people of different backgrounds, was known for its religious tolerance and harmony. Our city Trivandrum in particular, with its strange blend of language, religion, and cultures was a model of diversity. Now, watching the news and reading the newspapers, I am always reminded of the partition stories my dad used to tell me from his army days. His friend Satnam Singh, a fellow officer from Punjab, had lots of harrowing partition tales to narrate. Satnam’s grandfather escaped with his dear life from his village in West Punjab when the borders of newly independent Pakistan and India were carved out in blood from British India on the dark violent nights of 14th and 15th August, 1947. Satnam was the only survivor of his family; his village became part of Pakistan.

I knew a bloody ethnic cleansing of Muslims occurred in the villages and towns on the Indian side of the border. Likewise, Hindus were killed and expelled from places on the Pakistani side of the border. It was a human tragedy of enormous proportions along the Hindu-Muslim faultlines on both sides of the new western and eastern international borders, and within the newborn nations of India and Pakistan; to what purpose, I have not been able to fathom till now. It was as though multiple strange sustained earthquakes and aftershocks occurred along the long western and eastern borders where men, women and children met their violent deaths while buildings and houses stood unscathed but haunted to tell ghost stories for generations to come. Rivers, streams, wells and alleys filled up quickly with mutilated and bloated bodies on both sides of the divide. The border towns suddenly became ghost towns.

I thought Remya was tracing the history of the bloody religious strife as a warning and a fore-

6 Banana flower or blossom

7 South Indian snack with a filling of spicy mashed/fine-cut potatoes inside a lentil shell deep-fried in oil

runner of things to come. Although still isolated, Hindu fanatics of the Modi era had started lynching Muslim men on the mere suspicion of possessing beef. The religious zealots, claiming they were cow worshippers, showed no hesitation in murdering fellow human beings for simply eating beef. In the meantime, the waiter had brought the soup and appetizers to the table. The optics, aroma, and the taste of the food slowly soothed our tongues and palettes, and further fueled the conversation. Thomas had finished his tomato soup, and quickly jumped into the conversational fray.

Thomas: I am happy with the current leadership of the country. Some people call NaMo⁸ a strongman, but I would say he is a strong and effective leader which our country needs, to stand up, and compete on the global stage. After Modi's emergence, India is getting more respect, visibility, and recognition in the various multi-national forums of the world.

I was surprised by Thomas's comments. However, I was gradually getting used to hearing such opinions from members of upper middle-class families, but mostly Hindu. I looked at Rahman. His eyebrows were raised; it was clear he was inching to say something.

Rahman: Thirty-five years ago, Modi's party, the BJP⁹, was struggling to get their people into Parliament. If I remember right, they had just two members in a house of five hundred and forty. Then they came up with this explosive and incendiary mix of Hinduism and communal politics, creating a rabid form of Hindutva, for political ends. And you saw what happened—communal riots, demolition of the Babri mosque, polarization in society, and BJP riding the communal dragon to power. The intolerance and hostility towards other religions, especially Islam, is now quite palpable. I am not an observant Muslim; still the Hindutva smog makes it hard for me to breathe, and leaves my eyes watery and red like tear gas.

It was becoming clear Rahman was getting agitated. He had pent up feelings, and that was quite understandable. I knew from talking to people that if you are a member of a minority group, it is difficult to breathe easy, and keep walking straight ahead, without turning and looking over your shoulder in this divisive environment. Even when the majority is not trying to impose its will, as a member of the minority group, you know that an unsolicited bear hug is not far away.

Rahman: BJP leader Advani embarked on a *Rath Yatra*¹⁰ from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. He was targeting the mosque by claiming its location as the birthplace of Lord, God, Prince Ram, or *Ram Lalla*¹¹. BJP started deliberately stamping mythological characters with the seal of history. It created mass hysteria among the Hindus, and eventually the mosque was torn down. More than two decades later the supreme court ruled in favor of building a Ram temple on the same land where the mosque stood. See the tragedy and the injustice. The judges came up with this ruling after explicitly committing in writing that the land was under the ownership of the Muslim community for half a millennium. The judgement became the laughingstock of the whole world. See, it became a political judgement in favor of the majority community; it was not based on the legal merits of the dispute, and sound jurisprudence. It was injustice, plain and simple.

8 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

9 Stands for Bharatiya Janatha Party, a pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim rightist party which is also currently the ruling party in India

10 Chariot journey

11 Newborn or infant Rama

Rahman's take on the BJP was right on the mark. Painting mythology with the brush of history, pandering to the Hindu base and stirring up anti-Muslim grievances, the party was setting up the stage and building a polling machinery to launder these communal divisions and sentiments into votes in future elections.

Dinesh: Mass hysteria influences justices also. After all, they are also human like you and me. Moreover, they are scared that they, and their family, could be targets of attack. When the majority sect or community becomes chauvinistic and jingoistic, and starts *othering* the minorities, it generates fear among them. Moreover, the majority community comes across as predatory; I would add, with good justification for that perception from the minority perspective.

The conversations were getting overly political. When friends meet after many years in the afternoon of their lives, a discussion of people, places, and the broader society is quite natural, even inevitable. It was a catharsis of decades of pent-up societal observations bubbling up and breaking out all around the table. It was not a professional meeting; it was a class get together with family. I was initially worried that we may not converge and the raw talk might cause a rupture in our friendship. But I also felt that when society is divided friends need to address these issues head on. Even when there could be no consensus there would be clarity on where each one of us stood on these issues. I thought that would be a good thing, something to be desired; it would enhance and update our understanding of each other which in turn would lead to a strengthening of our bonds. The restaurant wasn't very crowded, the food was delicious, and it made a good setting for the conversation to flow without causing awkward gaps, and long pauses.

Thomas: Yes, the majority tries to dominate everywhere. Take the Islamic countries, for example. Let us just name three—Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Iran. Islam predominates; they don't allow freedom of worship for people of other faiths. BJP points a finger at the Islamic countries while pushing its Hindutva agenda, and talks about India being a predominantly Hindu country. That is why BJP likes "Hindustan" or "Bharat" over "India", to refer to our country.

I: India didn't set out to become a Hindu country in 1947. Our constitution clearly says that India is a secular country, and it guarantees the freedom to profess or practice any religion of their choice to different sections of the populace.

I had been observing Pramod and Priya as the conversational train was gathering speed and puffing out steam while traveling on political tracks, as though it was being pulled by a chugging steam engine. Pramod had been swallowing one vazhapoo cutlet after another, washing them down his food tube with tomato soup. Likewise, Priya was doling out summary justice to the bondas, intermittently sipping and occasionally gulping down the mushroom soup thereby adding her contribution to the sound effects of our dinner orchestra.

Pramod perked up with his safe and risk-averse interjection as a newcomer to the group.

Pramod: I am surprised that you folks are discussing our society like we dissected the human body when we all entered medical school. In our batch get togethers we have this unwritten policy of avoiding current politics to keep the flock together. But I personally support discussing social problems. After all, we are doctors. To be good doctors we need a critical grasp of social issues.

Now it was Priya's turn to jump into the fray. Turning her head to face Pramod, she started.

Priya: Your batch is snobbish to avoid politics. It reflects society and its ills, is supposed to address them, and provide solutions. I agree with Pritish that our society has taken a Hindu chauvinistic turn. And I don't think it bodes well for the country.

Gaya also had been sitting quiet all along, focused on food while listening intently to what others were saying. Suddenly, she entered the discussion with a grave tone in her voice.

Gaya: Being part of a majority gives you many advantages in society. I think the minority communities also understand this well. Some of my friends tell me that minorities, especially the Muslims, deliberately try to have larger families so that down the road they can emerge as the majority community in the country.

The conversation seemed to be veering off in a tangential, and dangerous direction. My heart missed a beat; then it started to gallop.

Dinesh: About Muslims there is a general perception like that. I have also noticed that when I take the family history of my patients, Muslim women report having more children. But I have not observed the same phenomenon among Christian women.

Thomas: I agree. It holds true with many of my Muslim friends. One of my colleagues at work, Zulfi, has four brothers and two sisters.

I: All this is anecdotal. I had some Jewish friends while I was an exchange student in the US. At that time, I lived in a locality called Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh while attending the University of Pittsburgh Medical center. I used to see large Jewish families, well-dressed, walking along the sidewalks in a single file as though moving in a procession. One friend told me, "After the Holocaust, the community made a collective decision to have large families to try to replace the millions we lost. The rabbis always remind the people about that even though many decades have passed since that catastrophe."

I looked at Rahman. He had remained silent while the rambling conversation about his community was in progress. I saw a mix of amusement and fear in his face. The combination seemed to create a feeling of pain which was becoming his facial signature through these difficult conversations. "Could it be that a sense of minority feeling, being cornered in some awkward way, is preventing him from speaking out", I thought. Remya was also observing Rahman closely, and sensed a demeanor of helplessness or isolation, weaving a veil of cobwebs over him, and restraining him. She quickly jumped into the fray.

Remya: Majority is privilege. I get that. But I am fine if my community is reduced to a minority. There should be the rule of law and a practice of fairness in society, that is all I care about. There should be opportunities for all; I can compete, and bubble up, if I get motivated enough. In the unlikely event that another community, Muslim or Christian, becomes the majority, I would have no problem with that. Think about this—in a country with a population approaching a billion and a half, only two-hundred million are Muslim. It would take at least a few millennia for Muslims to become a majority if they really try hard. Otherwise, they need to come up with some magic wand to convert a lot of people at one stroke to their faith.

The waiter came with dessert—vanilla and chocolate ice cream. Gaya, Dinesh, Pramod, and I chose chocolate; Remya, Thomas, Priya, and Rahman picked vanilla.

Rahman: “Muslims are gradually becoming a majority”—this insidious and damning propaganda is exerting a powerful influence among a lot of folks. But it appears preposterous to me, and would seem ridiculous to people who can think through it. The difference in the birthrates of Hindu and Muslim communities is quite small; the math doesn’t add up. The Hindutva folks just want to muddy the communal waters and stir up trouble. Moreover, as children get educated and families transition to the middle class, we are finding that the younger generation is opting for smaller families. And this holds good for Hindus, Muslims, and other religious groups alike.

Rahman: I want to make one more thing clear. I have embraced Islam as a matter of personal faith. I just try to follow it in my private life, and that too sparingly. I know there are fringe elements in my community who call for violent jihad, and for the reestablishment of the caliphate. I do not support stretching religion to the sphere of politics, and religious groups clamoring and jockeying for political power.

Priya quickly jumped into the fray with her thoughts. She had been carefully tuned to Rahman.

Priya: I see eye-to-eye with my classmate Rahman on this. I can very well relate to his concern and pain at the turn our society has taken under Modi rule even though I am not a Muslim. Majority is *privilege*. Hindu fanatics should backtrack from their attempts to put a chokehold on the minorities. I saw Rahman nod a couple of times, a sign of some relief for him. I thought Priya’s words were having a calming effect on Rahman.

The deserts were mostly gone. The waiter brought some coffee. Gaya, Priya, and I asked for tea. It was getting late but the conversation continued without a conclusion or a clear end in sight, for some more time, as is typical in these settings. I had been observing Gaya. She hadn’t spoken for quite some time now. She would be lost in thought, and then she would perk up. I had a feeling something was bothering her. She slowly took a few sips of the green tea, looked around to see who was within the range of her sound bites. She brushed her hair away from her eyes and ears to the sides, planted both her elbows on the table leaning forward in the process, and then cupped her cheeks in her open palms. I noticed an amalgam of fear mixed in with relief, as though she had just dodged a near-calamitous event, which could have drastically altered the course of her life.

Gaya: I’ve been keeping this within me for a long time now. I want to get it out in the open, and share this episode from the past. I was in the final year of my pediatric residency training at a teaching hospital in Ahmedabad. This was in the early two-thousands when Modi was the chief minister of the state of Gujarat. And I was taking duty in the newborn nursery of the hospital. Hearing the key phrase *newborn nursery*, Pramod’s eyes lit up.

It was now quite dark outside. Gaya looked to the right, then to the left, and finally turned and looked behind her. She then swung around, refocused her gaze to look straight ahead, took a few long and deep breaths, and continued.

Gaya: I noticed that about half the babies in the newborn ICU were Muslim. The newborns were tagged with their mother’s names as Baby Shakuntala, Baby Mumtaz, Baby Haseena, Baby Neelima, and so on. I knew Muslims were a minority in the state of Gujarat, and the city of Ahmedabad. I took this newborn nursery scenario as proof of the Hindutva argument that Muslims were deliberate-

ly increasing their kind.

Gaya took a long pause. I could see that she was getting agitated. Her breathing had become labored. I could hear her heart beating. It had picked up pace and going LUB-DUB, LUB-DUB. I felt as though I was standing on a railway platform and a long train, pulled by a steam engine at its head, was approaching the platform. Her tone suddenly became hushed and she said abruptly, “I decided to do something about it.”

She turned her face to look at Rahman. He had been staring at Gaya while she was speaking; hearing her last utterance, he quickly lowered his gaze. Now he was looking intently at the floor with a mix of horror and pain. Remya, Priya, Pramod, and I were looking at Gaya, worried about what she was going to say next. Everybody else was looking downwards with a sense of shame reflected on their faces.

The restaurant crowd had mostly thinned out. There was just one other group in a far corner chatting away. Now looking at Gaya, I asked in a feeble beseeching voice— “what happened next Gaya?” I was surprised that I had started panting by that time.

Gaya’s voice took on a strange monotone, and it had no emotion. Her body adopted a stiff metallic posture as though she had been suddenly transformed into a poorly cast bronze sculpture, or a fire hydrant in a street corner. A strange forlorn look came over her. This is what we heard, in a monotonous voice with a nasal twang. It seemed as though her words were being broadcast through an old wooden speaker with a bamboo screen, attached to the ceiling above us. For a moment I felt as though I was having a hallucination.

Gaya: Whether you like it or not, Taj Mahal is a cultural icon of India. It is a beautiful art-structure built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his wife and Queen Mumtaz. Like the pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, or the Eiffel tower in Paris, the Taj is a part of our heritage. We all know that. But you see folks, I was under the propaganda spell of the Hindutva movement in the early days of this century. I believe it was the memory of the Taj, and the attempt of Hindutva forces to denigrate and undermine the Taj as a relic of the Mughal empire, which they always demonized, that made Baby Mumtaz a *marked* baby for me. But I felt she was also the healthiest of the lot.

There was total silence now. We were the last group left in the restaurant. Gaya was now looking straight ahead with a vacuous look in her eyes. Pramod’s gaze was still on her face. The rest of the group were looking down at their feet. Their ears were wide open and tuned to Gaya, but none of them felt comfortable watching her face as she narrated this. It was mostly dark outside except for the light seeping out through our window. The moon hadn’t woken up yet; it was likely a new moon night. And no stars twinkled in the dark black sky that was visible through the window. An owl flew past just outside the window, with wide-open eyes, and screeching looking for a perch in the nearby tall tamarind tree.

Gaya: Newborn babies mostly look alike. In a lot of situations, you cannot tell one baby apart from the other. But there are also some differences, skin color is one. Then there is hair; some of them are born with a lot of fuzz on their heads. Baby Mumtaz had pink-white skin and lots of thin silky-brown hair on her head. But her eyes were the most remarkable. She had probably the largest

eyes among the newborns I had seen. She had penetrating bluish-green eyes, and she was a beauty among newborn beauties. If there had been a Miss newborn-world contest she would have won hands down and crowned. For a moment I thought she could be a descendant of the original Mumtaz of the Taj Mahal fame.

I could visualize what was coming. And I also heard everyone's heavy labored breathing. Pramod's face wore a nonchalant look. I noticed a sparkle of curiosity in his eyes.

Gaya: I think her eyes somehow marked her for me. She was sleeping; the oxygen tube supplying her nascent lungs with oxygen kept her breathing, and her skin pink. That is when a bluish-looking newborn was brought into the nursery. Unfortunately, there was no additional oxygen line in the nursery and I had to make a difficult call. I decided to disconnect the oxygen tube from Baby Mumtaz and connect the same to Baby Maria, the newbie. I sincerely thought Baby Mumtaz was the most likely one to survive without the oxygen tube. I am not sure if I lost my humanity when I abruptly disconnected the oxygen running into her. I was biased against Baby Mumtaz; I will admit that. From a safe distance of more than two decades that have elapsed since then, in hindsight, I can clearly see it. And I want to take responsibility for it. Baby Mumtaz woke up and gave me a wide smile which still lingers to this day, etched in my memory. There was this large picture window on the far side. A dark night, sans the moon, or the bright stars. The nursery was eerily quiet in the middle of the night. Baby Mumtaz's face illuminated by the soft light, adorned by her large eyes now twinkling with a smile, substituted for the absent moon and the stars.

Gaya paused for a few seconds, and slowly continued in the same monotone voice, a little more hushed. I noticed that everyone else in the group froze.

Gaya: I think that wide smile of Baby Mumtaz solved my moral quandary and saved my feelings of helplessness tinged with some guilt, or so I thought. Baby Mumtaz went back to her original sleep state keeping the smile unforgettable on her serene face, her large eyes now closed shut. And, to my relief, Baby Maria slowly started turning pink.

All this turbulence happened during daybreak. There was no more drama afterwards and my shift ended uneventfully at 8 am that day.

'She should be a beautiful young woman, with even a baby of her own', I thought as total silence descended in the room. She had been called Baby Mumtaz, but I was curious to know her given name. "Could it be Noor?", I wondered.

I noticed Pramod shaking his head in an ambiguous manner. I couldn't fathom what he seemed to be thinking about Gaya's narrative. While others relaxed and raised their heads, Rahman's face was red and contorted with pain and anguish. He looked up eyeing each one of us in turn, and then stared straight, his eyes pointed like arrows at Gaya. Muttering "I don't think it is the whole truth", he waved to nobody in particular, and walked hurriedly to the exit.

No one else made any comment. I sat watching Gaya's face. I didn't find it serene or relaxed.

Not even a single word had been exchanged amongst us on that dark moonless night after Gaya finished narrating her story. Rahman had felt that Gaya had not given a full accounting. I thought about the travails, and the life trajectories of Baby Mumtaz starting with that ominous night in the newborn nursery which she would have no memory of. And I kept wondering what all memo-

ries and experiences she would have gathered during the ensuing days, months, years, and decades of her life. Noor would certainly have lots to remember and recapitulate; moreover, the country hadn't become a better place for the baby Noors after a quarter century, I realized.

I had been the last one to leave. As I was dragging my leaden feet while keeping my cloudy and dazed head straight up and tried to exit the gate, I heard footsteps behind me and a muffled cry, "Preeeteesh". I turned back to see a teary-eyed Gaya walking towards me. "I want to talk to you", she said. The restaurant front porch was mostly dark. A dim ceiling light illuminated a bench on one side. We walked towards the bench and sat there. My heart started racing. "I am extremely sorry; I want you to forgive me", Gaya said abruptly. I looked into her eyes. Tears were still streaming down her face. Wiping her eyes with the sleeves of her kameez, she looked straight into my eyes. I sat silent for a few seconds just staring at her. "I came to know later that day that both Baby Mumtaz and Baby Maria died. And I felt guilty and sad. I was in therapy for three years, my fellowship dragged on, but I finished somehow." Saying this Gaya continued to look at me. I didn't know what to tell her. I couldn't just say, "it's okay, time to move on". I was not in the mood for that. It wouldn't have been right anyway.

The ceiling light was gone. It was pitch dark now. Trying to make out her face I managed to say— "things happen and they do happen mostly for a cause, or for a reason. Baby Mumtaz is gone; Baby Maria would've died anyway as she was seriously sick and destined to pass. I feel I am not the right person to forgive you. I don't know if Rahman could or would, if you were to ask him. Remember, he was the first one to literally walk out in anger and anguish after you finished your tale." Gaya remained silent.

I pulled out my phone and switched on the torch pointing the beam at the floor revealing a complicated pattern of cracks in the tile which I thought was a reflection of the faultlines in most people's minds including mine. "Let me walk you to your room", I said. Gaya stood up like a robot responding to a verbal command. She seemed composed. I gave the phone light to Gaya. With the wobbly faint light bobbing ahead on the broken night terrain leading the way, Gaya and I walked a few steps behind and soon reached the front of her hotel. After a faint and hesitant exchange of *good-nights*, which we both knew we could not anticipate, I walked towards my room in a dizzy state. It had been a long dinner.

The Sun had set a few hours earlier and the moon had refused to come out of its hiding place. The only sound I could hear was the mewing of a cat from outside the window resembling the crying of a newborn baby. The cat continued to keep me awake deep into the night. I thought of Hippocrates. "Do no harm", he had said; that formed part of the professional oath we all had taken. But that was in the context of the practice of aggressive interventional medicine. But Gaya's actions were clearly ambiguous, motivated by hatred for a community, and possibly even criminal. 'Lies repeated by people in power taking on lives of their own, getting transformed into weaponized avatars, and instigating even physicians to harm newborn babies, and snuff out tender lives; this is a topsy-turvy world indeed', I thought, lying wide awake. Sleepless in bed, and struggling to somehow doze off, and shake off Gaya's descriptions of Baby Mumtaz's face, my grandma's story from my elementary school days wafted into my mind, like a long dream sequence.

On his eighth birthday the little boy emptied out his piggy bank, stuffed his shorts pockets with all of the rolled and folded currency notes and coins, and walked slowly towards the village market square, a few long blocks from his home. He had been there many times with his uncle, but this was the first time he was visiting all by himself, with his pockets bulging with coins and rupee notes. The market was already crowded; vendors were selling all sorts of things—handicrafts, candy, snacks, vegetables, fruits, toys. The boy bought some candy paying a few coins. Munching toffees, he first stopped before a street performer. A throng of people had already gathered to watch his *show and tell*.

The performer looked to be in his forties. He was wearing white canvas shoes, white pajamas soiled in places, a brown kurta, and an orange cap which protected his head, and part of his face from the morning Sun. He also had an old-looking watch tied with a black leather strap, creased, and crumbled in places, on his left wrist. The man would look at the watch from time to time, to what purpose, the boy could never comprehend.

He looked big and impressive in a six-foot frame with a large head, big protruding eyes, bushy eyebrows, and a prominent nose shaped like a parrot's beak, with a thick mustache with streaks of gray flowing over his upper lip. His elephantine ears were pierced, with a gold ring dangling from each ear. On his kurta, where his left breast pocket should have been, was written in big bold letters the name GAMA in Hindi. He probably weighed north of two hundred and fifty pounds, and looked like a giant in the village square. 'If he had a *gadha* in his hand, he would have looked like Bhima', the boy thought.

Gama moved a big biscuit tin with a capacity of about fifty liters and positioned it in front of him. He opened the lid with a folding pocket knife which he pulled out of his side kurta pocket. Digging both of his large hands inside the opening, he fished out the tip of a thick rope, and pulled it up a couple of feet. Strangely, the rope stood vertically erect like a stick or a cricket stump. Gama then attached a metal hook to its tip and proceeded to dangle a fresh carrot from the hook. He then retrieved a small wire-bucket with a handle, placed what looked like a small hen's egg inside, and tied the bucket handle with a string to the *rope-stick*.

Left-right-left; with a synchronized movement of both his hands Gama pulled up the rope. Amazingly, it went vertically straight up like a pole to a height of twelve to fifteen feet. He swatted the "rope-pole" at the bottom near the tin opening a couple of times with his right hand. The pole jerked and oscillated without gyrating, bending, or swaying much from its vertical posture.

Gama opened a wicker basket and let out a snow-white rabbit which jumped onto the tin and started scrambling up the pole. It reached the top, and began nibbling at the carrot. Once it had its fill, having finished about two-thirds of the carrot, it scurried down and rested on the edge of the tin. Gama lifted the bunny up with his left hand and stroked its back with his right. Everyone clapped. Putting the rabbit back in the wicker basket he diligently opened a black wire-mesh basket. Gama announced in his hoarse commanding voice—everyone just stay-put where you are; stand your ground, but don't move—reminding the little boy of his elementary

school drill master barking his commands. A forest-green slithery snake uncoiled inside like a spring released from its tension and emerged slowly from the basket. Popping its head outside the basket rim, it slid down to the floor, climbed up the tin making a grating sound, and finally latched on to the rope-stick, moving up. Crawling all the way up, it put its head inside the wire bucket. With a quick jerky motion it reached the shell, opened its mouth wide, and slowly swallowed it whole, cracking the shell with a crunching sound while keeping the whole egg inside its now-ballooned mouth. To everyone's surprise, it then regurgitated the crumbled shell into the basket. The boy had never seen a snake feed like this before. To the relief and amazement of all, including the little boy, watching with trepidation, it slithered down and settled inside its wire basket feeling content. Only after Gama secured the lid did the crowd erupt with a big round of applause and shouts of Wow. Gama then took off his cap and went around, circling the gathering, asking for donations. The boy excitedly threw a couple of rupee notes inside his cap and clapped vigorously as he walked away. He then moved on to the pet corner where a wiry man, a small woman, and their little daughter were selling all kinds of small pets.

I twisted and turned in my bed. Tonight, sleep seemed to be avoiding me. My mind tuned back to grandma's dreamy tale.

A little lamb, bleating, ran forward, and stood in front of the boy. It looked up at the boy's face, met his eyes, kept on looking for some time, and then lowered its gaze. The boy bent down, stroked its head, nape of the neck, and its back gently with his right hand. The lamb felt good, and showed its happiness by wagging its stump of a tail and its behind. The boy instantly fell in love with the lamb and negotiated a price to purchase it. He emptied out his pockets and counted the coins and rupee notes. After paying for the little lamb he was left with only some change. With that he bought some fresh grass-feed which the lamb happily munched and swallowed without leaving behind even a single blade of grass. Walking the lamb holding a short leash, the little boy began trudging back towards his home.

At the next intersection he noticed two older boys staring at him and his pet with a mischievous look on their faces. One of them called out to the boy— "I like your baby wolf; you better be careful when it starts growing up or you'll get bitten bad". Both then laughed teasingly. The boy looked at his pet. He knew the boys were bluffing but a small seed of doubt had been planted in his mind.

The boy walked on, with the lamb hopping in step beside him. They would have walked a couple of more blocks when an old man with a thick mustache and long graying beard looking like a sage, standing in a corner sipping tea from an earthen cup, looked up and called out to him in a raspy voice— "Nice little dog you got there; it has a ferocious look on its young face; you better take care". The boy meekly muttered, "it is my pet little lamb". But his voice didn't carry much conviction now. He looked downcast, and his spirits were sagging. He continued walking in the direction of his home holding the leash.

Just one block from his home he saw a cute little girl, almost his age, smiling at him from a distance. His dipping spirits began to rise up, and he started to feel light and cheerful as though he was breathing in warm fragrant air. When he got closer, she began to giggle. He perked up, gathered some courage, and asked her— “What do you think of my little lamb? I just bought it from the central village market.” With a look of disbelief on her face, and adopting a mocking tone, she confronted him— “Are you kidding me? It’s a scary doggy, can’t you see? You better watch out, my dear boy.”

The boy didn’t say anything. He became thoughtful in his silence. He was now convinced he had made a grave mistake. He felt like he might faint any moment. He sat down on a corner bench and thought about his awkward situation. An idea cropped up in his mind. He would take his pet to the edge of the nearby forest, and let it loose there. He got up, and slowly walked the little animal in the direction of the forest.

At the edge of the forest, he found a trailhead with the trail extending deep inside the forest. Facing the trail which seemed to disappear under a dense growth of foliage and trees, the boy removed the leash pointing his pet to the trail, and a grass patch at the mouth of the green canopy cover where the trail seemed to go under. He patted the pet’s back, stared at its face, still confused, unsure of himself, and waved goodbye. Then he began to walk towards his home. With sadness in his heart, and an exhausted blanched look on his face, he trotted back slowly. After two or three minutes he thought he heard a bleating sound he recognized and turned his head in the direction of the sound. The lamb was running towards him with a scared look on its face, and behind it deep inside the trail was the silhouette of a big wolf. The boy lifted up his precious little lamb, and hurried home holding the pet close to his heart.

‘There will always be people trying to confuse you in this world by creating alternate *realities*’, I thought, staring at the ceiling. The ceiling fan above spun slowly, circulating much needed air. ‘Some will be creators of egregious lies, others will be messengers—amplifying them, carrying them around, and disseminating them widely, like birds and bees propagating pollen, or even more dangerous, similar to mosquitoes carrying parasites and viruses, spreading them around. I needed to survive somehow, somewhere, in the middle of all this’, I was left thinking.

‘There is the real world, and the make-believe-alt-world quilted with stereotypes and lies, created by people with agendas of their own. Caught between the two, the real and the camouflaged, spun with lies, we are required to navigate this complex web of life carefully, guided by our moral compass’, I thought. No work-arounds, or short-cuts here, but chance did seem to play hide and seek in guiding people’s lives. Before sleep slowly overcame me, I was left with the fuzzy images of Baby Mumtaz and her smile, Gama with his rope-trick, and the young boy’s predicament with his little pet lamb, now hovering in front of me, in a sequence of frames. The little boy appeared to be a younger version of me from my long-vanished childhood. There seemed to be visible and invisible threads tying together these images as though a hidden spider and a silkworm were at work behind the scenes spinning their

web of fine fibers and connecting them through space and time.

There seemed to emerge a plasma of sorts, with truth and falsehood mixed in, the boundary separating them smudged, stretched, fuzzy, and broken in places. I dozed off contemplating and seeking a way to tease out truth from falsehood, factual from the make-believe world, and reality from illusion. I knew it wasn't going to be easy. ❖

END TRANSMISSION