



EIMONA

G. B. PRABHAT

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India's leading literary critic and
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A novel by

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ArcheBooks Publishing

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For Kottoppa

Raconteur par excellence
Grandfather
Guru unconventional

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“Twenty-five years ago, acclaimed writers such as Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai presented the world with an India wrestling with the simultaneous formation and partition of its national and traditional identities. Today, G. B. Prabhat has provocatively expanded the purview of world literature with *Eimona*, a novel that depicts another psychic partition defining contemporary India. Between the nouveaux riches enraptured with the magic of the stock market and modern media, and those left behind by the new world economy, the reader glimpses a society all too willing to gate its communities and sell off its sense of history. Ultimately, *Eimona* is much more than an essential addition to Indian literature, as it illuminates a brave new world everyone must come to terms with. For we all come from *Eimona*.”

KEVIN CAROLLO

Professor of World Literature and Writing
Minnesota State University Moorhead

PRELUDE

“A lost boy has been located. His name is David Johnson. He says he is three and a half years old and claims he is American. He has blue eyes, is dressed in a yellow tee-shirt and blue jeans...”

The announcement was distinctly audible, though unobtrusive, over the soft, civilized bustle of the well-lit, lavish airport.

“I wonder whose child it is,” she remarked.

She should have been in her late twenties. Her early pregnancy had not started showing up on her

figure—the hourglass figure, which compelled heads to turn.

Her husband, tall and sporting a crew cut, was about the same age as she was. He had an arresting aquiline nose and a mild cleft chin. Under his left eye was a Z-shaped scar. The result of a childhood injury. Women invariably found him attractive, and remarked that the scar was a natural tattoo that complemented his perfect nose and cleft chin.

They wheeled their cart looking for their boarding gate.

For a while, he had noticed through the corner of his eye, two young men and a woman who had been following them at a discreet distance. They couldn't be called young men. They were boys turning into men. When he turned to look at them, they turned away. When they stopped at a bookshop, the two young men and the woman appeared to gaze at the watches in a nearby shop. When he visited the toilet, they stopped to lean on the railings to gaze below, while at least one of them was throwing a furtive glance at his wife.

“This is our gate,” he pointed out to her.

His wife looked up. “Yes. This is our gate,” she confirmed.

The board said: “No carts or trolleys beyond this point.”

He pushed the cart out of the way, and picked up their bags. Just when they were about to enter the gate, he heard somebody say, "Excuse me," and turned around.

The two young men and the woman stood with expectant smiles.

"Yes?" He looked at them quizzically.

One of the young men produced an autograph book and stretched it towards his wife. "Autograph please..."

He was puzzled. Why would somebody want an autograph from his wife?

"Why?" he asked.

The young men and the woman giggled.

"Why wouldn't somebody want the autograph of Nadira?" the other young man asked.

"What Nadira? She's my wife," he said annoyed. But he knew what they were getting at.

The young men hesitated, stared at each other, and then at the woman. "Your wife? Is she not Nadira?"

"Nadira who?" He continued his pretence.

"Nadira...the famous Indian actress...who also won the Miss World title."

This was not the first time somebody made this mistake. People were constantly mistaking his wife for Nadira.

He laughed. "Sorry, boys. Better luck next time."

Without waiting for their response, he turned around to enter the gate with an arm around her waist. Through the glass doors, they could see the young men and the woman arguing. Obviously they were trying to blame each other for the embarrassment.

Many years later he would remember this incident.

"A lost boy has been located. His name is David Johnson. He says he is three and a half years old and claims he is American..."

The announcement was aired again.

"I can't believe people lose their children, especially in such a well-organized place," she said shaking her head. "It's stupid."

"Yes, it's stupid," he agreed.

CHAPTER 1

This happened in Eimona.

Your experience with Eimona is so intimate that you are tempted to look it up on the world map. In vain.

You are not sure precisely where it is except that it seems to be everywhere: America, India, Europe and spreading to the rest of the world.

Its exact extent is unknown, though you know it is massive and expands inexorably every day. The annexation policy of Eimona doesn't seem to be defined by any one individual. It is almost as if it has a dif-fused consciousness.

Eimona

Eimona seems a bit like its only historic parallel: the Internet. Like it, everyday Eimona grows without a central authority that sanctions its expansionism.



Bharat was glued to the computer screen. The ticker tape indicating the stock prices on the National Stock Exchange showed prices rising every minute.

It would happen today!

Didn't take great analysis or statistics to know that. His hand was impatiently and unconsciously rolling the nameplate meant to be stood on his worktable. "Bharat – Senior Investment Manager" it said for the benefit of his clients.

He glanced sidelong at Mangal who was sitting at the next workstation. Mangal's knuckles that gripped the table were white. He knew that Mangal knew, too, that it would happen today.

The ticker tape showing the stock prices was on its next round. "FI – Rs. 555*," it said. That was the only share price that stood out for Bharat. FI – the stock exchange symbol of Fusion Investments. It was

* "Rs." designates Indian Rupees, which are approximately 45 to the US dollar in 2006, i.e. 555 Rupees is approximately \$12.33.

a tiny private American company when Mangal joined it. It was still small, but public in America when Bharat joined it five years ago. When Bharat and Mangal were both offered thousands of stock options every year, and their CEO explained seriously that stock options could make them rich, both Bharat and Mangal had to suppress the urge to say, “Oh, yeah? So you don’t want to hike our salary very much. Even though we earned the company fifty million dollars in profit last year.” Stock options, then, were an official corporate device of deception. A pacifier.

Then the dream took over.

FI, typified by smart investment managers like Bharat and Mangal, invested in software and information technology companies. And then FI went public in India. Suddenly the stock market zoomed. The daily variation in FI’s share price equaled Bharat’s salary of many years. He, Mangal, and many colleagues were officially rich.

Keshav, who never believed in stock options, had gifted many of his shares, with malicious intent, to his in-laws’ families when there were weddings and birthday parties. For his own relatives, he bought nice gifts like flasks and table lamps.

“It’s perfect comeuppance,” he lamented. “Who the hell thought our company shares would do so

well? My in-laws are rich. My own relatives? They own flasks and table lamps. Is there any way of getting the shares back?"

The computer screen now showed FI-Rs. 585. It was only a few minutes back that it was Rs. 555. Bharat mentally calculated his wealth gain in the last two minutes and laughed out aloud at the absurdly large amount. Startled, Mangal looked up briefly, but returned to his trance with his computer screen.

Without speaking a word with Mangal, Bharat was sure that the tingle in his spine was the tingle in Mangal's spine also. The screen dazzled him. He shifted his gaze to look out of the window at the sun-soaked streets of Madras. A Pizza Hut billboard announced exciting new Indian toppings, including spicy *paneer*. A street dog stretched itself and wandered listlessly, stopping occasionally to sniff at the food wrappers thrown into and around a garbage can. Unconsciously, Bharat downed the coffee from his mug.

It would happen today.



Pantu-thatha – Grandpa of the Pants – was an ironic sobriquet, a name Subbu's grandson, Bharat, gave him as a three year old boy. Under the inescap-

able Gandhian influence, early in his life, Subbu took to donning a white *khadar* shirt and a white south Indian *veshti*. Not *dhoti*, which he considered a North Indian condescension. He had never worn any kind of trousers or pants. He had opposed his Britain-bred boss to wear *veshti* to work. When he came so dressed under protest, his boss threatened him with dire consequences. “Then I will quit,” Subbu had retorted quietly, but indicating that he meant business. Being a man of conscience, his boss had given in, shaking his head in despair. The issue did not bother Subbu for the rest of his working life.

Many years later, Subbu belligerently turned down speaking engagements at fashionable clubs because they required him to wear trousers. “Fie upon you,” he would bellow. “The British have left. The colonial hangover persists. How can an Indian club turn away people for dressing in traditional Indian attire?”

Karna’s tale was one of Subbu’s favorites for narration, and Bharat’s favorite for listening. Bharat was singularly fascinated to hear that, unlike other babies, Karna was not born naked. He was born with *kavacha*, an armor almost integral to his body, and *kundalas*, protective earrings—both gifts from his resplendent father, Surya-the Sun God.

It was only when Bharat was a little over four

years old, he realized that the white shirt and white *veshti* were not a part of Subbu's physique, unlike Karna's *kavacha* and *kundalas*.

He asked his grandfather with a furrowed brow, "Thatha, why don't you wear pants?"

Subbu was reading the newspaper and replied distractedly, "I don't like pants."

"Why not?"

"Well, I think *veshti* is a lot better," he continued without taking his eyes off the newspaper.

"Oh," said the boy, as if he understood. But he continued to be thoughtful. He was bewildered how his grandfather felt more secure with a length of cloth loosely suspended around his waist like a towel than in a pair of trousers that clasped the waist reassuringly.

The clock struck eight and shook Subbu out of his reading. "Bharat, time to eat."

"Will you wear pants for me?" Bharat asked with his large doe-like eyes.

"What kind of idiocy is this? No, no," said Subbu, dismissing the question. "Time now to eat. Tomorrow's a working day."

"Will you wear pants for me? Just once? Please?" Bharat asked his question more earnestly.

"No." Subbu's hostility and finality surprised the boy, and himself too. "Come now to eat," he de-

manded, half expecting a yelp of protest.

Bharat did not protest loudly. A lone teardrop stood delicately poised on the brink of his eyelid, and then rolled inevitably down his cheek. He rose quietly to sit at the dining table.

In a Pavlovian response, Subbu walked into the kitchen to get the dishes. The lone tear seared through him. Had he ever spoken so harshly to Bharat after the death of his son and daughter-in-law? Not that he could recall. Their death had steeled him into the resolution of treating his grandson with the greatest possible kindness. No, it didn't include extravagant indulgence. He hadn't extended it to his son; he was not about to extend it to his grandson. But surely the boy didn't have to understand his private prejudices?

With his mind made up, he went to his wardrobe. He noticed that his hands trembled when he opened the doors. Undisturbed lay his son's trousers in sedate shades of gray and black and blue. The unmistakable odor of his son. The odor that is as distinct as a fingerprint. The odor that emanates from all objects used by a person long after he is gone.

Telling himself that he was doing this only to entertain his darling grandson, Subbu chose a pair of gray trousers and climbed into them clumsily. The

wardrobe door was hastily shut to prevent the odor from escaping. Irrational, of course, since the odor had stayed for years after his son's death. His inserted *khadar* shirt stuck out of the trousers awkwardly. In spite of his animosity for the two-legged attire, he curiously stared at his image in the mirror.

"Ta-da-ing..." he made his appearance in the dining room, mocking the background music that accompanied dramatic announcements in Tamil movies.

Bharat let out a whoop of joy and surprise. With the child's instinctive genius for names, he shrieked "*Pantu-thatha, pantu-thatha.*"

Pantu-thatha—Grandpa of the Pants.

The name stuck even though Subbu never wore pants again. He failed to understand why he did not mind this moniker that possessed an object of distaste. Maybe it was because of his acute remorse at having been hostile to the boy. A sort of penitence. No, no. It was perhaps his sense of humor. Or the apathy of advanced age.

Then he became *pantu-thatha* to everybody. His friends, neighbors, all sorts of relatives, Bharat's friends, the corner store grocer, the neighborhood at large. Very few cousins and relatives of his age remembered him as Subbu. Of course, not a soul maybe would remember him as Subramanian. Even

to him, his full name represented only a fuzzy link with the past.

Later, when Bharat was a near adult, Subbu tried to introduce him to his father's smell. Bharat smelt the clothes and reported, "Smells of naphthalene balls. The trousers are fraying. Maybe you should get rid of them."

When Subbu stepped out to do his daily shopping that morning, a cosmic question was troubling him. The previous night, Maya, his great-granddaughter, had sought his assistance to complete her science assignment. She had just started her third standard and was overburdened with homework. How Subbu hated homework, tests and assignments which held young children indentured slaves of the educational system. When Maya thrust her notebook under his eyes, he couldn't help wondering how similar the gesture was to Bharat's. Not too long ago, he was helping Bharat with his science assignments. He found it hard to believe that he was helping Bharat's little daughter with her assignments too.

Her teacher had asked the students to figure out, with the help of elders at home, what caused waves and tides in oceans. With an imperfect recollection of his baccalaureate physics, Subbu explained the interaction of winds and waves, and how the moon's gravity affected tides. Maya did not understand grav-

ity. At some length, he taught her what gravity was.

When he was done, Maya pondered for a quiet, long minute—the way she pondered always. She lacked the impetuous responses of children, which was fine with Subbu, who had an aversion to pompously smart children with brimming, inane questions.

At the end of the long minute, she asked, “Why are there no waves in a lake? Or in a bucket of water. Don’t the winds and the moon’s gravity act on it too?”

That stopped him short.

Why, indeed? Why is there no wave in a bucket of water? Why can’t there be a storm in a teacup?

Subbu would turn eighty-four next month. Why had this question not troubled him till now? He was a little ashamed.

That morning, ever since he sent Maya to school, the question tortured him intensely, distracting his attention. But due to sheer force of habit, he unconsciously managed to navigate his way to the mall and to the grocery supermarket, *Foodmania*. They were very lucky to have a supermarket within walking distance of their apartment. Most others had to drive to complete their shopping. Subbu detested driving as much as he loved walking—even in the discouraging Madras weather. For most part of the day, he was

walking, outside the apartment or inside.

The question so engaged his mind that with the shopping list in his hand, he asked the first *Foodmania* helper he sighted, "Where can I find a storm in a teacup?"

The helper responded with a baffled, "Excuse me?"

Regaining his composure, Subbu asked, "Where can I find teacups, please?" He had no need for teacups but since his first question contained "teacups," his second question had to contain "teacups" to permit him a dignified recovery.

As he expected, the helper did not say, "Aisle 13," and walk away.

"What type, exactly, are you looking for?" he asked most kindly. Intrusive courtesy when you didn't want it.

"Never mind. I'll come back," said Subbu in a hurry to extricate himself.

After paying for his purchases, when he collected his bags and was about to leave, another helper, in a ridiculous orange uniform, with a plastic grin pasted on his face, looked Subbu in the eye and said, "Have a nice day."

The statement infuriated Subbu. It had become a world of words.

"Do you know me?" Subbu asked the helper.

The helper, who did not expect to have a conversation after chanting his customary greeting, stopped, a little startled. “Sir, were you talking to me?”

“Yes,” said Subbu, repeating, “Do you know me?”

“I am sorry, sir, but...” the helper stammered, searching Subbu’s face for some sign of familiarity. “No sir, I don’t think so.”

“Why then do you want me to have a nice day?”

Relieved at this question, the helper said, “It is *Foodmania*’s policy to greet customers this way.”

Wearing an innocent expression, Subbu continued, “If your company did not want you to greet customers this way, would you still?”

Not sure of the intentions of the silver-haired gent, dressed in white, the helper replied, “Maybe not. We say what the company policy asks us to say.”

“That means you say it like a robot. Without expression or feeling. You are paid to say it. Right?”

“Yes, sir...no, sir.” The helper wondered if the man was senile or mad. The old man’s firm posture, piercing expression, and studied casualness belied any such possibility.

“Is it yes or no? Do you really care whether I have a nice day or not?”

“Yes, sir. I care.”

The old man scratched his head. “How is *Foodma-*

nia doing?”

“Not too well, sir.”

“Have there been layoffs?”

“Yes, sir. Some.”

“Have some of your colleagues been laid off?” This last question of the old man perturbed the helper. What was he getting at? Was he a corporate spy or something?

Hesitantly, looking both ways, the helper answered, “Yes, sir. Many of my friends have been laid off.”

“Is there a chance that you’ll get laid off?”

“Yes...yes, sir. That can’t be ruled out under current conditions.”

“Let’s assume that you are laid off. You and I meet at the bus stop. Would you wish me ‘Have a nice day’?”

“N...No, sir,” the helper responded with greater uncertainty.

“I thought you just said you cared whether I had a nice day or not.”

“Sir, I do.” The helper’s professional earnestness was back.

“Then you must care, whether you are employed by *Foodmania* or not.”

“Sir, but it is our company policy to greet you that way.”

“Oh, then you are a paid robot. You don’t really care.”

The helper began to protest once more.

When Subbu was done with the helper, he walked away licking his lips like a lion after it has demolished its prey.

The automatic doors of *Foodmania* swished open to let him outside. Just then he heard a loud, cheerful greeting from another helper near the next door, “Have a great weekend.”

The helper wondered why the old man, instead of proceeding outside, started heading towards him.



Indu had the air of a rambunctious horse under restraint. It did not help this image that she wore her hair, almost invariably, in the form of a ponytail. She had good taste and was always dressed nattily in western clothes, though her equal opportunity employer permitted Indian clothes. “As long as you have something on,” her company CEO would remark, and everybody would laugh obligingly at the boss’s joke that stank with staleness. She was impatient and restless with everybody and with herself. A trait that had earned her widespread popularity with her bosses, the respect and awe of her peers, and the

ambivalence of those who worked under her. When something did not get done, particularly if it was elementary, her restlessness suggested a racehorse kicking its feet, raring to go.

Many did not know her precise age, though they knew she was very young. Not too long ago, she had joined Paragon Software as a graduate programmer trainee. With lightning speed she had risen to become the youngest vice-president. She managed complex computer programming projects for customers all over the world.

When she was not reading computer-programming books, she was reading or re-reading Sidney Sheldon novels. Somebody commented that it was old-fashioned to read Sidney Sheldon. It didn't matter. For her Sheldon's heroines were an addiction.

Her office had an anteroom with a bed and a wardrobe. When she had to put in long hours, she would shower in the office, change, and be ready for the next round. She would go to bed around midnight and be up again at 3:00 AM.

Her colleagues, who were forced to stay back, cursed her. "Stinking armpits don't increase programming productivity," one of her meek male colleagues remarked once. "Madam enjoys a bed and a wardrobe and access to executive showers. It's okay for her to stay back. What about me? Don't I need a

wash?”

When another colleague offered to represent this grievance to Indu, the meek one was petrified. How foolishly he had provided others a perennial taunting opportunity! Indu’s irascibility was legendary. Nobody messed around with her. Men found her irresistibly attractive, but nobody made passes. Her one-liner insults, while evaluating her team’s professional work, had paralyzed people for weeks. Since she punished herself equally and was technically competent, the others grudgingly tolerated her tough treatment. “Madam” was married, but little was known about her husband. His plight was the subject of much speculation. The office was rife with ribaldry about “positions.”

Indu married Bharat nine years ago. Both were twenty-seven at the time. They met when Bharat, as a representative of Fusion Investments, had visited Paragon Software. Bharat’s company was planning to invest in Paragon. His boss had asked him to visit Paragon to check out the quality of management. Even though she was not a vice-president then, because of her confidence and presentability, Indu was asked to manage many of the presentations to Bharat and his team. On returning from these meetings, Bharat recommended Paragon very favorably to his boss. Fusion became the largest shareholder of Para-

gon.

Thinking about this later, Bharat had often wondered whether the extremely positive image of Paragon that he went away with was an exaggerated impression created by the young woman with a perfect figure. That figure was firmly etched in his mind, not so much the figures the woman, her CEO, and the rest of their team presented.

Indu also grew interested in the young man from Fusion Investments. He was not only good looking, he was also intelligent. More importantly, he was a winner. And best of all, she could gather, he was one his firm's most successful investment managers—and, very well compensated.

Even in the slickly managed presentations, Indu could not help revealing her volatile temper. They were tiny slivers, but unmistakable. Bharat became cautious. Though the young woman appeared interested in him, he could not summon up the courage to ask her out. His doubt, his cursed doubt, which was the leitmotif of his life, stopped him from inquiring. Luckily for him, the young woman took the first step.

With a sense of joy, Indu realized that the young man from Fusion had a very desirable trait. For all his strengths, he was meek. That's exactly how she wanted it. She hadn't been too sure until then

whether good looks, razor-sharp intelligence, meekness at authority, and a capitulating instinct could all be part of one package. Bharat confirmed that such a package existed.

Reluctantly, many years into her marriage, Indu had to admit that her marriage was an extension of her office life. She certainly did not enjoy the company of idiot slaves. Just as she required resourceful but servile subordinates at office, she had subliminally desired a meek but intelligent husband. She ran her home affairs with the same iron hand with which she ran her office. Just as easily as she could be filled with certainty and confidence, her husband could be filled with doubt.

Much ahead of Bharat receiving compensation through stock options, Indu did likewise from her company. Paragon Software did very well in its international business. Like Bharat, she became rich beyond her expectations, though unlike Bharat, she had determined to become rich, to win. Stock options and her status were wins at the office, her marriage to Bharat and her almost complete control over their daughter Maya were her wins at home.

Like Bharat, she, too, was waiting for it to happen. But her expectation was filled with a cool certitude, unlike Bharat's expectation, which was marked by nail-biting anxiety. At well-timed inter-

vals, she was taking a look at share prices. Paragon was at Rs. 155; fifteen minutes before it had been at Rs. 140.

Her heart rhythm was not varying with the stock price as Bharat's was.

She was sure.

It would happen today.



Subbu had married early. His son, Krishnan, was born when he was in his early twenties. Immediately, Subbu vowed to his wife, Jaya, that they would have no more children. He was just waiting for a safe delivery and a healthy child.

"I want to give all I have to just this one boy," he had explained.

There was no need to explain. Jaya understood him on cue, and was moved by the remarkable dedication of the young father. Instantly, her desire to have any more children dried up. Until she died, her world did not extend beyond her husband and son.

Subbu gave everything of himself to Krishnan. Not in an indulgent way. In fact, his expression of affection was understated. Many times, he was left wondering if he was being communicative enough. His government job gave him the luxury of coming

home early on working days, and enjoying pressure-free weekends. He taught the boy his school lessons only when Krishnan came to him with doubts, but took charge of initiating him into history and economics, literature and art.

Subbu's favorite pastime became taking the boy to the public library or to music concerts. It was anathema to him to feed Krishnan with predigested knowledge. He believed in providing broad direction and planting a few clues. He determined way-stations in the boy's journey of learning, but allowed the boy to beat his own path between way-stations. Eventually, the boy would determine his destination and the new way-stations.

Subbu actively recommended *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to Krishnan. After reading the story, the boy asked, "Appa, what does one learn? What's the meaning?"

"Everything you need to know is in the story. I don't have to tell you anything."

"But I didn't understand it. Does that mean we shouldn't be immoral?"

"Maybe," said Subbu, not giving in.

"But then Dorian Gray's sins don't affect him when he lives. They get him only after he dies. Right? So maybe it's okay to sin?"

"Maybe."

“Why don’t you tell me for sure?” little Krishnan demanded angrily.

“I don’t know for sure.”

“You are a grown-up. You must know,” insisted Krishnan.

Subbu gave him a cryptic smile for a reply.

Krishnan’s intellect was precocious, but his emotions were a child’s. “You don’t want to tell me.” He stomped out of the room angrily, turning away to hide his tears of frustration.

Anybody who saw Krishnan’s professorial demeanor when he was barely eight would not have been surprised that, later, he became a professor of economics. A professor who constantly disproved that economics was a dismal science. His manner was quiet. He conspicuously lacked the high decibel monotone that teachers were either born with or very assiduously cultivated. His lectures were scintillating and generously sprinkled with humor. At the height of humor, his voice dropped so much that students leaned forward, anxious not to miss the best parts. He adopted the technique of telling tales that personalized impersonal economic theories like capitalism, free markets, and mercantilism. Instead of cutting economics classes, which was the universal student routine, students thronged to attend his classes.

When Krishnan fell in love with Sharada, a fellow professor who taught history, it was a most natural act. If Krishnan had been a woman, he would have been Sharada. She had the same scholarly, inquiring mind, the same sharp sense of humor, the same quiet manner. In the first year of their marriage, their home had hardly any noise of inhabitation. Each would be stuck to his or her favorite chair with a book. Conversations were low-pitched and the lighting was soft.

When Sharada became pregnant, Subbu was elated. While he had relished bringing up Krishnan, he did not have the luxury of enjoying Krishnan's company without the strain of chores. Plus there was the distance between man and son that cannot be shrunk, but magically shrinks between man and grandchild.

Every morning he woke up with a lurch of his heart looking forward to the arrival of his grandchild. He was waiting to minister to its every need when Sharada resumed work. But Sharada would have none of it. She was determined to look after the baby, and resigned from her job two months before her due date.

Subbu was a little disappointed that he could not monopolize his grandchild, but was grateful that the child would get a full share of its mother's love. Later

in his life, he regretted that he so fervently wished to take care of the child. Maybe that was why it was granted.

He distinctly recalled a day when Bharat, nearly six months old, was playing with his favorite teddy bear while Sharada watched with shining eyes. Krishnan was lounging in his chair poring over *The Brothers Karamazov*, something he had been longing to read for a long time, but had never managed to. Subbu was gazing at the newspaper without reading anything. His mind was taking in the scene and contrasting it with the clamor outside.

Krishnan and Sharada, genuinely affectionate, artistic, understated and phlegmatic—conspicuously incongruous with the world outside. So incongruous that they had to depart early.



“Excuse me, Bharat. Do you have a minute?”

“No,” growled Bharat like a sage whose penance had been interrupted. “Leave me alone for now.”

Now FI’s share price was Rs. 600. A short distance to go.

In anticipation, he had retrieved the phone number of Indu on his phone so that he could just press the “Call” button when it happened.

He briefly glanced at Mangal. Gentle beads of sweat had broken out on Mangal's brow. The air-conditioning thermometer indicated 19 degrees centigrade. Unobtrusively, Bharat pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his brow just in case the sweat was showing.

The price of FI dropped to Rs. 595.

"Oh, come on," Bharat said. Mangal gave him a meaningful look.

A presence behind him made Bharat turn around. It was Keshav.

"Not bad, *yaar*, for you guys. Any idea how I can get my shares back?"

"Keshav, beat it," Bharat said menacingly.

"Okay, *yaar*. Take it easy," said Keshav and walked away.

After staying for the five longest minutes at Rs. 595, the price of FI started inching up: 600, 607, 608...609, 610, 611...

Bharat realized that he had been drinking water indiscriminately while waiting for it to happen. His kidneys were bursting. He pressed one hand on his crotch as if to silence it.

611...612.

It had happened!

Simultaneously, Bharat and Mangal thumped the table and said, "Yes!"

Yes. Rs. 612 was the stuff that dreams were made of.

It had happened!

Both he and Mangal were now millionaires. Not rupee millionaires, which was like yen millionaires. They were full-blooded, US dollar millionaires. The stock options that they had derided so much, had been so skeptical about, that Keshav had thoughtlessly distributed to his in-laws, had now made them millionaires.

Indu had to be told. As he reached out to press the “Call” button on his phone, it startled him ringing shrilly.

“Hello,” said Indu from the other end.

“Indu...” Bharat was gasping. “It...”

“...happened.” Indu completed helpfully.

“Yes.”

“So looks like you were watching my company’s share price quite closely.”

Bharat didn’t get it for a moment. He had not been watching the Paragon stock price. It sank into him slowly.

“Indu...really?”

“What do you mean? So you were watching only *your* company’s price, weren’t you? I was watching both.”

“I am sorry,” he said, a little guiltily.

When he put down the phone, he couldn't help emitting a low whistle. His indignant kidneys said, "Hello?"

Indu was also a US dollar millionaire. On her stock options.



With bags slung from both arms, Subbu paused at the foot of the staircase. Though their apartment was on the fourth floor, unlike Bharat and Indu and the rest of the occupants, Subbu never used the elevator except when Maya wanted to amuse herself. She was still thrilled by the prospect of going up an elevator. The elevator was a play object for her. Just when they got to their floor, she would command it to go down. Up and down a few times. Subbu would indulge her so long as no one appeared to be waiting. After a few times, he would keep the "door open" button pressed, and would order her to leave. When there were other people, she would politely press the "door open" button for everybody to get in, sweetly ask for the floor numbers, shield the switch panel with her body lest somebody should press the buttons, press each floor button in order, blush for every "thank you" that was said, and say a polite "bye, bye" to somebody that might be left in the elevator when she exited.

To her the elevator was a ceaseless wonder. To Subbu, every elevator experience with her was a ceaseless wonder.

He took in the height of the first flight of steps, braced himself, and ran up the stairs, skipping every alternate step. Occasionally, the Coiffured Man, who lived in the apartment above theirs, took the stairs, and saw him doing it. Unhesitatingly he said, "Wow!"

Even as he inserted the key, Subbu knew Aaya was home. She had gone to her village for the weekend. Her slippers were outside, near the doormat. The sound of running water was unmistakable, as were the other intimations of the woman at work.

As he entered, he perfunctorily called out, "Aaya."

"Here, *pantu-thatha*," she called out to confirm it was she.

"Okay. Carry on."

Aaya must be between sixty and sixty-five now, Subbu calculated. He had brought her from his village as a ten year old girl to help at home when Krishnan arrived. She helped with the household work, barely a half-adult herself, and had stayed with them ever since. Jaya jealously looked after all of Krishnan's needs leaving only the chores to Aaya. Subbu was certain that Aaya wistfully desired the duty of looking after the child. Perhaps she shouldn't

have been so wistful; perhaps his wishes had a misplaced intensity.

After the accident, when Subbu wasn't tending to Bharat, it was Aaya. And now she looked after Maya and the home. Her real name, Meenakshi, had disappeared from all records except Subbu's memory. She used to call him "*saar*" without complete conviction, until Bharat named him "*pantu-thattha*." She clung on to it as did Subbu and the others, to "Aaya."

Many times, in the presence of guests, Subbu had embarrassed Indu by introducing Aaya as "Aaya." Indu would suppress her rage with a smile when only her lips smiled without the cooperation of her eyes, and explain, "Nanny, you know." She had considered the possibility of "governess" and quickly dismissed it as absurdly regal.

Once later on, flicking the hair from her eyes, she demanded, "Why don't you introduce her as the nanny, or better still, as the *au pair*?"

Subbu rolled the word on his tongue and said, "You know, a name must fit a personality. *Au pair*? No good. Nanny? Worse. Aaya is good."

Knowing this was an unproductive battle, initially Indu stuck to her "*au pair*" and Subbu to his "Aaya." Maya, of course, called her "Aaya." She had a compelling reason. "Aaya" rhymed better with "Maya" than "nanny" or "*au pair*" did, and that was

that. Bharat called her “Aaya” loudly, with affection and authority, when Indu was absent. But when Indu was around, he called her, “Aaya” timidly, and consciously limited the need to address Aaya. Indu herself was forced to call her “Aaya” when guests were not around because she could not think of any other name. Besides, Aaya was beyond the age when she would respond to a new name. Her partial deafness was tuned to responding to Aaya, and not to any other name. Aaya lived in mortal terror of Indu.

“Aaya, water...” Before Subbu could finish hollering, Aaya had appeared with a glass of water. This was routine. Shopping at *Foodmania* carefully including a choice of Post cereals, his breakfast favorite. A run up the stairs. Panting for breath. Flopping into the sofa. A drink of water. And a second round of detailed reading of the newspaper after the cursory first round with morning coffee.

Something disturbed his concentration. He had forgotten a tiny bit of his routine. Controlling his rising chagrin at himself for forgetting it—how many times must a man disturb himself before he can settle down to the day’s papers—he walked to the niche on the wall near the shoe cabinet, reached into it and shut off the central air-conditioning. In a quick stride, he was opening the windows one after another, his impatience evident in the windows

banging open.

With matching impatience, when Indu returned home, she would replay the sequence in reverse. After shoving her shoes into the closet, she would slap the air-conditioning switch on, and go about shutting the windows one after another. She couldn't imagine, why in such hot and humid weather, anybody would deny himself the elementary comfort of air-conditioning.

Even with pollution reaching record levels in Madras, Subbu longed for fresh, natural air, not the recirculated, stale air-conditioned air. Besides, on the fourth floor, pollution wasn't as bad as on the ground floor. The stale air-conditioned air and the perpetually closed windows were not the only things that Subbu disliked about this apartment: The Home. Maya had named it The Home to distinguish it from their weekend beachside apartment, the Second Home. The Home depressed him in many ways. He did not like the antiseptic decor created from pre-assembled pieces, the decor that was in virtually every apartment in the block, the duplex organization, the smell of the room freshener which had become permanent on repeated use, and the neighbors.

The part of the duplex level that annoyed him the most was the bedroom section. Maya had a bedroom

to herself. Aaya slept in the passage just outside Maya's bedroom. Next to Maya's room was his bedroom. Across the passage were two bedrooms, one for Indu, and one for Bharat. When Indu moved in and made this demand, Subbu was incredulous, but did not express it. Bharat fumbled, but quickly agreed. A child learns about matrimony from the marriage it observes most intimately—its parents'. Bharat was significantly disadvantaged in this respect. In this and in other marital matters later, his understanding stemmed from consultation with friends or from Indu's proposals.

"I want my space," Indu had emphatically declared. Her bedroom had a corner patio and a wardrobe. She was the only person who had keys to the different drawers and would not brook even Bharat wandering about her bedroom too often without purpose. She was fair to let Bharat have his patio and wardrobe in his bedroom.

A door connected their bedrooms. It appeared locked every time Subbu had a passing glance at it. Maybe it was sensitized to hormone levels and opened automatically when the hormones surged. Where did this mischievous thought come from? Must be the insidious influence of early Sean Connery James Bond movies.

In general, Subbu hated apartments.

The Second Home was an apartment too, but he tolerated it. Because it was built on special soil. The soil on which Subbu's house originally stood.

He had a sprinkling of the articles of Krishnan, Sharada and Jaya in both the apartments. That's about the only thing that helped his transition from independent house to apartment. These articles—Krishnan's clothes here, Sharada's clothes in the Second Home, his son's cherished book collection here, Jaya's bronze statuette supposedly dating to the Chola period in the Second Home—were his few but strong roots in a rootless apartment existence.

After much deliberation, he had decided to leave the family photograph—his greatest treasure, his guarantor of sanity—in the Second Home. Krishnan and Sharada would smile from it. Their eyes radiated sublime, inexhaustible serenity. Bharat, with a mop of curly hair and sitting on his father, would look at him from a peculiar angle (he had been torn between a moving spider on the wall and the photographer's call, "Readyyyy...smile."). Even though he visited the Second Home only during weekends, Subbu decided the photograph belonged more there than here. That's where Krishnan, Sharada and Jaya belonged.

The most striking part of the photograph was his wife, Jaya. Somehow she managed to convey her great but undemonstrative compassion for her lim-

ited, yet infinite, world of her family. It was the only surviving image on paper of her. She was very photography-shy. He could still feel her wriggling against him in the few long seconds when the photographer was peering into the camera to make fine adjustments.

Out of view, he had to squeeze her hand in admonition. She grimaced for a second in pain, and then became photography-ready as best as she could.



When Bharat came that evening and broke the news, he was visibly excited. His fair face was suffused with a red blush. He was hardly able to shut his smile. There were many raucous phone calls. He called Mangal at least thrice. He had spent the whole day with him. What world-changing events happened between then and the ride home that he had to call him thrice, Subbu wondered.

Even Indu's armor of composure showed chinks. She did not like to expose them, so hers was repressed gloating. When Bharat exuberantly suggested that they go out for dinner with friends, Indu accepted dinner outside but ruled out going with friends. "Just you and me."

When Subbu's own marriage was contemplated

long ago, his mother reported that during the pre-marriage discussions, the whisper doing the rounds in the bride's family was that the bridegroom had a salary of four hundred rupees. A salary that would assure the couple later of a reasonably affluent life.

The numbers that Bharat and Indu were discussing had so many zeroes and so many currencies that Subbu was beyond caring. He wondered if he could write correctly such large numbers.

"*Pantu-thatha*, can you take care of Maya this evening? Indu and I want to go out to eat," Bharat implored.

Quite unnecessary, Subbu thought, the imploring part. What else did he have to do? Maya, uncomprehending, had her left hand index finger stuck into her mouth, as ever. It gave the impression that her hand, hanging limply, was suspended from the mouth by her index finger. Subbu was desperately hushing her to drop her hand since this irritated Bharat. Because it irritated Indu. But Bharat was too distracted.

"Of course, I will take care of her."

"Can I go, too?" Maya asked.

"Not today, darling. Some other day. That's a promise," Indu responded.

Not even waiting for her to complete her reply, Maya ran away calling out "Aaya..." She didn't ex-

pect her mother to say “yes”, but nobody should blame her that she didn’t ask.

When they were leaving, Subbu asked anxiously more than once whether they had taken the keys to the apartment. Bharat was peeved by the repeated question, but Subbu had his reasons. The one thing he would never give up was his sleep. He had to sleep at 9:30 PM, a half-hour after Maya went to sleep, and get up at 4:30 in the morning for his walk. He knew Bharat and Indu would now return only in the wee hours of the morning.

This time, however, they returned at the stroke of midnight. Slightly drunk, Bharat lurched to switch on the light of his bedroom. Indu had gone into her bedroom. He stood staring at the connecting door for a long moment. Then, muttering something, clumsily he climbed into his bedclothes and switched off the light.

The connecting door opened. Indu stood silhouetted. She knew Bharat would have been staring expectantly at the door, willing it to open. Permission was now granted.

Blowing whisky fumes into each other’s faces, they made violent love.

He, thinking of his million.

She, thinking of her million.

CHAPTER 2

Early that morning, when he turned over, Subbu knew he had lost sleep. The luminous arms of the timepiece (a winding piece, made in China, bought in the early 1960's) showed 4:15. It was a little earlier than usual. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep. He brushed his teeth for longer than usual since he had earned fifteen more minutes of life that day, lingering on some teeth with the wistful thought of removing the steadfast betel-nut stains.

They were a magnificent set, his teeth. He had a full mouth. There were betel-nut stains, and one tooth was a bit chipped. During his yearly prophy-

lactic visit to the dentist, she would remark, "Good as ever." He strongly believed that betel-nut chewing, the only supposed bad habit that he had acquired during the early years, had turned out to be his savior. People maligned the habit in the 1960's and 1970's since they suspected betel-nut caused severe anemia among other things. However, Subbu had chosen the sensuous pleasure of the sheer piquant taste of betel-nut over the suspected damage it would cause. Later, it turned out that many of the claims were spurious. His constant chewing had ensured a sturdy dental set-up. Except for the one time when a tooth chipped, he had had no other problem.

He stepped into the passage and stood for a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He could see the huddled form of Aaya in the corner. The passage resounded with her snoring. A most intriguing phenomenon. How could one's ears be insensitive to such a deafening noise that arose from another organ within a few inches proximity? Why doesn't a person wake up due to his snoring, while he could wake up by a small shuffling movement that somebody else caused? At least now she was partially deaf (perhaps her snoring had caused her deafness). But she hadn't been disturbed by her snoring, even when her hearing had been perfect. During those days, however, she would wake up if he made the smallest noise.

Since he still had a few minutes to start his walk, he indulged in his favorite pastime, something that he never tired of. His feet were socks-clad in preparation for walking. He could silently sidestep Aaya. Step after step, he walked into Maya's bedroom. The room was at the end of the corridor, and a soft light drifted in through the blinds. The night lamp and the skylight together lit up Maya's face as she slept facing the ceiling.

He sat beside her on the bed and watched her sleep. The gentle flaring of the nostrils, the up-and-down movement of her chest, and her near transparent eyelids. This staring stupor he acquired ever since Maya had been two months old and Indu had to return to work. How the attractiveness of a baby increased with the viewer's age! He was intrigued when his son was born. He was fascinated by his grandson, Bharat, but was constantly distracted by the general challenges of life then. But when his great-granddaughter was born, she held him in a complete, magical thrall. It could be because she came as an unencumbered bundle of joy. Or because she was a great-granddaughter and, therefore, a rare privilege. Or because she was a girl, tender, and so different from the two boy babies, Krishnan and Bharat, he had known closely.

When he laid Maya on her bed, as a two month

old baby, after lulling her to sleep on his lap, he would go into the staring stupor that he was in now. The baby would lie with both its hands in the “hands-up” position, clenched fists possessively enclosing a sweet nothing each, with a beatific look incongruous with that position. The transparent eyelids, the almost imperceptible rise and fall of the soft belly, and the baby fragrance of Johnson’s baby powder and Bengal gram flour would send him into a frenzy of affection. While every little thing about her was perfect, the most perfect part was the tiny fingernails. It was a hard fought contest between the luxuriant eyelashes and the fingernails. Often he had opened the tiny clenched hands to marvel at nature’s best work. He would then have to exercise great restraint to smother her with kisses lest she should wake up. As he had to, now.

The day Maya was born, Subbu had been filled with terror. What if she was named one of the tongue-twisters of the New Economy: Vrimnolika, Karnishta or Avnita? The general principle of naming now seemed to be that the rarer and more unpronounceable the name, the better. At one time, Krishna and Rama competed with Mohammed and Chang for the most used names in the world. Mohammed and Chang were still going strong; Krishna and Rama did not figure in the race at all. It was ages

since he had met a young man called Krishna or Rama or a young woman called Uma or Geetha.

He had resolved to fight Indu if she chose a difficult name. He had been preparing for the argument, when Bharat came out of the hospital ward and announced, "*Pantu-thatha*, we have chosen a name for the baby."

Tense, Subbu asked, "What?"

Hesitantly, anticipating to mediate a fight between *pantu-thatha* and Indu, Bharat said, "Indu wants to name her Maya."

Subbu heaved a sigh of relief. Indu wants to name her Maya.

How else should it have been?

Maya. The great illusion that is life. The ultimate legerdemain.

For a moment Subbu was angered that his beautiful great-granddaughter, so real and so innocent, should be so maligned as an illusion. Yet in the next moment, the grandeur of the name struck him. Its greatness, its ability to mock at the meaningless world of self-important humans. Also, the relief of being spared from a tongue-twister. Plus, if you wanted to call out "Mayaaaa..." the name had an infinitely long syllable at its end.

Subbu heaved a second sigh of relief.

"*Pantu-thatha*, what do you think?"

“I think it’s a wonderful name.”

It was Bharat who now heaved a sigh of relief.

Maya turned eight last month. She was an eight year old angel.

For a while now Indu had been saying that Maya had “problems”—a description Subbu detested and despised. He quarreled with Indu whenever she said this. How could angels have problems? Somebody had to just take a look at her now. Problems?

Suppressing the temptation to somehow wake her up by touching her, he stepped out of her room, and tiptoed down to the shoe closet. Wearing his walking shoes, he shut the door gently behind him.



When Subbu left home, the neighborhood showed no signs of waking up. It was too early for Madras to wake up. Some years ago, the morning activities would have begun. The milk-distribution boy would be pedaling his tricycle furiously to deposit one or two wet packets of milk, wet from freezing overnight, at every doorstep. He would be greeted by barking dogs in the independent houses. He would regard them with the scorn of familiarity. In his footsteps would follow the newspaper man, who would reach into his carrier, scroll the newspa-

per, take careful aim and jettison it towards the doorstep. He would suffer a minor loss of balance at the end of this target shooting, but would recover quickly. The swing of his bicycle, after momentarily losing balance, was a small cost to pay for not having to get down each time. Doors would be opening and closing for commuters to far off factory locations to take an early morning bus or train. Some remaining vestiges of the Old World would be drawing the *kolam* well before the reddish orange of dawn started washing over the sky. This generation would not remember *kolam* as the art of creating intricate patterns on the floor with rice flour. That was then.

Now during his walking hours, although the newspaper man and the milk boy reported for work, Madras slept. The newspaper man reported a significant decline in business.

“Who wants to read a paper newspaper?” he lamented. “Everybody reads on a computer.”

Now five in the morning was too early for most people to stir. Except for the young fitness freaks and the odd walkers, who came out only when he returned, most others woke up around seven. All of them came back late on working days, and had to catch up on their sleep. And who commuted using public transport anymore? Everybody had a car, maybe two. Waking up late, they could still report

on time. Immediately upon getting up, they threw themselves into a whirlpool of activity. The quiet apartment complex would transform into a bedlam of noise and confusion by seven thirty, only to become quiet and solemn by eight thirty, leaving little indication of the activity hysteria that gripped it a short while before.

Subbu carried a walking stick on his walks. He did not need one for walking support, just to protect himself against stray dogs that were particularly active at that hour. They wandered around in packs. Every summer, they dutifully increased their numbers by a factor of two or three. Within a few days, the pups grew as menacing as the adults and snapped at the heels of walkers without provocation. Some things about Madras hadn't changed.

When he returned home, swishing his walking stick through the air, some signs of life would begin to appear. The young fitness freaks were now out. They would be jogging or walking furiously without taking in the charm of the walk. Mostly it was people from his apartment complex or the neighboring apartment complex.

And then the dogs on leashes stepped out. They diligently took their owners on walks, straining on their leashes to smell something inside the bush while their owners used their feet as skidding brakes,

and cried an admonition, “Johnee...” Subbu had concluded that the pet dog’s response to anything vertical, such as a lamppost, was watering it. And it didn’t matter how many were in a row or how close they were to one another.

One of the regular walkers, with a huge Labrador and a small Chihuahua type, was a scientist named Praveen whose recent book on astrophysics had caused quite a stir. Leafing through the book in the local bookstore, Subbu was amused by the introduction of the writer on the book’s jacket: “Praveen lives in Madras with his wife, children and two dogs, Rob and Jack.” Wives and children didn’t have names any more. Dogs did. It was completely fair since the man had switched wives four times, had children of each of them, but hadn’t changed Rob and Jack during the period. Now, with Rob and Jack in tow, Praveen stepped out. Subbu crossed the road to avoid him.

Subbu’s apartment complex was filled with spinsters and bachelors. “Bachelors” and “spinsters” seemed anachronisms. Single men and women sounded a lot better. They were mostly young or pretending to be young—liberated single men and women who were programmed to “enjoy” life no matter what. “Enjoying” life bewildered Subbu. What exactly did it mean?

Aside from Bharat and Indu, he was aware of only

two married couples in the entire apartment complex of over a hundred apartments. Aaya reported that one of the couples had already separated. At one time there were more couples who had arrived married, but separated quickly thereafter. Some of them traded places with others in the same apartment complex.

Subbu's apartment neighbors had stopped him on the road and introduced themselves many times, but he felt they did not deserve particular names. His memory for names, particularly of people that he didn't care for, was poor. He didn't know whether this was the gentle intimation of senility or whether it was a deliberate forgetting. His references to the few people he cared to remember were mnemonics. The Coiffured Man who lived one floor above him was one of those up early. His hair, a towering six inches, reminded Subbu of Kramer on the television program *Seinfeld*. The Plastered Hair Man, a young man with premature baldness, had grown long strands of hair which he meticulously plastered over his bald pate, ear to ear. Who did he think he was fooling? When he gunned his green luxury car, a Linda convertible, to life, he would gingerly hold his pate with one hand. The Plastered Hair man was in the apartment diagonally below The Home.

If the Coiffured Man, the Plastered Hair Man and

the Pockmarked Man had exchanged their heads, he would have been completely unable to spot their bodies. They all had sculpted bodies and tight-fitting tee-shirts that revealed the pumped-up biceps and triceps. Bulging biceps and triceps had become the counterparts of the woman's cleavage and navel. It amused him sometimes that he conversed at some length with many of the apartment occupants on the most inconsequential topics, but they had not been curious to find out his name. And neither he, theirs.

At a distance he could see the Moon Woman. She lived in the apartment directly below his. She had closely cropped hair that she dyed black. Then her hair color would go through a waxing and waning phase from jet black to a black and dark ochre, then to a tortured black, orange and white, to completely white, reverting dramatically to jet black again. He didn't have to cross the road. The Moon Woman always kept to herself. "Good morning," she muttered before she zipped past.

As he climbed the stairs, he saw the Moon Woman's apartment door was open. She lived alone, and was now walking. He stood there for a second, his suspicion aroused. A moment later, the Coiffured Man stepped out. He was in his bedclothes. His hair was disheveled, making him more Coiffured than ever. Smoothing his hair and suppressing a yawn, he

slurred a “Good morning, uncle.” As he locked the apartment door shut, he called out, “Uncle, go ahead. I can’t run up with your speed.”

As Subbu inserted the key to his apartment, the opposite apartment door opened and the Plastered Man stepped out. Subbu knew that this apartment was the Stick Woman’s. The Plastered Man was in his bedclothes and his hair was more disheveled than the Coiffured Man’s. With a slightly sheepish grin, holding and smoothing his hair desperately, he greeted Subbu, “Hi, uncle.”

Subbu returned the greeting with a nod and let himself into The Home.



Doubt was central to Bharat’s existence.

Thinking back when he was a full adult, he realized that doubt had been his most domineering emotion even as a boy. When he performed onstage on school day in group dances, he would always act on cue looking at the others. Though he had memorized all the steps. During his early years, his strong-willed grandfather handled his doubts. He always felt secure when somebody thumped the table and told him, “That’s the way to go.” He felt absolutely sure that the questions bothering him must have

been bothering humanity for some time now. Surely there were right answers and wrong answers. Why did he have to do all the figuring out again?

He asked *Pantu-thatha* about this.

Pantu-thatha gave him an Irish proverb as the answer. “It doesn’t matter how tall your grandfather was. You have to do all your growing up by yourself.” To Subbu that was only recasting his belief about way-stations and destinations.

When Bharat grew up, his doubt grew up with him. Where *pantu-thatha* was an expert, his strong opinions helped Bharat make up his mind. But when his grandfather professed ignorance or wasn’t interested, his doubt tortured him. In matters big and small.

When he was in the seventh grade, his class was to go for an excursion to Bangalore. He asked *pantu-thatha* who promptly gave him the reply he dreaded. “It’s your choice.”

The owl-eyed English teacher, with a pad of paper in his hands, had asked him sternly, “So are you going or not?”

Bharat had fidgeted with his hands in his pockets for a full two minutes. It would of course be exciting to go, screaming and joking with his friends. But if he did, he would have to miss the entire cricket match on TV.

“Do you want to go?” This time the teacher’s voice had a rasp.

Cricket match or excursion?

“Sir, I...I don’t know. I can’t make up my mind.”

“You Buridan’s ass,” the teacher cursed sibilantly.

Bharat slunk away and tried looking up Buridan’s ass in reference books. At last, he spotted it in an extended language dictionary. A hungry ass that died of starvation because it could not choose between two identical bales of hay. This stung him, and with face in hands he had sobbed.

The Buridan’s abstract ass formed a graphic image in his mind. It was a scrawny ass with protruding teeth, but for some reason it had long prickly hair jutting out of its sides like a porcupine’s. It was looking sideways, its face a wry apologetic grin. He was not sure if other people had such graphic images of themselves.

His doubt continued to eat at his vitals until he enrolled for MBA in Finance after his Bachelor of Commerce degree (Subbu helped him with both decisions). At the university, Prof. Chauhan, his teacher of economics, and the guru who saved his life, offered him a palliative. When the professor once, in very personal counsel, began, “In the long run...” Bharat expected him to repeat the Keynesian wisdom: “In the long run, we are all dead.” Instead, Prof. Chau-

han concluded, "...the majority always wins."

In the long run, the majority always wins.

In the short term, there may be turbulence. It didn't matter. The graph always settled in favor of the decision of the majority.

The aphorism was his salvation, and Prof. Chauhan, his savior. This piece of decisive wisdom provided a quick egress from his tortuous journeys of doubt. When in doubt, which was almost always, he started deciding as the "majority" did.

When he started his professional life in the mutual fund operations, he knew he was trusted with other people's money. What stocks should he invest in? What stocks must he sell? Decision-making became a daily demon to exorcise. He looked to his sides, not inside his analytical brain.

What were other investment companies doing? What were his colleagues doing? His elaborate network of relationships ensured he was in receipt of privileged, semi-official, but accurate information. When all the information arrived, he would whip out his calculator to determine what the majority was buying and what it was selling. If everybody bought pharma and sold cement stocks, that's what he did. If everybody sold pharma and bought cement stocks, that again is exactly what he did. The majority had never failed him. He was now a successful investment

manager.

When he was asked whether he would take stock options instead of cash, as compensation, again he couldn't decide. It was Mangal who emphatically said that stock options would fly. Mangal and Bharat knew that the choice of cash or stock was actually theoretical—his company simply did not have enough cash—yet one had to reconcile to his pick. If it wasn't the majority, it was an emphatic personality that saved him. *Pantu-thatha*, Mangal, and now, after his marriage, Indu.

Indu agreed to marry him only on one condition: that her premarital past never be probed. She had hinted at boyfriends, drunken orgies and more. Once more the majority came to his rescue. Bharat asked for some time and consulted Mangal and other friends. Most of them said that they had similar pacts with their wives. After all, their own pasts were not much to write home about. For a tiny moment, Bharat felt cheated since he did not have anything to conceal about his past. And he was ready to tell everything. Prof. Chauhan loomed before him and pointed a mighty index finger towards the majority. It should be all right then.

Indu built this condition into a prenuptial contract carefully worded by her lawyer. The contract had also a catalogue of her assets and Bharat's assets

in Schedule B of the agreement. It spoke of the consequences of terminating the marriage.

Subbu hadn't so much bothered about Bharat's choice of Indu. He felt that it was entirely his grandson's decision. When he heard about this contract, he first thought Bharat was joking.

"Since when did lawyers start deciding marriages?" he demanded.

"*Pantu-thatha*, you have been a little out of touch. This is how things are done these days. It's not just with Indu. It would be with any other girl too," Bharat had beseeched.

Till death do us part. A lifetime of sharing begins with an agreement on dividing. Property and cash settlement if the marriage falls apart. Who owns what.

When he was into his fifties, Subbu wrote his will. Much against the advice of a then young Gopalan, the family lawyer. "Very inauspicious to write a will at such a young age," Gopalan had protested.

When Subbu proposed to transfer immediately all his property to Krishnan, and keep a modest sum for his subsistence, again Gopalan had reservations. "Anyway, after your time, the property is his. Why transfer it now?"

"Owning anything is a burden, Gopalan," Subbu

had reflected. "I am not doing good to Krishnan by passing on my property. I am telling him that, as a responsible son, he should pick up my burden."

A few days after the death of Krishnan and Sharada, Gopalan came home clutching the draft of the will. His youth worked against him, and he broke down holding onto Subbu's shoulder.

Once more, soon after Bharat graduated, Subbu requisitioned the services of Gopalan. "I want to write my will."

Gopalan was furious. Despite their age difference, he muttered some expletives.

Subbu was firm. He transferred the title of his house, the prized home that he had planned and built brick by brick, to Bharat. He had a sum of money invested in fixed deposits which gave him more than the money he needed for his sustenance. Later, when Bharat wanted to demolish the house and build apartments with a real estate businessman, Gopalan pointed out the folly of transferring property early.

"It is his burden. He should do what he believes is appropriate," Subbu had explained.

"Brave words. Would you have the courage to see your house come down?" Gopalan had asked. Subbu never once visited the site, confining himself to The Home. He saw the Second Home only in the fully

finished form, a ready to occupy apartment among dozens of similar looking apartments.

Now as he read the verbose legalese that defined the canons of a modern marriage, his eyes glazed over.

Ridiculous! A piece of the world that he had carefully constructed for himself crumbled. What would Jaya have said? What about Krishnan and Sharada if they had been alive?

“This is all so strange to me. You have to decide,” Subbu had declared.

Reflecting later, he decided that the contract was the first point of the estrangement between himself and Indu.

Regarding the marriage contract, there had been only one thing for Bharat to do: Go back to the majority. Ask Mangal. Ask Keshav. Ask at least ten other people who got married recently. Yes, seven had signed such contracts.

Subbu and Bharat visited their family lawyer six times before the contract could be concluded. When Subbu expressed his outrage, Gopalan waved it away with a phlegmatic smile. “Times change. Better to have this contract rather than fight bitterly after a divorce.”

Even before his marriage, *pantu-thatha*'s strong will could not help Bharat make all decisions, espe-

cially since *pantu-thatha* was not always on the side of the majority. In fact, in many instances he was against the majority. Prof. Chauhan's homily had greater power than the strong will of *pantu-thatha*, and only in cases where the majority did not decisively point in a direction did he summon *pantu-thatha's* will.

After his marriage, he not only sensed a strong will in Indu, he was relieved to know she was frequently on the side of the majority. Taking a decision, abiding by the iron will of Indu and the opinion of the majority did not create conflicts for him most often. When conflict did happen, he went to *pantu-thatha* or roasted in doubt till events made a decision, not he.

But at all times, whether he was implementing the will of his wife or the recommendation of the majority, *pantu-thatha's* opinions caused doubts in him. Sometimes mild, sometimes serious. He got the feeling that *pantu-thatha* was in possession of superior knowledge. *Pantu-thatha* was also willing to face the wrath of the world for owning his opinions. Bharat could not help feeling that if he had the same fortitude, he would take the side of *pantu-thatha* most of the time.

He had a compelling experience of this feeling that *pantu-thatha's* opinions could be superior when

he faced the question of religion. Bharat's religion was filled with doubt. Subbu, an agnostic, discouraged him to be religious. However, Indu would not brook an irreligious husband. Nonsense, she said to Subbu's recommendations. The whole world could not be a fool! This view of the majority easily compelled Bharat to embrace religion, at least its rituals. However, when he folded his arms in prayer, quite often he was befuddled by what he should pray for.

To whom was he praying? Is God's benediction reserved only for those who pray? If so, what would He dispense as punishment for not praying? And if everything was His will, why couldn't He get everybody to pray? If He was capable of doing that, then why did He need prayer? Maybe *pantu-thatha* was right about his doubts. When his mind strayed thus, he would open his eyes a chink, and hear Indu's stern admonition, "Mmm..." He would then hastily close his eyes like an errant schoolboy. How did she know he wasn't closing his eyes, if she hadn't opened hers?

To resolve the difficulty of keeping eyes closed for a few minutes, he had a version of the prayer that he called a general prayer. Its supplication was not completely clear to him. Subbu used to read it out aloud from some Sanskrit book, but not because he believed in religion. He had a curiosity for all religions and philosophies without following any. Besides,

Subbu adored the Sanskrit language.

Thus Bharat's prayer was the universal invocation, "*Sarvejana sukinobhavanthu.*" Let everyone live blissfully. Sometimes, when he shut his eyes very tight and tried hard to pray, the ass with prickly hair on its sides would appear, with its sideways apologetic grin. To destroy the image, during the palm-folding ritual he would steal sidelong glances through half-open eyes at Indu even though there was the danger of her noticing it. When she finished, he also gleefully did.

Now, during lunch time, as he ate a vegetable sandwich with mayonnaise, a new doubt assailed him. He hated the insipid stuff. He could not help wondering why it had become inconceivable to bring lemon rice with fried yoghurt chili for lunch—like *pantu-thatha* used to send him when he was in school. That seemed like better lunch, or was it? He glanced around him. Most people were eating a sandwich with mayonnaise leaking out. If this wasn't such good lunch, why were so many people eating it? Maybe this was better lunch?

Out of a certain masochistic curiosity, he opened the half-eaten sandwich and stared at it. A bit of mayonnaise was streaking down an uncooked cucumber piece. He shuddered, wrapped up the rest of the sandwich, handling it with two fingers like it

was a decomposed insect, and dropped it into the dustbin under his workstation. This, he could eat no further. He stared into the dustbin, and watched with morbid fascination the mayonnaise leak out from the sandwich bag.

A Hamlettian dilemma gripped him. Should he or shouldn't he? He wrestled with his doubt until he felt ashamed of himself. Yesterday he became worth a million dollars. He took a look at the ticker tape. FI-Rs. 621. He was worth more than a million dollars. Surely a millionaire was entitled to liberties in such matters without having to go through this kind of tormenting angst? In an unobtrusive stride, he left the room.

When he returned to his workstation later, he had taken adequate care to smother the scent of lemon rice, fried yoghurt chili, and onion *raitha* that might emerge from his mouth. A generous helping of scented *supari* suppressed all the other aromas.

He felt smug.

It is not often that he managed to triumph over majority opinion, and more importantly, his doubt.



“I think Maya has a problem. Her teachers think she has a problem,” Indu said, when they were talk-

ing after she had returned from her office.

Maya was away at her karate class.

“What did they say?” Bharat asked.

Indu had informed him in the morning that she would be attending the quarterly Parent-Teacher meeting at school. Bharat knew that usually meant he would face her ire when she returned.

Subbu was not in the living room, but could overhear this conversation through the open door of his bedroom. He dreaded this subject. These days the frequency of this conversation had increased.

“Well, she doesn’t participate in learning how to use the Internet. All other children just go to their kiosks and hammer away at their keyboards. Learning math, science. Taking tests. Most of them have cleared their year’s exams before half the year is over. It is close to half-yearly tests. And Maya’s cleared just the first quarter. That, too, not with great grades.”

“That’s not much to worry about. I am sure she will make it up,” Bharat said, battling with a complex mental calculation about tomorrow’s investments.

“I believe she insists on playing in the mud, on the slide, or playing catch-catch. Or throwball. What’s with her? Every child is playing with every other child on the Net. Very complex video games you know. You must plan carefully, make hard calcu-

lations, and move both hands real quick. She can't play simple games like Roboball. When will she play Martial Arcades and such stuff?"

"Don't fret. I am sure she will get around to it." Indu's interruptions forced Bharat to start over on his calculations.

Bharat's preoccupation annoyed Indu. "Bharat, I want you to concentrate on what I am talking about."

"Sure, I am listening. Children learn at different speeds. They make it up as they go along."

Subbu tried as best as he could to distract himself from this conversation.

"Forever she seems to want to play outside. Go for walks. Watch trees. She has taken a fancy to eating gooseberries," Indu continued.

"Where does she get gooseberries from?"

"There's a tree in the school compound. In the next Parent-Teacher meeting, I must ask them to cut it down."

Gooseberries. Subbu could feel the piquant bitterness on his tongue. To smother it, the adept eater would use a mixture of chili powder and salt. Once done, without wasting a moment, you would take a sip of water. The hot and bitter taste would give way to a mellow, mild sweetness. In fact, if your tongue was not well-conditioned you were sure to miss it.

Practically everyday, to bribe Krishnan to go to school, Subbu had to buy him two gooseberries.

“Bharat, I don’t know what you’ll do. Make sure she learns to browse the Net. She must start chatting with her friends. Most importantly, she must learn to take her tests on the Net. And she *must* remove her finger from her mouth.”

Subbu’s worst fear was that this conversation might end with a suggestion that they take her to a psychiatrist. Or set her up for an online psychiatric consultation. He had seen both Bharat and Indu log into a site called www.soothe-your-mind.com or something like that. Bharat had told him that it was a paid-for service.

When Bharat or Indu had a stressful day, the opening screen of soothe-your-mind.com would come on: “The best online psychiatrist.”

I had a particularly bad day at office.

OH, DID YOU? I AM SORRY. TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.

A customer screamed. He said he would sue my company.

DID THAT MAKE YOU UNHAPPY?

It did. It makes me insecure.

WHY DOES IT MAKE YOU INSECURE?

Because I may lose my job.

THAT'S OKAY. PEOPLE LOSE JOBS AND GET JOBS.

Subbu decided that he would descend the stairs and go into the living room. With him around, Indu might stop the conversation from going to undesirable ends. Yet even as he was climbing down the stairs, the conversation had ended. He knew for sure since Bharat was barking orders to his personal assistant, BOREBO. An intriguing name, Subbu thought, but the Japanese should be able to explain it by a clever expansion of the acronym.

Some years ago, Bharat had first brought home a pet dog, which was a robot. It did nothing much. Just barked, wagged its tail, rolled over, and responded to commands like "Walk" and "Squat." Compared with that, BOREBO was far more powerful. It looked like a real dog, was a computer, had powerful sensors in its eyes whereby if an unfamiliar figure, whose image it had not stored, walked

through the door, it would alert by barking. It was also a phone. Bharat could order it to call somebody by just yelling his name.

Now that the conversation with Indu had ended and did not require his intervention, Subbu had to explain why he had walked down.

“Going for a walk,” he announced.

Bharat was sitting amid a pile of papers with steaming coffee in a mug. He had to speak to Keshav immediately about an early morning deal he had to do for one of the financial institutions. As Subbu was leaving, Bharat barked at BOREBO, “Keshav.”

Subbu left The Home arching his eyebrows. Why would a man bark at a dog? That, too, an electronic dog?

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