

Discourses **IT**
with *IT*



by
SAIN SUCHA

To

Khalid Sohail and **Hamraz Ahsan**

two other lost souls who hold their

Discourses with IT

and regularly give us sophisticated

trialogues.

Discourses with IT

Sain Sucha

Short Stories

Vudya Kitaban Förlag



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PREFACE

This book contains seven stories.

The stories are in the form of dialogues – discourses which take place between the narrator, the persons who are directly or indirectly involved, and IT.

Who, or what is IT?

Whenever a conversation proceeds between two or more persons, the very instant an element of ambiguity appears, a dialogue always develops – the audible dialogue which takes place between the persons who speak to each other directly, in which words and sentences are said and their obvious, accepted meanings are exchanged; and, the silent conversation which runs parallel to the audible one, in which each person tries to comprehend the essence of that conversation, and where the hidden meanings, over and above the obvious, are sought. The entity with which this silent conversation is conducted I have given the identity of IT.

In other words, IT always emerges whenever a complex dialogue occurs between two or more persons, or a monologue is conducted by a person.

IT can represent anything – an abstract entity, a real person or a feeling. There are two attributes which are essential to IT – IT never lies, and IT is omnipresent; although, quite often we are not aware of its presence, or

even when we feel its presence, we do not acknowledge it.

The seven ITs treated in these stories are Death, Longing, Fear, Memory, Lust, Him, and Life.

I look forward to the criticism from the readers, and thank them for any comments made by them, which will be much appreciated.

Sain Sucha,
September 4, 2019

THE OTHER SIDE

The older woman was at least ninety. She looked frail, but neither did she put much weight on the walking-stick nor did she seem to require help from the young woman escorting her. She studied me thoroughly with her lined, but shiny, eyes and said, "It is a long round trip. When we get there I will like you to wait while I am gone."

Any trip at her age was long, and I really hoped that it was not *the trip* she meant. Then the word *round trip* reverberated in my ears, but just to be on the safe side I asked, "Will both of you return or only one?"

What I actually wanted to say was, "... or only the young lady?" but decided against it.

"Both," she said in a tone, accompanied by a sardonic smile as if she expected me to get hurt

I was relieved.

The aged lady occupied the seat beside me, while the younger one sat behind us.

"It is about eighty kilometres from here towards the North. I am going to call upon my elder brother. He does not like long visits, so I shall stay for about an hour. I shall pay you when we get there by 'handicap coupons'. Then you shall wait, but will not be paid for the waiting time. I will not let society pay for my indulgence. And then we shall return."

She must have concluded that I was outside the society, otherwise she wouldn't have objected to society paying to one of its own members; besides, I wondered if the society was worse off than a taxi-driver and was about to start a lively argument, but then thought better of it. I was not going to get any other passenger in that area - they had their own taxi service. So, instead of driving eighty kilometres alone it was much better to wait for an hour and then accommodate the ladies.

Moreover, there was a chance that I might get a glimpse of the older brother of that ninety years old *kid-sister* I had sitting on my right. Old eccentric ninety-plus were my favourites.

I showed her my teeth and pulled the facial muscles to feign a smile.

"While I am away Anita shall keep you company. My brother does not like young people either, not even his grand-niece."

Experience must have taught her not to take chances in life by asking questions, so she kept her communication strictly to declarative statements.

I glanced at Anita in my rear-view mirror and caught her eyes for an instant. I wished that her grand-uncle would have a change of heart for just that one day and keep his sister much longer with him. With Anita providing me company I did not mind waiting longer, even without getting paid. Perhaps the old lady was

correct in asserting that the society must not be taxed for our indulgences.

I looked at the road ahead, disdainfully eyeing the other cars which were causing a delay in my waiting with Anita on the other side of eighty kilometres, and tried to concentrate on driving.

For some strange reason, I felt a chill make its way through my spine. It was June, the sun had baked the city since its rise, the window panes of the taxi were fully withdrawn, the fan for extra ventilation was running; yet, I felt cold. I cast a look at the relic on my right. She appeared to be in congress with some entities in her mind; a benign smile clung on her face.

"I like travelling on a day like this," she murmured to one of them.

"I like travelling on a... day like this," she said it again, but this time her face was turned towards me.

Suddenly I realised that even the first utterance was addressed to me.

"Oh yes, isn't it wonderful!" I chose a standard reply from my collection; pondering; at the same time, how a combination of simultaneous sweating and freezing can be described as *wonderful* in a positive sense - malaria was one known fever which produced such a condition. I had not been to the tropics for years, and love-bites on the neck by passionate human females were not supposed to transmit the parasite, but only bites from

blood-sucking female Anopheles mosquitoes. Those particular females did not thrive in this country.

The city traffic had fallen behind us, and we were speeding along the highway. In order to overtake the lorry ahead, I needed to change lanes. I glanced in the mirror. No other vehicle followed us. I looked at the road again. On the highway it was a clear view, yet there remained two black spots on the panorama in front. I concentrated. The spots did not belong to the scene outside the windscreen, but to the vision within my head. The spots seared. With reluctance I tried to trace their origin. My memory made me raise my eyes slowly towards the rear-view mirror, and I looked at her. She calmly sat in the seat behind, lost in her thoughts, but her two eyes stared at me through that mirror. Two big, blue, expressionless eyes which produced dark spots on my brain. I jerked my body, and tried to shake off that feeling. The old woman noticed my discomfort.

"Must be difficult to drive a whole day within the town in this heat," she made another statement

"It is always pleasant to come out to the countryside, especially when it is so lush green," I answered her anyhow.

"How long have you driven taxi?"

"About six years."

"Do you like it?"

She could ask questions too, but only when the decision making by the other party was irrelevant to her purpose.

"It is hard work, but not a dull job." Another one of my standard answers.

I met a stream of slow-moving cars, and it took several minutes before I cleared them and regained a steady flow of my own.

"She is not very talkative," the old woman declared after a while.

"I thought that you were calling upon your brother?"
"Not him, I meant Anita."

That was a nice habit Anita had. I could think of many other ways of tiring that mouth of her than through the mere act of speech.

"Why not?" An unnecessary question slipped from my tongue.

"She has changed. Last year she tried to commit suicide."

"Did she really?" the second, consecutive, silly question. She shook her silver braided head in affirmative.

"Took pills. Life is not easy for youth any longer."

"Did you have it easy in your youth?" I badly wanted to fill my mouth with chewing-gum, so that it would stop talking.

"We did not have any youth. I was born. I remember childhood, and suddenly I was working to assist my

parents, met my husband quite young, was married, had children, raised them, and one day I was old and put into a pension. A lot of other worries were there but *not how to spend my youth.*"

With that she retired to the confines of her mind, the serene smile was re-pasted on the face, and she looked at the spectacle beyond infinity.

The feeling returned. An ice-pick was gently drawn in line with my spinal cord. The hair at the back of my neck felt like bristles. To distract myself I bit my lower lip. Without looking at the mirror I knew that the two blue eyes still stared at me.

I also knew that IT was there. I had met IT before, but never like that. Never with IT sitting behind me. My hands sweated, my feet froze. Then I heard IT laugh – sand-corns filled my teeth, the taste of bitter almonds burst in my mouth, my chest ached, I heard a thousand pigs cry in agony.

"So! We meet again," IT whispered.

I kept my face straight and pretended that I did not hear.

"Glare at me, swear at me, but don't ever ignore me." IT whispered again in a deep coarse voice.

"Go to hell," I said nastily.

"What did you say?" The old woman retracted herself from across the horizon.

"I am sorry, I was talking to myself," I said to her apologetically.

"Not a very good habit when driving. You can lose your concentration and we may never get there."

"Well! *There* we shall all get one day, and *you* before both of us," I thought, but to appease her I said, "Don't do it so often, must be the weather."

"And in your case, you need no further telling to go to hell. The way you are sweating it appears that you are already there."

The old witch had a twisted sense of humour too.

A funny thing to be told that I was sweating in hell when my whole body was under the impression that I was sitting naked on an iceberg, drifting in the stormy North Sea.

I almost jumped when I heard from behind, "Could you play some music?"

It took me another second to realise that it was not IT but Anita who spoke.

"Oh yes, what would you like?" I said.

"Anything, just anything," she said.

"Play us a funeral march." IT said.

"I don't have any," was my spontaneous loud response.

"If you do not have any music then why did you ask me what would I like?" Anita enquired.

"I do not have the music which IT wants."

"It, which it?"

She looked a bit confused in the rear-view mirror.

"Well! Yes.... I meant"

I did not know what I meant

"Are you alright?" the lady beside me asked with an overdose of concern in her tone.

"Perhaps it is the heat. May I make a break for a few minutes, stretch my legs and get some fresh air?" I asked. "With all the windows open I thought that we were already drowning in the *fresh air*, and we have only driven for half an hour."

Women of ninety-plus were no longer among my favourites.

"But we can stop for a short while if that makes you more alert"

"Thanks a lot," said I, and stopped on a narrow woodland, off the main road.

As I opened the car's door the first recollection which hit me was of the days when I went track-running every morning. At that moment I badly wanted to take off my heavy shoes, and start running away from that car, away from the old lady, away from Anita, and far away from IT. I could not, of course, run away. Taxi drivers are not expected to desert aged women and suicide inclined young girls on small wood paths, in the middle of nowhere. But then a taxi driver ought not to be expected to drive customers home with IT whispering in his ears.

"What is wrong with me? Is it age?" I wondered.

I had come across IT many times before, but under quite different circumstances. I remembered when the old man was murdered, the temple was burnt, when cholera broke out in Lahore, the car crash in Afghanistan, the tyre burst in Luleå. IT was always there, but not once had I felt frightened, or even threatened.

"So, what was different before? Was it that I was younger, confident, reckless, prepared, or what?"

"No, none of that," I thought, as I performed jump-ups to put up a show for the bright-eye; which were watching me intensely.

"So, what is different?"

And then the answer came.

Suddenly I was immobile in the mid-air. I knew it then – the difference was that IT was there in the rear with me, but I did not know where. I had just felt IT's presence and heard it without knowing its whereabouts. Slowly I de-froze myself, and returned to the taxi.

"Do you always fall into catatonic trances when you exercise?" She seemed amused.

I wished that I was at the same place where occasional, spontaneous elimination of twisted, aged females was not considered as the capital crime.

"You must have worked as a dancer before, move your hips pretty smoothly."

I did not like being flirted with by darlings-over-ninety either.

"Nice of you to observe," was all I could say.

I started the engine and found the road again. There was dead silence in the car.

"Glare at me, swear at me, but don't ever ignore me." A few minutes later IT sang again, mockingly.

That time I was prepared. Without opening my lips I released the thought, "You know that I don't care for you. What do you want?"

"I know you don't, but admit first that had you scared today,"

"True, but just for a while. Where are you?"

I could not turn my head while driving, so I just asked silently.

"I am with Anita."

"Who is this Anita then?" was my reflex question.

"You better ask her," was the plain answer.

I lowered the speed as we cut through a small town. "Please, stop at one of the shops. Anita can buy some refreshments. Do you want some?"

I said I wanted a cold drink, and glided to a halt by a store, went out and opened the door for Anita. She stepped out.

"It will take a few minutes. I need to go to the toilet as well." She said politely and went in.

I paid extra attention to the word 'I', and was certain that she did not say 'We'.

Hurriedly I reached my seat and silently asked, "Are you there?"

I got no reply.

IT had gone with her. An impulse urged me to drive away with the eccentric brother's little sister, still sitting beside me. Then I wondered what the charge would be - kidnapping an old woman or abandoning a young woman. I could not even decide which one of the two was more grave.

"When did she try to commit suicide?"

My own inquisitiveness surprised me.

"Last year in December. Rough time, this Xmas period. People often feel lonely and insecure when these expectation-loaded occasions come."

I thought about Xmas. Did not like it much. Jesus was probably a good man, but his setting up the precedence, portraying what the wolves of his mighty Creator could do to His sheep and get away with it, had subsequently caused enormous suffering not only for His flock but even for those innocent souls who had never heard of the Creator, His wolves and sheep. Besides, my own experience in life had taught me that, barring a few accidental happenings, at the individual level the less one intermingled with the alleged omnipotent authorities and their agents, the less likely they were to bother you. For that reason I had, with great effort, avoided those paths in life on which professional missionaries of different

cults stood and harassed the believers with the sufferings which were likely to afflict them if they ever stepped off the path which led to the destination which was determined by the figure-heads of that cult. I had actually taken up a completely opposite role. As a taxi driver, instead of telling people what their destination was, I always took my passengers to the destination which they had chosen for themselves. Like any professional path-finder I made my livelihood by helping people to get home, but I used no coercive drive while leading them.

Anita came back with *three* chilled Fantas.

She looked relieved, I felt relieved.

It was a tremendous feeling to drop the chill from my spine, and pour that effervescent chill into my throat. Still sipping it, I smoothly put the gear in Drive and started cruising.

"I am still here," some minutes later IT informed me.

I did not respond. The tingling taste of Fanta was too good to be adulterated by the nasty taste which IT produced in my mouth. To take another mouthful I lifted my eyes from the road for an instant to trace the straw.

"Oh my God!" by the woman on my right was followed by "Oh no!" from behind.

The front right wheel of the ear had gone off the road's edge, and lost traction. The vehicle lurched. Desperately, I gave a hard jerk to the steering wheel. The ear jumped

back on the highway, missed an oncoming truck by millimetres, regained momentum, and then started purring like a content tomcat, which had just come home after a wild chase and felt good under my hands.

IT was giggling hysterically behind me.

"Glare at me, swear at me, but don't ever ignore me," I was reminded.

"You took us all almost *there*." Silver-braids with shiny eyes commented.

"Where?"

"The *hell* for which you showed such a strong longing a bit earlier."

Rather than answering her and be stabbed with another witty remark I switched on the radio.

"It's Now or Never," was Elvis Presley's suggestion. 'Now' was definitely against my choice, and I knew that 'Never' did not apply either, because someday IT had to score; but until that day came I preferred to reject Presley's proposal. For the next quarter or so the radio offered me choices of a most diversified nature. I liked none but kept the volume high, because it saved me from even worse probable suggestions from IT.

"Take the road on the left, and avoid the ditch," the firm, resolute voice commanded.

I took the left turn and avoided the ditches on both sides of the dirt road.

We travelled for another ten minutes when I was given the next instruction, "It is the red house on the right"

I found the red house in the middle of green pasture, traced the narrow stone-paved drive-in to the front door, and parked the car alongside an abominable creature which was large enough to be a donkey and seemed to have inherited his fangs from a tiger. I cut off the engine, the car stood still. Abruptly there was total silence. The old lady sat there and looked in front, Anita sat there and looked in front, I sat *in* there and looked at the four-legged beast, while the four-legged beast stood *out* there and looked at me - his tongue protruding, fangs shining, and eyes greedily locked on me. I remembered reading somewhere that the best way to pacify an unfriendly member of the canine family was to lie on one's back and offer it the neck. The last action I wanted to take at that moment was to go out of the car, lie on my back and offer my neck to that son of a bitch which was standing out there waiting for me. I wondered whether or not dogs read books when their owners were away, and if that monster knew about the expert advice which someone had endorsed in that book.

"Have you fallen in that catatonic trance again?" I heard the grandma say.

"I beg your pardon," was my reply.

"Aren't you coming out, and help me to the front door?"

"Yes, of course," was the conditioned response at that time.

I scrutinised the dog, the dog scrutinised me. Neither of us liked what we saw, IT chuckled; I remained glued to my seat.

"You are the worst taxi driver I have travelled with," was her next declaration.

"He is afraid of the dog," Anita explained it on my behalf.

"Afraid of a dog! Which dog?" Then she apprehended the monster.

"Oh! You mean Dimbo," she eyed me and added scornfully, "Don't be ridiculous. Dimbo is just a lamb."

Instantaneously I decided that I would not trust 'lambs' which competed with donkeys for their size, and with hounds for looks; besides, if I ever saw a 'lamb' which looked so determined to avenge mankind for what mankind had done to lambs over centuries, then that particular 'lamb' stood out there and waited for me.

I sat inert.

"Oh, you are totally irresponsible," was her final analysis of my character.

Then she promptly opened the door on her side, went out, reached the main door, opened it, lifted her stick and barked two words, "Dimbo, in."

Terrified Dimbo went in like a lamb.

"I will be back within an hour," was for me. "Pay him the fare up till here," was for Anita. Then the old tyrant went in.

The door closed behind her.

I held on to my refuge in the car, expecting Dimbo to charge any second.

"Dimbo is actually very gentle," Anita tried to reassure me.

I kept quiet

"Well! We have an hour to kill. Why do we not go out and sit in the sun?" she suggested in a flat tone.

"*An hour to kill?*"

When it came to killing that day, with IT lurking behind Anita's eyes, and Dimbo waiting behind that door, I was not taking any chances.

"Grandma said that it shall take an hour or so."

If only she knew what it meant for me to hear that the hour was only to be *taken* and not *killed*.

"I am going out."

With that, she also made her exit. The front door remained shut.

Cautiously, I pulled the latch on my door, and made a trial opening. Everything worked the way it should. I collected my wits, took a deep breath and also ejected my being in the precarious world which existed outside my car. I smelled the fragrance of caprifolium in the

atmosphere, the wind caressed me lovingly, birds sang, the sun winked at me from a veil of a broken, vagabond cloud; and the front door, still, remained shut. I followed Anita. We strolled for some fifty steps and then she perched herself on a large, dry rock.

"Grandma is fussy about payments. I shall pay you the whole sum when we get home."

My opinion was not invited; I was just being told the way things were to proceed.

I studied her face – pale complexion, slightly freckled smooth skin, straw-coloured hair, dark eyebrows, beautifully proportioned ears, nice nose and sensual lips. In the lateral view, the eyes were large, blue and clear, but sparkless.

I, deliberately, sat a bit behind her, on her left.

"Now you want to watch, without being watched?" IT asked.

"How right you are."

"Anita!"

She slowly turned her head till our eyes met "Why did you try to kill yourself?"

According to the regulations taxi drivers were not encouraged to initiate a conversation with their clients; far less to ask them about intimate matters concerning their rejection of the gift of life.

She mused for some instants and then said, "I did not want to live."

An intelligent answer to a silly question.

"What happened?"

"I just took a bottle full of sleeping pills and swallowed its contents."

It was not the correct answer to the question, but it was better than none.

"And?"

"They found me vomiting, and called for the doctor. I fell into a coma. They all thought that I was dead. Then came the doctor, emptied my stomach, and put life back into me."

"No, he did not," was the comment from IT.

"When I woke up I was alive, and in a couple of days back on my feet"

"Back on her feet, yes; but not alive," IT rustled.

"Oh, shut up," I growled at IT.

"Why are you so unkind to me? It is the second time today you have used unfriendly language."

Anita had stark pain in her eyes.

"I am sorry. I wasn't talking to you." I felt really bad.

"But there is no one else around. Oh! Maybe it was addressed to you again. Why are you so unkind to yourself then?"

I stared blankly into space.

"Go on, tell her," IT coaxed me.

I took a deep sigh.

"Anyhow, that was seven months ago. It is different now,"

"Ask her, 'How?'" IT demanded.

"How is it different?" I complied.

"I used to be so unpredictable before. Had unexpected changes of mood. Lost temper on trivial matters, or became overjoyed over small happenings. Sometimes I woke up in the morning singing, but retired to the bed sulking. Or was merry the whole day for nothing worthy,"

"Go on,"

"When I recovered, I promised myself that I would become a new person, and have another sort of life. I became a believer."

"And now?"

"I have become stable. I know my way, my destiny. Once a week we gather for the prayer meeting. We have some senior members in our congregation. They teach us how one could spend one's life for the Lord, and avoid temptation. It is so nice to lose all those feelings of longings and desires - so painful, so futile."

"So, you feel content now?"

"I believe so. It is another form of life for me."

"Another form, not another *form of life*," laughter burst out from IT.

It was the most sarcastic laughter I had heard in years.

"She has another form, but there is no Life in it," between the fits IT sneered.

"IT! What happened?" I had to ask.

"I changed face with Life. Between the last heart-beat of her old existence and the first heart-beat of the new, I turned Life over, and put myself there."

"Why?"

"What do you mean by Why'?"

"Why did you change places with Life?"

"I always do - in my kind of people."

"But not like this. Normally a person also 'dies' when Life expires."

"Now you are green my friend. A person 'dies'. What is death? Cessation of heart-beat is just one empirical proof of a form of death. If you only knew how many zombies walk around in the world. Automated people. No likes, dislikes, anger or love - no feelings. Skeletons covered with flesh, which carry single-track minds, programmed to cues which are fed to their brains by a few manipulators, who tell them that everything in their past, present and future is preordained, and they are to do what they are destined to do. Batches of them scheduled to sit, stand or lie at the appointed hour, and at fixed places."

"But they are people too. It is their way of life. Why not, if they are satisfied?" I pleaded.

"Way of life! What life? Are they alive?" Now IT was furious.

"Does Life propel them or are they my pawns? Are they the evolution of the same primary matter which acquired form many millions of years ago and developed into thinking, reflecting beings; who traversed the wilderness, solved the mysteries of Nature, unfolded routes to the unknown, discovered ways to reach advanced cultures; or, are they now merely degenerated, two-legged puppets with operational hands, their minds numbed with the fear of the wrath of unknown, bodies satiated with the daily feed, their expectations and aspirations limited to the possession of those few items which they produce themselves, or those which they are promised in a world yet to come by the selected few who hold their strings?"

IT had lost its previous tone of familiarity with me.

At that moment. After first being dominated by the Grandma, then scared stiff by IT, and finally intimidated by Dimbo, IT's philosophy of existence was beyond my active comprehension.

"What did Anita do?"

I changed from generalisations to specifics.

"She rejected Life. At her age with so much to experience, she went and sedated Life and pushed it to the level of physical limbo. You should have seen her lying there, with Life depending upon a single heart-beat.

Life is also an element like me, and I just could not let it be debased. So, I changed sides."

"But her heart still heats like mine, she breathes like me,"

"Her heart beats and her lungs perform like yours, but her mind is different"

"How is it different?"

"Different in the sense that she merely transits through existence, while you give colour to existence."

I tried to grasp IT's meanings.

"You know that you are a life-loving bastard," IT said it in a soft, sad whisper.

"That is why I could never touch you. Oh yes, I have been near, very near. I am always near, but never could I touch you,"

"I have known several other *life loving bastards* like me *touched* by you," I protested.

"No, not by me. People like you at times disappear suddenly from the visual scene, or else they fade into oblivion if Time stands on their side, but I do not claim them to my realm. I never will. Without *you*, there will be no *me*."

"And all these millions who get up every morning, perform their tasks, raise families, and then go to sleep hoping for another day?"

"They vary. Some participate in life, many have the potential to participate, the majority merely breathes, a

few like you set a challenge to my domain, and others like Anita, men and women, attract the stray to my embrace."

I concentrated, created a blank in my mind, and then released a single thought.

"What is in my mind now, IT!"

"You know that I do not know."

"You do not know?"

"No, I do not know. You are out of my embrace anyhow, darling."

IT felt mischievous.

"What is in Anita's mind just now?"

"Even *that* I do not know."

"I thought that she was in your 'embrace'?"

"She is."

"Then how come you do not know what is in her mind?"

IT was quiet for a few moments, and then said, "I shall let you in on a secret"

"Do that,"

"I never know what a mind thinks on its own."

"How do you control your pawns then?"

"By not letting them think on their own."

"Elaborate," I urged.

"Apparently you have difficulty in distinguishing between *thinking* and *making one think*?"

"Perhaps I do. So, tell me."

I had IT fully engrossed, and I wanted to learn that distinction from it

"I can seed thoughts in the minds of others and thus retard, or even stun, their own thinking and, subsequently, control them as my pawns; but I do not know all the thoughts which are produced by each mind."

"So, if different minds resisted the acceptance of non-meditated thoughts then you have a challenge?" I inquired cautiously.

"I certainly have a challenge then," was the frank admission by IT.

"Then there is a chance for the others too?"

"That chance is, also, always there. Chance plays as important a role in the determination of events as do precalculated moves,"

"It appears that the majority just sit around and wait for the chance to come their way, they never strive to create chances," I almost talked to myself.

"How right you are," IT confirmed.

"And predestination?"

"Nothing like that. There are active or inactive minds, independent or enslaved beings; but each born with an initial capacity to determine its own course. Though, I shall add, chance and circumstances play a vital role in that determination. But again *vital* is not the same as *total*."

I reflected for a short stretch of time, and then said, "I will fight you, IT."

"Haven't you always, darling?" IT said in a level tone. "And you want me to fight you?"

"Of course, without some fight there is no win, and without some struggle it is just stagnation. But remember, a match with me can have grave after-effects. So, fight me if you dare."

I raised my fist and waved it against IT.

"You do talk a lot to yourself,"

I was brought to attention by the Old Terror.

"Do I really?"

"Of course, you do. And why were you waving that fist of yours?"

I got up and was near to throwing *that* fist of mine at her, but then quickly regained those senses which conduct proper behaviour at improper times.

I had started lowering my arm when she enquired to someone, "Are you hungry?"

My fist remained suspended where it was because I was certain that the question was put to Dimbo.

"My goodness! He has gone into that trance again," she said to Anita

Anita looked at me and suggested to her grandma, "Perhaps we should pray for him this evening. He looks lost. Maybe we ought to ask him to join our

'transformation programme'." On that cue, with an amazing change in my mobility, I re-acquired my human posture, turned towards the old lady, grabbed the massive sandwich from her hand, returned to the rock, and attacked the sandwich voraciously.

"I didn't mean you, I asked Anita." The old witch was fuming at me.

I did not care.

I had remembered what IT had told me earlier – that it would never touch me, and Anita had already gone over to the other side.

LOVER BOY

As usual, we started our dinner with dessert.

He prepared a heaped spoon of cream-topped strawberries, sucked and licked them off deep in his mouth, closed his lips tightly when the spoon left them and started working methodically on the sweet-sour-creamy contents with his grinders.

During that engagement, he never took his eyes off the rest of the dishes, which were nicely laid out on the table.

I said 'as usual', because that is what we have done for the last few years.

It has not always been like that – once upon a time, as college students, we used to eat in the regular order of the menu. But one day I, in the eyes of Fatty, made a very grave slip, and ever since then we have used our own order.

In my eyes, on the other hand, Fatty's real problem was that he could never gauge his intake of food on a particular occasion. Somehow his degree of hunger and appetite had reached an unexplainable state of imbalance; which meant that he required enormous concentration to accommodate all that his hunger yearned for and his appetite could comply with, at each meal.

On that particular day, we had gone to an expensive restaurant, The Paradise Point, to avail of their special offer on the day of their tenth year of catering. They had called the offer *The Hour for Eating* – the guests were given a free choice to consume whatever their stomach would hold from the buffet tables within a period of one hour. It was not exactly a buffet in the proper sense of the word. Instead of guests wandering between tables picking their snacks, they stayed at a chosen table while the food was continuously served to them by the caterers.

The moment we entered the place we were certain that the management was serious about its deal, as were the enthusiasts who had accepted the invitation, at a token price. A whole army of efficient waiters manoeuvred among the hordes of gourmands who had attacked the various tables with eager mouths.

I am a person of less-than-moderate hunger, and the main reason for Fatty's preference for my company at culinary engagements was that he, by posing to be my saviour, could redeem me from the disgrace of leaving meals unfinished, and in that process gorge almost double-portions with a clean, if overloaded, conscience.

I looked at the other members of the congregation and decided that the majority of them were capable of eating me within the permitted hour. I kept myself close to Fatty – just in case I needed some heavy help. Huge mountains of flesh in-flux repeatedly collided with each other in

their pursuit of palatable objects. Ladies and gents of the otherwise soft constitution, ravenously tore chickens apart with surprising callousness and chewed the skin, meat and cartilage with a canine zest which would have given an ordinary street dog a profound inferiority complex had he strayed in at that display of teeth-power.

One of my early impressions was that the assembly was not only constituted of people who were eaters par excellence but were also essentially cross-eyed; because irrespective of which plate those people plucked from, they always looked in the direction of a tray from which others procured their mouthfuls. Slowly, but amazingly, it dawned on me that that cross-eyedness had two functions - it permitted a general control of what others relished, and it also ascertained that one could keep account of the degree of interest which the others held in one's own consumption.

I surveyed the variety of eatable stuff which adorned the tables. Surely it was not a place for animal lovers. Once alive and running, but now well prepared, any kind of beast which was not forbidden by some religious command has had its head chopped off, and carcass devoured by the hungry jaws. Nor were the cooks particularly partial to the vegetation; the produce of the soil in all shapes, colours and sizes decorated the tables.

My study was rudely interrupted by a sudden grunt issued by Fatty, which was supported by a growl from

the other side of the table. A rather thoughtless waiter had by-passed us and placed a large tray of deep-fried sparrow breasts on the next table. To each arm which stretched out to get hold of a piece for its owner, there were at least a hundred eyes which registered the whole performance of that arm and the mouth it served. From the look on the faces of the happy chewers of tiny sparrow breasts, I deduced that the pleasure which they drew by the emptiness felt by their competitor was far in excess of the satisfaction which they received from the shreds of meat which reached their stomachs. A lady, who must have had a liking for low ceilings and wide rooms, cooled her anger by pouring a jug full of iced water down her throat, and then without least display of feline grace, which the poets so often attribute to the tender sex, commenced a determined, wolfish attack on the roasted lamb chops. Fatty was not to be left behind. He grabbed two huge plates of chops, imprisoned one in his left paw and gave the other to me. He knew that I detested lamb meat. So while he happily munched from his own, I stood there holding the other plate in my hand which was apparently mine but in reality his. I cursed him for his selfishness, and hoped that something would still be left for me when he relieved me of its care.

I looked at my watch and realised that forty-five minutes had already elapsed. To that point, I had been so

preoccupied with my study of edacity that I had yet to take my first bite to qualify to call myself a functioning member of the attendance.

I threw a rather hungry glance at the table and observed that the main courses were on their way out and desserts were being served. I looked at Fatty but he did not seem to be aware of my presence. From over the bulk of his nose his stare was focused on a plate of fried kidneys which, as yet, lay unattended on the table on our right. I took a deep breath to give my trunk an illusion of filling.

At that moment the waiter brought in a tray to our table which contained silvery dessert bowls. In each bowl, fresh strawberries emblazoned a small hill of vanilla ice-cream which was surrounded by a tiny lake of chilled brandy, and all that was set ablaze by a kiss of live fire. Everyone at our table, and around it, went into an ecstatic trance by that feeling of beatitude which overwhelmed the atmosphere, and where the spirit of enflamed brandy ascended towards the heavens in a blue sheen. An air of tranquillity accompanied the serene gracefulness, while newly cut pieces of strawberries slowly sank in the freshly melting ice-cream. In a dreamlike daze I apprehended that those bowls suddenly started to disappear before my eyes, as if some sorcerer had cast his spell over them. First I thought I saw a dozen of those bowls, then there were only eight, then five, and

then three. As the number continued to dwindle, I started to regain my senses. From the corners of my eyes I saw Fatty put his plate of meat down. Then he extended his hand for the second plate. I, being a true friend, put *his* plate in his hand. As a conditioned reflex his fingers took hold of the plate but for some strange reason he would not withdraw his hand. I left the possession of that dish, and with a swift sweep of my arm deprived two other contenders of the ownership of the last dessert bowl.

Moments before I reached the bowl, and lifted it clean from the tray, I heard the venomous whisper, "I shall kill you!"

It confounded me for a while. The sound had come from somewhere close by. I could almost swear that it came from Fatty. But why should Fatty threaten to kill me? I, who had held his portion of roast lamb for him till the last instant and given it to him before I picked up my first, and probably only, food of the day.

I looked around. At least sixteen pair of identical eyes stared at me. They all belonged to different faces, yet they were identical – same colour, form, size and expression. Slowly I turned my face towards my right and searched for Fatty. His face was there, next to me. But even his face carried the same eyes as everyone else on my table. There was no trace of friendship or affection in them. Only accusation and contempt glared at me.

Then I heard IT's voracious laugh – cries of newly hatched hungry baby-birds invaded my ears, a pack of hyenas opened their jaws and snarled at the bowl, a serpent opened its coils in the depth of my abdomen, and I felt Fatty's breath at the back of my neck.

Quite instinctively, I got hold of the metallic spoon with my second hand; and turned it around so that the broader concave part sat firmly in my palm, while its thin pointed shaft projected outwards. I am not a man of violence, but if anyone had tried at that moment to rob me of my only sustenance at hand, I surely would have stuck that spoon in his gut from the wrong end.

I had known IT ever since my childhood. Every time I had a pocket full of sweets, IT would turn up in the eyes of other kids. But it was not children only who held IT in their eyes. Grown-up persons of status and esteem, even elders, who never learnt to be satisfied with their own share, had Longing as a permanent part of their nature. I had seen IT in many disguises but had not expected it to be in that gathering. But, of course, IT had to be there.

I re-directed my attention to my adversaries and steadied myself on my feet.

IT found my stand rather funny. Jokingly it asked, "Will you really take them on?"

I looked at the heaving flesh around me. IT's question was not only in poor taste, but I found it also rather indecent

"Not as long as I am my own master." I gave IT a cryptic reply.

IT meditated on it for some seconds, shook its head and said, "I do not see any connection between you being your own master, the lust of these people for your bowl, and your defiant stance."

IT's perplexity pleased me. The reason IT did not see any connection was that there was none. Two of my teachers in philosophy had changed their job after four months or so of debates on logic with me and my class fellows. We appeared to have a natural gift for building up argumentations in which nothing ever made sense to anyone but us, despite the methodically correct application of the rule of logic. The force of the degree of consensus among us was so convincing that several of our teachers seriously thought about early retirement, believing that their wits were already spent, when we regularly and unitedly rejected their efforts to pass on to us their treasures of knowledge.

On the other hand, IT's information that those people lusted for my bowl disturbed me. I had seen them practice their desires on a host of victims which had the misfortune of being laid within their reach on the tables. And no matter how passionate their desires might have been, I was not there to be licked by anybody.

I remembered a trick from my childhood which used to be a sure guarantee against compulsive tasters. With a

few dozen eyes as my witness I spat on the burning tip of the island in the brandy lake, hoping that its visual effect, and the arrest of the rising spirit from my bowl, would pacify the ardour of desire in that gourmet company.

"How fantastic!" ejaculated the man from behind me. "I have seen this delight served on TV, and always wondered how they took the heat out of the Ice."

After that, in the tradition of the best of apes, he also imitated my method to do away with the fire, and the greedy eyes.

A few moments later an extremely worried looking man approached him and asked, "Is there something wrong?"

"Not that I know of," answered my follower.

"I saw you perform an unusual act in your dessert," said the enquirer; at the same time he glanced at the man in the red jacket who was watching us from the main door. He was obviously the general manager.

"My dear young man!" The man exclaimed and added, "It is cream you see which is covering the fruit."

"And what is that frothy substance covering the cream?" The-dear-young-man asked in a nervous voice.

"If the rich can do it in their homes then why can't we do it here?" the man with the extinguished brandy flame said in the manner of a true democrat, and gave us all a triumphant look.

"He did it first," screeched the lady with an abundance of mass but restricted height.

"Did you, sir?" the assistant asked me with wide eyes.

"Have done it since I have been recommended," I answered calmly.

"Recommended by whom?" he was very shaky now. Recommendations were not something which one challenged openly.

"By the man who must have known what he was talking about," I hit him with our own special branch of reasoning.

That put a dead end to his inquisitiveness. He shook his head a couple of times and said in an almost convincingly pleasant tone, "Very well sir, I hope you enjoy the recommended concoction."

Then he turned towards the other man, bowed a little and wished him success as well, cast a quick look at the rest of persons around us to see if the recommendation was coming in vogue, noticed the indetermination in others, smiled and retreated to his position behind the boss.

"May I ask you about the source who made the recommendation?" the previously offended lady was now intrigued.

"I was recommended by IT," I could not think of anyone else.

"By it?" she raised her eyebrows on her narrow forehead.

"No, not by it, but IT?" I whispered in her ear, and winked salaciously when she looked up.

"I see," she said in a low voice, turned quickly and left the room empty between Fatty and me.

Fatty's expression was not changed. "You can fool them but not me," he said in an emotion-laden tone and added, "I always thought that you were a friend one could depend upon."

"Of course you can. Didn't you see how I held your meat for you?" I tried to defend myself from an accusation which appeared totally baseless to me.

"But what is my meat as compared to the beauty which you are holding in your hands now?"

He finished the sentence by licking his lips.

My eyes guided me to the beauty in my hand. It did not look so pretty. The strawberries were submerged in a puddle of loose ice-cream through which small channels of unchilled brandy had broken out. It appeared as if I stood there holding a cup of coffee with sour cream floating in it. I darted a questioning glance at Fatty. He stood there all tarnished as if he saw his beloved publicly soiled by a friend turned foe.

"You find this mixture beautiful?" I enquired.

"Yes!" he replied softly. "I am a man in love".

For the first time since I had taken possession of the dessert, he raised his eyes from it and stared at me. There

were signs of tears in them. His whole body swayed gently when he whispered, "Absolutely ravishing!"

I watched him as he continued to sway. I felt a roll of thunder build in the depth of my belly. I wanted to burst into a fit of laughter. As the tremor started and I was about to open my mouth and release the storm when I heard IT say in earnest, "Don't! The beauty is always in the eyes of the beholder, and at the moment you are in the middle of a gathering of dedicated lovers."

"Gathering of dedicated lovers!" I exclaimed scornfully.

"This bunch of gluttons is unfit to be described as *lovers* in any form of that noble species."

I let my eyes glide over the whole lot of them, and damn it if I saw a single being who would resemble any of the great lovers I had read about in all the classics! Instead, a variety of breathing blubber seemed to have invaded the place with intentions which in no way could be considered as loving; at least not by the victims of their intentions.

"You do not understand," declared IT. "What greater expression of love is there than to become one with that which you love?"

Without turning my head I tried to think of someone whom I might have seen there and wanted to become *one* with. There was no member of the opposite sex in my close vicinity who had the dimensions which did not

pose a lethal threat to my oneness, if I ever let her exercise an act of love-making on me.

"Imagine yourself to be loved and then slowly released from the bond of appearances, and taken deep into the warmth of a spacious receptacle by the caresses of an ardent tongue. There you are worked upon by voluminous baths of vital juices which dissolve your essence from the unnecessary covering, and then by absorption make you one with your lover." IT was now in a state of an orgasmic flush.

I had started to feel uncomfortable. I had heard that the French had a special taste for the things which they loved, but IT's description of caresses by an ardent tongue appeared to have far more deadly consequences than those which I associated with the Latin touch.

"I shall never make this mistake again," Fatty made a solemn declaration.

"Which mistake?" I could not resist the question.

"To give my whole body to the main course of the occasion and forget about the absolute pleasures which come in the end. If I was not slow to react when he brought this vessel-of-joy you would never have beaten me to it," he said that regretfully. At the same time anger had started to give timbre to his voice.

"Do you want it?" I asked him.

"After you have put your mark on it?"

"Just a slip of judgement, but I never laid my tongue on it." I confessed.

"It is enough that you laid your hands on it. *You thought that it was yours.* Yours! While I stood beside you paying tribute to the majestic glow with which it blessed the otherwise insipid world of ours. Don't you see that you are a stranger in the party of epicures?" He looked at me benignly and added, "I take you along with me to the intercourses where the mouth serves as the entry to the pleasures of the Sybarites. I take you there to see and learn, open yourself to the world of smells and taste; but as a novice you are not expected to exceed the limits of proper conduct. Today, right in front of some of the high priests of edacity you humbled me and some other brethren, by depriving us the climax of our devotion."

I appreciated Fatty for several reasons, but at that moment I started to build up a dislike for that fat elephantine brute, and was about to drench him with a shower of abuse, to bring him back from the distant realm of epicures and Sybarites to that bloody overcrowded restaurant where a pack of rotunds had begun to sweat and belch after their bout of voracity.

Suddenly I heard IT's voice, "Please don't hurt him. He is, actually, your friend and meant every word he said."

That saved Fatty from the bath of dirty language which I had just prepared for him from my huge reservoir of profanity.

"Tell me why these people eat so much?" I asked IT instead.

"It is like sexual intercourse. You can have a quick shot and screw someone, or indulge yourself in a feast of love-making. To you perhaps their involvement appears to be just mass consumption, but for them it is a prolonged communion with the object of their desire," IT explained to me the passion behind gluttony.

"What is the point? They just eat, and eat and eat."

"What is the point behind any pursuit which is considered pleasurable by its own fans? You play squash; so, what do you do? Two persons who consider themselves perfectly sane get into a small enclosure and then chase a tiny robber ball for an hour or so like demented persons. You sweat, swear, hurt each other, hit the walls and then come out feeling good. Or worse still, think of twenty-two idiots who for an hour and a half beat the hell out of a small leather ball, break each other's legs, kick or spit at anything within their reach, and all that watched and enjoyed by several thousand dunces who sit in jammed places, purring, growling and crying like copulating cats. If that was not bad enough, these cheering idiots get into bouts of mutual bashing when all that is pleasurable is done and over with. So, why don't you tell me what is the point behind people chasing balls like mad and beating each other?"

IT wanted me to expound the psychology of collective insanity.

"Do I understand you right that all these gorgers are here strictly for the sensual rapture and not really busy eating like pigs to soothe their craving for food just for the stomach?"

"Can't speak for *all* of them. I presume there are people here who have had a past full of deprivation and hunger, and their paramount interest is to compensate for the period when life was empty. And I believe there are those who stuff themselves because they can't bear to see another person eating and enjoying. This later kind can eat till they become sick, and are actually a disgrace to the true lovers of the pleasures of the palate. The enthusiasts I referred to are the dedicated people who seek hidden treasures deep in the tissue which forms the animal and vegetable body."

With growing respect, I re-examined the throng which I had previously thought to be an army of locust, but which could be, though I still carried heavy doubts, an assembly of sophisticated masters of the Tongue Arts.

"Do you mean that most of these heavyweights consider themselves culinary Romeos at heart?" I asked.

"Not just *consider*. Every one of them *is a culinary Romeo* at heart, and all the way to the depth of his stomach."

I refrained from asking IT about all the oversized Juliets who waddled around me.

I put my hand on Fatty's shoulder and said, "Lover Boy! I apologise for my misconduct, and I promise never to touch my dessert before you in the future."

He studied my face intently, and then gave me a smile of genuine affection, pointed towards the bowl which was still clasped in my hand, and asked, "Are you going to consume it?"

I looked at the rather unsavoury mixture, and remarked loudly, "No, that would be adding insult to injury. Already I am guilty of sacrilege, and I propose that my redemption be granted by common consent of the worthy guests on this table by the addition of their mark to mine in this bowl."

With that, I handed over the bowl to Fatty. He held it for a moment looking perplexed, and then he added his froth to mine and passed it to the next person who also granted me redemption. By the time the bowl returned to me, there was ample froth in it to guarantee me absolution forever.

Holding the bowl in my left and pulling Fatty with the right hand I moved towards the main door aiming for the general manager, who had been watching us all the time.

The man instantly looked like death itself. With a face as grey as cold ashes, he lifted both hands to protect

himself and pleaded, "I swear that it was made of fresh cream and hand plucked strawberries."

I bestowed upon him a merciful nod, and said, "I know."

Then I put the bowl in his hands and instructed him, "Bury it deep in the back garden. This cup holds the mark of many lovers."

He did not understand the subtlety of my expression but shook his head in agreement, and promised, "I shall do so with pleasure."

Fatty and I grabbed the first taxi we saw and went to our favourite steak house. After we were comfortably seated I waved to the waiter. He recognised us and came straight to our table and asked, "What will it be today for the start?"

"I think we shall open the evening with dessert."

"With the dessert, Sir?" He inquired doubtfully.

Both Fatty and I nodded in accord.

Ever since that evening, we take the dessert for the opener, and Fatty always picks the bowl first.

Millions of Hands

I looked at him and wondered if he ever had a mother, and a father. I didn't mean a woman who opened her thighs and dropped him in the hostile, external world; or still worse, who let someone pull him out of his place of refuge, all terrified; and that somebody first slapped him a couple of times on his arse and then deposited him beside his producer against her will. Nor did I mean a man who cursed him at his arrival for being a further burden to his meagre economy; never mind what his faith told him about the great Caretaker who provided for all.

What I meant was – had there ever been a woman who held him tight against her bosom when he cried, washed him in tepid water and kissed his body to feel the gentle warmth which only emanates from the bodies of very young babies, caressed his cheeks and talked to him in soft tones when he showed signs of distress? And a man who held his hand when he felt unsteady, guided him at times of uncertainty, taught him skill when he felt like learning, or answered his look for the assurance with a smile of reassurance?

I was certain that neither of the two had existed; because if he had ever experienced even the rudiments of primal animal love, then that man would never have sent all those thousands of young innocent men to their

graves; promising them eternal bliss, provided they were willing to give up their present gift of life - with or without sharing his ideology.

I looked at him again - white hair bristling out of dry skin, yellowish nails protruding from wrinkled paws, hardened dark eyes which radiated the temper of a mind which, a long time ago, had closed itself to the reception of all that did not harmonise with his idea of obedience of his own creator; who, in turn, was himself a creation of some fanciful mind several thousand years ago. I also wondered about what his newly washed and pressed clothes concealed? A slightly arched and withered body, supported by two unsteady legs; and which in its frontal, middle depression contained the residue of his now departed masculine virility - two cockled balls topped by a prawn. What did that creature have to do with the concept known as the *Future*? When I said 'tomorrow', I meant the day when the sunshine would fill our hearts, children laugh, birds sing, the wind caress us and we dance; when there would be no begging for a simple meal, no slavery of body or soul, no tyranny. What did his tomorrow contain? The day when the trumpet should sound, earth crack, lightning strike, mountains explode, mothers abandon their children, brothers slay brothers, and we all forsake the Earth and return to *his Maker*. To me that old man was forever caught in a network of tales from the past and, at the same time, dreaming about a

life away from our planet. The main structure of *his* belief stemming from roots of over three thousand years, the great guardian of *his* world described by an inexperienced youngster who lost his own life rather hastily while redeeming the rest of mankind, and the central hero of his saga drawn from a bunch of tribes for whom the height of human ecstasy consisted in laying youth in gardens filled with exotic fruits, and in which rivers of non-intoxicating wines ran to quench the thirst of his fellow men-of-sand.

As a matter of fact, one of the greater enigmas for me had always been - why able-bodied and able-minded people accepted that the world should be ruled and terrorised by aged, infirm, won-out tyrants who, when viewed from whichever angle, never could have a personal interest in those events which were to affect the Earth in the future; and, therefore, spent their powers, relentlessly, to secure a place in some world which they believed would be their permanent abode, while they mercilessly sacrificed the younger generations to reach their fanciful destination? I was told that we did so as an act of gratitude for the efforts and labour which our fore-parents and parents went through to bring us about in the world. I tried to think back and remember if I was consulted by my parents for my advent on the globe, and if I was considered a participant in their rejoicement for bringing forth a being who was born obliged. My

memory failed to provide any trustworthy information. I presumed that there was joy felt by my parents, there often is that feeling at the moment of most births; but I was not certain if that joy was experienced because they had contributed to the world a new member who should have a mind of his own, or if they had begotten a debtor who after being fed for a while and some schooling would be taxed for the rest of their days for being a party to a contract in which he had no say. That I was a product of *love-making* I was certain of; but if I was also a produce of *love*, I wasn't quite sure. If the lives of most of my contemporaries were any indication to go by then selfless love seemed to play a trivial role in filial relations; instead, self-interest and personal motivation appeared to be the dominant universal factors. To my mind the way millions of parents accepted, and at times even praised, the slaughter of their children in the name of religion, patriotism, political ideology or even the group honour, on the recommendation of the ruling leaders for their own definite preservation here on earth, and only apparent, future, expected rewards for the slain in a mythical world, was anything but an indication of parental love which is so often extolled in our myths.

And at that moment I was seated within three metres of one of the biggest executioners in the world

I was there, along with eight other advisers, to assist him in defending his land; and in that process destroy

the evil opponents. Which, in concrete figures, meant the death of many thousands of young men, several of them teenagers, sent to the front line with the blessings of their loving parents!

I was not actually a member of the delegation in the capacity of an adviser, but merely as an interpreter. Being a committed coward, a bend of mind of which I was rather proud, I had little place in such commissions. Had the original interpreter not withdrawn his name, and I suspected that he did so after good thinking; I would have been many thousand kilometres away comfortably seated in my armchair sharing a poet's dream world. And had my employer told me about the exact nature of the job I would still be in my armchair, behind a door with double locks and a steel safety chain. I was rather hurriedly called upon to undertake the assignment at a more-than-reasonably good fee, supplemented with a promised quick return to my haven. I had fallen for that enticement. Later on, at a height of eleven thousand metres, I did not really have a very open choice to follow or not to the prescribed destination. Besides, my eight companions never bothered to ask me about my preferences. Behind their stiff uniforms, and glare of polished metal on their breasts, were present brains for which bodies like me were similar to electronic appliances, where a particular sound fed into the two lateral holes in my skull on its emission from the third

frontal hole was expected to become comprehensible to different people present.

To keep the maximum distance from *him* I breathed rather slowly – that gave my chest an extra space of five millimetres or so.

I listened to him again.

"With the help of the Almighty, we shall conquer that culprit. We are not against his people but we cannot, of course, forgive those who support him," said he.

I translated the statement, quite bewildered how he distinguished the people of his rival from his supporters when the machine guns blew their heads off.

The eight shook their heads in unison. They had no difficulty whatsoever in understanding the same statement

"Our main problem is not defeating them, but what to do after their fall when the bigger forces which support them come into open confrontation with us." He said that, and looked upwards towards the roof, and beyond it

That time he was not so sure if the help of his *Almighty* would accomplish the defeat of the *bigger forces* as well.

The eight swallowed that information too. They also seemed doubtful about the successful intervention of the *Almighty*.

"Many of our young men have gone to paradise for the glory of our victory ..."

My mind instantaneously raced back to a scene on my television screen when a documentary was shown on that war. I remembered the close up of one of *his* young men who was badly shot. Lying there in that torrid sand, a swarm of desert flies flew in and out of the orifice in his face, while he emitted a few moans which sounded more like groans of abandoned hope than hymns of praise to his Creator, who should open the gates of his paradise to him the moment he stopped respiring. It had looked as if his earthly body was adamant to delay his soul's entry in the glorious home for the martyrs in the heavens above. I had wondered if he wouldn't have preferred a glass of water and some balm on his wounds then and there to the rivers full of wine, and gardens adorned with servile damsels, which waited for him elsewhere.'

I heard a low cough.

I raised my head and found many piercing eyes staring at me. With my retreat to the television scene, I had broken contact with his conversation and not communicated his precious thoughts to his advisers. I stared straight into his eyes. He beamed his attention at me. It was a hypnotic look. I also concentrated, deflected his energy, and then penetrated through his cover to apprehend the being which lay behind those eyes. He narrowed his gaze and murmured a few words to divert my progress, but I was already through.

Then I heard IT's foul laughter – the smell of stale fetid sweat invaded my nose, rank flavour of rancid old butter spread on my taste-buds, a splitter-bomb exploded in the pit of my stomach, and I felt slimy leeches crawl up my legs.

"We meet again!" IT smirked.

"So it is you hidden behind this pompous facade?" I said to IT in amazement

IT deliberated for a fraction of the second and then said, "What did you expect?"

Of course, *what did I expect!*

Yes! What did I expect?

Damn it! What could have been there behind those magnanimous shows put up by those tough, iron-balled world rulers except IT?

I admit that it had not been easy to recognise IT in that disguise. I had met IT many times before – in the eyes of small children terrified by vicious elders, in the cries of hungry stray dogs which suddenly confronted a larger belligerent beast, in the voices of refugees in alien lands questioned by hostile officials, or on the faces of street prostitutes when settling rates with strange obnoxious men.

But on all those occasions I saw Fear present among the underdogs.

"But then isn't an *old man* also an *underdog*?" I asked myself.

No, not every old man. There were persons who matured into dignified elders, shared with the youth what life had taught them and accepted from them what the new experiences in life provided. And then there were persons who slipped from one phase of life into the next resisting at each step any change which time brought with it, trying to hold fast to those few strings which formed the fabric of their existence in which their being was woven so helplessly. It was that latter type which harboured Fear, expected rebellion in any progress, tried to impede all advancement and did their best to reach those summits from which they could dictate their will over the others, in order to circumvent their own fears.

"Did I say something which confounded you?" I heard the question.

I wasn't clear if the words were spoken by *him* or IT. So I gave a neutral reply, "If you were to repeat the sentence I would be thankful."

He watched me intensely for a while and then added, "You appear tired. I shall use our own translator."

With that, he nodded at one of the persons present. He stepped forward, took a place beside me, and started doing my job for their benefit

He was good at his task.

I kept quiet and tried to analyse the situation. Had he known that I had recognised IT?

I knew that one dog could smell another dog, but did that apply to cowards as well?

Yet we were not cowards of the same breed. I belonged to that category which treasured life, avoided the limelight, minded my own business and believed in the principle of 'live and let live'. He, on the contrary, treasured *his* life, had been an appointed guide of *his* people for a long time, made the lives of other people *his* business, and defied the adage of 'live and let live'. He had, actually, in spite of the open acceptance of defeat by his opponent, another despot, gotten a multitude of lives wasted on both sides because he wanted to humble one single individual for a personal triumph. A triumph he expected to achieve for himself by making speeches from behind bullet-proof screens, in which he told his passionate followers that the bullets fired by the enemy in their bodies were like roses which were thrown upon the martyrs by the jubilant angels at the occasion of their entry into the paradise.

Why he chose to put up a protective screen between himself and the roses cast by the angels was never taken up for discussion in his speeches.

Worst of all, though I had recognised IT clearly, I failed to assign it a definite identity. Fear was a natural constituent in our reservoir of feelings. Along with Love, Hate, Curiosity, Adventure, Chance and many others it was an elementary force which both propelled and

protected Life. As a natural feeling, there was nothing malicious about it. But the vibrations which IT sent me in its laughter were overwhelmingly ominous.

What *sort of Fear* was harboured by that man?

My eyes re-focused on his face. He uttered further words of praise for his all-knowing and all-powerful deity, and then asked one of the advisers how they could convert the expected theoretical help by his Lord into practical executions of his intentions.

The adviser, rather well versed in the kind of talk that was appropriate for the situation, also lauded the infinite wisdom of the despot's lord, and very casually handed over the catalogue of the latest weapons to one of the assistants, adding that at relatively low-cost heavy losses would be inflicted upon the enemy.

All present praised *their* lords.

I also nodded. Not to show solidarity with them, but to keep me out of probable trouble.

"How come they intrigued you out of your shelter?" IT enquired.

I just shrugged. What else could I have done?

"We have met many times before, but never in this kind of situation. Why does this autocrat with unlimited powers bear you as the principal-agent?" I decided to have a direct communication with IT.

"Autocrat? Unlimited powers? Perhaps that is the way you see him today. I have been with him since the day he

was born and refused this world at the very first glimpse. Since then he has waded his way up, horrified and scared of what the others might do to him if he ever took a wrong step. All the time building up his own list of infliction which he would exercise on the others if conditions permitted him."

"But why? What did the others do to him to make him that bitter?" I was trying to get some grasp of his personality.

"They didn't *do* anything to him" IT replied.

"They didn't do *anything* to him?" I must have sounded confused.

IT sneered, and said, "Yes, they didn't do anything to him. From the day of his birth till he reached maturity the others ignored him. He grew up in the shadow of those who received attention, care and response; hating and detesting their progress, and simultaneously terrified about what the others would do to him if they got to know his true feelings. Without me as his life-long ally, he should have perished a long time ago."

"And what can an ally like you accomplish but bring pain and loneliness to your friends?" I was also full of contempt.

"To *my* friends?" IT said in a mocking tone.

"Who else?"

IT farted one of its nauseating laughs and asked, "Aren't you being totally blind? Don't you see who my *friends* are?"

I tried to think of people in whom Fear dwelled – the poor, subjugated, alienated or deformed. There was a whole lot of them, but none who could make Fear so boastful of its alliance with them.

IT successfully read my thoughts and said, "No, not them. Not the ones who are perpetual victims of others and live under my shadow. I mean those who have adopted me as their driving force, and use this force to overcome the shortcomings which they were either born with or which were imposed upon them by others, and then they go on to reach those positions from where they can avenge their griefs."

I thought of people who sat on seats of power and could have been probable allies of IT.

Suddenly cold sweat broke out on my forehead. I could see them now. How many were there?

There was this lunatic who regularly recited lines from the earlier stages in his life. Mixing fiction with reality, he had resolutely thwarted all plans of world peace put forward by other leaders. He also lauded *his* Lord regularly, and putting his trust in Him he had sold weapons, both openly and secretly, to the killers from East and West to spread the heat of His love among the others. His greatest admirer was the lady across the

waters who has had him as her dream-hero since her youth, and even after reaching middle age could never abandon the images she had carried with her in her prime. With all her maternal love and other attributes which are associated with the *gentle sex* she had sent the sons of other mothers to one of the far corners of the empire to fight and die in a meaningless war for the honour of another majestic lady, who in turn had always detested the defender of her honours for her cold-bloodedness and scorn against most of the citizens in her own coun.try.

So how many friends of Fear were out there posing as brave champions of their people's cause, while they mercilessly pushed their followers towards those darker ends which they had presented as befitting for them?

Once again I directed my attention to the old man who for nearly a decade had been the spiritual as well as the political leader of his people. Through the medium of his sermons to the nation, drawing heavily on the rewards and punishments which would be bestowed or inflicted upon them by their supreme Lord, he had procured conditions which had successively pushed his country several hundred years back in time. In that process he had re-subjugated children and women to a primitive state of slavery, sentenced thousands of youths to an early death by sending them to the battle-field, and eliminated all intellectual opposition by straightforward

public execution for being the agents of devil, the foreign powers or both. To realise his plans, both internally and externally, he had asked for and received full assistance from those foreign powers whose name he had associated with the devil when he condemned the thinkers in his country.

I tuned my hearing to his voice.

"Our country is just the starting point. In the very near future you shall see the flame of our inspiration kindle many fires in other parts of the world," he said with total confidence.

No one among the listeners opened his mouth. His own countrymen had no doubts about his ability to start fires - each time the enemy fired the whole bloody country was a devastating proof of his claim. While the invited advisers, although definitely impressed by his potential, must have been resolutely against seeing the flames ignited by his followers light their homes.

I cleared my throat

He turned his head towards me and eyed me the way butchers normally look at lambs in the slaughterhouses.

"Do you have something on your mind?" He asked.

"The schemes which you have mentioned stretch over many years. If I understand you correctly then you also expect to implement them personally?" I found myself uttering these words.

"Yes. What is so odd about that?" He inquired.

"Don't! You fool. Keep quiet!" IT's warning reached my ears, but it was too late. I had already opened my mouth.

"You are a very old man; what happens when you die?"

He stared at me as if he did not hear my voice, and expected me to say something audible.

In spite of being a recognised coward, I re-addressed my sentence to the dictator.

Deadly silence prevailed. He blinked once, shook his head twice and then closed his eyes. I presumed that he was trying to comprehend the implications of my statement. Apparently, the idea of his own death was not an active part of his thought process.

He suddenly recited some verses of poetry in which his Lord was described to be from the beginning of time till the end of it. Then he sat still. That surprised me because I had expected him to recite the same verses again, but that time his name substituted for his Lord's name. But he remained silent. Suddenly I remembered that I was confronting a man who was fraught with fear, and although he might be ruthless when it came to exercising his mind over other men it was beyond him to dare challenge that authority from which he drew his sanction.

"He may not admit it, but does he not consider himself immortal?" I asked IT.

"Don't they all?" The person you just addressed as an old man has never aged since he made his pact with me.

The thought of lost youth, advanced age and death as you know it is for those who live in your so-called world of reality in which comparisons are made about actual happenings. In my domain, all that does not appeal to a person is rejected as irrelevant and only those appearances are considered vital which suit his egotistical needs."

"Yet the inhabitants of your realm age, weaken and die like anyone else. So what is the difference?" I needed more clarification.

"One experiences the effect of a happening only when the mind grasps that particular situation. When a person never apprehend processes which you take as normal, then how can that person be consciously aware of the consequences of those processes? Death is the state in which the brain stops reacting to the incoming stimuli. Until that state finally prevails, there are many different intervening stages of consciousness in which a person, primarily by choice and later on as an acquired character, may refuse all that *really* threatens his ego and, instead, create far less potent entities – entities which are easily manoeuvrable – as hostile agents. Then enormous fuss is made over the threats which such hostile agents pose. In other words, instead of facing life as it is, a part reality part fantasy universe is built, which still lurks with dangers and threats, but such which are not considered uncontrollable by the creator of that universe." IT gave

me a lengthy lecture on the psychology of the terrified autocrats of our world.

"Am I living in a world which is ruled by a bunch of semi paranoids who, from behind a smokescreen of high morals and benevolent promises, have deluded the people all over after making some sort of united assembly of the avengers to escape their personal dreads?" I felt so dejected when I said that to IT.

"First of all I shall concede that my domain, as yet, does not include all people, but mainly those who have been conditioned to expect help from sources which extend beyond the normal human range – the unusual happenings which are propagandised as divine intervention. These are the people who await heroes and messiahs, and every time some pretender turns up on the scene, they rush to be his flock. On the contrary, any set which scrutinises such pretenders first, and accepts its leaders only after careful public choice and consensus, is a far more difficult group to master. Secondly, it is not the people you call *semi-paranoids* who have formed a union, but I provide a connecting link for all of them through which they may communicate, without being directly involved with one another. Left on their own, with all the mistrusts and suspicions which each of them harbours, they should sink one another in no time. I make them function,"

IT clarified. "But why?"

"What do you mean by 'But why?'" IT asked.

"I mean, why have you set up this network of maniacs who have the sufferings of other persons as the source of their pleasure?" I elaborated.

After a while, IT said, "Like any primary force I also have a domain of my own. Its members are the people who are naturally or circumstantially drawn to it. The man sitting in front of you was a born inhabitant of it, the feeling of his membership simply intensified by the ignoble treatment accorded to him when he tried to make contact with people of other domains. Can you imagine the emptiness which a recurring feeling of loneliness produces? No, you cannot. You are a coward. If ever loneliness haunted you, you would either seek company of others and if that was not available, find refuge in some book or other mental preoccupation to escape it. But what happens if a person neither finds harmony with the people around him, nor he gains affiliation with the thoughts of others which are given in books or similar reservoirs?"

IT's question was not an easy one to answer.

I took notice of the man sitting in front of me. I tried to visualise him as a young child – unloved, uncared for, unattended and afraid. I saw him growing up – feeling empty, bitter and fearful. Slowly he transformed into a young man – still lonely and bitter, but now resolute and revengeful. He reached middle age – his loneliness was

still there, yet his relation with Fear had altered. Instead of being a protective feeling it had become the aggressive force. He changed into the old man - not only the loneliness and regrets remained, but now he had also reached a position from which he could spread the feeling which had been his life-long companion. The more of IT around the more he found himself at ease.

And that applied to the millions of other possessed souls who had made a pact with Fear.

I concentrated and tried to think what the same person would have been if he had received love and attention when he was a child. I could not make out any definite personality but one thing was certain - he would have not been an ally of IT.

I looked at his face. He was still sitting in the same meditative posture which he had taken when I had raised doubts about his immortality. By a strange coincidence, all the others present were also sitting dead still - out of respect or because of fear.

Calmly I crossed the distance between him and me, softly placed my palm on the back of his hand and let it be there while human affection permeated through it to him. Probably the first time in his years he felt the warmth in another human being. Very slowly, he opened

his eyes and caught mine. His hand turned and he gently held my palm into his.

I heard the clock tick again. Time had stood still. Then he smiled.

"Under the circumstances, it would be appropriate if I were to devise plans which may also be workable for our children," he said in a determined tone.

"Yes, but to give these plans real meanings you will require *living* children, who may carry on with their completion after you are gone," I pointed out

A larger smile dawned upon his face, and he said, "How right you are!"

He took his eyes off mine, looked at my companions and said, "You may leave."

The colonel with the thick hair opened his mouth to interject

"You can leave." The old man gave the command.

They all left, but I had to stay - he still held my hand in his.

I searched through his eyes. There was no trace of IT. He must have annulled his pact with Fear.

"I have never met such an outspoken man as you, and I would like you to be one of my advisers in the reformulation of our policy. A policy which is based upon the real conditions and not wishful thinking."

To a coward like me, his words and invitation were more than a compliment.

I wished that I had millions of hands – hands which I would stretch out and place on the hands of all those who had never felt the warmth of human affection.

Anyhow, I had broken Fear's bond with one of his principal allies. That was not bad for a start.

Memory

The moment our eyes met I knew that I had found her. I had seen IT.

She entered the carriage, came directly to the seat opposite mine, put her handbag on the luggage holder, took off the jacket and hung it on the peg, occupied the seat, straightened her skirt with her palms, crossed her legs, folded the hands in her lap, looked at me and smiled- Albinoni's Adagio filled my ears, I saw a pair of entwined cobras dance in ecstasy, heavy perfume of Jasmine from a summer evening after the rain overwhelmed me; suddenly my mouth watered for the taste of salted and roasted, warm cashew nuts. I remembered the touch of her soft lips.

No matter which other impressions might have found their way to my mind, how could Memory ever fail me!

I smiled back.

She blushed a little.

"Are you also going to Heart City?" she asked.

I wanted to say, "I am going where you are going," but restrained myself to a single word, "Yes."

Some lines appeared around the eyes as her smile deepened.

"I was told that it is a lovely place," she said, and continued, "A place where dreams come true."

I didn't know where Heart City was, but I knew that to make my dream come true I did not need to travel to it – my dream's spirit sat just opposite to me; real and smiling.

Yet, I had a feeling that she was not aware of it. How could she know that IT was there?

Or, did she?

"Do you live there?"

"No," she shook her head, and then added, "But, I would like to. Wouldn't you?"

"Of course!" I answered enthusiastically; and silently completed my thought, "If you also move there; otherwise, I shall live wherever you do."

IT caught my thoughts and responded, "Hello there!" "Hello!" I replied in a soft whisper.

"I had started to doubt if we should ever meet again. It has been a long time," IT murmured.

Old times must have shown on my face because she said to me tenderly, "A penny for your thoughts!"

I tried to displace old recollections with a happy grin, and answered her, "I was far away, very far away."

"Already in the Heart City!" she conjectured.

I looked out of the window at the distant clouds which floated on the horizon, forming a dark hedge – like a patch of hurt grafted on the fabric of life. Always within the sphere of vision, following my journey out of their own will; yet, beyond my approach, painfully reminding

me of the days when we were together and thought of them as 'Cotton Palace', where we could go and hide if the sun turned unfriendly. I wondered if somehow I could reach them at that moment, bring some of them down to my cabin and let them hang outside the window, then would they have stayed there for a while to give me some shade or just vaporise and dissolve, leaving me again unsheltered before the burning sun?

I abandoned the clouds and retreated to my seat I blinked my eyes and found them both waiting for my reply.

"No," I said to both of them. To her I clarified, "Don't want to be there all by myself," and to IT I said, "How can you talk about *meeting again* when I have never lost you?"

"Never?"

"Never!" I re-asserted.

"Who are you searching for?" she said hesitantly.

"Am I searching for someone?"

"Why would you go to Heart City if you aren't looking for someone?" the smile faded from her face; instead, pain took over.

I wanted to tell her that I was not going to Heart City. I never intended to, and now I definitely was not even required to. I had already found that *someone*.

I gazed into her eyes and asked, "Are *you* searching for someone, too?"

She thought for a short while and then said, "Yes, I am searching. Oh, I have been searching for such a long time; actually ever since I lost contact with *him*."

Two transparent pearls hung at the comers of her eyes. With one finger she felt the warmth of her lips, and then returned the hand to her lap.

"I have travelled to many places looking for him before I became aware of Heart City. In vain, of course," she took a sigh, and continued, "they say that every person has its other half in another person, and when these two meet then all the peacocks in the world rejoice and dance in unison. In the East, they believe that a perfect union of the body and soul leads to Nirvana."

Had there been a single glimpse of recognition in her eyes I would have gotten up and danced in unison with all the peacocks in this world, and the next one - if there was one.

While the path to Nirvana lay less than a metre from me, I was caught within the confines of Memory's domain. I searched in her eyes again, but found no reflection which resembled me.

"How long will you go on falling like this?" IT asked.

Yes! How long?

I had also travelled from place to place since I had lost *her*. Several times I had tried to fill the emptiness left by *her* with other bodies and discovered that while the eyes were so easily cheated the sense of smell and touch were

far more critical judges to deceive. It is true that on most occasions the physical hunger was appeased; yet, the scars left by *her* on the mind smouldered incessantly. I had told myself that with the passage of time the ghost from my past would also find its solace and go its own way, leaving me free to start anew on the path to my happiness. Yet, on each new pursuit, at every bend, I ran into a whiff of the smell, an echo of some laughter, a familiar gait, or some haunting tune which brought back the reverberations from *her* being so strong that my whole person trembled with the impact of Memory.

I recalled that while my body pressed against hers used to set on torrents of steaming sweat, my flesh rubbed against other flesh would merely enhance the chilling feeling of distance between us.

"When she came in I got the feeling that you had eventually found her for me and I could bid you 'Farewell'. But somehow I sense a deception. What are you up to?" I answered, and asked IT.

Memory burst into wild laughter. It took some seconds before IT regained control over its hysterics, and then said, "You thought that I came to you with a new home in which you might gain access and bid me 'Farewell!' forever. Wouldn't that be suicidal for me?"

I studied Memory. For the first time, I felt a dubiousness towards IT. Memory had been with me since the evening I had learnt that the woman I lived with was no longer

the same person I had believed her to be. The discovery had come by the utterance of a single sentence. I still remembered the way numbness came to rescue me when her voice made its contact with my eardrums and slowly, but with intensely growing pain, the physical vibrations got converted to recognisable words with meanings, and the mind eventually comprehended and accepted the message. When the cognition returned my love had gone; in its place I found Memory as a comforting companion, and a woman sitting in front of me, who appeared to be vaguely familiar and said things to me which made little sense. Very politely I had asked her to go where her heart was, and leave me in peace. I did not want to waste my time listening to some tales from bygone times told by a stranger; I had lost someone precious and I must search for her as soon as I had picked up the pieces of my broken heart and set them together with hope. Then, with Memory as my guide, I had sought her overall; but, until that day without success.

The very instant I recognised IT, I had thought that Memory had eventually led me to her; yet, that was apparently not the case – not with that tinge of rebuke in IT's last expression. Now when I sat across from her it was not easy to accept that she searched for someone else; still, IT had implied that such was the case.

"And what happens to the people who never find their other half? Do they ever attain Nirvana?" I continued our conversation.

She took her eyes away from the same clouds which I had thought of catching and hanging outside the window and studied her palms. I wondered if she also saw those clouds as patches of pain, or were they small parasols of hope which promised her shade on the path of her pursuit. When she lifted her glance the smile had returned to her eyes.

She said, "Everybody finds the other half in Heart City. Whenever you lose someone that person heads for Heart City, and if you get in there you are bound to meet."

I had a feeling that there was more wishing than certainty in her tone.

"Not everybody has heard of Heart City. You said earlier that before you learnt of its existence you searched for *him* everywhere."

I pursued my enquiry.

"Those are the really unlucky ones." Grief had made her voice shaky.

"You are all the time talking about those who had been in love and lost that person. But what about the people who never succeed in even meeting their other half?"

She opened her mouth and tried to answer me, but the words wouldn't leave her tongue. Her whole body rocked gently as she closed her eyes to concentrate.

"She is wrong when she thinks that *everyone* has one's counterpart in *another person*," IT came in on her behalf, "but only those who realise the incompleteness in the totality of their experience of the Self and, consequently, become conscious of that part which is amiss. On the other hand, the multitude is so influenced by the impressions imprinted upon their minds by external sources that they never even realise that they have a personality of their own. They go through the whole length of their journey like tiny, fragile bubbles which appear on the vast ocean of life, floating there till their time runs out and then they just burst, losing all significant traces of their existence."

Without opening her eyes she said, "Until you mentioned it just now, it had not occurred to me that there could be persons who are so unfortunate that they never come across another being that makes their hearts beat in accord. Of course, it could take time before one eventually finds the real other half. And before that, there could be semblances, which for a short while might give one a feeling of completion, but it does not take long to recognise the imperfection of such feeling. Yet, there are probably people out there who are totally alien to this rapturous union."

A perceptible shiver went through her body as she thought of all the lonely souls who had neither met, nor would meet their other halves.

I looked at her and wondered how much she and I were victims of our own cultures? How helplessly we were caught in that web of directions which told us what to like and dislike, and even when one broke away from the presented primary code of manners, how difficult it was to dodge the secondary mode of behaviour which was imprinted in the subconscious?

I thought of all those people and cultures in which human relations were built upon the practical requirements of situations. Other than transitory meetings in which physical and material needs were satisfied, nothing was promised to or expected from the person in contact. Were those people and cultures inferior to us? Or, were we fools who instead of accepting those pleasures which Life offered us in its daily course, spent our lives seeking those hidden treasures which we were told were the worthy goals? Wouldn't it have been better if I had just shrugged at the utterance of that sentence, told that woman to 'piss off, and then moved on to enter the first pair of arms which opened to embrace me?

"No, you couldn't have done it," IT said to me.

"Why not?"

"Because the grasp of the first pair of open arms wouldn't necessarily have given you the gratification of a loving embrace."

"Still better than roaming from face to face, yearning for an expression of tenderness, once so familiar," I reasoned with IT.

"Why didn't you?" IT asked.

Why didn't I?

Didn't I?

Well! I didn't tell her to *piss off* – that was not my style. I had always believed that any of us had the right to break our bond of affection and make it known, if and when there was no genuine love felt towards the other. This much basic freedom and honesty were the foundations on which the structure of our personal relations was built and we had discussed it on our wedding night. But once love died out, it could not be permissible to go on consuming another being emotionally and financially because the parasite found it convenient. Therefore, while I had accepted her basic right to follow her heart without reservations, I found it unforgivable that she had wasted so many years of my life when she already knew that she was using me. I had also instantaneously decided that she must not be allowed to take any further advantage of me in any way; no matter what it took to respect both decisions. And it took a lot. Financially it did not matter – I was born empty-handed and that was the way I intended to die. Emotionally I was depleted – I missed *her*. Strangely enough, that is not how I felt towards the woman whom I had asked to leave me in

peace. Actually, it was amazing to experience how a person whose body and essence I had loved for years, lost her essence in a matter of seconds and the body changed from an object of an earnest desire to sixty kilograms of old meat which disgusted me. Since then I had searched for her *lost* essence.

Many arms had opened to take me in their embrace but Memory had always intervened and reminded me of some little thing which deviated; not much, but sufficient to make the heart miss a beat

Was IT actually assisting me to find her, or had IT taken her place? I could not help thinking about it Irrespective of the actual units of time spent, for me the whole process in which the arrival of numbness, her departure, the return of cognition and my discovery of Memory took place was a single link of events where all four happenings merged into a unit of experience. All I remembered was that after her disclosure *she* was gone and I was left with *Memory*.

So, had Memory come to comfort me or was IT there to fill her place.

I had never seriously minded carrying IT with me; although, at times I would have preferred if it had left me alone for a short while - to attend to other openings which circumstances provided for me.

But at that instant, I resented IT's presence in her.

But, then again, would I have recognised *her* if IT had not been there?

The physical resemblance was unbelievable – same hair, face, eyes and almost the same build. In fact, even before she had boarded the train and I had caught only a lateral flash of her through the window, something deep in my subconscious had immediately awoken to prepare me for her arrival. And when she blushed the same way as *she* had done when we met the first time I was overjoyed that Memory had brought her to me.

Yet, something *primaeval* was now warning me to watch out for IT.

I took a deep breath and concentrated to mobilise those energies which are vital for precision when critical judgements are made. I held my breath and let the blood go to my brain to provide it with maximum fuel. Slowly the haze which had arisen from the chasm of separation and narrowed my vision to her memory for such a long time started fading. My mind cleared up. The sun no longer posed a threat; instead, the sunshine gave brilliance and colour to the world outside my window. The hedge of clouds far away appeared as if it was an old discarded bandage which I had taken away from my wounds, and a look at my Self told me that the sores were healed.

I turned my attention to her.

She was again peering out of the window when she asked, "What was she like?"

"Look into my eyes and you will see her," is what my heart wanted to say; instead, the mind told her, "Someone like you."

She kept her gaze out and said, "I hope you will find her."

I did not want to find her, any longer.

"I have found *you!*" without opening the lips I cried so loud in the depth of my soul that my whole being shuddered.

Had I?

I had to find out.

"What was he like?" I asked.

She smiled as usual and said, "Very nice and tender."
"Where did you lose him?"

"I don't really know. I was in my early twenties and gone through a rather difficult period in my life when I heard of him. Actually, I was told about him by a friend of mine who had warned me against his charm. He said that I would be taken in if I was not on my guard. Then one day in the kitchen I heard his voice, and I knew that I was in love. He was rather taken aback when I disclosed my love to him. He would not come out when the others were around. I didn't care. I wanted him all to myself anyhow. So we met when no one else was near."

"A secret love!" I interposed.

"No, not really," she paused for a moment and continued, "I could never keep secrets. If something happened it had to be told. So, all my friends knew, but we did not intermingle with others."

She studied the pattern of clouds on the horizon for a few seconds and then returned to the conversation, "You see, he was not like most others; and I was not certain how much he would be accepted by the people who were close to me. Personally, I did not care; not very much anyhow. I was happy. But as time went by, the attitude of others became more pressing. Small things which did not matter at all between us became big issues in the presence of others. Slowly my friends started evading me. When he was with me I never missed anyone, but in his absence I began to long to be in congress with others. Then I got married."

"You got married to him even when you longed for others when he was away?" I could not hold my question.

She was embarrassed when she said, "I did not marry him."

"You did not marry *him*?"

"No," she appeared undecided if she wanted to go into the details of her life or not, then she made up her mind and said, "I married another person who attracted me very much. I had thought that perhaps I could have him,

and share him with the others and keep *him* to only myself."

Innocence was paramount in her voice; and damn it, if I had ever heard anybody telling me about their double-dealing with so much simplicity!

I watched her face carefully to see if she was pulling my leg. There was no sign of mischief there.

She noticed my perplexity and looked questioningly.

"Go ahead,' I said quickly to not to break her flow of thoughts too much.

"It worked for a couple of years but then the situation became difficult. My husband sensed the presence of someone else in my thoughts and became irritated. Not so much in our direct relationship, as it became obvious from the distance which he started to take in our emotional contact. It was not easy for me to be split between three worlds either. I had my previous contacts, my beloved and my husband. A sort of triangle which enclosed me in the middle. Up to a certain extent I was quite content - I could deal with all three of them separately and feel no strain, if only they would not pull me in different directions simultaneously."

I looked at the woman sitting opposite me who was capable of taking on three mutually incompatible worlds and felt no strain if she could tackle them one at a time, and I thought of myself who had gone to pieces the very

first time I was hit with bard words by somebody whom I had placed in the centre of my world.

"Anyhow, there came a time when my relations with all the three worlds became automatic responses. Life was a kind of closed-circuit train which rolled on fixed routes, stopped and started at predetermined junctions where exchanges of people and feelings took place for specified lengths of time. I was still in love with my friends, my husband and *him*, but it was love without passion. A lot of activity but no reciprocity of tenderness, no song which we could sing together, no accord which made our hearts beat in concord. And then one day they were gone."

"Who were gone?"

"All of them," she threw her hands open and made a gesture of helplessness, rubbed her temple with a finger, carefully analysed the texture of her blouse, cleared her throat and carried on, "Every one of them. My friends would not meet me, my husband divorced me, and *he* stopped coming. I missed them so much in the beginning - my friends and both of them. I thought that they might return after a while, or at least he would."

I wanted to ask her which of the two she meant but resisted the temptation.

"None returned. It was as if they had a pact between them - when one was gone so disappeared the other too. I searched for him. I went to all the places where he and I

met previously. He was not there. I talked to people who knew about him, and they said that he would surely return; yet, I knew that deep in their souls they did not trust their judgement, and just made pacifying statements to calm me momentarily and to give false hope."

She now appeared close to a breakdown. Heavy clouds of emotions repeatedly arose on her face and I thought that any moment her eyes will release a downpour of tears, but she must have had a vast desert of retention behinds those eyes which absorbed all the flood which her agitated feelings produced. Not a drop fell from her eyes; she just sat there biting her lower lip.

To ease the pressure on her mind I extended a bridge of words to help her come over her affection, "You decided to go on your own; instead of listening to the priests of different thoughts and just sit and wait for his second coming you gathered your courage and went looking for him?"

That brought her lovely smile back to her face. With her eyes shining, partly with restrained tears and partly with induced encouragement, she replied, "Yes! I decided to be my own mistress. I realised how stupid it was to just sit and wait for him to come back. And how selfish - if we were in love, then why must I expect him to return? Why should I not go out and search for him?"

I had realised that she was saying 'him' and not 'them', though I was not sure which one she was looking for – him or *him*. Not so easy to determine the preferences of people who have the propensity of falling in love with several beings simultaneously. Rather than pushing her to tell me the identity of 'him' and risk her slipping back in the sway of old memories, I decided to keep quiet and dwell in ignorance.

"Where did you hear about Heart City?" I changed the topic.

She stared in space for a while and then shook her head, and answered, "Can't recall. There was no one in particular who told me of it. I got to know about it a little here and a little there. What you call small talk. No one was willing to admit that they knew where it existed, or if it existed; but, no one was very keen to deny its existence either. Then I heard of other people who had gone searching for their dear ones. They, too, like me, had sought their beloved ones in the usual manner, but without success. Many of them found persons who were identical to their lost love in all appearance but still they were different when it came to loving. They tried to deceive themselves by pretending that if they spent time with those persons then they would learn each other and the essential differences would diminish, if not disappear altogether. But it does not work that way – Memory is not something one gets rid of so easily."

I felt that I had swallowed a live flame. Someone took hold of two gigantic cymbals, brought them close to my ears and banged them against each other. I heard the word 'Memory' resound a million and one times. I wanted to howl like a mad dog. I opened my mouth to yell, "To hell with you Memory!" but then I closed it hurriedly.

She must have thought that I had seen a ghost, because she put her hand on mine and asked, "Are you alright?"

I noticed the concern in her tone, and also felt the warmth from her hand which lay on mine.

"Damn you IT! Is she your victim too?"

"You saw me the moment she looked at you." IT answered.

"Yes, I did. But I had thought that you were mine."

"I was." IT replied calmly.

"And her?" I asked after a little deliberation.

"And her." IT maintained its calm.

"Are we all your victims?"

"How unfair you are!" Memory said it resentfully. "I came to your side when you were deserted by your dearest. Had I not been there you would have gone into a blank, you had lost all traces of love from your past and nothing to go on to in the future. I lulled your pains. I stimulated your contact with people whom you had never seen before by providing your mind with some vague resemblance to stir the numb feelings. I let you rise

to the situation and relieve your tensions, and I brought you back to reality by showing you the essential differences lest you become a permanent slave of your own illusion. And what did you do? All this time I helped you recover you wanted to get rid of me the instant you found your old love."

I listened to IT. I tried to understand how much I owed to Memory for being a daily companion which helped me establish contact from one instant to another, giving life a sequence and a pattern for identification. Without Memory there would be no continuity in life - no relations, nothing before or after each instant. Yet, how much IT could demand from me for helping me out from an extremely difficult situation, where I had no choice but to accept the first aid which was offered to me? Would I now live forever being a debtor? No, that could not be possible. No one had the right to enslave another being forever, no matter which debt was incurred upon that being, and no matter under which circumstances.

And how much did she owe to IT?

I felt her breath on my face. I heard her say again, "Are you alright?"

"Yes," I straightened up in my seat, cleaned the sweat from my brow with the handkerchief, wetted my lips with the tongue, and said, "I am sorry, something perturbing came to my mind and I reacted rather strongly. I hope I have not frightened you?"

"Well! You weren't a pretty sight, if I may say. I was talking to you and suddenly you went all yellow. Was it something which I said?"

"You said that you could not lose IT."

"I could not lose *it*?"

"Never mind that. Tell me, have you met someone who has been to Heart City and came back?" I did not want to discuss IT with her.

"Returned from Heart City?"

"That is what I asked."

"You do not travel to Heart City to come back from there,"

"No?"

She gave me a funny look and said, "Will you come back from Heart City, once you get there?"

I did not know what to answer. I had no idea where Heart City was, and I was not going there either.

She saw my apprehension and asked, "Would you leave a place where all lovers abided in perfect harmony? Where there were no disputes, no hypocrisy..... no unpleasantness? Where no one went with a broken heart?"

I looked at the woman again who had claimed that she was capable of dealing with three separate worlds without being strained, and wondered if she belonged to this world at all.

I saw a middle-aged woman who seemed to have fallen in love in her youth with some imaginary figure and in her mind conducted a love affair which she considered as complete. Somewhere in the course of her life, she probably met other persons with whom she engaged in some sort of intercourse to satisfy the needs of this world; otherwise, as far as I could deduce, she was looking for a realm which lay beyond the edge of my world.

"Tell me one thing," I heard her say, "Why did you ask me where Heart City was? Aren't you going there yourself?"

She had so much ardour in her face that I turned my eyes towards the window when I said, "I am afraid I am not"

"Aren't you?"

"No. I am on my way home. When I saw you board this train you reminded me of someone, and when you asked me if I was also going to Heart City I just said 'Yes'. I do not know where Heart City is." I made an honest confession.

She gave me an enigmatic smile, caressed the back of her right hand with her lips and told me, "I have not been wholly fair with you when I said that I did not know where Heart City was."

I prepared myself for the revelation.

"It is within you. And one does not travel to it; one carries it within oneself."

"Then why did you ask me if I was *travelling* to Heart City?"

"Because when I saw you I thought that I was seeing a double. I caught just a glimpse of you from the window and I was drawn to this seat beyond my control. And when you looked at me and smiled I wanted you to be *him*. Of course, I knew that you could not be *him*. He is within me, in Heart City. But I could not resist asking you if you were also going to Heart City - my Heart City."

Now I knew which *him* she searched for. I also knew that I could never be that *him*.

We were nearing my destination. From the window I looked at the flowery hedge on the horizon which had now taken a rosy tinge, giving life colour and gaiety. I got up from the seat, picked up my brief-case, and as I turned towards the door I said to her, "Thanks for asking me along, but I must go my own way."

I got off the train and headed for the taxis. Just as I reached the main hall, I saw Memory desperately trying to catch my attention in another vaguely familiar face.

I grinned and said to IT, "Piss off!"

The Last Time

I detested most of the proposal the moment it was put to me.

Still, I agreed to be a member of the delegation.

The proposal was that I should bridge the gap left by an adviser, who had fallen sick, and accompany a group of experts to one of the Gulf States, to advise the despot how he could advance female literacy in his domain.

I detest experts, sand, and despots – in whichever order you may care to put them.

The females, on the contrary, were the attractive part – in whichever field you may care to extend their advances.

Then there was another attraction – I was told that the Sheikh had married Farida, and she was to lead the programme from his side.

Farida and I were in the same class in college. She used to be a brilliant debater with her words, a dazzling beauty in her looks, and a habitual heartbreaker in her deeds.

After graduation, I had drifted around the world and lost track of most of my classmates; although, on my occasional returns I always visited Rufi to catch some of the gossips.

According to him the Sheikh, while visiting the city, ran into her in a variety show at the university and had a

spontaneous, elating feeling that if he, after removing the formal outer protective habit of the native people, was to use his abundant assets for the initial entry into the opening available at the cultural show, followed by a deeper thrust into the channels for the personal contact, then his connection with his hosts would be much more firm and pleasurable – socially and politically.

Rufi did not know the details; but, it appeared that the Sheikh had actually put his thoughts into practice by disclosing that elation to her; and, after the consent of her parents, a promise to contribute to the well-being of his new affine, and the recitation of some verses of ancient classical poetry, had made a publicly accepted entrance into the indigenous sphere as a new member; who, despite his foreign origin and sudden rise, soon became the dominant figure in her closed circles.

The existing situation was that, currently, Farida lived with the despot, surrounded by sand, and advised by the experts.

Therefore, when I was asked if I would agree to play the role of an expert and *advise* her, I had said "yes" to the enquirer.

The team consisted of eight persons – four men, three women and an eighth being, who could be *either, neither, or both* – I settled for the both.

During our flight it became obvious that the experts, I included, had absolutely no information at their disposal about which level of education the advancement was expected; or, if the concept 'advancement' was equivalent to the concept 'start' in this particular case. Yet, the general feeling was that something could be done to cultivate the feminine mind in that barren, arid sheikhdom.

The plane landed smoothly.

The Sheikh had sent four black camels, each fitted with four wheels and bearing an insignia of Mercedes, to fetch us. The drivers opened the stomachs of that special breed of camels and invited us in. I and HeShe shared the same ride. During the journey through the desert, I studied those tiny hostile sand-corns, stretching all the way to the infinity, through the blue-tinted window panes. They also glared back at me with their thirsty eyes.

How fantastic, that the same desolation which would have swallowed a whole ocean of water if it were poured on its chest, gushed oil when it was tickled artfully on the sensitive points on its breast!

I was so lost in my thoughts that for the rest of the journey whatever the eyes reported to the brain my mind took no conscious notice of it, and it was recorded in those layers of the grey matter which release their stored information every now and then in our dreams.

The Sheikh's tent showed marble, granite, glass, and steel on its face, and was probably supported by the latest technique from the West in its substructure. Two extremely unfriendly looking creatures, dressed like human beings, guarded the entrance.

The drivers came and politely ejected us in the uncomfortable atmosphere outside our refuge.

We were attended by a young man, who spoke English with a strong American accent. He told us that we were scheduled to be received by the Sheikh after the mid-day rest. He also wondered if we would like to get some rest as well. We said that we would. He escorted us to a section of the edifice, and after making us climb two short flights of stairs showed us a room each, for our siesta.

So many tents within a *tent!*

My sleep was dreamless; which, probably, meant that my eyes had not reported so much to the brain after all.

At about four in the afternoon a servant brought me a long-drink made of newly pressed lemons and sugar, tastefully diluted with iced water.

After I had satisfied my thirst, I took a lengthy shower, shaved and made myself presentable to the Sheikh, and his wife.

At five we were collected from our rooms, and guided by the same young man to another section of the building. Whatever other pleasures in life might be out of

the reach of a desert dweller, comfortable living, apparently, was not one of them. The place, or palace, was furnished with the very best amenities the money could buy.

We were led to a large hall and told to wait there. Six of the experts had made a closed team, the seventh was considered as the reserve; while I was the player on loan. The six conducted some animated discussion among them. HeShe tried to tune in his hearing to their frequency. I retreated to the days of the college and sunk deep into old memories.

After a quarter or so the huge carved wooden doors to the room-across-the-carpet opened and Sheikh Nasir, himself, came out to greet us.

"I hope you had a nice rest," he said in a pleasant voice.

The six answered in unison that we all had a very nice rest

"I believe that we shall proceed directly with the discussions. I have a late appointment with another delegation after you. But nothing to worry about, we have ample time," he said to us in a resolute tone.

I wondered how *condensed* his *ample time* was going to be. Still, in the modern world whoever pays for the useful time also decides how to stretch or shorten its duration.

He showed us into the room. The whole place was pink. Either Sheikh Nasir was colour blind, or had a tremendous taste for fine variations within hues; because, although the whole room was pink, it was actually imbued with six or more nuances within the same colour range.

Farida had grown older, and slightly heavier, but she had maintained her looks.

We were presented to the Sheikh and Farida by the American-accented-secretary. The secretary had done his homework rather well, because he seemed to possess most of the background information about all of us, except me. I wondered if he worked full-time for the Sheikh and only part-time for the CIA, or was it the other way round.

The Sheikh shook hands with us; Farida just nodded and cast a smile. When my turn came, she nodded and smiled, and our eyes met for the fraction of a second.

How short was that fraction!

There was no recognition in her eyes.

Or was there a smile different from the other seven smiles?

Two other persons, both Arabs, completed the quartet on Sheikh's side. A low table separated the two groups. With a lot of luck, and some skilful shuffling of my feet, I occupied a seat just opposite to Farida.

There was no doubt that Sheikh Nasir did not believe in spending his money on idle things; because, in spite of the air-conditioning of the room, he had ordered to switch on both of the electric fans which stood behind them. A stream of rather cool air flowed from them to us.

Our expert on pedagogy started a monologue; replete with all the jargon he could remember, about the advantages of education to the young people. To me it appeared a sheer waste of good time; because, if the Sheikh was unaware of the merits of education to the young people he wouldn't have invited us to advise him.

So, while others listened to the expert, or pretended that they did, I paid closer attention to Sheikh Nasir. He did not give the impression of being a bully – his voice, though firm, carried no sub-surface threat in it; his eyes were attentive and interested; his general attitude was authoritative; yet, not dictatorial.

But then those were only my first impressions, and they could be wrong.

Suddenly, I felt the heat-wave.

I analysed the surroundings. Apparently, nothing had changed. We all sat exactly in the same positions as we did when the monologue had started. The Professor of Pedagogy was not yet through with his lecture, at that moment he concentrated upon different modes of education to the future mothers-to-be and their role in the advancement of the society as a whole.

I sensed the warmth again, and that time there was no doubt that it was not merely a product of my imagination. The room was almost chilly – first, there was full air-conditioning; then, two rather large fans, silently but viciously, exhaled their breath in our direction – yet, I was caressed, twice, by the hands of soft, warm puffs.

Then it dawned upon me – she used to do that in the classroom too. We had called it *The Farida Effect*.

In the middle of a lecture, however interesting or dull, the boys, and only a few of us, would become aware of her presence. There was never any perceptible effort on her part; we weren't even sure if it was a conscious action; yet, she made us feel her presence. It used to have a feverish effect upon the victim. Strangely enough, she only hit each of us one at a time. In the beginning, we had thought that it was a personal communication between her and each of the victims only. As the time passed the results of those attacks started to become more known, when a few close friends of mine began confessing to others about their bleeding hearts; without being aware that the listening party also suffered the same pangs from the induced *love*. All in all, she had chosen five of us for her targets. She never talked to any of us, nor were we ever encouraged to approach her. In her overt behaviour she was a model of modesty. We

suffered our misfortune during the two years we were together, and then came the big dispersal and we split.

That day, twenty-five years later, she still had that effect upon me.

I crossed my legs and paid attention to the next expert, who seemed intent to impress upon the Sheikh that besides formal religious and linguistic studies it was necessary that the ladies-of-the-future should be fully familiar with the intricacies of the scientific knowledge. I admired the Sheikh. I did not think he understood a word of all the rhetoric which was being thrown at him; yet, he appeared totally engrossed in the conversation.

I, also, paid attention to the second, silent, intercourse which took place in that gathering.

There were three meters of space between the four of them and the eight of us. The intermediate room contained one table, the resonance of the speaker's voice, the wind blown by the fan, and a very faint scent of her body. I threw a glance at her and then looked, as usual, at the invisible spot between the two parties. She had her eyes fixed on the scientific adviser.

I wished I was cross-eyed.

With each passing instant, the perfume of her being grew stronger.

I wondered if my feet sweated in that cool room.

Then I straightened up a bit in my seat, slowly turned my upper body, so that both of my shoulders were at

right-angles to the current of air which came from behind her and after going around her body advanced in my direction. Almost imperceptibly I bent my shoulders forward till the waves in that stream of air subsided and a steady flow was reached between her and me. From that current, I stopped a few molecules on my chest, and then with an extra heartbeat sent her my remembrances.

From the corners of my eyes I saw when she felt the impact on her breast; she blinked once and her lips parted a bit she protruded her tongue to wet the lips.

I cursed the Sheikh for not providing anything drinkable on the table.

Others might have sat in a cool air-conditioned room, but I was in the middle of a desert, burning intensely in the heat of passion, longing for the shade of her locks and a few drops of nectar from her mouth; or, at least, a few sips of water from her house.

I heard IT laugh - my breath burnt like a furnace blast, the moans of an orgasmic nymph echoed in my ears, a taste of warm spiced marrow invaded my mouth, an intense heat broke out from the centre of my body and like a mushroomcloud enveloped my whole being.

I dreaded that perspiration might exude from my face in that low temperature.

"Are we smouldering in this refrigerator?" IT asked me teasingly.

"Go away! It's quite had as it is," I said to IT.

"Go away, and miss all the fun! What is the matter with you today? Take her!" IT wasn't to give in so easily.

"I can lose my head for indulging with Sheikh's wife in his own palace, and presence," I declared my fears.

"You will lose your most precious dream forever if you miss this opportunity which has come your way after all these years." IT pressed my emotions to choose between the fulfilment of a dream and the saving of my neck.

I wished that IT had stayed away that day. I had known Lust for a long time, and it had given impetus to some staggering experiences in my life. I remembered the first time Yette had kissed me and I had that explosion of arousal, and the first real contact with IT. The erotic rise in my muscles by the hoarse and salacious laughter of the lady-in-the-dark who responded so heartily to the pelvic thrusts of Natalie Wood in 'Gypsy'. Then there were encounters with Sewada, and Pippi and

Over all these years IT had been a close companion and its nearness was always intoxicating and cherished by me.

Except at that moment.

The fear of what a despot might do to my body was in direct clash with the pleasure which Lust induced into my senses.

"Tonight, after living a night, through one night,
I have lived through the length of eternity.
Tonight, as if it was a bowl of elixir,
My hands have drunk the essence of my beloved."

IT recited to me a fragment of poetry by Faiz.

I diverted my attention to the expert on 'female autonomy in modern politics'. Both of the concepts - autonomy and modern politic - seemed to me quite irrelevant in the world ruled by the likes of Sheikh Nasir. Nevertheless, the lady expert continued to squeak her precious thoughts for the benefit of her, entrapped, listeners.

Very cautiously I detached my Self from my body, and then advancing slowly on my fingertips I closed the gap between her and me. She must have felt my approach, because her grip tightened on the arm of her sofa.

From the little cleft between the mountains under her silk gown, I gently made my entrance on her territory and started my ascent towards the tip of those mounts from which spring the rivers of milk, providing Life with its very first nourishment. The ground under my touch felt soft and a bit slippery. I gathered myself, and put my ears to her softness and listened to the heat of that music which, with each cycle, prolongs existence till the next stroke. I wanted to close my eyes and fall into a deep sleep on that warm, soothing spot.

"Are you crazy? Satisfied with the very first touch of intimacy?" IT whispered to me.

I opened my eyes and resumed the climb. As I approached the top I noticed a change in the terrain -

instead of being soft and smooth the surface had become somewhat uneven, with some rudimentary growth of vegetation. In the darkness, I tried to see the colour of the skin but failed. I laid my hand flat on the surface and crept a few millimetres with each movement of my finger.

Almost out of my breath I reached the summit, and with the tip of my tongue licked the tiny drops of ambrosia which waited for me in the small cavity at the top.

It tasted salty and smelled musk. I licked again.

A wave of shudder went right through her body.

To ease the tension she reclined on the sofa, slowly stretched her legs, and pulled her dress downwards to cover them.

What a sight it was!

Lying there on top of the mountain in the newly arrived dawn, brought about by the electric sun and its dim light, which now filtered through the thin gown, I could see a long way down the slopes, over the plains of her belly, deep into the dark valley which started below the small Mount of Venus.

"At the top of the world?" IT enquired in a husky voice.

"Yes," I answered in a soft rustle.

The descent from the top was much faster. I let my whole palm glide down the fall and stopped at the edge of her stomach's flat. It was much more wet down there.

Probably I was not the only person sweating in that chill!

After a few seconds rest, I continued my journey towards the rim of the forest, which I could see from there. If the situation deteriorated I did not want to get caught out there in the plains without any protective growth. The landscape had changed quite radically. It appeared as if I neared a volcanic crater – there was a slight odour of sulphur, and I heard the sound of boiling lava from underneath.

Someone said something funny and a number of persons laughed. I too opened my mouth and released a few sounds, to give an illusion of my presence to the rest of the assembly.

I also hoped that the joke had nothing to do with me being beheaded in the public square for nurturing thoughts which the others might consider as immoral. Otherwise, my laughter was at my own expense; and that was not very funny.

"Go ahead, they weren't laughing at you." IT consoled me.

"Thanks for this information," I said with a real feeling of gratitude in my voice.

"Don't mention it. It is your day today, enjoy it." IT was more than kind that day.

Suddenly I apprehended a tremor growing in the soil. I fell flat on the surface and tried to hold fast to my position.

Farida had changed her position in the seat again, and crossed her legs.

All at once the translucent light disappeared and I was left in the dark. Carefully, I got up and moved a few centimetres in the direction of the valley. I slipped on a large drop of perspiration and found myself lying in a tiny pit, which emitted a stronger odour than the area on which I had stood upon a few moments earlier. I concluded that I had fallen into the navel. Fortunately, the Sheikh had not implanted a ruby there or I might have broken a finger-nail on it

I climbed out of the pit and carried on with my journey downwards. Progress of some centimetres further took me to the periphery of the undergrowth, marking the start of the forest ahead. With my finger-tips, I parted the bushy growth to make way for my advance.

I heard a soft sigh from across the table. She gave me a sharp, burning look; parted her lips a bit more and, then, moistened them again with her tongue. Thereafter, she uncrossed her legs; removed a particle of something from her dress; rubbed the chin with the back of her hand; and then placed the hand, on top of my Self, in her lap.

My invisible hand was caught under hers. My fingers took hold of some bushes; but I could not pull them too

bard, lest I hurt her. She let her hand lie on mine; then after a while, she tickled the hair on the back of my finger with her ring-finger.

I saw the tension build in me. I took a deep breath to regulate my respiration. It felt as if my heart pounded at twice its normal rate.

I looked at the Sheikh. He was watching me.

I heard him say, "I asked for your opinion about the matter."

I did not have the faintest clue what the other experts had said lately. The last piece of conversation which I remembered had something to do with the dangers of too rapid, as well as too slow, the introduction of new thoughts into virgin minds. Unless the Sheikh wanted us to advise him about the education of new-born girls, the reference to 'virgin minds' sounded rather inappropriate in that context; but, then, the whole idea of advanced female education in a land where all forms of modern thinking were considered a product of the devil's mind was a kind of project which was, also, quite out of context.

"I am actually an expert in *Perceptual Observations*," I answered him, after I had drawn an extremely benign smile on my face.

I had never heard of a 'Perceptual Observer' before; but had hoped that, as none of the others knew me closely, it

would provide me with some sort of diffused identity to give me a cover.

"And what does the **Perceptual Observer** thinks about the project?" he asked me in the same friendly tone.

"The bastard has you hanging by your balls!" IT announced the good news to me.

"Damn you IT! It is all your fault" I cursed IT.

"My fault?" IT yelled.

"You put me to it."

I put you to **what**? For the last twenty-five years, you have gone around dreaming about her. And now when you are face to face you wanted to chicken out; so, I held your hand. *Did I put the idea of intimating with her in your head?*" IT enquired.

"No, you did not put the idea, but you encouraged me." I held my ground.

"No dear, anything you do is always your own responsibility, at your own risk." IT told me flatly.

I converged all my attention on Sheikh's question.

"To be able to make a qualified assessment I need to be familiar with the opinion of the person who should lead the programme from your side," I badly needed some time to sort out a reasonably satisfactory reply to his initial question, "Who shall supervise the project from here?"

Although I already knew the answer, I threw the question at him anyhow.

"My wife shall supervise the project," he supplied me with the information.

"What does she think about the project?" I asked.

"What? Does? She? *Think?* About? The? Project?"

He was the first man I had met who could ask eight questions in a seven-word sentence.

I tried to recollect my wits – for him there was definitely a distinction between being a supervisor of a programme and the thinker, or planner, of it. And these two abilities were not necessarily to be found in the same person; at least not in Farida.

I gave her a quick look and tried to see if there was a fine scar at the base of her hair-line, indicating that she had gone through some sort of cerebral surgery in which her brains were removed and some sort of mini-computer was implanted.

From that distance, I could see no scar. Which meant that either her brains were intact or the surgeons were extraordinarily competent at their task. I suddenly realised that with the exception of a sigh she had uttered no other sound; that far.

I took a chance and addressed her directly, "I presume that you have conducted a preliminary investigation about the level of literacy which currently exists among the women."

She remained silent longer than the situation required; thus, I tickled her gently with my forefinger.

"O' Yes!" she said in a tender voice. It sounded like "O 'No" to me.

I wasn't really sure if she had responded to my conversation or tickling, and which of the two I should discontinue.

I played it safe, eased my finger, and said, "And at what level is it?"

She looked at me, wetted her lips with the tongue and then looked at her Sheikh.

"My wife has not been given all the details so far; but, she has graciously agreed to give her valuable time to this cause," Sheikh Nasir declared the worthy intentions of his wife. There was also a touch of acidity in his timbre at that time.

I decided to leave Sheikh's wife in peace, but kept my hand under Farida's.

"Perhaps you could illuminate me with the same information," I tried to sound as polite as I could.

"Well, as a matter of fact, no reliable survey is concluded as yet. The population is rather dispersed in my country, and it is not so easy to reach women in our society; therefore, a lot of our information is based upon assumptions," he said to me in a frank manner.

"So, how do you intend to conduct this progress in feminine literacy?" I was stupid enough to ask him that question, putting the rope around my neck.

He promptly tightened the noose by saying, "The reason we invited this delegation of experts is to find out that best way. It is your job to suggest to me that way." I could have kissed HimHer when that tenor voice sliced right through the heavy sheet of silence, which had fallen after Sheikh's last comment, and proposed, "I presume that the initial step is to find out that how many females are there in the sheikhdom."

That made sense, and all twelve of us nodded our consent

"How many schools are already there for women education?" I asked my next question.

Sheikh Nasir just stared at me; while Farida's grip tightened on my hand.

Apparently, my knowledge of the sheikhdoms was exceedingly simple, and dangerous to the safety of the rest of the members of our delegation, because I could sense a general feeling of unrest in my companions.

The lady with the silver hair was my next rescue. She cleared her throat, induced a wise expression on her face and addressed the assembly, "I think what we ought to start....."

The sensation of a slow vibration in the mass under my palm faded out the words of my benevolent from my hearing.

The task at hand was reaching its climax and demanded immediate manipulation.

I pulled my hand backwards.

She realised the reversal in my movement. Her fingers squeezed my hand.

"What are you doing?" there was bewilderment in IT's cry.

"Fulfilling a dream, as you had urged me to do," I told IT merrily.

I withdrew my hand a few millimetres farther from the brim of the crater. It felt warm and humid down there.

Farida threw a perplexed look in my direction, closed her legs tight and exerted pressure on me.

I relaxed my hand and let it lie there for a while. She perceived the change in my attitude, loosened her own clasp on my fingers, and a wanton smile appeared on her face.

With one jerk I freed my hand from her grip and retreated to my body.

Her mouth flew wide open, a low moan reverberated in my ears, her fingers dug deep in that depression, the dry tongue unsuccessfully tried to wet her lips, and her eyes burnt holes in my profile.

"What have you done? Why? Why?" Lust was genuinely upset.

A soft rumble started in the depth of my stomach, worked itself up to thunder as it approached my mouth and then burst into loud laughter.

"You idiot! Why are you laughing? You have had this dream for over two decades – to be with her, to feel her, to make her feel you. And now when you were so close to the finale you deserted your dream,"

"No, I did not," I said to IT.

"Didn't you?"

"No, I did not *desert* my dream." "What did you do then?"

"Fulfilled my dream," I answered in an intoxicated tone.

"Did you really?"

"Yes, I did. For two long years, she played with us. Made us sweat, made us bum and then left us out in the cold. How many nights I felt her hand caress me; first soothe me and then bring me to the boiling point, and when the explosion was near it disappeared."

"And you *waited* all these years to take your revenge?" IT said that with amazement

"If only you knew how bitter-sweet this wait had been," I replied to IT.

"She will see to it that you lose your job," IT warned me.

"I never wanted this job. The only reason I came here was to see her for the last time."

"You said that you were an expert in 'Perceptual Observations'?" Farida's voice interrupted the dialogue between IT and me.

"Yes," I kept my answer brief.

"Lately I have heard a lot about this field and find it exceedingly interesting." She continued the conversation.

"What does she want now, IT? How could she have heard a lot about *Perceptual Observations* when I had never heard of it until today? I just coined the title."

IT blasted out one of the nastiest laughter I had ever heard, and said, "Sheikh Nasir only had you hanging by your balls; she is, probably, going to cut them off you."

Eleven pairs of eyes stared at me.

"This is a rather uncommon subject. Where did you hear about it?" I made a desperate try to deflect her.

"That is why I find it so fascinating. I do not remember where I first heard about it; but now it does not matter, being an expert you can fill me in."

At that instant, I would have staked my last penny that she really wanted me to *fill her in*.

Damn it! I had totally forgotten that she used to be a formidable debater at the university. If I wanted an escape, it was not to be found by straightforward verbal combat with her.

"I will be delighted to do so," I made a statement which was partially true in any case. "But I need to collect my books to prepare myself for making the entry into the subject intimate and thorough".

"There is no need for you to return to collect your books. Just give the list to the secretary and you shall

have them within days." Sheikh Nasir blocked my latest escape route.

"It is not the books alone. Most important are my private sketches which are drawn after personal observations of the people in action; and only I can get hold of them from certain special places," I said with maximum resolution in my pitch. "Well! If you must do it yourself then there is no choice."

Sheikh accepted my argument

"You are not so bad with words either," IT said it with a tinge of admiration in its tone.

"Thanks for the compliment," I said with true relief.

That was also the end of our session.

Sheikh Nasir and his wife, and the two silent observers, arose from their seats and wished us good luck for the completion of whatever plans they had agreed with the rest of the experts.

Then he told me that he would be seeing me soon; which I was certain that he wouldn't.

Farida said that she looked forward to taking me on in Perceptual Observations.

I said that I also looked forward to being *taken on* in whichever field she liked.

What I did not say audibly was that *taking on* had to be out of her sheikhdom and away from her Sheikh.

On the way back HeShe said to me in the ear, "You look rather exhausted with the exertion in work."

I just smiled.

Obviously, the poor thing did not know the difference between exhaustion through exertion in work and exhaustion through, indulgence in pleasure.

IT smiled with me.

One, and Only

"I have *him* in many forms, which one are you looking for?" he said, as he studied Lihar and me through the bush he carried on the face, where the growth from his eye-brows, eyelashes, beard and head entwined to shape that hairy mass.

I badly wanted him to lift his head and throw the eyes wide open – I longed to see what they looked like.

He held his breath and waited for my answer.

"I thought that there was only one," I said hesitantly.

"Yes, yes! There is only *one*, but he has many appearances," he tried to make it easy for me.

I kept silent, and expecting.

He also kept his silence, but his attention moved to the beads in his hand.

The journey had been arduous. We had travelled by air for eleven hours, by train and bus for three days, on the mule for one and a half, and on foot for four hours. The weather had been on our side. The temperature had maintained itself to lukewarm; the humidity was low and the wind gentle. That, supported by the exuberant greenery which surrounded us for the last two days, had made us feel the length of time, as well as the distance, shorter than it really was. Nevertheless, I found fatigue rise in me. In a period of six days, I had moved from the

bustle of metropolis to the stillness of wilderness, in the middle of nowhere.

Still, now when I sat in front of him I found myself in both worlds simultaneously – the old man himself was undoubtedly from the prehistoric era; while the room we were sitting in appeared to me, and what most enthusiasts would also describe, as a dream-room for the next century. It was air-conditioned, decorated with fine Italian wood furniture along the walls, the middle part was covered with thick Pakistani carpets, on which chesterfield sofas accommodated us, and had a place for several more. The lighting was arranged in indirect Scandinavian style. Soft flute music was poured into our ears by hidden loud-speakers. I never heard any scratch or hiss, so the sound probably had its origin in a laser CD, designed for multiple discs. There was a faint, pleasant smell of sandal-wood in the air. I did not see any lens, but had a hunch that we were being recorded on a video recorder.

I could not decide whether the builders of the house found him sitting there and constructed the building around him, or if they completed their work first and then deposited him on the cushion.

He sat on an elevated, circular cushion, in the comfortable Lotus position. He was not very large. Under the grey hairy bush, a white cotton shirt concealed his torso, and a loose pale orange garment covered the legs.

The only parts which I could see naked were his two hands, they weren't scaly; otherwise, I would have taken him as the 'missing link'.

I also remembered that he had spoken to me in cultivated English.

"I have come all this way because I was told that you know *him* well, and if I wanted to find *him* then you are the most reliable source," I put my case to him.

"Absolutely true. Have no fears," he said calmly. "I only asked you how will you like to meet *him*?"

His question made me feel uneasy. He sensed my perplexity and added, "For what purpose do you want *him*? For personal use, for the family protection or for your people, if you are one of those who have people?"

"For me, my family and my people, I believe," I replied.

"Ah, you *are* one of those!" He shook his head understandingly, and continued, "Always a bit complicated when I have to fix *him* for private as well as public image; but nothing to worry, you will get *him*."

His right hand left the beads and disappeared under his cushion, stayed there for a couple of seconds and then returned in his lap.

I heard a soft hissing sound. A small section of the thick wooden table between us slid to one side, and a thin tray from the hollowed portion ascended. On it lay a tiny, hypersensitive, cordless condenser microphone.

"We shall proceed scientifically," he pointed towards the electronic listener, and commented, "it helps if either of us wants to refresh our memory in case of a doubt."

"You are rather well equipped," I could not hold my comment

For the first time, he showed any sign of emotions – I did not hear any laughter, but his body quivered with its onset. When he finished enjoying whatever triggered the laugh, he said, "If only you knew what sort of people come here."

I tried to think of different kind of persons who might come to him in search of *him* and decided that that could be any sort. Yet, one thing was clear – he claimed to provide all sorts of him to all sorts of people.

"Your name, age and place of origin?"

I told him.

"Who is this boy?"

"My adviser," I said.

He deliberated for a few moments, then asked Lihar, "Your name, age, and place of origin?"

Lihar gave me an uncertain glance, considered the question, and then provided him with the reply.

"Who is whose adviser?" the old man asked me.

"It is mutual," I answered.

He accepted my statement

"Have you decided about the use you want to put *him*?" That confused me again. What did he mean by what use I wanted to put *him*?

"Perhaps if you tell me about different sorts which you have, then I can decide about the kind which I want," I suggested.

"I told you from the very beginning that I have all sorts." He reminded me.

"But you must have some representative types."

He reflected on my request for several minutes, and then raised his head to take a full view of my person. Our eyes met His eye-balls weren't fluffy; instead, two pieces of ember worked to burn my stare, and failed. He retreated to his meditative pose. Under the table, Lihar pressed his little leg against mine. I acknowledged.

"Most of the people who have come to me lately had specific purposes in mind, and that made it convenient for me to satisfy their needs. Yours is obviously a different case, so let us probe a bit deeper in the matter," he suggested.

The suggestion sounded absurd – I had come to him for spiritual guidance, and probing a bit deeper in the matter did not appear to me as the correct approach. On the other hand, I had come a long way to seek his counsel, and if the man said that we could come closer to him by taking his recommendation, and then why not try it?

"What kind of people do you represent?"

"Ordinary people with ordinary needs," I answered humbly.

"But what are they? Patriarchs, matriarchs, egalitarians, formalists, anarchists, patriots, xenomaniacs, philanthropes, misanthropes, misogynists, androphobes, androgynes, homosexuals; transsexuals, heterosexuals, pantheists, monotheists, polytheists, atheists, extroverts, introverts, sadists, masochists, or just lost?"

I regretted saying 'ordinary people with ordinary needs'; obviously there was an extraordinary variety in people and their affiliations; and that recluse seemed to know the most, if not all.

"I ... I mean we ... We are looking for a new way to come near *him*, to understand *his* message better, and then follow his path. We thought that you could lead us to it." I was getting a bit restless.

He maintained his posture and asserted, "I surely can. All you need to tell me is that how near you wish him to be, what is the nature of the message you like to understand, and how tedious or easy path you intend to tread upon, and I will get *him* ready for you, with all the oral and written instructions, to meet your requirements."

I sighed; but Lihar's little voice said, "I would like *him* to be very near, his message not too difficult and the path not too rough."

He did not expect intervention from the boy, and remained waiting for my rebuke. I backed up the boy with prolonged silence.

"Perhaps I ought to tell you about one of the complicated cases so that you get a picture of the kind of guidance I provide," he said that, when the silence became too dominant

"Some three and a half years ago came a man to me with an acute persecution complex. He insisted that his people were in imminent danger of genocide by their powerful neighbours. He said that their plight was partially brought about by animal fetishism, since his fellowmen had taken to singing songs of praise to a calf and that made the neighbours angry, because they considered cattle as their property. He kept on murmuring that he was so tired of all those disputes over animals that he required some sort of documentary proof from an alien authority, which was preferably out of the direct reach of his people but was reputed to be all-powerful, in which the authority proclaimed that it liked them much more than that calf did, and would help them in all sorts of tight situations if they were to dedicate their hymn to it, and made sacrifices in its name. He never directly mentioned the likes or dislikes of women in his people, but I got an impression that their main function was to keep the channels well maintained for breeding the stock. I asked him how much proof he

required. He extended his palms and asked for a handful. So I gave him a book of songs and ten instructions, one for each finger, to take to his people and tell them that if they did not stop extolling that calf then hell would break loose. In that book it was written that they were the best of people, and things would go really well for them in their quest for re gaining the land and riches which they had lost through the fall in their live-stock if they were to keep their cocks trim, held the women on their knees and forgot about dealing with other animals; instead, they could concentrate upon metal and stonework, and in their leisure time argue about the one-sidedness of their distant *Padrone*. He went home full of self-praise for his new achievement I did not hear a word from him or his people until two years ago when a cousin of his showed up here cursing a man called Caesar who had overcome his sheep, and taken the wealth away from his relatives. He seemed to have a great infatuation for his herd, and a greater mistrust for his close friends who, he was certain, would let him down at the moment of truth."

The old man threw his hands in mock despair, shrugged once, and then commented, "What can one do for such a quarrelsome lot? First almost a genocide on cattle fetishism, and now blood-shed over sheep poaching. Anyhow, I reasoned with him, and he eventually agreed to return if I gave him a new book in which the timidness of his friends was documented in

detail, along with a testimony that he was the son of his father, and even if his friends and enemies tried to cross his way, and interfered with his mission, he should rise again and return to reclaim the sheep. I promised to prepare a book for him as well, with all the necessary instructions to bring about peace. Among other things I recommended that if he could give to Caesar whatever he thought belonged to him, and put the rest in a Swiss bank account under the assumed name Pope, then he and his people could carry on with the exploitation of the sheep which they already had, and at the same time secure more from other parts of the world. He loved my advice. Told me frankly that he had seen the way to the riches in heavens. Had some sort of father complex too. Said repeatedly that no one could get to his father except through him. Odd as it is, he never showed any personal interest in breeding or accumulation of wealth; just wanted to wander around with his sheep, and amuse them with his unusual skills. Said he could walk on water, turn water into wine, procure fish in a small bucket and perform many other tricks. I never really comprehended why he, with all those fascinating things which he could do, was so anxious to return to his father; an amphitheatre was what I suggested, but he would not listen. Rather temperamental was he. One day he became so irritated, because there was no fruit on the plum tree, that he overturned the tables and started throwing the

things around. It was not easy to make him understand that the tree did not bear fruits out of season. He threatened that his father would put his curse on that tree. He fell in such a fit that he would not wait for the printing of the book. He just mounted his donkey and left, telling me that Paul would come, and fix it for his followers. About a week later that fellow Paul came in great haste, did a quick editing job on the book, in which he threw away almost one-third of it, saying that those parts disrupted its continuity, and would cause misunderstandings in the flock, and disappeared from here. I remember that just before leaving he gave me a tremendous hug, and thanked me sincerely for the Swiss Connection which, he thought, should guarantee good times in the future for his brothers-in-deed. All went well for about six months. Then one fine morning another cousin turned up here. He traded in camels. He was rather furious at his cousins because according to him the relatives of the other two did not recognise him as their leader. He did not like that his cousins left no clear instructions about his presence or succession. He was especially angry at the disciples of the second cousin who had misunderstood a certain passage in the book and waited in vain for his coming. Said something about his second cousin being the genuine son of his mother, but not begotten by the one which the disciples claimed as his father. The second cousin had run into a local gang-

war and was executed by that bad egg Caesar after a mock trial, in which one of his boys, as he expected, had helped the enemy to nail him.

The old man stopped abruptly, as if trying to remember something. He rocked his head a few times and then said, "I liked the third cousin. He enjoyed mixing pleasure with business. We talked a lot He called himself a culinary connoisseur. Said he had a great attraction for birds and stuffing tender meat; although, he confessed, at that moment he felt apprehended by the strict control of his current wife who was senior to him and decided what might be relished in their home. He said it rather candidly that if she was ever away, and an opening came his way, he would love to grill the sausage in an attractive oven and make his dreams come true.

Actually, I think that he was one of the most versatile persons I have met A truly great poet too. None of the three cousins was keen on abstract formulations, but the third had quite an interest in mathematics, though nothing made 'two plus two equal to four' in his system. I do not know what he had against the number hundred, but he totally refused to name anything beyond ninety-nine."

He paused for a few seconds to sort out his thoughts, and then asked, "Where were we before I started talking about his personality?"

"You said that he was mad at his cousins," Lihar supplied the relevant bit.

"Yes, of course. Well! We discussed the situation in detail. Incidentally, you remind me of him," he eyed me appreciatively, and carried on, "Like you, he was not sure either what was he looking for. Sometimes he talked about South Asia and its metaphysics, at others he wanted something which was easy on the mind and good for the body. Oriental mysticism was a bit too much for him so he settled for the practical solution. I arranged a book for him too. Actually one of the technically better collections of poems which I ever composed jointly," he raised his index finger to add strength to his words. "In a certain way a strange book! Not the book itself, but the way he wanted it. The lines provided in it were simple and straightforward; yet, he was adamant that I should agree that each of them had seven, seventy or seven hundred interpretations. I think that although he did not grasp the gist of Eastern thought he was so deeply impressed by its mysticism that he had to have some of it in the book which he received. He had a strange concept of equality too - if other people read his book and spoke its language then they were all equal; otherwise, unequal to his people. In the case of women he drove me crazy - he said that spiritually they were equal to men; but, for all legal purposes their testimony, on its own, meant nothing; while the word of two women and one man was

equal to that of two men; in marital games one man could ball four women, and after death each believing man should get seventy-two of them. Can't think of any sane person who would like to believe in him, if he had to put up with seventy-two women for having that belief. Would you?"

I hurriedly jerked my head in negation.

He nodded to show approval and continued, "He was so impressed by the last book that he formed the opinion that anybody who had read it once and understood the contents ought to be put to death if on a later day he discovered that he disagreed with those contents. Actually, he got so over-excited by it that he would not believe that the book was composed by us. He started saying that although it was written here, it had to be a copy of the *original* book. That really scared me. Imagine being accused and then convicted of plagiarism. He even made me add that his first two cousins had been wrong about the protection by their invisible godfather, who had decided that in the future he would back up the affairs of the third cousin, provided the representatives from his people paid a homage at his house once a year, and the others daily performed a set of prescribed motions. I did my best to persuade him to the contrary, and advised him to keep an open mind. Instead, he closed the book in my face and went out, where four of his friends were waiting for him. For the last year and a

half I have not heard from them directly, but I am told that the relatives of all three cousins are still fighting over oil and property rights."

He took a deep breath to vitalise his mind, waited for the effect, and said, "Now we have a concrete situation before us – A family ... call it a tribe ... is interested in trade as a privileged group, like dealing in animals and want their women under them. For some reason, they run into a dispute with their neighbours and find themselves militarily weak but intellectually superior. So what do they do? Their leader comes to me to concoct a saga in which their material deficiencies are balanced by spiritual superiority, and a promise about their return to a promised land on a later day provided they could survive the existing situation by an exodus."

"Why did he come to you? He knew what he wanted, so why did he not tell them the saga directly?" I interrupted.

That brought about another fit of visible, but inaudible, laughter. When he had his fun he asked me, "Can you imagine him telling his people to pack their goods, cross the waters and then return one day to re-possess them?" He shook his head a couple of times, and explained, "They would have kicked on his arse and drowned him into deep waters for such a treacherous suggestion. It was necessary for him to get the suggestion sanctioned by *him* to make it effective."

"Which *him*?" I enquired.

"The same one you are searching," he told me. "As you said earlier that there is one, and only one, him."

"But I am not searching for any *him* who goes around making covenants with people according to the demands of those people,"

"No? Would you really put your trust in *him* if he promised you things which were against your desires?" That question made me sit upright Would I?

I thought about my friends who had helped me with the fare to make that journey. Would they have accepted my recommendations for a fresh life if I had gone to them with a new set of commands, however easy or difficult, the fulfilment of which brought them results which were of no ultimate interest to them?

However much I disliked my conclusion, the old man's statement was not to be just refuted.

And still, I could not agree with his assertion.

"But you have not shown any participation by *him*. All that you have told me is that a certain number of men from a certain group came to you to settle their existential problems. They told you what they wanted, and you sent them back with some books of poetry with instructions about their behaviour and social conduct, and promises which they expected. Where does he come in?"

"*He* does not come in anywhere. *He* is there all the time."

The man reasoned. "Where?"

"All over," his eyes roamed around us. "You see *him* the way you want to see *him*. That is the only way you can see *him*. Whatever is beyond your comprehension is nonexistent. A hole is not just an empty space, but an empty space within a boundary. Take the boundary away and disappears the hole as well; all you are left with is a blank. Similarly, whichever way you look at him it has to be defined, if the intention is to have a common reference for apprehension and communication. To say that he is indefinable is to say that one believes in a blank. And anyone who asserts that he is beyond our comprehension merely confesses that that person has reached the limit of his own understanding and *is not satisfied with the concept which his mind has succeeded in evolving; and, therefore, would rather believe in a non-definable diffused entity than accept either the actual product of his mind, or the limitations of his ability to analyse the complex situation which lies before his mind.* Such an answer is alright if the purpose is to confuse the people, and let them go around believing in concepts about which they have no understanding; or, in other words, they have no clear idea of the content of their belief. It is not my intention to assert that at the ordinary level of comprehension a person behaves and functions strictly in accordance with his actual state of knowledge only. Many actions of a person are guided by the beliefs which that person holds; but, on each occasion a person acts he

treats his beliefs as knowledge; therefore, a false belief would lead to actions which are not true to reality – a reality which may not be accessible to the person at the time of action, but reachable later on when his knowledge expands, either by self-learning or through instructions from others. At every stage of existence, each being lives in two separate universes – the universe based upon our direct or indirect knowledge of the human state of knowledge, and the universe driven from our expectations and beliefs about which we have no real knowledge but we wish that it could exist. This latter universe is the favourite abode of those who do not accept their actual existence, but seek refuge in a mythical world. Many exploiters who use religion as a medium insist that he is to be found mainly in the universe which is drawn out of our beliefs, and not .the one which is built upon our knowledge. "

"What about that fat man who, about two and a half years ago, said that *he* could be found if one becomes *nothing*? Did he come to you?" Lihar could not hold his curiosity.

The old man moved his eyes to the boy and said, "Oh, him! He was in a class by himself. Would you believe that I found him sitting under that Banyan tree out there, looking like death itself! All skin and bones, and so dismal. Would not come in. Just sat there with his eyes closed for almost twenty days. One morning I found him

in the kitchen gobbling up my yoghurt and cakes. He said he had broken his fast and was very hungry. Never mentioned that he also broke my window to get into the house. And I have never seen anyone gain his weight as quickly as he did. One week he was merely a skeleton, and the next only flesh and fat. Changed his temperament too. Used to laugh as if someone tickled him all the time. Told me that he had a bad childhood. - Rich parents but rather strict. Did not let him play in the street with other children. Seemed to have taken it rather seriously the first time he saw an old man, followed by a funeral. Ran away from his wife and son to find peace and tranquillity, and wandered for many years before he became aware of me and came here.!

"But what about his views which I read in the papers? He said that we could find our essence by losing our appearance. Did you tell him that?" Lihar pursued his enquiry.

"In a certain way, yes. I did."

"What is that way?" I asked.

He reflected on the answer he wanted to give, opened his mouth to say something, closed it, sat still for some seconds, shook his head as if he was mixing the cocktail of ideas in his skull, and then poured his thoughts, "You two are taking a lot of my energy, but now when I have started I might as well carry on. I have to tell you some of his backgrounds - he came from an area where a

multitude of people lived close to one another but not with one another. They had divided the people into four or five groups which had almost no interaction between them, except the exchange of services which were hereditary. Now, this Chubby was born among the top ranks and had an easy life to start with. His problem was that he liked to think abstractly, and that is an affliction which all top people do their best to avoid; otherwise, they get nightmares. The rule at the top is to be glad for what you have, thank the power which you claim has made you what you are, and screw the people from whom you get what you have. All progressive thinking is considered detrimental to the grand plan of their overlord. But life at the top is also very lonely; drives any thinking person mad. And that is what he realised. One night he stole away from his mansion and went to a distant part of the country. He had a hazardous start. Ran into a 'Big Boss', who had multiple personalities. He had many followers in that part of the world. Sometimes he rode a blue bulldozer and went on a rampage, killing and destroying all that came in his way. At others, he felt so amorous that he claimed he had made lots of women pregnant, and called himself 'the Lord of Fertility'. In his best mood, he invited young girls, who were out with their cows in the pastures, to blow on his flute, and asked his favourite maid to milk him. His wife was no less split. When impassioned, it was said, she had an insatiable

hunger for the vital juices and sucked the living organism to total collapse; while on her calmer days, she posed to be a model of female virtue. Those two had formed a perfect union, both in their deeds of good and bad, and had a total grip over peoples' minds. They had a whole army of priestly under-lords which helped them reign over their subjects."

Suddenly the old man stopped the main conversation and told us a secret, "Actually that pair had been here as well, before this princely friend of ours came to me. I had a rough time with them. They tried to convince me that all reality was explicable by the rule of paradox. Spent a whole week with them beating my brains and did not catch a single thought; yet, on their way out they told me in all seriousness that their visit had been extremely valuable, and they had learnt a lot. As a token of their gratitude they taught me to sit like this," he pointed towards his crossed legs to show us.

"I did not tell him about their visit to me. Saw no sense in upsetting him. Anyhow, although he did not like that pair, he was definitely much influenced by their outlook on existence. Probably absorbed quite a bit when he travelled in their domain. He was not much interested in the pleasures of life; must have had more than his share before he hit the road. He was obsessed with finding ways to reduce pain. Said that all pain resulted from craving. Personally, I have never seen anyone who had a

greater craving for avoiding pain than he did, but that he could not understand. I wish I had talked to him about pain and all that when he sat out there torturing himself day and night. And talking again about craving, you should have seen him the way he depleted my reserves of food after he broke his fast. He looked like a huge caterpillar going through a metamorphosis, and all the provisions which I had. I was forced to leave hounds as guards in the kitchen at nights... Where were we?"

"He said to you that all pain resulted from craving," as usual Lihar bridged the gap.

"Yes! He said that he wanted to find a way by which he could avoid being born again,"

"What do you mean by 'born again'?" Lihar asked.

"Oh, I did not tell you about that. He reasoned that there was so much to experience in the universe that one life, or in his words 'one cycle of life', was just not sufficient to travel and understand all the intricacies and mysteries which analytical observation offered us. Therefore, it had to be several reincarnations for each person, who had a functioning mind, if he wished to participate in that learning which life provided. With each re-birth a person's level of knowledge rose a stage higher than the previous one, if he had used his life correctly by assiduous learning; else, he was merely recycled at the same level or even under that level if he misapplied his time. Eventually, a person ascended to the

top level where his knowledge was equal to the total knowledge which existed, and there was nothing more to learn and, therefore, no need for a re-birth. One reached a point where the boundary between all that exists and does not exist disappeared and only the blank remained. He argued that there was a short cut to all the re-births – instead of learning by degrees with each re-birth, filling the mind with knowledge at each level, and arrive at the blank by progression, he believed that one could reach the same blank by reversing to it in only one lifetime if one could empty the mind of all information, and remove the boundary between knowledge and non-knowledge. That was the ultimate reality as far as he could deduce. I told him that although his explanation definitely led to boundless knowledge, there was a danger that if a person emptied his mind completely then others might take him for a vegetable and implant him in a nut-house. He said that all we saw were appearances, and reality was essentially unknowable; if we refused the world then it did not really matter if we end up in a palace or in a nut-house; it was all the same. Imagine that huge fellow squatting where you are sitting, consuming my biscuits by the packets and tea by litres, and be had the nerve to tell me that what I saw was not real. I stopped serving tea and biscuits to my visitors since his departure – if they never experience them as real then what is the point in

serving illusions to people; besides it saves a lot of money too."

He paused for a short while and then asked us, "We have been talking for quite a while, if you feel like some refreshments then I have installed some slot machines in the kitchen," he pointed in the direction of the kitchen.

"No dogs on duty I hope?" I asked, as Lihar dug in his pockets to extract some change.

"I had them shot; too expensive to keep in the long run. I have electronic eyes covering the place now."

Lihar returned with two bottles of Soul Cola. The old man's hand vanished under his cushion. The table-top opened from the left corner and a small tray with three empty glasses arose to the occasion. He poured half of my bottle and a half from Lihar's in his glass, raised it to our health and finished it in one go.

"You must have adopted the arithmetic of the third cousin?" Lihar enquired in all innocence.

"It is a simple matter of 'give a little and take the most'," he remarked casually.

"He stayed here almost a month," he proceeded with the narration. "During that time we talked about every aspect of life. Though I do not think we talked much about practical matters. Almost every sentence started with 'If' and finished with some sort of 'then' possibility. In a remarkable way he was just the opposite of the third cousin you mentioned just now. That one had a fix for

enumeration - how many times up, down, left or right. How many times a day, month and year. How many lines in a passage, passages in a chapter and chapters in that book? To that you can add his equations about men and women. This one insisted that one is all, all is one, one is the same as zero, and zero is interchangeable with all. What do you think made my hair so grey?" He asked me and then, before I could open my mouth, gave the answer, "Those two and their discussions about equality"

"What was your advice to him?"

"A rather delicate formulation which I suggested to him. Had to convince him that if everyone decided to equate himself with zero then that would be the end of tea and biscuits for him and me; therefore, there could be only a limited number of people at a specific hour who might indulge in the regression which he urged, the majority must aim for the progressive style and work their way up to liberation from earthly duties. He accepted my view, and called them the greater circle and the smaller circle, with nothing in their middle - he said that it was an absolute solution. If I remember correctly then he never wished for any book or written proof for the sanctity of his concepts. Started to giggle when I asked him if he wanted to borrow my computer for the proper documentation of the proceedings here. I think he is the only one who came here without really looking for *him*."

"How come?" my tongue threw the words at him.

"Other than his craving to find an escape from the re-birth, he had no other motivation. He was not keen for women, money, property, fame, power or anything else which brings most people to me. I can say that he was mainly aiming for his own escape, believing that as an example it was also an answer for everyone else, free from any distinction of sex, colour and race. If others accepted his route then all was well and good; otherwise, he said that he did not care. In any case, he did not require a backing up by *him*. I have a sneaky feeling that the true purpose of his visit was to give me advice rather than taking it from me, though he hardly ever exerted himself to inflict his views upon mine. As a matter of fact, he burst into laughter each time we had the positions locked. Quite fun it was to listen to him. Had it not been so expensive to maintain him I would have treated him here much longer, but the grocery suppliers fly in my orders by helicopter only twice a month and I wasn't sure either whether he had any intentions of making contributions in the collection box. Without being rude I told him that although one, after being spent, was the same as zero, the zero, single or a whole collection of them, was definitely not equal to any usable one, at least not in the accounts of the boys who made the deliveries, and believed only in cash payments. I also, rather tacitly, conveyed to him that the impact of his presence had been

exhausting, and perhaps I stood a better chance of finding the gist of his visit if he disappeared from here."

"Is that what he meant when he said that we find our essence by losing our appearance?" Lihar cried impatiently.

"That is what I meant when I said that it was a delicate formulation. My words were that perhaps *I stood a better chance of finding the gist of his visit if he disappeared from here*. He became overjoyed with that utterance, and said that if I could find his essence after his disappearance then he could, also, find his essence after he lost his appearance. Actually, that was the last thing he said before he disappeared from here, with all my servants, who had fallen for his laughter, and the claim that the less one worked the more one could meditate, and attain liberation."

He made a break by taking out a box of matches from under his seat, and asked me if he could borrow my packet of cigarillos. I gave it to him. He promptly took out two cigarillos, gave one to me, put the other in his mouth and lighted them. Then he placed the matches and the packet under the cushion.

He filled his lungs with the nicotine from nearly half of the cigarillo, let his blood absorb the poison thoroughly, exhaled the consumed contents slowly, and when the smokescreen almost hid his face he asked, "Are you

anywhere close to determining the form in which you would like to have *him*."

I wasn't.

"So far you have told us about three cousins who wanted him for some sort of protection racket, a pair of exploiters who commended paradoxes, and a happy-go-lucky who enjoyed much food, little work, no pain, and was not seeking after *him* at all. Where is the true *him*?" Lihar was a greater participant than I

"*He* is true in every form," the old man told Lihar.

"We were told that *he* created everything, knows everything, and understands everything. *He* is everything." I came in to rescue the boy.

"Precisely!" said the old man.

"I do not get it," I confessed.

"You just said that *he* is everything."

"Yes," I agreed.

"Then all the forms in which I provide *him* must be true," he re-claimed.

I started to see his logic, and decided to proceed within his system, "What is the most complete form you have?"

"That depends entirely upon the set of expectations which you can conceive for *him* to fulfil. Not only those things which you know that they could be done, but also those which you can imagine could be done, and those which you know could not be done by you as a human being but you wish that they could be done by someone

with whom you might communicate. *He* is expected by you to be there when you wish to perform an act which is within the human sphere and you require extraordinary external help, and you wish *him* to take over and perform those acts for you which you know are beyond human sphere but you want to be done anyhow. Am I reaching you?"

"Go ahead," I requested.

"There are no people on this earth who do not have the three grades of wishing as I explained just now. On the other band, there are innumerable ways in which the three grades are put into words, and those words are arranged in variable degrees of complexity to convey meanings. Yet, a simple statement like 'I want to be happy' by a straightforward, so-called, primitive person to a stone *him* is essentially the same as hours of beating about the bush by the people of reputedly more advanced cultures, where the same wish is addressed to an abstract *him* in cryptic words which are sanctified by certain religious bosses. As far as I am concerned it is the same *him* which I supply to both parties, I just pack *him* differently, in accordance with their instructions."

"Then what about all these religions and faiths, and the disputes between them?" I asked.

"All the different religions have the same basic psychological content - the satisfaction of their believers at most times, and a promise of help if things go wrong,

either immediately or in some distant future, here or in another life. This core is served to people in decorated packages to which various strings are attached to achieve a uniformity of behaviour in the believers, and their compliance towards the execution of their duties to the few persons who delivered the packages," he studied my face to see if I was with him, looked satisfied, and continued, "I help people to prepare these packages."

"And you help everyone who comes to you - good or bad?" Lihar came in.

"I help anyone who comes here. If you want the truth then they prepare the packages themselves. I am more like an echo chamber, where they hear their own voices many times repeated. They come here pretending to be lost and confused, but in reality fully aware of what they want me to say. And what they want me to say is exactly the same which they would have said themselves if convention permitted them to do so without any danger of reprobation for the open declaration of their desires. That is why I claim that I have him in all forms, because every form which I provide is the form which they mould themselves."

"But you have not given *me* any form?" I pointed out

"I never do. I say that I supply *him* in all forms. You have to tell me which one of these forms you want and you will get it"

We were back on square one.

He did not wait for my answer, "I said that they come to me *pretending* to be lost; but in your case *you are lost*, and that makes it unnecessarily tedious. I not only have to provide *him* to you but also make you discover *him* first. And that is something different."

"And where do I discover *him*?" I enquired, although I thought that now I knew the answer- I had recognised IT. "Do I need to tell you?" IT said that and had its, silent, fit of laughter.

"Don't forget the collection-box," were the last words he said, as we got up to leave.

Lihar and I walked in total silence for nearly half an hour. Suddenly he stopped and said, "Papa! If you were to let your hair grow wild you would appear like him."

I looked at the boy and smiled. He smiled back.

We both turned and cast our eyes in the direction of the hill from which we had come down. In a room up there I, like many others before me, had met the universal *Alter ego*, and conferred with IT. There IT had been sitting since the beginning of time, and would remain the whole length of eternity, arguing with each seeker what that seeker wanted to believe, and finally sending the seeker home with a form to contain that belief.

I put my hands in my pocket and realised that all the

cash was gone, only the return tickets were there. Perhaps the fat fellow was right after all --by the time we get home even the tickets would be gone.

Didn't IT say that he believed that all became eventually nothing; or, was it zero?

The Soft Drink

Some invisible power pulled the hidden strings, and all of his arms and legs shot out simultaneously. Then he tried to catch some things in the space which I could not see.

His head, slightly slanted, wobbled on secret hearings of the highest quality, while he exerted himself to take notice of my frame with his one and three-quarter eyes.

I wondered what I looked like from a pair of eyes which had not been washed properly for days, were laden with semi-dry muck and roiled in sockets which in turn were fitted in a perpetually rocking head.

His teeth, a clear cream-yellow, gleamed behind his partially open lips. Dribble ran from the left side of his lower lip, and made a wet spot in the middle of his chest.

One of the safety belt's straps ran across his lower abdomen; while the other, starting from above his left shoulder and after rounding his torso, disappeared behind his hip, pinning his body firmly to the wheelchair.

He continued to swing his limbs, and analyse my appearance; while I shifted my attention to the woman who had accompanied him.

She appeared to be in her twenties - average height, a trim frame and quite shapely legs. Her hair was newly washed, and brushed back into a pony-tail. The hands

were neat, but the short cut nails carried faint black lines under and along the edges; which hinted that she had some sort of manual job. Her face added a few years to the rest of her body; spider-webs had already started to show around the outer corners of her eyes. The eyes, although bright, carried gloom.

Whatever her philosophy of life might have been, *evolution* could have not been any part of her belief – not with that *thing* twisting unrhythmically in the wheelchair.

Our eyes met. She gave me a contemptuous look. I felt relieved that she did not carry a witch's stick in her hand; otherwise, with a simple twist of her wrist I might have landed in the chair, and her own 'extension' running and kicking in the summer sun.

We both turned our attention towards the child and I heard her say, "We will have to take him out from the chair, and then you could lift him into the back-seat"

Both of us bent toward him.

My eyes felt mesmerised; my mouth watered.

Under the thin cotton garment, she wore no bra. Nor had she bothered to strain the upper two buttons of her blouse.

All at once there were *three* wobbling objects before my eyes, *two* of which I yearned to hold and ignore the third;

but the situation demanded that I should ignore the two and attend to the *third*

It was not easy.

Suddenly I had the acute fear that if I did not control my feelings and physical movements then I too would end up being strapped to a chair.

I also wondered if an external watcher would have observed the similarity of movements between my hands and that of the child – our real focus of attention was in one place, while the hands went grasping in some other.

She, too, must have sensed my disorientation and its probable site of origin, and straightened up a bit, which drew a veil of thin cotton over those two live centres of cosmic flux.

She also lifted her head and gave me a brief look – this time there was no contempt, just stark pity; and not all of it for me alone.

I cursed myself, and tried to concentrate upon the real task at hand.

To loosen the belt on his stomach I needed to release the latch on his left. I extended my arm and leaned across his chest. The fragrance of Charlie from her body and the odour of old spittle from his breast invaded my nostrils. It was a mixture of smells I could experience only sensually, but fail to spread it as words on a page. Alternate chains of attraction and repulsion worked on my nerves.

She found the latch and released the belt and gave the free end to me.

The boy uttered a grunt and clawed for my spectacles. With a brisk withdrawal of my head, I dodged his open paw, which landed on my left arm and closed its grip.

It was a cold, rough grip of amazing strength.

His nails cut into my flesh.

To loosen his fingers I laid my hand on his.

Our eyes locked, and he pulled an ugly grin. Two muck filled eyes tried to adjust their focus for my close-up. His lower lip dropped on the left side; then he showed me that he had a tongue as well.

I had started averting my eyes from his when I saw IT smile in there and caught its laugh -I heard a blackbird sing, the taste of honey and almonds filled my mouth, an exuberant aroma from the body of a newly bathed baby rose and imbued my senses, the sunshine warmed up.

I smiled too, but was not really sure if it was actually IT or just my imagination.

"Don't pull your hand away. Let it be there," IT felt my doubt and said, just as I was about to remove it

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"What are you doing here in this *thing*?" I elaborated.

"*Thing!* Which *thing*?" IT sounded hurt, "He is not a *thing*. I am here, perceiving, observing, learning,

remembering and interacting. In an unusual physical apparatus perhaps – not perfect, but responsive."

I had met IT many times before – children shouting in the courtyards, the gusto of youthful confrontation in the playground, ecstatic dancers on a floor, impassioned debaters on some rostrum, or solitary pursuers in meditative trances.

IT was always there. In one form or another, it kindled the spark of lust which brings the activity of animated beings into mutual interaction by direct or indirect participation.

Yet, the animal being seated in front of me, strapped to that wheel-chair, seemed so far away from the animated beings which I associated with Life.

I studied him again – about ten or eleven years old, languid, pale and unclean. I doubted if he could stand straight or still.

At that moment the only positive activity I could possibly associate with him was that if the cords of a generator were to be connected with his limbs, he would have produced a non-exhaustive supply of electricity – how ironic that a being which apparently lacked all flow of coordinated life in it could have been a regular supplier of energy to others.

"Don't be misled by appearances!" I heard IT mutter.

"Are you *really* there?" I asked.

"Feel me," IT said.

I slackened the muscles in my forearm. Through the crust of his epidermis, the smoothness of IT seeped on to my skin. Those five spots which felt chilled under his fingers were gently warmed up by IT's soothing touch. In his thumb I caught the pulsations, each one murmuring, "I am here! I am here! I am here!"

IT was there.

I looked at him again. He stared back.

I smiled and whispered to him, "You bastard! You are a fraud. Why this camouflage?"

He smiled too.

IT said, "No, not a deliberate camouflage."

I raised my eyebrows.

"The external covering is a material process. A process which started at the 'beginning' and proceeds mostly quite efficiently; but sometimes there are flaws too - a few accidental, others by occasional neglect, some by deliberate misconduct. As a driving force I can only propel the bodies which I get; their efficiency only partly dependent upon me."

IT continued.

"But you get into every body anyhow?" I enquired.

"I must ... I am one of the elements. The intelligent growth started the same moment as the material growth, and I belong to both. They are two parallel processes. You can say that they are like the two sides of the leaf of paper - independent, yet dependent."

"How does it work?" was my next question.

"Mostly symbiotically,"

"Does it *work*?"

"Again ... mostly," IT said.

"Don't be a miser with words. Open up a bit," I protested.

That made IT laugh.

"The growth of the physical apparatus is a process which involves material consumption of energy sources, their metabolism within the basic cells, the growth and sustenance of those cells, and then later on in some cases the formation of multicellular organisms; among them the beings to which you normally add the prefix *human*. The mental growth is a process which involves the reception of intelligible sensations, their comprehension and their subsequent storage as knowledge within the reservoir you call the mind in its functional capacity, the accumulation of personal knowledge by self experience and then the collection of universal knowledge gained through the interaction of different minds and finally the application of that knowledge for intercommunication with other beings,"

"And what is your status?"

"I am the driving force behind both growths, although I prefer to be identified with the latter." IT pondered for a few instants and then added, "Mental growth is totally dependent upon the physical growth, at least in the

primary stages. I cannot exist solely as an intelligent vital force. The physical container is a must. I can, of course, exist as a non- or semi-intelligent physical being but that is a vapid state; almost like death – a flute, but no music. Thus, with my dual identity it is up to me to apply my other side to the looking after of the physical body. The better it functions the greater the probability that the intelligent being can cooperate with it. But it does not always happen that way. All too often one of the two outgrows the other, or it is even worse when one of them refuses to accept the other's existent identity; although, apparently they have balanced growth and give every indication of harmonious coexistence. Its reverse is also true – apparent disharmony between the two, yet a mutual acceptance and proportional evaluation of each other ..."

"We cannot sit here the whole day." Unexpectedly IT changed the topic.

I tried to coordinate my *two beings*.

"We cannot sit here all day!" I heard it again, and realised that the words were actually spoken by the lady with sad eyes, no bra, unbuttoned blouse, and two devastating proofs of extremely healthy physical growth.

Instantaneously I broke communication with IT and converged my attention on the *opposite of healthy physical growth*.

He still had his fingers imbedded in my forearm.

I gently pressed my hand on his and suggested to IT, "Let us move!"

He released his grip, and then tried to grab my glasses, missed them again, and with a half-somersault landed deep in his wheel-chair. I loosened the other strap as well and stood up. He threw a rather well-aimed kick and almost made it to the centre of my masculinity. Had he connected, I would have cursed him in falsetto for the rest of my life. I could never have guessed that the boy was probably the karate champion among the wheelchair confined handicaps.

"You better take him from the side," his mother advised me.

I took two crab-steps and approached him from the side. His head also rotated and he tried to assess my strategy. I advanced with one quick step and then retarded my speed as I bent towards him. He chopped at the spot where my neck would have been had I not slowed down, and missed. As his arm fell I rushed and got hold of his legs with my right arm, and with the left arm under his neck, while pinning his arm with my torso, I lifted him out from the chair.

The back door of the taxi was already open. I angled myself for a clean landing and was about to deposit him when IT said, "Wait a minute. Hold me tight this way."

"Why?"

"It feels so good. To be held in your arms, listen to your heartbeat, feel your body heat,"

I lowered my face and kissed IT on the cheek.

He looked up, with surprise floating in those watery eyes. I winked at him.

He winked back.

IT chuckled. I laughed.

She said, "What is so funny?"

I answered, "Nothing."

IT giggled.

He laughed.

She said, "What is going on?"

"Nothing, I think I tickled him a bit," I had to give some logical excuse.

I stood there a few moments holding him close to my *Self* and let IT feel me.

She probably thought that I had difficulty in placing him on the seat; so, she entered the car from the other side and extended her arms to receive him.

He looked at her and let out a soft cry of pleasure - I was certain that he had not seen her too often in that posture; so willing to receive him.

I put my left knee on the seat and gently lowered him into her embrace.

Her arms held him, *and my hands*, tight against her softness for some extended seconds, and then placed him on the seat

He seemed happy.

She looked a bit embarrassed.

I felt stiffening in some muscles.

IT said, "You are a crazy one!"

"You know that I am," I answered.

I tried to settle him on the seat in such a way that he would not hurt himself by hitting something hard by his involuntary swings.

It did not seem to work.

So I told her, "It will be safer if you were to sit closer, and keep one of your arms around him."

"Yes, of course," she said in a robot-like tone, but did not move.

I kept staring at her and waited.

Reluctantly she shifted towards him and put her arm around his neck and, then, held his left hand. Their heads turned towards each other and the eyes met

She faced him with a look which contained a mixture of regret, pathos, affection and apology.

He looked back at her with a face which exhibited expectation, pleasure, affection and acceptance.

I returned to my seat and waited for the instructions.

IT said, "They haven't had this meeting for months."

"Don't they live together?" I asked.

"In the same house, but not *together*."

I remained silent, but expecting.

IT sensed my confusion.

"Sharing a house is one thing, being together is another."

"Isn't he, her child, her *extension*?" I enquired.

"He is her produce, but she considers him as her *termination*."

"How so?"

"She was nineteen when she got him. When he was two the whole family went to North Africa on holidays. There the boy became very sick with a loose stomach. The local doctor, in good faith, wrote him 'Enterovioform' as a prescription; a medicinal product which besides being a cure for the stomach disorders is also a known cause of muscular and nervous disablement of thousands of children all over the world. Although it is now not sold in the western world after massive protests by medical practitioners, and the subsequent ban by the authorities, it is still marketed in the third world countries under many trade names. Anyhow the boy recovered from his stomach ailment, but later on his condition slowly deteriorated, and now you can see for yourself the way he is."

"Does she blame *him* for it?"

"No, she does not blame him consciously; on the other hand, she has an existential problem - the boy's father, that bastard! He said that he could not face the situation and with tunes of regret and a commitment to pay a monthly allowance, imposed upon him by the court,

made his exit from her and *his* extension's life. She, on the other hand, through convention or choice ... the choice to start with ... has his custody and the responsibility."

"And?"

"Well! To start with there were feelings of love, duty, responsibility, commitment, and, of course, the concomitant fatigue."

"And now?"

"There is mainly fatigue; the other feelings exist too, but now she has to summon them up, and not always successfully."

"What happened?" I continued.

"The usual - when the boy became an invalid there were friends, and some relatives, who stood by and helped enthusiastically. But as time passed they started to fade away. The first big blow came when the father packed his things, cursed the mother for selecting North Africa for their holidays, apologised to their remaining friends for his defection and then moved on to another healthier house for his future. Nine years also mean three thousand two hundred and eighty-seven days, and nights; each day and night with its own requirements, and each depleted her reservoir of energy - physical and mental."

"And where do *you* fit in here IT?" I asked.

For once IT was slow to respond.

"Where do you fit in as the *driving force* in the daily existence of an eleven-year-old imbecile invalid, and a twenty-nine-year-old abandoned, embittered and depleted woman?" I could hear the fury in my own voice.

"I am what keep them going,"

"*Why?*" I spat the single word.

"Because in spite of all these occasions of pain and exhaustion there are other pleasures and involvements which Life has to offer to them, provided they apprehend their situation as it is and then proceed from there, and break the conventions."

"But what about these *occasions* of pain and exhaustion which have become an integral part of *their* life?"

"That is what I called earlier as 'accidents in life'. To the question 'Why such accidents happen and who is responsible for them?' I have no answer; except that in all those cases of misery in which the causes are known the human understanding and compassion can play a vital role to delimit, even erase, the suffering of others."

"That was not what I asked IT. I asked you about the *pain and exhaustion* which have become a part of the life of these two," the venom in my voice was still there.

"You are angry with me today?" IT said it with a tone of surprise in its voice.

"Yes, and do not deflect the question." I was still not friendly.

"It is easier for her to rejuvenate her existence because most of her pains are on grounds of conventions, and imposed. She needs to accept the naked fact that because her own situation is not within the range which is described as normal by the society, she cannot expect herself to live by the normal code of behaviour. She must find the courage to be alone, when necessary. Once she succeeds in identifying her own actual existent situation, its limits as well as scope, it will be easier for her to choose her future course of action regarding the life of her child and her own as an act of volition and not merely as the fulfilment of an obligation. This distinction - the acceptance of an act as a personal choice and its execution, and the execution of obligation as an impersonal act - is the decisive factor which determines the contentment or discontentment of a mind, even when the act performed is identical in both cases."

"Easier said than done. Aren't you asking too much from an individual to make such assessments?" I protested.

"Not really. All I am asking for is a *re-assessment* of one's view of oneself from a different angle," IT said it gently.

"Explain it a bit more," I said.

"Each being at every moment in its life has a functional evaluation of its situation; mostly a distorted evaluation because it is done with reference to the situation of other beings. Yet, it works because it operates like a chain of

compromises linking one individual to another, each trying to look at itself from the eyes of the other; and, thus, making adjustments according to that perspective and its requirements. Still, just because such an existence empirically works it does not mean that that is what each person really desires."

"If I interpret you correctly then you are hinting that each person ought to apprehend his situation from his eyes only?" I interrupted IT's elaboration.

"No, not from his eyes only. That would be a very narrow view. Each person must judge his situation from his own perspective and at the same time from the perspective of other persons who are in a direct or indirect personal relationship with him. This dual awareness, let us call it 'Conscious Existence', which involves the judgement of a situation both from personal motivation and external expectation of other persons, and then a balanced interaction between the two is the gist of harmonious coexistence."

"And what happens when personal desires clash with the desires of other persons?"

"That is when the cardinal virtue of Conscious Existence becomes evident - when a person is judging himself through the eyes of others, and making adjustment according to their expectations, then in a situation where there is a clash of interests he feels that he is settling for too little. On the other hand, when the same person

assesses the situation from his angle and decides what the balanced outcome ought to be then the feeling is that he is not taking too much. In both cases, the actual quantity or the quality achieved may be the same, yet the psychological difference between the obligatory reception of something which could be *too little* and the voluntary acceptance of something which is *not too much* is what determines how the situation will be accepted by the mind

"You are not a great supporter of the societal determination of our mode of existence?" was my next comment.

"I am involved with real animal beings, not fictional constructs which are meant to explain the control of the masses by a few in the name of masses. These theoretical beings which encompass everything, yet originate from none, are the tools which are used by their creators to mould the framework which is imposed upon individuals, as members of some society, to restrict personal contact among them. No, Sir! Each individual is primarily a unique being, existing in a unique universe of its own; and it is only through mutual interaction that one becomes a participant in the external universe of other beings. Only when a person loses his position in his own universe does he become a satellite in the universe of others and come under their domain. All these monarchies, republics, lands, nations and religions which

engage people within their boundaries are social constructs meant to legitimise the separation of one individual from another on the personal level by coercing them, and then projecting them, as the members of a larger body - the named social construction. For all practical purposes, the pains and pleasures of a person are strictly at the individual level; although common sense says that personal pain can be reduced and pleasure enhanced by sharing it with other persons if, and when, the exchange takes place between mutually receptive persons."

"So, what is your recommendation for her? Or rather 'How can you *propel* her through existence as a content person?" I wanted to concentrate on specifics.

"I shall *propel* her through *life*, but her *contentment* is not within my sphere. For it she must, herself or by suggestion, review her current state of affairs, eliminate that which is enforced upon her by external sources and then decide her own line of positive thinking, I will tell you one thing! She is a tough one. The suffering she has gone through in the last nine years is enormous; but instead of consenting to play the role ... as demanded by the society ... of a dedicated but embittered mother, a decent but frustrated woman, religiously moral but emotionally depleted believer, had she opted for a more liberal approach towards life, in which rigidity of social behaviour was dropped in favour of more flexible and

practical solutions, then without being an unethical person the life would have been much more colourful for her." IT seemed adamant to contest that in the midst of all the chaos which swells around each person there was place and occasions for contentment and pleasure in the daily existence.

"And what about him? As you said earlier that it is easier for her because, apparently, she is physically and mentally a healthy person. How does he, with his definitely distorted body and probably imperfect mind, resolve *his* individual pains?" I matched my persistency with IT's adamancy.

"He is a special case. He could have been a flaw in the evolutionary process and, thus, require a different approach; but in this particular case he is a product of the deliberate misconduct by society – he is a victim partly of the greed of that minority of people who for the sake of monetary gain have not stopped marketing a known diabolic preparation, and partly of the neglect of the majority which despite their knowledge of the adverse effects of such preparations have allowed their sale to continue in the world market; and, thus, both parties consent to the disablement of multitudes of children. Therefore, his caretaking must be considered as a societal obligation."

"This still does not answer my question. What I asked was what can *he* do to resolve *his* pain?"

"He *does* resolve his pain the best he can. Your problem is that you continue to look at *his* problems from *your* angle. That is not the way he looks at them. The only way of living which he confronts is the one which he has. His apprehension and reception of pain and pleasure are from his point of view. That is not to say that he experiences them more or less than anybody else. Nor do I mean that he fails to appreciate the obvious differences between himself and the majority of the other people who surround him. But after noticing all the differences and similarities, what it boils down to is the way people treat each other. Whatever the appearance may be, the elements which provide pain and pleasure for the human mind are basically the same. Under normal circumstances, the human-animal has evolved a system where it can cater to each other at the individual level or at the group level, where different services are mutually exchanged. The problem arises when masses of people are forced together in small areas in the modern cities and then are compelled to live in isolation in tiny compartments. This multitude gives a false appearance of togetherness because in reality there is little interaction between the members of these swarms. Oh! I beg your pardon. Somehow I always get side-tracked when talking to you. Where were we?" IT suddenly asked me.

"You were telling me how he could resolve his problems," I answered.

"Yes! As I said he resolves his problems his own way. What is actually needed in this case is the collective help which the other members of the society must provide to lessen her burden because she is not individually responsible for the mishap which has struck the child."

I looked in the rearview mirror at the pair where one was individually responsible to resolve her problems while the other was a societal responsibility as well.

They still sat in the same position in which I had left them - his left hand in her right, while with the other hand she gently stroked his cheek.

I had a feeling that he was smiling.

"We cannot sit here all day," my lips moved, although I thought that I heard an echo.

She slowly lifted her eyes from his face and caught mine in the mirror. With a beautiful mystic smile on her face, she said, "No, we do not need to. I do not believe that we shall go anywhere."

"*Not go anywhere?*" I could not believe her statement

"No. I was going to leave him in the rehabilitation hospital for treatment, but he looks so happy sitting close to me that I will not part from him just now."

That put an end to whatever that trip was going to be worth to me.

I gently turned my face towards her with an inquisitive expression set upon it.

She maintained her mystical smile and said, "It is getting so hot and you have waited for so long. If you were to come up perhaps I could treat you to a soft drink and something with it."

A happy smile exploded on my face. I took the ignition key out of its holder, and then told her that I would enjoy *her* soft drink and *something* with it very much.

Discourses with IT

(Sain Sucha)

