

ENTRY 01

A memory half forgotten

-Yashi Jain

It was a dull day and I was sitting in my old squared room, on the same squared bed with a handful of popcorn in the left hand and some crayons in the other. I was trying to color my life which was bleak and white as the empty papers kept on my bed. These crayons usually sat inside my wooden cupboard amongst my oversized clothes, waiting to fill the colorless pages of my life. Their sharp-pointed tip and blunt ends reminded me of the VIBGYOR life I had.

...Three years back, as I remember, I was sitting in the same room, on the same bed with a handful of popcorn in my left hand. My right hand had a coin though. Initially, it was as useless as a screen door in a submarine, as for the first hundred times, it proved to be the ideal coin you would expect to see in a math textbook, showing up heads and tails exactly fifty times each. I decided to give a last try. As the coin tossed up into the baffling air, my heart started to thud inside my chest and my mind chattered YES and NO a thousand times before the metal landed right onto my palm. I had made my decision as the shiny head of the coin revealed itself. My heartbeat went down to normal linearly in a few seconds and I decided to tell him everything, truthfully. I was going to step into the next vivid part of my story when my mom entered my room, making me aware of the fact that I had crayons on my right hand and not a helpful silver coin.

“Stop eating popcorn throughout the day, Jia, will you? Look how fat you are turning every day. Leave your popcorn and artwork aside and go out and exercise for a while?” mummy said, turning red like a Kashmiri chilli.

“Oh, don't worry, mummy. I will soon turn into a big dumpy balloon with every bit of cheese I intake and then burst into the sleek and thin daughter of your dreams,” I replied with my terrible sense of humour.

That was too much for mom to handle, and she left the room, banging the door loud enough to scare the other members of the family.

I continued to eat my cheese popcorn, for my love for food was and is still enormous. My stomach turns into a supermassive black hole on seeing food. I spiraled back into the scenes of my old vibrant college life, while I licked the remnants of cheese in the bowl.

...It was a glorious winter and my favorite day, my birthday.

“Will it be weird to tell him everything today? Maybe, I could tell him tomorrow. But then, it would be the best birthday of my life if it's a yes and worst if he says no...”-I was constantly

speaking to myself while putting on my eyeliner in my hostel room. As I was making my fish braid, my heart babbled again-

“Some birthday has to be the worst birthday, right? So better spoil it today.”

My phone screen glared again for the 21st time and I rushed towards the elevator after seeing his message.

My life was dissolving into a strawberry pink shade as the elevator door gradually opened. I saw Shreyas in his usual Tantra T-shirt and peach-colored pants that camouflaged well with the wall behind. It seemed as if he was trying to hide a smile behind his expressionless face and a gift behind his stiff back. As he approached me, my heart filled with overflowing emotions of both excitement and nervousness. A slow smile worked its way across his face and into his eyes, and he hugged me tightly and said,

“Happy 21st birthday, Acari!”

“When would you stop calling me by that weird arachnid name?” I retorted.

“The day you stop sucking my blood and eating my head,” he replied.

I was going to explode like a volcano, but before I could do that, he handed me a piece of paper and a gift wrapped in pink gift paper. I opened the folded paper and...

“Wow! This is so pretty! The sky you've drawn looks more real than the actual one, and the clouds...they look like a huge cotton bedspread in this blue heaven. And, by the way, who are these two people on the beach?”

“Oh, it's us! Some fine day, I'll take you to a beautiful beach just as in the picture. But for now, let's walk around the cricket ground.”

The path from hostel to the cricket ground seemed longer that day.

“Isn't it quite cold today? See, there's fog everywhere.” I rubbed my hands as my teeth chattered.

“Wanna become a cloud breathing dragon?” he responded stupidly.

“Are you high or something? How would you transform yourself into a dragon who breathes out cloud and not fire?” I chuckled at his silly question.

“Well, it's really simple, just take a deep breath and exhale while opening your mouth wide open. It's just condensation, birthday girl!” he explained showing off his science knowledge.

We were having the best time that day, howling like wolves and breathing like dragons. With him, time just flew. He had the unique ability to make me laugh with his stupid sense of humour, even on a frosty winter night.

Very soon, we were lying on the freezing green grass discussing philosophy, maths and politics. The discussion turned into a debate, like always. Before it could turn into a fight, he kept his hand on top of mine. We gazed at the beautiful moon and the twinkling stars when he pulled me closer. I stirred and cuddled into him. My head lied on his chest and our heartbeats resonated. I thought this was the right time to tell him how much I loved him. But before I could do so, he pulled me even closer until our lips touched for a soft kiss. I knew he loved me too, and without uttering a single word, he had made that clear. The night was still, quiet and wordless till he said, "I think it's time for you to open your birthday present." And I opened the gift wrapper with the utmost curiosity.

It read "Jumbo Wax Crayons, Smooth and Bright Colors."

"Oh, it's an awesome gift, but you know I don't draw, right?" I enquired.

"I do know that," he replied confidently.

"But, what will I..." I began to speak in a confused tone and he interrupted.

"You know, colors are the most wholesome gift you could give someone. If you ever have a day bereft of colors, just grab these crayons and paint your world. I never want to see that cute little smile leaving your dumb face, okay?"

Slowly, the red color started to fade into my black and white present life. Things had changed since then. A huge fight one day had caused us to drift apart, and we never spoke after that. I have a faded memory of this part of the story and I don't want to remember it again, as it would give me an infinite amount of pain.

My eyes were brimming with tears as I saw those priceless crayons, someone so close to me had gifted me. I started copying the exact same picture he had gifted me, with blurred eyes when I received a call from an unknown, but familiar number. I thought that I'd again gotten a call from Kalinga University, as I had been receiving various calls from there recently.

"Would you stop calling me, please? I have already told you a couple of times that my brother is in his third year of graduation and he is not desperate for an engineering degree from your college." - I picked up the call getting annoyed. I guess it was their failed 69th attempt of trying to convince me how useless a pure science degree is.

"Oh, I am sorry. But the call is for you, ma'am. A very happy birthday to you." It was a familiar voice.

"Ummm... Thanks a lot for your wishes, but, I have completed my post graduation and I am soon going to pursue a PhD." I was completely mystified at this point.

"Oh, that's great Acari! From, which university?" said the palsy-walsy voice.

“SHREYAS?” I was astounded.

“I’m glad that you realized it so soon,” he said sarcastically.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe that it’s you. I thought you would still be angry at me for whatever happened. I am really very sorry, and...and thanks for calling me. This is my most special birthday wish so far. Oh, and I am pursuing my doctorate from the University of Chicago. What about you? And...and how have you been? Is everything fi...”

He interrupted me like always and said, “Relax, girl, relax! I am here in Pune for some work and would like to see you in the evening if you’re free. We could discuss everything then?”

“YES! Sure. How about our old favorite café at 5 pm?”

“Cool! See you at 5 pm sharp at Tales and Spirits? Remember, whoever gets there first places our customary order!”

I agreed and cut the call.

I was in high spirits after listening to his charismatic voice after years and immediately put on my circular glasses to make a picture of a magnificent and colorful night sky, as a symbol of our unforgettable memories.

ENTRY 02

Mirror

-Saksham Rohilla

It was 24th of october, 1965. I distinctly remember because it was Diwali yet everybody in the house was crying. My mother had sent me to Girdhari’s shop to buy garlands. I was around 4 or 5 and yet confident with travelling alone to nearby shops. I bought 4 garlands.

While coming out of the shop, I felt hot as the sun was directly overhead. I was walking back home when I saw an old man at a distance, it was him. “Grandpa”, I cried. He looked back and smiled with his usual raised eyebrows and gloomy eyes. That glow and confidence he wore on his face reminded me of ‘The Sun God: Suryadeva’. His beard looked white as cotton with a trace of radiating life.

I ran towards him and held his icy cold wrinkled hands. He was silent as sea. We walked together and changed routes that I had never seen before. The road was empty except the dead tiger lying in the middle of the road. As I focused my eyes on the supposedly dead tiger, he suddenly opened his eyes and gazed right through my soul. Full of terror and shock, I closed my eyes and hid behind grandpa slowly peeking through his torn kurta. He, still smiling, took me to a secluded lake where we sat on a stone bench and silence prevailed.

I was constantly looking at him with both fear and love. He seemed so dreamy and refreshing. I was busy listening to the song of breeze and water when he suddenly interrupted - "Son, always remember, death never comes to you unless you've faced the reaction of every action you've taken in your life. The god is so clever that we don't receive all the answers at once. Instead, he provides us with enormous choices each with their unique consequences tightly bound to them. And it is also said that there is no correct option, there are some good ones and some bad ones. So, our own definition of good and bad segregates the choices based on our experience which makes this process purely subjective. Embracing that subjectivity, we learn and progress towards a better future with no competition of thoughts and persona. God never gives us joy without fear, luxury without jealousy, peace without war and life without death. Everything we choose has it's own predetermined paths and instructions that gives a purpose without which no one can survive. Inherent to this purpose is faith which acts as guide in this process of self development. I have now fulfilled my purpose by giving you all I learnt in my life which means I must depart. The world is not a cruel place, my son, it's just a little hopeless". He said with everything left in him, it was like he paid his final duties and released a life long burden. He rose in the end tapping my head and started walking towards the lake with his clothes disappearing slowly. I saw him surrendering himself to the lake with no clothes just as he came to this world. Heavy tears rolled down my cheeks knowing that he would never come back and in no time I started crying loudly. With so much emotional tension and fear, I lost my senses and fainted right there. The next thing I know, I was on my bed looking at my grandpa's framed picture with garland on it on the wall. It's been 80 years and now when I'm lying on my deathbed, I finally know what his words meant.

ENTRY 03

A Quarantine Preparation

-S.J

Finally, it was happening. Jeremy had been dreaming for a really long time that such a day would come. Well, it was sad for lots of people sure, but still this was his chance. A chance to prove to everyone that he was so much more than what they thought he was. The purge.

Everyone would either be listening to the class or checking their phones while Jeremy was preoccupied fighting monsters in his imagination. Usually daydreaming about this during class, things went a little differently.

In this imaginary world, often a zombie would burst through the door while the teacher was teaching, startling everyone except him. He was ready. He would immediately dig out his swiss knife from his

neatly organized backpack and jump on desks of frightened and unprepared students to make his way toward the zombie which had its hands wrapped around Mrs. Heather's neck, choking her, ready to devour her brains. Jeremy would then get to the first bench, do a flip, landing in front of the very busy zombie. He would swiftly pull out his swiss knife and thrust his knife right in the middle of its throat. The zombie would fall down and Jeremy would turn to see the blood soaked face of Mrs. Heather and be greeted by silence from the rest of his class.

"You're welcome", would be the only thing he says before swaggering out of the door poised to kill more zombies.

Nobody had noticed the smirk on his face except Mrs. Heather who was thoroughly annoyed that he wasn't paying attention to what she was saying. He snapped back into reality and looked around the class, sure enough he was in the same old classroom with the same old classmates, all listening intently about some virus that was spreading through the nation.

"So much for saving your life", he mumbled under his breath.

"I'm going to ignore what you just said because I don't have time for this right now", she said and turned back to the memo she had just received and resumed, in her robotic monotone, explaining that the schools were to be shut down and everyone was to stay at home and not wander out until they contain the virus. Murmurs erupted all around the classroom as everyone had their own opinions of a million different things.

He stopped paying attention after that and resumed daydreaming.

All Jeremy could do was smile. He was preparing for this his entire life. Defenses mounted all around his house, weapons hidden inside, hundreds of movies about catastrophes and countless videos about surviving all on your own with the least of supplies. And fighting zombies. This was going to be his life.

Slowly they were instructed to leave the classroom one by one and make their way to their respective transportations.

Jeremy kicked into action, he observed everyone in the classroom and made a note of anyone who seemed sick or just out of place. He emptied his backpack to make it light, carrying only his water bottle, swiss knife and lighter. He didn't smoke, but neither did he know how to build a fire without using matches. It was a hard skill to master. He checked the battery on his phone, made sure he had his wallet, cycle key and headed out of the class. He made a mental note to stop by the grocery store to buy some extra supplies. He ran through the checklist he had prepared long ago and started crossing them off one by one.

First step was to remain calm and clear his head.

Check.

Second step was to make a note of all the things he had.

Check.

Third step was to get extra supplies in any case. That's where he was headed.

Check.

He cycled slowly, ready to pounce into action if he sensed danger, noting which places to avoid in the future.

Fourth step was to check on Mom.

Shit.

He immediately got off his cycle and called her. She didn't pick. Don't panic, she's probably just busy, call her again after you reach the store.

Fifth step was to set up defenses at the house and just wait for the government to collapse and the economy to crumble, a world without laws and lots of zombies to kill.

He reached the store and immediately started searching for chocolates, mountain dew, matches, lighters, masks, chips and deodorants as fuel for his flamethrower. He put them all in a big basket and made his way to the cash counter. He knew he was spending all the money he had saved, but he had saved it exactly for this situation. The world was ending, he wouldn't need to worry about money soon.

He stuffed it all into his backpack, started walking to his cycle and called his mom again.

She answered on the first ring, "Hey, I got the message from your school, I hope you're coming back home immediately." His mom could be really direct sometimes.

"Hey mom, hope you're okay too. I stopped on the way for some food."

"Get over here immediately, and stop being so happy that your dream might've come true." his mom knew about his obsession with apocalypses and did nothing to discourage it.

"Sure, I'm heading over right now."

"Don't stop by for anything else."

"Alright mom. See ya."

He hopped onto his bike and raced back home. A few turns later Jeremy parked his cycle close to the door and locked it. He went around the house once and began searching for the traps he'd hidden. As he found them, he activated them and tested one or two to see if they worked alright. He circled back to the front of the house and took a good look at it.

A small house, with a freshly mowed lawn, a few trees lining the sides of the house and a car parked in the doorway. He smiled at himself thinking how much he enjoyed all this and opened the door. Immediately his mom shouted at him to clean himself up and to change his clothes.

He ran upstairs and did just that, a pair of cargo pants with a lot of pockets, a light half sleeved t-shirt, socks and a comfortable pair of boots. He started filling all his pockets with essentials and weapons such as protein bars, knives, lighters, a small pocket diary, pen, mobile and your run of the mill apocalypse supplies.

He walked around his room setting defenses and making sure the weapons he'd hidden long ago were still there. His room had one small bed, a big poster of the band MICROWAVE on the wall beside it, a PC on an unorganized desk on the opposite wall, a few books and CD's lying around the room. An average teenager's room, to the untrained eye but if you looked closely you would find pens all around the room which could be converted into darts with the push of a button, a knife taped under the desk, a dis-assembled homemade wooden crossbow whose parts were camouflaged in the surroundings, a pair of binoculars hanging in the corner of the room, a strengthened rope with clasps, an unbreakable baseball bat, an open helmet, sunglasses, and many more goodies hidden in the weirdest places you could imagine. He smiled to himself and sat down on his chair and switched on the laptop to see the news about the outbreak.

He scrolled through the feed and opened many news articles. Giving up, he shouted, "Hey mom, they're saying this isn't a zombie virus."

"Yeah, I thought they explained that in the school", his mother shouted back.

Oh crap, that's the part I didn't listen to. It was going to be hard to explain to his mom that he spent all his money on a non-existent zombie preparation. He really should pay more attention in class.

ENTRY 04

The Bellandur Play

-Merak

Shankar had nothing to do in the evening anymore. He would return from being ignored at work to fight with Ayesha but that was a thing of the past now. He had tried staying at home and picking up the guitar but it seemed too cliched. Maybe, baking? The dough never rose, baking seemed too effeminate, and Ayesha's parting words stung even more now. But she had also felt like she was living with a ghost, so it was probably all his fault. Had he not been enough for her? Maybe that's why she cheated with the larger than life, decidedly more virile, Shayansh? Had she brought her lover into his house, and maybe on this table...?

Shankar needed to get out of his head, out of the house. So when Gemini Theatre Club turned up at his front door- well, one member- his small, pudgy roommate Ryan; Shankar promptly joined.

The whole operation was amateur at best, and chaotic at worst - the Club was a bunch of morose corporates doing second rate improv and third rate theatre in the basement of a dimly lit gym in an armpit of Bangalore. The place rang with a smattering of stressed applause every second Saturday when the members performed their supposed masterpieces and the usual passive aggressive bickering of the actors on all the other days. A life of office deadlines does that to you. Or getting cheated on by the love of your life...Shankar shook off his bitter cloak and refocused on whatever Divyasha was lecturing about. Divyasha and Ryan had worked on a new screenplay, and it certainly seemed promising. Shankar had hung out with Ryan the last few nights as he had slaved away at his magnum opus, dimly illuminated by the glow of his screen in his perpetually dark apartment. Nice guy, that Ryan. Between jobs, he wanted to do stand up. It was beyond Shankar how the nervous, non-descript man could ever hold a drunk crowd bound to their seats but it was a fragile friendship, and he did not want to risk losing the only semblance of human contact he had.

And so after battling to be seen and heard in the cubicles, he sat in the dark and watched Ryan toil.

Shankar ended up playing numero dos to Tanmay's character. Always jealous, his character; always jealous, psychotic; overshadowed by Tanmay, drowned out by Divyasha.

But Shankar loved the story and he sure as hell loved his friend. He wanted to make Ryan proud. Shankar lived the dialogues, he breathed his character, and he hung out with Ryan. Ryan would pour out a single glass of liquor, and they would share it. Slightly weird, Shankar thought, but he reasoned it was his lack of glassware: Ryan in his infinite bachelorhood had even forgone buying even a pair of glasses. After 8 hours of being ignored at work, he would come back to sit in the dark, rant about it, and then sink back into Ryan's companionable silence.

Saturday the 14th rolled along, and the jitters came with it too. It was just another play. Just one more production for the exhausted spouses and bored children of the participants. But this one will be momentous; Shankar could feel it in his bones. He hadn't felt like this since the day he had netted his current job; the emotions were gone and his presence had too but the performance would be different. He had dreamed the enunciation during his meetings and fantasised the applause in his pyjamas. For once he did not feel invisible.

Intermission

And then Shayansh showed up to the recital. Why? How...? WHY? Shankar dreaded the knowing, pitying glances of his fellow actors; but apparently no one gave a damn. Shankar could feel his bravado break down, it took a toll on him-acting he was fine, acting he was happy, pretending he wasn't invisible...

A drop of sweat trickled down Shankar's back. It felt like a centipede making its merry way down his spine. The spotlight was uncomfortably bright and in his eyes. Not a word came out of his mouth. He felt Ryan's stare burn up a hole in his costume. Was he pleading with his friend to keep his emotions in check and get through the performance? Or was he furious someone fucked up his magnum opus? Or was Ryan disappointed? Shankar did not know what scared him more.

There was nothing left to say. After his last line, Shankar went home.

His house was a garbage dump now. Without a feminine touch, without a reason to care the place had gone to shit. That fucking whore. Breaking his heart like that. Like it was nothing. Like he was nothing.

Alcohol or oblivion? Shankar had to go to the office tomorrow.

Tomorrow was a Sunday.

The bathroom basin was filled with empty strips of over the counter sleeping pills. They sold these in jars till people started overdosing. Now he could not pop one without the fucking blister pack causing enough noise to raise the dead. He wished he could kill himself.

His phone constantly buzzed with the Gemini group chat flooding with self-congratulatory messages, patting themselves on the back on getting this shit done, kudos, once-mores, olive-fucking-wreathes, encores- they refused to shut up. Shankar threw his phone into Hydra's nest and sunk into the couch. Shankar was devastated his poor performance hadn't put a dent in their libations. No one had even called him to join them at the bar.

A few hours later a very drunk Ryan let himself into his little depressed hole and loudly proceeded to make tea. The noise irritated Shankar. It was jarring. Brutish. Ryan stayed silent about his absolute shit show on stage, and the silence was worse. Shankar begged his friend to scream at him, to berate him, to acknowledge his presence; but Ryan stoically continued as if Shankar wasn't even in the room. So when Ryan set down a single cup of tea on the table, Shankar lost it. Was he real?

Did Ryan know he existed?

Was he alive?

Did he even have a part in the play? A job?

Was anyone aware of his existence?

Had he killed himself and the realisation was taking its sweet, sweet time to sink in?

Was his hate all that was left behind, trapped here in his little high-rise hellhole to rave at Ryan and future occupants?

He screamed in Ryan's face, waved in his face like a madman, and received not even a flinch from his dear friend. Shankar conceded his own existence as a ghost, a lost spirit in his private pocket of Purgatory.

And what did ghosts want? Revenge, obviously.

So, he took a knife: surprised he could still interact with the material world, and slit Ryan's throat. Try standing up now. Haha. Poor little Ryan. So much blood. Now for that bitch who broke his heart, and her lover. Who made him kill himself. All those pills, so little water. So much hate. Anger, anger and pain. Hate. Hate. Death.

Epilogue

Cops at the Bellandur local police station received frantic phone calls from a panicked woman regarding an unknown man armed with a knife trying to break into her house at about 3:30 AM. The suspect was apprehended and was "surprised that officers were able to see him". Charges include attempted criminal trespassing and disturbing the peace; he was threatening a "C. Ayesha" despite there being no record of the same in the tenant list. He was taken into custody

on suspicion of using hard drugs, and on questioning “burst into tears of joy because he was real” and confessed to the murder of his roommate. Preliminary investigations show that the suspect lived alone. Suspect is undergoing psychiatric evaluation.

ENTRY 05

The Chicken and the Cockroach

-Chrisil Ouseph

Dear diary,

So I was protecting my imaginary genitalia under my rebellious towel with one hand and balancing a bucket & way too many clothes with the other. The unforgiving February wind through the hostel corridor was stabbing icy toothpicks through the water droplets on my bare torso as I limped to 707. I entered my room to find his holiness, my roommate, on his bed trying to console his bloody lips with a pad-like mess which used to be tissues. Not that I know what pads are. Because I don't have any (female) friends.

“You know that intentionally bleeding yourself out is a clinical disorder, right?” as I stupidly let my shampoo tumble out of my bucket and he inspected his lips for more of that red nectar.

“Do you also want to enjoy the second most pleasurable activity involving your lips? Since the first one is anyway out of your reach! Lookie here. You slowly search for irregularities on your tender lips... Here's one. An electric flutter in your heart when you feel a seam. Slowly inspect the area with your fingers and tongue to make an educated guess about whether it'll start oozing blood when you pull it out. If it will, then lick that spot, make it juicier.” as he was performing a breath-taking demo for a masterclass of a hundred students and I was wasting too much time decorating my wet clothes on the stand.

"You feel the size of the flap. Big enough and you tug at it with your fingers. Too small, then you slowly nibble at it. Keep doing this until either you win and the entire flap comes off clean, revealing fresh, red lip tissue... or you lose and have to deal with periods from your face. But only bad boys with chapped lips get to experience this!"

I was slapping lip-balm on my face when he was justifiably deriding me. But I seemed to not listen to him like a diva and dressed up with my usually horrible sense of fashion: a striped t-shirt, sandals from the wrong century, and long blue jeans folded outwards at the bottom for extra ugliness.

And since it was my time of the month to instigate a fight, "You slam the door too hard when you come back at night. The neighbours screamed at me today before you woke up. They think I'm the one who hates everyone sleeping in the hostel."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, sorry. Will take care from tonight." in his nonchalant machismo, looking out the window and adjusting his massive morning wood.

Being a prying pansy, "By the way, what do you do in the night nowadays? You used to stay home watching YouTube and suddenly you've started coming back so late."

Like a snake recoiling as if an idiot had invaded his privacy, "I have... friends... to hang out with. Unlike you." destroying me with a reference to my loneliness.

"FriendS?" He seemed to have friends other than me, which was doubtful, but still hurt.

"Yes." He got off the bed and stretched out a majestic yawn.

"Who are these... *friends*?" I am such a suspicious nosy bitch.

"Many..." I knew he had trouble remembering things, but then again, it was that time of the month. "You know... She's there..."

"She?! A friend?!" surprised, yet savouring the satanic satisfaction of sticking myself in someone's personal stuff.

"Yeah... Why not?" as he popped his morning meds, scratched his stomach and reached for his brush and paste.

"Hmmm..." A small pimple made it look like I was scratching my chin in deep contemplation and judgement.

"What?!" like a prof would scream after catching the mid-benchers laughing at a meme of the prof.

"Nothing. Nothing." as the pussy in me overwhelmed me and made me run to the mess.

I later went to the library like a chicken, ate veg lunch like a chicken, returned to the library like a chicken, ate chicken for dinner (cannibalism!), watched a movie on my laptop sitting like a chicken and went to sleep like a cockroach after leaving the lamp on for his highness' late return home.

Yours truly,

Pussy McChicken

Note to self: Never leave the diary in the open again. Some people just don't seem to have any sense of boundaries. "Dear Diary"? "Yours truly"? Looks like the last time he wrote a journal entry was when his teacher must have forced him in 7th. Even then, she would've definitely cut marks for his hypersexuality. It's funny: He wants to remember his life, but with no diary for record and shit for memory, will he remember me when I'll invite him for my wedding?

My collarbone still hurts. I should probably listen to him and go to the college doctor. Why didn't he mention his screaming at me for half an hour to meet the doctor? Ah, that explains the McChicken. Then shouldn't he be the cockroach, roaming around at night and ruining everyone's day? I mean it's cute and all that he wrote my diary entry after I forgot and went to sleep, but a bit of privacy please? Another note to self: Tell him I don't leave the lamp on at night for him, but for myself. Actually, scratch that. I don't need fear of darkness to be another thing he teases me about.

Parents and sister seem fine, although this corona thing doesn't. I just hope we never have lockdowns and panic shopping here like China. Ah, my imagination's running amok again!

Oh, and our conversation this morning! I really should have prod further, brought him down from the high skies he's flying in. Ah, tomorrow for sure. And since he's set the style for these things, I think I can borrow it this one time.

So, I woke up after his highness reminded me in his high squeaky voice that I had rudely snoozed my alarm twice already. The February sun had a certain warmth to it, but not enough to pull me out of bed. I rubbed my eyes and slowly sat up to see his highness on his bed deep in thought. Now I knew he had returned late that night and couldn't have woken up before me.

"Did you even try to sleep last night?" scornfully as I put my glasses on.

"I tried. But not much." unfazed.

"What happened?" as I made my bed and fell back on it.

His gaze slid to the floor and his hands fell interlocked. After a considerable pause, "We kissed."

Like a snake recoiling when an idiot steps on its tail, "What?!... She?... But you aren't dating... Are you?"

“I don’t know.” like an annoyed mom whose kid just had to know the process of its conception in detail.

Knowing that the dagger had hit the right artery, “Ummm... shouldn’t you?”

“Date or know whether we’re dating?” as he writhed in his sheets, squirting imaginary blood from his neck.

“Both, but let’s start with the second part.”, saving the juiciest gossip for last.

He got up, stretched out a puny yawn and shrugged at me before reaching for his brush and paste, then the door.

A sudden epiphany seized me. “Hey! Is it me or have you actually stopped picking your lips?”

Like a gazelle seeing a lion, his highness froze for a moment. His pensive eyes fleetingly met mine for the first time before gliding to the floor. His fingers found his lips again as a small smile flourished on the right side of his visage.

Like a kid returning from school for the first time.

Like a firefighter seeing a rescued girl smothering her teddy in love.

Like God when someone notices one of His countless thankless miracles.

“Hmmm...” as his smile became a grin. Then he suddenly threw his hand away from his face and galloped out of the room, humming, if I heard right.

Final note to self: Leave the diary on the table one last time today. He should see this.

ENTRY 06

The Soul

-Neel Shah

The birthday party was at a Chinese restaurant. Vishnu's friends were surprised to see the boy who had spent his entire life in a village eating noodles with chopsticks faster than they could with their forks. His go-to explanation for all such feats was that he had looked it up on the internet. For this reason, he was glad for the internet's existence- he had a harder time explaining how he knew a German apple pie recipe to his Jewish family in the US, during WWII.

Of course he wasn't called Vishnu back then, her name was Taylor. He didn't remember much about Taylor since she was one of his shorter lives. Just a year after he took Taylor's mind and body, she was diagnosed with a terminal illness. Before risking sleeping on her deathbed she transferred himself to the mind and body of his son and cared for his ailing mother. (It was impossible for him to get pronouns right when thinking of himself/herself in third person. He decided to stick with 'it'. It pitted anyone who would write about it in third person, and it pitted the would-be readers even more.)

It thought that it could avoid personal pronouns altogether if it had a name. That was odd- wasn't his name Vishnu, what everyone knew him by for 10 years? Deep down he knew it wasn't. He was named Vishnu by people who didn't understand who he(it) was. But recently he had thought of a better word- something more fundamental to his identity than a name. He started calling itself the Soul. The Soul didn't think it was the entity postulated to be the basis of consciousness by Jainism and Buddhism. For one, it had never experienced reincarnation to the best of its knowledge, since reincarnation requires death, and death itself was an unnatural concept to it.

The Soul had lived, not just centuries ago when it witnessed the Industrial Revolution, not just millennia ago when it witnessed the beginning of civilization, but ever since 4 billion years ago, when all it knew was water, when life started on the planet. Another difference with the common interpretation of the 'soul' was that in most religions, every living thing has a 'soul' of its own. The Soul had so far seen no other being like itself. Yet another difference- the Soul had the capacity to change its host body at will, it wasn't bound by physical means of life and death.

All it needed to do was to look at someone, hear their voice or touch them, and 'concentrate' on their presence. It would then leave its current body and be the master of the other person's body, their memories and all their decisions. It would inherit the memories of the previous host, but not their emotions- its emotions were influenced by the new host, as if they were inseparable from the mind and body. As for the previous host, they would just act like a normal person with their life experiences would. Until recently, the Soul was clueless about where the 'original' consciousness of its host resides during its takeover of the host, and whether the 'restored' consciousness is the same as it was before the Soul took over.

The Soul had learnt some lessons from assimilating thousands of human lives. It knew the kind of people to prefer to live in and the kind to avoid occupying. It, naturally, liked to live a happy person's life. It had lived in a lot of children. Whenever the kid became old enough to prepare for entrance exams, it would realize it's getting depressed and take refuge in another younger kid in the neighbourhood. But it would not grow up with the new kid either- it desired a drastic change in location. It would keep transferring to a chain of nearby people, travelling faster than a pandemic but not spreading like one, till it ended up in

a new city. Even if it kept forgetting things all the time, it was too boring to have the same mother-tongue for more than two decades. Having lived for countless millenia, it was extremely easy to get bored. In fact, the Soul's extreme hatred for boredom was how it cleverly proved something about itself- it had separate feelings of its own, feelings that could never have been acquired from any of its host's minds. For example, the Soul hated boredom even more than a prisoner in solitary confinement for years- as it had verified when it happened to possess one out of curiosity.

That prisoner's name was Amar. When the Soul took his mind and body, it knew that he was in a cell in Port Blair. He was suffering this fate because of being part of the independence movement in India from the British rule. How he ended up here didn't matter anymore, he thought. But though the past was meaningless, so was the present. Every day was like every other. Everything was done because it was meant to be done, not because he wanted it. He ate because he was meant to live, he was given labour because he was supposed to make use of life. He knew that in some other cells there were people he considered friends, but the thought of sneaking up and talking to them didn't entertain him. That would probably lead to unhelpful conclusions: either the friend would be as helpless as him and they'd realize that none of them can give hope to the other, or, even worse, he'd discover that the friend hadn't been thinking of him inside his own cell- he cared less about Amar than Amar cared about him. While that hadn't always been a bad thing for the Soul, as Amar, he knew that he preferred to live alone in a cell rather than meet other people and discover that he was alone not by his physical confinement, but because no one felt the way he did, or had the time or desire to remember or understand him. Finally, he got so bored that he thought of stopping this unending cycle the only way he could- by committing suicide.

That was the most surprising thought that he had had in about 4 billion years. Whenever the Soul thought about Amar, he could never explain how, when it wanted to stop living Amar's life, its first thought was to kill himself rather than simply transferring itself to another host- the warden who served Amar food was the easiest target. That was indeed what it ended up doing- as the warden James, he was relieved to be having a life at least several times better than those Indian criminals who dared to oppose the Crown. But, having been Amar in his past life, James also knew that the British were cruel oppressors who had no right over India and their rule must end. The Soul was often driven insane when it contained past lives with radically different beliefs. It knew that it wouldn't stay sane in James for long and soon transferred itself to someone on a ship sailing back to India. Later, it came to know that James had gone a bit insane after it left him and had been transferred to someplace else. This strengthened one of its suspicions.

The Soul's suspicion was that it had driven James insane, James' emotions weren't responsible for his insanity. It had bombarded him with Amar's memories of a completely different side of the world he was used to, and though he wouldn't retain any of them when the Soul left him, he was damaged by the powerful confusion caused due to two incompatible ideologies coexisting in the same mind. So, the Soul had two competing hypotheses: The first was that the people it occupied controlled the Soul's actions- e.g. a happy temperament would make the Soul happy. The second was the opposite- which the Soul now knew was true to some extent, that the Soul controlled the lives of the people it occupied, it made them more than a single human.

The Soul thus had a brilliant idea. If it decided to do something new- to make a difference in the world, it could work with a perspective that no single human could. It could master vastly different fields. It could make a dictator as kind as a monk. It would be backed by experience of millenia. The only remaining question was that the Soul didn't know what it wanted. Some of its past lives wanted to become presidents, some scientists, some soldiers. Anything it could achieve wouldn't seem worthwhile to some part of it and might drive it insane due to that part not agreeing with it. Thus, the Soul was waiting for something so noble that all its myriad lives would be proud to accomplish it. Something that would make everyone happy without exception. It remains to be known whether it ever found it, went insane, or is still searching.

ENTRY 07

The Birth

-Arindam Bhattacharjee

What was his name? You may ask. But this was before names. This was when the world was seen as either me or them, no second person. But a story needs a name for the protagonist. Let's call him *the priest*.

Right now, our not-so-alpha priest was hiding in a cave-ish hole just outside the settlement of his tribe. He was bleeding from his hands and his back and although he doesn't know it, his femur is fractured from the fight he had with *the leader*. His instinct told him that the leader was weaker now but his ego overestimated his own abilities. Even during the fight, he saw the leader's hands flinch multiple times, but the hit was still enough to steal the glory away from this rebellious subject. But the priest was a curious creature. He knew something was up. His Neanderthal brain knew that the hands have ruled the tribe for too long. Unconsciously, he rubbed the area behind his ears. It felt he was concealing the biggest weapon, bigger than even the bone stick of the leader, right there. From his hole, the back part of the river was near. He went into the water and washed himself. The other members of his tribe has always been amused by this fascination of his. To them, getting wet was an occupational hazard. But the priest went to the water as if he missed it. As if it's a toy of a child. Even on the days he didn't go hunting, he'd leap into the water and get soaked. But today, he also fished. As he was not welcome to the communal dinner of the tribe. After you've attacked the leader, it takes a long time even for these primitives to forget your atrocities.

The wait, though, was shorter than he expected. The leader died the next day, his partner soon followed. But before she died, she shouted on top of her lungs to gather more than a hundred of her tribesmen in front of their enclaved cave. But language was limited in those days to communicate hunting and demanding shares of the hunt. Those one-syllable words were not enough for her to convey the ache she was feeling in her heart. The burn that was flowing through her bloodstream was about to make her the hunted one. Still she tried, knowing full well that the rule of the world was that the victim would stay quiet. The spectators of this scene saw her screams gradually weaken but before it was completely gone, they noticed their leader's body at the back of the cave and rushed towards it ignoring the lady. Even in death, she was a sidekick.

By the time they threw the body of the leader through the backside of the hill, they were too exhausted to go for hunt. The leader was a big man (or whatever equivalent of man they were) and it

took four of them to drag his body atop the hill and ultimately throw it on the east side jungle. It didn't help that his body was extremely sweaty for some unknown reason. He will be free food to the sabre-tooths tonight. Ironical, they would've thought, if they knew what irony was. They came back to the caves covered in sweat and chose the successor among themselves pretty unanimously. Death came so swiftly to their guardian it made them dazed. They went to bed that night with an occupied mind and an empty stomach.

Yet, death was not done with them. The stick of the leader, which was actually a bone of a dead mammoth they once hunted, didn't suit *the successor* for long. He was one of the four

men who conducted the last rituals of the leader. When they went hunting the next day, his first day as the new commander-in-chief, he already felt nervous. The stick slipped from his hand while attacking a boar. Fortunately, his subjects took care of it quite easily. He also didn't give it much thought, rubbed his sweaty palms in his chest and shouted to assert dominance, probably over his own mind. The hunt continued but it was disrupted again. One of them suddenly slipped from a tree branch and died. This was not unforeseen but it was so rare to see a mature member of the hunting group to suddenly fall like this that it shocked them. They rushed towards their leader to let him know of the incident, when they realised a similar fate was met by the successor as well. Silently, they came back to the caves. Carrying all the food gathered and the bodies of their comrades. The children were happy to see the food. They will not go to their beds hungry tonight. For the rest of the group, the proximity of so many deaths made them anxious. They didn't ask for explanations, they didn't know that explanations can be asked of natural things such as death. But a vague pattern hid in their foggy consciousness which they could almost reach but can never exactly pinpoint.

The priest was unaware of these incidents. His life was going pretty uneventful in his isolation. For almost four days he was alone. Not that it bothered him much. He was strong enough for small hunts by himself and seclusion protected him from the judging eyes he gets while bathing for fun. He was in the middle of one of his water sports when he spotted the one of his tribesman for the first time after many days. Something told him his time to return is near.

The follower has just returned from the cliff tossing the freshly dead kin. He was sad, not because of the death of his close tribesmen but at the prospect of his own demise. He knew all of them were doomed and this thought made him restless. To find peace, he got away from the herd and came near the backside of the river. He was aloof, a dangerous luxury in their life and almost seemed to pay the price. He suddenly got kicked in the back and he was so unprepared that he completely lost balance and fell into the water. This broke his drowsiness and he looked up at his attacker to see the priest who came down to the river to duel. But he was mistaken. The priest didn't seem to be interested in a duel at all. Only every time he tried to come off the river the priest would overpower him and push him into water. This kept on happening till the sundown. He was panting and gasping by then.

Suddenly the priest stood on a side, gave him enough room to escape and curiously looked over him as if he's fascinated by something. The follower didn't care to find out the reason. He took the chance and flung towards their caves as fast as he can. He knew revenge would come soon.

But when he reached the caves he saw with horror the drama that was already going on there. Both the men that carried today's dead to the cliff with him were gathered at the central arena. Both of them shivering excessively. The spectators of this inevitable looked at him curiously, as if to understand why he wasn't joining them. When he didn't show up, they almost thought he was already dead, met the same fate sooner. But here he was, himself astonished by the fact that why he was alive at all.

Suddenly it clicked him. He was alive because maybe the priest did something to him. Everyone that went to the cliff died within next sunset, everyone except him. He knew where he broke the pattern, he knew what had to be done. He quickly grabbed the stick of the leader, something that was changing owner everyday now, and ran towards the backwaters. That's the only way he knew how to show appreciation.

The priest didn't accept the stick till he threw it to the water. Then he jumped into the river and cleaned it thoroughly. The follower joined him. He rinsed the follower with almost a ritualistic fashion. Now he could see through the future. He knew how to become the saviour of the whole tribe. He'll rinse them in this water. The whole tribe would be *purified*. Of course, not the whole tribe. He can't save those who've already started the shivering. No, those unfortunates will meet the treatment of the stick. The rest will follow him, like they always do. His immense joy of achievement came out as a shout "Raaaaa..." while he held the stick up in the air. The follower imitated "Raaa" not fully sure if it'll please the new lord. It did. The priest thanked the virus for this knighthood. Only in his mind, because he didn't know better, he thanked God and with that... God was born.

ENTRY 08

Wild Estates

-Rhea Poddar

When dawn finally pushed the darkness away, and the golden morning light peeked in through the window, Noah sprang out of bed, his heart racing at full tilt. His hands flew to his head as he looked around his bedroom, distressed. Sprinting off of his bed, without a second thought, he bolted out of his room, into the hall. There was no one.

Relieved and drowsy, he slouched onto the couch. With his head still thumping, Noah took a deep breath as millions of thoughts just started flooding his mind: What's happening? Why's it happening? Who's it? Noah has always been a quick witted, logical and an easy-going person.

However, everything that has been happening for the past couple of weeks has changed him completely. Nowadays every muffled, dull sound he might hear outside would stagger him, make him paranoid. He had installed cameras all over the apartment. It horrified him so much that even thinking about it disturbed Noah.

Now every night has become a living nightmare for him. Even after being worn out and so mentally exhausted from the horror, the daunting, blood-curling nights that he had to go through were unexplainable.

Yet he is never able to actually wake up from his sleep during the night. He hears a low clamour and some sort of tapping, as if someone's knocking on the glass window. Many times he sees shadows in his dreams too, with eerie laughs. Sometimes, he can feel some gentle strokes on his arms as if someone's brushing their hand against his. There are footsteps, which usually seem to be coming from outside. Nevertheless, the spine-tingling screams petrify him. It's always that

same scream: a male's low pitched, unbearably distressing screech of excruciating pain.

Still, Noah would wake up to find hand prints on the window. When he tries checking the camera footage, the footage from the night would either be cut off or there'd be really faint shadows. It was hard to confirm if they were actual human shadows, lingering around, mainly in the living room.

Noah sighed as he scanned around the living room once again, praying not to see anything. Nevertheless, thinking about it made it even worse. The camera footage from the night was cut. He had heard that chilling scream again in his dream. Just that this time it was louder, and seemed to be coming from inside the house...

Before this, all the things happening in his dreams were outside his apartment, except the strokes and faint shadows. This time, everything happened inside, he could hear muffled voices. Uneasy and distraught, all Noah could do was listen and watch. Suddenly, the screams turned into head-splitting roars. Noah realized there were slashes, still the screams were too loud to make out what it was.

It had been a few minutes and now the screams had, all of a sudden, completely stopped. Sweat rolled down his forehead as he heard footsteps: swift but heavy footsteps, every step louder than the last one. From the gap below the door where some light was peeking in through, there was a shadow now, right in front of the door, facing it. Noah, in a panic, covered his mouth, stopping himself from shrieking. It had seemed like a couple of seconds passed before the light peeping through started fading away, and another faint golden light started appearing. It was morning...

Noah, still slouched on the couch, wearied from last night, sat up properly so that he could think straight. With knees trembling and his hands still sweaty, he got up to get a drink and calm down. As he sauntered towards the kitchen, to his dismay, he saw what he was hoping not to see. There were footprints. All over the kitchen floor. Noah got a feeling of hostility and malice. Everything around him started spinning around. Hesitantly, he backed away, nothing seemed to be making sense anymore. He was having a migraine now, making it even worse. He felt like throwing up, it was getting harder to breathe for him.

Noah was all alone in this. He had called the cops several times before, and they seemed to not really believe him, saying there wasn't enough evidence to go on. Hence, Noah had to deal with it himself. He had even asked the apartment office. They as well didn't do anything and told him it was just his mind. Many people suggested going to the psychiatrist. But Noah knew that it wasn't just his mind. He didn't know how, but he knew it was real.

The fact that no one was believing him and no one seemed to really care, affected Noah a lot. He stopped going out, talking to people, he would stay home and try to distract himself from it. However, lately it was just getting harder to do so.

Often he would just be too paranoid to do anything, even during daytime.

Noah sat in silence for a few minutes, trying to calm down; yet it was as if his mind kept on going, all the thoughts, possibilities...

“Ding!” Noah’s cell phone suddenly turned on, breaking the silence, making Noah jump up from the couch. Gingerly, he went to get his phone. It was a message from an unknown number. Dubiously, Noah opened the message. It was a link to some news report. Reluctantly, he pressed on the link. Noah’s face turned completely pale. He felt as if he was about to pass out. The news report’s title was: ‘Owen Luke’s Murder’.

‘Owen Luke, a 27 year old man had disappeared on the 16th of March 2018. After long days of searching, and still no evidence, the police didn’t really know where to look, until on Wednesday morning, 24th of March, a man called saying there was a dead body in the back of Wild Estates. It was soon identified to be Mr. Luke’s body. He had been stabbed 19 times around the chest and his cause of death was strangulation. It is believed there were more than one person involved in this, but they haven’t been found yet. No further information has been shared by the police on this case.’

Wild Estates! That was the name of Noah’s apartment. His heart skipped a beat. And those screams at night, and the slashes and the voices... Noah stared at the screen for a couple of minutes, unable to believe what he just read. He gulped, this news report was from 26th March 2018. Today was only 16th March 2018!! The phone dropped to the floor from the frigid hands of Owen Noah Luke...

ENTRY 09

The secret metabolic lives we live

-Netra Kadambi

We have started witnessing the rise to power of board games during this lockdown season. Be it chess, carom board, scrabble, chinese checkers, Uno and even what Kannadigas call chowka bhara; a game played with cowrie shells. Recently, my cousin and I decided to play Scrabble to beat the boredom and have some fun with words. Within a few rounds, I realized that she had never played the game before for she was flaunting the basic rules. She started constructing words without using the letters from the pre-existing words on the board. When I called her out on this, she defiantly pointed to the tagline on the Scrabble box that read “Every word’s a WINNER.” I laughed but maintained that every game has rules

and operating smartly within the rules is the exciting bit of the whole exercise. Nevertheless, her response reminded me of how high school and even undergraduate Biology teachers introduced us to metabolism.

We were taught about catabolism and anabolism; how energy is obtained by breaking down large molecules and how it is saved up by building these large molecules. All the pathways were rather fed to us like guinea pigs and none were left to our imagination. However, what were glaringly left to our imagination were the rules. There was less emphasis given to the regulation of pathways and the context in which the regulation happens. In other words, we were handed out the letters and taught how to construct words but no one handed us the rule book to the game. Like my cousin who presumed she could construct any word, do I then presume that every cell in my body right now is carrying out every pathway I had learned? Does this mean that if I pick any random cell in my body right now, it is using fat to obtain energy and simultaneously making fat? I could fathom this situation only if it is happening in two separate organs with different needs or if it is happening in one tissue but at different rates. It really makes no sense for two pathways with opposing outcomes to occur at the same rate now, does it?

It is important to understand the backdrop in which pathways occur and the hierarchy of their occurrence in different energy states. For instance, what pathways occur after a large meal? Does the proportion of carbohydrates, proteins and fats affect what pathways take over? What about when you exercise for half an hour versus one hour? What about when you sleep or decide to go on a hunger strike like Anna Hazare did? The dizzying number of energy states should not discourage you from understanding your body. All you need to be armed with are the rules and you can always make an educated guess on what could be happening.

To understand the rules, let us create a game and call it the Energy Crisis. In this game, you need a minimum amount of energy, in form of what we measure as calories, to survive each round. One round is equivalent to the energy you need to survive a single day. You are handed over some calories in the beginning of each round and you need to wisely distribute it to all your organs. While making this decision you have to keep in mind that some organs, such as the adipose tissue or the liver, already have earlier stores of energy. They may need lesser energy than other organs such as the brain which do not store any energy. In any given round of the game you may be penalised and may not get your minimum amount of energy. This is when the organs with energy stores come to your rescue. It is why we can starve for some days without dying.

Let us get back to the game. In each round you have to pick a card from a pile that will describe an energy state. To make the game trickier in advanced stages, you might have to pick both an energy status card and an “underlying condition” card. For instance, if you get the cards, “slow jog for an hour” and “diabetes” you have to decide energy distribution to different organs as a diabetic who is slow jogging for an hour. In this scenario, you have to additionally understand the role of hormones. I may go on and on but the best way I can drive this message home is if I play the game myself!

Let us say I randomly pick a “starving for many days” card. This card reminds of a scene from a recent movie, “Ford vs Ferrari”, where Ken Miles is sitting with his son and talking about racing. “If you’re going to push a piece of machinery to the limit, and expect it to hold together, you have to have some sense of where that limit is.” If I push my body to starvation, I need to know the limit. The only problem is the human body is more of a mystery than a man-made machine. Developing a sense of its limits is a life time of trial, error and repeat.

For the starvation card, the first step is to recognize the organs that are the energy store houses of the body. These are the adipose tissue, liver, muscles and kidneys. Glucose is the most readily utilized form of energy. Under starvation, the body will tap into any molecule that can break down to give you glucose. These include glycogen and proteins. Fats cannot break down to glucose in our body. Only plants can do that by switching to what is called the glyoxylate cycle. Therefore humans have to make do with just glycogen and proteins to get their glucose.

To understand the rules, imagine you have been fired from work and you need to survive with whatever you have saved for years. You would first choose to take out money from the savings account before you break a fixed deposit or sell your house. This is because the latter choices are what economists call fixed assets. They are harder to convert to cash. Similarly the common energy currency of our body is ATP and the calories we store in our body by consuming carbohydrates, proteins and fats are all the various forms in which we store our assets. Carbohydrates such as glycogen are our savings account that we can easily dip into. Fats and proteins are your fixed deposits, with proteins being the asset you would touch only under desperate conditions.

Now let us crunch some numbers. The ratio of glycogen to glucose conversion is close to 1:1 by weight. On the other hand, the ratio for protein to glucose conversion is 1.6:1. To make matters more complicated, every gram of protein comes from 5 grams of muscle tissue. This means that under starvation conditions, if I consider only supplying the brain which needs around 110 grams of glucose per day and I have emptied my glycogen reserves, I need one kilogram of muscle tissue to give me 200 grams of protein and 125 grams of glucose. Muscle mass of young adults is around 60 to 80% of their body weight. If I weigh 70 kilograms and I have 70% muscle mass, that means I have 49 kilograms of muscle. I may survive for many days but using proteins to ensure I maintain normal blood glucose levels is comparable to eating your own muscle tissue. All the photographs of hungry Ethiopian children whose ribs could be counted make sense now, don't they?

The rules are simple. The common currency organs deal with is ATP. The brain can only transact in glucose from glycogen and proteins. It can also transact in ketone bodies but how the body switches to ketone bodies is a subject that is worth another article. It is quite remarkable how the economics of our daily life is the same common sense our bodies have evolved to follow. Once you understand the simple rules, you would be amazed at the secretly diverse metabolic lives of all living creatures starting from bacteria to plants and human beings. In my opinion, the most exciting bits are always the creatures occupying the tail end or the extremes edges of these rules. Maybe if you stop sleeping all the time during this lockdown and read about naked mole rats and their secret metabolic lives, you will know exactly what I am talking about.

ENTRY 10

The Knight and the Rogue

-Gautam Hegde

The year was 1192 AD. The third crusade raged on in the Levant, where modern day Syria lies. The crusaders, as the Christian nations called themselves, fought to free their holy city, Jerusalem, from Muslim hands. In Europe, the crusades were seen as heroic and holy wars. Bards spoke of brave knights, defending Christianity against the forces of evil, despite great peril. Boys as young as fifteen were inspired by these tales, and many dreamt of fighting in the holy land, winning glory for themselves. This is the story of one such boy, named Edd, a young and naïve boy from a simple baker's family from London, who found himself in the army of King Richard I of England in the deserts of the Levant.

Edd waited impatiently in formation. Today was going to be his first battle. His first real fight. However, it wasn't fear that made Edd jittery. It was eagerness. For their unit was going to be led by Sir Roland, the most renowned knight in England.

Soon, Edd heard the galloping of horses in the distance. Figures appeared on the horizon. Edd could make out nearly two dozen men on horseback approaching them fast. *They ride gallantly.* Edd thought to himself. As they came closer, Edd observed that the man in the centre stood out from the rest. His gilded plate armour shone in the sunlight, a longsword was buckled to his hip, a shield tied to his back. He wore a flowing white cape, with the Holy Cross embroidered in its centre. He was a most dashing man; his hair was bright golden and his clean-shaven face bore an elegant and regal look. *So, this is a knight.....a holy knight.* Richard thought to himself, awestruck.

“Sir Roland!” Drake, their unit commander, exclaimed, as the horses came to a stop a few feet from the unit. “It is an honour to fight alongside a man of your virtue! God has been kind to us.”

“You are too kind, Drake” Sir Roland replied. His voice had an air of nobility to it. “Is this the unit I am expected to lead today?” Sir Roland asked Drake. Drake nodded.

Sir Roland trotted his horse ahead, facing the soldiers directly.

“My fellow Christians! Men of good faith!” Sir Roland yelled, raising his sword high. “We have struggled for months now! We have fought valiantly!” he continued, enthusiastically. “Aye!” The crowd cheered.

“Under the leadership of our great king, we have taken the city of Acre! This is just one step in a long journey. We will continue to fight, until the holy land lies in our hands once more.” Roland proclaimed.

The crowd raised their spears and yelled “Aye, Sir!” Edd himself was cheering the loudest. For a boy who grew up baking bread in the day, but fighting cloth dragons with wooden swords at night, fighting alongside a knight, fighting for virtue, was a dream come true.

After addressing the unit, Sir Roland turned his horse to face the men behind him. Now that they were up-close, Edd could make out that they bore a stark contrast to Sir Roland. They were lightly armoured, wearing what looked like rags, bore unkempt beards on their faces, and carried large poleaxes behind their backs. The look on their faces was not that of a noble hero, but a hardened warrior, ready to pulverize the enemy when the need would arise. Edd admitted, that they looked quite frightening. He would not want to be on their opposing side.

“These men are former rogues, brought from England. They have sinned grievously in the past. As repentance they will fight with us to reclaim the holy land.” Roland said. *That explains it. They couldn't possibly be knights,* Edd thought to himself. The men looked like they lacked the basic discipline of a good soldier, forget the chivalry of a knight. *Why would his majesty send such men to fight alongside us?* Edd wondered. These men looked like they could strangle a baby if paid enough to do so. The rogues glared at the soldiers silently.

“This may be your first battle in the holy land. Some of you may fear for your lives. Worry not, my good men! For our cause is just, and the lord is on our side. You are protected by the light, and I promise you, we will emerge victorious!” Sir Roland roared. The crowd cheered, once again raising their spears. “All hail Sir Roland, knight of England!” one soldier yelled. Roland smiled/

“My good sir, Drake! Let us march!” Roland exclaimed.

The unit marched forward for nearly the entire day, halting only for food. Finally, an hour before midnight, they stopped.

“Sir Roland, we are nearing our target!” Drake yelled. “Ah, that is good” Roland replied. They halted, and Sir Roland and Drake walked ahead, and turned back to address the soldiers. Edd felt a combination of excitement and fear bubble within him.

“Men! Prepare for battle.” Drake bellowed. “Our objective is to advance on a nearby village belonging to the Sultanate! They have stockpiled a large amount of grain. We intend to take it in order to feed our forces.”

Edd frowned. This was not the kind of mission he expected to be given. Looking around, it seemed a few others around him also were having similar thoughts. “We are attacking peasants?” One soldier asked. Sir Roland looked at him. “You are attacking unbelievers, boy. Soldiers, nobles, peasants, kings, they are all the same.” He said haughtily. Edd was aghast. “We are attacking innocent commoners?” Edd questioned, greatly troubled by this new turn of events.

Roland turned towards him. “None of them are innocent, boy. These people are unholy savages. They refuse to accept the mercy of the one true lord. They banned us good Christians from pilgrimaging to our Holy City. They all deserve death” Roland declared, with a tone of finality. “If any man has any qualms, he may desert this army now. But beware, King Richard does not take kindly to deserters.” Roland continued.

The whispers in the unit died down. *This is not right*, Edd thought to himself. He had imagined this crusade to be a holy endeavor. Instead, he was tasked with spilling the blood of innocents.

After about half an hour, they reached the village. They had slowed down their pace and marched in darkness, so as to not alert the villagers. “On the count of three” Drake whispered. “One...two...three!”

Drake blew his horn. Sir Roland reared his horse. With a loud neigh, his horse started galloping towards the village. “Advance, soldiers!” Drake hollered, as he lit a torch, and threw it the nearest house, which caught fire. The inhabitants came out screaming, clearly taken aback, muttering in a language Edd couldn’t understand.

The soldiers advanced, and starting rampaging through the village. It all happened so fast, what happened next was merely a blur to Edd. Many of the villagers were unarmed, and offered little resistance. Spears ran through their guts, spilling blood everywhere. Buildings all around Edd started to alight. All he could hear, was screams in a foreign language, and the mad shouting of his fellow soldiers.

This is not a battle...this is a massacre! Edd looked around him. He had to put a stop to this. *I need to find Sir Roland. I have to tell him its enough.* As luck would have it, he saw a plated figure enter what appeared to be the most luxurious house in the village. Edd sprinted in pursuit.

He sprang the door open. “Sir Roland! Stop!” Edd exclaimed. Sir Roland held a bloody sword in one hand, and what appeared to be a broken gold necklace in another. His armor was splattered with blood. On his side lay a body of a middle-aged man. A girl, who could only be his daughter was crouching in the corner. One of the rogues, was beside him, with his poleaxe in his hand. Sir Roland turned. His face was fuming. “What? Have you lost it boy?” He snapped.

“Sir Roland...they can put up no fight. We can ask them to surrender. Let the killing end.” Edd begged, with tears in his eyes. “This...this is slaughter.”

The rogue looked at him, surprised. Roland gave Edd a look of utter incredulity. “Boy... have you gone soft in the head? This is war. People *die* in war.”

Suddenly, Edd heard the girl scream from behind Sir Roland, and saw a hand smash a vase over Sir Roland's head. However, the glass vase had no effect on the steel helmet. Sir Roland had a shocked expression on his face. He turned, his face twisting. Edd looked at the girl. She looked the same age as Edd. "You heathen bitch...." Roland snarled.

He threw his sword, and grabbed the girl with his gauntlets. "You hit me? You, a stupid girl, hit me, a knight?" He yelled. "You aren't escaping from me now. I'll show you what a real man can do...." Roland whispered darkly, as he began to tear off the girl's dress.

Edd went cold. In that moment, it all came crashing down. The heroic image of a knight, the code of chivalry...were torn in an instant in that moment. He dropped his spear, unsheathed his dagger....and drove it in Sir Roland's neck from the back. Sir Roland gasped. His mouth was ajar for a moment.

Edd stumbled backward. *What have I done?* He shivered, speechless in front of Sir Roland, who fell to the ground.

Next to him, the girl was equally frightened. She looked at Edd, though her eyes did not express gratitude. *It is fear.... they are scared of me.*

Edd looked at his own dagger, and threw it, more out of fright than disgust. The rogue looked to him. "First kill?" "The rogue asked dryly. Edd did not reply.

The girl quickly got up and ran out of the house, screaming things which Edd did not understand.

"He wasn't supposed to kill them...Knights protect the innocent." Edd finally said, his voice croaking.

The rogue grunted. "Virtuous warrior they say. How does one become one virtuous if one's job is to kill, will forever escape me."

Edd stayed silent. "You have family? Back at home?" The rogue asked him, plucking the knife out of Sir Roland's neck.

"Yes. I have a mother and younger sister, my father died of the flu last year."

The rogue nodded. "You are needed then. You have someone you care for, back at home. You should be grateful boy, not all of us have that privilege. Some of us don't have much to live for." He said, eyeing the knife.

The rogue continued. "You know it is odd. Sometimes we fight for kings, sometimes we fight for invisible men in the sky. Yet all the times, the ones who die, are the ones who asked for nothing more than three square meals a day, and a loving family." He almost seemed to find it amusing.

Edd heard footsteps. The rogue yelled and slashed at Edd's arm. Edd, staggered, and fell to his knees. He clutched his arm. It was a light cut, but he could feel the warm blood from his arm.

Drake and four other soldiers stumbled in. He looked at Sir Roland's corpse, and his mouth fell open.

"What happened here?" Drake snarled. Edd was grabbing his arm, still bleeding.

Before Edd could even open his mouth, the rogue spoke. "I killed your knight. He tried to steal a woman I set on eyes on first." He said, in a completely calm and almost nonchalant voice.

“You wretched traitor!” Drake screamed, aghast. “Men, slay him!”

And just like that, the four soldiers sunk their spears into the rogue. Edd gasped.

Drake took a look at Edd. “Well fought boy.... The battle is over. We have won.”

Edd looked at him, still shaken thanks to the events that just occurred.

“If this is victory, sir...I’d rather lose” he finally spoke.

Drake grunted. “Be careful what you wish for boy...the lord is listening.”

Edd stood up. He looked around him. A former knight lay on the floor, blood oozing out of his neck. A rogue lay next to him, with spears impaling him. *So, this is war...*

It had no glory in it. No honor. No sense of justice, or pride filled Edd. *No tale is worth this bloodshed.* From that day onwards Edd knew the truth. Knight’s weren’t always noble. Rogues weren’t all treacherous. It wasn’t the sultanate or unbelievers who were evil. The true villain was war. Violence. Greed. Lust. These were the real devils that plagued mankind. And a hero... was anyone who could conquer them.

ENTRY 11

The City That Never Sleeps

-Abhinav Masih

Samuel decided he couldn't just lie on the uncomfortable and empty bed anymore. It had been four hours since he hit the sack, but not a single wink of sleep had come to him. While being awake at 2 am in the night would be perfectly normal during his college days, he wasn't the same young man anymore. Like a functioning adult, he would be expected to reach his job at the veterinary hospital at sharp 9 am. Samuel loved working with animals. However, recently his personal life had decided to take a vacation through the dumps which had left him a little disturbed.

He got off the bed and into his slippers, thinking that a drink might help him in getting a few hours of sound sleep. Samuel had always been a fan of a good Old Fashioned. Shuffling to the kitchen, he got out a glass and put some sugar with a few dashes from an old flask of bitters. He retrieved an open bottle of Sazerac from the liquor cabinet and poured himself a decent amount before popping in an ice cube. The simplicity and robustness of the drink put it high up in the list of preferred cocktails.

Lightly stirring the drink, Samuel walked to the wall-length window in the living room, peering to the street below. You could hear honks of the cars and the sound of the city in the apartment

on the eighteenth floor. However, what caught Samuel's eye was his own reflection in the paned glass window. The pain in his head was matched by his dishevelled look and dark undereye circles. The Sazerac was smooth, opened barely a month ago for Jacob's and his anniversary; they had never been a Champers couple.

The drink, though cold in his hand, made his throat warm until it suddenly turned into a burning sensation. Samuel knew it wasn't the drink, but the anxiety that seemed to poke him in the chest like a deep-wedged thorn. The past week had been tiresome mentally, and he wished he wasn't alone tonight. The one time Jacob was visiting his family, it seemed like everything had come crashing.

Three days ago, an unexpected phone call from the police station let him know that his brother, David, had been arrested as a part of a nasty drug circuit. A hasty hearing at the magistrate left him incarcerated for the next seven years.

It had been some time since Samuel had heard from his brother. They used to be close as kids and even teenagers, Samuel having saved David's posterior from many sticky situations. With time, they had lost the closeness, which, Samuel guessed, led to a broken relationship.

He kept his glass down on the coffee table and sat on the carpeted floor, leaning against the side of an armchair. Mulling over his thoughts, he realised that the room was pretty much engulfed in darkness. The only light that seeped into the apartment was through the window- the shining lights of the city.

It was in this moment of being that Samuel wished that they had a dog, someone that would give company during lonely times. As luck would have it, Jacob was severely allergic to pet hair. When Samuel returns from work, he must undergo an extensive de-hairing procedure before he can even dream of kissing his husband. This took away any chance of the couple owning and caring for a pet.

His brother wasn't the only thing he had to worry about. A call from his father earlier in the evening had left him shaken. His mom was critically ill, and the doctors did not believe that she would survive for long. With David being pretty useless at the moment, Samuel would have to rush back home at the earliest. But the thought that swam in his mind, that kept him from thinking straight - would he be welcomed home?

Eight years ago, Samuel's parents had lost their daughter. His father had come to terms with it; however, his mother had never stopped blaming Samuel for it. This had ended up leaving their relationship broken. His 'lifestyle', as his mother called it, had been the crux of multiple dinner table arguments which usually ended up with his mother storming off calling him ungrateful. The rest of the family, while slightly more accommodating, had never seemed to be on his side of the argument. Yet they managed to keep a cordial relationship with him.

Surprisingly, all of them, including his mother, took to Jacob quite well. While unhappy faces were plenty at the wedding, it was attended by many in the hopes that it would jolt Samuel out of the 'phase'. But Samuel was more than happy that the state let two men marry because of technical loopholes.

Tired of his mother's outbursts, Samuel had decided he wouldn't be returning home. Now it seemed that there was no choice and he would have to partake in this painful journey minus his supportive husband.

Still staring into the nothingness of the city, with about two sips left in the glass, Samuel was fiddling with his cellphone. He hadn't informed Jacob of the situation yet, but he would drop him a voicemail before he left for work. Jacob was a very supportive person and had been instrumental in all significant decisions that Samuel took. This time he knew that Jacob would push him to go. He would have to deal with his mother when the time comes.

With that out of his mind, Samuel got to his feet to return the glass and headed to the bedroom. With his laptop booted up, he logged on to a travel booking site and got himself a flight ticket for the day after. It wasn't easy on the pockets, but he and Jacob were, you could say, doing well financially.

None of Samuel's problems had actually been solved; he had just decided that he will be facing them a day from now. He didn't even know if his parents were aware of David's situation - but they should be, right? His father would have tried to inform him of his mother's condition too.

The thoughts did not vanish from his head but having made a decision, his heart seemed lighter. Keeping the laptop aside, he got up to switch the lights off. The bed seemed a little more comfortable, but it was probably the alcohol that made him feel that way. Fluffing up his pillow, he pulled the covers over himself. The cool side of the pillow felt nice on his face, but it couldn't satisfy the empty pillow beside him.

He missed Jacob a lot at that moment. Samuel wouldn't be able to see him for quite some time now. But he would have to manage to stay with his family for the time being. The alarm clock on the bedside table showed that it was 3:15 am. He was slightly glad that the alcohol had started taking its effect because he would have to be up in about four hours. Turning around, he pulled the cover closer to him. The warmth made him feel that Jacob was cuddling him, and that thought was enough for Samuel to close his eyes and drift off. He could finally sleep in the city that never sleeps.

ENTRY 12

Say Something

-Omkar Joshi

The quarantine period can be tough. It's not easy to be productive, work-life slows down, and the majority of us cannot step out of our homes for a jog or a walk. It gets especially tricky if you have recently shifted to a new home. As it gets suffocating inside, the least one can do is to climb up to the terrace and embrace the winds. About 15 minutes in the evening at the top floor can refresh minds and rejuvenate us in whatever way. Overall, the terrace is somewhat a go-to place for some exposure to outside.

It was 23rd of March, I was at home, IISER had almost shut down, and everything was off. I went up to the top floor at around 5 in the evening, you know, to take a stroll and feel fresh again. I entered the quiet place, gentle breeze flowing across the building. I started at one corner, looking at the residential area that I recently shifted to, with a lot of trees and no tall buildings. It was indeed a refreshing view. I started walking around the perimeter and blankly looking at the structures and roads all across the building. Everything was quiet, no honking, shops closed, and an occasional vehicle just passed. I was engrossed in the absolutely noiseless arena and enjoying the breeze as it whispered past. Not exaggerating, it was a dream place for a romantic poet.

As I submerged in this tranquil and peaceful atmosphere, I was jolted by the spring of an animal. Size-wise, it was big, big enough to scare me in and out. Reflexly, I retrograded a few steps, and the next thing I knew, it was a Labrador. An adult Labrador with shiny black fur, deep yellow eyes and an irritated expression. It was tied to a pole with a metal chain and was trying its best to be set free. It was twisting and turning and pulling and pushing the chain, all in vain. For the next couple of minutes, I barely moved, still recovering from the sudden exposure. As I caught my breath again, I checked if I was alright. I was. Then I stared at the beast, intensely barking at me for reasons I wish I knew. It didn't seem in a mood to stop, and I couldn't talk. All I did was blankly stare at it for a few minutes and leave quietly. Still in some shock, I didn't think or do much. I went to my bedroom, resumed my work on my PC and almost forgot about the incident.

A few days down the line, strangely oblivious to the previous incident, I decided to go to the terrace again, for some fresh air. As I climbed the stairs and was about to open the grill-door, the magnificent black Lab sprung again. Right in front of me, barking at its loudest voice and poking its snout in the gaps of the grills. Fortunately, I had not opened the latch. Shell-shocked yet again, this time, I decided to take some steps. I found out the owner of the Lab and requested her to kindly tie it for me. I also got to know then that his name was Rocky. As the owner did what I asked for, I straight-away went to the pole and stood at a safe distance, staring at Rocky again. Rocky was at his usual business, barking and trying to physically break the chain. I kept staring at it for a few minutes before gathering the courage to say something. I whistled. This had a strange effect. The dog stopped all the physical effort to break the chain, stood still for a few seconds and then dashed towards me, barking. With some more courage, I took a step towards it. The barking intensified, but so did the tail wagging. One more step and it was clear that all Rocky wanted was some company.

Since then, my terrace visits have increased to once a day, if not more. As much I feel the tranquillity of the place, I now also get some energy and excitement with Rocky. As I think about the whole incident, it occurs to me that a whole lot can improve if things are said when necessary. Timing is everything. During this lockdown, when meeting new people is too far from practicality, I made a new friend, probably just because I didn't fail to, you know, say something!

