

I am intrigued by how her clothes and actions manifest an existential irony: liberated actions, incarcerated wardrobe. Whether she is an actual Mussalien, or a human masquerading as one, is something I cannot ascertain from this distance. After all, the physiological similarities between humans and Mussaliens are uncanny: two ears, two eyes, two hands, two legs, one nose, one mouth, the lot. They have even developed congruent socio-cultural traditions over decades of co-existence, and organized themselves as per similar political and economic systems. The two were allowed to inter-dine and intermarry by previous administrations, courtesy a revolutionary who wished to annihilate the difference between the two species. However, a valiant dharmijihad led by the NavManavBahini has recently restored the natural order of things: today only the tongues of the humans and Mussaliens remain mutually intelligible.

Barely.

The girl doesn't let up. Between her icy-thin squeals of 'DNA' and 'Dikhayenge', the mob resounds with a baritone 'nahi'. My eyes squint in concentration: the sloganeering can be easily edited with the RazrProSoft implanted in my retinas. I strain to identify facial expressions and phrases that might be deployed in a world of deepfakes. It's a...hang on, I got something. Record, morph, input, report, upload – there, done. And the network has yet another gem for its primetime broadcast.

My lips curl up arrogantly as I realize the bureau chief might love this story – he might even offer a life-extension service for my ageing BND unit.

My eyes dart around. I am in a shabby, concave 50x50 jiotent that has either seen better days or has been purposefully refashioned to appear damaged, perhaps following a fad like ten-year-old-worn-jeans that was a rage in the early 2000s. My suspicions are confirmed by what carpets the floor: a green, foul-smelling dhurrie I had covered upon its launch three years ago, a product engineered to absorb toxic fumes from the air and thus a basic necessity for our drawing rooms.

I soak in the din around me, a chiselled amethyst in the sun. Seven rickety chairs – red-and-white, their plastic bands sagging – are kept on a raised, makeshift stage. Peeling portraits of long-forgotten figures adorn the sides of the tent and shimmer as the fabric sways in the dust-laden wind. Cigarette burns pockmark the off-white material, and the air smells of sweat, over-boiled tea and tear gas. I am about to have the outdoor broadcasting Aai jot down something when my head snaps towards the right of its own volition. An aroma hits me like a chitta-line – and the sringara lubricant overheats. I forget the assignment for a brief moment and zoom in.

BIRYANI BAGH

SAMI AHMAD KHAN

Dedicated to the loving memory of Barkat Zaman Khan, who left us on 26 April 2021. Abbu, you will always be remembered.

I

A remote signal turned on my soul – and I felt biryani.

Now, the question that plagues most gourmands isn't what kind of biryani is the best – the flavourful Mughlai, the subtle Awadhi, the hot Hyderabadi, the fragrant Malabari, the potato-laced Bengali, or even its strangely spiced Mussalien variant – but what came first: biryani or the idea of biryani? A simmering deggh hangs over a raging fire in Shah Plato's Cave – casting long shadows over stellar civilizations. If this universe is a malfunctioning meta-brain, supernovas are its synapses and biryani its quarks. The quirky thought comes to a gentle dum inside my head until synapses start reeking of basmati, and primary cognitive functions project vibrating strings of bubbling white-and-orange gold onto the canvas of our existence.

A scream, a sudden wave of dizziness. An insatiable hunger lacerates my belly, a kicking absence that makes me want to double over. The jolt pulls me under a lone, decaying shahtoot tree that no can longer flower: the air is still semi-toxic and a dull mechanical thrum caresses my ears. A motley crew mills around me, laughing, shouting, jeering: it is an ensemble crowd, a protean mass of genders, classes, languages, castes, religions and species. What is that specific stimulus, that target threshold, over which a docile herd such as this transmutes into a rampaging, bloodthirsty mob? A new neural pathway opens up within me.

Someone screams again. A veiled girl to my north-west howls at a spherical, blue-liveried MediaDrone that hovers 15 feet above our heads, just above the panoptower; the #MussalienLivesMatter digiplacard she holds changes with her fluid movements to read #FuckUPolice and #3BlackLaws in succession.

At a distance of roughly nine metres, an aluminium ladle deposits a steaming mound of biryani onto a waiting styrofoam plate. Its white-and-gold shimmer complements the smoggy, sunless December afternoon. A short, wiry lad in his early teens, dressed in a mustard pullover and a beige monkey cap, leans into the blackened degb again and heaps another serving. My next frame is eclipsed as a protestjeevi, an anti-human – or anti-hum as we call their ilk – enters my line of sight and demands his hourly share. I strafe left as the insanity of the situation gets to me.

Barely a decade ago, the Trumped Nations Oligarchy (TNO) had reached an uneasy compromise with the retreating Qa'haQ forces: a brutal, bigoted race from beyond the stars, beaten back after years of ruthless domination. Humanity had finally thrown off the yoke of these foreign invaders and the Pax Manavika gave the Qa'haQ another planet to call their own. While the high command of these bloodied external aggressors decided to withdraw to this promised star-system, some sentimental stragglers – mostly the Qa'haQ who were born on the Earth and called themselves the Mussaliens – stayed back, ruing a joint heritage that humans never wanted, and kept calling *our* land *their* home. They looked like humans, adapted to our lifestyle and culture, and pretended to be a part of this planet's native ecosystem. The Mussaliens, thus, became a part of us – until they were not – though they never truly adopted our core values except perhaps one aspect of our culture, our food. Biryani became the only thing they ate. *Ever*.

The anti-hum steps away and my visual is restored. From inside the degb, wisps of steam billow into the smog, blending into the hazardous suspended particulate matter of the day. The young coal miner comes up for air again, and throws his goods onto a waiting trolley, which are then carted to their end-consumers. I see three small, black moles on his face in the shape of an isosceles triangle: one on his nose, and two on his cheeks, unevenly distributed. The biryani boy is a Mussalien.

I eye the mound of spiced rice, bobbing up and down in the hands of a volunteer – a tall, skinny girl in a white shalwar-kameez and a brown leather jacket with close cropped burgundy hair – sail towards an empty belly. I scoff as the object of my lust is deposited into another man's waiting paws: this one's a chubby punk wearing an Institute of Eminence hoodie and baggy blue jeans. He does not even seem to enjoy the meal – or be grateful for it – as he tears into the labfowl. The nonchalance with which biryani is thrown onto a plate meant for contemptuous bellies reminds me of the utter randomness, perhaps even senselessness, with which the portal near our North-West Frontier

Provinces had spewed the Qa'haQ into our world. The portal has long since been barricaded, fenced and sealed, but still remains a site for patriotism for those whose bodies – and economies – can afford to travel.

The *thrownness* of the situation gratifies me, especially vis-à-vis where I currently stand. Such pernicious protests always scream of extraterrestrial-funded sell-outs and anti-human agendas – and are organized by those who refuse to accept the aadhar of our world. DNA precedes species; species precedes community; and community precedes rights.

A dark, hot wave grips me as I stare at the degb. A Persian king *may* have gone to war over biryani – we surely *will*.

You

Your kurta lost its starch a long time ago – the glimmer in your eyes will leave too.

A neon searchlight tiptoes through the crowd like zealous riot-control batons do not. Your right fist stabs the shabby skies; your left hand is slung over a purple rucksack. Static electricity spills out of your hands, making its way to the silently pulsating cell phone tower across the road. You stand next to a cellular base station site: its signals yearn to escape the jammers placed beside the force-fields. The Manav Rashtra takes no chances even with the Qa'haQ gone.

The nauseating smell of expired lachrymator gets stronger. You spring to action after the recent spate of slogans, jostle and push for a better position; your voice echoes, amplified by micro-transmitters installed at the periphery. You feel at home in the grimy, whiffy shamiana – a throwback to the actual one from 2020s – where nothing radical really happens, and where change in the status quo is slightly more possible than improbable, and just a tad less probable than impossible. You feel within your bones that these protestors are a lost cause at – and to – Biryani Bagh. Still, you have joined the rancid ranks of these who have sold their souls to their anti-hum handlers.

You stand behind one such abomination of five foot four inches; her head is wrapped in a black cloth that flows over her shoulders, all the way down to her ankles. Hi'Qah, they say, is what covers a Mussalien's dignity, while exposing the nakedness of sentient identity. The MediaDrones know her well; she used to anchor specials for RashtristanNews a long time ago, during a brief

truce between humans and Mussaliens, and was the network's eye-candy – a fifth column of the fourth pillar. She doesn't seem to notice as she carries a lit candle that vomits hot wax on her hennaed hands. Tomorrow, she'll carry another baby.

The next day, she'll carry a bomb.

Although that is unlikely now, ever since shuddhikaran has exposed her exotic DNA and put her under surveillance.

You follow the direction of her outstretched fingers, shallow-focused against the setting sun. Ahead is a glittering heap of white Yamuna sand that rusting TraVans ferry to covert mineral processing centres all across the Uttamnest Provinces. Decades ago, while the rest of the Manav Rashtra was planning trips to Europa on Brhaspatiyana V, the anti-hums were busy setting up Mussalien ghettos to rehabilitate those who did not board the last ships meant for Qa'haQam. The humans did not mind the Mussaliens then, but with their ever-increasing numbers, violent psyches and fanatical faiths, it was only a matter of time before these foreign invaders reneged on the promise that their ancestors, the Qa'haQ, had made – that of leaving *our* planet alone, especially since they now had their own.

We responded the way *they* always did – there was only one way to stop them breeding. Today, their sallow eyes are downcast, their emaciated, pestilence-ridden bodies are weak, and their souls are buried deep in poetry, penury and porn.

Do not pity them. You are an idealist, an ill-informed university student who is unaware of how they have many wives, children, sisters and mothers. It's a different culture, theirs, a different way of thought. Monogamy is not for them; gods are not for them; traditions are not for them. Their brains are hardwired differently. Do not scorn: you will not remember the *Years of Dasta* when the Qa'haQ, the ancestors of these anti-hum Mussaliens, had unleashed a reign of terror against the original inhabitants of this planet. They had stolen the harmony of our lands, plundered our meagre resources, and pillaged our dying tribes. *They* were the infestation we wanted to get rid of. And we did.

Ah. But you are not interested in ithasa, are you? Your disinterested eyebrows say it all. I know why you're here. It is okay, no need to be ashamed. We were all young once. The deep brown of your eyes clashes with the dash of red in the sclera – quite possibly a nashedi. Your hair falls in locks around your neck. 'Are you a female, yaar?'

You ogle as the girl flashes her wrists in the process of raising a red flag. A blooming lotus is etched on her metacarpals, a popular motif amongst these anti-hums. Do you know it is based on the *nam myoho renge kyo*, and comes in handy when the upper palms of the Mussaliens are inked for centralized identification? I, for one, like them inked.

What, why do you think I am missing the point?

Bah. Look at you now, you working-class hero, you revolutionary, misquoting Faiz and Bidrohi Kobi in your sparkling Che tees, eyeing that panoptower, licking your lips, and...hum dekhenge, kya...that stone.

Him

He stands quietly in a corner, on an elevated platform about 15 feet in height, next to a flashing digiboard that reads 'Prove your identity: Biryani Bagh. 2038'.

His eyes look down at the protestjeevis just as the muzzle of the 5.56 mm Tavor assault rifle faces the skies. Alone, especially when surrounded by people, his eyes sneak around, sanitizing the area in his mind. Ninety-four minutes left for his shift to end. He shrugs and adjusts his BP jacket, which is still third-rate; the panoptower, however, is brand new. Military-grade aluminium polymers secure the insurmountable barriers around the Jamia Depopulated Zone (JDZ). Molotov cocktails and angry stones – yes, they are still used, though mostly for theatrics – are usually deflected by the energy barrier that surrounds them. But one never knows when a stone can turn into a hand grenade, or when a lucky stone can find a brief window between shield-cycles.

He suppresses a yawn and checks the Geiger counter on his outfit. All lights are green: he wonders why the N-radio earpiece inside him suffers multiple distortions of late. He does not know enough to be scared of this static. The hissing is a muted scream of a thermonuclear device going off in our future – for N-radio-waves travel back in time.

He misses his family, and yearns to taste this year's sugarcane crop. He knows that men, women, children, senior citizens, humans, Mussaliens, et cetera, are all checkboxes on the casualty forms he fills after every shift. These categorizations organize bodies like meat boxes in a cold storage facility – labels that carry their date of expiry. He understands that when these checkboxes walk out on the road carrying flags, they cease being categories and emerge as a people. When a community is hacked off its hands that are needed to

earn, and its tongues needed to speak, it is reduced to a dissentious animal, furious at injustice, angry at the world. Unpredictable – and uncontrollable.

The merciless Qa'haQ had done precisely that to humans for a long, long time in cities not so far away – they had treated humans as expendable matter, as impure, lowly beings who had to kowtow to hegemony, suffer unspeakable acts of zulm and vacate their ancient homes amidst verdant Koshur valleys. Humans had become refugees on their own planet. Until the hissing mass of humanity found its forked tongue – and its glinting claws – and repelled the marauders. Justice had been served.

With the Qa'haQ gone, the world had to change. Protests, after all, are all about symbolic clichés: law and order, peace, harmony, brotherhood are but hollow words, and the only *real* thing is a raging fire, a whizzing stone, a burning house, a cracking katta, ominous slogans, screaming sticks and a slaughtered animal. He knows that hatred, greed, power and violence are edifices of not just human civilization but of all life. Humans and Mussaliens are nothing but thoughts and blood. Get rid of the thoughts and only blood remains – and he was there to prevent it from flowing freely.

Today is an easy day for him. Prahari, the Aai of DelUPo, routinely pulls up intelligence from the RASHTRAGRID and analyses it using a heuristic algorithm of threat perception. The system is based on dynamic data that flows from various networks, and is mostly accurate – most of the time. Despite the cold, dark patches of sweat appear on the khaki of his uniform. He looks down from his perch, and sees the anti-hums everywhere. Babies, aunts, grandmothers, young men and women – in diapers, veils, saris, T-shirts, jeans and even flowing Mussalien robes – shout in languages, dialects and accents which his brain struggles to make sense of. It is the 'Mile-sur-Mera-Tumhara' of the new age – except this time with the dushman.

He scoffs as the incomprehensible slogans reach him again. Abey, what is the big deal in showing one's DNA? Doesn't everyone have it? And why won't you let the TNO help you market your crops and produce worldwide? Isn't this what asli farmers everywhere really wanted?

A siren in the distance interrupts him. A few hundred metres away stands the Holy Tridev Kuaranteen Kendra, a detention-centre-cum-hospital-cum-retro-viral-research-lab, whose massive iron gates are guarded by an elite C.B.R.N. (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) battalion. The high-security barriers lift to allow a packed medical transport to enter the bowels of the dilapidated building. As if on cue, the chimneys of the hospital suddenly puke out their contents into the air.

More bodies are being sterilized, he infers. He is uneasy at detention centres being located in the same buildings as anti-coronavirus research centres, but live tests and Mussalien trials are required for best results, his seniors tell him; the supply chain demands that the detainees, at least those without proper documentation, serve the purpose of their existence this way, especially since the latest outbreak coincided with their ancestors leaving Earth. Was Covid-18 a secret Qa'haQ bioweapon?

He doesn't agree – and he would rather make the final journeys of the tainted-DNA-carrying-anti-hums and Mussaliens painless. Despite their foreign DNA, they were sentient beings still, now floating in the air around him. He twitches, stops breathing for a moment and readjusts his PPE. He is sure his rDNA inoculation will protect him, but why take any chances? At that precise moment, his chief post officer, a bored, grumpy S.I., wheezes, his six-foot-plus frame shaking.

He jumps: his adrenaline-pumper is automatically activated. There is something in the sky, something flying towards him. Wait, is that a bird, is it a plane or...?

Behen...

I

A lot has changed in the past few years. Indraprastha comprises residential, commercial and TNO sectors but is peppered with checkpoints one cannot usually cross. Massive holographic projections of TNO's samraat lock eyes, smile paternally and wave at passers-by. A caption appears and disappears on the walls around the city: 'atom-shakti se aatm-shakti'. It is an age of unprecedented stability – the only conflagrations the city witnesses are water riots; humanity has moved beyond caste and creed, and women can freely step out after sundown without being raped and burnt. The megacity now has its own satellites: it is garlanded by hastily-assembled habitation domes spread across its perimeter – their occupants still fighting for a cause their fathers believed in.

Drones and CCTVs cover the entire length and breadth of Biryani Bagh and relay the footage directly to RashtrianNews, which then airs it 24x7 to holo-screens – and BiggProtestjeeviBoss subscribers – across the world. Bluish force-fields have replaced yellow, corrugating DelUPo barricades. A small altar

representing a temple, mosque, church, gurudwara and a Mussalien shrine has been constructed at the very spot where people from different faiths congregated for the first time all those years ago. Turrets, panoptowers and drones adorn the JDZ: a concrete fortification insulates it from the outside world, and no one can cross into Indraprastha without a genetic scan. This is where the old meets the new: rustic deghs share space with sparkling, portable biryani dispensers that have sprung up at regular intervals, corporate vending machines that are regularly serviced for taste and freshness, and where one can order up to 56 types of biryani. If one wants something else, one can simply raise one's hand and beckon a langarbot anywhere in Indraprastha. Look, there's one now, dodging behind a media drone. These little machines are munificent food couriers, programmed to serve *anyone* who is hungry – that too without any prior authentication or orders.

Yes, that might be a problem – their funding may come from dubious sources.

The darned azaadi chorus starts again and jolts me back to reality. The word has been banned, though it often resurfaces during these protests. Under a new TNO Evidence Act, the Prahari drones can testify in a court of dharmasharia, but I can do much better. I blink twice in rapid succession and start recording: guilty faces are only as important as the clothes they wear. No one pays any attention to me, though. I have donned a frayed kurta over ripped jeans, the stuff their kind usually wears. A seven-day stubble hides my intentions under a facade of academic venerability and Clark Kent glasses lend me a professorial look. I swear sometimes I even feel like a JNU (now Manav Rashtra Vishwavidyalaya) teacher. If only I also had one of those type-VI quarters in the only location of Indraprastha where trees still grow naturally without extensive soil enrichment and microdrip irrigation procedures.

The naarebaazi starts again. It goes up and down, down and up. Pitch, tone, tenor, rhythm, chorus. Beating drums, their hearts. It is a sigh of the silent; a rave for the raveless. Their canvas, Biryani Bagh.

Time to up the ante. I capture a few more incriminating instances, repeat the same drill and end the recording. Then I join in the chorus with all I have got and push my way to the front until I am right next to the force-field. The aroma of sizzled flesh mingles with that of well-roasted labfowl and ersatz spices. The smells drive me mad. I raise my right hand and shout some more. I gingerly reach out and scream in pain. A modicum of pain is generated by my cortex and fed to my cognition matrix. My left index finger comes away, burnt, though not fully exposing what lies within.

My clamouring does not go unnoticed. A pair of strong hands pull me back, and I am pushed to the rear of the formation within seconds, a cocoon for the injured. No longer at the frontlines, I reckon another type of trench. My hand is sprayed with a cold aerosol, a torch peers into my eyes, a stretcher appears out of nowhere.

My body clock ticks to ten. As soon as I come about, a plate of hot biryani is waved in my face. I am not surprised. For the Mussalien metabolism, regular intake of food is vital, and the only item their digestive system can fully process is biryani. I also sometimes wonder if the Mussaliens utilize biryani the same way humans use insulin.

My facial muscles work overtime, vocal cords are silent. With all five fingers of my right hand, I dig in deep, and my mouth chomps on the fine, long-grained GM-rice that I know could only come from an underground food-replication lab. I shove another fistful into the engine of my soul. Sniffing, biting, chewing and relishing the ambrosial morsel: it's good to feel alive. Biryani is alif bae pay, I wordlessly mouth, and chuckle. This is definitely not going in my report.

You

Blood is the global currency of 2038 CE. How much does a pint of blood cost in TNO dollars? Its exchange value depends on the forces of supply and demand, and of violence and death – easily earned by those in power, and easier shed at the altars of alterity.

You gawk at the grey-and-crimson patch of blood on the street, a puddle of putrid, decomposing matter. Some careless idiot caressed the barbed wire of JDZ, which is meant to protect the protestors from touching the more lethal force-field. Blood on the streets was almost always how human civilizations built – and undid – their own selves, but in order to fathom how *this* blood turned grey, you have to understand its chronology.

The past two decades were brutal for our world, especially after the Qa'haQ invasion and the spontaneous mutations in humans all over the world. As the atrocities of the foreign invaders and draconian provisions of martial law became increasingly more pronounced, the NavManavBahini emerged as a shining beacon of human resistance: a vishwaguru that unified all human nations under a single flag. After long, lean years of resistance and asymmetric warfare, the TNO succeeded in fighting off the Qa'haQ – and exiled them to

an adjacent star system as per a bilateral Pax Manavika (though a minor border dispute near Pluto still rages on between our people).

The downward spiral did not stop here, unfortunately. More woes and foes waited in the shadows; nation-states resurfaced in the process. South Asia became a tangled mess of raw nerves, nuclear wastelands and killing fields. Sri Lanka's civil war reignited; today the L.T.T.E. runs a parallel government out of Prabhakaranapura, and the Sinhalese state hopes that the Eelam does not deploy the lone nuke it inherited from the war against the Qa'haQ. Nepal is now a province of China; its productivity has gone up, so have the number of inexplicable disappearances of pro-democracy activists. In the process of inching towards a de facto secular polity, Bangladesh faced an angry backlash from the Jamaat. An unauthorized operation by non-state actors poisoned the river Padma, and sent the nation into severe economic depression. Manav Rashtra, thus, acquired a new prefecture. A recalcitrant Afghanistan, already reeling under all the battles fought on its turf against the Qa'haQ, found lithium within its belly. The country was subsequently depopulated by the TNO, and its lithium deposits now power every second battery of the world. However, it still suffers from irradiated refugees trying to make their way across the Durand Line – for Pakistan no longer exists. A year ago, Islamist fundamentalists secured access to Pakistan's formidable nuclear arsenal, and accidentally glassed their own country while trying to blackmail the entire subcontinent into accepting Islam.

While the world folded on itself, the Dominion of Manav Rashtra – or Rashtristan as it was called – prospered. Gold and money were passé; data became its *ṛtā*. In the early 2030s, the nation's far-sighted leadership became the protector of Big Data, the fossil fuel of the new century. Slowly, through a slew of economic measures, political manoeuvres and technical investments, it became the Switzerland of the East – except this time, the impenetrable banks of Manav Rashtra hosted clouds and secured servers for clients around the world. It became the data storage-cum-refinery for the TNO, and collected and catalogued all online activities and then developed algorithms to predict – and then direct – human behaviour. The Big Data knew everything about everyone – particulars of birth, blood group, hobbies and education, sleep and snack timings, reading/viewing preferences, shopping history, sex patterns, emotional intelligence, childhood traumas, and so on. You name it – the *ṛtā*Machine had it. Two billion human survivors meant trillions of digital choices on an hourly basis. Finding the underlying sutra within this ostensibly random data flowing in from all over the globe and coming up with intelligent

Aai sophisticated enough to locate patterns became the Holy Grail. A bhavya temple was erected to this endeavour in service of the *ṛtā*Machine, and its sanctum sanctorum became the engine of the Manav Rashtra's growth. You see, if you could truly grasp the underlying reality of your today, you can extrapolate a future – and in doing so, shape it in a manner that it becomes the future. You can control this future, precisely because you were able to predict it.

I see you shaking your head, perhaps this is too much information for your maal-riddled brain to process. I will stop my commentary with just one request – recall 1948.

And 1966. 1984. 2002.

2020.

Ah. The twinkle in your eyes tells me that you might just have connected the dots. All these years are 18 years – 216 months – apart. Every 18 years comes the year of the hagfish, when natural disasters such as earthquakes, cyclones and virus outbreaks jostle for print space with human-incited catastrophes such as riots, wars and terror attacks. A thorough cleansing of the human soul is required after every 216 months; a blood sacrifice must be made every 18 years for the wheels of Manav Rashtra to stay in motion. After all, every generation needs a new mass grave – and 18 is the legal age to vote. What better affirmation of a functional democracy than to vote for genocide?

Now you will be made to remember 2038.

A grey projectile lands on your solar plexus with a soft thud. I relish the crunch that follows – a Kit-Kat being split. It is a self-propelled baton – fired by a black-and-red drone that hovers in the air, an overgrown dragonfly that stings. Where is your azaadi now, I want to ask, but don't. You see, unlike you, I retain some basic courtesy, some sabhya-tehzeeb. You shriek as a fountain of blood spouts out of your mouth, and the Burqa-Barbie rushes to press a black rag torn from her clothes to your stomach.

I feel that I am in an old Tarantino film as blood soaks your garments. It seeps out of your mouth and snakes towards your chest. Excuse me, please give me a moment. I am suddenly feeling very hot.

Him

The projectile hits him squarely on the head. The impact dents his helmet – a micro-crack appears – and hurts his skull. He instantly crouches and grunts

as his nose starts to bleed. He is more surprised at the force-field's inefficacy than the pain that shoots through his body.

His training takes over now as he glances towards the starboard. He blocks out the pain, sprints to the central console and awaits the authentication order. He doesn't sway even once despite the concussion; his step is practised, precise. Years of running on the raised, narrow mud paths between fields serve him well.

His radio crackles, codes are exchanged and real-time data is relayed. A drone has taken automatic counter-measures even before the sector commander is informed. The Shanti Dal is en route and the execute command comes right on time: central dispatch has become surprisingly efficient. He stares at a few tabs of the HUD and lets the Aai Prahari take over.

A few metres from him, a sleek hose springs to life, a snake charmed by an electronic tantrik. It attaches itself to a blue-green storage tank with a hazmat logo that is located right next to the panoptower, and the Aai decants the right dose of Shuddhifier. A Chakra drone then docks with the tank and gulps copious amounts of the solution; the colourless, odourless liquid mixes with the recycled sewage water. The drone mixes the two liquids and hovers over the crowd.

He's safe, he knows – so are those who belong here. The others, however, are not.

With the Chakra drone on standby, the Prahari scans for hostiles in the vicinity. Its programme begins with facial recognition of those present, and then executes a detailed study of their genetic predisposition towards anti-hum activities, previous infractions, credit scores and Aadhar violations. A quick sieving through the CCTV footage identifies the assailant, who is located and locked on shortly. The drone adjusts its pitch and yaw, arms the stinger and ejaculates. Twice.

The entire process takes a total of 4.22 seconds.

I

I feel something alive inside me at almost the same time the inbuilt AlienSetu app shrieks in alarm. A bout of extreme exhaustion courses through me and intensifies into a feeling of profound discomfort. The plate falls out of my hand and the ground rushes up.

I do not know what to rue more: that I have been hit, or that a simple hit can make me suffer thus. I can feel the Shuddhifier moving inside me – a breakthrough biological agent that only targets Mussalien DNA. It cannot harm human beings: the TNO guidelines are strictly enforced, and only the Mussaliens need fear its wrath. Even the pesky anti-hums are safe, whether they like it or not. In such cases, the Shuddhifier causes a brief nausea and leaves the body when they pee next.

Except, I am neither human nor a Qa'haQ.

With this illogical memory, my imprinted personality caves in, and the illusions around me shatter into a thousand flow chart options. Before I can think more, the Biryani within my belly reacts to the Shuddhifier. My body becomes the site of an evenly poised match, a contest between the delicacy from across the length and breadth of Manav Rashtra, and the agent meant to neutralize all non-terrestrial genes in human bodies. My circuits begin to overload as the spliced human/Mussalien DNA within me screams – and spontaneously mutates.

The chronology reappears out of nowhere: perhaps I was engineered to fight the Qa'haQ when/if they returned. And now I have turned on myself – and that somehow turns me on. Something punches my intestines from within, and my stomach growls. I black out to see infinity before me: rainbow-coloured, criss-crossing conduits of swirling singularities that intersect and intertwine, that lead nowhere because they go everywhere; all points in space-time, one; every single point in the curvature, many. Particles become waves, waves become strings, strings become particles again. Gravity at the quantum level, and quantum forces at a galactic scale flicker in tandem. This is what they must call God, I tell myself – I am going to meet the maker of my makers.

I sense a shudder in the cell phone tower behind me. The inbuilt-EM radiation monitor is rendered inoperable in my current state. There's Omtronic radiation coming out of the tower, I sense it; the Qa'haQ stratagem has been remotely activated. I cannot help but think about what would happen when the biryani-in-itself becomes biryani-for-itself. The biryani has begun to fight back.

You

A sinister sparkle runs through the biryani, making it glint with an unnatural florescence. You feel a soft drilling eating into your bones. Tiny spots dance

in front of your closed eyes. Your chest moves. There's something inside you, an eel of longing that intends to get out.

The aspirin you were given seconds ago wears off exponentially – and the crashing waves of pain return, smashing against your skull like an angry tsunami. Smoke whirls in the distance. Perhaps a data refinery has been set on fire again. What happens to your social media accounts when you die? Digitized, uploaded and forever trapped in the same temporal loop of your account profile – you realize there are many kinds of graves in the ḡḡḡMachine.

But you are still alive – though not for long. A fly gently rests on your cheekbones and meanders its way towards the inner folds of your thickly lashed eyes. Flies love the softness of warm flesh – you smile at this surge of primitive wisdom. Your breathing slows down as red-hot needles of pain hit you, a hammer shredding your brain to bits. A scream of excruciating horror bursts nearby.

Every generation is cursed to live through its own 1947, its own 1971, its own 1984, its own 2002, its own 2020.

Maybe this was yours.

Welcome to Biryani Bagh, 2038.

U

It started with a bile-rich hiccup, a cue to swallow air and hold my breath like a child throwing a tantrum. Next came a wave of sickness in my chest like I had ingested too much coffee: my heart wanted to throw up but could not. It is an indescribable, unforgettable feeling – like the ecstasy of first love and its protracted death. A pulled lamb gouache, fluttering in pain, bleating in spirit. Like an 80-something being slow-roasted in a house set on fire amidst the heart-wrenching war-cries of 'Qa'haQam Qar' and 'Jai Terra'. Piercing coughs. Shrilling burns. Wrinkling hair on bubbling skin. A juicy patty simmering on a hot grill. Death makes us food – and our food brings us closer to death.

Delirium: a montage of my battle with Covid-18, which made them give me this body a long time ago.

The drone expands in size, burning its entrails, mocking my helplessness. The next second it turns upside down and shrinks to the size of my toe. I could not tell any more whether I am on acid, epidural or morphine. They say the body feels and forgets the pain. I guess the same goes for torture or

annihilation. There is aesthetics of pleasure in extinction – and a pleasure of annihilation in all living beings.

If there's one lesson I have learned, it is that during morphosis, the butterfly should remain calm -- so should civilizations and species as they are torn apart from within. The organs reorganize, the bones shift, the flesh tears and glues back, only a little differently. When the rDNA activates, the phyla become freely permeable. The rawness on the gum is felt for many months when the wisdom tooth sprouts -- only, in my case, fangs erupted from the bony goo in my mouth, an absolute impossibility considering my flesh had been artificially grafted.

My ribcage realigns and the thorax yields. There is pain but also a feeling of pleasure and evolution, like after performing an asana I never thought I could. An error in my coding quells the tarsals, pushing against the skin which starts to keratinize into a holographic blue-black. I could feel my temperature rise with my new metabolism, and for a moment I felt 3 lub-dubs of a heart I had not felt in a long time. The invisible sun had set a few moments ago, now it was time for the darkness to fall.

Still, it's Diwali for my pathways, which light up my processors. It is a new feeling, so new, in fact, that it does not pain at all. However, I know that when the pain reaches its crescendo, the only survival strategy is to submit. Life is misunderstood. It refuses to leave the body in an instant, death comes slowly. With every lathi, every beheading, every lynching, every bomb blast, every bullet, the flesh moves. The veins burst, the organs break open and the cells rupture. The rakshas in our shell watches but the blows do not stop.

My mind bursts open – and there is no Ripley in sight.

I see a red chunk of intelligent meat, mine, not the charred carcass I recently ingested, crawl over me. A foot-long centipede wriggles out of my mouth, dripping green chemicals in its wake -- probably from my mobility subsystems. I squirt at it, but my eyes start to hurt. It is a shape-shifting chimera that exists in dimensions of more than three, a being that comes from an E8 lattice of another universe. My gut-processor relays to me that the monstrosity I witness is the result of the coming together of the EM radiation from the cell-tower, the Shuddhifer coursing in my veins, the Covid-18 virus I was purposefully infected with, and the spliced DNA in the malfunctioning biocircuits. We have managed to rip a hole in reality with our inextinguishable hatred and anger towards one another -- and invited the hungry maws of the dark universes from within.

At that precise moment, an image is beamed to my visual cortex: the radiation receivers form an unwitting link between me and the creature that I have just given birth to. I perceive what it sees (or directs?) clearly: the doors to the Tridev Kendra burst open, and shapeless forms ooze out onto the streets, chanting and humming. I look for the guards, the doctors, but they no longer exist in this dimension. The link is severed immediately: the creature feels I have been watching, but lets me be. Perhaps it owes me the love of a child. Nothing destroys you from within more than love – my makers were right about this.

The creature howls in response to my inadequate parenting skills. It chides my voyeurism and lunges for you. Within a few moments, it stands tall over your chest, its body piercing your heart. You enter the void without much pain, but its fury flows out and mixes with your blood.

A steady stream of projectiles emanates from the panoptower; the creature looks up and feeds on his presence. There's a new food source in Delhi-25. The creature wriggles and digs itself deep inside your intestines, and takes off. Your world goes dark. His is about to.

At the security post, he sees something unknown zero in on him and tries to shoot it down. He empties an entire clip, but the bullets ricochet harmlessly off a quasi-metallic armour that has suddenly appeared out of nowhere on the creature's hide – and that's exactly what he had then, nowhere to hide. With the grace of a viper, the creature attaches itself to his stomach; razor-sharp strings shoot out of its body and dig a tunnel into his innards. He was bitten earlier; now he was being eaten.

It makes sense to us now. Why merely convert when you can consume? The universe does not waste, it recycles. It does not die, it reawakens. It does not merely expand, it contracts. And now it was the turn of the human condition. Grammar hybridizes much later – first people do. You, him and I fuse together in the consciousness of the creature, aggregating into a primordial slime, a placenta connecting life and death. The creature proliferates: out of one emerge hundreds, millions. A living nest of termites that wants to do only one thing: consume. Whoever and whatever they touch disappears in a cloud of nanodust, their flesh and blood being reengineered at a microscopic level. The creatures then turn on each other without any distinction: true equality and fraternity, equal death for all and equal food for all.

Not for me. My primary systems are shutting down; self-diagnostics indicate an inability to self-repair. I am about to go into the eternal night. The thought makes me happy, though, especially since I called myself 'I' and not an 'it' –

unless, it strikes me immediately, this is the purpose of my programming. As my last breaths rattle out of my throat, as my subsystems struggle to finish their penultimate operations to keep me just conscious before total break down, I hear a chattering. The shadow creatures swarm over the screaming protestors, security personnel and media with equal magnanimity – and indifference.

I reconcile. There may be no meaning to this pain, grief and death, but this is about genesis and life. Maybe it always has been. For, in death, we have achieved what thousands of years – spread across trillions of light-years – failed to infuse in us. A manifest destiny of unity and purpose, a collective conscious of togetherness: for in our slaughter, we had finally become one.

I smile. A pulsating singularity materializes right in front of me: for the warm, beckoning tunnel is often cold and devoid of meaning. As an ancient Earth philosopher might have argued: this singularity exists and it doesn't; it is not only there and simultaneously not-there but also both there and not-there and neither there nor not-there. It appears and disappears, like the meanings of our words, the consequences of our actions, the fragility of our relationships, the futility of our faiths, the fatality of our dreams and the love of our lives.

The singularity beckons as screams echo in the distance; two streams of warm human and Mussalien blood make their way to the base of the lone, barren shahoot tree. Its fruits would be red and juicy, holometabolism-driven caterpillars inching towards a higher form of existence. Pining, my left hand reaches out for the singularity, whirring, jerking, yearning... For on the other side, I swear I can smell biryani.