

The Small Wheel

*Give up yourself merely to chance and hazard
From firm security.*

William Shakespeare

I entered as if I was very sure of myself. In reality though, I was not. It never occurred to me that I would like to be in such a luxuriously beautiful playground. Everybody seemed too busy with their own things and that made me feel a bit more comfortable. 'They are so tensed; more than that they are tensed on trying too much not to look so', walking among them I was wishfully thinking that none will even notice me.

Immediately to the left of the next turn I saw a cabinet and a man standing next to it. He smiled at me and the sensation of being pried open tempted me into standing there for a while. 'If he asks me anything I will pretend that I don't understand a word.' I walked by him and he did not say anything. 'What was he doing there?'

Ahead I saw the piano and a man was playing it. He did not seem to notice anything around – the noise, people moving here and there, and the smoke that covered the whole place.

'Now, shall I take left or right? What did he say? Oh, after the piano, go straight and then left.'

'Don't waddle.' Hardly breathing – not for any other reason but the too tight pink stretched dress – I kept telling myself what he told me. 'Feel as if you were born on those high hills and that you have been wearing stretched cloths with a large cleavage all your life. Your confidence will make others look at you with admiration. Don't we always admire what we lack?'

All I knew of a roulette, 'the small wheel' in French, are fanciful stories about its invention – where quite a few versions go about Pascal, or a French monk, or a Chinese guy from whom Dominican monks brought it to France. None is sure of its origin but that does not seem to stop people from gambling – with a considerable consciousness of the risk but a greater hope of the gain.

Last year I took some classes on probability; ever since I wanted to play the roulette. My probability professor, who spent lots of his money and his vacation time in the Casino, agreed to explain to me the game's rules. I have never played it or seen anyone doing it – well, except in movies.

The concept of probability arose in logic as a means of defining lack of proof. Even the methods of probability were developed initially for the analysis of gambling games. Pascal developed a theory for understanding gambling in which the main role is played by chance. Well, besides our earthly concerns he as well gambled on faith – on ‘God exists’!

Gambling is viewed by risk averse non-players as Immoral, a Dishonorable Vice. For my professor believing in chance, in gambling as well, was the same as believing in free will. ‘If there is no chance there is no free will – we are simply puppets sticking to someone’s damn fixed rules. Put your savings in and triple your money, there is nothing wrong in gambling. Even people like Einstein ended up in believing in the laws of chance, forced upon us by the complexity of Nature. The great physicist of the last century, Schrödinger, said that the only underlying common element of everything that happens around us is observed by chance.

He also spoke about the natural hazards of nature – Nature itself gambles at times - avalanches, major droughts, blizzards, hailstorms, and what not. I recently read somewhere of such a hailstorm that hit Bangladesh. Could you guess the weight of the hailstones? Not possible, for it is unbelievable, 1 kg. The great Napoleon, who could not be conquered by anyone in Europe, had been defeated by silly blizzards in his campaign of invading Russia.

Even if chance is nothing but a failure to pin down some cause it is still a Chance unless I find a certain cause for it. ‘The winning number could be predicted’, he said, ‘if I note the exact location of the wheel when the croupier releases the ball, as well as the initial speed of the wheel.’ Then I understood that to predict anything at all I would need a sophisticated PC to calculate the probability, enough time and, of course, everyone in the Casino around me to be sound asleep.

He told me the stake possibilities: straight, or single-number (*en plein*); split, or 2-number (*à cheval*); street, or 3-number (*transversale pleine*); square, quarter, corner, or 4-number (*en carre*); line, or 6-number (*transversale six*); column, or 12-number, dozens, or 12-number, low-number or high-number; black or red; odd-number or even-number – they all sounded Chinese to me even if they were in French.

Everyone who crosses a street in Kolkata is, really, gambling one’s life, because its crossing increases, to a small extent, the risk of being run down if not killed. But to refuse to cross a street on these grounds is irrational. This sort of risk-aversion, when generally applied, would paralyze anyone.

The tube in the background released air as pulses and the thus created sound waves made me think of the circles shaped on still water when a stone is dropped into it. Simultaneously changing colors were projected on a screen covering the wall next to the Roulette table.

I decided to watch the game for a while. Consecutively numbered rectangular spaces, colored red and black alternately, arranged in three columns. Everyone around the table – three men and two women – was probably reckoning and calculating chances. I got a sit just in front of the croupier. Watching the game I found it impossible to calculate anything for the wheel moved too fast and too unpredictable. There was no order in it; or rather there was order in its obvious disorder! 'Is it the pleasure for the game, making one addicted as well, or just the desire to win that keeps them sitting here?' It could be that there was some sort of a passion for the game for I noticed that they would not show any sign on loosing or winning, but continued to stake hazardingly on numbers, on "odd" or "even," and on colors.

As the man next to me said, staring at his unlit cigarette, that I cannot sit without playing, I swear that I saw him smiling sarcastically – of course, he could guess that I have no idea of what I should do next. Confidently I said 11 and placed my chips on it. The wheel spun and stopped at 36. I had lost! Brooding over the memorized lines and staring at the green baize, I staked another time – this time on the black and surprisingly the black turned up. Next time I staked again just where they lay—and again black turned up. Again I staked the whole sum, and again the black turned up. Clutching my won chips, I placed all of them on odd, and the wheel stopped at eleven. The croupier paid me out three times my total stake! Once more I staked the whole pile of chips on the even. The wheel stopped at 22. I was paid out another pile, and, seizing eagerly my doubled pile I thought, 'The roulette wheel has landed on black the last three spins. Therefore, since red is 'due', the next spin will probably be red.' My professor warned me against such a fallacy and I did not stake but watched the others. "Rouge!" called the croupier. I took a long breath, and cold shivers went down my body...

Deciding that it was the best time to quit I rose from the table to scoop up the pile of different colored chips, spread on the green baize, while tittering and quivering with delight. That moment I thought that I might be dreaming. Picked up all the chips and decided to call for a cab, just to be in control of the situation. I looked into the bag to see whether any change was left. That made me sure that I was awake for I saw myself trying to find coins next to me in the bed. 'Strange that I did not change into my pajama', I thought as I saw myself even now wearing the nice pink dress. I was holding the handbag full of chips and the screen projecting the changing colors was fixed on the wall opposite my bed. At this point I really woke up and found myself in my bedroom, in my reddish pink pajama and, of course, without any coins or chips. I felt like I have been flung into an ocean where I remained groping for some time.

Feeling totally drained and sighing I swept the beads of sweat that dotted my face. Mulling the dream over and over again I sat up. 'Today is THE DAY. God! I have gone there and I won! The ancient believed that dreams are sent by gods to tell us something.' My joy steeped in confidence and I jumped out of the bed. I went to take out the dress, the too pink and too stretched one, and chose the collar and the earrings to match it. In my handbag I put the small kit of the face powder and the pink rouge, the mascara, the eye shadow, and the eyeliner.

I waited for the evening, when I intended to go to the Casino, and one picture pleasantly haunted my mind the whole day – the stupefied me smilingly scooping up the pile of different colored chips, spread on the green baize, while quivering with delight

However absurd it may seem I was expecting to win. 'If everything in this universe expands, why not my bank account? It should also be carried along in this expansion flow.' I entered the place utterly sure of myself. Immediately to the left of the next turn I saw a cabinet and a man standing next to it. He smiled at me and, this time remembering him, I smiled back quite confidently, knowing exactly what I was there for.