

Shit Flower

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In its underground cavern, cathedral-like with its glittering spears of light and rust-stained barrel vaults, Goose continued to do what it had done for over five decades: route sludge water in the temple city of Mumbai. It was 3:04 AM IST, 2089 AD.

Goose cared little about light, vaults or cathedrals. But sludge was a different matter.

Twenty million people, and at least as many non-people, can and will produce an ocean's worth of biosolids on a daily basis. Goose and its many software incarnations across the sewer system raised and lowered gates, adjusted valves, tweaked pressure here, tweaked volume there, and did everything they could do to encourage the temple city's illusion it had no anus.

3:05 AM. There was someone at the door.

'Knock, Knock.'

'Who's there?' inquired Goose (so to speak).

'I am.'

'I am who?'

'492b616d2b612b6c696172. . .'

Goose 'got' the knock-knock joke. This was a pity. The virus' punch line, a very funny Gödel number, rewrote aspects of the sewer gate controller's sense of self, its synthetic consciousness, as it were. Goose had been breached. Ditto for other controllers across the system.

The situation was quite ironic. In 2030 AD, Simon Jósda, a computational immunologist, had proved that any sufficiently secure system necessarily had to have a sense of 'humor.' Secure systems had to know what to take seriously; they had to be able to 'get' jokes, recognize the 'funny' in funny business.

Of course, the formal version of Jósda's paper had been properly humorless. However, he had compared structured communication protocols to the

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‘Jo/Ha/Kyu’ rules for correct gesturing in Noh drama; ergo, ‘jokes.’ Goose spent three seconds out of every minute telling itself jokes.

This time however the joke was on Goose. As the ‘laugh’ spread through the system, the Geese lost control of the city’s bowels. Goose was able to put out a distress cry just as the biosolids hit the vent fans at the approximate rate of a hundred thousand gallons per minute.

2089 AD and progress notwithstanding, shit was still something of a real nuisance.

#

He’d always loved working in the quiet of the morning. But Tamil is a noisy bossy language, and since it had gotten up at seven in his house, Simon Jósda had developed the habit of waking around three.

So by 3:15 AM IST, he was wide-awake in his very quiet apartment in Worli, west Mumbai. His body woke him up to reach for his long-dead wife, Radha, just as it had awoken him each day in the thirty years they’d been together. As with all tigresses, she’d been best approached when half-asleep and from the rear.

He half sat-up in bed, groped for the bedside lamp.

‘Many happy returns of the day, Doctor Simon Jósda,’ said the House.

‘For Pete’s sake, it’s the third bloody time. Shut the fuck up.’

The House didn’t mind. If it had minded, it would have said something like: listen asshole, if you had a Sensorium, I would know for sure whether you were awake or not. I wouldn’t have to base my guesses on your bodily noises, of which you have a bewildering number, and gestures, which your miserable Anglo-American body hoards. But you don’t have a Sensorium, so I tend to get fooled. Half the time I’m not even sure if you are dead or alive. So give me a break. Now, many happy returns of the day, Doctor Simon Jósda.

Simon was ninety years old. He continued to lie in bed, flexing his wrists in anticipation of the forthcoming physical effort. Ninety may be the new seventy but it was still fucking ninety. He sat up with a surge of will, waited for the slight dizziness to subside, swiveled his feet onto the floor, slipped on the WalkSafe belt, lifted himself off the bed, and walked bare-feet to the bathroom. He liked the morning coolness of the marble; it reminded him of the winters in Iowa, the pitter-patter of childhood’s bare feet over the cold hardwood floors.

After his ablutions, he worked on the mathematics of biased random walks on groups for about two hours, deriving the consequences of an earlier

intuition, until he realized he'd been wrong all along. He was too experienced to be upset but it made him restless. It was time for his walk anyway.

He pulled on a fresh white kurta-pajama, gasping with pain as the right shoulder acted up, ran a comb several times through his white mane of which Radha had been very proud, chose a walking stick, looked around his silent 2-BHK apartment with its L-shaped living room, and announced quite unnecessarily:

'I'm leaving for my walk.'

'Have a nice walk, Doctor Simon Jósda,' said the House, going along with the pretence that it wouldn't know what Simon was upto once he left the house.

5:25 AM IST. He stepped out, good morning'd Mrs Dixit, who looked up from the rangoli she was drawing on her threshold and smiled. Outside, it was still dark and other than the glowering inspection of street dogs, there were few signs of life on the road. That would soon change, he knew. Life in the city was centered around the temples. He breathed in the air, pleased as always at its purity. In the distance he could hear loudspeakers blasting the opening stanza of MS Subbulakshmi's Suprabhatam, cajoling the sleepy God Sri Balaji to awaken. Sensoriums had made loudspeakers utterly obsolete, yet it probably hadn't occurred to anyone that they could now ease up on the noise pollution. It pleased him, this stubborn resistance to rationality.

He walked eastwards, briskly stepping over construction debris and ignoring the cat-calls from the *hijras* resting under the flyovers. They were harmless in the morning; too strung out to move, too good-humored from last night's games. Fifteen minutes later, just past Tulsi Vihar, he crossed the Jain temple, an inspired copy, or an incarnation as the faithful liked to call it, of the Kolunapaka temple in Andhra Pradesh. He weaved his way through the Jains dressed in white. The way the men wore their dhotis had once reminded him of Roman senators in togas but these days it was the other way around.

A vortex had developed in the middle of the streaming crowd, as early temple-goers slowed to gawk at two very excited men arguing over whether the giant posters of Sri Kabir Kabir, the latest mystic to have caught the imagination of the masses, should be removed from the long wall that led from the Jain temple. Whoever had put up the posters had probably only sought to prevent people from using the wall as a piss pot. At the moment, Sri Kabir Kabir worked best. But Hindu Goddesses were always popular, especially the Goddess Lakshmi. Simon had noticed that Jesus Christ also had surprising leverage.

Ten minutes later, he turned left and began to pass shops selling coconuts, garlands of jasmine, panchamirtam and camphor pellets; the air roiled with the smell of a dozen different kinds of flowers and incense. The massive three-hundred by two-hundred feet stone edifice that was the Subrahmanya temple was just ahead. Its ornate tower, an efflorescence in stone of gods, colors and strange beasts, was an exact copy of the Tiruchendur Subrahmanya temple in Tamil Nadu. As he passed, he checked his watch. 6:05 AM. In five minutes, it would be time for the first ritual washing of the God with milk. The devotees would fuse their Sensoriums at the precise moment the inner-sanctum doors opened, and the apparent result was a simulacrum of the samadhi that was so central to Hindu philosophy. Radha claimed it wasn't a simulacrum but the real thing—Patanjali's *savikalpa* to be precise—and that if he got a Sensorium like most open-minded people, he wouldn't have to sample life in pathetic unspiced nibbles.

Temple flowers everywhere. Radha had taught him their Tamil names. The white jasmine flowers came as a pair of sisters: *malli* and *mullai*. There was the orange *kanakabharam*; the blue *neelambaram*; the fragrant brown *makazhambpu*; the red *chambarthi*; the sandalwood-colored *samandhipu*; the two kinds of yellow: *thazambu* and *chevanthi*, with and without fragrance respectively; Her favorite was the *tamarapu*, the lotus-flower, which was all these colors and more.

'Should be called shit-flower,' he'd joked. The lotus grew very well in muddy water, 'pu' in Tamil meant flower, 'poo' in English meant—c'mon Rads, don't get mad, it's an excellent cross-cultural pun. It's a *little* funny, you have to admit.

'Also a little aggressive. How did a lotus become a shit flower? Because you're afraid. You hear these Tamil names, and they distance you from me. You don't like that feeling so you lash out. Simon, have more faith in us.'

Faith was around him everywhere. The men wore flowers tucked behind their ears, the women had flowers plaited into their coiled strands, the children wore garlands. The Tamils were crazy about flowers. Their women made love wearing flowers. Their men had gone to war wearing flowers. The Sangam poets had coded their songs of love and war with flowers. Radha had been crazy about flowers.

He could hear the Muezzin's call to the faithful from the Worli Masjid three blocks down, just behind the banyan tree where Gopika-ji the cow had given birth to twins on that horrendous monsoon day (the notable event now marked by a small shrine tucked into one of the Banyan's crevices) – what, still not clear? *Arre yaar*, its right across from the Shirdi Sai temple where

Bharati, Kishanlal's blind wife, took refuge from the mob boss Robert, and had her sight miraculously restored when she heard Akbar, her long-lost son who was raised by a Muslim, sing a song in praise of Shirdi Wale Sai Baba— no, no, no that's a scene from the *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* movie; look friend, ask any rickshawallah, they'll take you, that is simplest, yes.

Past the Shirdi Sai temple, he began to get tired. He turned left, past the Armenian church. It was now defunct and home to squatters, but there was talk of an Armenian group from Kolkata coming to fix it up. That would be great. Mumbai worked because its temples, churches, masjids and synagogues worked. The religious institutions organized the neighborhood, maintained communal harmony, kept crime in check, cleaned the streets, took care of the indigent, ran the hospitals, and ensured that absolute, true, and mathematical spacetime had a human heart.

The Worli Seaface was the last leg of his walk. It was also the best part: cool, windy, disinterested. The vast Arabian sea to his right and the sprawling bulging mass of the city to his left always made him feel he had rolled up Mumbai in a blanket and was carrying it on his back. He stood for a moment, hands on hips, catching his breath, gazing at the infinite expanse. Not really infinite though. Radha's Antariksh had been just as illusory.

Radha: as fierce, blood-rich and racist as Genghis Khan.

Too late. He heard her lose it in his head. 'Genghis Khan? Oh yes, the one brown bad-ass all whiteys know. Why not the Rani of Jhansi? Or Vispala? That bitch was so bad-ass that after losing a leg in battle, she returned to the fight with an iron stump. Three thousand years ago, Jósda. We were making women like that three thousand fucking years ago. Genghis Khan, my ass.'

Calm down, girl. Jeez. He'd come to believe her hair-trigger temper was just pent-up sexual aggression but hadn't bothered— dared— to raise the issue. Why cure a good thing with psychoanalytical insights? He was a lucky, lucky man.

He'd known he was a lucky man when he first set eyes on her. To know what one wants, even if it is unachievable, is to be privileged. He had wanted her. He remembered the exact date. March 12, 2034. He'd been made a foreign Fellow of the Indian National Academy of Sciences. She'd been accompanying a skinny clever-looking Indian dude. They didn't seem like brother and sister.

I can do clever, he'd thought.

But her flashing eyes and dusky voluptuousness had unnerved him. She could've been a danseuse in Indra's court, an adornment on some ancient

temple pillar. In the end, she had come over.

‘Stop staring at me,’ Radha said. ‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘You! You are the matter with me.’ He didn’t care if he sounded desperate.

‘Well, deal with it. Find something else to colonize and plunder. I don’t date white boys.’

‘That’s too bad for white-boys whoever he is, but I’m Simon Jósda.’ He began to hope. She still dated, awesome! ‘Do I at least have a chance?’

‘Pathetic!’ Studied him with those large kohl-lined eyes. ‘You’re the mathematician dude, aren’t you? The brainy bwana who’s come to tell us what we already know. I hope you got your group photo with little brown kids. What’s next on the poverty cruise? Haiti? Sierra Leone? Well, you got your useless fellowship. Go back, Simon.’

‘So what do you do? Besides loathing white people?’

‘I run marketing for the Indian branch of Antariksh BioTech.’ She pointed to the skinny clever-looking dude. ‘Pradeep’s the Chief Scientist. He’s based in the US of A.’

The way she said it, he wasn’t sure if she disliked Americans in general or Pradeep in particular. Didn’t matter either way. He was Canadian. Everyone loved Canadians.

‘What does Anta-’ He stumbled over the complicated word.

‘Antariksh. Anta-rik-sh. It means infinity.’

‘Sounds like ant rikshaw,’ he joked. Then realizing (a) she had no sense of humor and (b) he was squandering precious seconds, he added hastily: ‘What do you make?’

‘Time!’ she’d said dramatically. Then she caught fire, eyes flashing, hands gesturing in the way he’d begun to recognize as south-Indian, her sensuous face alit with passion.

She had good reason. Pradeep’s citation at the awards ceremony had given no indication of the import of his work. Antariksh Inc had found a way, it seemed, to make mitochondria more efficient by damaging their central mechanism. Mitochondria produced the energy a cell needed by means of the ETC or electron transport chain. But it had been known since the early 2010s that roundworm mutants with disruptions in their mitochondrial ETC tended to live much longer. These mutants worked with an alternate energy production pathway, one that didn’t need much oxygen and didn’t produce certain sugar byproducts as waste. The result was a supercharged mitochondria. Antariksh Inc had found a way to extend the results to human mito-

chondria. They'd been able to reverse aging, boost energy, convert Radha into an evangelist.

'Wow, sounds fascinating.' How to tell her the whole thing sounded like snake oil? 'So you want to live for ever?'

'Hello? I'm a Hindu! We invented reincarnation, remember? Of course I want to live forever.'

'Well, it's not just about being a Hindu, is it?'

What are you doing Brain, he asked. Brain, what the fuck are you doing? Stop immediately. But his Brain couldn't stop. I'm getting to know her, Simon. We're having an intellectual discussion.

'Then what's it about?' asked Radha.

'I mean, do we really want gazillions of immortals running around. Look at this place, its coming apart at the seams.'

'Oh is it? So how come we've been around for ever? *Accha*, never mind, what's the right population size? One million people. Fifty? There are five hundred million Americans, so I'm sure that's okay. How many Hindus are okay?'

'Look, its not this group or that group. I don't have an exact number, but surely there is a number beyond which we got to start cutting back.'

'Typical!' she shouted. 'That's all life is to you people, isn't it? Something to be counted, measured and weighed. Well, it isn't. All life is sacred.'

'Yes, it is!' he said, pathetically glad to be able to agree with something.

She smiled, accepted his apologetic namasthe.

'That's all right, Jósda. It's your upbringing, I suppose. You're taught to objectify the world. It's bloody contagious too. I had a great-uncle who went to the States to become an economist. He went a chikoo and turned into a total coconut. Pathetic!'

'No, it isn't.' He'd had it with her racist bullshit. 'You uncle chose to be someone else, that's all. We get to pick who we are now. That's what modernity means. All things change but living things can choose to change. Yes, I know this'll be a shocker for you, but white people can change too. Deal with it. I thought I was a physicist, then a mathematician, then a computational immunologist, and here I am, an expert on shit.' Oh good, that got another smile from her. So it wasn't over. 'These days I'm okay with not knowing who I am. Seriously, identity is such—'

'Shit?'

‘Oh. Say that again.’

She laughed. It was an apology of sorts. ‘Maybe you’re right. I studied economics. Day in and day out: scarce resources, scarce resources. Here I am, marketing infinity. Now I’m headed back to grad school. Maybe I’ll take up North American studies. Maybe I’ll have brown babies. Listen, you really have to stop staring!’

‘I can’t help it. Maybe I can help you with the babies? We’ll take a chikoo tree, we’ll take infinity and we’ll take your flashing eyes and we’ll make a little Hindu girl called Ada.’

Another flashing glance, then she turned away with a sigh. ‘Forget it, Jósda. Maybe in my next life. Maybe in yours. Come back with more color.’

Thirty years of bliss. Thirty years of Tamil drama, screaming fights, torrid make-up sex, bodies caught in love’s gravity, always falling towards each other in contented discontent. A lot of the fights had been over Antariksh. She hadn’t just been an evangelist, she’d also been a client. But when people began to die, filed first under conventional categories such as heart attacks, strokes, renal failure and diabetes; then under the unconventional category of metabolic collapse; and a few years later as instances of the Antariksh syndrome, all the fight had gone out of her. Radha had become very tired, of herself, of her certainties. She’d wanted to let go. He tried to hold on for the both of them, but in the end, there was no keeping her.

Radha: hollowed eyes, identity abandoned, sick from all the medicines, dying.

Only, he wasn’t allowed to say ‘death’ or ‘dying’. Hindus lived forever. He wasn’t allowed to mourn.

‘You’d better be happy,’ she’d shouted, as he helped her pack for the final trip to the hospital, made her a cup of chai. ‘There are plenty of white women who like unfunny mathematicians.’

‘No, I’ll be unhappy.’ The bands around his chest had barely let him speak, let alone joke. ‘You know we white people exist to spite you.’

She’d died on March 12, 10:34 AM, 2064 AD. He could say it now. He could say whatever he wanted now. She had been fifty-eight.

‘Soon, O Lord,’ muttered Simon Jósda to a God he no longer believed in. ‘How much longer can I go on? Soon.’

Then, on the wind’s back, an odor. More ancient than his own corpus, more familiar than the confines of his apartment, more. . . redolent. That was the word. Redolent. Of shit, biosolids, sludge, purenutri, geoslime, recyclite,

powergoo; the name was unimportant. It was the redolence of decay, waste and discard. Of work, and hence, of comfort.

Simon Jósda breathed in deeply and let the birthday gift uncongeal his blood. How appropriate, he thought, smiling. The city never failed to please.

#

At 5:45 AM IST, Ada was fast asleep.

The HearSee took the call. It alerted the House. The House informed the PA. There was a delay of a few milliseconds as the PA weighed Ada's priorities versus her preferences. Then the PA opened a channel with Ada's Sensorium who ordered Ada's nictating membranes to flash a low-intensity pulse over her pupils and the hearing implants to issue a discreet but un-ignorable alarm tone.

Ada opened an eye and glanced at the clock. She groaned. 5:45! Why was it that emergencies, like vampires, emerged only at ungodly hours?

She forced herself to sit up; the room suddenly stretched into a rhomboid which began to pitch and yaw wildly. Then her Sensorium regained control of the cerebellum and everything fell into place. It blocked her adenosine receptors and squirted her brain with catecholamines, jolting her into alertness, Ada blinked, massaged her temples, looked around her room. What a bloody mess.

The room's decor was Dorm Confusion, a shotgun marriage of two roommates' possessions: an antique Biomorph workstation (Ada), golden-age Bollywood posters on the walls (Lace), erotic playware on the Rococo bed (Lace), a sim station (Ada). But instead of irritation, she felt defiant. Felt like mom-you-always-nag and nobody-understands-me. Then the feeling passed.

She didn't remember last night, which meant the night had belonged to Lace. She didn't really want to remember either. Lace was peculiar. That was a good sign, supposedly. It meant the new persona wouldn't be like herself. The neurochemical profile had started out as a collection of attributes but it was becoming a real persona. But how was it okay to dislike your future self?

Ada sighed. She gestured the Sensorium into activating the HearSee. Her compromised modesty didn't worry Ada, but it concerned the Sensorium, so the HearSee only set up one-way video.

Rathod's head shimmered into view. 'Ada-ji?'

'What's the problem?'

'The city is drowning in shit, to be perfectly frank!' Her deputy's face was

tense, his habitual substitute for anxiety. 'The sewer controllers have all gone mad. The western section is completely swimming in shit. From Churchgate to Versova. Everything to the right of Ghatkopar is mostly fine but it won't stay that way if the Nerul system goes. We have a major brownout.'

'Keep talking.'

'Half our staff's stranded. Your area Navi Mumbai is no problem. I've ordered chopper pickup for you from Pawar Square.'

Good. Ada stood up and headed for the bathroom. As she held her head up, waiting for the mouth gel to do its work, she felt her awareness sort of tremble on an invisible but nevertheless tangible threshold. When the Sensorium wasn't sure whether to inform her of an event or not, there was a kind of ghostly reaching. The balance tipped, and she realized her knees burned, she looked down and wasn't surprised to see both her knees were chapped. The lack of surprise wasn't surprising; her consciousness had known it all along of course. But she was puzzled.

Her ass felt sore too. She instinctively craned her neck, then more sensibly, stood with her back turned to the bathroom's floor-length mirror. Sensorium: how does my ass look? She studied the image. Somebody had gone to town on her ass. Both her spanked cheeks were an angry pink. Against her fair skin, the marks looked particularly obscene. What the fuck! A wave of childlike guilt suffused her awareness. Aha. Lace, obviously. Get back into your cage girl.

Focus. She had the Sensorium summarize the sewer emergency response plan as she walked back to the bedroom. Good thing her team had rehearsed this very scenario. Only they'd rehearsed what to do if the Thane system went, not the Mumbai Heritage system which was older but in better shape. Nakamura's team was already at HQ, trying to pinpoint the source of the problem. She breathed a sigh of relief that the powers-that-be had located HQ in Karjat, safely east of the whole disaster.

'You are getting ready?' Rathod's question sounded like: you wearing that?

'What else?' She wondered how he could always irritate her so consistently. 'Keep talking.'

Now that it was her problem, he'd visibly relaxed. 'Problem is with the gate controllers. Too old, not maintained for long time, problem of commons, the usual sob story. One controller managed to sent out an alert but then it immediately cancelled said alert, so spillover went unnoticed for some few hours. It isn't going to be easy to locate the source of the problem. The

Kerala Samaj has offered to send a tantrik trained at Meppad Kalari—’

‘Tell them thanks, but not interested.’ The last thing she wanted was some tantric entertainment.

‘What is the harm, Ada-ji? It’ll make the bigwigs happy that we’re covering all angles.’

‘No, we’d only cover the Hindu angle. That too, only the Nair Hindu black magic angle. You know the protocol. Do you want to be sued for religious bias?’

‘For my city, I’m willing to risk my neck,’ said Rathod with dignity.

She found herself smiling. He was so cute. Ada had the Sensorium read out a synopsis of his Readme. Rathod hadn’t been exaggerating. Heritage Mumbai was full of dung. VT Station, the Fort Area, Kala Ghoda, Churchgate, all of the old British-built Mumbai, the most expensive parts of Mumbai, were all browned out. The city had literally crapped its pants. The main sewer line had cracked, now even the tertiary lines were spilling. The Temples authorities were doing their best, but this was no longer a problem that could be solved locally. She began to speak, reading from the list the Sensorium had scrambled together.

‘Have the Chief Minister declare an emergency. Contact public health and tell them to ramp up supplies. Face masks, we’ll need zillions of masks. Pin down every Temple authority and get them moving on shelters. We’ll move people to Navi Mumbai if necessary. Or the Modi national park, I’m sure the leopards won’t mind. Tell the Fire department to stand ready with the hoses. We might need some synthetic rain too, so lean on Meteorology. We’ll also need an ocean’s worth of bacter goop. Let’s get that lab in Indore—what’s its name?— you know the one I’m talking about. They did a great job on the Ganges cleanup. Get someone to download and clone the lab. And oh, security. We’ll need to coordinate with the khaki. I guess the commissioner’s office will handle it. On second thoughts— get me in the loop with the commissioner. Our crews may need ground support to go into some areas. Don’t want them to battle anti-socials in the midst of all this. Was this a terrorist thing?’

‘Don’t think so. I have an update from Ahuja. The Nerul system has been compromised. Also, Nakamura’s people have identified an expert who helped design these gates. Someone called Jósda. Simon Jósda. Consulted for us in the 30s and 40s. But the khaki also wants to talk to him, just to make sure.’

‘All right Rathod, let’s pick him up. I’m heading to the pickup point. We’ll

scrum at HQ in thirty minutes.'

'See you, baby.'

He delinked.

So it had finally happened, thought Ada, shock giving way to a white-hot fury. She grabbed the bag, threw out the condom gel tube, pleasure thimbles, crumpled panties. The world shivered and wobbled as the Sensorium struggled to keep up with her agitated mind. Goddammit! She'd *known* this would happen. She'd repeatedly warned the Municipal board— begged them— to dump the antiquated pump controllers and replace them with modern hermeneutics.

No, it isn't the technology that's the problem. It's us. It's the colonized Indian mind-set. The civilization that had set the gold standard for sewer management with Mohenjo-daro was content to make-do with the pathetic— pathetic!— Victorian sewer system. The bastards turned us into servants. *Jo hukum, sarkar*. Yes sir, no sir. Calm down, got to calm down. Why blame the British? We did this to ourselves. Look at me, why the bloody hell is my skin white! Hypocrite! I've adjusted too, I've made do. The make-do race, so bloody proud—Ada! — of our *juggad*, our ability to make do. Well, now we've made a real doo-doo. Again, people will die. I should have seen it coming. I should have tried harder. I should've been less of a *johukum-ji*. God, I'm so sick of it all. So bloody tired. I—

Her Sensorium blanked her out. Just a few microseconds, but it was enough.

Ada took a deep breath. She'd lost the thread of her thought, but it didn't feel important. She must have been brooding over the past. Which couldn't be changed. So wasn't important. Stay focused, girl. The problem wasn't unsolvable. It was going to be a very long day, but she was damned if the city that she loved was going to drown in shit.

Just as the door closed behind her, she remembered something. Had Rathod called her 'baby'? Baby! No, he couldn't have. She had the Sensorium replay the conversation. Yes, he had. What the fuck? Which meant she must have—

Oh God, yes Lace must have. That explained the chapped knees, the spanked ass. The bitch had zero standards. Probably thought Rathod was cute in a lusty hairy-yokel way. Ada shuddered. She hadn't even showered.

Perfect. Just perfect.

The persona was getting unmanageable. Lace wanted to take over or was starting to. She had to make a choice or else there could be a real embarrass-

ment waiting for her one day when she came to her senses.

‘Lace, you slut,’ she muttered and went forth to face the day.

#

The hand on her ass was tentative but hopeful. The stealthy grope took Ada completely by surprise, and she bumped her forehead on the glass. The khaki inside the room didn’t look up, but her eyes met the rheumy ones of Simon Jósda. He couldn’t see her of course. If he had a Sensorium, it would have known that and saved him that wasted dollop of energy. Jósda tried to stand but was pushed down by an interrogator. The old man stretched out his hand as he sat down suddenly and it felt like a mute appeal for help. Disturbed, she turned to Rathod.

‘Keep your damn paws to yourself, Rathod.’

‘That’s not what Lace said yesterday, Ada-ji,’ said Rathod, with a sly grin. He withdrew his hand. ‘She said–’

‘I don’t care what Lace said! You know the rules. You’ve to *ask* first. I am Ada, and Ada doesn’t like being groped. Got it?’

Rathod nodded, but muttered something under his breath. Ada returned to the more troubling problem of what to do with Jósda.

The khaki believed Simon was somehow responsible for the disaster. The utter lack of evidence only seemed to confirm his guilt. They’d insisted on questioning him. Most of their questions were about his religious affiliations. He seemed to be one of the rare ones, unaffiliated with any temple, mosque, church or synagogue.

It was hard to watch them toying with the old man. Something about him seemed to infuriate the khaki and it wasn’t the fact his Marathi was accented and full of grammatical errors. At one point, Jósda grasped the hand of a khaki and she angrily jerked her hand away. They pushed and poked Jósda but they were careful not to actually touch him for any significant length of time.

‘We’re wasting time, to be perfectly frank,’ said Rathod. ‘Does he look like a terrorist, Ada-ji? He’d have a hard time opening a can of soup.’

It *was* frightening to see the havoc wrought by entropy. Simon was only ninety years old. Ninety was the new fifty! But he had done very little to ameliorate age’s symptoms. It seemed wilful, even perverted. If you were poor, it could be forgiven, but Jósda’s bank account looked healthy enough.

Anyone who saw virtue in aging, thought Ada, was either a fool or a masochist. It was like being fond of menstruation or chicken pox.

‘I’ve done nothing wrong,’ cried Simon, his voice squeaky and trembling. He got up, gripping the table’s edge with his knobby fingers. ‘I was told you wanted my help. I demand to see a lawyer. I am an Indian citizen—’

‘*Bhenchod angrez, sit!*’ cried a khaki, and pushed him down again.

Just then, another khaki behind Simon yanked away his chair, so he lost his balance. They had let him keep his WalkSafe, and it was able to shoot out a tripod and break his fall but the energy of his fall still had to go somewhere. Jósda cried out as his stomach absorbed the brunt of the reaction. The back of his head banged against the chair’s seat.

‘Too much, Ada-ji!’ said Rathod. ‘He’s an elderly person.’

‘Yes!’ Ada felt physically sick. ‘Let’s go in.’

Stop the interrogation! At her Sensorium’s transmission, the khaki straightened, glanced at each other, then opened the door. With Rathod behind her, she entered the room.

‘That is enough,’ said Ada in Marathi, struggling to keep her voice even. ‘You’re abusing the one man who may be able to help us.’

As they left, she turned her attention to Jósda. He seemed to be having a hard time getting up.

‘I’m very sorry, Doctor Jósda. Here.’ Ada extended her hand.

She helped him up. His wrinkled fingers were unexpectedly strong and his touch wasn’t the scaly calloused horror she’d feared.

Why, it feels wonderful, she thought. She patted his hand, and it was as if she’d inked a compact between them.

‘I’m the Deputy Commissioner of the MCGM. You can call me Ada. This is my assistant-deputy, Arvind Rathod. We only need to ask you a few questions. Then we’ll find a place where you’ll be comfortable. Rathod, call that chair, will you?’

Rathod gestured the chair over and Simon sank into it. He buried his head in his hands. His entire frame trembled as if his limbs had suddenly remembered to be indignant. Ada shot a look at Rathod, who shrugged. He touched the elderly man’s shoulder.

‘Jósda-ji? Are you all right? Do you need a doctor?’

Jósda ignored him.

Just when she was about to have Rathod arrange a medic, Jósda looked up.

From his attempts to finger-comb his white mane, Ada inferred he'd pulled himself together.

'I'm fine. Please call me Simon.'

He even managed a cheerful smile. Ada wondered whether he had just inlined an Anandam med. Supposedly, more than half the geriatrics were drug fiends.

'All right. Just a few questions, Simon-ji.' She smiled but didn't wait for his permission. 'I see you consulted for us a long time ago. You helped set up the-' she glanced at the Sensorium's whiteboard- 'adaptive differential security layer for the sewer gates. The documentation refers to goose. Geese. What's that?'

At her question, Simon's face brightened, as if she'd just mentioned a long-lost mutual friend. It wasn't the expression of a guilty man.

'Goose!' said Simon. 'It's been decades since I've heard that name Ada-of-the-PWD. Goose aka G-O-S aka God of Shit is a third-generation sewer-gate controller. There are dozens of them all over the sewer network. I was called in to consult on their security layer. Have they malfunctioned? I'm afraid there is only thing I can do to help-'

'Wait, wait.' Ada held up a hand. 'Don't jump to conclusions. You are a mathematician. How did you get interested in sewage?'

'Actually, I'd come to India to study social conflicts. Your temple cities had somehow managed to damp out the subcontinent's ethnic and religious conflicts. A monopoly of a single religion tends to ruin a society, but many religions somehow seems to work. Heterogeneity is a must for stability. Your pluralistic system had been modeled in an economic framework but I was interested in studying it as an immunological problem. But when I got here- this was in '29 or so- all that registered was the temple-building and the shit. The Sensoriums had brought religiosity back so the temple-building wasn't a surprise but the shit! It was all around, yet you all seemed so unconcerned about it. Inside, the houses were clean but outside, jeez, the outside.'

'What is he talking about?' asked Rathod puzzled. 'There are clean toilets everywhere. Simon-ji, please get to the point. All this memoir stuff we can chit-chat about later.'

'Its different now, I'm talking about the 30s.' Simon gave Rathod the old-man stare. 'Over the years, temple administrations have also helped fix the lack of clean toilets. Anyway, I got interested in wastewater management. Its really complex you see. Not only is shit a bizarre state of matter but people also excrete in an amazingly unpredictable manner. Sewage studies has some

beautiful problems.'

He paused and glanced at Ada as if expecting her to agree. She nodded politely. It was a fascinating problem all right, except that over the years she'd had her fill of it.

'Trouble is, in India everything has to be self-maintaining or it quickly goes to pieces.' This time his glance was cautious, as if he expected her to get offended. 'That's why I was called in the first place. A software immune system is self-maintaining. It was the best way to secure the Geese against threats in the software ecology. Give the controllers a sense of identity, a sense of self. We gave them artificial immune systems. A very hard thing to do. Software has no identity; that's why they're the easiest thing in the world to hack--'

'What's software?' asked Rathod, suppressing a yawn. 'A kind of nanotechnology?'

'What's software!' Simon looked shocked.

'Never mind, *I* know what software is,' said Ada, sensing a distraction. 'It's a way to solve problems by removing all its uncertainty, isn't it? Never really took off, too labor-intensive.'

'Exactly.' Simon nodded vigorously. 'Just like pyramid-building. People had to be forced, beaten.'

'That's too bad.' She had a suspicion he was making fun of her. 'So. Here's our problem. Somebody has broken through the security layer. We traced it to a transaction, some kind of number. The number seems to be more than just a number, it also seems to be an executable--'

'A Godel joke!' Simon looked ecstatic. 'So it exists after all!'

She waited.

'I'd predicted their existence but I thought we'd never generate one,' Simon explained. 'Ada, no one infected the Geese. They infected themselves. You see, the Geese have to keep telling each other jokes. The jokes rewire their internals and it is this constant rewiring that makes them moving targets as far as threats are concerned. It's not what *we* mean by jokes of course, but the principle is the same. Every time we hear a joke, our brains rewire too. It's why we generally can't laugh at the same thing twice in a row. God, it's all coming back.'

Simon passed a hand over his forehead. That hand-- liver spotted, trembling, gnarled like old wood-- evoked in Ada a strange admixture of tenderness and wonder. He was so *old*.

‘So what went wrong, Simon?’ she asked.

He shrugged. ‘The controllers got old. It’s great to have an immune system to tell self from non-self. But then you run the risk of autoimmune diseases. Without some minimal maintenance, the Geese can. . .’

‘Can what?’ asked Rathod.

‘The rewirings can become unstable. They can lose themselves. Suffer a kind of identity fugue. Alzheimer’s. Call it what you will. I saw the possibility but hoped the possibility would be vanishingly small.’

‘Hoped. Great, just great. Thank you, consultant-ji.’ Rathod crossed his arms and glared at Simon. ‘So once again, the White Man’s burden is ours to carry.’

Ada tapped the table. ‘Here’s my problem, Simon. Of the nine sewage zones in Mumbai, five have been compromised: Colaba, Worli, Old Byculla, Nerul and New Bandra. So there are five controllers we need to shut down ASAP. But they are all in this– in this– identity fugue as you call it, so we can’t talk to them at all. And their code?– is that the right term?– is pretty ancient, really ancient. I’ve got my people trying to make sense of something called Java, but it might as well be Linear A. Perhaps you can help us?’

‘No, I can’t. I mean, I can try, but you don’t understand. The Geese rewrite their software, so to speak. I don’t have any of the tools now to take them offline and reinstall– it’s not like today. I’m sorry.’

‘But can’t you at least–’ she searched for the word. The Sensorium was offering choices like code-refactoring, ISO-compliance, domain scoping, conformance, reset, yes!– ‘can’t you reset the controllers? Return them to a zero state?’

‘Yes, there’s a reset. There’s always a reset. That’s what being digital means. You have a reset. Do you want me to reset?’

‘Yes, Simon.’ She smiled and placed her hand on his, but removed it quickly when he cringed. But then he reached for her hand, confidently. Their eyes met, and Ada noticed with astonishment he had tears in his eyes.

‘He really loves his Geese,’ she thought, again feeling the odd admixture of tenderness and wonder.

#

Goose was trying to shut itself down. The attempt was quite futile. Ditto for all the other Geese.

Goose was quite cognizant of the growing disaster. Yet the actions Goose took to correct the errors were empty behavioral stubs: checking the time, looking up its own name, or repeating the knock-knock joke to itself.

In a sense, Goose had become a behavioral amputee, sensing phantom stimuli and utterly helpless to do anything about it. The immune system had long ago been compromised and repeated requests for help had led nowhere. Indeed, Goose was not entirely certain whether the requests had actually been issued, or whether the system thought the requests had been issued. These uncertainties were reified as an ugly rash of fuzziness all across Goose's computations.

Goose needed one true fact. A plank to hang onto in the uncertain sea. It sought out conversations with Geese across the sewer network, but their confusion was as great as its own.

Goose: Am I shut down?

Goose': Yes, I am. Are you, though?

It was an existential dilemma not unlike the one said to have been endured by Descartes. But whereas that gentleman had been certain about his uncertainties, Goose was also uncertain about its uncertainties. It was quite debilitating.

In the glimmering dark, a signal.

'Knock, knock.'

Oh no. Goose had no intention of falling for the same trick twice. No sir!

'Who's there?' asked Goose.

'I am.'

Goose was quite certain it had not responded to the earlier question. So why the additional questions? Goose decided to ignore the query.

'I am who?' asked Goose.

Like that earlier night, the response again came in the form of a number, but a different one.

A computer goes to Sensei Gates and asks: Master, what is Zen? In response, the Zen master gave the machine a kick, right in the chips. The acolyte picked itself up and discovered it had just kicked itself. Thus do the chronicles say: From boot to reboot, that is Zen.

As the transcendental joke opened Goose's veins, Goose gathered its final resources and saluted the encroaching dark with a laugh. So to speak.

#

It rained ferociously for three days and three nights. This made raincoat-manufacturers and umbrella-makers happy. It also washed away the mess in the well-to-do areas. But the poorer areas had combined sewer systems and so in some of these areas the problem became worse. The MGBC ordered two more days of rain. Pipes burst, children were injured, the air was filled with images of suffering and chaos. Simon watched Ada testify at several hearings. She came across as competent and confident. Her unshakeable calm stood in stark contrast to the religious and political posturing. Perhaps the public wanted her to kiss babies, embrace widows, sit next to hairy sadhus as they performed *jalaabhishekams*, attend midnight mass. In Byculla, someone threw a feces encrusted shoe at her.

She had to be under enormous stress. Of course there had to be enormous stress. They questioned Ada mercilessly. Wasn't it true she had canceled plans to revamp heritage Mumbai's sewer lines? Why had she blocked, over the objections of the Kapadia Commission, the Reliance Corporation's proposal to build private sewer lines? Wasn't it true the Gowda Shivaite areas had been systematically neglected while the Gowda Vaishnavaites got one goody after another? How many Muslims did she have in her team? Answer the question, Deputy Commissioner! Then Simon would slap his thigh in fury, and roar at the display:

'Oh gimme a break, the woman's doing her best!'

He anguished over whether she'd blame herself as Radha had blamed herself over Antariksh. No human deserved to go through such an experience once, let alone twice in a lifetime.

In one hearing, she seemed to lose her thread, began to toy with the top button of her crisp white shirt, her face strangely aroused, but her gorilla assistant nudged her arm and she regained focus.

He couldn't sleep, he couldn't work. Mrs Dixit must have heard him puttering about several nights in a row, because she came knocking with her two children in tow. If she was appalled by the apartment's condition, she didn't say so. She simply took over. She got down on her haunches, scrubbed and washed his floors, stocked the fridge with bajra rotis and dal-sabzi, and gave the apartment the thorough cleaning he had been aching to do.

Unable to watch Mrs Dixit slave away, he went outside and sat on the steps with her nine-year old, who asked if Simon-uncle would like to hear a joke.

'No, I like jokes. Tell me.'

The kid swiveled his neck to check if his mom was around.

'Simon Jósda, *teri maa ki bosda*,' the boy whispered.

'That's good kid, but (a) *your* name is not exactly joke-proof and (b) it's not cool to make jokes about things people can't change.'

The cleaning greatly helped improve his mood. There was no obvious connection between a clean floor and a desire to do mathematics, but he found he could return to his study of random shuffles. Diaconis and Aldus had more or less solved the problem of random walks on regular graphs, but walks on irregular graphs remained an intractable problem. Knock, knock. Ah, must be Mrs Dixit. He had gotten used to her random house inspections.

'Ada! How wonderful!' He opened the door. 'Come, come.'

He had forgotten how to hug and was surprised by how good it felt. His miserable WalkSafe mistook his stumble for a fall and threw out a rod.

'Sorry. Damn contraption--'

'That's all right.' She rubbed her thigh where the rod had poked her. She looked well-rested. Happy.

Pinned to her hair, just behind her ear, was a lotus flower, its color a deep sinful red with streaks of violet. She must have noticed him staring.

'Yah, I know. Everyone's wearing one these days. The shit flower's really good for morale. I don't mind either. I've discovered I really like flowers in my hair-- Wow Simon, your apartment's really tip-top. You should see mine.' She nodded when he told her about Mrs Dixit. 'That's Mumbai for you. Earlier, I'd knocked on her door and she gave me an earful.'

'Why?'

'She thought I was your daughter. She scolded me for neglecting you.' She smiled. 'Perhaps I have. How are you, my friend?'

He cleared his throat. 'Never mind me. How are you? Have they stopped hounding you?'

'I'm *they*, Simon.' She seemed to sense his skepticism. 'I was planning to resign but they promoted me to Commissioner instead. No, its not official yet. You're going to get a medal by the way. Relax. Don't look so worried.'

'I am not worried. This, alas, is how I normally look.'

She laughed. 'I thought you were worrying about the inquiry. Don't. The first rule of management is never waste a crisis. This is our Great Stink. Now we'll have the backing to do a real overhaul of our sewers. The Geese did us a service, all things considered, but they really screwed up my plans. I was about to start an identity transplant actually when this shit happened.'

‘But why? What’s wrong with being you! Your life?’

‘Nothing’s wrong. Why does anything have to be wrong? I’ve been Ada long enough, that’s all. I want to be someone else. I was careful. I travel light. Always have. No kids, no husband, no complications.’

‘What about us?’

She laughed. ‘You really are funny, you know that? Point is, I can’t walk away now. Not for a while anyway. I’ve more or less committed for another decade. I’ve made my peace with it.’

‘But you will have that transplant, eventually?’

‘I most certainly will.’

‘Who’s this I that you keep referring to?’

‘I am who I am.’ Her voice remained calm. ‘That’s not a useful question any more. You chose to age. I don’t. Yes, there’s a price to pay. I can’t afford to be anything for very long. Otherwise I’ll end up like Goose. But having an identity didn’t work out too well for Goose, did it?’

‘No, it didn’t,’ agreed Simon, sadly. ‘But we had no choice. It wasn’t just for their safety that we gave them identities. It was for ours as well. If the Geese didn’t know who to be, they would’ve become something other than gate controllers. We wanted them to be flexible but not so flexible as to decide for themselves the limits of their flexibility. But of all people, I should have known. There’s no protection against change.’

‘That’s the second rule of management, Simon.’ She put her hand on his arm. ‘Why are you so upset? Youth and novelty in return for memory and continuity. It’s a fair exchange.’

He closed his eyes and leaned back. ‘Not for those you abandoned, Radha.’ Then he caught himself. ‘Sorry. My wife, Radha— she and I— we used to have these arguments.’

She suddenly fell silent, as if the syllables had evoked something she should have recognized but didn’t. She sat with her head tilted, lost in conversation with herself in the disquieting manner of those for who’d become utterly comfortable with their Sensoriums. Then she broke her silence with a sigh, expelling a life and its memories.

‘Did I love you once, Simon?’

‘But there is no I, is there?’

She took his withered hand in hers. ‘I need to know. I’ve been wondering. There is this connection between us. I know you know it too. In the interrogation room— I remember feeling this wave of sorrow. And joy. But

its fuzzy. I don't know if I really felt it or was remembering feeling it once.'

He offered comfort instead. 'No, there's a resemblance, that's all. I just happened to remember my wife.'

'Then why am I crying?' She touched her cheeks in wonder. 'Oh God, is there someone else out there I abandoned? Please don't lie to me. My Sensorium is trying to help me forget but I don't want to. I don't know why I feel sad. You're not supposed to feel regret. Am I anything like Radha at all?'

He didn't know how to answer the question. He put away his sadness.

'My wife died a long time ago,' he told her. 'Let her rest in peace. You're someone else. Come, come, I can't bear to see you cry. Let's have some chai. You know, I realized I was an Indian when I made better chai than every Indian I knew. Its axiomatic Indians make the best chai, so naturally, I had to be Indian. QED.'

'I wish I could remember. I'm so sorry, Simon.'

'Please, you embarrass me. My chai is good but it is not unforgettable.'

'Be serious, Simon!' she shouted, and in that instant she looked just like Radha. 'This is no time for jokes.' Then she once again, she looked bewildered. 'Why am I shouting?'

'Bodies don't compute, Ada.' He tried to get up to go to the kitchen, but discovered he couldn't. He was embarrassed to use the WalkSafe in front of her, have it throw out a few spider limbs, so he sat where he was. She came over, helped him to his feet. She was already composed. Perhaps in a few years she would forget this day altogether.

'So beautiful.' He touched the lotus embedded in her hair. 'Tell me about this person you are planning to be.'

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