

THEY DIDN'T EXPECT THE WORLD  
TO NOTICE THEM AT ALL

*THE COCKATIEL  
CONFESSIONS AND  
OTHER COLLECTED  
WORKS*



SHORT STORIES COLLECTION BY  
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## FOREWORD:

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The best books in the world are those whose characters leap off the pages for their story to be told. This book is a collection of my short stories ranging from fairy tales to sci-fi, fantasy to adventure and finally, life vagaries to all the humour that it offers.

I have taken a break from writing the next instalment of my fantasy series about the gutsy girl, Maya and her faithful friend Hari in compiling this collection. The series borrows elements from the Hindu, Greek, Norse and Roman mythologies and also provides a few head turners based on solid sci-fi. The books are available for purchase on amazon. ("Maya & the Mind Mystics" & "The God, The Girl and The Gem")

So, there you go! That's it folks. Read. Laugh. Enjoy. Plunge straight into the story. Don't forget to stop by my website [www.thelavmuse.com](http://www.thelavmuse.com) for more reads and if you would like to leave a few comments.

## THE BLUE MOON

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*“The ancients worshipped it. Spun mythical tales out of its occurrence. And yet sadly understood so little of it. Ironically, the name held many subtle hints as to its true nature.”*

Prior shot out a mental “Stop!” to the wribulizer making notes on thin air while she pondered on what to write next. She usually looked down upon these archaic modes of expressing her thoughts but her AI teacher had insisted that doing wribulizer notes taught her hard work. Prior shuddered as she remembered the history lessons which talked about a world where people and students used their fingers to (Horrors!) print (what was it they called it in those days… oh yeah.. WRITE) letters on paper.

She never could understand why they didn’t use the memory, history and the other gazillion nano brain implants that Prior had right now. It was way cooler to spout out answers without effort, not to mention easier.

“Prior, may I remind you that you are wandering off topic?”

“Geez, all right.”

“It must have been awesome to have your deepest thoughts undecipherable. No wonder the ancients didn’t use the blasted implants which enabled AI’s like Theo to know you better than yourself” thought Prior furiously.

“I heard that.”

“I meant you to.”

“Concentrate.”

“Alright, alright.”

*“The literary elite liked to make fun of those who didn’t understand the phrase BLUE MOON. The moon was not actually blue you see, they liked to say. It was just a second full moon in the same calendar month. And yet they were the ones who were wrong. Moon had an excess of Cordierite that couldn’t be detected by naked eye in those days. The excessive digging for establishing moon colonies now showed the blue veins in the moon rocks apparent for all to see. The moon wasn’t blue just during the BLUE MOON, it was always blue! The moon colonies were so important now for the earth economics that no one talked anymore about all the things that were apparent for anyone who could look up to the sky to see. Huge chunks torn*

*out of the moon crust as building material for colonising other near planets. The tidal waves that rose 50 feet high with alarming regularity. The moon drawing closer and closer to the earth orbit succumbing to the gravity monster. The missing eclipses for half a century.”*

*“I do wonder whether the ancients would feel a strong sense of déjà vu all over again, at least those who sat helplessly during a particularly prone period of climate change. Their inaction had led to the current state of affairs where one could no longer leave the air conditioned protected sanctuary of the smart buildings the residual human society lives in without protective clothing against the extreme temperatures that rage outside.”*

“Prior, you are wandering off topic again.”

“Theo, can you please let me do this my way? I’ll submit an edited copy to you. You are making me do it the ancient way after all.”

“Alright”

*“And yet, to tell the truth, I find the cool blue light of the moon now much pleasanter to enjoy the night than what the ancient pictures of the white orb showed. Theo tells me there will be three jagged pieces of the moon in a century torn apart by the earth’s gravity as it nudges closer to the L1 point. The Eurasian President is leading the efforts to evacuate the moon colonies before that happened but its moving at a glacial pace. But a line I read in the ancient literature now makes sense. Enjoy the sunshine while it lasts. Or in this case moonshine.”*

“Are you done?” asked Theo with her infinite patience.

“Not really but this is the best I can do today.”

“Do you understand the reason why AI’s are in charge of the world now? This is why.”

## ORIENT EXPRESS

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Leslie looked dejectedly out of the window of the Orient express trying to ignore the nosy stares directed at her and the handcuffs across her hands. Reflecting on her life, she wondered how it had all gone so awry. She hadn't had the usual excuses of poverty, negligence or bad parenting to blame on this rather spectacular fall from her station in life.

A physicist father had given her a deep intellectual curiosity at a cosmos scale and a professor mother had kept her grounded and fed her a daily diet of moral values to augment her undoubted brilliance. Life had seemed rosy and all things good until she graduated from school. She remembered her first train journey after her school graduation and how she had clicked numerous selfies and groupies with her proud parents seated by a similar window seat.

The entry of Alex in her life first as a friend and then a soul mate at the university just seemed to indicate the continuance of what seemed destined to be life long good luck. She often wondered when she looked at her classmates and saw the shifting signs of stress, grief, guilt, complete nonchalance in varying degrees and in different circumstances.

Tragedy first struck when she learnt of her parents' death in a car crash. In the present, she mentally shuddered when she was reminded of a similar memory of being seated beside Alex next to a window in another train and feeling incapable of breaking out of the stupor that had enveloped her the first time when she heard the news. She had hardly noticed either the passing countryside or the bustling station stops with people and even farm animals, flitting past the platform.

She remembered being grateful to Alex for his assistance in arranging for the funeral and liaising with her parents' lawyers for probating their will. He had remained beside her side throughout, held her hand in the courtrooms and had hardly paid any attention when the judge had declared her the sole beneficiary of 4 million dollars from her parents' wills. She felt reassured by the calm competence of Alex at hand and had signed all the papers he put in front of her, eager to have the entire ordeal behind her.

She had regretted agreeing to stay over with her aunt Mina post the funeral when all she had wanted to do was to be with Alex and burying herself in her studies. Alex had convinced her to keep her word: both Mina and she needed to bond and heal over the varying degrees of their shared grief.

Leslie had felt a minor spasm of relief when Mina had parted with her in the airport to fly back to her archaeological dig in Greece. She felt the first flutters of excitement at meeting Alex who had insisted on staying off the phone from her over the past few days for her to recoup her mental energies.

She felt the first flickers of alarm when she couldn't locate him in the apartment. She could neither reach him on phone nor was he at any of their usual haunts. Deciding to call on their mutual friends for info, she had pulled open the address book only to find a letter addressed to her.

“Hey, babe –it was good while it lasted. Sorry and all that but a guy has to live and you didn't make it easy for me to keep out the temptation when you trustingly signed at everything I threw at you. Good luck!”

Shocked, she called the lawyers who confirmed the dreadful news that he had indeed cleaned out her trust account. Now in penury, she hoped to get a night job while she made her way through the university, all the while trying to track down the traitor. The day the university sent her a dismissal letter due to arrears of tuition marked the lowest point in her life.

Her temporary waitressing job became the means of her livelihood. Her string of bad luck continued to boomerang when she was arrested on charges of drug peddling. One of her fellow waitresses had planted the evidence in her bag to escape the rap. Out of prison, seven months later, she found the doors closed to her on her charge sheeted history no matter, how lowly the job was.

Walking back in a daze, she was suddenly struck by the sight of Alex in a restaurant wreathed in smiles, seated across another girl. Overwhelmed with rage, she had stomped in and hit him on the head with an object she had found in the alleyway, which she later realised was a workman's hammer.

She was brought back to the present when the woman cop across her warned her that their destination would soon be arriving. Looking out of the window, she suddenly saw Dr Gupta, her father's best friend and her

godfather on the platform. Energised, she yelled out to him just as the train had started moving. Startled but taking in the situation at a glance, Dr Gupta jumped in her compartment before the train picked up speed.

He looked dumbfounded when he took in her tattered clothes, the handcuffs and the cops seated around her. Leslie took a deep breath and began narrating the entire sequence of events starting with her parents' death. She saw the cop's demeanour change as the story progressed and saw her eyes film with a thin sheen of tears as she brought her narration to a conclusion.

When the train reached their destination, Dr. Gupta visibly moved, promised her all legal help possible. She took a last look outside the window as she was getting up. The world looked brighter to her again as the cops led her towards the penitentiary.

## **SUNRISE AND SHADOWS!**

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Janice looked at the last snowman she would ever build in her backyard. The horror of her impending doom had dulled. Yet the rogue voice wouldn't be silent, reminding her of the rash decision she had made to trade excessive life credits in a desperate hope to save her dying mother.

Yet, it was done. The reckoning was here and now. She had neither the truckload of money that was required to purchase new credits nor the political connections to get a waiver from the looming threat.

Janice wished for the simpler days a century ago when people were allowed to have as many babies as they wanted and could save as many sick people as they wanted merely by paying in that archaic mode of exchange, money. But looking back now, she could see how it had all failed spectacularly. The unconcern for the environment, the greed for the resources and the "living in the present" attitude without any thought of the grief that awaited the future generations.

As the seas were sullied and the atmosphere poisoned, the earth ran out of space to hold the burgeoning billions of humans who reproduced furiously having conquered their natural predators many millennia ago. That was the last straw.

Unable to feed the huge populace, the government of the day had brought in strict measures. The sick and the starving were allowed to perish of natural causes to reduce the strain on the environment. The primary motivator that had led to the current crises i.e money was rendered redundant. Food and water were strictly rationed for survival and not for satisfying the taste buds. The government satisfied all the basic needs of everyone in the society but let a cruel profiteering system based on life credits replace money for trading in other goods and needs. The more the credits you had, the longer you could live without being killed by a rigorous government as your credits ran out.

Yet, knowing all of this, Janice had persisted in trading her life credits so that her sick mother could get medical care. Repeated entreaties by her mother and her few friends not to do so had failed to move her. The greedy plutocrat

who had bought her credits had arranged for the medical treatment that had proved fruitless.

Here she was now, to be culled like a weed to compensate yet another undying plutocrat.

As dawn neared, she heard the dreaded sound of the airborne drone landing which could mean only one thing.

She smiled when the first rays of the dawn shone on her face. It was a beautiful sunrise.

## CONFESSIONS OF A COCKATIEL

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Hi he-humans and she-humans – a chirpy day to you.

I am Scooby, the cockatiel and I wanted to let off steam a bit by ranting my tale of woes. I don't remember when I was born or how many times I was transported before I first saw "Chirp", my human and her mate "Chirp-chirp". I have heard it said before by Fuff-fuff, the resident sage of my first non tree nest (a yellow-red mish-mash of colours and an upturned beak) that first impressions are often the truest but I have to admit, my first peek at Chirp and Chirp-Chirp was not positive.

I have always wondered why humans have those ugly bulbous things in the centre of their faces which Chirp calls a nose instead of a natural (and beautiful) beak. As Fuff-fuff says – "God has not always been kind when creating other creatures that are not birds, but we must be kind and not show how hideous the humans in their ugliness are." As far as looks go, Chirp and Chirp-Chirp looked no uglier than the rest of the human hordes who trickle in throughout the day in the space where my metal nest is and poke in their long toes which is attached to the upper part of their body. I gave my best chirps hopefully when they approached as I noticed Chirp holding some ga-ga in her hand. We, birds, sort everything that we see into gaga and not gaga. If we eat gaga, then the strange pain that comes over our tummies two or three times a day goes away and we feel happy. We ignore everything else as non-gaga. I could feel her front toes stroking my head when I was eating the gaga but hey I was too busy eating to protest and besides, it felt just like how my nest human strokes. I was too distracted to listen in to the conversation that Chirp and Chirp-Chirp were now having with my nest human. I realised that I was moving to a new place only when I was eased into a smaller metal nest that was moving and my best friend Beaky started chirping in alarm as Chirp and Chirp-Chirp carried me away.

I was lulled into sleep as the shiny beast's belly I was put in, moved in a rhythmic pace and woke only when the beast's belly opened and Chirp carried me outside along with Chirp-Chirp. I saw 3 more humans peering in at me whom I didn't bother to name. Cockatiels don't believe in naming and counting more than two and I saw no reason to change this wise tradition. I

was soon placed into another metal nest with an (extremely) pretty she-cockatiel who ignored me and preened her feathers. Chirp and Chirp-Chirp called her Luna. She climbed affectionately onto one of Chirp's toes and ate some gaga while fixing a beady eye on me.

We settled into a daily routine with Luna ignoring me for the next few sunrises and Chirp and Chirp-Chirp cooing every morning and evening when they came to fill the gaga cup. I helpfully tried to correct how to cheer(chirp)fully sing in the mornings but Chirp and Chirp-Chirp seemed too stupid to follow my lead. I recalled Fuff-fuff's wise words and magnanimously ignored the tuneless chirps & coos every day from Chirp and Chirp-Chirp.

You, dear reader, might think why I am tapping all this in Chirp's red thingmajigie (she calls it a Lahhhhuppptop) if my entire day consisted of listening to tuneless coos and eating ga-ga. Well, here is what happened, countless sunrises later (cockatiel's counting strategy applies to sunrises too). First of all, Luna politely allowed me to drink slosh-slosh today first, though she pretended to be busy cleaning her feathers. Second, Chirp coaxed me to her shoulder and carried me outside where I saw neighbourhood crows cawing insults at each other as they fought over scraps and I saw more shiny beasts moving fast and past where we were standing. As I watched the entire scene open-beaked, I heard the nearest crow shouting abuses at me – “what ho, yellow-feathered slave fool. You are the reason the crows on the street no longer get any food. Come and fight with me like a bird.” (You may have heard the phrase – “Come and fight like a man” which is sadly overused and especially when most humans discontinue the fight when one of them gets red flower on their toes or any where else in their body and it starts flowing. But to watch a real fight, a bird fight; is to watch Rajnikanth instead of Quick-gun Murugan – one of many Fuff Fuff's trainings is to watch the latest or oldest Rajni flick)

I flew up ignoring the indignant coos from Chirp near the mouthy crow. I wish I could say I gave as much as I got but sadly the unnamed but no less hated crow left me in a tatter of feathers and a riot of red and yellow. As I hopped sorrowfully on one leg, I saw Chirp coming towards me. Before she could reach me though, I saw the next door Mrs Dog bearing down on me.

Alarmed, I shook my feathers and found that I could fly. A scared soar later, leaving an alarmed Chirp below, I found myself on top of a metal pole. The mouthy crow returned to taunt – “How long will you sit on a light pole, you airhead? Haven’t you seen dogs before?” without realising that the neighbourhood puss bearing down behind him on the adjacent pole. I chirped a “Hey, watch it” which the idiot Crow took to be a taunt. What happened later can be imagined – the puss sprang. What was unexpected was that I felt a strong urge to defend my fellow glider – albeit the distantly related (and not so distantly perched) crow and flew to the cat’s rear to give him a strong nip. Stunned and in pain, the puss fled. The (not-so-mouthy) now scared crow watched the entire by-play open-beaked and croaked thanks after he shook himself violently.

The now-friendly-not mouthy crow (seriously, I have been corrupted by the humans to even say mouthy instead of beaky) invited me to his real nest to visit his she-crow. I politely declined. After an “I was so jealous because you found yourself a human family to give you ready made gaga every day. Go now, your human is waiting for you below. Just soar and flip twice to reach her.”, the friendly crow urged me to fly back down.

“Wow, you are so smart, how do you know the way?”

“Well, you would know if you were wild – we all have the Wooglesense inside us which always shows us where to go, how to go and what time to go. Also, live on-air-traffic updates when we are in flight. Good luck!”

I followed his instructions to a now anxious Chirp waiting on the ground and flew down to her shoulder. A few dismayed exclams later and after having some slosh poured over my flowing red flower, I went back to my metal nest and had the satisfaction of seeing a worried Luna awaiting my arrival back. Well that human saying of “All is well, that ends well” is so true.

Chirp Chirp Chirp, till I write again.

## THE SWITCH – HE AS SHE AND SHE AS HE.

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Rory and Rachel were in the middle of a raging argument.

“It’s your job to make sure the bills are paid and the house is clean. I can’t be bothered about things like these – it spoils my creative juices for the day” raged an agitated Rory.

“While you indulge in your creative juices (Yes, I do know you are a successful & creative ad director), I have to deal with grumpy bosses at work, fix breakfast and lunch, clean the house, drop Tim to school and pay all the bills to boot. Don’t you think this is a little too much for one person to handle?” screamed an equally frustrated Rachel.

Rory muttered while leaving the room – “I just wish you could be me for a single day and see how difficult it is.”

Both of them went to bed with a deep sense of bitterness and the unfairness of it all.

Rory had a strange dream in the middle of the night but tossed and went back to sleep without waking up. In the morning, he woke up and marched down to the bathroom careful not to turn towards or wake the sleeping Rachel. It was when he was pulling the toothpaste that he first noticed something strange. His fingers suddenly seemed to have elongated and sported a manicure during the night. Rubbing his eyes to shake the sleep out of it, he opened his eyes again to the same fingers he had seen a few seconds ago. Now alarmed, he went to the mirror and found Rachel’s face staring back at him.

His scream came out girlish and tinny and woke up the sleeping Rachel. Rachel rushed into the bathroom and was stuck dumb at seeing her own face staring back at her.

“What… Who…#?#”

Rachel was quicker to adapt to the strangeness of it all than Rory who was still dumbstruck.

“How did this happen?”

The more practical Rachel mused – “It must have been your last thought of the day that somehow caused this. You wished I was you to understand you – don’t you remember? I generally don’t believe in magic and stuff but we’ll have to deal with this for now.”

“But I have an important client meeting today for the new Pepsodent ad. My team has been working on this for months and today is the scheduled day for presentation.” said a worried Rory.

“We’ll manage. I’ll go as you and try to complete the presentation while you have to meet the new director who is flying in today to my office. Let’s trade info on what to do.”

Agitated, after trading their responsibilities for the day, Rory spent the morning trying to fix breakfast. After burning the bread three times in a row and congealing the compensatory noodles, he was forced to accept defeat. Turning to see a round eyed Tim who had been watching the entire mess, he suddenly remembered that he had to drop off Tim to school that day as Rachel. Waving a hasty goodbye to Rachel (sitting as Rory), he started driving to Tim’s school trying to remember the way. Tim looked at him strangely before commenting – “Mom, you have missed the right turn to school.” Making a U-turn was a disaster. The built up traffic to the turn to the school was a nightmare, with drivers honking everywhere and screaming abuses at the previous vehicle.

After dropping Tim off in the school without a breakfast or a lunch and pressing down a wad of money in his hand, he started the 1.5 hour drive to Rachel’s office. He arrived half hour late and spent another 15 minutes trying to find an empty parking spot. He rode up the elevator after pressing it continuously for the next few minutes and found himself staring at Mark, Rachel’s boss. Mark expressively looked at his watch for a few seconds before commenting sarcastically – “Thanks for making it to the office, Rachel. Tony has been waiting patiently for you for the last half hour. Care to join him?” Muttering under his breath, Rory pushed on to Rachel’s office and spent the next hour listening to Tony’s non-stop conversation trying to make sense of all the financial lingo being thrown at him by recollecting snippets of Rachel’s prep talk in the morning.

It was already past the lunch hour when he trudged into the cafeteria to grab a sandwich when the mobile phone rang. It was the maintenance guy calling up to confirm when he can come and fix the leaky faucet. Having no clue of what he was talking about, Rory quickly cut off the connection with a “Sorry, I’ll call you later.” Post lunch, he spent the next three hours in meetings with Mark individually and a combined meeting with Tony before feeling completely drained. Rory snuck out of the office at 6PM and entered his apartment to be met by an irate Tim and dirty dishes. Tim angrily asked him – “What happened to you today, Mom? You didn’t give me any food, dropped me late at school and finally didn’t come to pick me up, with no notice. Sheela aunty dropped me home.”

Rory shrugged and started to do the dishes when he heard the doorbell. It was Mrs. Next Door whom he had never bothered to remember. She shrilly yelled as soon as he opened the door – “My bathroom is flooded because of a leaky faucet in your house. Why can’t you fix your messes? How will I………….” Rory tuned out the rest of the monologue and muttered a “I will fix it.” and shut the door at her surprised face. Turning to a hungry Tim, he said – “Let’s eat out today and pick something for your Mom er… your dad.”

After a drive in the pouring rain, he managed to spot an open diner in which the lone man shouted out a “We are closed before snapping the window shut.”

When the car stalled in the middle of the road, it was the last straw. He then guiltily remembered Rachel reminding him for the past 3 weeks about fixing the misfiring spark plug. Pushing the car to a sheltered place on the road side, he and Tim started their way back after locking the car. He found the apartment lights shining when he went up the stairs (the elevator was out due to a power cut) and found an exhausted Rachel waiting for him.”

Both of them started at the same time – “I am sorry………….”

Smiling through their frustrations of the day, they again started –

“I never knew how hard it’s to meet with the creative demands……”

“Your job is so exhausting………….Talk about a bad day.”

before clamming up after noticing Tim’s confused stares.

After having a small dinner of soup and toast that Rachel whipped up, the 3 of them retired for the night exhausted by their trials of the day. Before dropping off to sleep, Rory held Rachel's hand and said "I am sorry I was so insensitive. If we switch back, I promise to help you more and be more understanding."

"Me, too" muttered a red faced Rachel before dropping off to sleep.

They opened their eyes together in the morning to find each other faces in their right places to their joy.

All was well!

## **THE DARKEST HOUR OF THE NIGHT COMES JUST BEFORE DAWN!**

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Shipra could not sleep. Later when she reflected on that fateful night, all she could recollect was the cagey pacing around the house while she waited for her brother Parikshit to call.

Her day started well enough with her usual cup of coffee. She had looked forward to this day for the past many months. She had received the much awaited e-mail from her publishers and they had invited her to discuss the terms of her upcoming book. Shipra went back to her office to kick start her usually boring day in her job as a store manager in a Barnes & Noble book store in good spirits. Her co-worker Tina had teased her, after she broke the news, when their habitual customer neared their desk. “Mrs. Harris, soon you’ll be buying a first edition Shipra autographed by our celebrity here.”

Shipra blushed and sent the friendly customer on her way after billing quickly.

In the midst of her celebratory dinner, Shipra had received a mysterious call from Parikshit. All she had heard was a – “Shipra, wait up for me at your house today after 9PM and don’t go out” before he hung up.

Shipra was baffled. Her brother was an up and coming name in the field of cutting edge epidemiology and currently worked as an assistant to the last Nobel prize winner. He tended to dress neatly, eat fussily and generally behaved like a nonagenarian with a head cold. His habits were as predictable as they were boring. So, why the mystery?

Without further ado and after looking at her watch and exclaiming at the time, she waved a hasty goodbye to Tina and sped on her way. As time passed by, she had fidgeted and worried. It was unlike her brother to be late. When he sneakily let himself in via her back door, she jumped out of her skin. Parikshit hastily held up a hand before she could start talking and said – “Shipra, sorry for all the stress this evening but believe me it’s important. There is no one else I can trust.” Before she could open her baffled mouth, Parikshit zipped open the bag he was carrying and handed her a container. “This box, here, is host to the most powerful pathogens humanity has ever

discovered. Someone very bad is behind this. Keep it safely with you. I will come back before the night is over and take it back.” He beat a hasty retreat through the same way he came.

Shipra sat by her telephone, mentally willing it to ring, hoping for a call or any news of her brother, while the clock ticked by. Suddenly, during the wee hours in the morning, she heard heavy knocks on her door. She looked through the peephole to find two strange bulky men standing in the hallway. Without opening the door, she hurriedly looked for a hide-out while she heard brute knuckles battering at her door and the door giving way under their combined strength. Completely alarmed, she hid herself in an alcove while she heard them rummaging in the house. After an unsuccessful search (she had the container with her), they left the house assuming it to be vacant. She stepped out and let out a relieved huff. Finally as the night sky lit up with the brightening of the dawn, she heard Parikshit’s voice calling and his hand on her shoulder. She came to and realised she had dozed off.

Parikshit had responded to her questioning look with a “Hey sis, all safe now. You can hand over the container to me. I am taking it to a safe place to be destroyed” and had left the house. She looked at the now bright silver of dawn with a relief that came with the knowledge that the night was over and she celebrated the birth of the new day with her usual coffee.

## HULOHOT

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Hulohot looked every inch the warrior chieftain that he was as he finished applying the final coat of bark white stripes on his face. As he bared his teeth at the pool water, his deputy Chu-chu came running. Knowing better than to disturb Hulohot at his daily routine, he waited patiently until Hulohot turned.

“Hmphahooooot, the gods have descended to punish us finally!”

“You lie!”

“Hmphahooooot, I would never do that. The prophecy has come alive. It’s the truth.”

“What do you mean, you slave?”

“Hmphahooooot, plssssssssss come.”

As Hulohot joined the little crowd of horrified natives on their knees, the vision in front of him struck him dumb with terror.

There was the prophesised beast in the huge clearing that was adjacent to the forest that Hulohot’s tribe lived in. Hulohot was awestruck, in spite of his terror, at the shining symmetry of the beast and the silvery reflection that resembled a rainy gray sky.

Hulohot could not believe he was the chief, the gods had deemed fit to lead his tribe through these challenging times. As he recited the prophecy lines, the assembled tribesmen all echoed him, spell bound.

*“Violets are blue, Roses are ruby and  
A shiny beast kills all things that move!”*

There was only one thing to be done. He had to frighten away the shiny beast. He knew just how.

“Chu-chu, you lazy thing, bring my colours here. Today is the day when all men in the tribe will wear the same stripes as me to frighten away the beast! Hurry.”

Hulohot watched surreptitiously at the beast as his tribesman applied the colours liberally. The beast showed no signs of being frightened by their show of aggression.

As the tribe started to move towards the shiny beast menacingly in their war formation and shouting their war cries, Hulohot's keen eyes noted a few small silvery figures moving close to the beast.

What was this? What were these other new figures moving near the beast? The prophecy had made no mention of such figures. What should Hulohot do?

Closer to the beast, the silvery figures watched as the tribesmen came closer.

The time travellers took one look at their audience and then their stalled craft and uttered a collective "Damn!"

## **GANPATI BAPPA MORYA!**

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Ashu was excited. This year's Ganesh Chaturti was going to be a blast. The other members of the organizing committee had been sceptical when he had explained his idea for this year's idol theme. Gappu Bhaiya had raised his eyebrows before opining that the entire concept was deeply disrespectful. Ganesh Chaturti was a day of deep prayers, piety and giving thanks for all the blessings received so far & to be received.

But Ashu had persevered and had even pointed out that their cricket Ganesha in the year when India had won the world cup was an assured hit. He had also, rather cunningly, pointed out how their Ganesha would one-up the idol the next street guys had already bought. That turned to be the clinching argument.

The neighbourhood kids had watched enviously while Ashu and his friends had proudly unveiled their cricket Ganesha in front of them all. The guys from the next street had reluctantly approached Gappu Bhaiya and requested his permission for them to take a groupie photo with the now-famous cricket Ganesha.

Gappu Bhaiya had, rather majestically, refused permission. Ashu and his friends had a great time that night, miming those next-street-guys pathetically requesting permission for the photo. Ashu privately and rather painfully was reminded of his own entreaties when the same guys had unveiled a mermaid Ganesha and a joker Ganesha in the previous years.

Now was their moment of retribution!

Ashu had been waiting for this day ever since he had been taken in under Gappu Bhaiya's patronage three years ago. His cricket Ganesha had made all his dreams come true for the festival!

As Ashu's gang triumphantly proceeded to lift the idol, the bomb went off.

## THE GODS ARE CRAZY

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“That is insane.”

“You are always a sceptic. Wait and watch.”

“But what do you hope to accomplish by this crazy scribble in a dried up desert?”

“Justttttt watch.”

The nomadic tribe headman sniffed suddenly and rushed headlong until he arrived at the gigantic heart shaped slush.

The tribe gathered around and watched as the headman dropped to his knees and began scrabbling with his bare hands like a crazed madman. The tribesmen looked on first in doubt and then with mounting excitement at the tell-tale sign of the moisture that can only be indicative of water.

They fell to their knees and started to help their headman in digging through the heart shaped slush in search of the water. They were soon rewarded. Water gushed out into the parched sands besides them as the tribesmen went berserk. Never had they seen so much of water at one place before!

The headman lifted up his wet face to the heavens and let out a mighty roar before falling to his knees. His tribe was saved! The desert had seemed unending and their destruction certain when the brackish pool his tribe had been drawing water from had dried up in this intense heat. The only alternative had been to go in search of the new sources of water. Leaving their women and children with dwindling reserves of water, they had wandered here and there until the headman had spotted the heart shaped slush from a distance. Strangely, no matter how much digging or trampling his tribesmen did at the patch, the overall shape of the slush-turned-small-pool resembled a heart. What was this wonder!

The men having quenched their own thirst were now filling up their goatskins to carry the precious water back to their women and children. While they had despaired at the long distances they travelled before they reached this water source, their hearts and legs seemed lighter now, though they had to carry their precious cargo back the same way.

Hera rubbed her hands in glee. Zeus frowned and said – ” What is the point, mine-crazed wife?”

“Water, life’s essence. Heart shape, harbinger of love and family. A clear connection in the minds of the savages now.”

“Kronos be cursed – how many more millennia should I endure this crazy patch?!?”

## DO YOU SEE ME?

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The setting sun was an omen. The masses toiled by the sun and enjoyed its life giving warmth but I wondered how many missed the coolness of the night and the other stars that the sun outshone everyday.

As I watched from thousands of miles away, I mused on how many, really had missed me and my journey. Here I was, tracing the same path seventy-six years later; yet it was the daily rise of the golden orb that all living things craved for.

With the bracing yet distant proximity of my journey away from the yellow sphere, I cannot but sigh at the fickleness of the humans.

The living beings could not exist without the rich bounty of light and heat that the sun gave everyday but the very fact of their existence was what distinguished the sun from the bigger gas giants and made it unique.

As my journey continued, I remembered how, I too, had once been worshipped and deemed important enough to be tracked in the ancient texts and star calendars. I had witnessed the birth of their saviour and the magi who had divined his birth by tracking my journey. The huge monuments that was raised in the honour of false gods and eschewed later.

As centuries passed and their artificial lights lit up their homes, the humans now had the audacity to transmit probes and crafts for intercepting me. What had happened to their awe and their respect? Yet, I felt myself growing smaller and feebler on every journey past as I lose a little bit of my strength and size over the years.

The sun whispers that civilizations rise and die but I would endure for eons. I sigh as the consolatory words don't achieve their objective of cheering me up. I pine for the centuries past and the time lost.

I am the Comet Halley, returned yet again to trace my blazing path through the heavens! Do you see me?

## THE CHOICE

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“Mama, I want two chocolates today, you gave me only one yesterday.” quipped Kevin.

Rita smiled at him and said – “You can either choose one chocolate by yourself or let me give you two of my choice.”

Kevin thought over that a bit and asked for two chocolates to be given to him by Rita.

Rita smiled and gave him two pieces covered in bright coloured wrappers. Kevin dimpled and ran away to a corner to enjoy his spoils. He came back a few minutes later agitated.

“Mama, you have given me a dark chocolate and a coconut filled one. I don’t like them. Can you please take them and give me white and nut filled instead?”

Rita responded – “Kevin, remember the time we went to Singapore and you wanted to buy a Dungeons & Dragons game, but couldn’t get it?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Rita continued – “Daddy and I asked you whether you wanted the Gameboy in the shop but you wanted only Dungeons & Dragons. So we left the shop and went to search for D&D in other shops. We never found that game. So you never got either D&D or Gameboy. What did you think that time?”

Kevin thought deeply and said – “Mama, I thought I should have made you and Daddy buy me the Gameboy in the first shop as I wanted Gameboy too but just wanted D&D more. Since you said I can buy only one, I wanted to wait to get D&D in the next shop but didn’t get both as we came back to India. Now I don’t have both games to play.”

Rita smiled and said – “Kevin, this is what I wanted to teach you when I asked you whether you want to choose your own chocolate or let me give you 2 chocolates of my choosing. Sometimes in life, you have to think before you choose to do something. Whether to wait for something you want or to take what you get immediately. When we went to Singapore, you decided to

wait for what you want and was unhappy because you didn't get what you wanted.

Today, I asked you whether you wanted to choose or take something extra without choosing and you chose to take extra chocolates. When you grow up, you will have to make bigger choices than these and sometimes you can't change the choice you have already made. Like the chocolates today. You will have to eat the ones I gave you because that is what you chose.

Tomorrow or later, whenever you have to choose other things, I want you to think of what will happen if you decide to do something and don't like the result of your decision."

Disappointed, Kevin chewed his lip in frustration and said – "Yes, Mama." before leaving the room.

A few minutes later, Rita went to the main hall after hearing Kevin's delighted squeals.

Kevin was standing beside a half opened pack of chocolates with all his favourite varieties while her husband watched with amused interest.

Kevin jubilantly declared – "See Mama, I chose wrongly today but still got my chocolates."

Rita smiled softly before saying – "That happens in life too, sometimes, my son" and ran a hand over his curls.

## ALL THE APPLES IN THE KINGDOM & A MISSING DAMSEL

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Aleksander stepped into his kingdom once again. Where another viewer saw a slightly seedy terrace overlooking newer apartment blocks and a small potted tree bearing mouldy apples, what Aleksander saw in his private kingdom was the tree of golden apples.

It had always been so, ever since his baba (grandmama) had narrated “The nine pea-hens and golden apples” which had held his childish fancy.

*“Once upon a time there stood before the palace of an emperor a golden apple tree, which blossomed and bore fruit each night. But every morning the fruit was gone, and no one was able to discover the thief.*

*The emperor commanded his eldest son to keep watch and discover the thief.*

*The young man went and hid himself near the apple tree to begin his watch but the apples had scarcely begun to ripen before he fell asleep, and when he awoke at sunrise the apples were gone. The King scolded him and set his second son on the same job with the same results.*

*Despairing of finding the thief, the King finally sent his youngest son with an ultimatum. At midnight when the apples began to ripen, he saw nine golden pea-hens fly swiftly through the air. While eight of them feasted on the fruit, the ninth landed in front of his and turned into a beautiful maiden who captured his heart. The prince and the maiden talked through the night and when it was time for her to leave, she left the prince two golden apples and joined her sisters before they flew away.*

*The prince’s brothers envied his success and set a witch to spy on him. So, when the evening came, the old woman hid herself under the tree and waited for the prince. She watched as the pea-hens arrived and one of them turned into a maiden. Then the witch stretched out her hand, and cut off a lock of the maiden’s hair which alarmed the maiden and made the pea-hens to flee in terror.*

*The prince was beside himself in rage and sorrow and killed the witch. As the pea-hens never returned, he set out in search of them.*

*After travelling for many days, he arrived at length before a large gate, and through the bars he could see the streets of a town, and even the palace. The prince tried to pass in, but the way was barred by the keeper of the gate, who wanted to know who he was, why he was there, and how he had learnt the way, and he was not allowed to enter unless the empress*

*herself came and gave him leave. A message was sent to her, and when she stood at the gate the prince thought he had lost his wits, for there was the maiden he had left his home to seek. And she hastened to him, and took his hand, and drew him into the palace. In a few days they were married, and the prince forgot his father and his brothers, and made up his mind that he would live and die in the castle.”*

At the time of her passing, her only senile words to him had been – “Grow the golden apples, the eight pea-hens and the damsel will come.”

In the intervening half century, he had been ground in life’s grim realities and watched his children grow up and start their own families. His grandchildren, as other youngsters of the day, were enamoured with shiny gadgets and had no interest in visiting their old dyado.

He felt himself whispering as he tended to his golden apple tree.

“Where is the damsel, baba? She never arrived.”

*Extracts from my published works - “The God, The Girl and The Gem” and “Maya & the Mind Mystics”*

**CHAPTER 1: AGE OF LEGENDS! (THE GOD, THE GIRL AND THE GEM)**

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As Bhibhatsu watched the gathering clouds, he had a vague sense of approaching dread. The restive horses, the scurrying ants and the circling jackals at a distance seemed to portend inauspicious omens. So absorbed was he in his thoughts, that he didn't notice his best friend, Aniruddha approaching.

“Stop worrying, dear mitr (friend)” muttered Aniruddha in soothing tones as he patted his friend's shoulder.

“How can I? You know what's happening. Is that evil prince to inherit the world, while we watch helplessly? If so, it must be true that the Age of Legends is indeed coming to an end.”

“Not while we still have living legends like you who are born to remake the world. Who, after all, can stand against a master Bowman like you in the battle? Isn't it true that the wrath of a single righteous man can destroy the world? Hold onto your inner peace. Worry not; you and your family will inherit the earth.”

“But at what cost, Aniruddha?”

“Come with me.”

While Bhibhatsu wondered why his mitr had led him to this desolate place, he instinctively closed his eyes when he saw a sudden flash of bright light. When he reopened his eyes, he saw a boy and a girl holding a blood red stone which looked eerily similar to the Symantak stone that belonged to Aniruddha.

As they came closer, he realised they weren't as young as he had initially thought. Aniruddha, however, smiled a huge smile of welcome at the youngsters as though he had been expecting them.

As they came closer, the girl's eyes widened to as big as saucers. The boy prostrated in front of Aniruddha.

The girl composed herself and prepared to speak. Bhibhatsu was faster.

“Who are you? How is it that children like you could travel to this place? How did you get Aniruddha's jewel? Did you steal it?”

The girl scowled at the torrent of questions and said –

“We are not from here and not even from this time. My Guruji asked us to travel here to meet both of you. He said there was something we both needed to learn and something that will benefit you especially because we are here.

And of course, we didn't steal anything. Guruji gave us Symantak for travelling here.”

“Aniruddha, how is this possible? Has someone been able to duplicate the Symantak? Even if they did, how will it help these children to travel? What does the girl mean by time travel?”

“Patience, Bhibhatsu. The stone they hold is the same Symantak that is even now at my home in its special place of worship. These children are from a different time period. They are the future, many thousands of years from now.”

Aniruddha smiled reassuringly at Bhibhatsu before turning to the youngsters.

“Welcome Maya and Hari, I have been expecting you.”

## CHAPTER 1 – THE AWAKENING (MAYA & THE MIND MYSTICS)

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Maya woke up amidst the patter of the rain with Luna still nibbling her ear for her morning titbits. She bounded across the floor stripping the covers off while the cockatiel squawked in outrage at being unceremoniously pushed aside.

Her mother opened the door at the exact same moment and smiled. Both of them had choreographed her morning wakes to a thing of perfection. Her mom plonked down her usual mug of hot streaming tea before urging her to get ready for her big day soon.

Maya rushed through her ablutions, stopping for a doleful moment to ponder the reflection in the mirror, which reminded her of the deep pools of dark-cinnamon swirls that was her father's eyes'. The dulcet tones of her father rang in her memory as a reminder – "Eighteenth birthdays are special; that's when you earn the right to the family legacy".

Pushing aside melancholy thoughts, Maya hurried down the stairs taking two at a time just when her mother called out – "Maya, honey, Har is here". Har beamed at Maya while trying to hide his birthday surprise behind his arms. Maya had to resist rolling her eyes – she had known, that he had procured tickets to Disneyland, for days. "Chow down, chomp up – we have to catch the 8:50" sang Har as Maya's mother gently interjected – "Maya, Har – take the wagon today – Auntie Aks is picking me up".

Maya shot a "Thank you, Mom" while shovelling down her breakfast of oatmeal & honey. She still hadn't thanked her mother for the new iMac at her desk as coming of age birthday gift now installed in her room – her mother had already left the house and was even now getting into the aunt Aks' Pontiac. Rinsing the bowl and grabbing her keys, she ushered Har out of the house while her excitement mounted at being allowed to drive the wagon without her mother's restraining presence.

Maya smacked Har on the back of his head as he whistled tunelessly along with the songs of the radio. The hour and a half's journey was peppered with

bouts of scenic shrubbery and Har's erratic whistling. Pulling into the parking lot, Maya stopped to get the ticket while Har trudged along to collect the passes. Maya's excitement peaked as she remembered her last trip with her father and her side stops at Winnie the Pooh and Aladdin rides. Pushing aside the sudden stab of pain that spiked her heart, she pushed Har in the direction of roller coaster. Har stumbled straight into a sordid boys' group who shoved him down and jeered while aiming kicks at his ribs and foot.

Rage filled her throat as she made to push the lead boy aside. To her surprise, the boy was already on the ground struggling to get up, as if being weighed down by something heavy. Maya became conscious of her throat slowly choking up to the point of breathlessness. She released her breath in a hiss while the boy on the ground seemed to recover; he stumbled for a moment and took to his heels while his companions viewed the entire byplay with astonishment. They scattered quickly after casting doubtful glances at each other.

"What was that?" coughed Har while shooting astonished glances at the back of his tormentors. Pulled out of her reverie and suddenly feeling drained; Maya helped him up and ushered him to the nearby drinks stall. The rest of the day proved uneventful unless one counted Har being pulled under in the wave pool.

The trip back was silent as Har slept, exhausted by the day's events and the roughing up in the morning. Maya was jolted out of her contemplation by the blaring honks once she reached the city limits. She jerked Har awake after pulling up at his curb. Mouthing quick thanks, she pulled away while Har was still walking up to his door.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. Exhausted by poor sleep, Maya stepped down the stairs after stopping for a quick pat for Luna. Her mother smiled at her as she pushed a mug of hot sweet tea into her hands. Saturday mornings were her favourite time of the week as she unwound after a gruelling schedule of 5 day work week.

"How was your day yesterday?"

“Fine, Mom.”

Maya’s mother paused and hitched an eyebrow at the patently false note in her tone and then let it go.

“What would you like to do today?”

At Maya’s lacklustre expression, she added – “Would you like to visit Aunt Aks?”

Maya nodded.

Aunt Aks had a way of lighting up the place merely by passing by; the bond forged in the shared pain after her father’s demise (Aunt Aks was her father’s younger sister) resulted in a special closeness; which she had felt only with her parents and Har earlier. Maya still remembered the day when the news of her father’s accident had trickled in. Aks had been in mourning for much longer than either her mom or her.

Maya’s mother drove away for groceries and a weekend habit of stopping for neighbourhood gossip while Maya walked between the welcoming blue of Aks’ home. Aks beamed at her.

“How’s my favourite niece?”

Maya rolled her eyes as she answered – “I am your only niece.”

“Doesn’t matter, you would still be my favourite if I had another two dozen”.

Settling down into her plush couch, Maya countered – “Where is my birthday gift, you slacker?”

Aks’ grin faded. She mutely looked at Maya for a minute before responding – “All in good time.”

Noticing Maya's keen look, she changed the conversation.

"Have you been practising the Visharadh technique this week?"

"No"

She sighed –

"Maya – you know your father wanted you to –"

"Stop, just stop – can we talk of something else?"

Aks sighed again.

"Sure, what is it that you want to talk about? How's school? How's Hari? What plans for college?"

"Whoa, there, Sparky. Slow down. Circuit overload. Time out."

"Fine, then. You tell things at your own pace while I make your favourite chai. Have a cuppa first."

"Okay" said Maya easily.

Maya spent the better portion of the next hour indulging Aks in her school routines, Har's latest goof-up that had resulted in his adoptive mom being pulled in for a warning and finally the inflamed emotions at her school and the city at the brutal suppression of the Umbrella movement by the authorities.

Aks had patiently sat through her narration, as she had for Maya's entire childhood. It had been Aks, who had been the one to bandage that scraped knee, indulge her in little treats for all of her academic triumphs and sympathise with her on all of the perceived suppressions of freedom of expression she had suffered at her school. Aks had also stood in for her mom, every time a parent was required – all of the PTA meetings, every time

she had needed help with a school project and finally now, when Maya had to choose the college to go to in the coming fall.

The rest of the day was spent playing Chinese checkers eating take out pizzas that Aks reheated in the oven.

As the twilight deepened, Maya waved a goodbye and started on the two km trek to her home.

Maya engrossed on the way back, didn't notice that the shadows that followed her, was not of the buildings besieged by the soft light of the dusk. She heard the startled quickening of breaths behind her as street cat gave a disturbed yowl. The last thing she remembered before the world faded into nothingness was that of a huge hairy hand closing in on her face.

Maya slowly came to; hearing noises of a scuffle and whispered conversations.

“She has to be an empath – can't you see? A fury would be my guess”

“Why not a quill?”

“You know why, she was able to unleash only when she was mad at you for squelching her friend.”

“Oh”

“You really are a bone head – shhhhh – she is coming to”

“Who are you girl? How are you connected to the quill extremists?”

Maya shook her head to clear the ringing in her ears. As her vision cleared, she saw that she was being interrogated by the boys' coterie she had run into the previous day (/s?) with Har. Dread filled her as she looked around and realised that she seemed to be in an old unfamiliar decrepit building and surrounded by five huge grimy figures. As her panic and her anger reached a

crescendo in equal parts, she heard five different shrieks of pain as the figure nearest to her began to swirl like a top.

“Stop, we mean you no harm – stop” came the panicked shout of the burliest of figures surrounding her.

As Maya quieted down, four of the boys squatted down, warily outside her reach, while the head burlo (as she called him in her mind) approached her.

“Fury – we are the powerless and a part of the Ayukta Samaj.”

“What are you talking about?”

The head burlo continued as if he was uninterrupted – “All we were doing was to watch the quil extremists since the time the Ayukta guru sensed her in the vicinity. We wanted to approach her and convince her to re-join the Ayukta Samaj. We followed you, as we were curious as to how a fury was so chummy with a quil.”

Maya rubbed her head and held up her hand. The head burlo silenced, she said – “I have no idea what you are talking about. Are you going to let me go or not? My mother and my aunt would have pulled out all the stops by now searching for me. You would be facing the police by this time tomorrow if you don’t let me go immediately.”

“We mean you no harm. Just answer our questions and you can go your own way. I promise” said the head burlo.

Maya looked around, her gaze lingering on each of the faces in front of her before finally focussing her attention on the H.B. Each of their faces reflected curiosity, a tiny bit of fear and a placidity at odds with their bulk.

Visibly relaxing, Maya asked cautiously - “What do you want to know? What are the other things you were blabbering about a quill and a fury? I don’t have any quills to give you and I don’t know what you mean by a fury.”

“You are making fun of us, right?” asked the smaller burlo next to the H.B.

“Well, I know the meaning of the word, just not what you mean.” clarified Maya.

“A fury is someone like you. You are a fury. And it’s quill with a single L not a double L. By which I mean it’s not a feather.”

“Well, I have heard of the term “*Hell hath no fury a woman scorned*”. Is that what you mean?”

The burlos looked at each other while the H.B scratched his head before replying – “We don’t understand. What does that mean?”

Maya sighed. Apparently the bulky bodies didn’t mix with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“It’s a pun. I didn’t understand all the references to a fury so I quoted William Congreve.”

“We still don’t understand.”

“God, you said fury. I am the woman…”

Maya broke off when she saw their blank faces and said wearily – “You know what? Forget it. I don’t understand anything of what you are saying and you don’t understand what I say. For the last time, are you going to let me go or not?”

The burlos once again looked at each other before the H.B who seemed to be the mouthpiece of the group said -

“We’ll drop you back from where we picked you up. But this isn’t the last you have heard of us. We’ll speak to you later under more pleasant circumstances. We’ll need to put you under though.”

As Maya stiffened, she felt the lure of same nothingness from previous day, as the head burlo's hand came closer.

**THE END**