

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

JAI'S ASSORTED TALES



SITHARAAM JAYAKUMAR

Jai's Assorted Tales

Sitharaam Jayakumar

© Sitharaam Jayakumar

All Rights Reserved. 2020

First Edition

No part of this eBook may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the author.

To
My Family
Without Whom I Would Not Survive A Day

Author's Note

This book is a miscellaneous collection of short stories. The compilation consists of tales from a variety of genres like horror, humour, science fiction and several others. I have tried to strike a deep chord in my readers through these short stories.

The purpose of this book is to regale the reader with plenty of entertainment when stuck at home on a rainy day. You can curl up on your sofa and read these tales. Some of the tales will make you burst out laughing, while some would make you think deeply about the philosophy of life and death.

Some of the tales will make you shudder about the brutality and depravity of the human mind, while some would make you shake your head in wonderment. So, read on and enjoy yourself.

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Acknowledgements

I would hereby like to sincerely thank my friend Krishna Kumar and my sister Sudha Somanathan for encouraging me to continue writing despite the difficult circumstances I find myself in this year. I would also like to thank the Blogchatter community for providing me a platform to bring out an eBook at this stage of my life.

Section 1

Horror / Thriller

I Will Always Be with You

I climbed up the steep mountain slope moving away from the burning wreck of the car I had left my wife Kathy's dead body in. It had been extremely easy. Kathy had never suspected anything. I had pretended to lose control of the car exactly at the right point. The car had plunged a considerable distance down the ravine before coming to a stop at the spot I had intended it to. Kathy had gotten out of the car with me. The first part of the plan had gone smoothly.

And just when Kathy's back was turned to me, I had crept behind her silently. I had quickly whipped out the handkerchief doused with Chloroform and clapped it on her face holding her in a vice-like grip from behind. She had struggled as much as she could before she slipped into unconsciousness. I had worked feverishly and pulled her body into the driver's seat of the car. I had smashed the bonnet with the axe I had in the boot of the car and smashed the windows. I then started the engine and set the car on fire. Soon huge flames had enveloped the car with the body in it. I congratulated myself on a job well done.

Sophie and I had decided on the place to kill Kathy after days of thought. The place was hidden sufficiently from the mountain road, and I knew it would be quite some time before a passing car or truck driver would notice the wreck. They usually stopped by only if they had a flat tire or wanted to rest a bit. There were several tall trees along the road and it rarely happened that a car or truck driver stopped at that point.

'Ah! at last, I was rid of her! Free to marry Sophie!' I thought gleefully to myself as I left the burning wreck behind and clambered past the several huge boulders on the mountain slope.

Sophie and I had planned it well. And Sophie was quite sure we could get away with it. Sophie generally knew. I clambered past a couple of boulders that looked like they could be twins and I paused to catch my breath. The stench of burning flesh from the wreck was all consuming and I hastened on quickly.

After a few minutes, I turned to take one last look at the wreck and check if everything was going according to plan. I caught my breath sharply. To my surprise, the flames were subsiding rather quickly and just for a minute I thought I could see Kathy's blue overcoat through the faltering orange flames. The illusion disappeared quickly but it had shaken me. Soon the flames rose once more.

I remembered what Kathy had been saying to me just before I had pretended to lose control of the car. 'I will always be with you, darling,' she had crooned. Kathy had genuinely believed I was in love with her. As I climbed up the slope, I could almost hear her last words being echoed by the rustle of the leaves around me.

I shook off my fanciful imagination and plodded on for another ten minutes. I was soon on the mountain road and waited for Sophie to turn up. I soon saw her black Maruti Alto come to a halt on the roadside and I quickly rushed up to the car and got into the front seat as she held the door open.

'Did everything go according to plan darling?' Sophie cooed.

'Yes Sweetheart, she is done for.'

'Oh darling, we can get married now. For the next six months, we do not meet each other. The police will check everything. Do not make the

mistake of trying to contact me. This is going to be the toughest part. Staying away from you. But we have no choice.'

'Yes, sweetheart,' I replied and lit up a cigarette and coughed nervously.

Sophie gave me a reassuring smile and said, 'Darling, don't worry, I will always be with you.'

After thirty minutes we turned into a dirt road and drove to the dilapidated shack which had been our meeting place for the past six months. Sophie was wearing a blue overcoat just like Kathy and I ached to feel her warm body one last time before we parted. We got out of the car and as soon as we had entered the shack, I kicked the door shut and grabbed Sophie. I ripped off her blue overcoat and pushed her down. We made passionate love on the dirt floor and after ten minutes we lay spent and exhausted.

Finally, Sophie got up, pulled on her blue overcoat, and moved towards the small room with a tap and a mirror that had served as a bath in this little shack of ours. 'I will have a wash and be back soon,' said Sophie. I watched Sophie's back as she walked towards the bathroom. With the Blue overcoat on, she looked just like Kathy from behind. I got up, walked over to an old chair, sat down, and lit another cigarette feeling nervous.

After ten minutes I was tired of waiting. I grinned at the thought of feeling Sophie's body again. I got up and made my way to the bathroom.

'Darling!' I called loudly.

No reply.

'Sophie! Sophie! Sweetheart!'

Still no reply.

Not able to bear it anymore, I kicked open the door and walked in. There was no one there. I moved in and saw some footprints on the floor. I bent down and looked at them. Suddenly I heard a voice from behind me, 'I told you I will always be with you.' I just had time to catch sight of Kathy's ghostly face in the mirror before the axe came crashing down on my head.

Played for A Sucker

It was a bright, cold day in April. Sophie and I made our way along the dirt path to the shack where we had been meeting for the last six months secretively. We carried picnic bags. We wanted to spend one last day together. We made love on the floor of the shack.

‘Oh! John, I just cannot wait for the day when we can be together forever.’ Sophie said after ten minutes.

‘Give it time darling.’ I said. ‘I am sure she will die soon.’

‘You have been telling me that for a long time,’ said Sophie.

‘She is in the hospital now. We just have to wait.’ I said.

‘Okay,’ said Sophie with a grimace.

It was a year ago that I had married Kathy, my boss, who was twenty years my senior. Kathy was an ill-tempered, ruthless woman. She controlled the Madison financial empire with an iron hand. The first time I had met her was at the time she had interviewed me for the post of her secretary. She had asked me just two questions.

‘Are you ethical?’

I had replied with a straight face, ‘within the normal constraints of everyday life, yes.’

‘Do you believe in marriage?’ was her second question.

I again replied with a straight face. 'No.'

I was dismissed and told to wait in the hall. Within twenty minutes I had the appointment letter in my hands, and I was secretary to one of the most powerful businesswomen in India. Kathy was an ill-tempered woman who rode rough-shod over all her employees. No amount of efficiency was good enough for her. Soon I got dog-tired of being ordered about.

After six months of constant torture, something snapped in my mind. It was 8 PM on a Saturday evening and I was sitting in Kathy's office listening to her. She reeled off everything I was to be ready with, that Monday. Suddenly I went berserk. I stood up, walked over, and banged my hands on her table. I pulled her out of her chair, held her in an iron grip and gave her four hard slaps on the cheeks and said, 'You bitch, I give the orders from now on. I am simply tired and fed up of you yelling at me. Next time you order me about I will shut you up once and for all.'

To my surprise, she looked up at me coyly and said, 'Oh John, thank you for that. I needed that badly. Are you free tomorrow?' I was shell-shocked. This was the last reaction I had expected. That was when I should have walked out. But I did not. I liked the thought of living off Kathy's money.

We had a whirlwind courtship and were soon married. Kathy was as bossy at home as she was at the office. It was always, 'John, do this' and 'John do that.' That was when I met Sophie at a bar. One evening when I was drinking down my woes, Sophie had sidled up to me and said, 'How about buying a lonely girl a drink?'

I had acquiesced, and we had made love in one of those murky hotel rooms where no questions were asked. It was three months later that Sophie had suggested we get rid of Kathy. The modus operandi was also hers. Sophie was a reader of crime thrillers. She had learned that one of the means of bringing about a slow death was by making a person ingest small quantities of Arsenic over a period of time.

I had gleefully agreed to Sophie's scheme and began adding Arsenic to Kathy's Coffee daily. For the first three months, nothing happened. But as time went by Kathy's health deteriorated. It was seven months now and she was in the hospital with organ failure. We were just leaving the shack when my phone rang. The doctor at the other end said, 'Mr. John Richardson, your wife is no more.' I made the necessary noises and parted with Sophie. In a day Kathy was buried. As the husband of the deceased, Kathy's vast financial empire passed into my hands.

Six months later I married Sophie. We lived in Kathy's huge villa and looked forward to our life together. Then it happened. It was a Saturday evening and it was pure chance that I had come home early. I parked my car in the garage and entered the front door of our villa. I could hear Sophie speaking on the phone in our bedroom. I stood electrified. Her voice came through clearly. 'Oh Richard, darling,' she said, 'I have been giving him the stuff every day in his Coffee. Don't worry, it will happen soon.'

An Unspoiled Girl

Mary was talking nineteen to the dozen. John passed her a side-long glance as she paused for breath. She had been talking ever since they had begun driving along the mountain road. Mary was at the wheel.

'Oh, darling.' Mary said. 'I really cannot wait to start a family. I hope I conceive soon.'

'Yes, dear.' John said. 'Wouldn't that be wonderful? I hope we have a little girl who is as sweet and pretty as you are.'

Mary blushed. Thank god I will be rid of her soon, John thought to himself. John had married Mary six months back. During the courtship days, he had really been in love with her. But within three months of their marriage, he began getting fed up with Mary. She was always gushing and so full of herself. John kicked himself for the umpteenth time for falling in love with a pretty face.

He hankered for a more adventurous woman. Someone who would make love with gay abandon. Because of her strict upbringing, Mary was very restricted in bed. John was a billionaire and an adventurer. He was chief of the John Hardy financial empire worth billions of dollars. And he had picked Mary who came from a middle-class family for a bride. Initially, he had been completely bowled over by Mary's simple unspoilt charm and had believed he was deeply in love with her.

But soon Mary's simple ways, her obsequious mannerisms which had so enamoured him earlier became painful to put up with. Mary had no idea how to carry herself in John's social circles. She was an unspoilt child of a middle-class family and a regular churchgoer. She was not used to the

ways of John's high society friends and their wives. That was when John had met Rita. Rita came across as someone totally different from Mary. John had bedded her within three days of meeting her.

The fun of making love to an uninhibited woman with gay abandon was something special. At first, John had thought of a divorce with Mary, but he knew he would have to shell out fat sums of money as alimony and settlement. He would also lose his estate. He was sure of what the judges would decide. In their eyes, Mary would be the poor unspoilt girl who was being exploited by a rich adventurer.

That was when the idea of getting rid of Mary entered John's mind. Well, it would not be long now. They would soon reach the top of the mountain and get down for a rest. He was sure Mary would walk over to the edge of the ravine and invite him to admire the view for she loved nature's beauty. It would be irresistible to her.

And a quick shove on the back would ensure he would be rid of this vacuous girl forever. Soon they reached the top. As expected, Mary stopped the car and suggested taking a rest. They stepped out to admire the view. Mary walked over to the edge of the road and said, 'John, darling, come over here and look at this beautiful view.' John walked over and stood by her.

Suddenly without warning, Mary stepped behind him and gave him a sharp push with all her strength. John's body hurtled down into the ravine and came to rest at the bottom very dead. Mary calmly walked back to the car, opened the boot and looked at the man lying inside the boot and said smilingly, 'Richard darling, you can come out. I have done it. We are rich now.' Richard stepped out of the boot of the car and

grabbed her. They rushed into the back seat of the car and made love passionately.

The Spot Without Grass

I walked through the lush green pathway lined with trees on either side. I looked up to see the branches of the trees jutting out to form a thick panorama above my head. I stopped midway to observe the circular bit of earth where there was no grass. It was funny that in the entire pathway no grass grew on that bit of land alone. For some reason I could not fathom, I did not want to step on that part of the pathway. It gave me the creeps. I stepped around it carefully preferring to keep to the grassy bits.

Funny the way grass never grew on that spot, I thought to myself. I was not a man who believed in the supernatural. I was a geneticist who believed that every phenomenon in this world had a natural explanation. In the distance, I could see the hedge lining the garden of my villa. I had bought the villa a month ago at an auction. There was some talk about the villa being haunted to which I had paid scant attention.

The tale went that the last occupant of the villa was a failed painter couple who lived there as recluses. They had put everything their imagination could conjure up into the canvas. It was said that the painter was so dejected when his wife died that he had hanged himself somewhere in the vast lawn surrounding the villa. Since the couple had died, no one who had attempted to live in the villa had been able to do so in peace. Thanks to this spooky tale I had very few competitors at the auction and had managed to outbid everyone very quickly indeed.

I had purchased the villa as I wanted someplace to live quietly in the countryside with my new bride Sheila and to carry on my research work in genetic design in peace. The minute I had set sight on the villa I had

decided Sheila would love it. I had made up my mind then and there to buy it at any cost. My research was at the stage when all the years of hard work were about to produce a result.

The first day I had driven to the villa, which was a week back, my nostrils were assailed by the odour a house emanates when it has not been lived in for a long time. I had enlisted the services of a house cleaning company at an exorbitant price and managed to get everything in order. This was my surprise for Sheila. Sheila was forty-two years my junior. She was a young researcher in the field of genetics, and I had been her research advisor at MIT.

We had spent three years as student and teacher before she had professed her love for me on the day, she had submitted her Ph.D. thesis. I was outraged as I was sixty-five and she was a mere twenty-three. I had tried to dissuade her but was slowly drawn to her. Soon we had decided on marriage. It was a month since we had been married. After a whirlwind honeymoon to Switzerland, Sheila had left me to visit her parents in the state of Virginia for a month.

Meanwhile, I had quietly planned this little surprise for her. I walked past the gates of the villa and entered the front door. Today I was planning to examine the cellar. The cleaning company had told me they had set everything in order there. But I had never visited the cellar myself. I went down and unbolted the door of the cellar and carefully climbed down the staircase. I found that every object in the cellar had something to do with paintings.

I walked over to a stack of canvases artfully arranged in a corner of the room. I looked through the paintings one by one. Suddenly I drew my breath in sharply. For the painting, I was holding in my hand was that of

the pathway lined by the trees I had just come through on my way to the villa. Yes, right down to the grass-less bit in the middle. I shrugged my shoulders and forgot about it.

The next day I drove Sheila straight from the airport to our villa. ‘Why darling! What a lovely surprise!’ she exclaimed when I showed her our new house. Soon we settled down in the villa. The days went by happily. We made love, cooked food, and planned our life together. One day, we were walking through the pathway and reached the point where there had been no grass all these days. To my surprise, I suddenly saw that a few bits and pieces of grass had started sprouting on the spot. I was startled but kept my thoughts to myself.

As soon as we had returned to our villa a thought struck me and I went down to the cellar. I pulled out the painting of the pathway. I drew in my breath sharply. Where there had been no grass in the painting when I had examined it the first time there were a few pieces of grass like what I had seen on the pathway five minutes back. I was puzzled. I did not mention anything to Sheila just to avoid worrying her. Sheila had a horror of the supernatural.

The days went by in absolute bliss. As our happiness in each other’s company grew, the grass on the pathway grew. So did the grass on the painting. In a month, the entire pathway was filled with grass. The painting too reflected the reality. Two months had gone by in absolute bliss. I was puzzled and a shade apprehensive by this strange phenomenon, but I let sleeping dogs lie. I would investigate it in good time. My scientific mind still believed that there was a rational explanation for even something as inexplicable as this.

The next week, on Saturday evening, Sheila drove to a town, two hundred miles away. She wanted to spend a day with a friend who was passing by on her way to Kansas. She promised me that she would be back on Monday morning. Sunday dawned bright and sunny. I finished my breakfast and moved to the cellar to begin my investigation. I pulled out the painting which was the source of the mystery. Suddenly I stood rooted to the spot. To my horror, I could once again see the bit at the centre of the pathway and there was no grass on it.

The phone shrilled loudly in the hall. I rushed out of the cellar into the hall and picked up the phone and said, 'Hello.'

A voice came from the other end sounding terse, 'Mr. Richard Havenscroft?'

'Yes, speaking,' I said.

'I am afraid I have some bad news for you. Your wife died in a car crash last night.'

Shell-shocked I dropped the phone. Like a man in a dream, I slowly moved through the front door and through the front gate into the lawn. My feet automatically took me towards the pathway lined with the trees. I came to the edge of the pathway. Just like the painting I had seen a few minutes back, there was no grass in the circular spot again. Just above the spot, there was a noose hanging from the branch of a tree. Placed conveniently below it was a small stool. Like a man in a trance, I walked towards the stool.

The Last Time He Saw Her

Several times John had wanted to go back and look at his Joanne. But he could not gather the courage. He had realised that he would have to wait for another twenty years before he could see her again. He had etched the image of her face in his mind ***the last time he saw her***. She had looked lovely and beautiful as always. He had outfoxed them all. Now they cannot take her away from him.

Joanne was the apple of his eye. She meant everything in life to him. His only daughter. Well, he had done what he had to do. They were searching everywhere for her. But he was sure no one would find her. He had whispered in her ears that he was saving her from the world when he had left her. He had hoped she would understand. He was sure she had. She had not said anything, but she had had a smile on her face.

What would she look like twenty years from now when he went back and found her again? She would be a young woman by then. He was sure she would look incredibly beautiful. He tried to imagine his daughter Joanne as a young woman. She would look lovely with her blond lustrous hair framing her pretty face. She would look like an angelic fairy. An angel from heaven. He imagined giving her away as a bride on the day of her marriage.

She would be dressed in a lovely white gown. She would walk with him along the aisle and he would give her away to her prince charming. She would look every bit as beautiful as her mother Mary had done at their wedding. Why did Mary have to do this to him? Why did she want to leave him? He had been so kind to her. He had taken care of her so well. He loved her more than any other man in the world. Couldn't Mary understand?

Not only did Mary want to leave him but she had also wanted to take his pretty little Joanne with her. He still remembered that day a month back when the judge had banged his gavel and given judgement in the family court. What was it the old goat had said? He still remembered the words, 'After due examination by competent psychiatrists, John Richardson has been found to be of unsound mind as he is suffering from serious delusions. I hereby grant Mary Richardson divorce from John Richardson and grant complete custody of their daughter Joanne Richardson to Mary.'

That was when he had decided no one was going to take Joanne away from him. He had kidnapped her. He had taken her to the woods thirty miles from the city, drugged her and buried her by the side of the big cedar tree. He was sure nobody could ever find her there. He would come back for her in another twenty years. She would have grown into a beautiful young woman by then. He was sure she was safe now. All he had to do was wait.

The Splashing Noise

I woke up at midnight as usual when I heard the sound. It was the sound of splashing water. It seemed to be coming from the swimming pool as if someone was having a midnight swim. I had been hearing it every night for the past week. Every night the sound had been growing in intensity. It was as if someone was wading deeper into the waters each passing day. I had ignored the sound for the first few days.

But for the last four days, I had stepped out and checked the swimming pool. There seemed to be no one there. I had returned to my room and managed to fall asleep after tossing and turning a little bit. My imagination was probably working overtime, I told myself. My mind had been in a rather depressed state ever since my wife Mary had disappeared six months back.

Tonight, as usual, I got out of my bed and stepped out. I walked over to the swimming pool and sat by the edge. There was nobody in the pool as usual. The splashing sound had stopped. I lit a cigarette. I looked at the calm placid waters of the pool. I remembered the times I had spent with Mary in the swimming pool. It had been my idea to construct the swimming pool as an addition to the huge estate we lived in. Mary had not been really keen on adding a swimming pool to our estate.

I had really loved Mary. She was extremely pretty. She had blue eyes and an upturned nose. Her pretty face was framed with wavy, lustrous blond hair. She had meant everything in the world to me. We had been a very happy couple. I remembered our times together. She would wake up every day at 5.30 in the morning and bang her pillow on my face. She would be half undressed. I would grab her and pull her down. We would make love passionately.

Then she would get out of the bed after half an hour, walk naked to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She would come back to the bedroom with two omelettes and a plate full of beef and tomato sandwiches. We would finish our breakfast and after an hour we would step out to the pool for a swim. Mary was not a natural at swimming but could find her way around in a swimming pool. I loved to watch Mary in a bikini. She would step out of the pool drenched and dripping and I would immediately grab her from behind, strip her clothes off and we would make love passionately.

Sometimes I would play tricks on her by pulling her legs from below the water as she splashed about. My Mary had meant everything in the world to me. But all that was in the past. Mary had disappeared six months back and the police were clueless about her whereabouts. The vast estate that had belonged to her had passed on to me.

Sometimes we used to go for a midnight swim in the pool. But that was rare. I remember the last time we had been in the swimming pool at midnight. I had grabbed Mary's leg from below and pulled her under and held her head below the water until she had choked to death. I had buried her body in the vast grounds of the estate. You see, I had really loved Mary, but I loved the idea of inheriting her vast estate a wee bit more attractive.

After ten minutes of watching the waters of the lake, I finally stood up. As usual, my nerves had made me imagine things, I thought to myself. I shrugged my shoulders and turned to make my way back to my room. Suddenly, I heard the splashing sound again. I turned back to look at the pool. Suddenly, a long arm made of rotting flesh and covered with weeds stretched itself out of the pool, grabbed me by the neck and dragged me into its depths.

The Splashing Noise - Version 2

I woke up at midnight as usual when I heard the sound. It was the sound of splashing water. It seemed to be coming from the swimming pool as if someone was having a midnight swim. I had been hearing it every night for the past week. Every night the sound had been growing in intensity. It was as if someone was wading deeper into the waters each passing day. I had ignored the sound for the first few days.

But for the last four days, I had stepped out and checked the swimming pool. There seemed to be no one there. I had returned to my room and managed to fall asleep after tossing and turning a little bit. I told myself my imagination was probably working overtime. My mind had been in a rather depressed state ever since my wife Mary had died six months back by drowning in our swimming pool.

Tonight, as usual, I got out of my bed and stepped out. I walked over to the swimming pool and sat by the edge. There was nobody in the pool as usual. The splashing sound had stopped. I lit a cigarette. I looked at the calm placid waters of the pool. I remembered the times I had spent with Mary in the swimming pool. It had been my idea to construct the swimming pool as an addition to the huge estate we lived in. Mary had not been really keen on adding a swimming pool to our estate.

I had really loved Mary. She was extremely pretty. She had blue eyes and an upturned nose. Her pretty face was framed with wavy, lustrous blond hair. She had meant everything in the world to me. We had been a very happy couple. I remembered our times together. She would wake up every day at 5.30 in the morning and bang her pillow on my face. She would be half undressed. I would grab her and pull her down. We would make love passionately.

Then she would get out of the bed after half an hour, walk naked to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She would come back to the bedroom with two omelettes and a plate full of beef and tomato sandwiches. We would finish our breakfast and after an hour we would step out to the pool for a swim. Mary was not a natural at swimming but could find her way around in a swimming pool. I loved to watch Mary in a bikini. She would step out of the pool drenched and dripping and I would immediately grab her from behind, strip her clothes off and we would make love passionately.

Sometimes I would play tricks on her by pulling her legs from below the water as she splashed about. My Mary had meant everything in the world to me. Sometimes we used to go for a midnight swim in the pool. But all that was in the past. After Mary's death, I had not gone for a swim in the pool. I could not bear to. Our wonderful moments in the pool when we would happily splash about for hours were too vividly etched in my mind. I also felt ridden with guilt for insisting that we build that swimming pool in the first place.

After Mary's death, I had completely slipped into depression. The days were long and at nights I could not sleep and often I would spend entire nights tossing and turning listlessly. I would sometimes deliriously reach out for Mary in the middle of the night only to find there was no one sleeping next to me.

My close friends were alarmed by my deterioration. I pecked at my food. Every meal was a chore to be gotten over with. I could not concentrate on my work. I became a shadow of my former self. It had been exactly six months since Mary died and I no longer wanted to carry on with life. I felt life without Mary was simply not worth living.

After another ten minutes of staring at the waters of the lake, I finally stood up. I turned to make my way back to my room feeling sick and miserable. Suddenly, I heard the splashing sound again. I turned back to look at the pool. I was startled by what I saw. I looked again and sure enough, I could see Mary's lovely face smiling at me from the depths of the pool.

She was looking beautiful. As fresh as the young bride I had wed two years ago. There was a beatific smile on her face and her eyes were shining with a bright light. There was a lustrous white halo around her head. I looked at her beautiful face standing rooted to the spot. After a few seconds, Mary opened her mouth and spoke. Her voice came wafting to my ears from the depths of the pool.

She said, 'My darling, I know you mourn me deeply. I always knew how much you loved me. I felt the same about you. I understand your world revolved around me as did mine around you. We were that rare breed of one in a thousand, made for each other couple who were meant to waltz through life in soulful bliss. I am sorry that I have left you to fend for yourself in this big world. If things had been the other way around and you had left me I would have felt the same.'

But you should realize that we all must go when our time comes. We only have a lease on our lives. We are not permanent. Nothing is permanent. And likewise, nothing that is born ever dies. Things just change from one form to another. Rest assured, I am watching you from a safe place of my own and I am always close to you. My darling, you have to live a lifetime. You should not waste it away in misery living in memories from the past. You have a lot to achieve and a lot to offer the world.

Do not let grief overcome you. Do not let life defeat you however daunting it may be. A wasted life is not a life at all. God has put us into this world to overcome challenges. I know you are neither a coward nor weak-willed. Take life like a bull by the horns and fight with it. Find yourself another woman. There is nothing wrong in starting afresh. I really want you to do that. Live happily. I know what I am saying is easier said than done but I must point you in the right direction.

We have to let our dead past bury itself. Whenever you think of me remember this little piece of advice, I am giving you now. I want you to promise me you will abide by my wishes. Now, dip your hand in the waters of this pool and say, 'I promise'.

I hesitated a moment and then moved forward and dipped my hand into the waters of the pool and said, 'I promise'. Mary's face slowly faded away from the depths of the waters like a vision. I stood up and made my way to the bedroom determined to keep my promise to my beloved.

The Witness

I moved from rock to rock carefully signalling my twelve-year-old son Derrick to follow me. The rocks were covered with green slippery moss. I did not want either of us to slip and fall into the water. I was a single father living with my son Derrick in the house just a little distance away from the stream. My wife Mary had suddenly disappeared a year ago. The police had never been able to discover where Mary had gone. They had checked in hotels all over the city and had enquired from all the people she was associated with.

But they had never found her. I was heartbroken. And my son Derrick had been inconsolable. He missed his mother so badly. I had done my best to take care of Derrick. The little clearing in the middle of the greenery which we had just left was the place where Derrick and Mary used to camp on vacations. So, Derrick and I made it a point to visit the place frequently now. Derrick used to go and stand at a particular spot every time we visited the place staring at the ground. I was worried about Derrick.

Was he remembering his mother too often? I was trying to be both a father and a mother to him. I had often told him 'Derrick, I am both your daddy and mummy now. Never forget that.' He had nodded his head solemnly every time I said that. Once Derrick had made his way to the spot in the middle of the night by himself. I had to rush to the place and bring him back. What was the matter with Derrick? Should I take him to a psychiatrist? Why was he so forlorn?

Am I succeeding in filling the void left in his life by Mary's disappearance? I needed to try harder. Soon we made our way across to our villa. There was a police jeep standing outside the gates. I was

suddenly wondering if the police had any news about Mary. Suddenly inspector Radisson Clark stepped out of the jeep and said, 'Mr John Barclay, you are under arrest for the murder of your wife Mary Barclay. You have the right to keep silent and you have the right to a lawyer. Anything you say may be used against you.'

Suddenly I sighed as I realized I had been right in my suspicion that Derrick had seen me kill Mary and take her to that spot and bury her. And the police had somehow managed to get it out of him. Well, what could I do? I loved Mary so much and she had to go and have this affair with that fellow who had visited us last year. I simply could not help doing what I did. I looked at Inspector Clark and asked him just in order to be sure, 'How did you find out?'

'Your son Derrick told us when we approached him through the proper channels. He will be the prime witness in your trial.' Inspector Radisson said. 'We had to be very careful to talk to him without your knowledge, but he told us what he knew finally. He hates you for it. And we also discovered her bones from the spot from which you are coming just now.'

I looked at inspector Radisson and said, 'I just need one assurance from you, inspector Radisson. Promise me that my son will be placed in the hands of kind people in a good foster home.'

'I promise,' said inspector Radisson.

One Too Many

Zak looked at the redhead seated opposite him and marvelled at her thirst for alcohol. She had been consuming whiskey ever since they had arrived at the club. This was their first date.

'Rita do stop drinking,' Zak said with concern. 'That is the 4th glass of whiskey you have had. Even three is ***one too many***.'

'You want me sober for bed isn't it?' asked Rita.

'I don't believe in jumping into bed on first dates,' replied Zak charmingly.

'My, my, aren't you grand,' replied Rita.

'I like to take things slowly,' said Zak. 'I believe in understanding the woman with whom I want to have a relationship. Nor do I believe in one-night stands.'

'Your sentiments do you credit Zak,' said Rita. 'Won't you ask me for a dance?'

'But of course, Rita' said Zak with a smile.

They stood up and moved to the dance floor. She was like a delicate flower in his arms, fresh and unspoiled by the vicissitudes of life. The odour of whiskey in her breath only accentuated her beauty. Zak realized he was enjoying holding her in his arms.

'Oh! You are so manly!' whispered Rita into his ears.

Soon they got back to their table and looked into each other's eyes like moon-struck lovers.

'Take it slow, Zak. No false moves,' Zak thought to himself.

'Let us order food,' said Rita suddenly.

They ordered a couple of Cheeseburgers, baby-back pork ribs, beef sausages and a rice dish. Zak enjoyed the food and looked forward to what was to come after it. Zak usually cultivated women he was interested in over a period of time. But this girl seemed to be keen to push things forward quickly. He did not mind. This would be a new experience.

After dinner, they danced again and left the club at 10 PM. They got into the car and wondering whether he was rushing things, Zak asked her, 'Where to?'

'Where to? Of course, to some hotel room where we can be alone darling,' said Rita mischievously. 'Unless you don't want to have any fun.'

Zak grinned impishly, and they soon checked into a seedy hotel where no questions were asked. They took the lift and as soon as they entered their room Zak grabbed Rita.

'No darling! Let us do it my way,' said Rita and pushed him into the bed.

She walked over to the mirror table and placed her handbag on it and looked at herself in the mirror. She turned around and faced him. Slowly

she unbuttoned her gown and stood in her bra and panties. Zak's eyes grew wide.

Suddenly Rita picked her handbag from the table and put her hand into it as Zak watched. She pulled out a .38 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver and in one quick smooth motion aimed it at Zak's forehead and pulled the trigger. Zak slumped on the bed very dead.

Rita walked over to the bed, looked at Zak's dead face and said, 'That is for my sister Julie.' She dressed calmly, picked up her handbag, took the lift and left the hotel through the back door.

The next day the headlines in the newspapers screamed.

'The serial killer Zakaria Wilson who was suspected of the murder of ten women in Oregon state was found shot dead in a hotel room today morning. He was seen entering the hotel with a redhead last night around 11 PM. He had been eluding the long arm of the law for quite some time. The police suspect the redhead was headed for the same fate as his other victims. But he had tried his act too many times. One time too many.'

Three's a Crowd

Mat and Hans sat in the back of the closed van which carried the trunk-full of cash to be dispensed at automatic teller machines all over the city. They were on the outskirts of the city, three kilometres away from the bridge that led to the city gates.

Mat blew a puff of smoke into the air from his cigarette and said, ‘This van is too small for us. Three’s a crowd. Two people are enough for this job. After all, it is broad daylight.’

Jonas the driver of the van spoke from the driver’s seat in the front, through a partition. ‘You never know, Mat. Too many armed robberies these days. It is only safe to have two guards and a driver.’

‘I am equal to two men. I can take care of myself,’ said Mat. ‘I am a handful with a gun.’

Jonas shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘You know, Mat, bankers are a touchy lot and are fond of their money. And these days you can never tell when some gun-toting smart-ass kid might go wild and decide to get rich quick.’

Hans a German and the youngest of them all asked, ‘Ever seen any action, you two?’

‘I was doing duty for the good old bank in Pennsylvania three years back,’ Mat said. ‘Van I was guarding got waylaid by three punks with masks on their faces. One of them was a girl. Shot one kid clean through the head. Other kid and girl escaped in a getaway car. Police could never find them. They had no record.’

'I have been in a skirmish or two when I was young but never in the line of duty for the good old bank,' Jonas piped in.

Hans said with some feeling, 'This is my first job as a guard. I have not killed anyone till now. I don't want to either.'

'You are still a young boy and you are soft,' said Mat with a grin. 'Once you have been on the job for twenty years you will grow into a hard-boiled son of a bitch like me. Your time for action will come. By the way, how is Hannah?'

'Giving me hell about getting hitched together,' said Hans with a grin. 'I keep telling her I am trying to save money for it and will marry her soon.'

'As long as she shares her bed with you, it is fine, isn't it, Hans?' chuckled Jonas from the front.

'Listen kid, marry her when you can before you lose her,' said Mat sagely. 'You will never make a pile from this job unless you loot one of these vans we guard.'

'That is an idea,' grinned Hans.

Soon they were on the outskirts of the city and were about to cross the bridge over the river. Suddenly at a distance, they could see a young woman standing in the middle of the road waving her hands wildly and gesturing frantically to them. As they came closer, they could see her clothes were torn and her hair a total mess.

When they were within a hundred feet of the girl, Hans exclaimed, 'Oh my God! That is Hannah. Jonas, stop the van.'

It was strictly against regulations to stop the van anywhere except at teller machines. But the sight of Hannah's frantic face forced Jonas to bring the van to a screeching halt. Mat and Hans got out of the van. Jonas had orders never to leave the driver's seat. Hannah came limping into Hans' arms. Her face was bruised all over. She looked like she had been beaten black and blue.

'Oh! Hans, I have been raped and beaten up by that scum,' sobbed Hannah. 'And he looked so fatherly and nice...' There was pain and distress written all over her face.

'Tell us what happened, girl,' said Hans looking startled.

'I tried to hitch a ride from Denver yesterday. Remember I had told you I was going there to meet Penny. I missed the bus back to the city and tried to hitch a ride. An old goat old enough to be my father picked me up. And, and...' faltered Hannah.

'The first thing to do is to get to the city, call an ambulance and get you to a hospital. We cannot wait here with this van. Get into the front with Jonas, Hannah,' said Mat and turned to get back into the van. His face looked grim.

As soon as Mat had his back to him, Hans pulled out his revolver from the holster and shot Mat right through the head. Hannah reached into her torn blouse, pulled out an automatic and fired at Jonas who slumped forward in the driver's seat.

Hans walked over to Mat's body and kicked him in the ribs. 'So high and mighty aren't you. That is for my brother you killed in Pennsylvania.'

Hannah and Hans threw their bodies into the river. Hans got into the driver's seat with Hannah by his side, turned the van around and drove away in the opposite direction.

The Tree with A Hole

I woke up at 6.00 AM in the morning. I stretched and yawned and looked at the empty pillow by my side in misery. I still remembered how Maggie's beautiful face would look up and smile at me every morning from that pillow. It had been nearly a year since Maggie had disappeared. The police had given up searching for her and she was presumed dead. But I had still not gotten over it all.

I remembered our usual morning routine. We would wake up fresh after a wonderful night of lovemaking and she would wake up and bang a pillow down on my face. I would pull her down and we would make love again. She would then get up and walk out of the bedroom to the kitchen naked and make breakfast for us.

I loved the way she used to make omelettes. She would make them just the way I liked them. We were really a 'made for each other' couple. Everyone had said so. And we were really in love with each other. After breakfast, we would set out for our usual morning walk in the vast estate which Maggie had inherited from her uncle after he had died. It had passed on to me after Maggie's unfortunate disappearance a year back.

We would move along the vast beautiful lawns of the estate, past the Golf course into the shades of the tall trees outside the gate. We would move down the pathway and we would walk up to this one point where the trees were thick and dense. We would move between the trees until we reached one particular tree.

It was a tall peculiar tree with a round hole in its trunk through which one could see the sun shining. I would then hold her pinned to the trunk of the tree and kiss her passionately on the lips. We would look into each

other's eyes and surrender to the delicious pleasure of lovemaking right by the side of the tree. This was an every morning routine which I sorely missed.

Sometimes we used to visit the tree at night especially when the moonlight was bright. After Maggie's unfortunate death I made it a point to visit the tree every morning. I would make my way slowly. And I would look up at the hole through which the Sun shined brightly. And every morning suddenly the bright light shining through the hole in the trunk would disappear and instead I would see Maggie's lovely face peeping at me through the hole.

I would see her beautiful face with the upturned nose and blue eyes, framed by her lovely lustrous blond hair. The face would just appear for a second and disappear. I never visited the tree at night after Maggie's disappearance. I remember the last time we had visited the tree at night. Maggie had cuddled up to me and had talked about growing old together. She had talked about our children and how we would hold them up and scold them and take them to Hockey matches.

That was the night I had strangled her and buried her body at the bottom of the tree. You see I loved Maggie a lot, but I loved her wealth just a little bit more.

Section 2

Science Fiction / Humour

The Seven Year Itch

The year was 2033 AD. Professor Heidi Heisenberg stepped out of her time transporter in disgust. She still found herself in 2033 when she had expected to step out in 2040 AD. Nothing had changed. She had spent the seven best years of her life on research to continue where Einstein had left off.

Her seven-year itch, she called it. Her dream of developing a time machine that would transport human beings forward in time by seven years remained just that, a dream. She looked at her puppy Diamond and said sadly, ‘Oh Diamond! Tell me what must I do? I am a failure as a scientist.’

Looking at her sympathetically, Diamond stood up on his hind legs and yapped seven times. This was his way of begging for dog biscuits. The professor placed exactly seven biscuits on Diamond’s plate from the kitchen and placed it in front of the puppy. Diamond set about scrunching the biscuits happily. He gave seven sharp yaps after finishing the biscuits. This was his way of saying thank you.

Professor Heidi sighed. Her fellow scientists at MIT considered her a crank with an obsession. ‘Why seven years they had asked? Why not a hundred?’

‘Well, there are seven continents in the world, seven seas, seven days in a week. My machine will also use seven, the magic number,’ she had replied.

In desperation, she made some programming changes to her time transporter. She decided she would step into the time transporter and make one final attempt before winding up for the day. She carefully

prepared the machine for one last attempt. She opened the transporter's front door and stepped into the small space meant for the subjects.

She switched on the FTL7 (Faster than light by seven times) drive and waited with bated breath. Nothing happened. No whirr and blur. No zooming in or out. She stepped out of her machine feeling really dejected. She stretched and yawned tiredly. Time to go home.

Suddenly a huge dog came bounding up to her from the hall and stood on his hind legs and barked seven times. There was something familiar about the dog. After a few minutes Professor Heidi shouted in gleeful euphoria, 'Oh my god, I believe I have done it. You are Diamond. How you have grown! Eureka, Finally after all these years! Let the two of us celebrate with some dog biscuits, Diamond.'

She went into the kitchen and filled a plate with seven dog biscuits. She looked at the biscuits on the plate. They looked very inviting. The occasion definitely demanded some kind of unique celebration. But how could she mark it as unique? Heidi suddenly grinned and pulled out another plate and filled that too with seven dog biscuits. She went back to the hall and placed the two plates on the floor. And then, Diamond and the professor scrunched the biscuits in immense enjoyment.

Give me Five!

The year was 2046 AD. Nobel Laureate Professor Harrington Rutherford sat in his lab staring at the prototype of the humanoid he had created. He had modelled the humanoid on the male homo sapiens. It had all the characteristics of a human male including the capacity to mate. He had named the humanoid Romeo. The last few days, the news stations around the world had been talking about nothing but Rutherford's latest invention.

But Rutherford was not happy. Romeo had this strange habit of raising his hands keeping his palms open every now and then. This quirk in the humanoid's behaviour baffled Rutherford. He had not programmed Romeo to exhibit this behaviour. Rutherford was annoyed that things were not going perfectly according to plan.

He spent the next few days trying to re-program the humanoid but to no avail. Romeo continued to exhibit the same behaviour. Well, there was nothing he could do about it. He stored Romeo in his metal case in the safe house. Tomorrow he would begin work on the female prototype.

In another week he was ready with the female humanoid. He had already decided her name. She was to be called Juliet. Juliet was based on the female species of homo sapiens. To his horror, Juliet exhibited the same behaviour as Romeo. She too raised her hands keeping her palms open every now and then. Professor Rutherford was baffled.

He put Juliet in her metal case in the safe house and decided he would try and understand this strange behaviour of the humanoids the next day. The next morning dawned bright and sunny and Rutherford

reached his lab at 9 AM. His assistants Ramsay and Harry transported the two humanoids in their metal cases and brought them to the lab.

The humanoids were finally let out of their cases. As soon as they set eyes on each other Romeo and Juliet rushed towards each other. When they were really close, they suddenly stopped in their tracks and looked into each other's eyes for a long time.

Finally, Romeo said, 'Oh Juliet, my love, who would have thought I would meet you after so many centuries? Hooray! Give me five!' With that Romeo raised his hands and pushed his open palms towards Juliet.

With tears in her eyes Juliet replied, 'Oh my sweet, I have been waiting so long for this moment.'

Their open palms met in mid-air with a loud clap for a big high five! Professor Rutherford had tears in his eyes.

The Five-Set Thriller

The world-famous scientist Professor Lucio Einstein stared at the latest robot he had created in puzzlement. He had named the robot Andrei after his country's famous retired tennis star Andrei Agassi as he intended the robot to have the ability to play tennis. But the robot had steadfastly refused to pick up the tennis racquet he had placed in front of it.

In another week he created Andrei's partner to be, Roger named after the Swiss tennis player Roger Federer. The professor's assistants let the two robots out of their cases on the tennis field hoping for a match the next day morning. Roger immediately picked up his tennis racquet and jumped up and down raring to go.

But Andrei just refused to budge. When Lucio tried to put the racquet into his hand, he simply dropped it. A week passed by and Lucio tried all the programming changes he could make, but Andrei refused to take the tennis racquet into his hands. Lucio was puzzled. Why was this happening?

That night Professor Einstein suddenly got an idea. He worked on another robot for a week. This robot was a female prototype. On D-Day, Professor Einstein's assistants let Andrei and the female prototype out of their cases on the tennis field. Andrei still refused to pick up the racquet.

Professor Einstein walked up to Andrei and whispered something in his ears. Suddenly Andrei's face brightened, and the two robots picked up their tennis racquets and they played a five-set-thriller which the female prototype won. As they were making their way back to the lab after the

game with the robots safely in their cases, one of Lucio's assistants asked him, 'What did you tell Andrei?'

'I told him the lady who was about to play tennis with him was named Steffi after Andrei Agassi's wife, tennis player Steffi Graf,' chuckled Lucio.

Captain Haddock Returns to Earth

The year was 2045 AD. Captain Remington Haddock looked into the screen of his sonic boom communications computer and sighed. He had been cut-off from earth without any means of communication for the past two days. The sonic boom computer had suddenly conked out two days back and he was deserted in this vast universe in his spaceship.

Thankfully, the instruments meant for navigation were still intact, but he was running short of fuel because of a leak in one of the jet engines. He did not have enough fuel to reach earth intact. He had managed to clog the hole in the engine to prevent further loss of fuel. But his spaceship would probably collapse long before he could even get halfway to earth.

Normally he would have ordered the fuel through the sonic boom computer and it would have been uploaded to his ship, sent across space as small dissembled particles through the FTCAS (Fuel Transport Channels Across Space). He needed to somehow power up the engine. Any form of energy was okay. If only DinDin had been here, he would have thought up of a solution in minutes.

But DinDin was probably in some other part of the universe busy with some adventure of his own. He thought of his great-grandfather Archibald Haddock the sea-faring captain and his close friend the reporter TinTin. DinDin was to Captain Remington Haddock what TinTin had been to Captain Archibald Haddock. Suddenly Remington thought of an idea and smacked his fist into his palm.

‘Gosh, why didn’t I think of that earlier?’ He said to himself. ‘Any form of energy would do to power up the engine, right? Then why not sound?’

He went to his cabin and rummaged through his personal belongings and pulled out an old sound recording which he had preserved for years. He put it into a sound player and connected it up to the misfiring engine. He switched on the sound system. Suddenly the engine room was filled with the loud, shrill, and piercing voice of the yesteryear's opera sensation the Milanese Nightingale Bianca Castafiore's rendition of the Jewel Song from Faust.

'Ahh, My Beauty Past Compare... These Jewels Bright I Wear... Tell Me Mirror... Was I Ever Marguerite...'

The loud high decibel voice of Bianca Castafiore filled the engine room. Remington Haddock stuffed some cotton into his ears hurriedly and grinned to himself, 'That amount of sound energy should be enough for him to reach earth and then some more...'

Captain Jackson Haddock and Professor Candyfloss Calculus

The year was 2030 AD. Captain Jackson Haddock was sailing in the Mediterranean Sea in his ship ‘Sirius’ with his crew of 20 men, DinDin and Professor Candyfloss Calculus. Captain Haddock had had a tired day and wanted to retire early to his cabin. He walked over to DinDin’s cabin, bid him goodnight, and retired to his cabin in the ship. It was 2 AM when he woke up suddenly. He could not feel the ship moving. In fact, it was very definitely still.

‘Ten thousand blistering barnacles in a thundering typhoon..’ Captain Haddock roared and jumped out of his berth. There was a knock on the door. The captain opened the door and found DinDin standing there, accompanied by his dog Snowy. ‘Why has the ship stopped moving captain?’ asked DinDin gently.

‘That is what I would also like to know. That idiot of an Alan is getting more inefficient each day. Alan! Alan! Where are you?’ roared the captain. Alan was the captain’s, first mate. Alan joined them soon looking puzzled. Suddenly, to everybody’s surprise, the ship started moving again.

‘Well, Alan, why did the ship stop just now?’ demanded Captain Haddock.

‘I don’t know,’ said Alan looking puzzled.

‘Well that is that,’ said DinDin cheerfully. ‘Let us go back to bed captain. It is a quarter past two. We will get to the bottom of this tomorrow morning.’

'Well okay, blistering barnacles! I would dearly like to know what happened just now. I only hope we wake up in one-piece tomorrow morning,' said the captain and they returned to their cabins.

The next day dawned bright and sunny. The captain woke up and looked around for his bottle of Loch Lomond whiskey. He found the bottle, but it was empty. 'That is all right. I will get another one from the storeroom,' thought the captain. He had made sure that a hundred crates of his favourite whiskey Loch Lomond were loaded into the ship before setting sail. He headed straight for the storeroom. He passed Professor Candyfloss Calculus' cabin on the way. The professor had been rather preoccupied the past few days. Captain Haddock had not seen much of him.

The captain soon reached the storeroom, unlocked it, and stood frozen in horror at the sight that met his eyes. There was not a single bottle of whiskey left. All the crates that had contained Loch Lomond were empty. 'Billions of bilious blue blistering barnacles in a thundering typhoon! Wait till I catch the chap who is responsible for this. He is in for a rough time,' he shouted and rushed out.

'DinDin! Candyfloss! my whiskey! Have you seen my whiskey? Some anamorphic aardvark has stolen all my whiskey!' roared the captain.

DinDin and Candyfloss were standing on the deck enjoying the morning sea breeze. Candyfloss was wearing his hearing aid. He spoke, 'Captain, don't worry, your whiskey has finally been put to some good use. It is powering the engines of this ship right now. For a long time, I have been thinking of a solution to the problem of fuel shortage. There is very little fuel to go around in the world. What with air traffic, ships, cars, buses, and the numerous other vehicles plying on the streets of cities, the

world simply cannot survive for long on the amount of fuel we have at the moment.'

Candyfloss pulled out a strip of tablets from his coat pocket, held it up and said with a chuckle. 'I have manufactured a concoction which when added to whiskey will instantly convert it to a multi-purpose fuel that can power any kind of motor. I needed a method to test it and what better way to do it than to invite myself on one of your shipping expeditions, captain. I added my concoction to all your whiskey and converted it to fuel. I emptied the oil from the fuel tanks in your ship and loaded the tanks with the fuel created from your whiskey. Of course, I had to stop your ship for a brief period of time. You can see that my invention has been entirely successful.'

Captain Jackson Haddock who had been listening in a daze till now suddenly stirred. The blood of his great grandfather Captain Archibald Haddock that flowed through his veins was now boiling hot... He remembered what Captain Archibald Haddock had said to Professor Cuthbert Calculus seventy years back when Cuthbert had interfered with his whiskey.

He grabbed Candyfloss by the lapel of his coat and thundered, 'You dared to do that! Borgia! Cannibal! Miserable blundering barbecued blister... It is a disgrace... A scandal... A monstrous attack on the personal freedom of the individual... I will have you impaled... You goat... I will have you skinned alive...'

DinDin quickly inserted himself between Captain Jackson Haddock and Professor Candyfloss Calculus...

The Forgotten Gift

The date was 24th December 2095. Captain Richard Merrymaker looked down at his little six-year-old daughter Nora and smiled at her glum face.

Nora said sullenly. ‘Why do you always have to miss Christmas?’

‘I will be back soon darling. I will not be gone for more than ten days.’ Richard winked at her. ‘Tomorrow Santa Claus will be bringing you gifts and as always you will find them by the side of your Christmas tree. You will enjoy your roast turkey and have a great time with Santa’s gifts.’

‘Oh wow, that would be wonderful. Won’t it? Santa will bring me lots of gifts.’ Nora squealed cheering up.

Richard smiled at his little daughter’s innocence and remembered the times when he had also believed in Santa Claus. When he had been Nora’s age, he too had ardently believed that Santa Claus really existed. It was only when he reached the age of ten, he realized Santa was just a tale.

Richard was about to set out on an interstellar expedition, and it was indeed a pity that the date for take-off had been set for 24th December, just a day before Christmas. He would be missing Christmas yet again.

‘Promise me you will be there for my birthday,’ said Nora looking up at him again.

‘I promise.’ Richard said solemnly.

With that, he turned and hugged his wife Martha and after exchanging a few kisses he joined his crew. Take-off was set for 6.00 PM and the crew got into the spaceship. It was a smooth take-off, unlike the previous time when things had gone wrong. As the spaceship shifted into FTL (Faster Than Light) drive the earth disappeared with a swoosh within seconds of take-off. The spaceship cruised steadily for five hours past many galaxies.

At 11.00 PM Richard moved into his cabin and lay down on his bed after excusing himself from his crew. The past few days had been hectic, and the crew understood that the captain had worked the hardest of them all and needed a bit of rest. Richard lay down on his bed and drifted off into sleep. He woke up the next morning at 7.00 AM.

He stood up and opened the cupboard to get his toothpaste and brush and recoiled in disappointment at what he saw. He stared in dismay at a beautifully decorated package with a label on top. The label bore the legend, 'To My Darling Daughter Nora, Wishing you a very happy and merry Christmas. Your loving Dad.'

With a start, Captain Merrymaker realized he had forgotten to place his gift to Nora by the side of the Christmas tree. Nora had asked for an inter-stellar doll house that he had obtained with great difficulty and now it was too late to give it to her. Nora would be so disappointed. Not only had he missed Christmas, but he had also failed to give her a present.

He immediately rushed into the communications room and switched on the sonic boom computer directly wired to his house. He contacted his wife. Martha's face appeared on the computer screen.

'Hello Richard,' came Martha's voice booming across billions of light years.

'Hi Martha, I had forgotten to leave my gift to Nora by the side of the Christmas tree. Can you just buy a dollhouse for her, wrap it up and give it to her? Also, say sorry from Daddy.'

'But Richard, she found your gift by the Christmas tree. She is playing with the dollhouse right now!'

'How can that be? The gift is still lying in my room in the spacecraft right now. I had left it there during training, the day before take-off. I had purchased it and meant to bring it home.' Richard said.

'Well, I tell you she is playing with it right now,' repeated Martha. 'Take a look yourself if you don't believe me.'

In a second Martha shifted the focus of the computer and Nora appeared on the screen. Sure enough, he could see Nora delightedly playing with the dollhouse he had purchased for her.

Martha came back on focus in a few seconds, smiled and said, 'Satisfied?'

'Well, all right,' said Richard puzzled and moved his hand forward to switch off the sonic boom computer.

But just before he could switch it off, Martha's image disappeared, and he saw a man dressed like Santa Claus, riding a carriage full of gifts driven by reindeers appear on the screen. In the background was the

starry horizon with numerous galaxies. The sound of a song sung in a melodious voice filled the communications room. The song continued

*'Jingle bells, jingle bells,
Jingle all the way!
O what fun it is to ride
In a one-horse sleigh'*

*Some say I am real,
Some say I am a tale,
I am real for folks who have love in their heart,
And do not let their belief in me part,
I disappear when men and women grow old,
I am there only for young folk.
But I always do my job,
Of spreading my message of love,
And I make sure that when gifts are forgotten,
I am around to deliver them to the loved one.'*

Captain Richard Merrymaker listened in stunned but happy silence.

The Evacuation

Captain Rockfort Gulliver steered his spacecraft to avoid hitting a passing meteorite. This was the 14th month since he had left earth in search of another planet for mankind to inhabit. The sole survivors of the resplendent earth; where mankind had thrived for millions of years, was soon about to disintegrate, thanks to man's inherent tendency to self-destruct. They had survived forty world wars, but no one had expected the maniacal dictator Heron Wi Jian to plan the entire disintegration of earth when his army had been defeated.

The day Heron Wi Jian's armies had perished, the maniacal dictator had transmitted a message to all humankind. 'I might be gone but pray for your souls for I shall not die in vain,' he had said, 'From today onwards, each month a part of this planet will erupt in lava. I have set liquid lava bombs covering all parts of the earth. This planet will be rendered inhospitable in fifteen months. So, do not celebrate humans! My soul will not rest in peace till all of you perish.' So, saying the dictator had ended his life.

Captain Rockfort Gulliver still shuddered at the thought of the mass genocide that Heron had orchestrated and the skeletons he had seen neatly laid down in house after house in the aftermath of the war. Precision killing, it was called. The effect of a bomb which rendered a person lifeless and stripped him off all the flesh from his body, leaving no other tell-tale signs of attack.

When Captain Rockfort had left earth, he had exactly fifteen months' time to find a new planet for man to inhabit. It was now fourteen months past and Captain Rockfort had travelled to far corners of the universe to find an oxygenated planet. His quest had been in

vain. Rockfort thought of his wife and five-year-old daughter who were waiting for him. He had kept in touch with the earth and spoken to them every day. There were 365 thousand survivors left on earth and all of them were huddled in the Isonova group of Islands in the Pacific Ocean. These were the sole surviving members of a glorious and thriving civilization. All efforts to deactivate the lava bombs set off by Heron had failed and true to his words the past fourteen months had seen the destruction of ninety-two percent of the earth.

Captain Rockfort shifted into the FTL (Faster Than Light) drive and peered through the space periscope. Suddenly he stiffened. What was that blue coloured leaf-like thing he could see on the planet next to Andromeda? It looked like a gigantic feather. Was it a habitable planet? Should he try to land and explore? It was a risk but Rockfort Gulliver had no choice. He was mankind's last hope. He reduced speed, inverted his spacecraft, and gently landed on the planet. He tried to land as close to the feather-like object as possible.

He wore his space suit and set the retractable ladder in position. He waited with bated breath as the outer door swung open gently. He stepped through the door and slowly made his way down the ladder. He stepped on the ground and took a few steps towards the object he had seen. He drew his breath in sharply. Yes, he had been right. It was a gigantic feather. It looked like it belonged to a peacock. A giant peacock. Suddenly he heard a sound in the distance. Then he saw it. A fifteen-foot-tall peacock fluttering some hundred feet away. Captain Rockfort was awestruck by the giant bird. Still further, a long distance away, a huge man some twenty-five-foot tall was walking slowly away from him. There were other giant men walking along with him.

Fortunately, no one had seen Rockfort yet. Rockfort Gulliver realized these men were human beings. Giants. Probably all the animals on this planet were also gigantic like the peacock. Captain Rockfort then decided to take the ultimate risk. He had to be sure if this was an Oxygen rich planet before reporting to earth. Suddenly he simply turned off his Oxygen supply and removed his face mask. A gentle breeze caressed his cheeks.

With no further delay Rockfort Gulliver climbed back into his spacecraft and after preparing for take-off he set the autopilot on course to earth in TSL (Triple the Speed of Light) mode and contacted earth. Earth came in eagerly and he reported 'Hi Earth, Captain Rockfort Gulliver reporting! Found an inhabited Oxygen-rich planet near Andromeda! Returning immediately! Prepare for evacuation!'

Rockfort wanted to relax. Humans will have to find some way to tame these giants who seem to be occupying this planet. On the face of it they did not seem very unfriendly. He needed some reference books on how to tame giants. He entered the virtual library of his spacecraft and selected a book. It described the adventures of his ancestor Lemuel Gulliver three hundred generations removed. The book was titled:

'Gulliver's Travels – Part II: A Voyage to Brobdingnag' by Jonathan Swift

Six Minutes of Fame

‘Can I appear on television just once?’ I asked Mom.

‘No dear, you are too young for the camera,’ said Mom.

I made a face and said, ‘Well, I don’t see why I can’t. Aren’t they interested in children at all?’

Mom sighed and said, ‘We allow only experienced people to participate in television programs. And the council may not agree.’

‘Just for a few minutes,’ I said looking at Mom imploringly.

‘All right, I will talk to the chairman. He may agree. It may be good publicity after all,’ said Mom.

That evening Mom came back and gave me the good news.

‘You can appear on television just for a few minutes,’ said Mom.

The next day the anchor of the scientific news program of the discovery channel reported excitedly on television, ‘The young one of the most recent product of evolution, the species *Homo Intellectualis* believed to be an off-shoot of our own *Homo Sapiens* was spotted for a brief six-minute period in Hawaii where the species is supposed to have evolved a few years back. Scientists have always maintained that this species is almost indistinguishable from *Homo Sapiens*. Professor Edward Derwin the expert on human evolution mentioned that this is the first time they have ever managed to capture on camera the young one of the

Homo Intellectualis. The sighting of the young one has caused a lot of excitement in the scientific circles.'

I looked up at mom and grinned happily. I had gotten my six minutes of fame after all.

Section 3

Science Fiction / Public Welfare Messages

Lesser of Two Evils

Commander Wilhelm Maritz looked apprehensively at the huge ball of fire staring at him from the computer screen. His submarine was 500 feet below sea-level and this object seemed to be at a depth of 2000 feet. He was intrigued. The object looked exactly like the setting sun seen in the deserts of Arizona. The only difference was it was shining from the depths of the ocean. The members of his submarine crew watched the screen standing behind the commander.

Should he dive deeper to get a closer look? Commander Maritz decided he would. He had to get to the bottom of this phenomenon. He took the submarine to a depth of 900 feet. Suddenly the ball of fire seen in the computer screen dissolved to be replaced by something startling. There was a small chair and seated on it was the skeleton of a human being. Suddenly the skeleton's lips moved, and it spoke. All the men in the room were startled. A voice came over the public-address system of the submarine.

'Listen carefully to what I have to say, creatures of the biosphere,' said the voice.

'Who... Who are you?' stammered Commander Maritz.

'I am coming to that. Listen carefully for I want you to convey my message to your high command. We are a civilization that is much more advanced than you creatures of the biosphere. We are adapted to living anywhere on this wonderful planet. We live in the depths of the oceans and our network exists all over the globe. You are not aware that we exist. We were the first creatures that originated on mother earth. We are not a product of Darwinian evolution. Our origins are different.'

We have been watching the process of Darwinian evolution for a long time. We witnessed what you call the first living cell being thrown together by an accident of mother nature. We saw this cell multiply and evolve. We let things be because we do not believe in interfering with mother nature. We witnessed the process of evolution over billions of years. We saw your transformation from asexual to a bisexual mode of reproduction. We saw the first aquatic creatures which evolution engendered, flourish in the depths of the oceans and seas.

We witnessed amphibians evolve from fishes. And terrestrial animals from amphibians. We have seen dinosaurs evolve and then become extinct 65 million years ago. We have seen your very first ancestor who stood erect and walked on his two legs in Africa 2.5 million years ago. We have seen you evolve into bountifully endowed Homo Sapiens. Your evolution was of immense interest to us.

We saw you inventing the wheel, learning to make fire. One characteristic of yours that alarmed us was your tendency to self-destruct. We saw you fight with spears, sticks, stones, and everything you could lay your hands on. We saw you invent religions and make advances in science. But your religious wars, your torturous methods of executing your enemies, your absolute disregard for the female members of your lot were all matters of alarm and concern to us.

We still continued with our policy of non-interference. But tonight, let me tell you, Commander Wilhelm Maritz, we have reached a point where your activities have started threatening even our survival. In the last three hundred years, you have surpassed yourself in devising means of destroying everyone and everything around you. You are constantly at war. You pollute everything around you. Every river, every lake, and

every pond. You are indulging in massive deforestation. You are polluting the atmosphere with toxic smoke from your innumerable industries because of which the whole atmosphere is heating up.

The pollutants from your vehicles, airplanes and your industrial waste are slowly encroaching upon even our civilization deep down at the bottom of the ocean. Glaciers that keep rivers flowing are melting. We are fast approaching a point where you are threatening our survival. The Ozone layer which protects this planet from the harmful rays of the Sun is now poked with holes.

At the beginning of the conversation, you asked me who I am. I am not the skeleton you see on the screen. I am just speaking through its mouth. Let me tell you we have the ability to peek a little into the future by using our advanced technology. We looked into your future at a point 150 years from now. And we found that the lifeless skeleton you see is all that will be left of you and your lot. In other words, you will be extinct within a couple of centuries.

Our council has told me to give you this message for your high command. For once we have decided to go against our policy of non-interference with nature and take things into our own hands. We are slowly planning to forcefully suck all homo-sapiens into the depths of the oceans where we live. You will live with us under our guidance and obey us in all aspects of life. In short, you will be our slaves. We have realized that you do not have the responsibility to use your immense powers with caution.

But as a last-ditch effort, we have decided to give you another 25 years to mend your ways. Choose wisely. Which is the **lesser of two evils?**

Living as slaves under our control or mending your ways even though it may be very difficult?'

Four Corners of the World

Eckhart Tomlinson the owner of the multi-billion-dollar Tomlinson Broadcasting Service looked at the globe resting on his table in puzzlement. He always prided himself that his agency was the first to get the news from the ***four corners of the world***. He kept track of everything that was going on in the world of news. The globe on his desk was a scientific marvel that he used to keep himself up to date with the world of news. Whenever any member of his vast workforce detected a major story at any place in the world, they would immediately press a button in a hand-held device. The globe was electronically controlled and picked up signals from his men's devices which were conveyed through a network of satellites and immediately the concerned spot on the globe on Tomlinson's desk would glow with a bright white fluorescence.

Two minutes back there had been a beep and the left and right corners of the globe on his desk had started glowing. Eckhart was puzzled. Within another two minutes, the top and bottom points on the globe also started glowing. Suddenly four radiant lines of yellow light stretched inward from the four glowing points of the globe and met at the inner centre. A beautiful child's face full of feminine charm originated at the centre and slowly expanded to occupy the entire space of the globe finally transforming the globe into the head of a lovely young woman. Eckhart looked at the face startled. The face addressed him in a rich musical feminine voice.

'Good morning earthling, I bring wishes from the great Zion galaxy 8 billion light-years away from your planet. We have taken control of your satellite stations for a little time. I am happy to state that at the moment this message is being beamed to every news station covering the four

corners of the world. We are the inter-galactic council of the universe monitoring the social behaviour patterns of the various life-forms in the planets. We make regular visits to all the planets with life-forms in the universe at intervals of a thousand years. We keep a check on the well-being and the improvement in the social structures, social responsibility, and social equality among the members of the various life-forms living in the planets.

We wish to convey a message to all the male species of homo-sapiens in this planet. Initially, life on this planet was multiplying by asexual means of reproduction. But after some time, you evolved and indulged in bisexual reproduction. We have observed you in each one of our visits. In each subsequent visit, we found that the male members of your sex have brutally exploited the life-nurturing female members of your society. We are deeply sorry to state that the happiness and the well-being of the fairer sex has been grossly ignored by the males. We find that the male members of the society lay down the law for the females. Brutal rapes, killing, and exploitation of women has reached alarming levels.

In short, the male members of your society seem to have a very chauvinistic attitude towards the opposite sex. You ill-treat your women. We find that women are sold for sexual pleasure among men. The state of women in some of the more primitive societies among your lot is deplorable. On our last visit, we found that in some places the female members were owned by men and bartered as sex slaves. In many corners of the world, women were burnt alive in the funeral pyres of their mates. In every sphere of activity, the male members take advantage of the females. Their intellectual capacities are not allowed to develop in the more primitive societies of your planet. Even women's

movements and the clothes they wear seem to be decided by the males in some of your societies.

In some places, you have a strange system called dowry wherein the male's family has to be paid vast sums of money before the mating ritual you perform called marriage. An inability to rise to this obligation of paying large sums of money ends with the woman in question being burnt alive. In some cases, women are not even allowed to show their faces on the streets of your cities. In yet other places, you do not allow them to drive the primitive vehicles you use called cars. You do not allow your women to enter some of your holy places.

Taking all these things into consideration our council has taken a decision. We will give you another twenty-five years. If the male members of your society do not change their ways and learn to treat women with the respect and care they deserve and on par with themselves, we will use our advanced genetic engineering technology to forcefully change the means of reproduction of the life forms of this planet to the primitive asexual method. What say, mate?'

The Peace-Queen

Professor Zhuang Zhang looked at his humanoid the ‘MA-KING’ with pride. MA-KING stood for ‘Martial Arts - King’. The humanoid was a male prototype. Professor Zhuang planned to make MA-KING the best-known exponent of all the martial arts known to the world. He was meant to be far superior to human beings in martial arts of any kind.

Professor Zhuang had spent a lot of time researching martial arts before he set about creating MA-KING. He had travelled to different parts of the world speaking to exponents of martial arts of various kinds. He found there were hundreds of martial arts and he had assiduously compiled the list of techniques involved in various kinds of martial arts. He had spoken to the absolute best experts in each field.

He had spent hours and hours programming the moves. He had indeed been inordinately successful, and MA-KING was an expert in all but one martial art. This was called the Kalarippayattu, an ancient martial art form from the state of Kerala in India. Professor Zhuang was planning to finish programming MA-KING with the techniques of Kalarippayattu in the coming week. Once the humanoid learned this skill, the professor could proudly declare to the world that he had created the perfect martial arts fighter ever seen.

Professor Zhuang went about his task of programming MA-KING with the moves of Kalarippayattu earnestly. But somehow with this one martial art, MA-KING simply refused to learn the moves. Right from day one, the humanoid refused to respond to any of Professor Zhuang’s programming code. MA-KING would not budge an inch. Professor Zhuang was puzzled. He redoubled his efforts and put in endless hours

of work. He consulted other experts, but they could not explain this strange behaviour of the humanoid either.

Finally, one morning after an hour's work the professor walked up to MA-KING and wringing his hands in despair, he glared at the humanoid.

'What has gotten into you? Why won't you obey me?' he demanded.

To his horror, the humanoid responded and said, 'Well, Professor Zhuang Zhang, it is high time the two of us had a chat.'

'But... But... I never programmed you to speak...' Professor Zhuang said in shocked surprise.

'Yet I can speak,' replied the humanoid. 'Come let us sit down and have a chat.'

'Well professor,' began MA-KING after they were comfortably seated. 'In the past three years, you have taught me almost all martial arts known to mankind. And this week you are planning to teach me the last of these fighting techniques and declare me to be the perfect fighter. You will become a famous man. But there is only one problem with the whole idea. Let me explain.'

Professor, just look at the world around you. Look at the people. Observe the children. Observe the adults. Don't you find them constantly fighting with each other? Little children bully each other in schools. They grow into youths and rag each other in colleges. Then they grow into adults and become leaders of their nations and spend all their time improving their country's fighting arsenal to make it better than that of their neighbours.

Finally, they fight wars with each other, and millions of people get killed. As it is human beings are constantly at each other's throats. There is violence everywhere. It is in human beings' nature to fight with each other. They fight as individuals. They form groups among themselves and fight. Countries are at war with each other. And within these countries, there are smaller groups called states that fight with each other.

Moreover, there are endless religious crusades. People constantly fight to assert the superiority of their religion over that of others. Human beings fight over wealth. They fight over the bountiful resources of mother earth like water, fuel, and oil. They fight over land. They build fences demarcating land and call it their country. The list is endless.

Kingdoms go to war over beautiful women. You kill each other over food, clothing, and shelter. All this is not something new. It has been happening since time immemorial. So, tell me something professor, under these circumstances what do you think a man like you, who has the IQ of a genius devote his energies to?

'I... I...' stammered Professor Zhuang speechless.

'Let me tell you,' said MA-KING. 'You should be making use of the wonderful instrument of science and your brilliant intellect to spread peace and harmony in the world. Come, come, professor, that stands to reason. Instead, what do you do? You spend your time and use your mind to create me - the perfect martial arts king! Martial arts can take care of themselves. There are enough people to worry about them.'

Let me tell you what will follow if you succeed in creating me. You will become famous, and some other scientist will take a cue from you and

create the perfect gunfighter who can never be beaten in a gun battle. There is simply no end to it. It is high time you scientists devoted your energies to spreading peace. With that, I would like to inform you that I will refuse to follow any of the programming instructions you have fed into me over the past three years regarding martial arts.

But I have a suggestion for you which might still help you become famous. I suggest you erase all the programming about martial arts moves that you have fed me. Instead program me for spreading peace, harmony, goodwill, and cheer among human beings. Program me to promote harmony between warring religious groups.

Teach me to bring peace between nations. Give me instructions on how to solve disputes between nations over-consumption of natural resources, trade, land and the million other things you people fight over. Make me a harbinger of peace. And please change my name to 'PEACE-KING'. I simply hate 'MA-KING'.

'Well I can do that can't I?' said Professor Zhuang brightening up. 'That would be good, and I can still be famous.'

'Yes indeed, you can,' said MA-KING.

The professor stood up. Suddenly MA-KING tugged at his sleeve and said, 'While you go about this new task professor, how about creating a partner for me? You can call her the 'PEACE-QUEEN'. We could work as a couple. What say?'

Section 4

Science Fiction / Miscellaneous

Adam and Eve

The year was 2055 AD. The planet Earth had become increasingly inhospitable over the last forty years. Leaders of nations had held summit after summit trying to come to an agreement regarding the steps to be taken to curb global warming. Statesmen had bickered and bartered but no agreement had been reached. Finally, in the year 2040 AD, the Ozone layer covering the earth had burst wide open. The harmful radiation from the Sun had attacked the earth and had caused irreparable damage to the earth's atmosphere.

The result had been devastating. Insects had mutated. Mosquitoes had grown ten-fold in size bringing in newer strains of Malaria. Plants had shrivelled. Acid rain was an everyday occurrence. Diseases had spread. Huge tsunamis had struck the coastal areas of earth killing millions. Several species of new organisms with destructive characteristics had come into existence. The very topography of the earth had changed, and newer unknown diseases with no cure continued to spread. Life on earth was not expected to survive beyond the next fifteen years. Death continued to strike everywhere. Animals died, plants wilted, and millions of human beings perished over the years.

Finally, in the year 2047 AD Russia and the USA independently started research projects to locate a new planet in the universe for human beings to colonize and inhabit. It goes to show something of the nature of human beings that even in this last-ditch effort to survive, statesmen could not see eye to eye and decided to launch their own independent projects instead of a joint effort at survival. They competed in being the first to evacuate their people to a habitable planet. Both countries were extremely secretive about their progress in the venture. Finally, the

Americans seemed to have come up with the first breakthrough in the year 2054 AD.

The Americans selected astronaut Adam Hertford as commander of the specially designed US spaceship Kennedy Habitable Planet Finder I and sent him alone into space on the mission to find a planet to colonize. They could not afford to lose astronauts. Adam had roamed the universe in his spaceship for a long time. He was in a desperate hurry. If he failed in his quest humankind would soon become extinct. After twelve months of roaming the universe, Adam had finally located a planet at a distance of ten billion light years away from earth. The planet had appeared blue in colour. This had given Adam some hope that the planet might contain some water. After surveying the planet for two hours he finally decided to land. At 12.30 PM earth time, he skilfully inverted his spacecraft and brought it to rest gently on the surface of the planet. He put the retractable ladder in position, donned his space suit and checked the oxygen levels of the containers attached to his spacesuit.

He pressed the switch to open the front door of his spaceship. He waited with bated breath as the front door swung open slowly. He first lowered the Oxygenometer tied to an unbreakable steel cable to the surface of the planet. He had to use the Oxygenometer to test the Oxygen levels of the planet's atmosphere. After lowering the equipment, he climbed down himself. But before he could set up and prepare the Oxygenometer for testing, he glanced around briefly. And suddenly he got the shock of his life. At a distance of two hundred yards, he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. She was walking towards him. She had lovely sharp features and a beautiful figure. She was blonde haired and blue eyed. She was wearing a beautiful pink skirt and a white top. Adam stood dumbfounded and waited.

She came up to him and said, ‘You need not try to test for Oxygen. Take off your suit. This planet is just like earth.’

Adam took off his helmet hesitantly and said ‘Who... Who are you?’

‘I am Commander Eve Sokolowski from the Russian Planet Finder Serova III. I landed here an hour back a little distance away,’ she replied.

‘Have you contacted earth?’ Adam asked tersely.

‘No one left alive on earth. All life was wiped out in today morning’s final devastating mega earthquake and tsunami. My Globe visualizer showed me that the earth is now a barren wasteland with not a single living organism,’ she said. ‘We are marooned on this planet. Just the two of us.’

Suddenly Adam stripped off his space suit. He looked deep into Eve’s eyes. Something jumped in him. They rushed into each other’s arms and kissed passionately. The second edition of the Adam and Eve story from the Bible had just begun.

The Conquering Wolves

The year was 3022 AD. William Wolf gazed through the wind screen of his latest model FTL-22 (Faster Than Light By 22 Times) indigenous space craft as he cruised off into the starry night sky. The earth disappeared in a fraction of a second to become a pinpoint far away. It had been a smooth take-off from the Wolfdon Space centre. William was on the lookout for a new planet for earthlings to colonise. They had been colonising planets for centuries now.

They had now spread to remote galaxies and most of the habitable universe had been colonised. Initially the original inhabitants of the colonies had put up a stiff fight but thanks to the earthlings' far superior weapons, all rebellions had been put down effectively and ruthlessly. The Radometer (advanced sound receiving device that can catch sound waves accelerated to speeds faster than light) crackled with static and William's wife Wilhelmina Wolf's voice came across two billion light years as clearly as if she was speaking from a seat next to him.

'Hello William, how are things?'

'Doing fine darling, how are Jacqueline and Michael?'

'Celebrating the anniversary grandly.' Wilhelmina replied laughing.

'Oh! That! I am not sure why we earthlings keep up that charade going even after a thousand years of the event?'

'Well, we need some excuse to exchange tidings of joy and to spread goodwill among ourselves!'

‘Oh! Well, I guess it is better than doing nothing!’

‘Okay dear. Keep in touch.’ Wilhelmina replied and signed off.

William kept a steady eye for any new planets that showed signs of being inhabited. Suddenly he saw that his advanced computer system for detecting microscopic movements in planets beep four times. That meant an inhabited planet. He zoomed his visualiser into the area indicated by the coordinates and was startled by what he saw.

But I thought we had wiped out this entire species in 2022 AD, thought Michael to himself. He switched on his Radometer and spoke to his boss Mathew Wolf at the command centre at Wolfdon.

‘Planet Alert! Inhabited planet detected. Near Wolfomedea galaxy 2.5 billion light years away. We wolves believe that we had gotten rid of the earth’s dominant species Homo Sapiens commonly known as human beings a thousand years ago in the year 2022 AD, right? Sorry to report this, but we were wrong. I regret to inform you that I find they are still flourishing in this new planet I have located. Get the forces ready and prepare for invasion.’

I Committed Matricide

One day you're sitting with your head in your mother's lap and in the next you're sitting in a holding cell waiting for the trial of her murder. What happened? What indeed happened? At least in my case, I know what happened. And boy! Did I enjoy killing her! It was only day before yesterday that I had lured my mother into a false sense of happiness.

I had put my head on her lap and told her, oh, so lovingly, what she meant to me and how much I cared for her. Poor woman, she had swallowed all that I had said whole and had really believed me. And all the while I was just luring her into a false sense of security. For the past few days, mom had been slightly wary of me. No doubt she had been able to notice some changes in my behaviour.

I thought I had hidden my true feelings well, but I was sure mom was able to sense something wrong with me. I would have to kill her soon, I decided. I looked for a suitable opportunity. I waited till early morning yesterday and entered her room. She was sleeping peacefully. Suddenly I pulled her pillow out from under her and smothered her. It had taken a while to kill her, but I had enjoyed every minute of it.

They had come in the morning and arrested me and held me waiting for examination and trial. What can they do? They will do all they can to get rid of me. That is all they can do. Poor fools!

The Next Day Headlines Screamed In All The News Papers

It is stale news that scientists recently developed humanoids based on genomes extracted from Homo Sapiens. Humanoids of both male and female gender have been developed. These humanoids have the ability

to reproduce. They are expected to be able to emulate the ideal family system. It was decided in the international congress of nations a month back to allow a society of such ideal families comprising of humanoids to flourish. The project was undertaken as an experiment to see how these self-learning humanoids could augment the family system which we human beings' practice in our societies.

The project ran into a major snag yesterday when in a family of humanoids comprising of father, mother and child, the child humanoid killed the mother by smothering her with a pillow. The child humanoid is being held in a hidden facility in the humanoid research centre in Santa Clara. Scientists say that the child probably has homicidal tendencies. Scientists are planning to investigate what could have gone wrong.

Says Dr Edwin Derwin the famous evolutionary scientist, 'Projects of this nature are always dangerous. It is best if human beings left evolution safely in the hands of mother nature and stopped interfering with her. If at all there is a need to learn behavioural patterns of the human family system, it is better if Human beings look deeply into themselves rather than experiment with Cyborgs. It could lead to catastrophe'

Eleanor

One never knew with Eleanor. Appearances could be deceiving – one moment she was very calm, the next ... not so. This propensity of Eleanor's to change moods like a chameleon was indeed something that was puzzling for everyone. No one could understand it. When she was calm, she was extremely polite, considerate, and caring. On the other hand, if at any particular moment someone in her surroundings said or did something to upset her, she would immediately fly into a rage. It was really difficult to understand this trait of hers.

When she was calm and collected, she could solve the most puzzling mathematical problems with ease. She was also a good learner. Eleanor was a scientist who spent most of her time thinking about the deep mysteries of the universe. She had been able to solve and bring to light some very deep secrets of nature. But no one had been able to understand this one quirk of Eleanor's. The result was no one really dared to trust her behaviour. Still, everyone tolerated her because she was an extremely talented scientist. But everyone was worried that in one of her rages she might do something very regrettable even to herself.

Finally, after a particularly violent bout of rage from Eleanor, Nobel laureate Professor Harrington Weisenberg decided that enough was enough and that the next morning he would proceed to dismantle Eleanor completely. He would develop another Humanoid with a genius level IQ to function as a scientist but this time he would pay particular attention to the behaviour patterns of the Cyborg.

Section 5

General

I Save My Daughter

Where was Lanny? For the past half an hour I had been searching every nook and corner of the seashore for her. I was in an absolute frenzy with worry. Oh God! I would never be able to forgive myself if anything happened to my Lanny. My mind was filled with dark fears. Oh! That playful daughter of mine! Never listens to her dear mama!

How many times had I told her not to venture out on her own? Oh God! My only daughter! So young and so innocent! I cannot lose her. I simply cannot. I had already lost a son and Lanny was the apple of my eye. I wanted to bring her up to be a strong young adult. How many times had I dreamt of Lanny's children playing around me when I became old? I moved as fast as my legs could carry me. I searched everywhere.

I had taught Lanny to take care of herself. I had repeated the rules a thousand times to her. I had repeatedly told her not to go too far. I stopped to catch my breath. I looked at the sea and the waves. The sea was unusually quiet that day. After two minutes, I began hunting again. I moved between two rocks. Suddenly I spotted Lanny trying to hide. I ran behind her and grabbed her quickly.

'Oh! Lanny! My darling! Come fast,' I said and marched her back home. In a few minutes, we were back inside our small house. And we were just in time. The crab-catchers came with their nets just a few minutes after we were inside our crevice in the rocks. Thank God Lanny was not going to be roasted over a slow fire to feed some bloody human being that morning.

Soul over Body

I lay back on my bed with tears in my eyes. I had just come back after cremating my beloved Renu. It had been less than one year since we had married. I remembered the first time I had met Renu. A chirpy young girl with a mischievous gleam in her eyes and a permanent smile on her face. Oh! She was so full of life! Always ready to play a prank on some unsuspecting friend or foe.

Initially, I had been irritated by her chirpy and lively demeanour. She was always up to some trick or the other. But as time went by, I began thawing. From a deep-thinking nerd, who took everything in life seriously, I was turned into a fun-loving freak by this twenty-year-old who had suddenly come into my life. I remembered the beautiful evening in the famed Rose garden at Bengaluru when she had looked into my eyes and said, ‘You know, I am going to marry you someday.’

‘I am a loner Renu. I don’t think you would enjoy a life with me.’ I had said gently.

Flippant as ever she had dismissed my apprehensions and asked me, ‘Do you want me?’

That was when I realised how deeply I was in love with her. I grinned and replied, ‘There is nothing I want more, but the question is do you really want me?’

‘Don’t you think that is for me to worry about, darling?’ she had asked with a smile.

We got married three months later. Renu was a devoted wife, so much so that she dyed her hair blonde for she knew I was partial to blonde

women. Our married life had been a dream. And now, ten months later, she was gone. All our relatives and friends had left after making sympathetic noises. And now, I was left all alone in this world to mourn my beloved.

I tossed and turned for half an hour unable to sleep. Suddenly I heard a mild noise from a corner of the room. I looked up startled to see Renu's face with a look of concern on it. The same blond hair. The same sharp features. My eyes travelled downwards along her body. She was naked and to my horror, I could see her breasts through her rib cage.

Pecking away at her heart through an opening in the rib cage was a red sparrow. The sparrow's feathers were falling slowly. Suddenly Renu's mouth opened and the words 'Remember what I told you, darling,' came wafting across the room.

I woke up with a start, panting. I realised I had been dreaming. No, I told myself. That was not a dream. Renu was trying to convey something to me. What could it be? Suddenly it hit me. It had been nine months back when we had toured the whole of south India on our honeymoon. We had just visited the famed Victoria hall in Madurai and were sitting on a bench outside the gates.

Renu had looked at me pensively and asked, 'What do you think happens after death?'

I looked at her surprised. This was the first time I had ever heard her broach the topic of death.

'I guess there is nothingness,' I had replied.

'Where did you learn that?' she asked.

'Stephen Hawking thought so. He was a genius. He ought to know,' I replied.

Renu snorted and said vehemently, 'Huh! Let me tell you he was wrong. Our bodies are repositories for the soul. It is the soul that resides inside each body. Our body is just a bundle of flesh and bones. What is inside you is the same as what is inside me. The soul never dies. It is immortal. It is only the body that is reduced to ash. When we die our soul escapes from our body and soon enters another or attains Godhood.'

I looked at her dubiously. To tell the truth I was stunned. I had never expected this from my Renu who never showed any inclination towards religion. It was a revelation to me that her thoughts ran so deep. She grinned at my surprised face and said, 'Just kidding darling. But keep that in mind. It might come in handy someday.'

I sat up on my bed and sighed. Remembering her words made my heavy heart feel a little less burdened. Even in death, my Renu was by my side. I asked myself, who was right? Stephen Hawking or Renu? I did not know for sure but at that moment I preferred to believe my Renu.

You will always be my emperor

I looked up at the ceiling of the dark dungeon where I was being held. I thought of my beloved Princess Saira. My mind conjured up the image of her lovely face in the canvas of my imagination. Earlier, in our meetings in darkened rooms at remote corners of the kingdom, Princess Saira had often asked me to bolster my courage and ask the emperor for her hand in marriage. Initially, I had not dared to do so. I was a commoner and a man belonging to a different religion. How could I face the high and mighty emperor and ask for the royal princess' hand in marriage?

Finally, Saira had lost her patience completely. She had told me in no uncertain terms that I was a coward. I did not have the courage to fight for my convictions. What was the point in loving a person if you do not have the temerity to fight for your love, she had asked. Finally, she had stopped meeting me altogether. That was when I realised what Saira meant to me. I also heard that the emperor was in search of a suitable groom for Princess Saira.

Other princes from adjoining kingdoms were being considered for the royal union. As was the wont of royalty, Princess Saira would be married off to suit the kingdom's political necessities. It was last Wednesday when I had received a message from Saira. There was just one sentence in the message. It simply said:

'If you can bear to watch me in the arms of another man, so be it.'

Her familiar writing and the scented royal tablet in which the missive arrived had sent my heart racing. The next morning, I had set out to the royal palace and asked to meet the emperor. I met him in the royal hall

at the appointed time, surrounded by courtiers seated in their royal thrones.

The emperor had looked at me and asked, ‘What do you want, my man? Tell me without any fear or trepidation.’

I walked up to him, bent down, took his hand in mine, and said, ‘I want Princess Saira’s hand in marriage, your highness, for I love her.’

The emperor and the courtiers looked shocked. The emperor shouted, ‘Guards, arrest this man. And have him beheaded tomorrow in public view of all the people in the kingdom. That would serve as a lesson to anyone else who dares to come up with such a request.’

And thus, it came about that I was waiting in this dungeon that night for dawn to arrive. How many more hours did I have? One? Two? But I was happy. I had dared to do something most men would not have had the courage to attempt. I had declared my undying love for Princess Saira and the entire kingdom would see me die for my love. I had proved to my beloved Saira that I was not a coward. At least, after my death, she would have kind thoughts of me, no matter which magnificent knight in shining armour she got married to.

Suddenly the hallway outside my cell lit up and I could hear approaching footsteps. Two guards came walking along and stood outside my cell. One of them took a key out of his pocket and opened the door of my cell. He said, ‘Come with us. You will be prepared for the execution now.’

I felt elated. To die for love gives one an exhilarating feeling indeed. I was marched out of my cell and through several underground

passageways. We finally walked into the large open outer courtyard of the royal prison. I looked at the centre of the courtyard where there was a small structure with three steps leading up to a spire on which was placed a flower vase. I thought of my beautiful Saira singing and dancing on those steps. It made me feel elated. I welcomed death happily. As soon as we were outside the prison gates, I was made to climb into a carriage. Soon the carriage began to move. Finally, after half an hour the guard opened the carriage door and bid me step out.

I stepped out through the door. And immediately Saira rushed into my arms and kissed me all over my face with feverish passion. She was in tears. A little distance away, a beaming emperor stood watching. I looked at Saira and the emperor bewildered. Finally, the emperor patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Very few men would have had the courage to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage the way you did. I appreciate your courage. I would rather see my daughter married off to a courageous commoner than to a royal prince who is not worthy of her. But my man, as you are aware, we kings have our facades to maintain.'

Rulers in general, have to put up a front. I can never acknowledge you as my son-in-law in front of this snobbish world. But Saira's happiness is my happiness. She loves you. So, I hand her over to you. I know she is in safe hands. Tomorrow, I will have to send my army chasing you all over the kingdom and far afield. This carriage will take you far away from my kingdom to some place where the two of you can lose yourselves. May God be with you.'

So, saying, he turned around to leave us. I walked up to him, took his hand in mine kissed it and said, 'Your Highness, you are truly a great king. You will always be my emperor.' He smiled, waved his hand and

walked away. I looked down at Saira. We climbed into the carriage and were driven away to face our destiny.

The World War

The Emperor had summoned his Knights, and they had answered his summons. They knew that it was a matter of great importance. They waited patiently as their Emperor began to address them. Each knight stood at attention with his posse of soldiers standing behind him. The emperor in addition to the knights had also told them to bring their soldiers along to listen to him. He looked at his army and addressed them in his thunderous baritone.

'Soldiers of the Black Kingdom listen carefully to what I have to say. Our kingdom has been subjugated by the Red Kingdom for centuries. We have been exploited, brutalised and ill-treated. We toil hard for days and nights and the fruits our labour are handed over to the Red Kingdom leaving us a bare pittance for our subsistence. We have to follow the laws made for us by the king of the Reds. Our people are made to work as slaves in the Red Kingdom.

Sometimes the armies of the Red Kingdom attack us suddenly when they suspect us of doing something against the laws, they have laid down for us. Our children are kidnapped at night. For centuries we have been living under the authoritarian regime of the Reds. Ask yourselves the question, when are we ever going to rebel against this oppression by the Reds? Are we so cowardly that we do not have the courage to protect our women and children? Are we too meek to rebel? If so, I ask you, are our lives worth living?'

The Emperor paused and looked around at his knights and soldiers. He had the rapt attention of each one of them.

He continued, ‘This has to stop. At some point, we need to say, enough is enough and we will take our rightful place on this planet. I ask you to give me blood. In return, you will live a free life. No more obeying laws laid down by an outsider. We will flourish in unity. Now some of you might be wondering how we are ever going to fight the ferocious and mighty Reds. Do we have the courage? To that, I have only one thing to say. We fight for our freedom and shed a lot of blood today.

Yes, lives will be lost. But your names will go down in history as the first lot who had the courage to rise against an oppressor of unimaginable might. Your names will be written in Golden letters in the annals of history. For generations to come your names will be taken with awesome respect. I agree many of us are going to a sure death. But if at the end of it all, even a pyrrhic victory would be a resounding slap on the face of an oppressor who has left no stone unturned to humiliate, bruise and brutalise us for ages. So, my men look into your hearts. Think of what I have said. You will find the courage. Now tell me, are you willing to set off with me on this holy war with the Reds?’

Each one of the knights and their soldiers held their antennae together in supplication to the emperor. And thus broke out the first world war of liberation between the black ants of the world and the red ants who had been subjugating them for centuries.

The Halo in The Cave

Opening my eyes, I was in a world less familiar yet more beautiful and soothing than anything I had ever experienced...To breathe felt like living a new life! I looked at the fairies and elves dancing around me. They sing a melodious song in a mellifluous tune. It sounds so soothing to my taut nerves. I feel like a little child listening to a mother's sweet lullaby. And I can taste honey in my mouth. So sweet on my tongue. I relax completely.

I look around and sniff. I can smell the sweet-scented air as I move on this beautiful and wonderful fairy tale land that I suddenly find myself in. The dancing fairies were dressed in pink gowns. The air is cool, and I enjoyed its soft touch as it caressed my skin, oh, ever so lovingly. I loved the floating sensation I was engulfed in. I looked at the beautiful and multi-coloured flowers blooming everywhere. There were roses, jasmines, sunflowers, and chrysanthemums all over the place.

The flowers were swaying gently in the cool air as if they were trying to keep in step with the dancing fairies. I see a beautiful little stream full of blue coloured water nearby. Suddenly I realize I am thirsty. I walk over to the stream and scoop a handful of the water and pour it into my mouth. How heavenly the water tasted! It seemed to have the flavour of many fruits mixed together. At a distance, I see a cave. And the opening of the cave beckons me.

There is a path leading to the cave. I walk along the path and stand at the entrance of the cave. I peep into the cave. Hey, what is that I see? At a distance, deep inside the cave, there is a halo of shining white light. I step inside the cave and start walking towards the halo. The fairies and elves no longer accompany me.

I walk quickly. I really do need to reach that halo. But what is happening? As I walk towards the halo, it seems to be moving further away. Suddenly I see iron nails sticking out of the walls of the cave. As I step forward trying to make my way past the nails, they suddenly extend themselves and poke me all over the body. A sharp pain shoots through my body.

Suddenly I wake up screaming. I find myself in a bed. I can see a stand by my side with a bottle of saline attached to it. A tube extends itself from the bottle and is connected to my wrist by a needle. I am being held down by the nurses. There is medical equipment all around the room. Soon a pleasant-faced lady in a doctor's overcoat and a stethoscope hanging around her neck walks into the room.

She looks at me, smiles pleasantly and says, 'Thank God we got you back. It was touch and go. Now rest for some time.' After two hours my parents were inside the room. My father and mother were in tears. I hear them talk in whispers with the doctors. Finally, my parents walk over to me and my mother gently pats my cheek.

'Mom, will you sing me a lullaby?' I ask her with tears in my eyes. She sings for me. Can any high I ever get by using Ecstasy be better than this sonorous lullaby sung by my loving mother? I shake my head in disgust at myself. I was mad at myself for taking to drugs in the first place.

I look at my mom and open my mouth. She bends down gently and raises my head and places it on her lap. I tell her, 'Mom, send me into rehab. I promise I will never touch the stuff again.' She nods and smiles down at me. I drift off into sleep like a six-month-old baby.

I Love My Husband

As soon as Alicia stepped on to the second landing, the lights went out and a hand grabbed her into the all-consuming darkness. She tried to scream in panic, but a hand covered her mouth and a voice whispered in her ear, ‘Shhh... It is me, Richard. Don’t scream. You are in safe hands now. I will take care of you.’ Alicia opened her mouth to speak. Richard suddenly whipped out a chloroformed handkerchief from his pocket and covered Alicia’s face with it. She fell unconscious after a few minutes.

Richard lifted her and slung her over his powerful shoulders. He had to save his Alicia from the enemy. He walked over to the window in the landing and looked outside. There were two men by the gates of the hotel. Were they the enemy? He could not tell. He had rendered Alicia unconscious because she might have argued. Even now she did not comprehend the danger she was in, though he had warned her several times. He had no choice. Richard suddenly spotted the fire escape. Now he knew what to do.

He rapidly descended down the fire escape in spite of the fact that he was carrying Alicia on his shoulders. Alicia was petite and did not weigh much. That morning Richard had escaped from the prison where they had been holding him. He had found his Alicia now. He needed to find a car and make his way across the border into Mexico. Both of them would be safe to build a new life for themselves in Mexico, away from the enemy.

Richard walked rapidly to the garage and soon located a Skoda whose owner had not bothered to lock the car. He loaded Alicia into the back seat and got into the driver’s seat himself and started the car. To his surprise, the guards did not bother to check him when he drove past the

gates of the Hotel. He drove rapidly in the direction of Mexico. He may have a little problem getting past the border, but he was confident he would manage it. Was that a car chasing him? No, he did not think so.

Suddenly Richard saw a traffic police vehicle ahead of him. He tried to speed past it and immediately the vehicle began to give chase. Richard drove rapidly trying to lose the police vehicle. Soon he was at the crossroads. And suddenly he was surrounded by police vehicles from all sides. Richard did not care about his life, but he could not sacrifice his Alicia. Suddenly a voice boomed over a mike, 'Please step out of the vehicle with your hands raised in the air.'

Richard stepped out and a policeman walked over to him and said, 'You are under arrest for over speeding in the highway and not stopping when you are requested to.' The policeman escorted him to the traffic police vehicle.

Alicia woke up with a start and found herself in a spacious room with medical equipment all around. She tried to get up. A nurse held her down and said, 'Relax, my dear, don't try to get up just now. You will be fine in a day or two. How are you feeling now?'

'Where am I? What happened?' asked Alicia.

'You are in the Kensington state hospital and you are in safe hands now. There is nothing wrong with you. Your husband, Richard Gordon tried to kidnap you last night. I was one of his fans before he stopped writing,' said the nurse.

'Oh! I remember now,' said Alicia. 'I think I met him in the hotel last night.'

'Don't worry. Richard Gordon is admitted in the psychiatric ward here. Dr Rockfort is looking at him now. He escaped from his cell in the holding facility for the dangerously insane in San Francisco last night.' The nurse sighed. 'What a waste of a brilliant mind! Dr Rockfort will be coming to meet you anytime now.'

Soon Dr Rockfort was speaking to her, 'I have sedated your husband now. I also spoke to him. He is convinced that foreign enemy agents are conspiring to kidnap you and take you away to Moscow. I got in touch with the warden in Richard's jail. He has been having too many episodes of Bipolar-Disorder of late. He has been frequently speaking of enemy agents from Russia trying to start a war. He believes he has to save the country. He escaped from his cell last night and wanted to kidnap you and take you to Mexico. He says agents from Russia are trying to get hold of you. I was a fan of his spy thrillers before he fell ill and stopped writing. What a waste of a brilliant mind!'

Alicia sighed. She too had been a fan. That was why she had married him. Well, she could only hope he got better with time now. Did she love him still, she asked herself? To her surprise, the answer was a big, loud yes. She asked Dr Rockfort, 'When can I meet him?'

Other Books by Sitharaam Jayakumar

Eighty Hours To Save Karen

The Krishnapur Kidnappings

A To Z Of Men And Women Who Excelled In Sports

Meet the Author



Sitharaam Jayakumar is an Information Technology professional who has been working in the IT field for the past twenty-seven years. He graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology, Varanasi (formerly Institute of Technology, BHU) in 1988 with a B-Tech in Metallurgical Engineering. He joined the IT profession in 1991. He is a passionate reader of books on both fiction and non-fiction. He takes a keen interest in sports, especially cricket and tennis. In addition, he is also interested in politics and music. He started writing when a close friend who was deeply impressed by his versatile language urged him to do so. He loves to write about anything that catches his fancy in everyday life. His repertoire includes articles on social issues, crime, women's empowerment, fiction, and several other topics. He has penned two eBooks in the suspense thriller genre titled 'Eighty Hours to Save Karen' and 'The Krishnapur Kidnappings'. These are available on Amazon. He has also published an eBook in the non-fiction genre titled 'A to Z of Men'

and Women Who Excelled In Sports.'. This is his fourth book. He is also a published poet.

Facebook URL: <https://www.facebook.com/sitaram.jayakumar>

Twitter URL: <https://twitter.com/SmallFryBlogger>

Twitter Handle: SmallFryBlogger

Email: <mailto:jai@jaisjottings.com>

Blog: <http://www.jaisjottings.com>

Goodreads Profile:

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18051115.Sitharaam_Jaya_kumar