



Short & Super Short Stories For Teens

***The Color Of Evil
& Other Stories***

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Dangerous Liaisons



I have a weakness for the wrong type of man. The type who lives dangerously, on the edge of a cliff, thriving on adrenaline. Nothing wrong with that I suppose, but it's not good for me. I, who thrive on order and planning, often find myself magnetically attracted to the opposite kind, but I have learned the hard way that a relationship like that is too volatile.

I have been heartbroken several times, and now I know better. This is where I come, when I need a reminder. This time it's Dave. He is new in the neighborhood. We met last night, when we happened to be taking out the trash at the same time. We chatted. He has started up his own firm. It seems to be working well for him, but he is already jonesing for a new risk. White water rafting, bungee jumping, motorcycle racing, he has already tried these. But the rush never lasts. Next on his list is skydiving.

I could feel the attraction pulsing through my body. The flirting came naturally. He has invited me for dinner tonight. That's why I am here.

This place reminds me, that some things are best appreciated from a safe distance. The entrancing beauty of this gorge for example is delightful, so long as you are not falling headlong in to it.

Well one dinner could do no harm could it? I'd be careful. He is my neighbor after all. It would be rude not to go, wouldn't it?

Okay! I tell myself sternly, just one dinner and that's it. I get up to leave. Just then a gust of wind blows my hat over the ledge. Forgetting where I am, I stretch my hand out to get it and almost step off the cliff. I remember just in time to keep my balance and barely manage. That was close. I watch, still frozen in fear, as my hat falls to the depths of the gorge and disappears.

"Okay, I get the message, no dinner. I'll find a polite excuse." I shout out loud, still shaking with fright.

This story was inspired by [the cover photo obtained here](https://stocksnap.io/photo/LP6E5BCIJP) (<https://stocksnap.io/photo/LP6E5BCIJP>).

The Evolutionary Twist



Vespa sat looking at the scenery. The late afternoon sunlight streaming through the trees cast an orange glow on everything. Yet, the river was bright blue. Vespa wondered if there could be any truth in what Granny had said. No, it was impossible. She must be turning senile.

There were mythological tales about humans who intermarried and traveled across the globe several thousand years ago. But how was that possible? They were just silly stories to entertain babies. They had to be.

Vespa knew she could not go to the Tustan industrial district, a mere 1000 miles away, or she would die of suffocation. The air there was almost gray with smoke, but the people there had evolved to tolerate it. Their noses were hairy and their chests were huge.

They did not, however, have the blue tinge to their skin like Vespa's people did, and they could not drink the water from the river Vespa was staring at. This particular river, in the agrarian district of Laoseer, had a very high concentration of copper sulphate, from the pesticides used on the farmlands in the district. Vespa's people had evolved to be able to drink and bathe in the water without any severe consequences. They considered it beautiful.

There were many such pockets of people all over Earth, who had adapted to the local conditions. Some had a high tolerance for sulphur dioxide, others for heavy metals, and still others for UV radiation where the ozone layer had a gaping hole. They communicated with each other electronically of course, but visiting each other happened only in case of dire need, in proper protective gear. Living in a different territory was unfathomable.

The idea that humans should have traveled frequently across the globe long time ago, seemed laughable. Surely the ability of humans to travel could not regress. After all they were the masters of the planet, making every aspect of it bend to their will.

And the mythological tales of intermarrying, why those were plain stupid. What if the baby inherited a combination of genes that were not suitable for either territory? That was the most foolish thing Vespa had ever heard. Yup, Granny's age was definitely catching up to her.

Vespa got up. It was getting late. Granny got cranky if Vespa was late for dinner. Vespa ran northward along the river bank, hurrying to reach home. She was almost there, when she tripped. As she tried to get up to catch her breath, she noticed what had caught her foot. She backed away and screamed. But no one was close enough to hear her. Retreating further, Vespa tried to calm herself down.

No! How was this possible? Who was this guy? Why was he here? Suddenly it occurred to her that the man may be dead. She would have to check. The idea made her nauseous. Gingerly she stepped closer to him. That's when she noticed the blue vomit a few feet behind the bush next to his body. Okay, so now she was pretty sure he had passed out. But he would need medical attention.

How long has he been lying there, she wondered. Stupid man. But more importantly why was he in her part of the world? She hunted around for clues and soon she found one. A shiny metal badge with the logo of the Global Association of Scientists (GAS).

Oh, of course! They were having their annual conference at Laoseer this

year and loads of specially distilled water with artificially introduced minerals had been made for them. This one must have been exploring. Vespa rolled her eyes. The GAS people were terribly curious, and it often landed them in trouble.

Vespa rushed home and told Granny all about the man. Granny nodded gravely and then took out a bottle from the medicine cabinet. Together they returned to the unconscious man.

"Where is he from, Granny?" Vespa asked. She had never seen one like him before.

"Hmm, let's see. Tall so probably from up north, but not quite lacking pigment, so somewhere where the ozone is depleted, and oh my, small pox scabs. He is from Serabi, the only place the small pox virus exists. It emerged from under the permafrost when it first melted long long ago. The population was almost decimated, but the few that survived evolved to be able to fight it.

Vespa looked at her grandma in awe. She did not understand what Granny was talking about, but Granny seemed to be far more knowledgeable than she let on. May be she should find out more about those mythological tales before writing her off.

Granny had managed to get some of that medicine in to the man's smelly mouth. Vespa was relieved Granny hadn't asked for any help. Then she suddenly remembered. Granny used to be a nurse once upon a time.

The man was finally coming around. He was blinking. As he took in his surroundings, he looked scared. "Who are you? What happened to me?"

"I am Vespa. This is my grandma. Are you capable of getting up and walking. Our house is just a hundred yards away. We can explain everything there." The man nodded and the trio walked to the nearby house at the border of a farm.

"Our house in on our potato and spinach farm." Vespa told the man as they entered the house. The man seemed to have run out of energy and collapsed on the couch.

"Was what I ate poisonous? Am I going to die?" The man asked as though resigned to his fate.

"You are not going to die, but how can you be so stupid as to eat something unknown in a foreign land?" Granny scolded. "You are lucky that I used to be a nurse with some medical training in ancient remedies."

"Oh my god! I need a bathroom." The man looked around desperately scanning the room for signs of one.

"Don't be such a drama queen. Go out in to the fields and throw up. It's good fertilizer for the crops. I don't want to have to clean up your puke in my toilet."

The man rushed out, and Vespa and Granny could hear loud retching sounds. The man returned after a quarter of an hour with specs of blue vomit on his beard. There was some dry vomit stains on his forehead too from the time he had vomited before passing out. But he looked cheerful, and a lot less sick.

"Great. Some of the poison should be out of your system and a tablet will take care of the rest. Now, go wash up there." Granny said clamping her nose with one hand and pointing to the bathroom door with the other.

At the sound of the tap being turned on, Granny shouted. "Don't drink any of that water. It will make things worse."

A few minutes later the man returned dabbing his face with a white handkerchief. "Could you please explain what happened to me?" He asked. "I thought it was safe to eat the fruits here. Don't you export them?"

"Yes. We export the ones we cultivate. But that doesn't mean you can just eat anything in the wild, you bungling moron."

"But I saw one of the locals eating it from his snack box at the conference." The man whined taking a sip of water from a bottle attached to his belt, to swallow a tablet Granny had handed him.

"My goodness. You are a scientist. You know all about adaptation. Exercise some impulse control man. Curiosity is great but you are not a child."

"So what were those?"

"Those were blackberries." Vespa volunteered, grinning.

"What's wrong with blackberries? And why were they blue?"

"Think about it man. Why are we blue?" Vespa snickered. It was fun to see Granny yelling at someone else for a change.

"Oh! I see. They grow really close to the river. So they have a very high concentration of copper sulphate and you have developed a tolerance."

"Finally!" Granny threw up her hands. "Call yourself a scientist!" She muttered. Vespa giggled.

"So what were the medicines you gave me?" The man asked.

"The first medicine I gave you was a pungent smelling liquid designed to revive you and induce vomiting to get as much of the poison out as possible. But some of the copper sulphate may have already entered your bloodstream. The tablet I gave you should neutralize any that reached your blood and spare you any long term harm." Granny explained contemptuously.

"But you are all immune to the poison, right? So how come you keep such a tablet? I recall you mentioned something about ancient remedies. Can you explain?" The man asked full of curiosity.

Ah, he is clever, Vespa thought. He knows how to mollify Granny. This is her favourite subject.

Granny's expression softened. "You see we did not develop our tolerance all at once. A long time ago, as the concentration of copper sulphate steadily increased in the water, our people started getting very sick. The doctors then concocted a medicine made of some plant extracts and

minerals to deal with the symptoms and neutralize the excess copper sulphate, but it only works for occasional exposure in small quantities. In the long term, only those who had the appropriate genes survived and procreated, eventually resulting in a local population that has a high tolerance for copper sulphate. Although we have a high tolerance for copper sulphate, the tolerance is not unlimited. Since we live so close to the river, I keep some medicine for those who over indulge on those berries."

The man was taken aback. "What do you mean, your people got sick? People here have always been able to tolerate higher concentration of copper sulphate. You don't actually believe all that stuff about ancient people traveling the globe and inter marrying, do you? That's just propaganda by the fundamentalists who want us to believe in some impossible utopia of the super humans of the ancient past so as to suppress progress."

"And yet you escaped death, because of a medicine I gave you based on my beliefs." Granny remarked, her eyes flashing.

"But your medicine may have been developed to deal with copper sulphate poisoning among your people, like you said your tolerance is not unlimited. And then someone just added the silly story you told me." The man retorted ignoring Granny's stony expression.

Vespa thought Granny would throttle the young man. But her anger abruptly deflated and she sighed. "I hoped, as a scientist, you would be open to reason and unconventional ideas."

"I would be, but you are just spouting the impossible magical nonsense those fundamentalists tell us."

"Am I? Do I sound like a fundamentalist?"

"No, not exactly. But you are saying similar things."

"You are a scientist. Shouldn't you have an open mind and analyse what I have to say and point out flaws in my theory if any, rather than dismissing it because it has some commonality with what fundamentalists spout."

After all crazy fundamentalist theories are often built on some garbled version of the truth."

"Okay Granny. I'll listen. So what's your theory?"

"My theory is that people in different regions were not so different to start with. Anyone could live anywhere and yes, even inter-marry."

"Why do you think that?"

"Consider our biological differences that limit us to particular locations. They are not limitations imposed by nature. The river here for example, is full of copper sulphate from our pesticides, but there must have been a time when there wasn't too much pesticide in the river. Your people have depleted the ozone with various chemicals. But the ozone was probably not always depleted there as it is chemical waste that caused the depletion. The high concentration of carbon dioxide in Tustan comes from their industries, but it wasn't always so. We can assume this because the peculiarities in atmosphere, ozone or water can be tied to human activities."

"But if people could travel and intermarry, why would they give it up? It seems ridiculous."

"I don't believe they had a choice. I believe they polluted the environment to the extent that it was making them very sick."

"But why wouldn't they stop polluting the environment, if that were the case?"

"Because they became so dependent on their pesticides and technological comforts, they could not go back, even when they saw it was costing them their lives."

"I see. So what do you believe happened next?"

"I believe that a large fraction of the population died out. But the small fraction that remained, stuck to their small localities and evolved to adapt to local conditions. But now again we are growing in numbers. We

retained their technological progress so our development was more rapid than the first wave of civilization."

"Hmm. There may be some evidence to support your theory. Recently, archaeologists have found an excess of fossils dating back to a few thousand years ago and they are at a loss for explaining what caused such a carnage."

"I am aware."

"You are? How come?"

"I am guessing I have read the same paper you have."

"You have read research papers in these fields?" The man seemed surprised.

"Yes, of course I have. They are publicly available to anyone who wants to read them. It's the one thing all localities co-operate over. It's why you people have a conference every year."

"I know that. I just did not realize you were doing real research. I thought you were, well crazy."

Granny glared at him.

"Why don't you tell me what led you to think along these lines?" The man continued.

"I used to be a nurse. My curiosity led me to explore ancient remedies and from there history and ancient cultures. I was already familiar with evolutionary biology as a part of my nurses training. Sorting the information and ideas I had gathered from various fields I put this theory together."

"Okay, so I must admit that it seems like is an interesting idea. Why didn't you ever publish it?"

"I wasn't exactly a scientist and it is difficult for an outsider to get a

journal to publish their theory, especially if it seems bizarre on the face of it. It also took me a while to convert ideas, intuition and strange connections between completely disconnected fields of study, in to a coherent theory."

Vespa had been looking at Granny and then at the man and back, like she was watching some exciting tennis match. She had heard Granny mention her theories, but seeing that Vespa had no patience for them, she never went in to details. This was the first time she heard Granny present them so logically and coherently.

"Yes that would be difficult. I'll tell you what. Why don't you email your theories to me and I'll go through them in detail to check for any glaring issues. If all seems in order, I'll forward your research to an appropriate journal with my personal recommendation. If your theory can stand up to rigorous academic scrutiny, it may revolutionize the way we think about our past." The man extended his hand. "No matter what comes of this endeavor, it is a pleasure to have made your acquaintance ma'am. My name is Evertotan."

Granny was tearing up and Vespa could not believe what she was hearing. "Not Ever-- Everto -- totan Goulapitite, the fa-famous Phy-Physicist, are you?" Vespa stammered out in shock.

"The very same." He smiled and Vespa could see the resemblance to the pictures she had seen, except that the beard threw her off.

There was a thud and Vespa turned around to see that Granny had fainted. She rushed to get the smelling salts from Granny's ancient remedies kit. Together Dr. Goulapitite and Vespa managed to revive her, but perhaps it would have been kinder to leave her unconscious, until the physicist had left.

"I called you a bungling moron." Granny was mortified. She hid her face in her hands in shame.

"It's okay Granny. I deserved it. Besides you did save my life. I owe you one. But I really think you may have an interesting theory here. It is not

my field, so I can't be sure, but it sounds logical to me and it seems like you are well informed. If I can't find anything glaringly wrong with it, I will send it to the right people."

Granny looked up. She had a hopeful expression of a child. "I can't believe it. After all these years of people calling me crazy," she shot Vespa an accusing look and Vespa was smart enough to look contrite, "I have an actual chance of being taken seriously." Granny smiled and her eyes shone.

Vespa was thrilled for Granny.

"But Granny, didn't you ever consider a career in research instead of nursing?" Dr. Goulapitite asked.

"I did young man. But 50 years ago it wasn't really an option for a woman, was it? One living in an agrarian district in particular." Granny raised her eyebrows and looked Dr. Goulapitite in the eye.

"No. It wasn't." Dr. Goulapitite conceded.

Granny had shot up in Vespa's estimation from senile old lady to a genius. Vespa resolved to continue Granny's research. It did sound rather intriguing and Vespa had inherited, not just her grandma's high copper sulphate tolerance, but also her creativity and insatiable thirst for knowledge.

This story was inspired by [the cover photo obtained here](https://stocksnap.io/photo/Q7STENMU1K) (<https://stocksnap.io/photo/Q7STENMU1K>).

A short flash fiction version of this story was first published on my own blog, but this entire short story was first published as a guest post on my friend Lavanya's blog [here](https://thelavmuse.com/2018/01/01/the-evolutionary-twist). (<https://thelavmuse.com/2018/01/01/the-evolutionary-twist>).

The Dream Team

Matt was exhilarated. After months of very hard work, the paper was finally finished. Just this morning, they had submitted it to *Nature*, and he was certain it would be accepted for publication. The results would revolutionize the way people thought about many-body physics.

In fact, their professor, Phillip, had been so pleased with the paper, he had invited the entire group home for a celebration. As Matt entered Phillip's living room, his eyes searched for Emily. He rushed up to her, and they bumped fists. This achievement was a product of their partnership.

In a few minutes all the group members had arrived. Phillip poured every one a glass of champagne and then called for a toast. "To Matt and Emily, the dream team." He said raising his glass.

"To Matt and Emily!" Everyone echoed, holding their glasses up.

Matt and Emily were indeed a dream team. Matt came up with completely wacky ideas, that some how made sense. He did not just think outside the box, he simply did not realize a box existed, and perhaps for him, it did not. He was great at coming up with theories and seeing complex patterns.

Emily was a wiz at numerics. No matter how crazy Matt's ideas were, Emily could always figure out a numerical model to verify his results. They worked wonderfully as team, coming up with novel theories and path breaking results. Emily's numerical analysis and models helped substantiate and lend credibility to Matt's revolutionary ideas, long before they could be experimentally verified. Fate had brought these two together, and their partnership held a lot of promise.

Matt had been a loner and preferred working alone. Yet Emily, a new graduate student in the group, had changed that. She had read one of his papers and come up with a numerical model to verify it. She walked in to his office, introduced herself and presented her model.

Matt was taken aback. No one had ever approached him so directly and talked with such ease. She did not seem to find him either odd, unapproachable, sullen, or intimidating, like most people did, or may be she did not care. Soon they started working together on a regular basis.

In this last project, Emily had not just verified his end result, but had helped him develop it. In the past, his abhorrence for numerical work, limited him creative yet relatively simple models that could be solved analytically. But with Emily's help, he could come up with more sophisticated theories. At each step Emily would do some numerical analysis to guide him in his thinking.

They worked together for long hours, often in a state of heightened excitement, as they brain stormed together. Occasionally, Matt had felt a mild whiff of sexual tension developing between them. At times he felt an impulse to hug her, when they shared a small victory, but he had resisted. Their professional relationship was perfect and there was no reason to jeopardize it. Besides, he did not really know how she felt about him.

Matt was brooding in a corner, as was his custom at all parties, when he felt a whack on his back. "Are you always so grumpy at parties?" Emily asked with a twinkle in her eye.

So unusual was such an occurrence, that Matt almost choked on the cocktail sausage he was munching. Emily laughed, and there it was, the mischievous expression that so enamored him. "Usually." He responded after he had managed to cough out the piece stuck in his throat.

"Come on. I hear music. Let's go dance."

"Dance! Absolutely not."

"Why not? Haven't you ever done it before?"

"No."

"Well then, all the more reason to give it a shot. Come on. Come on."

She had caught hold of his arm and was leading him to the dance floor. Matt tried to resist, *but how does one resist a fierce tornado*, he wondered. Phillip was surprised to see Matt on the dance floor, but he and the other group members encouraged it. After a few minutes, Matt stopped feeling awkward and self-conscious. He enjoyed the dancing, and for the rest of the party, participated in the chatting, joking, eating and drinking, lots of drinking.

Since the next day was a working day, everyone dispersed by 8:00 pm. Matt was feeling too pumped to work. As he sauntered home, wondering what to do next, Emily caught up with him. "Hey I am too excited to work or read tonight. Do you want to come over and play Wii?"

"Mm, yeah, sure." Matt enjoyed video games of all kinds and was pretty good with the Wii, but in Emily, he found a formidable opponent. They were well matched and the tennis matches got highly competitive. Both Emily and Matt were concentrating hard, and Matt could feel the adrenaline rush through him.

At one point, after a well executed smash Matt exclaimed, "Take that sucker!"

"Hey watch your language Mister" Emily retorted.

They looked at each other and laughed. They were sitting really close to each other on the couch.

"You sound like my mother" Matt complained.

"Do I, now?" Emily raised one eye brow and looked him in the eye.

Matt felt a tingling sensation. "Perhaps not." He said looking down and holding her hand. He wondered if she would pull back, but she did not. So he looked back at her, and she looked straight in to his eyes. He held her gaze for a moment, and then leaned in and kissed her.

With the potent cocktail of the alcohol and adrenaline, coursing through his body, the night took a turn for the carnal. Good sense was long out of the window, and neither of them cared that they did not have condoms at

hand.

I am still some days away from ovulation Emily reasoned, and Matt, driven by lust beyond his control, hardly cared.

In the light of day, the night's escapades seemed stupid. Both Matt and Emily agreed it was a mistake and decided to chalk it up to a one time drunken episode. Thankfully, they found that they still shared a productive professional relationship.

All was going well, until a month later Matt noticed, that Emily wasn't as sharp as usual.

"What's up Em? You seem to be off your game. Did you stay up too late binge watching some sci-fi show?" He snickered, well aware of Emily's one weakness.

"No. I don't understand what's going on. I feel really queasy. It must be the sushi, I ate last night. But *Taste OF Tokyo* always has fresh stuff." She barely managed to finish her sentence, before she had to rush off to the restroom to throw up.

Matt did not see anymore of Emily that day. He wondered what had happened. She came to his office the next day to resume their discussion, but her face was the picture of misery.

"What happened? Did Patrick Stewart die?" Matt asked knowing her absurd obsession for the man who played Jean Luc Piccard.

When even such a glib remark about her beloved actor failed to get a reaction out of her, he got really worried. "What happened Em? Is everything okay?"

"Not really." Em replied.

Emily was the most direct person Matt had ever met. Her evasive demeanor frightened him. "Em, you are my only friend. Please tell me. Whats wrong?"

"I -- I, I'm pregnant." Emily could barely get the words out.

"What? How is that even possible? Oh!" Then realization dawned. "Oh! No. No, no no." He protested.

"Yess." Emily hissed.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I took four tests."

"Okay. Okay, okay. I am in my final year. So we can figure this out. I'll talk to my mom. I am sure she will help."

"What, in god's name, are you talking about?"

"We need to figure out a way to look after the baby." Matt replied, puzzled.

"Are you insane? I am going to have an abortion. It's been only 31 days, so I think I can just take a pill."

"Abortion! You are going to have an abortion?" The color drained from Matt's face.

"Yes, of course. What did you expect?"

"Right. Makes sense. You are in your first year of grad school. Raising a baby is going to be impossible for you."

"Duh!"

"When are you getting it done?"

"In a couple of days, I expect. In these cases, the sooner the better. I'll call today and get an appointment as soon as possible."

The two of them sat quietly, lost in thought, and no amazing physics ideas came to them that day.

Matt went home at lunch time and called his mom. Then he went to see Emily at her apartment. Emily answered the knock, and then dashed off. Violent retching sounds from the bathroom informed Matt that she was puking. He sat on the sofa and waited for her to return. He wished her morning sickness was not so severe. It was going to make it less likely, that his request would be granted.

"Whats up Matt?" Emily asked plonking herself on the sofa.

"Em, is there any way you would agree not to have an abortion?"

"What? Are you crazy?"

"I'll take full responsibility for the baby. I won't ever expect anything of you. I promise. My mom has agreed to help me out."

"You must be insane. No. No, absolutely not. And you have no say in this matter." Emily shouted in anger.

"I am the father, right?"

"Of course. Don't you remember what happened on this very couch, a month ago? Do you think I go around doing that everyday? But that does not give you the right to tell me what to do with my body." She was fuming.

Matt was hurt and angry, but he had to stay calm, or he would have no chance at all. "No. But please. As the father, I feel a responsible for this child."

"Of course you are, but you know very well, that the decision is mine. I don't need your approval."

"I know. That is why I am pleading with you. Please have the baby. I will take care of everything else. I'll give you my word, and I'll even give it to you in writing in front of witnesses if you want, so it is legally binding."

"Why does this matter to you so much? It can't be convenient for you to care for the baby either. You will be graduating next year and searching

for a postdoc. Your situation is hardly stable. So why?"

Matt sighed. "I am the product of a one night stand. My mother almost had an abortion. At the last minute, in the hospital, she had a change of heart, and that is why I exist. So I can't bear to have this baby lose a chance at life, for my folly. I am begging you. I, of all people, should have known better. I am older than you too. I know, I failed you that night and I have no legal right to ask this, but please."

In spite of her anger Emily couldn't help feeling sorry for Matt, but she had to be firm. "Oh Matt! I am so sorry, but I can't endure the pregnancy for 9 months. I must focus on my research. Even if the morning sickness goes away in 3 months, and that is not guaranteed, the third trimester is no joke. Besides, the longer I stay pregnant the more my brain adapts to be a mother, and the harder it becomes to give up the baby. If I actually have the baby, I may not be able to give it up to you. I can't take that chance. I have worked too hard to get here and I am in no position to give a baby a comfortable life. I can't do it Matt. I am sorry."

Matt got up to leave. Then he turned around to ask, "Would you like me to come with you to the hospital, when you go for the procedure?"

Emily was in tears. "If that's not too much to ask, I could really use some emotional support."

Matt nodded and left. He was upset, that he could do absolutely nothing. He wanted that child. It meant the world to him. Yet the law gave him no hope. He understood why, but that did not make him feel any better.

Two days later, he sat beside Emily at the hospital. The doctor had checked her up and then handed her the pill. He looked at her meaningfully. "No Matt, I am not changing my mind." Emily said shaking her head.

He held her hand, while she took the pill and he whispered an apology and a farewell to the baby he had so wronged. Then he sat there staring at the wall and crying silent tears. He felt great resentment for the law, and the woman who wasn't willing to make any compromise. He felt angry

and helpless.

But that was only until he looked in to her eyes and saw the sadness there. For all her certainty, Emily was sad too. *How much harder it must be for her, since the life is blossoming inside of her*, he thought. He stopped resenting her.

As they held hands and walked out of the hospital, Emily thrust her head on to his chest and broke down crying. He realized her rational, practical arguments were a facade to help her go through the abortion, the thought of which, was upsetting her deeply. He wondered how hard she had to fought her emotions to keep it together. He patted her head and stayed with her the rest of the week, helping her recuperate.

During the week, they both realized that, they did not want to be in a relationship, at least not for a while. They both needed time to process the abortion, but perhaps some day. Until then, they would be colleagues and may be friends.

For the next few months they drowned themselves in Physics and were glad to find that they still enjoyed working together.

The Matador And The Bull

"Ruchi. What's wrong baby?"

"Nothing Mom."

"It can't be nothing. You are fidgeting and stomping around the house. It's not like you. Come on. Tell me sweetie."

"Mom! I am a teen now. I need my space. I can't coming running to you for everything. Can you respect that, and leave me alone?"

"Sure Honey. But I'm here, if you need me."

Ruchi was having a heated online argument about a post she had written condemning marital rape. She was surprised at the viciousness with which people attacked her. She knew that there were people who practiced marital rape regularly, but she assumed it was a clandestine pursuit that no one would want to admit to, let alone advertise.

She was astonished how strongly people could advocate a heinous crime like marital rape. And people seemed so concerned about malicious accusations and damage caused by the misuse of the law. But what about the damage caused by the absence of the law to the millions of women who lived with their rapist believing their deplorable misery to be the norm?

That wasn't considered damage apparently, because it was already happening to silent sufferers. But men being deprived of this privilege. Now there was true suffering!

Ruchi was horrified to learn how many men thought there was absolutely no use in getting married at all, if marital rape were to be a crime. The whole point of getting married, they believed, was to get to rape as and when they pleased, without suffering any adverse consequences.

Although outraged, Ruchi tried to calmly combat these comments with

logical arguments, facts and statistics. That's when her mother had noticed her agitation and asked her about it.

But when Ruchi returned to her post, the comments were no longer about marital rape. They were now personal attacks, insults and threats. Ruchi tried not to think of them. But they kept rankling in her mind, tormenting her mercilessly.

She wiped away flecks of tears as she typed furiously. This was war. She was just finishing up her first scathing reply, when her mom stepped in to the room her head hidden behind a pile of clothes.

"Ruchi you need to sort and put away your clean clothes." Her mom called out as she dumped the huge pile on Ruchi's bed. That's when she noticed her daughter's tear stained face.

"Ruchi baby. What happened? Please don't freeze me out. Something is clearly wrong. Let me help you fix it!"

Ruchi collapsed on her mom's lap sobbing. "You can't fix it Mama. Nobody can. It is a horrible horrible world. And it's making me feel horrible too. Here look!" Ruchi said shoving her laptop at her mother.

Her mother glowed with pride as she read the post. But when she came to the comments section she cringed, and then she was horrified. She had just seen the angry reply Ruchi had composed to a hideous comment.

She held Ruchi close and hugged her till the sobs subsided.

"Ruchi honey. You can't write that comment"

"Why not Mama? Are you going to lecture me about language? Have you even seen the comment I am replying to?" Ruchi was getting angry again. She had hoped her mother understood.

"Ruchi, you think I care about the language? Of course not, silly."

"Then what?" Ruchi was confused.

"Honey what do you think will happen when you reply with that aggressive comment?"

"The guy will learn that he can't mess with women. He will learn that we give it back as good as we get. We are not to be trampled upon. That's what he will learn. That women cannot be silenced or intimidated."

"Sweetheart, if only he were that intelligent, he would never have said the things he did. You are mistaken, if you think nasty sarcastic remarks will teach him anything! He will fume, fester and then take it out on his poor wife probably. Then he will come back with a scathing reply, that will upset you even more. There is no end to how nasty people can get, and how much one can escalate these things. You'll spend the whole day contemplating clever nasty replies and so will he. What good will come of it?"

Ruchi looked at her mom. "Then what should I do? Let him win? Let him get away with his foul comments meekly."

"You can reply firmly and politely with what you believe and then ignore what he says after that. You have made your point. What else can you say? You can't force people to agree with you. You can only share your ideas."

"Mama but some things need to change, and if I keep quiet I am just agreeing with him."

"No, Honey. It is easy to fly off the handle, give in to anger, and waste a day in a mudslinging match, that will do absolutely no good. In fact, it may attract a few more foul mouthed people to join in. What takes strength, at this moment, is exercising restraint."

"Girls are always told to exercise restraint Mama."

"I know. I just wish men were taught that too. One thinks strength lies in yelling and screaming and shouting. But an infant can do that. True strength lies in doing, only that which is meaningful and productive."

"So you are saying, that is how I should display my strength, by keeping

quiet? How does that help my cause?"

"You have made your point in a dignified way. Don't let him gourd you in to being as vile as he is. Then he is just controlling you, like a matador at a bull fight."

"Besides every time you reply you give him attention, which like any other bully, is what he craves. He uses it as a chance to say more vile things and spread his disgusting theories. *He is a parasite, using your blogging platform to spread his poison.* So the only way to win, is to keep quiet. If he still continues to attack you, without you replying, he starts to sound crazy and your mission is accomplished. As long as you engage him, you give his views legitimacy. Let him shout himself hoarse, sounding like a raving loon. And if he is still getting too much for you, use the tools you have; and block him."

"Mama, I never thought of it that way. But it does make a lot of sense. I am going to do it Mama. I am going to post a dignified reply and then ignore him."

"Honey it won't be easy though. You'll want to rage and yell and do something. But sometimes doing nothing can be the the most difficult, yet effective response. Besides you can't get completely emotionally spent on this one post. There are so many more issues for you to write about and fighting uselessly with this man is taking away your time and energy which could be used for working on more causes, so you see he wins that way too if you engage him."

"Then Mama I will do nothing. I will do this with all the social awareness posts I write. And I will write a lot of them."

"That's my strong girl. You will change the world by speaking difficult truths and then keeping quite when you need to, even though it is the hardest thing to do, and see just how effective it is. Besides, there is so much poison on the internet these days. Curtailing the spread of venom is also an important social cause, perhaps, one of the the most important social causes of your generation."

"Thanks Mama. I will. I will work on bringing about constructive change. I will focus on building, not destroying. I will shout out radical new ideas and solutions, instead of shouting at people for being wrong. That's how I'll bring about change." Ruchi hugged her mom.

The Famous HP

Inspector Radcliffe was miffed. Unceremoniously yanked out of his Sunday afternoon nap, he had been summoned to a cottage in the woods, that could only be accessed by a dirt road. Right at this moment, the mud stains on his crisply ironed beige trousers seemed to disturb him far more than the body lying on the floor. And not the mention, the group of caricatures that surrounded him.

These loons, as Radcliffe had summed them up to be, were having some sort of ridiculous costume party. Grown ups parading around in costumes all weekend long, eating junk food and playing nonsense games. What was the world coming to? The goofballs insisted on *staying in character*, as they called it.

Dagny Taggart, Leo Valdez, Emma, Count Dracula, Miss Marple and loads of other fictional characters seemed to have escaped the confines off their pages and assembled in this cottage, for the sole purpose of annoying Inspector Radcliffe, or so he grumbled.

And there on the floor lay Harry Potter. He was dead. *Pity there is no Voldemort. Then it would have been an easy case to crack*, Inspector Radcliffe mused. Harry Potter had died in the drawing room much like the Riddle family, but the frothing at the mouth indicated he had been poisoned. Perhaps he was paralyzed too, because he hadn't moved or cried out. So on the face of things, it had *the look in to my eyes or wand and drop dead please* approach, that Voldemort so favored.

When the Inspector first entered, he tried questioning the suspects, which included everyone in the cabin. But he got the most irritating answers out of them, only to realize that they were being true to the characters they were impersonating. Yoda was the most vague and infuriating of them all. *Most unfortunate*, the inspector thought, when he learned with great difficulty, that Yoda may have been an actual witness to the crime.

But, "Find the answer behind the curtain, you will", was all Yoda had to

offer.

Hermione Granger had tried to be helpful, but she knew very little and was distraught. After all Harry Potter was dead! Did they know each other? Good luck with finding that out! The only answer he got was, Hermione and Harry have been firm friends since they were 11 and had to collaborate to outwit a three headed dog named Fluffy.

Ron Weasley was conspicuously missing. But apparently no one had chosen to impersonate him.

No one else seemed to really care that a man was dead, but then again most of them had no reason to care about Harry Potter, if they were staying true to their character. Only Miss Marple showed interest, but of course investigating a murder would be right up her street. In fact, it was she, who had called him.

For a moment the inspector wondered if the man had really been murdered, or if this was some elaborate charade, a part of the program, to get a real police inspector to participate in their nonsense.

As he examined the body again, he confirmed that this was no joke. The man had indeed been poisoned. Miss Marple was looking at the body too. She clicked her tongue. "Such untidy hair and strange clothes. What is wrong with young people these days? But the boy did not deserve to die. He's so young."

"What do you think happened?" The Inspector could not resist asking.

"It's too early to tell but, it is probably someone who has murdered before. A murderer always wants more. You may want question that suspicious egg headed foreigner with a mustache, who keeps stealing furtive glances at the body."

That was the first time the Inspector noticed Hercule Poirot, leaning against a window half hidden behind the frilly pink curtain. Odd, he thought, that Poirot wasn't all over the case.

"What's your take on this case Monsieur Poirot?" He asked, and noticed

that Miss Marple was right by his side waiting for an answer.

"Hercule Poirot does not want to be disturbed." He said. "The little grey cells, they are busy."

"Hercule Poirot, are you French?" Miss Marple demanded.

"Belgian, Madame." Poirot replied, annoyed.

"He has murdered, hasn't he?"

"Poirot? He is a famous detective. Just like you." The Inspector replied amused.

"But he has murdered. I can tell."

"Oh yeah. In Curtain. Poirot's last case."

"Vanity. He was out smarted." Miss Marple observed.

"I suppose you could say that."

"Then he could murder again."

"Wait, Curtain! Is that what Yoda was talking about? The answer lies behind the curtain. In the story Curtain, Poirot was a murderer. So was it you?" He looked at Poirot, who was now sitting down on the floor looking curiously ill.

"Yes, I must admit, it was."

"Why? Why would you do it?"

"His name is Harry Potter. He has my initials. Yet he, an untidy teenager, dares to be more famous than me, me the great Hercule Poirot. Outrageous!"

"So you killed him?" Inspector Radcliffe could not believe what he was hearing.

Two days later the man died in custody. Advanced stage pancreatic cancer was the cause of death. Inspector Radcliffe later learned, that the doctor had given him a week to live. Perhaps this final death sentence completely unhinged an already unstable man. Who knows?

He had left behind a letter. He would restore Hercule Poirot to being the most famous HP, by killing Harry Potter and he would commit this one and only murder, just before he died. It was murder for a good cause, following in the footsteps of the all time greatest HP.

A Death On Stage

Yawn! The evening sure was a drag and a colossal waste of time. It was even worse than Shalini had anticipated. Shalini was here to cheer for her best friend, Manisha, who was being honored for her new and successful entrepreneurial venture at an award function for young women achievers. The NGO, that hosted the function, championed feminism and worked towards securing justice and safety for women who were victims of violence.

The awards were being presented by a plethora of supposed celebrities, none of whom Shalini recognized. *Boring, boring*, Shalini, thought. The girls had hoped, that Manisha would get her award early. Then, the two of them could grab a quick dinner and skedaddle off to the nearest bar and have a girls night out.

But, the already long and boring award ceremony, was being stretched by repeated intermissions involving music and dance performances, and now this mind numbing fashion show, where human mannequins were scuttling around in elaborately silly clothes and finery.

Unable to contain her bladder any longer, Manisha had dashed off to the bathroom leaving Shalini alone to watch the eerie and expressionless moving statues, making random jerky incomprehensible movements. But suddenly with a loud thud, one of them collapsed! Were they really robots or human beings, Shalini vaguely wondered at the loudness of the thud.

The other mannequins crowded around their collapsed sister. Some of the audience gathered up on the stage too. One of the models must have fainted, Shalini mused. Big surprise!! Shalini felt like, she too would faint, if she did not get some food soon.

Aaaahhhhhhhh! a loud chilling scream from one of the models pierced through the atmosphere thick with perfume. She was the first to notice the blood, that had finally penetrated through the elaborate clothing of her fallen sister. It was now pooling thick and fast. Some people ran away

from the stage. Others speculated hearing a gun shot. In the midst of all the madness, Manisha returned. "What did I miss?" She asked arranging her dupatta, as she sat next to Shalini.

"Look!" Shalini pointed at the stage. A policewoman in full uniform, one of the award recipients, rushed over to the stage to examine the body.

Just then, the master of ceremonies came to her senses. "Do we have a doctor here?" She announced. "Please, is anyone a doctor?"

Shalini got up reluctantly. She might despise these people, but she had taken an oath. She walked up to the stage. "I am a doctor." She mumbled.

Everyone looked relieved and shrunk away from the body. "She is alive." Shalini announced feeling her pulse. Then she loosened the woman's uncomfortable clothing. That's when she understood what had happened. The woman had suffered a miscarriage.

"I need help carrying her off stage." Shalini looked around.

A bunch of people from back stage showed up to assist her. Shalini gave Manisha an apologetic look and followed the woman. Manisha nodded to convey that she understood.

Backstage, Shalini did what she could to revive the woman. She stripped her down to her undergarments and petticoat to make her comfortable. She asked her name.

"Vandana Kumarchand." The woman replied and then gasped. She seemed very reluctant to let Shalini examine her properly. The woman must have been very upset after what had happened.

"I am so sorry Vandana. Were you aware that you were pregnant?" Shalini asked.

Vandana shook her head and sobbed.

"I just need to check your pelvic area for pains." Shalini said undoing the petticoat.

But the woman retreated, as if she had been burned. "It's okay. I won't hurt you ...". And that's when Shalini's experienced eye noticed that Vandana was a victim of domestic abuse and she was trying to cover up the marks.

We are in the perfect place Shalini thought. "I will talk to these people Vandana. This organization helps victims of domestic abuse."

"No please." The look of terror in her eyes was understandable.

"Don't worry. Your husband won't find out, until things are taken care of. They will protect you. The organization helps women like you. Don't you know that?"

But Vandana almost choked up with fear. Just then the ambulance arrived. So Shalini let it go. She did however talk to a few organizers of the event backstage about Vandana before returning to Manisha.

Manisha hadn't received her award yet. Shalini briefly told her everything that had happened. "Why did the organizers seem so uninterested in helping Vandana?" Shalini asked. Isn't this their specialty? And right under their noses too! I thought they would be keen to help her."

"May be they are too busy tonight. Talk to them tomorrow." Manisha suggested.

Just then the girls heard the master of ceremonies announce "And now I would like to welcome our biggest donor and champion of our cause, the honorable Mr. Rakesh Kumarchand. Mr. Kumarchand, please say a few words."

Kumarchand, Shalini thought. *No it must be a coincidence.* Manisha and she looked at each other.

"Thank you Malini. I am honored to be here. Violence against women is disgusting and law enforcement must do its job in apprehending these monsters, who parade around society looking just as normal as you or me. I commend you on your work in helping women, but I apologize I must make this brief. I have just arrived here from work and was

informed a few seconds ago that my wife who was performing in your fashion show was just taken ill, and my rightful place is by her side. I must leave for the hospital." He left the stage to thunderous applause.

"Biggest donor. I see. That's why they were ignoring me." Shalini's face contorted with anger and she left. She only hoped she hadn't put Vandana in further danger. She was happy to turn back and see that her friend Manisha was following not far behind, before even she had got her award.

Awards from hypocrites were not worth the cheap metal they were made of.

The Third Date



"Aargh! How incredibly annoying." Dan blurted out as he felt his pockets for his cell phone. Had he actually left it behind? He was almost half way home for crying out loud. And his nose was freezing in the wintry Chicago wind.

He kicked the stone parapet lining the road in frustration. "Ouch!" he shouted as his frozen toes crashed in to the hard stone surface. He felt around his coat and jeans pockets once more for his cell phone. "Fine. I guess I just have to go back. " He mumbled annoyed and retraced his steps to Natasha's apartment.

And she is going to be so mad at me, Dan fretted. *She has that important meeting in Seattle tomorrow, and in 5 hours she has to leave for the airport. But at least the phone is on silent, so it won't bother her.*

She had said she wanted to be well rested, for the outcome of the meeting would determine whether or not she would get a promotion at work.

Dan had wanted to stay the night. The evening going so well. It had been their third date and sex seemed likely. Dan had hoped for it. But Natasha was adamant. "The meeting tomorrow can make or break my career, Dan. I must stay focused." She had insisted.

Never mind, thought Dan. *There will be a fourth date and then another.* He was sure of it. Natasha had shown so much interest in his hobbies, his work and his family. Clearly she was in this for the long haul.

As he approached Natasha's apartment, he was surprised to notice the dim glow of a night light in her bedroom. Perhaps she was afraid of sleeping in the dark, he mused, and it made her ever so much more endearing. He hoped she wouldn't be too mad at him, but what else could he do? As a sales guy, his cell phone was his life line, and she was supposed to be far away in Seattle for the next couple of days.

Dan was about to press her doorbell, but he hesitated. Natasha often left the door unlocked, he knew because she had mentioned it just a few hours ago. Perhaps he could slip in and pick up his phone without disturbing her. Slowly he pushed the handle and noiselessly opened the door. *Perfect,* he thought, as he saw the phone lying under the coffee table reflecting the dim light oozing out of a narrow gap under the bedroom door. But just as he was about to reach for the phone, he heard voices.

Baffled and panicking, he ducked behind the couch, just in time as the bedroom door opened. A strange woman stepped out and walked towards the kitchen. Dan could no longer see her, but he heard her put something in to the microwave. A few seconds later, Natasha stepped out and joined the woman in to the the kitchen.

The two women seemed to be having a very strange conversation. It took

Dan a couple of minutes to follow the thread of the conversation he had stumbled in to the middle of. His heart skipped a beat when he figured out that Natasha and the unknown woman were planning a murder that they would execute that very night. He stifled a gasp just in time, when he realized that the person they were planning to murder was his upstairs neighbor. Mr. Bradshaw was undeniably annoying. He bounced a ball or tap danced loudly at the oddest hours of the night. *But for all his idiosyncrasies Mr. Bradshaw did not deserve to be murdered*, Dan thought.

Distracted by his thoughts about Mr. Bradshaw, Dan almost missed out the most important part of the conversation he was eavesdropping on. He almost fainted when he learned that Natasha and her accomplice were planning to frame him, Dan, for the murder. Natasha had shared with the other woman all the personal information she had fished out of him on their date today, and they were discussing which bits they could effectively use to make the frame up convincing.

Dan struggled to keep calm and silent so he could hear all their plans. He dearly wished he hadn't told Natasha that he had complained to the super about Mr. Bradshaw. He waited till they returned to the bedroom and then quietly grabbed his phone and slipped out of the apartment. His mind was in a whirl. What should he do? Should he warn Mr. Bradshaw? But Mr. Bradshaw may not believe him. Besides, from what he could make of their conversation, Mr. Bradshaw was probably a Russian spy. That explained all the strange noises at odd hours.

Who were these girls? The whole thing was so surreal. However did he get tangled up with them? He remembered Natasha telling her accomplice that she had sought him out because he lived in the apartment below Mr. Bradshaw. Yes, of course, she had bumped in to him at the supermarket carrying an armful of toilet paper. It had seemed so cute to him then. To think it was all a charade on her part.

A new alarming thought occurred to him. Were the girls working with the CIA? Hadn't that other woman mentioned something about *the agency*. In that case, going to the police may be a very bad idea. Whatever could he do? He was too frightened to return to his apartment, and it was just so

cold outside.

Then he had an idea. The important thing for him was to find a reliable alibi. That way he could not be framed. Then it came to him. The drive-through ATM had a security camera that recorded its surroundings at all times. The arches around the ATM would shield him from the wind. So he leaned against the wall in front of the ATM and snuggled up feeling safe. The security tapes would show him lying there all night with the appropriate time stamps.

But what next, he wondered, sleepily. *Tomorrow*, well he would cross that bridge when he got to it, he decided and dozed off.

Far away from the ATM, in a dimly lit bedroom Natasha and her friend were incapacitated by a fit of giggles. Finally, after almost a quarter of an hour, Sally calmed down enough to say, "Really Natasha. You're a riot. How could you do that to him? I wonder what he is up to now."

"No need to wonder." Natasha replied recovering a few seconds later. "I bugged his phone. And as for how I could do it, whatever do you mean? You were the one who dared me to! You dared me to convince my new boyfriend that I was plotting to frame him for murder."

"Tasha you idiot. I was drunk at that party last night!"

"Yeah, but a dare is a dare, and I always meet the challenge."

"By the way, what do you mean you bugged his phone?"

"I mean, I programmed it to send me its GPS co-ordinates every few minutes. See he is at the drive through ATM. He has been there for a while. Smart guy. The security cameras there provide an iron clad alibi of his whereabouts."

"Wow you are tech savvy! Amazing, how you used that concealed webcam to spy on the door, so you would know when he entered. He was as quiet as a mouse. We would never have known when he entered

without it. But how did you know he wouldn't ring the bell? What would you do if he did?"

"I didn't know he wouldn't. I had turned off the buzzer in case he did, and hoped he would just try the door. I made sure he knew I usually keep it unlocked. I slipped it in to some anecdote I told him today. After all, I had taken his phone, and I knew how important it was to him. I also made it very clear that I would be very upset to be woken up. If he had knocked I would have not answered, and he would have probably tried the door anyway. I must admit it was the weakest part of my plan though."

"So you think he will ever forgive you for this prank?" Sally asked.

Natasha shrugged. "Let's see. Tomorrow is another day."

This story was inspired by [the cover photo obtained here](https://unsplash.com/photos/XySeOUcwSKM) (<https://unsplash.com/photos/XySeOUcwSKM>).

Chinese Whispers

Lost

As the clock struck midnight, a shrill cry pierced the silence of the cool night. Lalita longed to cover her ears with a pillow and go back to sleep. But it wasn't really an option. Baby Ruchi and her terrible screams ruled the home these nights and it was time for her feed.

As Lalita coaxed herself out of the warmth of the covers, she knew something wasn't right, but she was too groggy to figure out what. She reached out to the crib next to her bed and grabbed baby Ruchi. Ruchi began to calm down. With six months of regular practice, Ruchi had become adept at feeding, so as soon as Lalita held the babe to her breast, quiet reigned once again in the Gupta household.

That's when Lalita realized what was missing. *Of course! It's too quiet.* Lalita realized, as she looked around frantically. The absence of her husband's gentle rhythmic snores had become conspicuous, once Ruchi had calmed down.

Lalita reached for the light switch next to the headboard and scanned the room. Her eyes confirmed what her ears had already indicated. Mukesh was not in the room. So where could he be?

Perhaps Lalita was edgy, because they had just moved in to this new apartment in a new town only a couple of weeks ago, otherwise she might have thought to check the bathrooms at least before she panicked, but it finally came to her. She thoroughly checked every nook and cranny of the house, but he was no where to be seen.

With the baby fed and sound asleep, Lalita called Mukesh's phone, but it rang on the nightstand almost waking Ruchi up. Lalita quickly disconnected and heaved a sigh of relief, after confirming that Ruchi was still asleep. *Now what?* She wondered. Where could he have gone?

She tried to be calm and think about what they had talked about before going to bed around 10:00 pm. She recalled that Mukesh had a spot of indigestion. Perhaps he had gone for a walk, or shot over to the 24 hour medical store to get some antacid. Yes, it must be that, she decided. She would wait. She tossed and turned, but she could not sleep. She wished he had taken his phone at least.

The minutes ticked away excruciatingly slowly as Lalita strained her ears to pick up any sounds that may signal Mukesh's return. But nothing happened. She began to pace. Then she stared out of the balcony to see if she could spot him walking near the building. But there was no sign of him.

She called the watchman and asked if he had seen her husband walking in the building compound. The night watchman had never met them, because they were new in the society and he had not yet had a day shift during their stay. All he could confirm, was that no one had been walking on the society grounds in the last half an hour when he had been doing his rounds starting at midnight.

Lalita was finding it hard to fight her panic, but she had to stay focused and practical. Yet she was so worried. She knew that a heart attack could often present symptoms similar to indigestion. What if Mukesh went to get an antacid and had a heart attack? What if he was lying unconscious somewhere or worse. No. No. She would not think that now.

Finally, she decided to go search for him. At least, she could get him medical assistance quickly, if required. She got dressed, picked up Ruchi and left the house. As she was stepping out of the building Ruchi started bawling causing one of the ground floor residents to peek out of a window. The lady at the window called out. "Hey! You there! Are you okay? What happened? Where are you rushing to at this time? Are you unwell?"

"My husband is missing." Lalita blurted out, as she hurried to the society gate, patting Ruchi on her back to calm her.

The watchman called out to ask her where she was going, but she did not

even hear him as she brushed away tears of anguish. Where could Mukesh be? The walk to the medical store was a good ten minutes long through winding crisscross streets. But she walked mechanically. She had been there quite a few times the past week stocking up on Cerelac, toiletries and medical supplies for the family. Somehow she had forgotten to buy antacid, and right now, she cursed herself for it.

A man dozing by the cash register was the only human presence at the medical store. Lalita tapped his shoulder. He looked up at her and yelped in fright. Perhaps her uncombed frizzy hair and large panicked eyes had frightened him. But he calmed down when he saw that she was carrying a baby.

"What?" He grunted, now more annoyed than scared.

Lalita showed him a picture of Mukesh on her smart phone and asked if he had been there at the store.

"Ah yes Mam. He was here sometime ago. Probably an hour."

"What did he buy?"

"Antacid and ..." His voice trailed off.

"And what? Aspirin? What?"

"Well, Mam, umm... You ask him only."

"Did he buy any medicine for a heart attack?"

"What?! No Mam, no." The man reassured Lalita. "He bought some condoms." He added, finally giving in to her persistent glare.

"Oh!" Lalita replied, as a feeling of relief washed over her.

But if Mukesh had been here over an hour ago where could he be, she wondered. And if he was buying condoms, then he couldn't have been feeling that sick. So what was going on? She walked back home in a daze, trying to puzzle out the curious situation. Could someone have

attacked him, or was he hurt while someone tried to rob him? Should she call the police?

As she approached the society gate she saw another figure walking through it. To her great surprise it was Mukesh. The watch man stared at them agog. "Mad, mad, raving loonies," Lalita heard him whisper as she walked past.

Lalita caught up with Mukesh in the stairwell. She tapped him on his shoulder. He gasped in fright and almost fell backward down the stairs, but just in time he noticed Lalita.

"Lalita! What are you doing out here at this time of the night? That too with the baby? She might catch a chill." Mukesh scolded.

"Oh yeah! So was I supposed to leave her behind at home all alone? And what are you doing out here?" Lalita was livid and Mukesh quelled under her angry gaze. Besides he noticed a couple of people peeking out of their windows at them.

"Let's go home and talk about this." He mumbled urging Lalita on.

Lalita too noticed the stir she was creating and blushed. The couple walked home with Ruchi fast asleep, her head resting on Lalita's shoulder.

When they got home Lalita placed Ruchi in her crib and then collapsed on the sofa. Exhaustion trumped anger and relief.

Mukesh sat next to her and put his arms around her. "Sorry Lalita. The acidity wasn't subsiding, so I decided to go buy some antacid from the drug store. I did not want to wake you. I was sure I'd be back before little Ruchi woke up. Sorry I forgot to take my phone, but I was trying to leave as noiselessly as possible.

"So then what happened? Where were you for an hour?"

Mukesh blushed. "I got lost on my way back." He mumbled. "I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. Everything looks so different in the dark

when the streets are deserted. Somehow I ended up behind the big park. I tried to take a short cut through it, but the gate was locked. So I had to walk all around it and that area was completely unfamiliar to me. I had no idea where I was and kept wandering around. Finally, somehow landed in front of the dairy shop down the road and made my way back. I am so sorry Lalita. I kept checking my watching and trying to walk fast but I was completely lost."

Lalita giggled. "Really Mukesh! You have no sense of direction." She admonished. "How could you even think of going out in the middle of the night?"

A sincere apology from Mukesh put an end to the matter, and then the condoms he had purchased were put to good use. Soon after, couple fell asleep, unaware of the dire consequences of their night's adventures.

I Know What You Did

In the morning, when Lalita opened the door to the garbage man, he gave her the oddest look of pity mingled with disdain. Confused, but attributing it to the man having a strange day, Lalita resumed her day's chores.

Mukesh left for office as usual at 9:00 am. As he passed by, people talked in whispers. What was going on, he wondered.

In the afternoon, Mrs. Sharma from next door invited herself to tea at the Gupta household. Lalita had plenty to do, and after the exhausting night she was in no mood to entertain. But she could not think of a polite way to refuse Mrs. Sharma, so she offered her a cup of tea.

As they sipped tea, Lalita searched for a topic of conversation, and finally asked about local pediatricians. She still needed to find a good one for Ruchi.

Mrs. Sharma suggested Dr. Bannerjee from the 5th floor and then said, "It's a good thing that there is a 24 hour medical store near by, isn't it? Not many localities are so lucky."

Lalita nodded in agreement thinking of Mukesh needing antacids urgently. Apparently Mrs. Sharma too was thinking of Mukesh, for she said, "Dear, was your husband very sick last night?"

"Oh, not really. But the acidity was bad. He has a chronic problem."

"Oh chronic is it? How long have you been married?" She asked sympathetically.

"Four years." Lalita said now puzzled as to how the two issues were connected.

"Has he always had, er, acidity?"

"He has had problems with his digestion for a long time, but ever since he was promoted last year, the increased stress at work has caused his acidity to worsen." Lalita brooded. "Perhaps this transfer will make things better.

"Yes keep up the optimistic attitude, dear. You are such a brave girl. Be strong for your baby and things will work out. Don't worry. We are always here for you."

Now completely bewildered Lalita decided to change the subject. "Can you recommend a good GP?" She asked.

Mrs. Sharma raised her eyebrows. "For your husband's acidity you mean?"

"Umm. Sure ..." Lalita was getting really annoyed with this woman fixating on Mukesh's acidity as if it were leprosy or some other unspeakable disease.

Finally after some more ridiculous small talk about medical stores and acidity Mrs. Sharma left.

That evening Mukesh returned home looking flustered. When Lalita opened the door, he was looking over his shoulder wiping the sweat off his brow with a handkerchief.

"What happened?" Lalita asked, disturbed by Mukesh's demeanor.

Mukesh entered and firmly closed the door behind him before he spoke. "This society is stuffed with crazies." He blurted out. "Loons, I tell you."

"Why? What happened?" Lalita inquired again. She was starting to feel worried.

"A bunch of the men here, they accosted me." He said, shaking a little. "They said that I needed to behave myself. My type of people were frowned upon in this society. They said the next time I have acidity, I should take a cold shower. The watchman has been told not to let me leave the society after midnight and before 5:00 am."

"What?" Lalita was baffled. "Why are they so obsessed with acidity?"

"What do you mean?" Mukesh asked.

Lalita recounted her conversation with Mrs. Sharma and the couple started at each other in confusion. Then Lalita fell in to a thoughtful reverie. Slowly as she thought about everything she had heard from Mukesh and Mrs. Sharma, things started to fall into place and make sense. She burst out laughing.

"Lalita! Lalita! Are you going crazy too? What's wrong with this place?" Mukesh was exasperated.

"No. It's just that I finally understand what happened."

"What?"

"Well you know how nosy people here are. They were looking out of their windows last night to find out what we were up to. I bet nothing much happens here and last night was the most drama they have drummed up in years."

"Drama? How do you mean?" Mukesh was getting more and more confused.

"Okay I'll spell it out for you. Imagine a new couple shows up with a new born. Suddenly the husband goes missing at night and the wife is running around carrying a baby in her arms looking for him. Mrs. A tells that to Mr.s B, who chimes in that the cashier at the medical store told her that the husband bought condoms and and then disappeared for an hour. Mrs. C adds that no one can find him and his poor wife is running around searching for him. What do you think they think? Then Mr. D reminds them that Mr. Paanwaala saw the husband near the park where some young couples make out late at night. I have heard the women here gossip about them. Now it's a game of Chinese whispers. At each telling, the story becomes more dramatic and exciting, until the society collectively decides they need to do something about such immoral shenanigans."

Mukesh stared wide eyed at Lalita. "You mean ... You think ... They think... " He couldn't even say the words, but Lalita understood and nodded meaningfully.

"But that's crazy. It's all conjecture. How can they come to these conclusions without even talking to us?"

"Oh but they think they did."

"What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Sharma came this afternoon to ask me about it. Only, I did not realize she was from the gossip committee. I mentioned your acidity, and she assumed I was using it as a euphemism for your nightly escapades." Lalita giggled.

Poor Mukesh collapsed on the sofa and covered his face with his hands. "This is not funny Lalita. They think I'm a philanderer for god's sake and you're laughing."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know." He looked at Lalita in desperation. "What do I do?"

"Nothing, silly. Do nothing. Just go on, normally. Soon something else with grab their attention, and this will be forgotten. Until then, just lay

low and keep out of people's way." Lalita pranced off to feed Ruchi who was demanding her attention again. But as she fed little Ruchi she was overcome by another fit of giggles.

Sunset And Son-Rise

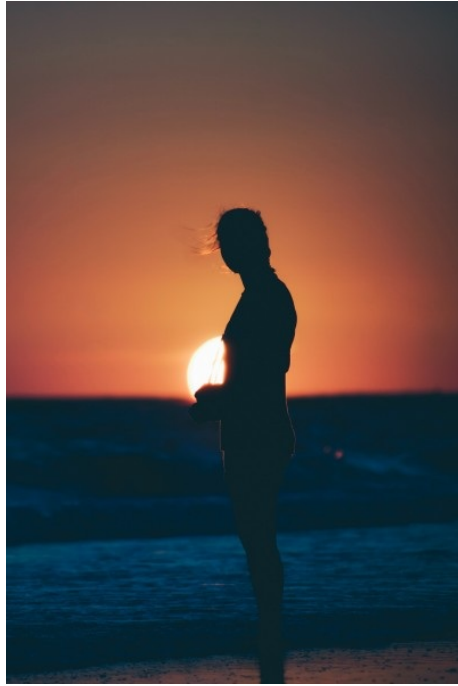


Photo by Dan Russo on Unsplash

She had been lured here under false pretenses. He had seemed so normal. And yet here they were, in Singapore. He wanted to commit a murder and that was why they had come here. All the talk of a needing a holiday free of cares, was bullshit. He was here for one and only one reason, cold blooded murder, and he was trying to convince her to be a party to it.

It started with cajoling, but seeing how appalled she was, he made it an order, and now he was blackmailing her.

She wanted to laugh. Did he really think, that dangling divorce before her, could be a threat under these circumstances? It was an escape route, for god-sake. After all, it had only been seven months. On the whole, she was glad she saw his true colors, before she had invested in family life

with him. Not much was lost in seven months.

She had signed the divorce papers. So, now there would be no murder. She had saved the poor innocent victim.

He had brought her to Singapore for a sex determination test under the pretext of a last chance at a carefree holiday as a couple, before the rigors of child rearing took over. He needed a pretext because sex determination was illegal in India.

As soon as she realized this, she knew she had to get rid of him. She told him they were going to have a daughter, and he insisted on an abortion and then threatened divorce. With the monster out of the way, she was free to raise her son to be a good man.

Yes, it was a boy. But he didn't have to know that. She had bettered many lives that day. She had saved her son from a bigoted role model and a miserable upbringing. She had saved a possible future daughter. She had potentially improved the life of the women who came in to her son's life. It had been a good day, she thought and smiled as she watched the sun set.

Author's note: Female feticide is a disturbing practice in India. This story is a piece of fiction inspired by [this article](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/rich-couples-flying-abroad-for-gender-test-abortion-fear-health-officials/articleshow/58651525.cms) (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/rich-couples-flying-abroad-for-gender-test-abortion-fear-health-officials/articleshow/58651525.cms>).

The Color Of Evil

When Sudha heard the doorbell, she looked at the clock. "Oh my goodness! It's already 7:30!" She exclaimed. *How time flies when you are reading a good book. That must be Maya. She is such a good girl. She always comes back home on time. I am such a lucky mom,* Sudha thought as she placed the bookmark and closed the book.

Sudha smiled as remembered her own mother tearing her hair over Sudha always being back late from her evening play time. Nowadays Mom just complained that Sudha did not deserve such a wonderful daughter. But Sudha thought things were so much simpler when she was a kid. Kids were free to roam around the housing societies on their own. Ever since she was 5 she would go to the society park on her own, where she would meet her friends. A dozen or so of them would get together and play *chor police* or 7 tiles running around the housing society like *junglees* as her mother put it.

Maya's life on the other hand was so much more protected and her social interactions so much more formal. Play dates had to be organized with other parents and were supervised by adults.

Last month Maya had turned 8. Sudha and her husband decided that Maya should be allowed to use the building elevators on her own and go to the society play area by herself. The play area was situated immediately above all the parking levels and cars could not get there. There were security guards and cameras everywhere. What could go wrong?

But the stories about rape and child molestation in the news made Sudha edgy. "Never the less, Sudha", Rahul interrupted her litany of objections, "Maya must do this sooner or later and it will be difficult for us whenever it is. She is 8 now. We must let her grow."

Finally, yesterday, Sudha had relented and all had gone off without a hitch. So when Sudha opened the door she did not expect to see Maya's

tear stained face painted with terror.

"What happened baby? Are you okay?" Sudha asked pulling Maya in to a tight hug.

Maya rested her head on her mother's chest and pointed at the elevator doors. "There was a bad man in the elevator." She said and broke in to sobs.

With Maya too overwhelmed to speak any more Sudha believed the worst. "Did he hurt you baby?" She asked and Maya shook her head. "Then did he touch you inappropriately?"

At Maya's blank look, she rephrased her question. "Did he do a bad touch on you?" Again Maya shook her head.

"Did he say he would hurt you or did they say he would hurt your family if you told anyone that they touched you." And once more Maya shook her head.

"Then what happened baby? Come on, tell me sweetie. What did he do?"

"He did not do anything Mama." In her mother's warm embrace Maya had calmed down enough to answer.

"He did not do anything?" Sudha was bewildered. "Then why did you say he was bad? Are you hiding something Maya? Did he threaten you? Don't worry baby. You can speak the truth. You are safe now. I'll keep you safe. If he did anything bad, there is camera footage. We will take it to the police. Please, just tell me what he did."

"He did not do anything Mama. I just know he is bad."

"How do you know? Did he say something?"

"No Mama. I know he is bad because he is black."

"Black? How do you mean?" Sudha was completely baffled.

"I mean his face Mama. His face is black. It's the blackest face I have ever seen." Maya shuddered as she recalled the terrifying visage.

"Um. Okay, Maya. Some people are fair and some people are dark. So what's the problem? Why does being dark make him bad? I don't understand. Did someone tell you dark people are bad?"

"He isn't just a little darker brown like Papa is. He is black Mama. He is evil."

"But why does being black make him evil?"

"Black is the color of evil. That's why all the super villains wear black. Dark forces, and black magic conjure evil."

"But Maya, those are just fantasy stories."

"It's not just fantasy stories Mama. You call Suresh uncle the black sheep of the family because he is rude and mean to Nana and Nani. Last week while shopping with Sheetal auntie you were trying out a black dress. You asked her how you looked and she said *absolutely wicked darling*. And that was just clothes. Imagine how evil a person must be, whose skin is so black."

"You are right, honey. Black has become associated with evil and treachery. In many metaphors it is also associated with sadness or danger or both. Either way the color black has many negative connotations. But it has nothing to do with skin color."

"It doesn't? What is it about then?"

Mama looked thoughtful. "It's possibly because we are afraid of darkness. Darkness deprives us of seeing clearly and it is a sense we human beings strongly rely on. Since for most of our evolutionary history we have had little or no access to artificial lighting we have come to fear darkness." Mama was excited for it was the first time she had put these ideas together. Thinking for a few second more she continued. "Human beings usually end up hating things they fear because hating often makes us feel strong unlike fear which makes us feel weak. So we have come to hate

darkness and by extension the color black and attributed various negative qualities to it."

"But today we have artificial lighting so why is black still considered wicked?"

"The negative attitude towards black is firmly built in to the very language we use as you pointed out through various phrases. The phrases are passed from generation to generation. Children even today fear the dark. It's a natural instinct that cannot be overcome so quickly as evolution operates over millions of years. So perhaps associating black with dark resulted you in being so scared of a person with a black face."

"So I was right to be scared of him?"

"No. All I am saying is that you reacted instinctively and I can understand that. But imagine how hard it must be for someone who is born with very dark skin. People automatically mistrust or fear them and there is nothing they can do about it. No matter how kind or helpful or polite or considerate they may be through their actions a lot of people will judge them poorly simply based on their skin color, something they have no control over."

"So people with dark skin are not bad even though the color black signifies so many bad things?"

"No honey, they are not. There is no connection. It's just a co-incidence."

"Then why do people have different skin colour?"

"People from different regions of earth evolved over millions of years to have different skin color to adapt to the amount and intensity of sunlight the place received. Many of us have black eyes and black hair, right? That doesn't make us evil or wicked. So why should black skin?"

"Oh yeah. That's right. I guess I am just used to seeing people with black eyes and hair and it never bothered me. I have never seen anyone with such black skin though."

"Yes. We human beings also have a natural fear of anything strange or different. But with great leaps in technology, travel and communication our world is becoming a smaller place and we come in to contact a much greater variety of people and situations than our ancestors. Evolution hasn't been able to keep up with technological change so we are going to have to use reason and intelligence to conquer fears that are no longer relevant."

"Like the *Small World* song says." Maya piped in, excited.

"Yes, exactly like that." Mama replied.

Maya became quiet for a moment. She hesitated a little before saying, "I still feel really scared every time I imagine his face Mama, but I'll try my best to be polite to him the next time I see him in the elevator. At least, now I know that there isn't any real reason to be scared of him."

"He still is a stranger honey, so do be cautious in ways we taught you to be with any other stranger, but don't judge him based on his skin color." It's complicated, Sudha thought, raising a kid in today's world.

Acknowledgements

This year has been one of experimentation. I learned loads of new things. I tried my hand at being an editor. Thanks so much Priya Bajpai for trusting me with your manuscript. It was awesome working with you.

I collaborated on projects for the first time and Lavanya and I have thoroughly enjoyed exploring the quirky characters of Nina and Nana and uncovering loads of quirky facts. Thanks Lavanya for being my partner in crime and for being the Nina to my Nana.

This year was also the first time I tried my hand at flash-fiction. Thanks Priya and Anshu for providing so many juicy prompts for me to sink my teeth in to with #TellTaleThursday.

I also started two facebook groups, one for free short stories from the web, and another for children's and young adult literature and the interactions on these groups has been rewarding.

Outside the world of blogging and writing too I have been trying new things. This year I learned rollerblading and started playing table-tennis regularly with my husband AKA Papa on my blogs. On the downside I got braces and they have taken the joy out of eating, something I thoroughly enjoy. But making lemons out of lemonade is my mantra, and so I have experimented with several new recipes some of which made it to my blog.

Sandhya from *Women's Web* and my friend Akshata have been ever so supportive and encouraging and my mother has bullied even more people in to reading my posts. Thanks Mama.

I am grateful for resources like [Unsplash](https://unsplash.com/photos/L93l5GJt5SI) and [1001fonts](https://www.1001fonts.com/knewave-font.html) for making pictures and fonts freely available. I used these resources (<https://unsplash.com/photos/L93l5GJt5SI> and <https://www.1001fonts.com/knewave-font.html>) to create the cover for my book. These free resources are invaluable to writers and bloggers like me.

Last but not the least, I must thank my husband, for inspiring one of the stories and for being my partner in everything I do from watching *Middle* to learning rollerblading. No matter what I try my hand at, he's always ready with a megaphone and a healthy dose of humour to cheer me on.

I hope you enjoyed this collection of my favorite stories from this year. When I put the stories together, I noticed they were particularly suitable for teens, perhaps and aftermath of writing [*Growing Pains*](#), which you may want to check out, if you haven't already done so.