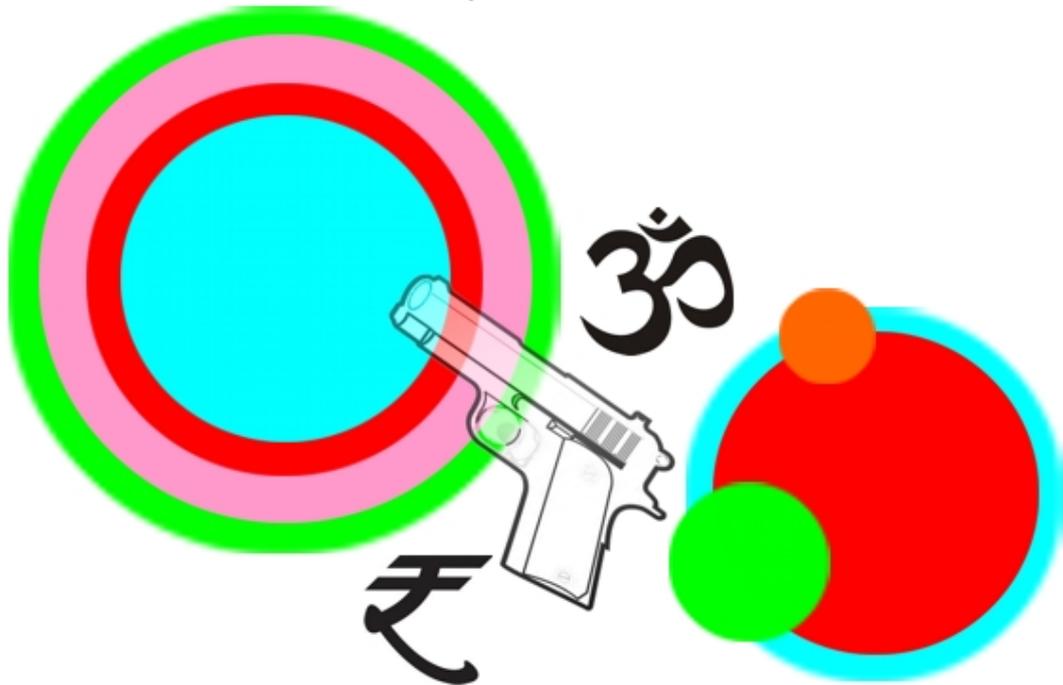


Victims Incorporated Circles Of Sub-Consciousness

by

Mallikarjun B. Mulimani



Foreword

Having watched with almost parental solicitude, Mallikarjun grow from being a fledgling poet putting out digital poems reflecting his vaguely romantic adolescent yearnings in a strikingly original language that was also visually evocative to being the author of this profoundly moving psycho-metaphysical thriller, it was inevitable that I should write a few words to introduce *Victims Incorporated ~ Circles of Sub-Consciousness*, his latest fictional offering to readers. Even if the author had not invited me to pen these words, I would have invited myself to do this job!

I consider the present work to be a unique contribution to Indian English fiction, charting its own path away from the traditions of realistic writing exemplified by the works of Mulk Raj Anand or Vikram Seth, the magic realism of Salman Rushdie, the dehistoricized fables of R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao's narratives with metaphysical frills. The present work locates itself in two parallel universes – the universe of the sub-conscious and the universe of metaphysical abstractions – and it explores the complex terrain of their interaction and interrelationship. The remarkable achievement of this work seems to me to be the fashioning of a language adequate for the difficult task and a narrative structure capable of articulating its ambitious aspiration. Since this is a pioneering work, it is likely initially to baffle and defeat the readers, but if they take the trouble to invest a little patience and persistence, it is bound to make a deep impact on them. Ultimately, what the author is engaged in doing in it is nothing less than the risky venture of wresting some meaning out of the meaninglessness of brute facts of living. I congratulate the young author on producing such a haunting work that is simultaneously psychologically disturbing and metaphysically misty.

28 May 2012,

Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao

DHARWAD

About the Author

The author, Mallikarjun B. Mulimani, born in the year 1979, is an Electronics and Communication Engineer. He has worked in different fields, but his passion lies in writing, and for the last six years he has dedicated himself solely to writing.

He has ventured into different fields of writing under the guidance of his Guru Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao.

His first book 'Abstractions' contains 37 poems and 7 digital paintings. His second book 'Buddha In A Mercedes' is a novella. The third book by the author 'The Holy Plumber and Other Stories' is a collection of ten stories and ten poems. His fourth book 'Operation Epiphany – God's Journey On Earth' is a novel which is currently being published.

All his books, excepting 'Buddha In A Mercedes' which was published by 'S. Chand Publishing House', have (and also his fourth which is being published) been published by 'Writers Workshop – Kolkata'.

The author's books delve into the realms of philosophy, psychology, God(s), religion(s), life, and death. They have tried to be as objective as possible without being derisive of anybody or anything. Of course, nothing can be truly objective, and the author's life which has been one of myriad and many turbulent experiences and expansive reading has played a major role in his writings.

The author calls himself a 'Hollow Bamboo' and hopes that his books do not harm anything or anybody, but only inspire.

About the Book

In this novella, the author has employed a different method of parallel narration.

In this style, there are two horizontal planes parallel to each other over which the story unfolds simultaneously. The events that unfold on the parallel planes are linked by an umbilical cord and are one of cause and effect.

There are six main characters. But one of the two parallel planes is exclusively for the four major protagonists around whom the story revolves.

This plane is the one which expounds upon the sub-consciousnesses of the four protagonists while the other plane holds all the conscious actions and thoughts of all the six main characters and other sundry very minor characters.

Here, sub-consciousness has been viewed as being pregnant with circles.

First of all, everybody has their own private innermost circle of sub-consciousness.

Secondly, other circles of sub-consciousness relating to others can originate and intersect their innermost circle of sub-consciousness if they allow those others to become a part of themselves.

Thus, this in turn leads to the people involved with each other to react and not to act when they are together – especially when they are caught in a tornado of emotions. They fly apart or dash into one another maiming or mercifully killing themselves or others.

These circles of sub-consciousness subtly encapsulate almost everything about one's being, and that being's attitude towards, or ignorance, of its own primordial nature leads to a certain conclusion which one calls fate.

It is all a play between conscious thoughts and actions brought about by the sub-consciousness which itself has been influenced by consciousness.

Cause and effect whirling around perpetually in a perfect circle – not knowing which was the cause and which was the effect.

Finally, it depends on how strongly the innermost circle of sub-consciousness of a person has been compromised by others' circles of sub-consciousness intersecting it in such a manner as to make him or her behave in a manner alien to his or her initially pure innermost circle of sub-consciousness.

Now, coming to the story at hand, it is set in the future – beginning in the year 2020.

It all starts with four ten year old children from extraordinarily different backgrounds coming together in a highly popular boarding school which catered to only the rich, famous, and the influential people of the society.

They were Bhiksh, Veer, Anna, and Fazal.

Bhiksh was the heir to the holiest of holy seats of a world renowned temple.
Veer was the only son of a global magnate.
Anna was the daughter of a famous actor.
Fazal was the son of a chauffeur who drove a wily politician's car and who was also his personal servant.

The story reveals in detail – alternating between the two parallel planes of consciousness and circles of sub-consciousness – as to how the four became the best of buddies and alienated themselves almost completely from the rest of society as they grew up into their teenhood.

But money, beauty, power, and above all, a misplaced ego have their own agenda.

Furthermore, far exceeding all the above mentioned entities, love is the worst criminal of all – especially when it is abstruse.

This leads to the death of Anna with a bullet hole in her head with Veer's hand gun lying beside her, and all three – Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal – confessing to having killed Anna.

Thus, without recourse, Inspector Vikram brings the three confessors to a newly and highly developed lab which could delve into the sub-consciousness of the subject at hand and delivers them into the hands of Dr. Maya, a renowned psychiatrist of the prison where the three male confessors were being held.

But sadly, even after splitting apart the skulls of the three confessors and delving deep into their sub-consciousness, both Inspector Vikram and Dr. Maya end up confused, empty, and guilty.

All the three confessors are then set free. But Inspector Vikram – who gets suspended because of his botching up of the case in which high profile people were involved – sets upon the path of redemption by following each one of the three remaining chums of the quartet of four.

He finds that all three friends of Anna have started digging their own grave with already one foot in it.

But by tenacious will power, he finally succeeds in solving the mystery on Anna's first death anniversary.

This helps the three young men to strengthen their hearts and souls and carry on with their lives.

Epilogue

Live and die. But die only when your body fails you, for your mind never fails you as it is eternal.

Acknowledgement

My Guru Prof. K. Raghavendra Rao, to him I pay my deepest respects.

My gratefulness to Prof. R. B. Gaddagimath who has been a constant source of support and encouragement.

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Mallikarjun B. Mulimani
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The Present – The Year 2029

Anna was dead.

Veer, Bhiksh, and Fazal were in the unrelenting and remorseless black grip of an all consuming and all engulfing shock.

Veer's state of shock was one that was born out of his long unused stock of guilt. Bhiksh's state had all the characteristics of an eerie calm. Fazal's shock was embedded in the throes of a grim and determined resignation.

However, the common bed on which these three young men slept was one created out of bloated egos and deep set insecurities.

The Place – The White Room

The four bodies had been placed in the White Room – a room which had been nicknamed as the Rat Lab – where the most radical of experiments in all of human history were being conducted upon humans, and where all the results of these macabre experiments were supposed to be as completely clear as if seen in bright and unblemished daylight.

But then again this was not the only reason that it was named the White Room or derisively referred to as the Rat Lab. The light inside the White Room was not the golden yellow of the sun playing hide and seek amidst clouds while helping everything its light touched to cast shadows. But instead, the light was a blazing white which permeated and destroyed even the faintest shadow which dared to cast its doubt over the proceedings which took place inside this chamber – a chamber which acted as the ultimate decider of condemned humans' fates.

The walls of the White Room were tall and mighty, and were painted a perfect white which not even a single spot of dirt managed to defile. The walls seemed to glow harshly as the discreetly placed white lamps spewed forth their blazing light. There were no windows and the only entrance into this ostentatiously lighted room was through huge sliding titanium doors which were guarded 24/7 by heavily armed security personnel posted outside the doors. The white light glinted sharply from the instruments placed meticulously beside the operating tables of the White Room and somehow managed to give it an ominous atmosphere of pure white death. The White Room, in addition to the shiny operating tables and their sharp instruments, also housed a wide array of electronic equipments which were all housed in spotless black external coverings – in stark contrast to the white in the White Room. Furthermore, these electronic gizmos were integrated with a masterful psychoanalysis program.

This magically horrifying room formed the epicenter of a dark huge building which was connected to an even larger and more threatening structure. This even more larger and threatening structure was not a hospital, but a heavily guarded maximum security prison designed to quell and subjugate its hardened inmates in whatever worst case scenario that may raise its ugly head as a result of their criminal mentality.

Both the White Room and the prison were perfect twins – each complementing the other.

In most cases, some, or in the worst possible scenario, all, of laboratory rats are fated to die after radical experiments conducted upon them have reached a conclusion or satisfied a part of the ultimate desired result in the science laboratories which hold them in lifelong imprisonment.

This was also probably true of the three human rats that were being experimented upon in the Rat Lab.

The naked body of Anna rested upon one of the four shiny operating tables in the White Room – her slender arms neatly folded across her pale full breasts and her long shapely legs firmly closed together in chaste virginity. Adding to these necromantic delusions were her half open eyelids with their long eyelashes adding a further impetus to her pouting lips and determined chin.

Even in blue death she looked pure.

She gave beauty to death.

But her three closest and only friends – Veer, Bhiksh, and Fazal had not been accorded such dignity.

They lay splayed apart – naked – on three operating tables placed parallel to one another with wires and tubes running from almost each and every one of their orifices, veins, and arteries to the black electronic machines which seemed to control and analyze the functioning of each and every one of their minutest organs.

This humiliation of their bodies was an infinitesimal transgression on the part of the doctors and their technicians compared to what had been done to their brains.

Their skulls had been neatly sliced open completely, and their brains along with their cerebral fluids were intricately suspended in transparent globes. A rainbow of tubes and wires ran from myriad parts of their grey matter through these globes, and after passing through intricate electronic gadgetry, finally attached themselves to massive silver screens erected behind each one of the lab rats.

There was a dull hypnotic humming sound, broken only by a few rare clicks as the highly sophisticated electronic machinery connecting the brains of the three human rats to these silver screens tried to keep pace with the rapidly firing neurons in each subject's brain.

The Procedure Begins

Dr. Maya had arrived that morning at the less insane side of the immaculately fashioned titanium doors of the White Room at precisely 6 a.m.. She was clad in a fresh white and blue doctor's outfit. Her face seemed to be set in stone and her body was rigid as she went through the biometric authentication tests which ascertained her identity – even though her appearance merited none – and finally entered the White Room. Suddenly as the titanium doors slid shut behind her, a dark pall of gloom descended upon her countenance as she remembered in vivid and horrifying detail the radical medical procedures which she and other surgeons had carried out upon the three young men who were now in her care – more precisely in her power. She hated her power for she had had to do what seemed to her to be extremely obscene.

Dr. Maya had seen to that her subjects, with pseudo-God paraphernalia inside and outside of their bodies, were placed in such a precarious position that they could all see with their bald eyes – whose eyelids had been stapled open – the body of Anna. Furthermore, Anna's body itself had been aligned in such a manner so as to display in all its gory detail the gunshot hole in her head to the three Rat Lab suspects.

Dr. Maya hated to be a part of this defiling of both dead and living bodies in all physical, mental, moral, and spiritual ways and especially loathed subjecting the three young men to a scene which would scar them beyond repair for the rest of their lives.

But she was a doctor of the prison – a highly placed professional – and she had her duty to perform.

This massive amalgamation of live and dead viscera with surreal machines playing the part of God formed an eccentric yet beautiful combination of life, science, justice and death.

Love was a defunct concept when one had to deal with reality.

Dr. Maya got into action right away. She had realized that the sooner she ended this madness, the better – for all, including her.

She nodded to one of the three technicians standing beside the three incapacitated lab rats. This technician was already a hardened veteran at this new game. He acknowledged her with a curt nod of his own and striding towards a cupboard built inside one of the white walls, opened it with a quick flick of his hand, and bringing out a full body enclosing suit along with its breathing apparatus, juggled it in so masterful a way that he was soon enclosed within it. After closing the cupboard, he quickly moved with military precision towards a glass enclosed vacuum chamber, and after entering it, walked towards a cold container unit. The technician then calmly entered a code on the containers keypad. After a few seconds, the doors of the container opened revealing rows of meticulously arranged syringes each filled with a soothing looking blue liquid. The technician, after retrieving three of these syringes, placed them on a tray and closed the doors of the cold container. He then walked out of the vacuum chamber and in to the White Room where Dr. Maya was impatiently waiting for him.

Dr. Maya, without waiting for him to remove his body suit, gave the order.

The three technicians immediately sprang to their jobs with enthusiasm.

Everybody likes to play God. At the least everyone wants to have a look into the innermost self of another.

The blue liquid in the three syringes was injected into the three globes encapsulating the brains and other brain matter of the three suspects by the enthusiastic technicians while Dr. Maya pondered for the umpteenth time as to whether her soul would regret this action of hers after her body had lived its life and her looks and profession had faded away into the black nothingness of time.

Instantaneously the six pupils of the lab rats' eyes widened to an unnatural degree – flabbergasted by a brilliant blue which suddenly seemed to seep into the White Room.

If there was a God, He tried to soothe what the eyes of the three lab rats beheld – a bluish white chaotic vision of their dead friend Anna.

There was one other person in the White Room who had kept a low profile until now. He was Inspector Vikram who had been assigned to this case.

He was the person responsible for bringing the four bodies – three alive and one dead – into the White Room the previous day. He had refused to leave the White Room until he had watched the macabre procedure right from its start till its end. He had managed to suffer the horrifying sights of his accused having their skulls split open and the terrible stench which had grasped his brain in a vice like grip at the sights, smells and sounds of the procedure without a murmur. He had then waited all night in the White Room for Dr. Maya to come back and finish the procedure while a certain part of his brain had kept revolting against the actions that had been performed on his accused and the victim. The night had been harsh on Inspector Vikram as he had finally seen what his actions had resulted in. But he was a man with a strong stomach and his brain had finally and firmly refused to accept even the idea of defeat and had allowed his dinner to remain within his body.

It had been a long night which had seen its salvation in the form of Dr. Maya entering the White Room at dawn.

Inspector Vikram – now that his insides had been calmed to a great degree by the appearance of Dr. Maya and her actions – suddenly sprang into action. Before the machines and the drugs could begin their real work, he shoed away the voyeur technicians from the White Room and stood alone with Dr. Maya – the psychiatrist – to study the results of this macabre experiment.

The First Discussion

When the room held but only six bodies – those that of the victim, the suspects, the psychiatrist, and an officer of the law – Inspector Vikram with his nightmares still rankling within him asked:

“So Doctor, which one of our three suspects do you think is most likely to have killed Anna?”

Dr. Maya – herself no stranger to ill equipped detectives trying to rush forward with their misconceived and hotly held prejudices – responded curtly:

“Officer, what I’m doing here revolts me. But since I’m a law abiding citizen and my profession asks from me this transgression, I have become a party to this unholy tragedy. And the tragedy of which I’m speaking about is not Anna’s death, but what you are putting these three young men through. They will be scarred for life. So please do your job and let me do mine – which is that of analyzing the results of this insane experiment and not judging. The judging part I leave to you and your judges who dictate that such an experiment is necessary for law to take its due course.”

Inspector Vikram, who was not expecting such a reply from a psychiatrist, who he had thought would be pleased by this procedure – allowing her unlimited entry into others’ minds – recoiled back, and managed to answer with a restrained silence.

Faint fuzzy images were beginning to form on each one of the three screens behind their respective subjects.

The Past – The Year 2020

The boarding school was set in the midst of huge rolling mountains which seemed to touch the sky. Clouds floated lazily over the lush green grass covering every square inch of the mountains. A calm river flowing in the deep valley formed between the mountain on which the brick red learning institute stood and its other gentle gargantuan mountain friends added its own vividly shining blue to the energetic green of the giants. Here and there stood massive coniferous trees adding their towering solitude to this paradise on earth.

This was not a school for the lower economic strata of society. Money and power were the twin casino owners who selected the children of society's high flying gamblers for admission into this exclusive club which rivaled the best of the gambling dens of Las Vegas itself.

The ornately structured old building was massive with lush green vines creeping here and there over its external surface – the ambitious creepers rising up from the ground around the buildings perimeter and trying to tower up and cover its huge centrally situated dome. Gigantic oak doors at the entrance of this graceful building opened into a large and tall hall, the walls of which were paneled with painfully polished oak from floor to ceiling. Huge chandeliers hung like acrobats trying to perform intricate acts of physical prowess and gave out a subtle yellow light which when it hit the meticulously polished oak panels was reflected back bringing about a shimmering amber ambience into the hall and which in turn caused the rich red drapes covering the windows to exude forth their own ruby red charm into this awe inspiring spectacle. A number of winding stairs at the end of the hall winded their way up to different wings of the building which housed both the dormitories of the students as well as the classrooms and offices. Each and every single room of the building tried to compete with the others in terms of the intricately carved furnishings, ornate carpeting, and subtle lighting which it held and which made these rooms and the building which housed them feel like a palace of a mad Maharaja rather than the educational institution it truly was.

Such was the golden ambience in which the boarding school's pampered students studied and grew up.

This year, after the admissions to various grades had been completed, there were four ten year olds who entered this school's portals for the first time in their lives not knowing that fate had spread a combined and inextricable future for them – a future which began in this lavish setting. Fate as always had a vicious sense of humor and it saw fit to begin its devious machinations in a place where it seemed that all was right with the world and that nothing could go wrong henceforth.

The names of these four pawns in fate's hands were Veer, Bhiksh, Fazal, and Anna. They had secured their admissions to the same grade and life had seemed to consider it just to place them in the same classroom in close vicinity of one another.

It was but natural for Veer and Anna to enter this school.

Veer's father was a hyper-rich industrialist who always wanted the best. Veer was his only child and it was obvious that Veer and this school were made for each other. He had waited for Veer to complete his early education close to him, and the day his son had turned ten, he had decided to enroll him for further education in a top institute where students from all over the world – future bigwigs – came to learn, hoping that the young boy would be able to develop a strong and self-reliant personality by seeing and coming to understand the wide world with all its nuances by interacting with other future bigwigs.

Veer's childhood had been one filled with laughter and gaiety with corporate bigwigs who worked under his father catering to each and every whim and fancy of his. Veer had never known the meanings of 'less' and 'want' and his father wanted to keep it that way for his son forever. Thus Veer already had a strong personality which could capture and hold captive anybody and everybody whom he chose to exert his influence and personality upon. Thus the ever happy Veer entered this school with a huge smile upon his face.

Anna's mother was a popular actor and her lifestyle did not allow her any spare time for the proper upbringing of her child. In order to get rid of her guilt and the problems she had to face with the day to day tiresome tasks of bringing up a child, she had Anna enrolled in this magnificent learning paradise the moment she felt Anna had grown up enough to handle herself in a strange environment. Thus she managed to get rid of her guilt and the problems she had had to endure over the last ten years by this astute move.

Anna was an extremely pretty and effervescent child who managed to evoke all the tenderness in the heart of whoever came into contact with her. She had a bubbling nature which infused joy into the members of whichever company she kept – bringing about a warm-hearted glow in them. Anna knew for certain that wherever she went she would always get whatever she wanted. Thus the cheerful Anna came to the boarding school with a carefree heart.

However, it was a slightly different affair with Bhiksh. He was the only son of the head of a very powerful religious institution. His father had understood the complications of a volatile society and wanted the heir to his holy seat to be well-versed with the affairs of an ever-changing outside world. Therefore when Bhiksh's father felt that he had successfully completed the initial strenuous training of Bhiksh in the holy affairs and duties of their sacred temple and their vast religious institution, he found himself ready to let go of his son, albeit temporarily, so that his young heir could understand the outside world in its most basic form. Thus the young Bhiksh, already clad in the robes of a priest at a tender age, paradoxically came to be admitted in this worldly school.

Bhiksh had been meticulously trained in the arts of meditation and discipline by his father right from a very young age. Therefore when his father decided to send him to the boarding school, he accepted the fact with equanimity and a calm sense of belief in himself knowing that he would surely succeed in the new environment. Thus the calm, meditative, and disciplined Bhiksh came to the boarding school with nary a butterfly in his stomach or an unsettling murmur in his heart.

The only outsider was Fazal.

His entry into these corridors of wealth and power had been due to the shrewd calculations of a high profile politician whom his father worked for as a driver and faithful servant. The politician, who had made it as a Minister in the ruling party, was no fool to spend money and exert influence for anybody or anything that did not further his cause. During the time of elections, he had held a huge rally for his community which was his vote bank. During that rally he had felt the people of his community drifting away from him on account of his enormous appetite for money and power. He had then decided to play upon their emotions by announcing that he would provide the best education possible for his trustworthy servant's son, who happened to be from their community, if he won the elections. This cheap trick did the people in, and the moment the wily politician became a Minister, he got his trump card, Fazal, admitted into the exclusive and popular casino of a boarding school.

Fazal's life had been that of a typical lower middle class boy. He had lived a tightly controlled life which had been dictated by his father's employer's whims and fancies. He had had to work as a servant in the house of his father's employer many a times when an extra hand had been needed. He had therefore known what it was to bend and bow to the whimsical wishes of the aristocracy. Over the course of his tender years of servitude he had developed a timid heart, and therefore it was with a quivering in his breast and a sense of huge obligation that he entered the gates of this lavish school which was for all true purposes meant for the sons of his masters and not for servants like him.

The First Day of School

Bhiksh had been ordained as a priest the day he was born, and contrary to popular thinking, this child of ten had never had even a single doubt about his calling. He went through every experience with a calm mind and an even calmer demeanor. Even at the tender age of ten he knew that he was destined to be better than most.

His innermost circle of sub-consciousness – currently the only one – held only peace, a deep desire for learning, and a surety of vision about his holy future. But as with all things both good and bad, this was soon to be changed, for Bhiksh had stepped into a society of which he was not supposed to be a normal member of.

It was the first day of school. Bhiksh was an early riser, and as others slept away the beautiful dawn behind thick curtains in the dormitory, he decided to do a little exploratory walking on his own before the first day's classes began.

The invigorating dawn immediately enthused Bhiksh with a soulful gratitude as he stepped out of the main gates of the school. The school authorities, in deference to his esteemed father, had allowed him to wear his priestly robes instead of the school uniform, and this allowed the crisp morning chill to enter his loose fitting robes and bathe his body with the freshness of a beautiful new day. Bhiksh had awakened before the sun and he now saw the orange hued orb lazily rub its sleepy eyes as it slowly rose from its bed behind the mountains. This brought about a cheerful smile upon Bhiksh's countenance and he set forward into a brisk walk. As he wandered further and further away from the school gates, he came to the edge of the mountain upon which the red school stood. He then walked along the edge of the mountain enjoying the depth of the valley below. The river which flowed through this deep valley seemed to mimic his enthusiasm as he wandered on with a spring in his steps. His wandering body soon brought him and his still mind to a wonderful place where a part of the mountain protruded in a slim elegant fashion far out from the edge. If a rock were to be dislodged from the furthest point of the ledge, it would surely dive into the river's middle. This fact filled Bhiksh with a deep thrill and he carefully walked out onto the ledge, and sitting down at the very tip of it, immersed himself in the vast panorama of beautiful and boundless nature in blissful solitude. He finally felt at home. He had despised the gaudy atmosphere of the school right from the moment he had set foot in it. But now here was a place where he could be alone with nature.

But loneliness, or solitude for that matter, is a vacuum which desires strongly to be filled – regardless of the might of those who strive for it.

Veer, the pampered kid, was a late riser. Fazal was too scared to step outside the school walls without permission from the teachers, for he had that blasphemous inferiority complex imposed by default upon the poor by the rich.

But Anna had neither the innocent lethargy of Veer nor the insidious fear of Fazal. She was an enthusiastic child who readied herself for her morning classes hurriedly, and finding that there was still a lot of time left before her classes began, pranced out into the cool invigorating dawn. The early sun shone down upon her

unblemished sunny face and fate led her jaunty steps to where Bhiksh was contemplating deeply with his innocent mind.

Anna was a happy go lucky child who despised loneliness and didn't know the meaning of the word 'solitude'. Therefore she was glad when she spotted one of her schoolmates who seemed to have sneaked out of the school premises before her. She immediately felt sorry for him because he was all alone, and then suddenly – for her emotions had the ability to swing from one extreme to another in an instant – her feelings of pity turned into those of happiness for she knew without a single doubt casting its dark shadow over her happy feelings that she would make him happy with her company. Besides, she herself had wanted to enjoy the beautiful panorama of boundless nature with someone, and she now had the chance to do so.

Wasting not even a second, Anna burst out gaily:

“What a beautiful view and you are enjoying it alone! By the way I'm Anna.”

The startled Bhiksh turned away from nature's beautiful bounty and saw that it was another one of nature's exuberant and pretty creatures who had come thrusting away uninvited into his sublime morning reflections. A complex part of life's ultimate duality confronted the surprised Bhiksh who was as yet too young to understand it and the repercussions which would follow this chance meeting of two fresh young beings. For the moment however, all that Bhiksh felt was that someone had intruded into his private playground, as he had already considered that magical place to be his precious find and personal sanctuary.

Bhiksh replied with a trace of jealousy in his voice:

“My name is Bhiksh. Nice to meet you.”

Anna asked with all the naivety of a ten year old child:

“Where is your school uniform? Why are you bald? Does not hair grow upon your head?”

She then broke into giggles.

Bhiksh fell into a flabbergasted silence as these deeply personal questions of Anna flowed over his still waters giving rise to unsettling ripples within them. But his initial pangs of jealousy had immediately started thawing into a mush of affection for this exuberant and sunny child. Anna usually had this effect upon everybody, and innocently realizing that her charm had worked once more, she started riding a reckless train without waiting for Bhiksh's reply to her impertinent questions.

She asked:

“Can I rub my hand over your bald pate?”

Bhiksh had been taught by his father to accept without regret or fear. But his father's teachings were not needed now for he found himself saying yes with pleasure.

Anna brought forth her soft hand and rubbed Bhiksh's rubbery clean shaven head, and then ran off, laughing her transgressions away.

The simplest things in life are tragedy and death. All anybody has to do to invoke them is to just stand by and let them happen.

Bhiksh had just allowed life and Anna to take control of him.

Neither he nor Anna realized at this juvenile moment of bliss that they were both rushing towards tragedy and death as a result of this blissful early morning meeting.

Circles of Sub-Consciousness

This was a defining moment in Bhiksh's life.

His innermost circle of sub-consciousness had been intersected by another circle – a small and fragile newborn circle which had its origins in a part of Anna's own presently dim and single innermost circle of sub-consciousness. This fragile new circle of his drew its defining energy from that part of Anna's dim and whimsical innermost circle of sub-consciousness from where it had originated, and intersecting his innermost circle brought to it a vague uneasiness by transferring into it the data which it had gathered from Anna's circle. Frivolity and whimsicality had sown their seeds in the meditative and calm visionary circle of Bhiksh.

For a split second he had doubts over his father sending him bald headed and attired in priestly robes to a school where a beautiful butterfly of an Anna had found him more interesting than the splendid nature which surrounded them.

His innermost circle had been compromised.

But something far more profound had happened to Anna. Unconsciously, her innermost dim and whimsical circle of sub-consciousness had with all the keen and unpolluted insight of a child managed to understand the huge potential of the calm and meditative innermost circle of sub-consciousness of Bhiksh. Anna with all the naivety of a child wanted all, and a small circle of sub-consciousness related to Bhiksh erupted within her. But unlike in the case of Bhiksh, whose new circle related to Anna only intersected his innermost circle of sub-consciousness, Anna's new circle was concentric with her dim and whimsical circle of sub-consciousness and had slowly but surely started expanding towards the boundaries of her dim and whimsical circle. There now seemed to be two innermost circles of sub-consciousness in the case of Anna.

The bells of the school rang loud and strong and their discipline song was carried by the sprightly morning breeze to both Bhiksh and Anna. After a momentary hesitation which belied his eagerness to learn at this incredibly fresh school – a new school with new promises – Bhiksh followed the running Anna to class.

Veer and Fazal's Circles

The 'Holier than Thou' school was filled with rich pampered kids who wanted to learn less and play more. But Veer and Fazal were made of sterner stuff than to mingle with other children who didn't have a set objective in their lives – even at an age of theirs when most people correlated their ambitions and deep set desires with stubborn childishness.

Veer at the tender age of ten saw clearly the power of money and he already wanted more than he had and would eventually have.

But Veer's innermost circle of sub-consciousness was in tattered confusion owing to the heady and exuberant lifestyle which his father had lavished on him since his birth. His sense of vision was left in the deepest and darkest corridors of his badly mutated innermost circle of sub-consciousness without being able to take a definite shape, and to a certain extent, even the beginning of his mission – to multiply his property by studying hard – was almost always overshadowed by his grandiose dreams of insane levels of money and power. In spite of this, Veer had a strong personality whose subconscious intelligence intensely desired a permanent remedy to his myriad faults.

Meanwhile, Fazal had a certain hazy vision of becoming an astronaut when he grew up, and dreamt of doing fabulous stuff in space – the stuff of which creative children are always in the midst of. And the reason his vision was hazy was because of his overwhelming sense of a mission in his life – which was to earn enough money; as soon as possible; to repay his and his father's debt to the Minister who had placed him in this prestigious school – a mission which overshadowed and blacked out his vision almost completely. Fazal, like Veer, only too clearly saw the play of power and money in his school and the outside world, and this and his mission – a mission born of pure duty towards his father and his debts – made Fazal's innermost circle of sub-consciousness into one of inflexible iron. It thus encapsulated a mission rather than a vision or a dream as Fazal allowed his dreams and his tiny and fragile bits and pieces of vision to be overwhelmed by his sense of duty.

But then again he didn't know that inflexible iron – even though it doesn't bend – is prone to rust and eventual breakage.

The Quartet is Formed

It is a paradoxical truth of life that our strengths can turn in an instant into our most damaging weaknesses and our weaknesses sometimes turn in to our strengths which adroitly and staunchly manage to defend us in our times of need.

As the eventful days in the extremely comfortable school rolled by, certain factors – slaves to life's design – were at work. These factors were dictated by the fates of this school's four impeccable children.

Veer and Anna had magnetic personalities and almost everyone wanted to be their friend.

But Anna with her dim and whimsical innermost circle of sub-consciousness seemed to have time only for Bhiksh from whom she drew a peaceful strength – a strength which seemed to strengthen her personality which had lacked a spine before.

Bhiksh had been a habitual loner, always serene and meditative, until his disciplined innermost circle of sub-consciousness had been interrupted by Anna's easy going exuberance. Bhiksh loved this new feeling, and soon he and Anna had become a constant pair who drifted away from all others of their age group.

Meanwhile Fazal had turned himself into a disciplined loner who stayed away from all the rich kids knowing that he had nothing in common with them.

Veer, who was alone with his innumerable acquaintances and zero friends, had become edgy and uncomfortable with his current society and had begun to search with his inbred determination for a friend who would complete him.

The mid-term exams came as a blessing for Veer's search as the results revealed Bhiksh to be standing first in the class, and Fazal - despite all his efforts – to be in the runner up position.

Veer was a child who always went for the best, but in this search for a best friend, he astutely knew that he had no hope of catching the biggest fish – for everyone knew that Bhiksh and Anna were the best of friends who avoided all others. Veer realized that he had to be content with the second best. Veer's personality did not allow him to think, not even once, let alone twice, as to whether Fazal wanted to be his greatest buddy or not. He wanted him for his best friend and immediately started upon his task. This was reverse magnetism at its best, for the magnetic Veer started trying to befriend the reclusive Fazal.

The very first thing that Veer did in this endeavor of his after the results were announced was to go to his dormitory, open up his magnificently huge suitcase, and bring out the costly chocolates his father had sent him – in advance before the results were announced! He then ran to the common room where the children – some happily and others sorrowfully – were examining and discussing their results. He then made a great public show of offering a few of the chocolates to Bhiksh, and even before Bhiksh could express his gratefulness, he hurried over to where Fazal was sitting – in second place gloom – and offered him the rest and the best of the chocolates he had unearthed from his suitcase.

Fazal was flabbergasted by this action on the part of Veer. He had always looked upon Veer as a part of something that he could never, even in his wildest dreams; be

close to, leave alone a part of. He shyly decided to accept the chocolates, and as soon as the decision occupied his consciousness, a small dark circle of sub-consciousness erupted within him, and somehow with great effort managed to intersect his ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness. This dark circle, which had its origins in the tattered innermost circle of sub-consciousness of Veer, initially manifested itself as one which encapsulated gratefulness. But in fact, its content was the exact opposite of gratitude. It was one of servitude. But Fazal was too young and naïve and his sub-consciousness didn't realize what it truly was.

After Fazal had gracefully – his gracefulness and gratefulness born out of tender years of servitude – accepted this sugar coated offer from Veer, who might have been to all practical purposes his master's son, he was suddenly left with a feeling of awe and serendipity. But he was not prepared for what would come next – a masterful play upon his emotions by the smart Veer.

Veer immediately cut to the chase and asked Fazal if he wanted to be his best pal. The new ominous circle in Fazal's sub-consciousness immediately did its part by making the dazed Fazal say yes to the offer. This dark circle which was related to Veer and had intersected Fazal's ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness had already started to corrode Fazal's strong sense of mission.

But it was altogether a different scenario with Veer. The moment Fazal accepted his friendship, a strong circle erupted within Veer's sub-consciousness and intersected to a large extent his tattered innermost circle of sub-consciousness. This tattered circle of Veer's tried and tried successfully to draw strength from this new strong circle which had its origins in Fazal's ironclad innermost circle. Thus Veer's tattered innermost circle of sub-consciousness started healing – albeit at the cost of Fazal's innermost circle.

Meanwhile Fazal had found a modicum of false peace at being accepted into a so called “Higher Strata of Society.” His dark circle made him believe that it was because of who he was internally, and not because of where he was and where he stood, which had made it possible for him to enter into a new and beautiful higher phase of life. Fazal, with the help of his dark new circle, had thus unknowingly sacrificed at the altar of a weak God his strength and enthusiasm to fulfill his mission in life. His fate resembled that of the fate of an ironclad soldier who meets an enchantress who manages to rid him of his armor with the blessings of Amor and then stabs him artfully in his chest.

The two soon became the best of buddies. Veer was just a child and yet he felt Fazal's growing subservience to him. But then again children are children and are sometimes cruel. Veer's tattered innermost circle of sub-consciousness started feeding frenziedly off Fazal's ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness through the strong circle which had originated within Fazal's ironclad circle and had manifested itself in Veer's sub-consciousness – intersecting to a great extent Veer's tattered innermost circle. Meanwhile Fazal's small and dark circle of sub-consciousness – the one of servility towards Veer – which had its origins in Veer's tattered innermost circle of sub-consciousness and which had manifested itself in Fazal's sub-consciousness while intersecting his ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness, started expanding and intersecting larger and larger portions of his innermost circle, all the while dismembering his ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness.

The seeds had been sowed for the future.

Wherever and whenever Veer got stuck and started drowning in swamps of his own making – a direct result of his high handed attitude towards his teachers and fellow students – Fazal was always at the periphery of the swamps throwing a self made strong rope out to Veer in order to help him out. Sometimes Fazal himself sank into the swamps of Veer's making while allowing his friend to stride on his broad shoulders and escape the deathly swamps.

But it was an entirely different story with the strong willed and disciplined Bhiksh who never forgot even the smallest pleasantries that had been bestowed upon him – even if the pleasantries had come from someone whom he was merely acquainted with.

Bhiksh had not forgotten the day when Veer had given him chocolates. He had immediately realized that Veer was lonely and was in search of a friend. He had at that moment decided to befriend him. But he had decided to give it some time before he made his move. He didn't want to seem too over eager to befriend someone just because he had been gifted chocolates by him.

So after quite a few days had passed, Bhiksh took Anna with him – after having educated her with his thoughts about Veer's loneliness – and approached Veer only to find the newly formed pair of Veer and Fazal. Without missing a beat Bhiksh then belatedly congratulated Fazal on his second place while admitting with all honesty that it had only been a few marks which had stood between them, and then added for good measure that their positions could easily reverse in the future.

While Fazal was once again flabbergasted by this approach of nobility, power, and money, it was really Veer who was under the shock of being approached by the most famous friends in school.

Bhiksh immediately realized that he could not backtrack upon his tracks without offending Fazal and therefore continued in a vein which he thought was best – the way being to make friendship with both Veer and Fazal.

Veer's and Fazal's happiness was suddenly overloaded further, as Bhiksh and the smart Anna – who had immediately grasped Bhiksh's thoughts – asked them to be their friends.

Both Fazal and Veer were so happy that they clasped the hands of their new friends with great warmth.

But Veer was a person who never rested on his laurels. He had always been held spellbound by Bhiksh's bald pate and had considered it to be the sanctum sanctorum of the most popular and yet the most secretive boy in school. Veer was a person who took high risks when it mattered the most, and thus suddenly asked Bhiksh to allow him and Fazal to run their hands over his bald pate as a mark of their newly formed friendship. Bhiksh was taken aback by this impertinent request, but he regained his calm almost immediately as his agile mind came up with an instant solution as to how he would be able to both fulfill the request of his new friends and also at the same time manage to prevent his bald pate from turning into an object of ridicule. Bhiksh had allowed this act of transgression upon his person only to Anna and he wanted to maintain a hierarchy within the newly formed quartet which would clearly show the newcomers Veer and Fazal as to who stood where in their newly formed friendship. He therefore without much ado immediately turned to Anna and asked for her permission. This act of his originated in his circle of sub-consciousness which had its origins in Anna and which drew its contents from a part of Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness and placed those

contents in that part of his own innermost circle which it intersected . Anna said yes with a laugh, and his innermost circle accepted into it a bit more of the society which was forever swirling around it – a society trying to add to the contents of Bhiksh’s innermost circle its own infinite frivolity.

Both Veer and Fazal rubbed the bald pate of Bhiksh gingerly while Anna stood nearby erupting with peals of laughter.

A foursome of myriad emotions had suddenly bloomed during this bewitching moment.

It probably happened because these two pairs were always in solitude with the other of their pair, and this hermit act always attracted other hermits to pray together while enjoying each others solitude and exuberance.

This moment brought into existence two new small circles of sub-consciousness in each one of this newborn foursome. Although three fresh pairs of circles – those of Bhiksh, Veer and Fazal – and one of Anna’s new pair – that which was related to Fazal – were harmless and comfortably warm in the first glow of budding friendships, the other one of Anna’s new pair of circles of sub-consciousness, which grew in her as she looked at Veer with her big sparkling eyes and conversed with him, started pulsating with a beautiful rhythm.

The child Anna had fallen in love with the young Veer as an adult may fall in unconditional love with a puppy or a kitten.

By now Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal each had four major circles of sub-consciousness. One of these four was their large innermost circle and the other three small circles intersecting their innermost circles in varying degrees were related to each other and Anna. But Anna had only three major circles, for the concentric circle which had erupted within her dim and whimsical innermost circle of sub-consciousness during her first meeting with Bhiksh had over time become one with her innermost circle of sub-consciousness. It was as if she had integrated Bhiksh within her.

These four also had other infinitely small or extremely vague and almost transparent circles of sub-consciousness related to myriad other events and people in them. These flimsy circles originated at specific times, tumbled across or into the major circles, stayed for long or brief periods of time, caused either pleasure or pain, and sometimes vanished or stayed on indefinitely. But none of these negligible circles would direct the course of the life of these four friends as the major circles would.

The Present – The Case Details

Dr. Maya had allowed her eyes to remain on the gory panorama of bodies with a chilly silence for a long time while myriad thoughts morphed and bred within her consciousness and sub-consciousness.

She was a very competent psychiatrist and had immediately realized that she was becoming subjective and starting to get personally affected by the case when her sub-consciousness had triggered uneasy thoughts in her consciousness. She could not control her emotions from being swayed as she realized with a feeling of helplessness that sub-consciously she was revolted with the duty she had to perform. This realization caused her to ask herself whether she would be able to mete out justice to the three young men whose sub-conscious thoughts she was trying to analyze. Furthermore, she was appalled at herself for allowing her sub-conscious thoughts to clash with her conscious actions. She found herself suddenly sinking into despair as she was overcome with horrifying doubts as to whether sub-conscious thoughts really led to conscious actions. If that had been the case, she would have resigned long ago from this terrible professional task that she had in all naivety undertaken – the terrible professional task being that of correlating positively sub-conscious thoughts to conscious actions. She knew that she herself was acting in contradiction to her sub-conscious feelings. So she tortured herself with the question as to whether it would be just to judge the three young men based solely upon their sub-conscious thoughts when their conscious actions had proved it impossible to judge whether they were criminals or not. But suddenly, her rigorous training of years took control of her emotions, and she ventured into the realm of a defensive mechanism which is inbuilt in each and every living organism.

She now diverted her steely gaze towards Inspector Vikram:

“Well... I guess one can't run away from one's profession and duties however morally repugnant it has turned over the years.”

Inspector Vikram's eyes had turned keen and sensitive to infinitesimal details over the ten years he had been working on homicides. He detected a slight glaze formed by tears in the psychiatrist's eyes which seemed to soften her steely probe into his uniform.

This unnerved him to no slight extent and suddenly he found himself grappling with coils of doubt which tried to suffocate him. He felt his life breath being squeezed out of him asking all the while whether he had done the right thing by bringing the three young men to the White Room and placing them at the mercy of a psychiatrist who herself seemed to have doubts about what she was doing. These thoughts were accentuated by the knowledge that he himself had failed to provide a reasonable solution to the crime and bring the criminal or criminals to justice by using the old tried and trusted methods of police investigation – logical analysis.

But then again even he had his duties to perform and his eyes and demeanor once again became distinctly aloof from the tragedy which the White Room so blatantly exposed in front of him. He pondered aloud, defensively:

“To each his own... I guess.”

The watery glaze seemed to evaporate instantly from the eyes of Dr. Maya as she flamed forth:

“Dragging innocent men into this devilish and paradoxically “White” Room to catch one criminal seems an act of criminal indifference to human values – to me at least.”

Inspector Vikram remained unperturbed as he faced this latest assault from the Doctor. He did not need anybody to tell him as to how to do his job. But a faint trace of the Doctor’s vulnerability to this madman’s portrait of a dead girl and three young men lying with their skulls sliced open brought about another defensive response:

“The murderer must be caught and these three men have made it hellishly difficult for me to find the real culprit. So they suffer for their own actions. By the way they may all be accomplices, and therefore please do not try to impair my judgments further. You do your job and let me do mine. And if you happen to be emotionally attached to this tragic foursome, I will ask my superiors to send me another – a more emotionally stable – psychiatrist who will be able to do his or her work perfectly – without intruding in my work of course.”

Dr. Maya and her professionalism, both of which had been at the bull’s eye of the subtly shaded assault by this sharpshooter of a Police Inspector, responded with true professionalism which had by now managed to overshadow her emotional doubts:

“Inspector Vikram, you will not find a better psychiatrist than me in this field, and I would like to know the truth as well, so that after this macabre experiment is over, I can help the innocents to regain their lost personas. So let us do away with the hidden cloak and dagger stuff. I already know the details of the case as I have gone through the necessary paperwork. But I would like to hear them once – from your perspective. Please explain without letting too many of your emotions sway you in myriad directions.”

This last sentence of Dr. Maya’s was a well directed rusty barb, and Inspector Vikram, relenting to the exhausting white light inside the room, started recounting the soul wrenching details of the past month as he had experienced them:

“Ok, here it goes.

“About a month ago we received a call around one am.

“It was from Bhiksh – the subject you have lying on one of your tables in the middle of the other two suspects. He identified himself, and after giving an address, said only one sentence after that:

““Anna is dead. She has been shot. I have the gun with me,’

“and cut the call.

“We immediately rushed to the address given by Bhiksh and found that the address was that of a four storied residential building which was being guarded by the security personnel of a security agency – an agency which we held in high esteem because of their perfect record – until now – and the immaculate professionalism of their personnel.

“We asked the four guards who had been manning the perimeter of the building – who upon hearing our sirens blaring to a stop in front of the building they were guarding, had all rushed towards the main gate – as to whether an Anna or a Bhiksh lived in the building. The guards replied in the affirmative while further adding that Anna lived in the first floor apartment while Bhiksh was the occupant of the apartment on the second floor. While my men and the emergency medical personnel accompanying us rushed inside the

building, I asked the security guards to give me the details of the people who had entered and left the building that day. They replied that, as far as they could remember, no one other than the four inhabitants of the four apartments in the building had ever entered through the gates of the residential complex they had been guarding – right from the time that the apartments had been leased out simultaneously to the four residents. They further added that it had been a week since any one of the four residents of the apartment complex had set foot outside the gates of the building. They then gave the names of Veer and Fazal as being the occupants of the third and ground floor apartments respectively.”

“I then rushed up to the first floor and found my men and the emergency medical personnel standing silently outside the open door of the apartment. I went in and found the suspect Bhiksh cradling Anna’s holed out head in his arms and crying his guts out.

“We tried to interrogate him on the spot, but the only words he would say were:

“‘Anna is dead. She has been shot. I have the gun with me.’

“We asked him over and over again if he had shot Anna and whether it was his handgun that was lying beside him. The damn psychopath would not say an extra word other than repeating redundantly the mind numbing sentence of his that Anna was dead, she had been shot, and he had the gun with him. We took him into custody and tried to draw Veer and Fazal out of their apartments. Both didn’t answer their doors, no matter how many times we rang the bell, shouted, or screamed aloud to them to open their doors.

“Since we didn’t have any warrants, we had to let it go at that.

“We then traced the handgun that very night, and it was found to be licensed in the name of Veer. But when we tried to check the gun for fingerprints, we found that it had been wiped clean.

“We got back to Veer’s apartment in the early hours of the morning with a warrant, and after he once more failed to open the door to his apartment – in spite of our exhaustive efforts to get him to do so – we broke open his door in order to arrest him.

“We found him passed out on the floor with whisky bottles strewn around him. When we finally woke him up after a long and tiring process, he was still inebriated beyond any limits. But the moment he grasped the reason as to why we were there to arrest him – after what seemed to be an endless repetition of the reason and its details on our part – he went into a shock saying:

“‘It is my gun. It is my fault.’

“It was a repeat episode of psychopathic illness like that of Bhiksh. Veer wouldn’t say anything except shouting out loud that it was his gun, and that it was his fault.

“As we were taking him into custody, Fazal – who had been finally awakened by the ruckus that had been cumulating since one am that night – appeared by the door and vehemently asked us as to what was happening in his apartment building and why there were policemen guarding the doors to Anna’s and Bhiksh’s apartments. This fellow appeared to have no regard for the police as he started screaming at us to let go of the inebriated Veer whom we had in handcuffs. We had to set an example. After a few well directed and repeated punches and slaps, he finally stopped screaming at us to let go of Veer and redundantly told us that he too lived in one of the four apartments in the building. He further added that he was a close friend of Veer’s.

“After we asked him as to whether Bhiksh and Anna were his close friends as well, he replied in the affirmative and further added that he, Veer, Anna, and Bhiksh had been inseparable friends for almost a decade. Then suddenly out of the blue, as if he had caught a hint of the tragedy that had traversed when he had been sound asleep, he became more wild than before, and it took four of my constables to pin him against the wall. We then had to repeat our methods of persuasion, and once he had been worn down and finally became quiet, we told him exactly what we had been witness to in the night.

“It seems that this particular brand of insanity of redundantly repeating something without saying anything new ran amongst this bloody triad of male friends, for he too – after hearing us out – suddenly went into a trance like state repeating over and over again the ghastly statement:

“‘I killed Anna.’

“We took him into custody too, for his statement far exceeded that of the other two in accepting responsibility for Anna’s death.

“At that time I thought that he was a sociopath who after committing the crime had for a while regressed into blissful innocence, and that it had taken our physical exertions to make him admit to his crime.

“Since then I do not know what to think as we have not been able to get anywhere with these damn triad of guys repeating the same thing over and over again without any remorse, sense, or sensibility. They won’t say a word other than their oft repeated mind numbing phrases. That is why all three of them are lying here in the White Room with their sliced skulls waiting for redemption.

“These buggers don’t need psychiatrists, but a slow torture I would be only grateful to give them in order get even the faintest sniff of the true facts.

“Thank yourself Doctor that I’m now in your jurisdiction. Otherwise these three maniacs would have felt far less alive than they feel now on your watch. I have suffered terribly for almost a month now. You do not know in the least the indignity and abuses that my superiors have heaped upon me during the last month on account of my failure to get even a single breakthrough in the case.

“It has taken all the influence that I had mustered up over my ten years of service to persuade the court to bring these three to the White Room.”

Dr. Maya was patiently hearing out Vikram while impatiently waiting for the blurred images on the screen behind each one of the “maniacs” to take even a slightly definite shape.

She then turned upon the frustrated Inspector and with a slight edge of superiority tinting her voice asked him:

“Do you or do you not know that these three “maniacs” of yours can hear every word we speak and see our bodily expressions as we do so?”

Vikram’s body immediately became tense for a few seconds before it convulsed with laughter at Maya’s question. Still holding his sides in laughter, he jettied out his reply:

“Do you know that Bhiksh is the heir to one of the holiest of seats in this country? That Veer is the son of one of the richest industrialists in the world? And that Fazal’s father has the highest connections in the ruling party? Do you think that my job has been easy while dealing with high flying fathers of psychopathic sons?

“My entire career for which I have slaved for since childhood is on the line because of these three maniacs and their fathers. Do you now really think that I give a damn about what these three mice in the Rat Lab hear or see?”

“I’m simply glad that they cannot speak, for I don’t want to hear any lies or convoluted truths from their obscene mouths. I just want Anna and her family to get justice. I hope you understand the meaning of the word justice. And by the way, I did not devise this White Room. You and your kind of professionals did so while striking a common chord with the justice system.

“I’m simply here to use it, and use it I will, to the hilt.

“The images are becoming clearer. Please get on with your job or else I will have to arrest you for complicity.”

The Past – The Year 2021

Their first year in the boarding school had ended for the foursome. The time had come for them to retire to their homes for a brief respite before beginning their grueling schedule in the next year.

All the students of the boarding school were filled with delirious joy at the prospect of seeing their parents and friends back home – even Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal.

Even though they had become the best of friends, their bonds of friendship were still flexible enough to allow them the joy of parting for a brief while. This joy not only had its foundation in the knowledge that this parting would only be brief, but also in the fact that their circles of sub-consciousness which encapsulated a part of each other and which intersected their innermost circles of sub-consciousness were still flexible. These flexible circles prevented the three friends from becoming sad at this first parting.

But Anna, who had only three major circles of sub-consciousness – for her innermost dim and whimsical circle had allowed Bhiksh to be an equal player in it – was the only one who cried and hugged Bhiksh repeatedly as she left with her mother. She did not waste her tears on either Veer or Fazal, but only on Bhiksh, for her innermost circle of sub-consciousness seemed to be shredded into two pieces – one for her and one for Bhiksh.

Anna had started to crave the inner peace which Bhiksh seemed to pour into her whenever she was sad, lonely, and missing her divorced mother and alienated father – a mother who seemed to care less and less about her daughter as each day passed with Anna in the boarding school, and a father who probably had other children of his to worry about.

Bhiksh had always been able to stem her tears and transform into light the darkness whenever it tried to engulf her.

Anna cried and cried as her mother drove her away from her home – Anna's home – to her home – Anna's mom's home.

All along, the paparazzi who had gathered outside the boarding school, fishing for the big actor and her daughter, snapped away. The flashes from the cameras burned Anna's already red tearful eyes as her mother waved her hand at the cameras in a graceful manner – her eyes shielded by sinfully extravagant sunglasses.

Meanwhile, a cavalcade of cars had arrived for both Bhiksh and Veer.

Veer was a smart kid who always wanted to observe and absorb all he could. He saw some of his teachers and fellow students line up in front of Bhiksh's father's car when it stopped. He also noticed that his father's cars were more in number and more advanced than those of Bhiksh's father's. Yet nobody crowded around them. Veer's father got out of his impeccable car, rushed towards his son, and gathered him in his arms while showering him with kisses. But Veer's eyes, instead of looking into his ecstatic father's eyes, were hypnotically transfixed by the people falling at the feet of Bhiksh's father, turn by turn, while Bhiksh stood nearby with his head bowed.

Fazal stood apart from this lavishly electric atmosphere and watched his three friends leave.

The school bus which was supposed to drop him off at the nearest railway station was late. He was worried, for he did not have enough money on him to catch the next train in case he missed the one on which his ticket was already booked. His parents had not come to take him home, for the train fare was too much for them to afford.

He waited in despair, for he wanted to go home and meet his parents as soon as possible.

Fazal was lucky. The school bus suddenly swerved out from the school gates and ground to a halt before him. The driver shouted at him to get on fast lest he missed his train.

Anna left crying.

Veer left contemplating about the relationship and the difference between money and power.

Bhiksh left embarrassed.

Fazal happily went home alone in an ordinary compartment.

Bhiksh's Vacation

Bhiksh's father was the holiest of holy men in the country who occupied the seat of the High Priest of a temple which was considered as one of the most sacred places in the world and which was thronged by lakhs of devotees every day. His son Bhiksh was the heir to the holy throne and had been brought up to accept with equanimity the adulation of the devotees who showered their devotion in no less a manner upon their future High Priest as they did on his father and the Supreme Deity of the temple.

Therefore, when Bhiksh's father had taken the decision to admit Bhiksh into the boarding school, he had faced a lot of resistance from the priests who served under him in the temple. They had all voiced their concern and opposition to their future leader being educated among the common masses. This reluctance on their part to allow their High Priest to send his son away from their temple and home for his education only grew more intense when they heard the name of the boarding school Bhiksh's father had selected. These holy men were used to receiving lavish donations for the upkeep of their temple from the rich and mighty. But they knew that most of these donors donated huge sums to the temple so that they may be rid of the sins they had committed in earning their vast sums of money. They did not want their future High Priest to be corrupted by the outside world – for he was at an age during which young people were most impressionable. But their High Priest had waved away their objections saying that it was in the best interests of their holy organization that Bhiksh got to know about the rapidly changing and volatile outside world at the earliest. He consoled the opposition by telling them that he would keep Bhiksh in regular and strenuous training during his vacations as to his duties towards their temple as future High Priest. But it was not without trepidation that his father had said goodbye to Bhiksh a year ago when he had first set foot in the boarding school.

So it came as no surprise that Bhiksh's father was extremely nervous and jumpy when he came to pick his son up. As his convoy of cars stopped in front of the boarding school, a huge number of devotees had already gathered to welcome the great holy man. The mob thronged around his car the moment it stopped, and as the High Priest stepped out of the car, people began to jostle each other in their effort to fall at his feet first and receive his blessings. In the midst of this melee, Bhiksh's father finally caught sight of his son who was standing far away from the crowd encircling his father – with an embarrassed expression on his normally peaceful face. The holy man was adept at judging the emotions of people and was suddenly terrified upon seeing his son in a negative frame of mind. He remembered that this sort of adulation had happened before when he had come to drop Bhiksh off a year ago. At that time Bhiksh had not felt even a tinge of embarrassment. But this time it was different.

Bhiksh's father finally managed to convince his devotees to take leave of him. When all of his devotees finally left him alone, Bhiksh came to him and fell at his feet. Bhiksh's father blessed his son and immediately took him inside the car. He then asked his convoy to hurry back home.

During their drive back home, Bhiksh's father was silent. Bhiksh was used to this, but not the furtive looks his father gave him every now and then. Bhiksh realized that his

father had noticed the changes that had occurred in him over the past one year and sat quietly with an uneasy feeling of guilt building up inside of him.

Meanwhile Bhiksh's father started sensing that this was not the wholly serene and deeply pious son of his whom he had left at the gates of the boarding school one year ago. He detected a slight strain of restlessness and a whiff of embarrassment in his son. But he did not say a word on these matters – which were causing him a deep mental anguish – during the drive. He maintained his calm demeanor all the way back home even as his mind grappled with conflicting emotions as to whether he had been right in his decision to send his son to the popular boarding school.

They reached home at night, and after completing the necessary rituals, began their dinner. After they had quickly partaken of their frugal meal, Bhiksh's father spoke for the first time since they had got into their car for the drive back home. In extremely brief words he asked his son to be present in the sanctum sanctorum of their temple by four in the morning. He then retired to his quarters without saying another word.

Bhiksh was deeply troubled as he went to bed that night. His father had spoken to him but once that day, and it was not a conversation but an order that had issued forth from his holy father's lips. Bhiksh was used to his father's silences, but what worried him most was his father's stoic refusal to hear or talk about his school. Bhiksh had eagerly tried twice to recount some of his stories from school – a conversation he had started to unburden himself of the unfathomable guilt he felt – but his father had avoided even eye contact during those instances. Ice cold water had been not too subtly poured over the young boy's enthusiasm, and he had kept deathly quiet after that. Even his mother who had fussed over him upon his arrival had kept off the topic of his schooling after a quick glance at his father's face.

Bhiksh set his alarm clock for three in the morning and drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

At four in the morning, Bhiksh promptly arrived at the sanctum sanctorum of the temple headed by his father.

The sanctum sanctorum of the temple was cool and was bathed in the gentle light of the steady flames of the lamps which had been lit to coincide with the beginning of dawn. Incense sticks which had been lit at the feet of their deity gave out a subtle aroma while giving rise to wisps of smoke which when combined with the peaceful lighting resulted in an ethereal atmosphere enveloping the sanctum sanctorum.

This temple being the most holy place in the country and his father occupying a position only next to that of God in the eyes of millions of devotees who thronged the temple each year led to the young Bhiksh wearing a heavy crown unsuited for his age and innocence. Bhiksh was his father's sole successor to the temple's throne and the priests and devotees never allowed him to forget it. People of all ages – even the extremely old and infirm ones – were always waiting to fall at his feet after they had first taken his father's blessings. This had been a matter of course to him and had never embarrassed him before he had started his schooling at the boarding school. But now the memories of his past, which resurfaced on his entering the sanctum sanctorum after a gap of one year – in spite of the ethereal atmosphere of the sanctum sanctorum – suddenly made him cringe.

His father, who had been waiting for his heir inside the sanctum sanctorum since three o'clock, noticed the cringe and realized with desperate finality that his son had indeed changed.

He had last seen that embarrassed look upon his son's face while he had been blessing his devotees at the boarding school when he had gone to pick up Bhiksh. A deep anguish and restlessness once more filled Bhiksh's usually peaceful father. He silently closed his eyes in prayer. After a few moments had elapsed he found himself blessed with a decision which he hoped would quell the discontent within both his and his heir's mind. His eyelids suddenly flickered and opened to reveal a modicum of peace in his previously troubled eyes. He then asked Bhiksh, who was standing obediently with his hands clasped in prayer in front of their Deity, to take over from him – as long as he was home for his holidays – all the holy rituals that had to be performed by the High Priest of the temple.

This order which was delivered more as a request or a plea did not frighten the young Bhiksh a bit, for he had not forgotten even in the least the rituals which he used to perform with his father until a year ago. He was however flabbergasted that his father had now placed the reins of the holiest of holy acts – the daily worship of their Deity – completely in his hands.

Bhiksh's father, by transferring temporarily the holiest of holy duties of the High Priest to his young son, hoped to turn back the clock by one year. He fervently prayed and wished in his heart of hearts that Bhiksh would once again become the completely serene and intensely pious boy of one year ago.

Bhiksh, on his part, felt relieved that he was being given a chance to rid himself of the unfathomable guilt his father seemed to have generated within him during the last twenty four hours.

He then arduously set himself to the holy task that his father had temporarily bequeathed to him and performed all the rituals of the temple meticulously over the course of one month of his vacation.

Bhiksh thus spent the whole of his vacation in the temple with his father, but it was impossible for his father to turn back the clock completely over the new major circles of sub-consciousness which had manifested themselves permanently in Bhiksh during the past one year. A part of Bhiksh's innermost circle of sub-consciousness did regain more than its lost calm and meditative properties, but the other major circles had come to stay, and often made him lose his peace of mind by yearning for the freedom and the companionship of his three friends which he had enjoyed at the boarding school.

Bhiksh's father completely saw through the young Bhiksh, but he had already cast his dices and they spoke to him only about not chaining the young Bhiksh to his duties at the temple when his mind, heart, and soul were someplace else. The holy man now wished that he had listened to his priests and not sent Bhiksh to the boarding school in the first place. But as he now only too clearly realized, he could not turn the clock back, but could only hope that Bhiksh would soon come to see the corrupt outside world in its true nature as he grew up, and would discard it as soon as his mind started maturing.

However, the barbs piercing Bhiksh's father's heart were soon to be joined by more of their comrades, for when the time came for Bhiksh to return back to school, Bhiksh, who had been harboring thoughts relating to uniformity over the past few

months, timorously asked his father as to whether he could let the hair on his head grow and wear the school uniform instead of his holy robes like his other schoolmates.

The three major circles of sub-consciousness intersecting Bhiksh's innermost circle of sub-consciousness, however weakened by his month of holy rituals, had acted.

As this question pierced deeply into his father, Bhiksh saw his entire month of servitude in the temple being smashed to jagged pieces which pierced him from every other direction possible, as his father who had resigned himself to sending back his heir into the outside world, suddenly became tense – tenser than Bhiksh had ever seen him before.

Bhiksh's father who had managed to retain his composure in the face of his son's; and heir's; transgressions of the mind until now, was suddenly chilled to the core of his being. He was not a man given to anger, but on this occasion of the blasphemous question posed to him by his eleven year old, he immediately flamed out. He shouted out at his heir that the only way he could return to school was by following the holy rules and regulations of their temple.

He then immediately regained his composure – for he was a holy man who was expected to be peaceful even in the face of insurmountable odds – and reminded Bhiksh that part of the duties of being a religious leader was to be disciplined and protect the sanctity of the outward appearance in order to maintain the sanctity within.

Young Bhiksh was left with no option but to go along with his father's orders – for he desperately wanted to go back to his boarding school and be with his three friends once more. He therefore bowed his head in acceptance.

That night Bhiksh eagerly packed his belongings, and the very next day Bhiksh's father dropped off his son at the boarding school.

Bhiksh had had his fill of his father's sullen silences and his holy vacation in the temple, and was glad to be back at the boarding school for his second year of schooling there.

Anna's Vacation

Anna's mother was an exquisitely beautiful movie star and her charming looks had been inherited by Anna. As fate had willed it, not only her looks, but her capriciousness too had been passed on to her only child. Anna's mother was not an inherently bad person. But it was a fact that she had not matured enough to handle her only child with the affection that Anna craved. Anna's mother was still to all practical purposes a teenager whose hormones were riding wild horses. This mixed with her beauty, flightiness, and profession had proven to be a toxic combo which had led her to sending off her daughter to a boarding school while she selfishly indulged in the myriad transient pleasures of life.

Anna, who had been whisked away by her mother from the eye blinding flashes of the paparazzis' cameras at the boarding school even before she had a chance to say a decent goodbye to her three chums, finally stopped crying after her mother rebuked her:

"Anna, stop being a crybaby. What do you think the magazines will say after they splash the photographs, right on their front pages, of you and me leaving your school with you crying endlessly? These sleazy magazines love to create a scandal. All of the gory tabloids will be filled with trash about me not being a good mother to you and as to how my only child was unhappy about going home with me."

Anna, being a whimsical child, instantly regained her cheerful disposition. She then started babbling on endlessly, vacillating between the topics of the new friends she had made at school and as to how nice it would be to meet her old friends back home.

Anna's exuberance was often shushed by her mother as the popular actor's cell phone kept on ringing repeatedly:

"Anna, how am I supposed to answer the phone if you keep on blabbering? Please keep it down."

Anna's cheerfulness started to disappear as her mother kept on talking to somebody over the phone about whether it was wise to bring Anna home.

After a few more phone calls during which Anna's mom used the words "camp" and "vacation" a lot, their chauffeur was told to make haste and take them to a different destination.

As the car took a turn and then set off at a fast pace in a different direction, Anna's fears, which had been rearing their ugly head within her sub-consciousness without her knowledge, suddenly surfaced into her consciousness as she realized with certainty that they were not going home. As her eyes filled up with tears, she fell into a gloomy silence.

Anna's mom, who had not yet removed her huge ornately framed sunglasses, turned to Anna and said:

"Baby, I have arranged a nice vacation for you. You will be going to a wonderful camp where you will make new friends and learn lots of exciting new things. There is nothing back home. All of your old friends would have gone off to vacation some place else, and you will be alone and bored. Thankfully, a few people whom I had called managed to pull some strings, and the manager of the camp where you will be staying agreed to take you in at the last minute."

Anna's mind became numb with a deep anguish which she knew very well, but she somehow managed to mutter out a pitiful plea:

“But mom, I want to stay with you.”

Anna's mom, hiding behind her impenetrable sunglasses said in a wavering voice: “There now dear, you know perfectly well how busy I am. I will not be able to cater to all your whims and fancies back home. But at camp, you will have a wonderful time, I promise.”

Anna kept silent for the rest of the trip as her mom kept on talking on her cell phone.

Anna was dropped off at the camp, and her mother, after giving her a perfunctory hug, sped away in her car. She went back home to her new boyfriend and a trip to Hawaii which had almost been spoiled by Anna's vacation.

Anna did not enjoy even a single day at camp or made a new friend. Her circles of sub-consciousness relating to Veer and Fazal expanded further to include more of them within her innermost circle of sub-consciousness – of which Bhiksh was already an equal part of – as she desperately waited for her vacation to be over so that she could get back to being with Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal once more.

Time being what it is, finally ended her misery, and an empty car – excluding the chauffeur – came to whisk her away from camp back to the boarding school.

Anna could shed no more tears, and she didn't miss her mom at all as her car sped towards what she – at a young age when everything seems to be crystal clear – considered paradise. A school with three beautiful friends.

Veer's Vacation

Veer's father was made of old money. He was also an extremely intelligent man who had managed to turn his father's small empire into a global one. After becoming a global business tycoon at an early age, he had retired early to enjoy his life and family with his money steadily multiplying in the trustworthy hands of his aides. He therefore had all the time, love, and money for his only son.

As Veer's car sped away from school, his father became more exuberantly happy with each passing minute which he was getting to spend with his son, and kept on asking – with increasing eagerness – him about his feelings and experiences over the past one year which he had spent in his boarding school. Veer's father had desperately missed being in his young son's life during the past one year, and he wanted to make up for it as best as he could in the one month allowed them for Veer's vacation.

But Veer was in a dark foul mood and kept on answering in monosyllables his enthusiastic father's happy questions, for he was still caught up in the imagery which showed his father's car cavalcade overshadowed by that of Bhiksh's father's.

But Veer's father did not allow his son's troubled mood to dampen his spirit, for he had seen the world and therefore understood his pampered son's dilemma. He had seen Veer glaring away at the pompous reception which the holy man had received, and had detected in his son's eyes, while he was hugging him, a strain of an inferiority complex. He wanted to correct it and did so in the only way he understood. He got hold of Veer's chin which was drooping away from him and turned his face towards his. He then brought out his briefcase, opened it, and revealed to his darling son the choicest chocolates money could buy. He also understood that his son needed love – a love which should be able to bridge a gap of a whole year in just one month – and kissed him lovingly on his forehead.

Veer and his father reached home to find a tearfully happy mother waiting for them. They all had a lavish dinner and went to bed.

The very next day the family set forth on an extravagant tour of the best vacation spots of the world.

Veer did not enjoy even a bit of his moneyed excursions as he saw that it was only because of his father's affluence that people respected them, and not because of who they truly were.

As they traveled the world, Veer's father quietly observed his son's dilemma and smiled – for he was sure that time would soon calm and enthuse his son into their prosperous family's way of life.

A different time soon came and rid Veer of his unhappy dilemma filled month by having his parents drop him off at the boarding school at the end of his vacation.

Veer was extremely grateful to be back at the boarding school, for he had waited impatiently – while disregarding his loving family and his entire vacation – to ask Bhiksh a certain question. A certain conundrum had stalked him since the beginning of the vacation, and the time had come to settle matters the blunt way.

The major circle of sub-consciousness related to Bhiksh intersecting Veer's innermost circle of sub-consciousness had worked overtime.

Fazal's Vacation

Fazal's father was a chauffeur, and to all external appearances a faithful and dumb servant of the ostentatious bigwig who had become a Minister riding on his religious card. But he was also the trump card in his employer's hand of cards and his eldest progeny was sent to a school in which his employer's peers' sons studied. He knew that this would help his family to rise above their station in life. But no matter what, he was to all practical purposes, still a poor man who could not afford the train fare to go and bring back home his son from school for his vacation.

Fazal's journey in his ordinary compartment was long and uncomfortable as he had gotten used to the luxury of his luxurious boarding school. But he managed to temper his uneasiness with the memories of his parents and new found friends. Time as always proceeded and brought Fazal's train, and Fazal, to his home station.

Fazal's parents had come to receive him at the railway station. As soon as he had got off the train with his luggage, he found himself smothered by his parent's hugs and kisses. Fazal had never been happier in his life.

He was welcomed home by a scrumptious lunch. But then again there is nothing like a free lunch, even in a disciplined youngster's life. The Minister who had paid for Fazal's schooling was there as well – greeting the smart boy with hugs and kisses.

Fazal was overwhelmed and hungry. But he had to maintain his decorum in front of his benefactor. He had to sit still, without allowing his eyes to fixate themselves on the platters containing his mom's delicious home cooked food whose aroma had already begun to tickle his nostrils. His long anticipated dreams were right in front of him tempting him tremendously, but the young Fazal somehow managed to hold his own against the towering temptations which were starting to befuddle him.

Before they began to partake of the food laid before them, the Minister asked the young Fazal as to how he was faring in his studies.

The suddenly downcast Fazal, forgetting all about the aromas causing his mouth to water, respectfully replied with a bagful of grief:

“Sorry Sir, I have been but able to stand only second – no matter how hard I worked.”

This answer brought forth a reaction from his parents and his benefactor – the Minister – which was totally unanticipated by the young boy. His elders erupted in peals of laughter, and in between scarcely controlled laughs, asked him as to what else he expected from a school which was controlled by religious fanatics of a religion different from, and in fact really opposed, to that of theirs.

The young and overburdened Fazal fell silent – all the while thinking about his three only friends who drank from those wells from which his parents and benefactor would not drink.

The Minister who took Fazal's silence as an appreciation of his radical policies, acknowledged this apology from the youngster by saying out loud a world worn philosophy which he had imbibed in his heart and which he had used to rise to his present position:

“Son, it is only the second best who always try to overcome the hurdles in life. The best always tend to wallow and drown in their pristine ponds, sooner or later. We of our religion are in a temporary hell and will someday reside in a permanent heaven, while those who are not of our mindset are temporarily in heaven and will surely go to a permanent hell. So let us enjoy God’s grace by partaking of the food that he has been benevolent enough to gift us.”

Fazal finally got to dig into his food. But by then he had already lost his appetite which had been building up over the past one year. He loved his friends and did not want them to rot in hell while he was in heaven.

He therefore decided to chain himself to them – all throughout their pleasures, troubles and travails – permanently.

Fazal’s vacation was slim, elegant, beautiful, and dark.

The three major circles of sub-consciousness which intersected his innermost circle of sub-consciousness grew larger and firmer.

The Present – The First Results

The White Room had turned into a theatre for voyeurs.

The three massive screens mounted behind the three accused finally started to become completely synchronized with their respective subjects' brain waves – brain waves corresponding to thoughts which the first dose of the drug had brought out from the fringes of the sub-consciousness' of the subjects and which were being converted into images for the Doctor and the Inspector to analyze.

These images being generated on the screens by the intricate gadgetry connecting them to their respective subjects, suddenly became vividly and grotesquely clear to the Doctor and the Inspector, both of whom had been impatiently waiting for the results of their initial test.

The three silent and still pictures on the three screens were those of Anna lying dead on the floor of her apartment. Each image on each screen was different from the other and was brought about by its respective subject's drugged brain with a horribly vivid perspective and in a completely different angle from that of the others.

The screen in the middle, which was connected to Bhiksh's brain whose body was splayed out in between his two brethren, showed Bhiksh in his ornate finery – a finery which could only be worn by one of the holiest of holy men in the world – cradling the holed out head of the dead Anna – who was otherwise looking every bit like an angel in her pure white dress and shimmering wings which were obstructing Bhiksh in his attempt to embrace her and lift her towards him – in his trembling arms.

The screen to the left of Bhiksh, which was linked to Veer's brain, displayed the beautiful Anna in one of her favorite dresses lying dead on the floor of her apartment with an enormous handgun lying across her breasts as if it was trying to stifle any heartbeats she may still have left inside of her body. This image also showed an immaculately clad yet hazy Veer crying over his handgun and the dead Anna with deadweight upon her chest.

Meanwhile the image on the screen which was on Bhiksh's right was in black and white – in stark contrast to the vivid colors which showed in gory detail the drugged mind landscapes of Fazal's brethren. It showed Fazal standing beside the body of the dead Anna with Veer and Bhiksh. In this noir image of Fazal's, only Fazal was clearly visible and dressed in black. All his other friends were immaculately decked in white – especially Anna who looked pristine in her white clad death. The handgun was nowhere to be seen in this noir picture.

The Second Discussion

Dr. Maya and Inspector Vikram had both viewed these silent images with a cold air of professional detachment whirling within the White Room.

Finally it was Inspector Vikram who broke the cold silence which had enveloped the six bodies in the room with its not too subtle ways:

“I’m sorry to disillusion you in your way of work, Dr. Maya, but shouldn’t the initial images display the last memory deeply etched in to the sub-consciousness of the subject?”

“All these images on the screen are superfluous – to say the least. They just show each one of the accused enacting the final scene of a great tragic play which each one of them have rewritten in their brains in the most masochistic way possible to suit their grim whims and morbid fancies.

“None of these images show either one or two or all of these high and mighty accused planning or committing the actual crime.”

Dr. Maya had had enough preaching and cynicism from the Police Inspector. The moment Vikram had finished uttering these last few words of his pungent diatribe, she cut in with a sharp rebuke:

“Inspector, please let me remind you that I’m the professional here when it comes to analyzing the macabre results of this still infantile and morbid experiment. Let me also mention to you once again – if you have already forgotten what I explained, or more precisely, tried to explain, to you the moment we began this grotesque process of slicing open the skulls of these three young men and delving in to the deepest recesses of their sub-consciousness – that this procedure is still in its experimental infancy. There is no way we can analyze with certainty the outcomes of this new age method of carrying out justice.

“Still I will do my best. But then again has it even occurred to you, even in the least bit, that this experiment has probably succeeded at this initial stage, and that all three of your accused are in every way innocent of Anna’s murder?”

At the end of this whip-lashing sermon, which was given more in a deluded state – during the play of one-upmanship between the Inspector and the Doctor – rather than in cool professional detachment, Vikram gave a condescending bow, and continued the game in this chamber of death and truth by replying to her question with all the sweetness in his voice that sarcasm could buy:

“I humbly beg your pardon, my dear Doctor. It is indeed you who should be doing the analyzing part and not me. I failed to understand my responsibilities and more importantly the restrictions imposed upon me by my professional boundaries.”

He then came to an abrupt halt – a halt that promised more scathing remarks to follow which would vindicate him of his sure shot cynicism.

Dr. Maya was no mean psychiatrist herself, and therefore fixed upon him a cold silent stare in order to prompt him into interpolating and clearly explaining himself. This chilled arrow which somehow managed to telepathically fly from the Doctor’s mind bow and pierce the overconfident Inspector managed to chill his guts and spill them in front of her:

“Doctor Maya, you have absolutely no idea as to how difficult it has become over the past few decades to get someone to admit to their crimes. The so called “humanitarians” are forever sniffing at our feet, and in whichever direction we try to go, they follow us and block our efforts to mete out justice with their ever increasing clout. These so called protectors of humanity have made it impossible for us to use our age old tried and trusted methods. In fact our methods are far less grotesque than those of yours which include the slicing apart of the skull of the accused and then tapping into his or her unshielded brainwaves with total abandon. All this terrible technology of yours has only gone on to prove the futility of the humanitarians misled ideology when it comes to tackling criminals and crime.”

Inspector Vikram allowed himself the respite of a few wheezing breaths before he continued his gut spilling venture:

“Do you want to know who and what else haunts us more?” and without waiting for a reply continued forth with wild eyed emotion, “the lawyers and their ever mutating judicial system. It is a fact that over the past few decades more and more young and highly intelligent students who pass out of school have chosen to graduate as lawyers. These youngsters who could have become intellectuals have chosen what they consider to be, and unfortunately is, an intelligent shortcut to the realization of money and fame. These highly bright idiots, in most cases, even choose money and infamy over all else. The initial batch of these horrendous scum have gone on to attain the posts of Judges, and even more – the more intelligent ones – have stepped out into a more powerful arena as politicians who are able to change laws in order to harbor more criminals in their wake. Their quest is for unlimited power and glory which involves setting the criminals who respect their wishes free to do their dirty work for them.”

Inspector Vikram, without pausing to catch his breath sputtered on:

“And the rest of the intelligent lot go on to become marketing experts who manage to earn more than a pretty penny with their perverted marketing of these judicial cases in front of the preying public’s eyes with their convoluted media.”

Inspector Vikram finally stopped long enough to catch a few breaths. But it was not long enough to allow Doctor Maya to interject. Vikram flawlessly continued on with his gut wrenching purging:

“I wish at least a few of the bright young ones had chosen either your profession or mine. It would have helped me in seeing a lot less of crime, which in fact has almost washed away my belief in truth and justice, and you from being a part of this – as you so aptly put it – infantile experiment. Think of all that these bright and intelligent youngsters could have contributed to your program and my salvation. Instead here we are – me doubting your proficiency and you doubting my agenda. I have no agenda but the truth, and whatever tools are available to me in this pursuit, I will use.”

Inspector Vikram finally seemed to have grounded to a halt. But it was only his emotional uprising which had fizzled out as he came back to the harsh reality of the situation.

Vikram then spoke with a professional tone coming back to the topic of Dr. Maya’s initial assumption that probably all three of the accused were innocent:

“I hope that by now you have gotten the gist of my monologue. I would like to get my hands upon a criminal with all routes enabling him to twist free of my grasp closed. I’m just doing my duty.”

After a silent and incredibly long pause – during which Maya was silent – he spoke again:

“Do you not realize that one, two or all three may be the perpetrators of this homicide? It is extremely difficult – in fact almost improbable – in our day and age to get someone to admit to his or her crimes. But here we have three persons surrendering themselves to my scrutiny. Do you think that I would be willing to let go of such a perfect amalgamation of crime and criminal, or criminals?”

Inspector Vikram saw Dr. Maya’s befuddled eyes – a perfect response to his thrusting question – and therefore continued with an extra spring added to his rebounding enthusiasm:

“Dr. Maya, can you not think even for one speck of time and circumstances combined, that one or all of these fools laid out in front of us are cold blooded killers?”

Dr. Maya chose to respond with her long dominant silence.

Inspector Vikram, without being distraught at the long silence which his immaculate question had failed to disintegrate, spoke aloud – without digressing – his interpretations of the initial images which the three gigantic screens had seemed to scream at them:

“I think that one, or two, or all of these accused are so smart and cold blooded that their heinous crime seems to have subsided extremely deep within their sub-consciousness in a wholly cold blooded criminal domain which we have been unable to tap into at this initial stage.

“But I will get the perpetrator or perpetrators of this crime in due time. I’m sure of this Dr. Maya.”

Dr. Maya, while maintaining her silence, quietly contemplated:

“But at what cost to the innocent?”

The Past – The Reunion

Reunions are always the happy part of being away from each other, especially if the gap of parting has been for a lengthy duration of time. Reunions are also mediocre in their joy if the concerned parties were vacationing in wonderful places, doing their most favorite things after a grueling schedule of trying to secure a better future.

In the case of Anna, Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal, the duration of being away from each other had not been long, and they had not at all indulged in their favorite pastimes. Therefore, both factors led to an extremely joyful reunion of the four friends as if they had been long lost to each other and the memories of one another had dangerously started to fade in each one's minds.

This reunion of the four great friends immediately gave rise to radical changes in their innermost and other major circles of sub-consciousness. Bhiksh's, Veer's, and Fazal's innermost circles of sub-consciousness gave way to the three other major circles of their sub-consciousness to expand even more and become more deeply and strongly entrenched within them while Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness ensured that Bhiksh's major circle of sub-consciousness which had become one with her own innermost circle of sub-consciousness enveloped it even more completely and strongly. Fazal's major circle of sub-consciousness too expanded and strengthened within Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness. But Veer's major circle of sub-consciousness intersecting Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness expanded and throbbed with a different kind of beat.

This complete enveloping of Anna by Bhiksh – now further accentuated by their reunion – once again started to pour into her innermost circle of sub-consciousness the calm and strong convictions of Bhiksh's innermost circle.

Therefore it came as a jack in the box surprise for the three young boys that Anna did not turn all teary and sentimental during this first reunion of theirs.

Thus the three small major circles of sub-consciousness – and in the case of Anna, two – which had been intersecting the innermost circles of sub-consciousness within the four friends, enlarged their domain of influence and enabled each friend to draw closer to one another.

But then again radical changes are seldom easy and almost impossible to accept for their repercussions cannot be either calculated or predicted with any degree of accuracy.

Before the beginning of their vacation, Veer's innermost circle of sub-consciousness had healed to a certain extent because of Fazal's ironclad innermost circle of sub-consciousness which had supplied Veer with self cannibalized iron to strengthen out his ragged innermost circle. But Veer's slightly strengthened innermost circle had suddenly returned to its previously tattered state the moment he had witnessed people thronging Bhiksh's father's convoy of cars while his own father's cavalcade of cars stood lonely in comparison. His strengthening innermost circle had been punished and dismembered by the reception Bhiksh's father had received at the beginning of their vacation. He had swallowed too much since the day he had left for his vacation and the time had come for him to purge involuntarily. This purging of his emotions, which was

directed at Bhiksh in front of his other two friends, had been enabled by his major circle of sub-consciousness, related to Bhiksh, which had instantaneously expanded further into his innermost circle of sub-consciousness during their reunion. This led him into asking Bhiksh with a wavering voice:

“Do I have to fall at your feet too?”

This question, accentuated by the timorous and insecure tone in which it was asked, unnerved Bhiksh. The memories of the embarrassment he had suffered when most of his teachers and fellow students had rushed to fall at his father’s feet when he had come to receive his son about a month ago once again reared their ugly heads.

Bhiksh could not look into Veer’s hurting eyes and suddenly closed his own in an instinctive attempt at self preservation. His head then started to hang down involuntarily as the vivid images of the priests and devotees of his temple falling at his feet flashed across his mind’s eye.

It was the ever exuberant and innocent Anna who broke the terrible silence enveloping the two young boys with her spirited voice:

“Why should Bhiksh want us to fall at his feet? Is it because he wears funny clothes and sports a bald head? In any case, even if he wants us to fall at his feet, for whatever reason, what is the big deal? We are the best of friends and we will do whatever makes Bhiksh happy. Isn’t it so?”

This question and answer session which Anna had completed on her own thawed the silence between Bhiksh and Veer as a cool interlude blew over them.

Fazal, who had been a party to the crests and troughs of the opinions and emotions dancing their way towards a rocky shore where they smashed themselves into smithereens, finally dived in to these turbulent waters and made a big splash himself by saying in determined tones:

“My elders say that ours is the only true God and we should bow only in front of Him and nobody else. Is it true?”

He then lapsed into silence, as was his norm.

Anna, who had watched and heard with bewilderment Fazal’s own idea of purgation, burst out laughing:

“Of course silly, all of us should bow down in front of our God. Do say something new for a change.”

None of the three – Veer, Bhiksh, or Fazal – wanted to destroy the beauty of Anna’s innocent understanding of God, and therefore kept silent about the different Gods who held sway over them at such a young age.

This was that unique moment which clouded the boundaries of the intersections of each others’ ever expanding major circles of sub-consciousness with their own innermost circles.

The major circles started to merge with the innermost circles of each.

Each friend came to accept, with all the inherent differences, the others as integral parts of themselves.

Nothing would ever be the same henceforth.

The Remaining Years in the Boarding School

The years of learning and vacations in school started flying by as these four unique beings blended subtly into one another. These young friends started favoring more and more the time they spent together in school while despising their vacations more and more with each passing year. This contradiction to normal behavior on the part of the four friends was brought about by various factors.

Bhiksh disliked his vacations as his father tried his best during those times to limit his son's ever broadening perspective of religion and freedom within the rigid boundaries of their particular brand of religion of which he was the leader. Bhiksh missed being a carefree school boy as he was forced to don the mantle of a religious leader during every vacation. With each passing year Bhiksh came to abhor more and more the rigid religion and the vast and deeply biased religious institution of which he was the sole heir to. But Bhiksh never – even for one unwary moment – lost his spirituality and meditative state of mind which enabled him to always maintain a certain measure of peace within himself. Thus, Bhiksh always managed to respond perfectly to his father's commands and never once voiced his opinions to his father. This kept his father happy and Bhiksh in school.

Bhiksh despised his vacations for another important reason. He knew that Anna could not bear to be far away from him and that wherever she spent her vacations, she would be terribly lonely. Therefore, before the vacation came close the second time, he had mustered up all his courage, and calling up his father, had asked his permission to bring Anna home along with him to spend the vacation. The moment his father had heard the name "Anna," he had immediately lost his composure and in no mean curt tones had ordered Bhiksh to stop making friendships with girls – especially those from a religion which he considered blasphemous. There had been no more talk between father and son about his friends after that.

Meanwhile, Veer stood in fear of his vacations as he would be deprived of the strong Fazal's convictions, ambitions, and drives, the calm Bhiksh's inherent peace, and the ever bubbling Anna's exuberance. These positive traits seemed to emanate from his friends and seep into him whenever he was in their proximity, thus enabling him to lead his boisterous life in full without any feelings of mediocrity or guilt waving their ugly hands at him.

He knew that neither Bhiksh nor Fazal could stay with him during his vacations, for both boys had their own strict duties to perform back at home. While Bhiksh had his religious duties, Fazal had his own duty of recounting to his benefactor the things which he had accomplished during the previous year at school. Veer himself realized that he could not stay with either of them, for he knew that they would not be able to provide him with the lavish lifestyle he was used to. As for Anna, her mother was extremely secretive about herself and her daughter, and in order to avoid the media's glare, somehow managed every time to whisk her daughter out of school to secretive destinations.

Fazal stood in ever increasing dread of his vacations as he had gotten used to the luxury of his surroundings and had slowly come to despise his family's poverty back at home. His impoverished surroundings embarrassed him and he did not dare to even once

invite Anna, Bhiksh or Veer to spend their vacation with him. Moreover, his performance at school had started to deteriorate as he became more and more enmeshed within Anna's frivolity and Veer's extremities while dreading Bhiksh's incomprehensible serenity. He lived in dread of the interviews which he would have to have with his family's benefactor – the religious zealot of a Minister who managed to pry from him every detail of his school life with a smiling exterior. He knew that the Minister hated him being close to his only three friends. But there was nothing Fazal could do about his situation except to bear it with a woefulness which exceeded that of Bhiksh and Veer.

Anna's intense aversion to vacations always went hand in hand with her deep set fear of loneliness and the distance it put between her and Bhiksh. She knew of Bhiksh's father's refusal to accommodate her during the vacations and she was hurt badly. This was a deep hurt because she could not fathom out the reason why it had to be so. Anna thus let her ever absent mother send her to one vacation camp or the other. She had ceased to care, for she knew that vacations were finite and that she would get back to being with her friends once more at the end of the terrible gaps which seemed to occur perpetually in midst of blissful continuity.

Eight years of schooling in the boarding school thus raced by in a flash for the four young children as they rode the ups and downs of life together and soon grew into teenagers.

At the end of their education in the boarding school, Bhiksh – as he had been doing so all the previous years – graduated at the top of his class. Meanwhile Fazal had slipped from his runner up position over the years and ended up somewhere in the top half of the class. Veer and Anna were blissfully happy with being in the top portion of the lower half, and the fact that they had not ended their schooling at the very bottom of their class gave them immense satisfaction.

All the four had then returned to their respective homes after having made a secret pact to continue their further college education in the same place – wherever that may be – so that they would be together once more.

Evolution of Characters and their Futures

Bhiksh, by the time he had completed his schooling, had grown extremely mature. His mind through rigorous meditation and discipline had given his cherubic face a glowing countenance over the years. The inner peacefulness of his which had shone forth through his calm and cool actions had made sure that Anna, whenever possible, never left his side and was seen most of the times clutching his hand and hugging him on the slightest pretext.

Bhiksh, on his part, had calmly accepted the fact that Anna was always happiest whenever he was near her and had tried his best to always keep her in her bubbling and exuberant state even though it had meant a continual invasion of his privacy and solitude – a privacy and solitude which he had treasured far more than anything else in the world until a few years back. But in the last few years of their schooling, things had come to such a state that both Bhiksh and Anna had placed each other on the topmost pedestal of their lives and minds.

But Bhiksh had managed to expertly juggle his schooling, his friends, his duties at his temple, and his fathers preaching. Thus, this calm teenager knew that his father would allow him to go to college only if it had something to do with god and religion. He therefore asked his father's permission to go to college and study theology. His father was pleased beyond his wildest dreams and immediately gave his assent to his son's request.

Veer had developed into a little Casanova during his last few years in school. By the time he had entered high school, he had started noticing the beautiful girls in the school. His dashing good looks, his outward show of supreme confidence, and the fact of his being the heir to an incredibly large estate had done the needful and had girls falling all over him. But Veer had not got deeply attached to anybody outside his circle of four. This had led to him having a succession of new girlfriends which could compete with even the longest train in the world by the time he was ready to graduate from the boarding school.

The oddest part of this scenario had been that he had never even once looked at the prettiest girl in the school – Anna – in a sexual manner. But his platonic love towards her had always far exceeded all the romantic escapades he had had with his innumerable girlfriends combined together.

At the same time, Veer had always managed to get into trouble with his fellow students and the school authorities. It always used to take all of his chum Fazal's ingenuity, and also sometimes self-sacrifice, to get Veer out of serious trouble.

This romantic and boisterous Veer, by the time he graduated from the boarding school, had also developed a different side to his personality. It was a personality in which others seldom, if at all, saw a cold and calculative side which knew that he had to graduate from business school in order to take over his father's business empire one day. Despite his low scores, he had already managed to secure his seat in one of the best business schools with the help of his father's generous donations to the concerned authorities of the institute.

Meanwhile, Anna, who had finished her schooling with the help of different strengths drawn from her three best chums, was smitten by the idea of a future in which all the four would be together permanently.

Her major circle of sub-consciousness related to Veer had always pulsed beautifully whenever she had been around him. But she had never even for a single moment realized that it could be pulsating so because she looked upon Veer as more than a friend. Hence whenever Veer had started off on one of his innumerable romantic episodes, Anna had never become jealous of Veer's new playmate as she had known only too well that Veer would soon get tired of his new friend and come back to their foursome fold.

With regard to her future, Anna was drawn like a moth towards an inferno – a moth which feels that it will be the first to survive after diving into the blazing flames which had consumed other like minded moths. She had seen and experienced her mother's chaotic life as an actress and hated what the film world had done to her mother and their relationship. But paradoxically, the stubborn Anna with her exceedingly good looks and enchanting personality, wanted to follow in her popular mother's footsteps. Anna had thus decided to graduate from an acting school. She knew that her good looks, charm, and her mother's influence would do the rest by getting her an admission into any one of the top acting schools she chose to go to.

Meanwhile Fazal, at the end of his schooling, had spent less time working on his studies and more time acting as a mentor to Veer and solving what seemed to Veer to be insurmountable problems. The pampered Veer had come to totally rely on Fazal to disentangle him from the perpetual messes he had the propensity of getting himself into – with his teachers and fellow students – as a result of his high handed attitude.

As a result, Fazal had lost his focus and had passed out with poor grades. Therefore, it came as no surprise that it was poor Fazal who had nowhere to go to and no future to look forward to except the bleak one of continuing in his father's footsteps as the driver and servant of the Minister who had paid for his education in the expensive boarding school. The Minister had taken notice of Fazal's falling grades over the years, and upon the completion of Fazal's schooling, had harshly told him and his parents that he felt betrayed by them as Fazal had failed to pass out with good grades. He had further emphasized that he had already spent an enormous amount of money on Fazal's schooling and would not spend any more to send him to college. He had ended his blistering attack on them by telling them that he needed a well educated servant to serve him in this day and age, and that Fazal was well suited for that job. He had then graciously added that they did not have to repay the money he had wastefully invested on Fazal, and that he was doing this last favor upon them – by accepting Fazal as his servant – since they all belonged to the same community.

Fazal and his family had been bewildered by this anti-climax to their dreams and had humbly bowed down to the Minister's commands.

But neither Fazal nor his parents had expected Veer to react to this misfortune they had drowned in as he did. Veer, upon hearing the news of Fazal's conundrum, immediately rushed to Fazal's town dragging his father with him. Veer's father – always keen to uphold the honor of his son's commitments – surreptitiously met with the Minister and donated a large amount of money to his party fund – an amount which had been calculated to exceed the amount of money the Minister had spent on Fazal's

schooling – thereby releasing Fazal from his bondage. The Minister was only too eager to comply, as he had gained more money than he had spent trying to gain popularity amongst the vast masses of his community. Furthermore, the tiny minded politician – who had reached his goal of becoming a Minister – was glad to escape a measure of displeasure he would have had to face from a section of the people of his community – those who were on an equal financial and social footing with that of Fazal’s family – because of his decision not to finance Fazal’s college education. The Minister knew only too well that Fazal’s friend’s father would do the rest and that he could collect all the laurels emanating from Fazal’s further education.

Veer’s father convinced Fazal’s parents that he was not like their popular Minister, and that he considered his son’s best friend as his second son and would ensure that he got off to a flying start in his new future. Veer and his father then made sure that Fazal got a seat in the same business school that Veer would be attending.

This happy news reached Anna and Bhiksh who then began maneuvering their elders towards a decision which would enable all four of the friends to be together in their new endeavors. Anna and Bhiksh were successful in getting admission to their desired courses in the topmost colleges of the big city in which Veer and Fazal would be going to business school.

Everything was simply beautiful for all except Fazal, for he had this sinking feeling that he had jumped from one small obligation into a bigger one. But Fazal had no chance to complain as he was overwhelmed with the emotion of being able to continue his further studies with his best buddies once more.

The major circles of sub-consciousness of Bhiksh, Veer, and Fazal relating to one another and Anna had almost reached the point of becoming one with their innermost circles of sub-consciousness. Meanwhile, the major circle of sub-consciousness related to Veer pulsed insanely while trying to become one with Anna’s innermost circle of sub-consciousness. Anna’s innermost circle of sub-consciousness was also slowly starting to merge completely with that of Fazal’s.

The Past – The Year 2027 – The Secret Trip

The boarding school had decided to hold a get-together for all the students who had passed out from the twelfth grade and were on the verge of attending different colleges pursuing various courses which catered to their ambitions. The authorities had taken this step in order to enable the current twelfth graders to interact with the passed out students and get an understanding of the myriad courses which they could pursue upon their completion of schooling in the boarding school.

The moment this news reached Anna, a germ of a thrilling idea manifested itself within her exuberant mind. She became ecstatic and immediately called up Veer. She asked him to come to the reunion driving his own car so that the four of them could slip away on a private vacation immediately after the get-together in their school got over. Veer marveled at the ingenious Anna's adventurous idea and immediately began his preparations for the journey after informing Fazal of the audacious trip they would be venturing on. Anna then immediately called up Bhiksh and after informing him of the secret vacation they would be taking, further instructed him to take the utmost care in making sure that his parents would not know the exact duration of the get-together at the boarding school. In fact all that she had asked from him was to steal a week of happiness without his parents getting to know about it. Bhiksh never lied, but he could be vague and somehow managed to make a week vanish in the minds of his parents over the period when the four would be holidaying together.

Veer drove to Fazal's town, picked him up, and the two then sped towards the boarding school where they knew that the remaining half of their quartet would be waiting for them with open arms and huge smiles.

Fazal knew that he could not afford the vacation – monetary wise – but Veer had now taken him under his wing – only as far as money was concerned, otherwise it was always Fazal who took care of Veer – and had told Fazal to stop thinking of finances as long as he, Veer, was alive. Everybody knows that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that everything arrives with a string attached to it. But in the case of these four incredible friends there were no conscious strings attached to anything they did with, or for, each other.

All the four, during their tough schooling of eight years, had for long wanted to get away on a vacation together. Their time had finally come and they had a full week during which they could experience together the beauty and variety of life before they began their college education.

After arriving at the boarding school, the foursome completed the social networking which had been a condition which the school authorities had imposed on anybody who wanted to attend the get-together and without much ado immediately started on their program of vacationing together for the first time since they had met.

They hurriedly packed their belongings, said goodbye to their acquaintances and teachers, and then straight away drove overnight to a beach resort – it had been Anna's idea to vacation at a particular beach resort in the first place and nobody had objected – in Veer's brand new four wheel drive – a gift from his father at Veer's completion of his initial schooling. Veer drove all the way, for Bhiksh and Fazal had never learnt how to

drive – Fazal as a result of his poverty, and Bhiksh as a result of his high stature which had always provided him with a chauffeur – and the only other person who knew how to drive, Anna, was blissfully asleep in the back seat.

Bhiksh and Fazal who had crammed into the front alongside Veer in order to let Anna sleep away the journey comfortably stretched out in the back seat, managed to doze off, having complete confidence in Veer to take them to their destination safely. Veer didn't mind – in fact he loved the solitude and the rush of adrenalin coursing through his body as he drove at breakneck speed through the winding roads of the nightscape with his powerful headlights on.

With every passing kilometer that whizzed by in a flash of glaring headlights and screaming wind, Veer became more and more contented and peaceful. He felt increasingly powerful as his leg came down more and more heavily on the accelerator, and his car along with its precious cargo sped sublimely along towards the four friends' long anticipated goal. A deep sense of warmth – in stark contrast to the chilly wind cutlassing its way around the speeding car – originated deep within his belly and finally pervaded upwards into his face causing his handsome young features to become suffused with blood as he made time and finally brought himself and his passengers safely to their destination.

The early morning sun emerging from the sea had just started to scatter away the darkest part of the night over the thunderous deep blue when Veer parked his car in the resort. The magnificent car's heart had taken a pounding as a result of his driving and was glad to be put to rest when Veer turned off the ignition and stretched out his limbs trying to get rid of the cramps within his body. He immediately felt relaxed and at ease as he started to watch the early golden blue dawn. He then turned to his dozing partners who had curled up within their blankets into a blissful sleep and gave each one of them a few playful slaps in order to awaken them to a glorious morning. Bhiksh and Fazal woke up with a start, but it took a full bottle of cold water poured over Anna's face to wake her up. She shrieked and rose up with a start, and just when curses were about to fly out of her mouth, she noticed the ethereal beauty of a brand new day through the parked car's windshield. Between her and the gorgeous sunrise – leaning over her with an empty water bottle in his hand – was the handsome Veer with a naughty smile upon his face. Then something entirely different and incredibly wonderful happened to her.

Until now, Anna's major circle of sub-consciousness which was related to Veer had only allowed her to love him with a childish infatuation a little girl can have for a cute and popular boy. A boy who had managed to nudge her tiny young heart at their very first meeting with his been there and done that attitude – an attitude prevalent among most young boys, but to which Veer had brought his own high and mighty confidence to.

But time had passed since then, and at this very moment, the insanely pulsating major circle of sub-consciousness related to Veer within her became one with her innermost circle of sub-consciousness and set it pulsating insanely too.

Veer in her eyes had suddenly transformed into a young man and she knew that she was a young woman.

Her innermost circle of sub-consciousness started pulsating even more insanely in tandem with her rapidly beating heart.

Anna had suddenly become a young woman in love with a young man.

Anna could do nothing else but stare at Veer's face with a dazzled state of mind and heart. However Veer, whose major circle of sub-consciousness relating to Anna had not altered by even a tiny bit, asked Fazal for one more bottle of water as he said jocosely:

"It seems our princess is not fully awake. Let me drench her fully so that she can get used to the sea which seems to have enamored her so much."

Veer's voice suddenly seemed to break Anna's hypnotic stare as she said with a new found enthusiasm:

"Let us freshen up and head for the sea before the sands start to burn our feet," and sprightly jumped out of the car. She then unloaded her luggage from the car's boot and with a spring in her steps, which rivaled that of a gazelle's, sprinted towards the resort's reception desk.

The others who had watched this incredible transformation of a soundly asleep Anna – whom it had taken a bottle of cold water poured over her to rouse – into a happily prancing vacationer, hastily followed her into the resort with their luggage.

Anna was the first one of the lot of four to step on to the early morning's golden beach after freshening up. She then waited impatiently for the other three who formed her immaculate quartet to join her, and the minute the last straggler – who was obviously the easy going Veer – joined them, she imposed upon them the very first thing that she wanted to do – which was that of exploring the surface of the ocean in a quick fire fashion. Anna suggested a powerboat ride to uncork the bottle of champagne of which they would be partaking in the next six days to come.

Whatever Anna wanted, she got, especially from her only three friends.

But nevertheless, this decision of hers to take a powerboat ride gave rise to an uneasy sinking feeling in the pit of the three boys' stomachs. Unknown to Anna was the fact that all the three boys were deathly afraid of water and didn't know how to swim. Even the three young males were in the dark as to the others' inability to swim. The three boys themselves didn't know whether their fear of water had kept them from learning how to swim in the shallow and calm swimming pool of their former boarding school, or whether the fact that they had never learnt to swim caused in them their deathly fear of water.

Despite this, all the three boys put on a façade of bravado in front of one another. It was a scared chorus of yeses as each boy managed to hide his childish fear behind a mask of budding manhood with mock cheerfulness.

All the four friends then walked hand in hand along the edge of the beach until they saw a powerboat tethered to one of the legs of a rickety looking pier. The foursome then eagerly approached the pier and then set foot upon it gingerly, testing each one of the planks which formed the floor of the pier before allowing their body weight to rest completely upon it. The youngsters thus moved hesitantly towards the leg of the pier to which the powerboat was shackled. They then looked down and saw a swarthy man lounging lazily in the powerboat which was being swayed not too gently by the waves lapping the shore. The moment the quartet bending over the pier called out to him in excited voices, the captain of this powerboat who had been trying to sleep away the beautiful morning opened his blood shot red eyes and took one good long look at the exuberantly shrieking foursome from underneath his cap and immediately foresaw an

extremely profitable morning. He then jumped to his feet and his sea legs did not buckle even a bit as he caught hold of the rope tethering his swaying boat to the pier and drew himself and his boat towards the shaky planks which formed a sort of steps from the top of the pier down towards the dying waves at the shore. The moment the powerboat drew up to the stairs, the gang of four walked down and got into the boat.

All of the four were then told by this sobering captain of the powerboat to wear the life jackets which he handed out to them. On hearing this, the three boys protested perfunctorily, and then with an outward show of nonchalance which belied their immense gratefulness towards the red eyed captain – a gratefulness which they tried hard to hide – encased themselves in the orange lifesavers. Meanwhile Anna had already belted herself into her life jacket and was raring to go.

The power boat thundered its way through the uneasy morning sea.

Anna, who had wanted to sit at the prow, suddenly became queasy and latched on to Bhiksh. Bhiksh held her tight and adjusted his priestly robes so as to protect the fragile Anna from the drops of salty water which flew like bullets and hit the temporary seafarers.

Anna was a temperamental girl who had wanted to sit at the prow, and further wanted Bhiksh to sit beside her. Veer and Fazal had no problem with this seating arrangement except that Veer always wanted to be at the head of everything.

But on this day, Veer sacrificed his perpetual desire for one-upmanship, and happily allowed Bhiksh and Anna to sit at the prow.

All four youngsters were at an age when fears were short lived and possibilities endless. As the powerboat ploughed through the bucking sea towards the rising sun with its hypnotic drone, Bhiksh had a life twisting thought. This thought of his which had waited all these years for the moment in which it would be able to catch the calm and meditative Bhiksh off guard, finally saw a chink in his armor and managed to nudge its way into his innocent mind.

The major circle of sub-consciousness relating to Anna had finally become one with Bhiksh's innermost circle of sub-consciousness, and started its not too subtle machinations.

Bhiksh took one long look at the innocent face of Anna which had managed to shelter itself from the stings of the mighty ocean and life in general by snuggling into his all enveloping priestly robes, and was suddenly filled with an overwhelming guilt.

In the face of Anna's soft body clutching his rigid one, he had realized his sexuality for the first time in his life. But Bhiksh's mind was mature enough to thrust away the temptations of his body and he suddenly realized with horror that he could not be there for her forever as he did not love Anna in the way that he thought she did. Moreover his religion forbade him from marrying outside it.

But at that moment in space and time, Bhiksh, with his calm and meticulous mind, realized that there was nothing that he could do about this quandary of his. He immediately made a pledge to himself that he would never again let his train of thoughts travel on this particular track again, and then laying aside his life changing thoughts, concentrated upon the present boating experience which had begun to thrill him.

The powerboat ride finally got over when the captain turned his boat towards the shore and then allowed the engine to idle as he subtly maneuvered his boat towards the pier and docked. Each one of the four young people then stood up in the still swaying boat with shaking legs and thudding hearts. They then carefully got out of their ride and shakily climbed the steps on to the top of the pier.

After they had paid the happy captain an exorbitant amount of money which seemed to them an adequate compensation for the early morning thrill which he had bestowed upon them, they took stock of their still trembling bodies and tried to adjust to the surroundings which seemed to keep swaying in front of them.

Finally their legs stopped shaking and so did the world in front of their eyes. This experience did not leave any physical scars on the vacationers, but each boy's psyche was affected permanently by the adrenaline rush which they had experienced while scorching the surface of a turbulent sea in a fast boat – their very first such experience, and that too in the face of their gargantuan fear of water.

Furthermore this experience had somehow miraculously changed the boys' mindsets about swimming. Each boy was still deathly afraid of water, but this early morning escapade had turned their minds in the direction of the pleasure, freedom, and grace of being able to move through water without sinking like a stone. Each boy was now both fascinated and scared by water, and each now desperately wanted to learn how to swim.

This powerboat ride with its physical and psychological effects brought a deep relaxation to each boy and their liberated minds started to make their stomachs growl. The boys then decided that they had had enough of water sports for one day, and dragged the unwilling Anna – who seemed to have not had enough thrills for the morning and now wanted to swim in the surf – to a beachside restaurant where they started on a huge and lengthy breakfast. Anna ate but little, for she was still in a state of high excitement due to the early morning ride, and having finished her breakfast early, started prattling on and on about how wonderful the ride had been and as to how she couldn't wait to swim in the surf. But this conversation was one sided, for the boys had their minds, hands and mouths completely full with the scrumptious and large breakfast they had lying before them. After quite a while of her lengthy monologue, Anna finally realized that she had been the only one talking and listening while the boys had been immersed in their own food world. This made her sulk and she suddenly grew quiet and looked away from her friends – allowing her eyes to settle on nothing in particular.

Fazal who was extremely sensitive to the changes in moods of other people immediately noticed the sulking Anna and brought his two male companions out of the gorging world into which they had immersed themselves by stating out loud that it was about time that they stopped gorging themselves and started enjoying the beach. Veer and Bhiksh groaningly acceded to his statement as they realized that they had exceeded their intake of breakfast.

After paying the huge bill which came to their table hand in hand with the quantity of breakfast they had stuffed themselves with, the boys left the restaurant with the still sulking Anna. It took the now satiated Bhiksh just a few seconds to gauge Anna's mood and her further plans for the day – which she would be certain to implement going by her present state of mind. His clever mind then worked fast and he came up with a perfect solution to the perils which lay ahead of him if he kept on catering to Anna's

whims and fancies. He then immediately spoke forth with a great amount of forced joviality:

“Anna, you are smarter than me. You knew that you had to swim and therefore ate less. But being the pig that I am, I’m now in no condition to swim. But I will gladly sit on the beach and watch over you.”

Bhiksh never lied, but he had a certain way of circumventing and blurring the truth whenever the push came to the shove – especially when the push meant a shove which would land him in water.

Both Fazal and Veer were only seconds behind Bhiksh in grasping the reality of the situation and hurriedly spluttered out that they were in the same boat as Bhiksh and would love to watch while she swam away the rest of the beautiful morning.

Anna’s mood instantly changed – as it always did – and after hurriedly changing into her swimming clothes, she rushed into the foaming water while blazing a hard trail to follow – an impossible trail for the three boys who did not know how to swim.

As the three young men splayed themselves on the beach beside each other while watching Anna swim gracefully through the waves, their minds started floating on the same calm pool of happiness as they started to doze off.

But then again there is nothing like absolute peace unless you detach yourself from all your worldly possessions including your loved ones. This point was proved soon enough as the deep calmness of the three boys suddenly evaporated when they heard Anna crying out loudly for help. The three startled boys instantly jumped to their feet and their bewildered eyes started scanning the ocean in front of them for their dear Anna. Their eyes soon came to rest on Anna who was floundering in the ocean – unable to swim as the thundering waves got the best of her. The three teenagers, without even a single thought arising within them about their fear of water and inability to swim, rushed towards Anna who was haplessly trying to keep her head above the roaring waves of the unforgiving sea.

The three male friends soon found themselves drowning into oblivion.

All four of the foolhardy foursome were rescued by the lifeguards who had been manning the sea, especially on the lookout for such foolhardy stunts on the part of the vacationers residing in the plush beach resort which employed them.

The fact that they had been staying at a seven star resort which had numerous lifeguards patrolling the beach in order to safeguard the lives of their rich and foolish customers had ensured that the four youngsters lived to see another day. In short, money had saved the foursome from a grisly death.

But then again, destiny cannot be thwarted. The drowning episode had been just one of destiny’s poor jokes for it still held a more chilling future for its four pawns.

Once the four youngsters had purged the salt water from their insides and were stable enough to take complete stock of their surroundings, they were taken by the lifeguards to the reception desk where the manager of the resort in which they were staying was agitatedly waiting for them. The manager then informed the foursome that

they would have to vacate their suites in view of their callous attitude towards danger – a callousness which would in all probability bring a bad name to the popular beach resort.

Neither Bhiksh nor Veer or Anna could bring themselves to impose upon the authorities in charge of the beach resort their parents influence, for this had been a secret vacation, and had to remain secret if the four – including Fazal – were to spend their future together.

But then again, money is a wily agent who once changes hands immediately enables the concerned parties to change their mindsets.

Veer's money – which he had more than he could spend – enabled the four youngsters to convince the manager to allow them to stay on in the resort for the remaining six days of their secret vacation. But the manager made it clear to them that they were not to set foot inside the sea again or else they would be immediately thrown out of the resort without any further mercy being shown to them. All the four hastily agreed to this condition imposed upon them and thankfully left the reception desk.

After this life changing event, all the four sat on the beach quietly, and while listening to the soothing sound of the sea, contemplated their foolhardiness and the new lease of life given to them.

At this serene moment, none knew consciously that the major circles of sub-consciousness of both Veer's and Fazal's – related to Anna – had become one with their innermost circles of sub-consciousness, and that Anna herself had accepted Fazal's major circle of sub-consciousness within her to become one with her innermost circle of sub-consciousness.

They had completely forgotten all about lunch.

But by the time the sun started to sink, a discotheque nearby opened its gates, and the peppy music blasting forth out of its open doors caused an instant and miraculous transformation in the sober minds of the four youngsters. The night life on the beach had started to come alive and each one of the foursome was suddenly filled by a never before felt exuberance and appetite for life – an appetite that had been gradually building up as they slowly recovered from their shock of having almost lost their lives in the all enveloping and uncaring sea. Once again the adrenalin started flowing through the youngsters' veins and they leaped back from their somber introspections into the many joys that life had to offer them.

All of the four friends eagerly entered the discotheque and found a table close to the dance floor. Then all of them – excluding Fazal who having been brought up to partake of life sans its extreme pleasures emphatically said no to the idea – immediately ordered an alcoholic beverage for the first time in their lives. Their second lease of life had caused Anna, Bhiksh, and Veer to decide upon enjoying this disastrous pleasure of life without even a speck of guilt tainting their decision. Veer's parents and Anna's mother had never made a huge deal about their consumption of alcohol. So it was an easy step forward for both Veer and Anna to begin their mature lives – newly regained lives after the swimming or more precisely, “drowning,” fiasco – with a glass filled with an

accepted poison. But it was really Bhiksh who went out of his extremely holy family's rigid tradition of abstinence after realizing the fickle nature of life and death. It was therefore with a great deal of discipline and thought that he ventured into the imbibing of a blacklisted liquid. But then again, this was a turning point in the life of Veer who lived life with a philosophy of "No Limits, No Regrets".

Anna sat huddled close to Bhiksh with the first drink of her life, and by the time both Anna and Bhiksh had finished their first drink, Veer was already into his third and had started eyeing the pretty girls gyrating on the dance floor.

Anna and Bhiksh loved the heady feeling which their drinks gave them, but it was really Veer who had been hooked by alcohol during his very first indulgence in it.

Veer then immediately gulped down the remnants of his drink, and without so much as a word to his friends, joined the dancers on the dance floor of the discotheque – his handsome contours and his fluid moves causing jealousy among the males and drawing accolades from the young females. After an hour or so, Veer managed to catch the eye of a very pretty girl and soon managed to strike up a conversation with her. This new couple then left the dance floor and headed for a separate table – far away from Veer's friends. As Veer started chatting up this girl whom he had managed to attract, the new lease of life that he had been blessed with that day gave rise to a deep sexual urge within him. The charming Veer easily managed to convince the girl to leave with him and they soon left the discotheque without Veer even waving goodbye to his friends.

Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness which had recently become one with the major circle of sub-consciousness related to Veer and had madly started pulsating with love for him had already started its machinations. But since she was close to Bhiksh who was also one with her – for a longer period of time than Veer – she somehow managed to barely maintain some of her composure at Veer's act of dancing with strangers and leaving with a girl who was a stranger.

But she, who had been casting furtive looks at Veer and his actions, started sulking more and more as a new emotion – which had never manifested itself within her before – took birth and rapidly grew to enormous proportions inside of her. This emotion was jealousy, and the moment Anna saw Veer leave with the girl, she realized with desperation that the person whom she had loved all along in a childish manner until that morning, had somehow during the course of the day become the love of her life. This intense feeling of love on her part for Veer had had its beginnings in the morning when she had been playfully woken up by Veer. During that gorgeous moment when she had viewed Veer's face against the backdrop of a beautiful morning, she had become heady and her heart had started throbbing abnormally for Veer. This emotion had then set itself in hard concrete after the swimming fiasco in which all four had almost drowned. This gift of life had made Anna realize that she truly loved Veer with all her mind and heart.

Such is the way of life. It tries to kill, and if unsuccessful, gives rise to insurmountable tasks which have to be tackled adroitly by its children in order for them

to attain a modicum of peace, and which if not attained by its pawns, leaves them pining for absolution.

Both Fazal and Bhiksh were angry at Veer for ditching them, and so they thought that Anna's foul mood was also because of the same reason. All three of them had their dinner. Anna only picked at her food. Both Bhiksh and Fazal thought that it was because of the drinks that she had had that Anna was not eating well and maintained their silence. They then went back to the resort to get a good night's sleep after the day's adventures and misadventures.

All three on their way to their respective suites saw Veer's door closed with a "Do Not Disturb" sign hanging over its knob.

The next five days of the vacation passed by blissfully for all except Veer and Anna.

Veer, who seemed to have lost all control over his libido, hardly spent any time with his friends and was always seen in the company of different girls – each one prettier than the last one he had become intimate with.

Bhiksh and Fazal gave no more thought to Veer's long absences as they lazily indulged in the sunny beach with its myriad attractions.

But Veer's actions strangled Anna's innermost circle of sub-consciousness to no small extent as she felt that she had the first right over Veer's love and none other could stake their claim on this matter.

Finally the seventh and last day of the four friends' vacation arrived.

Anna had deliberated over her emotions endlessly over the last five and a half days and tortured herself with her feelings which had become increasingly jagged with each passing day and pierced her insidiously with increasing fervor until she could not take it anymore. She was finally driven by her pitifully fluttering heart to a long withheld decision to come clean and lay out the bare facts of her love for Veer bluntly in front of him.

On this last day of their vacation, Anna finally gathered up her courage which had been strengthened by her pining and unexpressed love, and knocked on Veer's door early in the morning disregarding the "Do Not Disturb" sign which seemed to perpetually hang on his door knob. Veer answered the door with a bathrobe clutched around him, and still in the throes of sleep, asked Anna as to what he owed her visit to.

Anna, in chilly tones, asked him to get dressed as she wanted to take a walk with him. Veer's fuzzy mind instantly cleared as this ice cold water of a tone was thrown at him. He then immediately dressed, and without waking up the girl on his bed, sneaked out of his suite.

After Anna and Veer had walked silently for a few minutes on the beach in the gloriously warm morning sun with the waves washing their feet periodically, Anna, without wasting time on preliminaries said with a choked voice:

"Veer, I'm in love with you."

Veer, who could be a perfect ass anytime, replied:

“Of course Anna, all four of us love each other more than anything else in this world.”

The exasperated Anna stopped and then kicked him on his shin.

This action of hers spoke better than any words she could have uttered and immediately sent the shocked Veer into a terrible silence.

At this moment, Veer’s innermost circle of sub-consciousness became even more firmly one with the major circle of sub-consciousness related to Anna. But it was not ready to handle the situation at hand.

Both of them then continued to walk along the beach – the silence being broken only by the waves which seemed to rush towards the shore one after another in order to witness the outcome of this session which was fraught with emotion.

Veer finally broke the silence in a calm and logical manner:

“Look Anna, all of us know that I’m a person who will never be happy with a single woman. I’m what most people would derogatorily refer to as a womanizer. I’m afraid I can’t change who I am. And on the other hand you are a beautiful and innocent girl who happens to be my best friend. You deserve somebody better than me who can be completely faithful to you at all times. I’m afraid I can’t be that and furthermore I can’t afford to lose you and our incredible friendship by changing the great relationship that we already have. So let us enjoy what we have without complicating things. Do you understand me Anna?”

Anna had listened to this “calm, and to the point answer” of Veer with tears glistening in her huge eyes.

But she was a smart girl whose brain could understand difficult matters when they were logically presented to her even though her heart objected vehemently to the course of events based entirely on logic.

Anna’s tired brain accepted defeat. She then smiled and hugged Veer, and without releasing her emotionally charged grip on him asked:

“Best Friends Forever. Right?”

Veer, who had been expecting an emotional revolt from the whimsical Anna was greatly relieved to be let off without even a single sob escaping the hurt Anna. He then broke out into a huge smile of his own and hugged Anna back with an indescribable emotion as he answered:

“Absolutely right! Best Friends Forever.”

They then walked back hand in hand to their resort where Bhiksh and Fazal were waiting for them to have their last breakfast in the resort together.

Anna’s mind had accepted the logical statements of Veer. But love being nothing if not illogical still had sway over her heart which she desperately and successfully tried to conceal from the world – for the time being.

Neither Bhiksh nor Fazal noticed anything different about their friends, and their ignorance on this matter would last for a long time with various repercussions.

Their last day at the resort ended in a pall of gloom for the foursome.

It was the first vacation the four young people had enjoyed in their lives, and hence they were loath to let go of it. In their minds, this vacation of theirs had not lasted long enough to satiate them – each youngster grousing about his or her own personal perceptions of the injustice which had been meted out as a consequence of their vacation having ended “abruptly”.

When the sun set for the last time on their first vacation together, the unhappy foursome lethargically loaded their luggage into Veer’s car and slowly climbed into it for their drive back home.

Veer then dropped off his friends in their respective places – far from their homes, for none of them wanted their elders to see them together – and when the last friend was dropped off, he speeded away to his hometown eager to begin his preparations for college.

All throughout the previous day and during the long drive back at night, Veer had not even given Anna’s revelation of her love for him a second thought as his male mind had considered the matter closed forever when Anna had hugged him and had agreed to be “Best Friends Forever”. He had proved himself to be the world’s greatest fool, for Anna’s feelings for him still boiled recklessly within her – although she had cleverly managed to hide them from the rest of the world including him, Bhiksh, and Fazal.

This time, Anna had shared in the driving. In fact she had driven most of the night for she would be the first person to be dropped off and wanted Veer to get some sleep before he took upon the responsibility of dropping off the other two young men and driving himself home. She had during the course of one week changed from an innocent young girl into a responsible young woman and was willing to take on her share of responsibilities with grace.

The Present – The Second Set of Images

Both Dr. Maya and Inspector Vikram, having hit a dead end with the first set of images, waited for them to clear and new images to take their place on the screens – new disclosures which would hopefully provide at least a slight lead in the direction of finding Anna’s murderer or murderers. But in spite of waiting for hours, which dragged by in painful silence, the sub-consciousnesses of the three young men revealed nothing more than what they had already did – the still images of their own version of Anna’s final state of death which had already taken place.

Inspector Vikram finally came to the conclusion that there were no more images which would be forthcoming from the sub-consciousnesses of the three accused unless they were drugged further. He therefore turned towards Dr. Maya, and gesturing towards the cold container unit in the glass enclosed vacuum chamber inside which the syringes with the blue drug inside them were placed, said to her in weary tones:

“Your turn Doctor.”

Dr. Maya – who had also tired of the failed procedure – upon realizing what it was that the Inspector expected her to do, felt obliged to explain the intricacies of this fragile experiment to the Inspector:

“Inspector Vikram, I think that there are certain aspects of this procedure which you don’t understand, and one of the foremost ones may be the fact that drugging these three young men further will only cause their sub-consciousness to regress deep into a past which has been indelibly imprinted upon it. They may even begin to hallucinate about past events in such a manner that we may be grossly misled into wrongly interpreting the meanings of the images which they would then generate on their screens under the hyper-influence of the drug.”

Inspector Vikram’s keen mind, having been caught on the wrong foot, suddenly saw a chink in the armor of Dr. Maya’s argument and immediately steadied itself:

“Of course we want them to regress more into the past, for as of now their minds are only revealing the final part of this grim episode – Anna’s dead body and their deeply personal reactions on seeing her dead. The past is what we are searching for, isn’t it? So why don’t you go ahead and drug them once more so that we can finally end what has been until now a complete fiasco?”

Dr. Maya calmly replied to this sudden assumption on the part of the Inspector of knowing precisely how this procedure, in which both of them were supposed to be equal partners, worked:

“Inspector, you do not get it. This second injection of the drug causes the subject to regress by a minimum of more than six months. Even after the second drugging of the suspects, we will not get closer to the instance of the crime which has occurred a month before. And if you are thinking that we can begin this procedure from scratch or administer the second dose of the drug after five or six months so that we can get to their sub-consciousness at the moment when either one, two, or all of them, committed the crime, you are gravely mistaken. This method has not yet been refined to the point where we can use it on the subject with a gap of even a few days in between the first and second injections of the drug without completely damaging the subject’s brain forever.

Moreover, we cannot even start from scratch even after a gap of many years, for this procedure can be used only once on a subject in his or her entire lifetime. Not only does the law prohibit this procedure from being used more than once on a subject, but medically it would lead to a complete and irreversible damage of the subject's brain. We have already injected the first dose and we have only two options now – either to stop completely forever or to go ahead with full steam and complete the procedure.

“And if you are wondering now whether it would have been wiser to have tried this experiment for the first – and obviously the only – time six or seven months from the date on which the crime had been committed so that we could have used more of the drug to get closer to the truth, I would like to tell you that the more time that elapses between the crime and this procedure, the more unstable the results are prone to be as a result of the subject's sub-consciousness altering endlessly with each passing moment. And the worst part about this procedure is that the first dose is the most potent and the most likely to produce fruitful results as the subjects invariably tend to develop a tolerance for the drug just after one dose and further dosages tend to produce erratic results.”

Vikram, who had once again been caught on the wrong foot, desperately tried to reassert himself:

“If what you say is true, why don't we progressively inject into them minute amounts of the drug within the syringes instead of giving them the entire dose at once? This may help us in making their minds regress to the exact time when the crime was committed.”

Dr. Maya wearily shook her head as she painfully continued explaining to the over eager and drug happy Inspector:

“Inspector, we have already injected into your three accused the minimal amount of drug that can be used upon a person in order to get him to reveal his sub-consciousness. Furthermore, this radical drug can be injected into a person only in a certain stipulated quantity before it totally fries his brain forever. Moreover, as I have already explained before, the drug can be administered to the subject only in one sitting. There cannot be a gap of even a few days in administering the entire quantity of the drug without effectively destroying the subject's brain. Since we have already injected the subjects with the first dose, we now have only this one chance of injecting the maximum quantity of the drug into them in phases. I have already taken the liberty of dividing into a maximum of three minimum dosages which will cause your three accused to progressively regress into their past. I hope this action on my part – which by the way took a long and arduous effort – pleases you. So since we have only this one opportunity to proceed further and inject the last two dosages into the three subjects, you decide whether you want to proceed further or not. But considering the futures of the youngsters in case they happen to be not guilty – either one, two, or all – I would strongly recommend against your proceeding further with this insane procedure. I do so thinking that their minds have already clearly shown that they are innocent of the crime.

“By the way, I would also like to mention to you that we doctors and scientists are not God, and are incapable of tapping precisely into anybody else's brain to ascertain their past deeds and actions. I would like to remind you once more that this procedure is still in its infancy and the method that we are following is one of hit or miss.”

This effort on the part of Dr. Maya finally managed to bring the Inspector down to earth as he grudgingly replied:

“Well, what have we got to lose? Since you have adroitly managed to wash your hands clean of the repercussions of this procedure and placed the entire onus to continue squarely upon me, I will risk my soul and plunge into the decision wholeheartedly without worrying about the aftershocks. Let us at least take a look at their past so that we may find some sort of motivation on the part of one or more of these youngsters to have committed the crime.”

Dr. Maya, after listening to Inspector Vikram’s reply, briskly strode towards the intercom – against her better judgment – and after activating it asked the lead technician to come in and drug the subjects once more.

The lead technician then entered the White Room in order to once more perform the elaborate routine of injecting the three accused with the so called “Truth Serum”.

But before he could begin to do so, the images on the screens started to flicker one after another, and suddenly vanished leaving behind them blank screens. Dr. Maya had a sudden intuitive change of mind and abruptly ordered the technician not to inject the second dose of the drug and to leave the room immediately.

As the technician left the White Room, Inspector Vikram was left astounded, but he managed to keep his silence.

Soon, after what seemed to be an eternity, but was in fact a few anxious minutes spent by the Doctor and the Inspector, faint ghost like images started to materialize on the empty screens.

Inspector Vikram then said with a wry smile:

“Well, well, well, it seems like our puppies heard us very clearly, and finally decided to co-operate instead of being subjected to one more dose of our brain juice.”

Doctor Maya felt relaxed as she realized that they were probably on the verge of a significant breakthrough in the case without having to drug her subjects once more, and therefore cheerfully waited with the smiling Vikram for the images on the screen to become clear enough to analyze.

It wasn’t long before the images on each one of the screens became crystal clear and had the Doctor and the Inspector stupefied by what they encountered.

Bhiksh’s screen clearly showed Veer, with a terrible rage twisting his handsome features, pointing his gun at the sobbing Anna as if he was almost about to pull the trigger on her.

Meanwhile, the screen which was Veer’s in the White Room, showed a calm Bhiksh, clad in his priestly robes, about to shoot the petrified Anna with Veer’s gun.

Fazal had a different scene to show on his screen. The screen displayed a heavily inebriated Veer with a whisky bottle in one hand and his gun in the other which he was pointing at the scared Anna who was trying to hide behind the shocked Bhiksh.

The moment both Inspector Vikram and Dr. Maya had finished viewing the indigestible scenes on the screens, Maya turned towards the Inspector whose face held both confusion and a barely controlled fury and said:

“Inspector, this matter is greatly perplexing. All the three seem to hold in their sub-consciousness entirely different scenarios which completely contradict their initial conscious confessions to the crime.

“It seems that all three of our subjects are highly intelligent and complex – many times more so than the average individual. This is going to be a long night. We almost lost these new images in our hurry to administer them their second dose. I would not like to repeat that mistake ever again. Therefore, we will wait for another four hours to see if these three accused are going to purge anything more while under the influence of their first dose of the drug. If nothing new comes out even after four hours, we will move onto the second dosage. Maybe you are right. Maybe all three of them were involved in the crime and gave themselves up as the sole perpetrator of the crime in order to confuse the police in their investigations.”

Inspector Vikram, who was totally fatigued by now, tiredly nodded his head in agreement with Dr. Maya.

Dr. Maya, who was herself extremely tired, noticed Vikram’s exhaustion and said to him:

“Inspector, you are totally exhausted. Why don’t you rest for the first two hours while I stay on the watch? I will immediately call upon you if there is anything new. After that you can take over for the last two hours while I catch up on my sleep.”

Inspector Vikram gratefully agreed to Dr. Maya’s suggestions and wearily left the White Room.

After he had rested, albeit uneasily, Vikram came back after two hours knowing intuitively that nothing new had occurred.

Dr. Maya then left Vikram on the watch and went to catch up on her sleep. She arrived after two hours to find that the images on the screens had flickered out giving rise to a surreal emptiness within the White Room.

The slightly refreshed Maya then took one long look at the Inspector’s downcast face and decided to take matters into her own hand. Without asking for Inspector Vikram’s opinion, she called the lead technician in to administer the second dosage of the drug to the three accused.

The Second Dose – Hallucinations

After the blue drug was injected into the three young men's brains once more, both Vikram and Maya held their breaths and waited with rigid anticipation for the results of the second dose of the drug on the subjects' brains.

Maya and Vikram were not disappointed, for all three screens were immediately flooded with images which chaotically appeared and disappeared from the screens in lightening fashion.

Inspector Vikram's face fell as he looked at Dr. Maya and asked:

"I know the images are being recorded, but how on earth are we supposed to parse through and make sense out of this almost infinite amount of data?"

In reply, Dr. Maya smiled at Inspector Vikram, and with a deep sense of achievement explained:

"There is no necessity to worry on that account Inspector, for right now as we speak, our computers – which are the most advanced in the world by the way – are already setting these chaotic images in proper order, and are furthermore extrapolating between the data contained within these images in order to create a continuous stream of data which we can later view in the form of an elaborate and clear motion picture – a video of certain life changing moments in the subjects' past to be precise. In fact, our computers are even able to add audio to the movies which we will view - an audio stream partly composed of narration of the subjects' thoughts and partly the subjects' and their co-actors' conversations."

Inspector Vikram, whose pall of gloom seemed to have lifted, waited patiently with Dr. Maya until the screens went blank once more.

Then he turned to her and asked:

"Whose movie shall we view first? Bhiksh's?"

Dr. Maya then went towards a console, which looked as if only the brightest minds in the world could understand how to use it, and punched in some keys on the elaborate keyboard which formed the centerpiece of the intricate gadgetry which surrounded it.

Immediately, Bhiksh's screen sprang to life and the White Room became a movie theatre designed specially for two very important critics whose impressions about the protagonist would be a matter of life or death for the lead actor.

Bhiksh was calmly meditating in his home outside his temple's premises when he was abruptly awakened by the whooshing sound of water invading his temple. He immediately rushed outside his home and was greeted by the sight of foaming water trying to force itself out through the half open gates of his temple. He then ran with astounding speed towards the temple's gates, and with superhuman strength managed to forcefully shut the half open gates of his temple, which were disgorging the rabid water, and then locked them firmly into place with the lock and key which he was carrying on his person. He then jumped with the agility of a powerful athlete over the walls of his temple into the temple's premises only to find himself drowning in swirling water. He somehow managed to surface and found that he was enclosed in a cage. Bhiksh

immediately sensed that some dreadful beings were circling around him for their kill. Half drowning, he realized with growing terror that these water creatures were crocodiles and piranhas who wanted his blood and flesh. He then suddenly managed to escape from his cage and grasping the bars of his cage, ascended to the top of the cage and plummeted from it to find himself drowning once more.

As he desperately splayed out his arms and legs and started beating the water to stay afloat and alive, he immediately found himself once more gliding over the water which had almost submerged his God in the sanctum sanctorum of his temple. He then glided in and out of the water like a splendidly fashioned water creature through every twist and turn of his vast temple where various incarnations of his God in stone were on the point of being submerged with various water creatures circling around them for the kill.

As abruptly as he had found himself in the cage within his temple, he suddenly found himself in a different arena swimming forcefully through a turbulent sea towards a far off island upon which stood an ancient temple on the point of collapsing within itself. He swam hard with all the agility of a mere mortal, but felt that there was something which was burdening his back and not allowing him to get to his forlorn castle of a temple. In between his swimming strokes, he managed to look back over his shoulders and found the scared Anna straddling his back. This backwards look of his suddenly seemed to weaken his limbs and he started sinking. But the petrified screams of Anna seemed to rejuvenate him as he immediately sprang into action by once more morphing into a powerful sea creature and bobbing across the sea waves in an immaculate fashion. He soon reached the island with the crumbling temple upon it. He immediately caught hold of Anna who fell from his back, and then carrying her limpid body in his arms, started to climb the decrepit stairs of the tower which would lead them into a place of worship. This tower, which was more of a Church's bell tower than a part of a temple, suddenly vanished along with its occupants.

Bhiksh's screen suddenly went blank.

Neither the Doctor nor the Inspector had said a word while being a party to Bhiksh's immaculate hallucinations. Both of them were dumbstruck by the vivid and grotesque scenes on Bhiksh's screen. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, Dr. Maya got up from her chair from where she had been witnessing Bhiksh's hallucinations, and moved towards the grandiose console once more as she spoke to Inspector Vikram in a barely controlled voice which suggested further action in view of their present helplessness:

"Let us see what hallucinations Veer has in store for us."

Veer was in his car driving with his adrenalin flow at full go through the ethereal night landscape with a pace which mocked the world's finest rally drivers while all his friends were soundly asleep in the car. Suddenly at one point he was stopped by the police for driving recklessly. The police upon finding out that he was punch drunk refused to allow him to drive on towards his goal. Veer immediately flashed a bundle of money and once again found himself driving towards the beach resorts without awakening any of his friends from their blissful sleep. The moment he brought his car to a standstill in front of a resort which he fancied, he found himself bribing the manager of

the resort into allocating him and his young friends their rooms while bringing him a bottle of whisky of which he had been deprived of in the last few hours on account of the police seizing his car's bar stock.

Veer then found himself taking his friends on a tour of the most open minded beach existing around their place of stay. But none of his friends – especially Anna – seemed to like the nude beach which Veer seemed to find thrilling.

Suddenly Veer's gaze came to rest upon happy and excited strangers surfboarding on the beautiful waves amongst horrifying sharks which were snapping away at their surfboards and legs. Veer, who was mesmerized by this scene, asked his friends to join him for a swim amongst the beautiful people and the deadly sharks. Fazal alone hesitantly agreed. Both of them immediately discarded their clothes and jumped into the fray – Veer with intense excitement and Fazal with great trepidation.

The happy Veer, after being carried by the waves for a few ecstatic minutes, started looking around for Fazal in order to share his joy. His eyes after failing to find Fazal around him started to look beyond his immediate surroundings and searched the infinite sea. Veer's searching eyes suddenly rested on a terrified Fazal whom the waves had carried far out into the sea. Fazal, who was about to drown, was screaming for help. But before anybody could do anything, he sank like a stone. The very instant Fazal disappeared from sight, Veer suddenly realized that he himself could not swim and it dawned upon him with horror that his feet were no longer able to find their footing upon a solid land mass. He immediately started splashing about with terror as he realized that he was drowning. This immediately drew all the sharks' attention towards Veer and he suddenly found that these sharks with wide open hungry mouths displaying their razor sharp teeth were rushing towards him. But then miraculously, a great big bluish gray metallic whale appeared from below him with a swooshing soothing sound and lifted him to safety upon its back.

The whale then twisted around its metallic hump with all the elasticity of a rubber band, and turning its face towards Veer, asked him where he wanted to go. Veer looked around him and to his great surprise found that Fazal, Bhiksh, and Anna were waving to him from a beautiful island in the sea far away from the nude beach with its exciting people and the thrilling sharks.

The whale, responding to Veer's unspoken wish, flicked its tail and within a jiffy deposited him on the beach of the island where his friends were waiting for him – a conservative beach which was far removed, both literally and figuratively, from his ideal interpretation of a holiday beach.

But Veer, to his horror, suddenly found himself back on the nude beach with its wicked amusements trying to lure him back into the sea. Veer's face submerged into a whirlpool of suffering as he was not able to be with his friends, and he gazed empty upon the nude beach and its lethal distractions without even a speck of feeling – other than that of pain – showing upon his face.

Veer once again jumped back into the fray, where people were gambling with their lives by playing amongst the giant life consuming fishes, and the whole episode, of drowning amidst the hungry sharks and getting rescued by the bluish gray metal whale which deposited him time and time again on the island with his friends, kept on repeating itself.

After numerous replays of the same scene, in which Veer was left pondering as to whether he was wishing properly, his screen in the White Room went blank.

Dr. Maya and Inspector Vikram were once more left flabbergasted by this intense dramatization of Veer's sub-consciousness – a sub-consciousness whose memories had left such a deep scar on his psyche that he was conjuring up scenes designed to shock beyond reason the viewers of his terrifying hallucinations.

Dr. Maya then shook off the shock which had enveloped both her and the Inspector, and went to operate the controls of the console once more. After punching in the required keys, she came back and took her seat as she pondered aloud:

“I wonder what kind of perverse hallucinations Fazal will provide us with.”

Fazal's screen immediately sprang to life.

Fazal was walking with Veer on a small mud road in the midst of a forest whose tall trees with their giant foliage made them feel like ants. Fazal had embarked on this expedition upon Veer's exhortations, and he was now scared beyond all normal limits. Suddenly the two explorers heard a growl in the bushes. They immediately stopped with fear numbing their bodies. A leopard jumped out of the bushes. Fazal, whose fear had already reached saturation limits, immediately jumped in front of Veer and splayed his arms to protect Veer from the leopard, all the while urging Veer to run and climb a tree. Veer ran towards a tree and climbed it while Fazal kept the leopard at bay by throwing stones at it. But this small measure on his part failed as the leopard started to move closer and closer to him while displaying its magnificent carnivorous teeth. Fazal stopped trying to scare away the leopard by throwing stones at it and started running as the leopard chased him. Suddenly he came to a standstill in front of an incredibly tall coconut tree and began to climb it with the agility of a monkey. Soon the leopard vanished from sight. Fazal then yelled across to Veer that it was now safe to climb down. However, the moment Veer started to get down from his tree, gargantuan gray elephants with magnificently huge and ultra sharp tusks, and rabid apes the size of huge trucks with sharp jutting teeth adorning their thrusting jaws which drooled incessantly with mad fury, appeared out of nowhere and started to converge upon him. Veer immediately screamed for help. Fazal, who was starting to climb down from the slim and tall coconut tree, on seeing Veer's predicament, immediately climbed back to the top and started tearing the coconuts from the tree which he then hurled at the elephants and apes. This caused the animals to turn their attention towards Fazal. The elephants on reaching Fazal's coconut tree, wound their gigantic sinuous trunks around its slim body, and started to shake it as if they were going to uproot the tree by its roots. Meanwhile, the apes, with their massively muscled shoulders and long arms, started to climb the coconut tree in order to get at Fazal who was hanging on for dear life at its top without bothering about the elephants trying to shake and uproot the tree by its roots. Fazal, who was looking down, got dizzy because of the great height at which he was being swayed around mercilessly. Moreover, the apes climbing his tree were almost on the point of getting to him. Fazal, due to the shaking of the tree by the elephants and a fear which had reached its peak by the sight of saber toothed apes getting closer and closer to him, finally lost both his grip and his consciousness as he fell from a great height.

Suddenly Fazal and Veer found themselves on the bank of a raging river. The only way to get across it was an old bridge which somehow managed to run from one

bank of the river to the other while barely skimming over the enraged waves. This river was filled with anacondas and crocodiles, some of which were basking – entwined around the ropes of the bridge – partly on the bridge waiting for some poor unfortunate creature to try crossing the river so that they would be able to make a quick meal out of it. Fazal suddenly heard a revving sound and turned back to see Veer straddling a handsome motorcycle. Fazal, with great gratitude, climbed onto the powerful bike behind Veer and clutched on to him for dear life as Veer raced the motorcycle across the river on the bridge, swerving around the snapping jaws of the crocodiles and the bone shattering coils of the anacondas. While they were on this desperate mission to get to the other bank of the river alive, without becoming prey to the preying crocodiles and anacondas, Veer expertly managed to keep their balance even when the wheels of the bike spun haphazardly on the wet edges of the bridge.

The moment Fazal and Veer succeeded in their daredevil attempt to get to the other bank of the river, they found a helicopter with Bhiksh and Anna inside it waiting for them.

Fazal became wildly happy, but only for a few brief seconds, as he suddenly realized that there was only enough space in the helicopter for one more person.

Veer immediately took out a coil of rope from the helicopter and tied Fazal with one end of it while holding the other end firmly in his hands with the help of both Bhiksh and Anna. Veer then got into the helicopter and it immediately took off with Fazal dangling below it.

Fazal became exceedingly intoxicated with pleasure as he got used to his flying status. He felt light both in his head and body as the sensation of flying freely liberated him from all his past woes and worries. But soon the helicopter started flying over the same raging river which Fazal had managed to cross with the help of Veer. Somehow the helicopter seemed to trace the river as it flew in tandem with the river's snaking twists and turns. Suddenly the helicopter started to lose its altitude as it approached a huge dam across the river. While Fazal immediately lost the lightness which had pervaded his mind and body enabling him to fly freely – albeit with a conscious connection to his three free friends in the helicopter – and soon became inebriated with fear once more, the helicopter with his three friends inside it barely managed to skim the top of the dam without crashing. But the rope which had tethered Fazal to his friends got entangled among the sluices of the dam and got cleanly cut in half. Fazal soon found himself dropping into the raging river with his umbilical cord cut off. He tried to fly by rotating his arms above his head, and even succeeded over the course of a few seconds before he finally lost his flying status and once more started to drop into the raging river – with its cruel inhabitants – below him.

As Fazal fell, the screen on which he was doing his falling suddenly went blank.

The Past – The Year 2028 – Living Together

A few days after the foursome's secret vacation, Veer rang up Bhiksh. It was late at night and Bhiksh hastily picked up his cell phone and asked:

“What's up Veer? Is everything all right?”

Veer laughed in his usual boisterous manner:

“Why would anything be wrong with me? Did I wake you up? You poor baby who is always early to bed and early to rise in his duties as the good Lord's pet prophet!”

Bhiksh grimaced and replied in a grim tone:

“Do grow up Veer. It is not right to poke fun at God – anybody's God for that matter – even though I believe that there is but one God who has been partitioned into many by nefarious people with their own selfish agendas.”

Veer then laughingly continued:

“Then are not you and your father leaders of this mad mob who have, in your own words, partitioned God?”

Bhiksh knew better than to argue with this wayward friend of his. He knew for a certainty that Veer had been drinking alcohol late into the night and was now at his worst best:

“Veer, please come back to the real reason as to why you have called me. I know that you don't remember your friends as you used to after tying your knot with booze and babes.”

Veer waved away Bhiksh's accusations:

“My dear friend you are mistaken. You know...”

The exasperated and tired Bhiksh immediately interrupted:

“I know you have always meant well Veer. I'm sorry if I sounded a little harsh earlier. Please continue with whatever you wanted to communicate to me before both of us digress from the issue at hand.”

Veer, on hearing Bhiksh's words, which appeared to his intoxicated mind to be the best logic he had encountered in his life, toned down his boisterousness as he eagerly explained to Veer the real reason as to why he had called him and awakened him at this unearthly hour:

“Listen Bhiksh, I called you at this late hour to make sure that your parents would not be able to eavesdrop on our conversation. Are you alone?”

Bhiksh replied in the affirmative with increasing enthusiasm as Veer continued:

“My dear friend we are not alone in this telephonic conversation. This is a conference call and you were the last person to be contacted. Say hello everybody.”

Bhiksh's ears were then shattered by a cacophony of “hello's” being screamed out with enthusiasm by Anna and Fazal.

Bhiksh's mood, upon realizing that all four of them were together again for the first time after their secret vacation – albeit over a wireless network – settled down into a happy and relaxed state.

Veer then brought this wireless assembly of friends to order:

“All of you please settle down. No questions until I'm finished with my announcement of good news. Agreed?”

Bhiksh, Anna, and Fazal responded with a chorus of yeses and then each waited impatiently with a barely controlled silence as Veer continued:

“Listen carefully to me you lazy brats. While all three of you have been scuttling around catering to the whims and fancies of your parents, I have managed to lease a building with four apartments which is almost equidistant from all of our three colleges. You don’t have to worry about anything. Just make sure that you both, Anna and Fazal, come to settle in your apartments a while after Bhiksh and myself have moved in, lest Bhiksh’s father makes an issue out of it and takes Bhiksh away from us. I will inform both of you as to the exact date when you can join us.”

Veer then immediately fell silent after stating what had to be done in order to ensure that all four of them would continue to be close to one another. A rare and uneasy silence cloaked the four conferencing youngsters as both the wonderful and indigestible facts of their situation hit them.

Before anyone of them could react word wise, Bhiksh, Fazal, and Anna heard the voice of a female calling Veer back to bed.

Veer immediately – in a tone born out of embarrassment mixed with tension – asked:

“Well?”

By this time, Bhiksh, Fazal, and Anna had each gratefully accepted the scheme of things which had been set into motion by the ever indefatigable Veer. They then spoke out hurriedly – for they did not want to disturb Veer and his friend any more than what necessity dictated at this point of time – communicating a common message to Veer that henceforth they would execute his instructions regarding their housing perfectly in accordance with his set guidelines.

Bhiksh, Fazal, and even Anna went to sleep that night with silent songs resounding in their hearts. The next day, after Bhiksh had got up at his usual early hour, he found that the previous night’s beautiful song which had resounded in his heart had turned even lovelier and was now vibrating in his mind with a soulful intensity. Therefore, it was with a jaunt in his steps and happiness exuding forth from each pore of his body that he set about his early morning rituals. After he was done with his holy duties, he approached his father and informed him that his friend Veer had found accommodation for both of them in the city where he was to begin his college education.

Veer’s father immediately became tense as he heard the word “friend”. However the name “Veer” seemed to reassure him to a certain extent. But it was still with a mounting nervousness that he asked his son about Veer’s background and religion. After Bhiksh answered correctly and truthfully – for his father had the ability to spot even a tiny lie – his father relaxed slightly with the knowledge that Veer’s religious beliefs were closely related to those of their own and that Veer came from an illustrious family. However Bhiksh’s father was still slightly edgy about the fact that his son had taken into his own hands the matter of his accommodation in the big city without asking him first and had instead informed him only after the play had already been made. But in his heart of hearts he came to realize that his son had grown up and that thwarting him from his decision would only make him dissatisfied and rebellious. He therefore nodded his head in silent assent. But after thinking for a few minutes, he told Bhiksh that he would like to meet Veer and have a look at the accommodations himself before he gave his final permission. Bhiksh was extremely glad at this acceptance of his actions by his father and

knew that he could not push the matter of his independence any further without ruining everything that he had accomplished until now beyond repair. He therefore silently bowed down to his father's wishes.

Bhiksh's father's car which had come to drop him off at his new abode in the big city where he would be continuing his further education silently crept to a halt in front of the ostentatious building in front of which Veer had been eagerly awaiting his friend's arrival. Bhiksh's father had not yet given his son the complete freedom which befitted a young man and had hence accompanied him to his new quarters from where he would be pursuing a course in theology. The High Priest then met with Veer whom Bhiksh introduced to him with a palpitating heart.

Bhiksh's father seemed pleased with Veer, which came as a great relief to both the young men, and then took a guided tour of the building and the apartments in which his heir and Veer would be residing in. The holy man's eyes did not miss anything and he immediately asked Veer as to who would be their future neighbors in the remaining two empty apartments of the building.

Bhiksh never lied, and therefore it came as a huge slice of luck that his father asked Veer and not him, about the future occupants of the remaining two apartments.

Veer, with his bravado – which he always managed to carry around in his sleeves like a magician – answered with aplomb that he had no idea about their future neighbors, but considering that it was a good locality, he was sure that only good and decent people would come to live in the remaining two empty apartments. He further added for good measure that it was always hard to get the best accommodation in a city which venerated money, and that they – both Veer and Bhiksh – were lucky enough to get such comfortable accommodations so close to their respective colleges.

Bhiksh's father finally gave his final permission to Bhiksh to reside along with Veer in the building of their choosing and left a happy man.

The moment Bhiksh's father's car was out of sight, both the boys carried Bhiksh's luggage to the second floor apartment which was to be Bhiksh's. Veer as always wanted to be at top of everything and had already started to make himself at home in the third floor apartment. After they had finished transferring Bhiksh's luggage, Bhiksh noticed that Veer was puzzled about something, and with a knowing smile asked Veer as to what it was that was bothering him.

Veer replied in a slightly amazed tone:

"In all these years that I have known you, I have never seen you carrying so much luggage. What's the deal?"

Bhiksh suddenly burst out into gay laughter and told Veer that he had a surprise for him and the other two who were waiting for Veer's telephone call to make their arrival.

No matter how much Veer pressed him to disclose his surprise, Bhiksh did not relent and in firm tones told him that he would reveal all only after Anna and Fazal arrived.

Veer immediately took out his cell phone and made the two phone calls to Anna and Fazal. He told them that the coast was now clear for them to make their appearance on the scene and urged them to make haste.

Anna and Fazal arrived the very next day. The moment Anna set foot inside the compound of the building, she asked Bhiksh as to which apartment he was staying in, and

upon hearing that it was the second floor apartment, she immediately selected the first floor apartment for herself. Fazal was left with no choice except to move into the ground floor apartment – not that he minded it in the least.

It was late in the evening by the time Anna and Fazal got set in their apartments. Veer had made sure that the duo had hurried in setting up their things for he had reserved a table in one of the most happening restaurants in the city and he did not want to lose the table by being late.

It was nearing dusk by the time Veer, Anna, and Fazal got into Veer's car one by one and sat impatiently waiting for Bhiksh to show up. It was unusual on the part of Bhiksh to be late for anything. The honor of being the last one of the group to show up had always been reserved for Veer. After Veer had sounded his car's horn for the umpteenth time, Bhiksh made his appearance. All the three friends waiting in the car were left shocked by what they saw, for Bhiksh – for the first time in his life – had discarded his priestly robes and was handsomely attired in a corduroy suit. The setting sun turned the color of his suit into a shimmering golden brown as Bhiksh stood beaming in front of his friends. There was no doubt in anybody's minds that Bhiksh looked dangerously handsome. Anna gave a scream of delight while Veer and Fazal responded with long whistles. After a certain period during which Bhiksh was made to feel like an endangered species being viewed in a zoo, he got in to the car and in mock anger said:

“Ok, enough of the staring, people. Let us get a move on, shall we?”

Veer started the car, and as they left the building burst out into amazed laughter:

“So, Mr. Peacock, this is the surprise you were talking about. Has daddy's boy been disobeying his father's orders?”

Bhiksh did not take affront at being referred to as a peacock and thrust back at Veer in calm and even tones:

“No Veer, I for one am not made up of your kind of material to disobey my father's orders or wishes. In fact he was the one who suggested that I wear normal clothes during the duration of my college studies. He said that he did not want my theology professors to be biased by my religion, caste or attire.”

Anna then immediately cut in:

“Stop it you two. That's enough bad natured banter for one day. Three cheers for the good and handsome boy Bhiksh. Hip, hip, hurray!”

Veer and Fazal joined in this good natured cheering and this made Bhiksh feel at ease with his new attire.

The foursome reached the restaurant and made themselves comfortable at the table which Veer had reserved for them. This upscale restaurant was filled to the brim with socialites, and Veer as usual could not help but gaze at the pretty women showing off their long practiced and well refined charms.

Anna had set out from her mother's house determined not to let Veer affect her emotions anymore. But it had been a tiring journey and she had allowed her guard to slip by the time she reached the building where her friends had been waiting to help her with her luggage. The moment she had set her eyes on Veer, all the resolutions of the past vanished and she felt herself being swept away once more by the current of her love for Veer which seemed to have gained in strength since the time they had parted after their vacation at the beach resort.

Her guard by now had disintegrated into nothingness as she sat huddled against Bhiksh and took despairing looks at Veer who had already started flirting with a beautiful stranger at the bar counter.

Fazal was the silent one of the group. It was not because he felt uncomfortable in the group because of his financial and social position with respect to the others – none of the other three had ever let him feel inferior in any respect for they were too close to each other to let insignificant factors like money and social status to cloud their camaraderie – but it was because he was the silent and keen observer of the group who always managed to sense with a certain degree of precision others' feelings, and was always the first one to heal things quickly within and sometimes outside the group, when the other three, whose feet rarely touched the ground of reality, sometimes got into skirmishes with one another or others who were not a part of their quartet.

It did not require a genius or a clairvoyant with a deep sense of empathy to figure out that there was something toxic brewing in the minds of Anna, Veer, and Bhiksh. Fazal had already sensed the tension which had made its presence felt for the first time among the other three at the beginning of their vacation at the beach resort, and which was now once again coming into prominence trying to cut the bonds of their friendship into negligible pieces.

Fazal realized that he had to get at the root cause of this abomination before it destroyed the bliss of which he and his three friends had been partaking of over the course of many years.

He instinctively and immediately came to the conclusion that it was the sulking Anna whom he should get hold of in order to understand the quagmire in which his three friends seemed to have stepped into.

He waited patiently until Bhiksh – after finishing off his second alcoholic drink – got up and excused himself. Fazal was sure that Bhiksh would have a certain amount of difficulty in relieving himself in the restroom because of his new and unfamiliar attire. He was also sure that Bhiksh who had been slightly enlightened after his two drinks – and who was wearing snazzy clothes far removed from his stale priest's attire – would stay a while in the restroom preening himself in front of the lavish mirrors which had been placed there for that very purpose.

Meanwhile Veer was busy chatting away with the beautiful woman at the counter trying to seduce her into coming back to his place.

Thus Fazal got his ten minutes worth of solitary prime time with the disgruntled Anna.

Fazal, without wasting even a second, immediately cut to the chase:

“Anna, please tell me what has been bothering you since the time we landed at the beach resort. Please don't try to tell me that there is nothing bothering you. I have been with you long enough to know when you are lying.”

Fazal did not need the ten minutes that had been granted to him by Bhiksh leaving for the restroom or more methods of persuasion he had packed in his bag in order to persuade Anna into revealing the truth behind her sullen exterior, for Anna, who had downed more than her share of drinks simply replied:

“Oh! I love him so much, but there are so many complications. It is my entire fault and not his. Please do not hurt me anymore by delving into the matter further.”

Anna then lapsed back into her desperate silence.

The major circle of sub-consciousness related to Anna had just become even more strongly one with the innermost circle of sub-consciousness of Fazal.

The flabbergasted Fazal, who had been planning a long and intricate investigation into the facts behind his friends' unnatural behavior, immediately withdrew, and found himself in a frame of mind which spoke to him in no ambiguous terms about the fact that it must be Bhiksh – whom Anna had always been the closest to – who Anna was deeply in love with. But his befuddled consciousness also told him in no uncertain terms that Anna was at her worst behavior when Veer was off flirting and making love to other girls. This train of thought brought him into a station where he thought that he saw the womanizer Veer trying – almost successfully – to steal Anna away from Bhiksh. His mind concocted a terrible triangle whose jagged edges seemed to be ripping apart the innocent Anna.

Fazal could not have been further away from the truth, but he was a man of action who immediately sprung up from his seat and went towards the bar counter where Veer was at the point of closing his deal with the gorgeous woman who had almost been seduced by him to the point of sleeping with him.

Fazal, as was his norm, wasted no time and bluntly badgered Veer with a series of deeply personal questions right in front of the stranger whom Veer had decided to bed:

“Do you think that Anna and Bhiksh are in love? Are you trying to steal Anna away from Bhiksh?”

Veer had drunk a lot, and for the first time in his life bellowed at his friend:

“You are a perverse maniac. I should not have to listen to these absurd questions and accusations. But considering that you are my best chum, I will answer you.”

The intensely agitated Veer then paused to catch a breath and then continued:

“Bhiksh may be in love with Anna for all I care. But mark this that Anna is not in love with him. Furthermore, you blasted snooping idiot, you should have understood by now that I do not steal anybody away from someone else, least of all from and among my best and only friends.”

Veer, who had cleansed himself with this heart splintering speech of his, then turned towards the bar stool upon which the girl with whom he had almost succeeded into getting in bed with had been sitting, only to find it empty.

Veer was not a person who dwelled in the past, and therefore immediately forgetting about what would have been a wild night, put his arm across Fazal's shoulder and walked back with him towards the table which he had painfully reserved for four after shelling out a huge sum of money from his father's bank account.

This physically friendly gesture on the part of Veer immediately soothed Fazal's nerves which had been shattered by Veer's outburst.

Furthermore, the drone of voices and the music which invaded the atmosphere, had made sure that the loud dialogue between Veer and Fazal had remained unheard by both Anna – who had been sitting at the table consuming with wild abandon cocktail after cocktail – and Bhiksh who had returned to the table after preening himself in the restroom of which he had been a magnanimous guest.

Far apart from the emotions raging within and between his three friends had stood the uneasy Bhiksh clad in his immaculate attire which seemed to make him irresistible – even to himself. He had all along been wondering how this progression of his would affect Anna who he presumed was madly in love with him. His intoxicated mind then gave rise to myriad disturbing thoughts:

‘Would Anna now think that he had almost given up his priestly ways and was ready to begin a different and more advanced relationship with her? Would she latch on to this opportunity to finally reveal her love for him? If she did so, how would he be able to tell her that he only looked upon her as a friend and that no other relationship would be possible between them...’

These alcohol and self admiration fueled thoughts tortured Bhiksh until with a great deal of mental strength he managed to subdue them and reminded himself that he had promised himself that he would not even stray close to these dangerous thoughts of his. He then assiduously closed his mind to them and came back to the partying present.

However thoughts are vicious things which having taken root once are impossible to root out until they have had their final say in the larger scheme of life.

It was past midnight when all four went back together to their new abodes with varying emotions catapulting within them – not realizing that destiny was smiling wickedly at the course her four pawns were taking.

First Year of College

The first year of college seemed to whiz by for the four young students as the freshness of a new environment filled each one of them with an intensity unsurpassed before in their young lives.

The freedom of being on their own in a metropolis which was filled with innumerable avenues and options to the avid seeker of excitement beckoned each one of them in different ways.

Bhiksh immersed himself in his studies with a passion which surprised every one of his professors. He spent all of his leisure time visiting the huge libraries which dotted the landscape of the metropolis and combing through their archives gobbled up anything which was even faintly related to his study of theology.

Veer became notorious among the party circuits of the metropolis as a result of his indefatigable enthusiasm for wining and womanizing. It was only his high level of intelligence quotient which enabled him to get through his days at college, for he always reserved the nights for his merry making rounds of the socialite circuits in which he had become quite infamous.

Fazal had realized that he could not always accompany Veer on his extravagant night escapades lest he lost his latest benefactor, Veer's father, as a result of doing poorly in college. Fazal had kept on burning his hands for a very long time by succumbing to Veer's everyday whims and fancies while in school as a result of which his grades had suffered and had thus lost his Minister's confidence. Therefore, Fazal resisted Veer's invitations to join him on his merry go rounds at night most of the times. It was only when Veer became adamant, and he felt guilty that he was not keeping up his end of the bargain by giving his benefactor the company he desired, that he joined his best pal at night. Fortunately for Fazal, despite his chum's insistence, he managed to stay clear of booze and babes which enabled him to wake up the next morning with a clear head for the day's classes, while his friend slept away the morning sessions of college.

Meanwhile, Anna had started to enjoy her acting lessons as the art of acting came naturally to her. This, combined with her exquisite beauty, made her very popular in her college and she had already started getting offers to act in various commercials. She even became more sociable and started making new friends outside her circle of four who adored her with an intensity which rivaled that of her three best pals.

This adulation which was presented to Anna on a golden platter did not come without poisonous thorns attached to it. The producers who approached her for commercials came carrying with them their casting couches. Her male friends used the liberty of their acting lessons to grope her while some of the other girls in the course who envied her spread vicious rumors about her which made her an easy prey to beastly libidinous males.

Thus even though time passed quickly for Anna, it was not without its everyday perils and heartaches which went unnoticed by her three best friends who seemed to be immersed in their own worlds even when all the four spent time together. Anna had never felt lonelier in her life.

Accentuating and far exceeding all these travails of Anna's was the womanizing habit of Veer's which deeply pierced her heart and mind and damaged them beyond salvation.

Even Bhiksh's major circle of sub-consciousness which was one with her innermost circle of sub-consciousness failed miserably to calm her – for it was a matter of the heart and not of the mind.

Finally their first year in college came to an end and each one of them started working on the projects which had been assigned to them by their teachers – projects which they had to complete during their vacation. None of them went back home as they were busy with their projects and were eagerly awaiting their first year examination results.

The First Passing Parade

Veer's car, laden with party prepping alcohol, howled around the corner of the familiar block and came to a grinding halt in front of the four storied building which had become home to four friends.

Veer grinded the immaculate machine's gears while pounding upon both the accelerator and the brake one after another in quick succession which resulted in a bucking bronco of a car.

The teetotaler Fazal, who was sitting beside him – his hands holding on for dear life bottles of exquisite liquor – started laughing hysterically – both with fear and ecstasy.

The results of their first year examinations were out. All four of them had passed – even the notorious Veer who had spent more time chasing girls and partying instead of concentrating on his studies. Bhiksh, as always, had topped while Anna and Fazal had passed out respectably.

It was time to celebrate.

The ruckus created by Veer's recklessness and Fazal's rabid howling brought both Bhiksh and Anna to their balconies. Upon seeing and hearing this uninhibited freedom of expression on the part of their friends, they too chipped in by laughing wildly and gesticulating beyond restraint while trying to shout something back at their friends below.

But it was everyone's moment to cherish on their own, and nobody cared about the exact words which were being thrown about with wild abandon.

Bhiksh and Anna ran down with their own paraphernalia of chocolate and ice-cream and jumped into the car while screaming away their world worn cares.

All of the four settled down in their own way into comfort and blazed away in the powerful car while swinging away at the bottles they managed to lay their hands upon in the chaos caused by themselves – except Fazal who only partook of the ice-cream and chocolates.

Vanilla ice-cream mixed with vodka, and dark chocolate with red rum added its own ambience to the vanilla sky which looked down upon four very happy youngsters who had embarked upon the journey of life together.

All the four had agreed to celebrate the day by visiting a discotheque far outside the city limits. But their festivities had begun even before they had traveled more than a block from their building. Veer, as always, had started to swig away at his bottle mercilessly as the frightened Fazal, who was sitting beside him, wished fervently that he had learnt to drive. But he had not, and all he could do was watch Veer drink and drive his four wheel drive with wild abandon. Meanwhile Bhiksh and Anna who were sitting at the back had opened the bottles which contained their own brand of poison and were heartily consuming the elixirs.

By the time the powerful car, after navigating recklessly through the city traffic, had reached the outskirts of the city, Anna, who had always managed to control her

intake of alcohol, had for the first time in her life become extremely drunk. Everybody assumed that it was because of her exuberance which had reached its peak that day. None of the three boys worried about it for Anna was known to hold her liquor well. But as the car raced on maddeningly, and the music and the laughter of the three boys reached a crescendo, the three young men failed to notice that Anna had withdrawn in to a shell and that her fair face was starting to turn a terrible red.

It has always been fate's game to make sure that everything is balanced with its opposite.

It was especially true for the four young friends whose miseries doubled whenever they were doubly happy.

That night was to be no exception to destiny's rule.

Suddenly, without warning, Anna turned sideways and started to slap Bhiksh with a terrible fury that left him flabbergasted. All the while during this inexplicable act of insane aggression, Anna kept on screaming:

“You were not there for me. You were not there when that bastard producer tried to rape me. You were not there when he tried to take advantage of me knowing that I was single and had nobody to fight for me. You are a despicable pig who has left me alone in this terrible world. You were not there when I needed you the most.”

It is sometimes felt by many that fate's arrows have pierced them by mistake – mortally wounding them – when they had been for all practical purposes directed at someone else.

Bhiksh had a certain knowledge about this terrible fact of fate's sometimes misdirected arrows, and therefore all along this horrifying episode which lasted for no more than a minute, he felt the same as he endured Anna's stinging blows – both verbal and physical – without reacting.

Meanwhile, during this brief yet intense outburst, Bhiksh's sub-consciousness – in direct contrast to his conscious calm which accepted Anna's verbal and physical blows with a perfect philosophy about fate and its misdirected arrows – tried to rationalize Anna's fury and left him with a dreary sub-conscious feeling that he had been guilty of a crime which could not be vindicated by any court – either earthly or heavenly. When the slapping came to an abrupt halt, Bhiksh's sub-conscious thoughts seized by the neck this opportunity which provided him with a brief respite, and suddenly pervaded into his consciousness as he thought to himself that he had been found guilty of the biggest and vilest crime that could ever be committed – that of not loving back a person in the same way that the person loved him.

Anna's tomado which had devastated the happy go lucky scene vanished as abruptly as it had materialized and she was left sobbing her guts out.

Veer, upon hearing the commotion at the back, had immediately swerved out from the road and ground his vehicle to an abrupt halt. He then swiveled his body and

saw the sobbing Anna and a lost Bhiksh with tears in his eyes whose face had turned a deep red due to the slaps he had received.

Veer had heard and seen all that he could digest. He knew that he himself was the guilty party and his guts churned madly at the fact that the unknowing and innocent Bhiksh had suffered in his stead. His petrified mind and body were suddenly galvanized into action by the tragedy which had unfolded behind him, and therefore without wasting even a second, he immediately turned his car around and drove back home at a speed which shattered all his previous records – all the while with the word “rape” resounding in his ears.

By the time all four reached home, Veer was into his second bottle of scotch, and silence and emptiness had started to impose themselves upon the four friends. Therefore, when Veer finally broke the silence by asking them to come to his apartment, it sounded like more of an order than a request. Bhiksh, Anna, and Fazal silently accepted Veer’s command and climbed into the elevator as Veer punched the number three on the inside panel of the elevator.

All three of Veer’s friends tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible – given the present situation – upon the plush furniture which seemed to explode within their friend’s apartment. Veer himself chose not to recline on any one of his luxurious chairs and kept on wandering aimlessly around his apartment as he polished off his second bottle of whisky. The very second after he gulped down the last drop in his bottle, Veer plunked down upon the centerpiece of his magnificent furniture with downcast eyes which enveloped not his friends but his inner mind which was in deep turmoil. He knew that Anna had turned her rage, which was rightfully his to endure, upon poor Bhiksh who was almost a saint. He waited until the excess of his drinking hit the spot and then got up from his recliner with a strange look in his eyes. Veer then rushed from the hall and entered his bedroom. His three silent friends heard him opening his vault and ransacking through it – all the while muttering muted expletives – until he finally seemed to have found what he was searching for.

Veer then staggered out of his bedroom into the middle of the hall where his three friends were anxiously waiting for him and brandished the automatic hand-gun which he held high above his head.

His three friends were left shocked in a no-man’s land as Veer screamed out: “If anybody dares to mess with Anna they will have to deal with me and my bullet spitting friend,” and then fell flat upon his face as he passed out.

The three still conscious and trembling friends silently helped each other in lifting Veer and managed to deposit him and his handgun on his luxurious bed.

All three of them then left without saying a word to one another.

The meditative Bhiksh who wanted calm at all costs and the scared Fazal who sought a normal life against all odds shelved the night’s occurrences in the deepest and darkest dungeons of their minds resolving to never ever bring up the events of that dark night into daylight again.

But Anna was still left with a terribly pierced and torn apart heart.

Unraveling of the Circles

After this mind shattering incident, Veer became a changed person. He drastically cut down on his hedonistic lifestyle and started spending more and more time with his friends, especially Anna. This change in Veer delighted all but Anna, who still did not get the kind of love she expected from Veer. Still, Anna was pleased to a certain degree that Veer was now showing at least a modicum of devotion towards her which he had exhibited during their years in school, but which had vanished abruptly without even a trace once he had started living his libidinous lifestyle – starting from the day when they had almost drowned in the sea during their secret vacation, and after which Veer had started drowning himself in alcohol and sex with beautiful strangers. In her heart of hearts, Anna started to wish that this would be the beginning of the kind of relationship she had always imagined with Veer.

As the days passed by with an increasing show of affection on the part of Veer towards Anna without the concrete results which Anna deliriously hoped for, Anna started getting more and more desperate by the day. She wanted to accomplish the impossible within the span of a few days. This incessant trauma of hers led her into getting attached to Bhiksh as if by an umbilical cord – for it was only in Bhiksh that the terribly troubled Anna managed to find some degree of solace in. She was always badly depressed when she was not with Bhiksh and this gave way to dangerous thoughts in the minds of all three young men who were closest to her.

Mortals are either uplifted or destroyed by their thoughts. Usually the latter scenario holds true when the thoughts of mortals delve into the realms of love and sex. It was to be no different in the case of the four young friends.

Veer, who had upped his crescendo of devotion towards Anna in a last ditch effort to assuage her feelings to some extent, started to notice with growing uneasiness as to how – despite all his efforts – Anna seemed to be happy only when in the company of Bhiksh. A dangerous thought then crept into his mind which told him that Bhiksh had always been in love with Anna, and that Anna knowing fully well Bhiksh's feelings towards her, was playing Bhiksh by drawing even closer to him than she had been at any time in the past in order to make Veer jealous and get him to love her in the way she wanted. But Veer realized that there was nothing he could do about it – for he knew with certainty that he could never bring himself to love Anna in a way that exceeded the bounds of a platonic friendship. He was thus left with a sinking feeling which assumed that one of his best friends – Anna – was using another – Bhiksh – to get closer to him in a way that he abhorred, and this thought left him devastated.

Meanwhile, another kind of a dangerous thought silently made its home in Bhiksh's mind and led him into thinking that Veer, the womanizer, had fallen in love with Anna, and was trying to win her love by his show of unadulterated and intense devotion, when all the while Anna was madly in love with him, Bhiksh. This creepy thought further instigated him into thinking that Veer had by now realized that Anna was in love with him and that it was driving Veer crazy with jealousy to see Anna happy in

his company. He thus came to a self-judged conclusion as to why Veer had been so troubled lately.

All during this while, the dangerous thought that had captured Fazal's mind made him remember how Veer had with a great degree of certainty told him that Anna was not in love with Bhiksh. This gave rise to morbid thoughts within his mind which suggested with a terrible clarity that Anna had been in love with Veer before, and that due to his womanizing and drinking habits, had ditched him in favor of Bhiksh who had all along been extremely devoted to her. Fazal thought with horror that a tug of war over Anna had sprung up between Bhiksh and Veer which Bhiksh was on the verge of winning. This thought in Fazal's mind further extrapolated itself and led him into believing that Veer in a fit of jealousy had started to mend his ways and was now showering Anna with the kind of affection she had always wanted from him, but was to all appearances too late in his endeavor.

Fate had rolled its dice and had come up with an evil number which it had been rooting for.

The major circles of sub-consciousness of the three young men which were related to one another had finally started to unravel as each major circle related to the others found itself entombed to a large degree within a personality far removed from that of its origin. The major circles of sub-consciousness in each one of the young men which had their origin in the other two youngsters started to separate from their host's innermost circle of sub-consciousness and vanish while leaving their dark shadows behind them in their host's innermost circle of sub-consciousness.

Finally a day came when Anna was found dead with a bullet hole in her head.

The Present – Final Analysis

Fazal's screen had just gone blank.

Inspector Vikram gave a wry smile as he broke the silence which had stricken the room as a result of the grotesque movies which had risen like deformed Phoenixes out of the scarred sub-consciousnesses of the three accused:

“Well, Fazal has certainly proved that he is not second to his friends when it comes to hallucinating.”

He then turned towards Dr. Maya and asked with a sterile emotion enveloping his professional words:

“So tell me Doctor, what do you make of all these hallucinations on the part of our young friends?”

Dr. Maya, after a studied silence which had managed to gauge her partner's professionalism, started on her own analysis of the hallucinations of her three subjects in a cool and efficient manner which would brook no interruptions:

“Well, two things are immediately clear. One is that these three young men have led an incredible life filled with intense emotions. The other is that all three of them are deathly afraid of water. But this second factor is merely symptomatic of their even deeper fears and insecurities which seemed to have ruled their lives.

“In Bhiksh's case, it is immediately apparent that he is a deeply spiritual person caught in a deep conflict with his religion and religious duties which seemed to have curtailed his freedom. He feels that he has locked himself away in his suffocating prison of a temple, unable to either perform his religious duties diligently or fulfill his commitments in the outside world.

“He seems to have cared deeply for Anna and may even have been in love with her. He saw her as an insecure person who was not able to make her own way in the world and who was on the verge of sinking into oblivion. He was trying his best to carry her along with her big bag of burdens. He probably wanted to relieve her of her insecurity by getting even closer to her, but failed as a result of his religious commitments.”

Dr. Maya then stopped to take a breath when Inspector Vikram suddenly interrupted her and added to her analysis his own thoughts:

“You are right, Dr. Maya. The homework I had done on Bhiksh is now clear. I had always felt that Bhiksh was a reluctant future religious leader and that he was predestined to rebel – what with his uptight religious upbringing coupled inversely with his curious and deeply analyzing mind. No wonder he was frustrated sometimes and had an occasional alcohol fuelled party with his friends in order to escape from the reality of his paradoxical life.”

Dr. Maya, with a nod of her head acknowledged Vikram's statements without any bitterness as to him having interrupted her, and then continued:

“Now coming to Veer's case, he seems to be an insecure and hedonistic person caught in the coils of drinking and womanizing. It looks like he has always tried to buy his way through life with his inexhaustible bank account. Furthermore, it looks like he relied heavily upon his friends, especially Fazal, to stay rooted in reality during the times

when his excesses got the better of him. It also looks like Fazal was extremely devoted to him.

“It is clear that he paradoxically used money as his life jacket whenever he was caught in the whirlpool of hedonistic life into which he had the habit of jumping – obsessively. It is also extremely clear that he was caught in a dilemma as to whether he should stay immersed in his extravagantly reckless lifestyle or to give it up and always stay close to his three friends who made him realize that life had much better things to offer other than a fanatic lifestyle.

“I somehow get the feeling that lately, he had grown to despise his lifestyle and wanted to spend more quality time with his friends, but that his addiction to his eccentricities always got the better of him.”

Inspector Vikram added once more to this analysis by Dr. Maya:

“You are absolutely right as to Veer’s horrifying lifestyle Doctor. Please continue.”

Dr. Maya then continued from where she had left off:

“Meanwhile, it looks like Fazal was caught in the coils of servitude towards Veer and was always trying his best to lift his friend from the quagmires that Veer was in the habit of getting into at the cost of his own life. It is clear that Veer at some point of time has helped Fazal out of a messy situation which would have left Fazal high and dry without the company of his friends.

“But it seems to me that Fazal had lately become a sort of an outsider among the four friends as a result of the threesome of Anna, Veer, and Bhiksh getting involved in something deep and personal between them.

“It looks like Fazal was left hanging by his friends lately even though he desperately tried his best to be an integral part of the foursome.”

Dr. Maya then took a deep breath at the end of her long analysis of the hallucinations of the three young men and with a feeling of having done her job immaculately calmly asked the Inspector:

“So what do you think?”

Inspector Vikram sighed as he replied:

“You are probably right about Fazal and his relationships with his friends. But I shall first touch upon Bhiksh.

“Bhiksh could have murdered Anna in order to hide a relationship which had far exceeded that of being just friends because he did not want to commit to that sort of a relationship – what with him being the heir to a holy seat far removed from Anna’s faith. On the other hand, Anna was probably involved with someone else, and Bhiksh getting to know that, probably killed her out of jealousy.

“In Veer’s case, Veer, being a womanizer and a drunkard, had probably tried to buy Anna’s affections, but on being rejected probably killed her in a fit of drunken rage.

“Meanwhile, Fazal could have murdered Anna on the behest of Veer, or he could have killed her thinking that she was the cause of his alienation from his three friends.

“Or maybe, Anna was playing both Bhiksh and Veer, and they having found out about Anna’s double game, murdered her jointly or got Fazal to do it for them.”

Inspector Vikram then said in a world worn tone:

“All this is purely immediate conjecture on our parts. We can keep on imagining various scenarios in which one, two, or all three could be guilty. But there is no hard

evidence to go on further. All the data which we have until now, including the confessions of the three accused, contradict one another.

“We will have to wait for the requisite amount of time to see if our friends have anything more to add to these hallucinations of theirs, and then – if nothing new of note emerges – go in for administering them the third and last dose of the drug.”

Inspector Vikram and Dr. Maya then waited as fatigue and insecurities about their skills started to weave their inescapable webs around them.

When nothing new emerged after the stipulated waiting period, Dr. Maya and Inspector Vikram jerked themselves out of their self created numbness and had the third dose of the drug injected into the three young men. This was a final thrust at the sub-consciousnesses of the three accused by Dr. Maya and her accomplice Inspector Vikram.

They then waited with bated breaths for the outcome of their final trial.

After a few minutes – which felt like an eternity – had elapsed, Dr. Maya, with her tone betraying the nervousness which she was feeling, confessed to Inspector Vikram:

“This is the first time in the short history of this procedure that subjects have been administered a third dose of the drug. Theoretically, these three doses amounting to the maximum quantity of the drug that can be administered safely to an individual in his or her lifetime, should in no way cause permanent damage to the brain, but we have no way of knowing that for sure. Frankly speaking, we simply do not know how the subjects will react to this final dosage.”

As the screens remained blank, Inspector Vikram broke out into an exasperated laugh:

“At least we will be making history if not accomplishing anything else of note. By the way, please do not forget that these three young men have brought this upon themselves by each confessing to the crime and not revealing anything that could have helped solve this case without the need for this macabre procedure.”

The very second Inspector Vikram finished speaking, the White Room was suddenly bathed in a rainbow of colors.

The three massive screens mounted behind each one of the three accused suddenly displayed in all brilliance three childishly colorful drawings – drawn using all the colorful crayons that a child could manage to get its hands upon.

These three portraits by juvenile artists had a common thread running through them. This thread was one of friendship between four children who appeared in all of the drawings – playing together with blissful abandon upon green mountains while a brilliant blue sky studded with pristine white clouds looked down upon a vibrantly blue river snaking its way through the valley in between the mountains. All the drawings had as their backdrop a huge cherry red building.

Inspector Vikram, who had done his homework, turned his dazzled eyes upon the teary eyed Maya, and cut her off even before she had opened her mouth:

“No, these are not hallucinations. Our friends seem to have regressed into their beautiful childhood. There is nothing in it for us. We will wait for the stipulated amount

of time during which the effects of the drug will wear off, and if nothing new has emerged by then, close their skulls, and this case along with it.”

Both Inspector Vikram and Dr. Maya then fell in to deep silences, each one pondering – with a feeling of intense guilt – about their part in the vicious game of drugs and sub-consciousnesses which had been played out almost to its finish within the White Room. Both felt terribly defeated.

Time went by without any further disclosures by the sub-consciousnesses of the three young men and Inspector Vikram finally left the White Room allowing Dr. Maya and her assistants to detach the intricate gadgetry from the brains of the three free young men and close their skulls while he himself closed the case – albeit with a deep sense of doom at not being able to solve the case.

Dr. Maya was a true professional. In the dreary days that followed her failure, she helped the three subjects to heal physiologically, and then tried her best to restore them to a sound psychological state – albeit without much success. All along the recuperation period of the three young men, their parents were at the neck of Dr. Maya asking her repeatedly – with subtly implied threats – to discharge their sons immediately. Dr. Maya – having exhausted beyond normal limits her endurance – finally gave in to the parents’ demands, and against her better judgment, prematurely discharged her patients. She then quietly closed their files and submitted her resignation.

Freedom and Pain

After the three young men were set free – each still carrying with him his own brand of psychological scars from the trauma of Anna’s death and the procedure of the White Room – each followed his own path towards redemption.

Bhiksh dropped his studies and went back home.

Veer, after transferring a huge amount of money into Fazal’s bank account – in order to enable him to complete his education – left for an unknown location.

Fazal moved out of his luxurious apartment, which reeked of memories, and settled down in the hostel of his college where he immersed himself in his studies.

Meanwhile, Inspector Vikram was suspended indefinitely from his job as he had made a mess out of the case by going to extreme lengths – at the end of which he had failed to come up with a satisfactory result.

Vikram had to suffer the double ignominy of not being able to solve the case and of being suspended – all because he had been reckless in using his powers upon the mighty sons of highly influential men.

The embittered Vikram decided with steely resolution that he would solve this case on his own without the help of his department. The bitterness in his mouth was not only because of the fact that he had been suspended in shame, but also because he felt a certain mind niggling guilt which told him that he had subjected at least one innocent person to the tortures of the procedure in the White Room. He realized with a deep sinking feeling that he had not used this latest technology with a human heart.

Vikram wanted to make amends, and therefore set upon trying to find the real killer by keeping tabs on each one of the three young men and their families as they all – including Vikram – set forth upon their different roads towards salvation.

Vikram saw Bhiksh – who upon returning home – starting to neglect even the basic duties which his future holy seat and his temple desired from him. He saw Bhiksh degenerating into a heretic within his own temple.

Bhiksh’s father had suddenly grayed when Bhiksh had been arrested, and he having lost his disciplined and meditative heir who had had not even a single spot blemishing his virtue before Anna’s death, had withdrawn into the shell of his temple in disgrace. He had just wanted his son back home, and after that had been achieved, he left his son to decay within the confines of his home while he himself shunned all his priests and devotees and started upon various appeasements to their Supreme Deity in order to rid Bhiksh and himself of all real and imagined sins. All the while during the religious rites, the High Priest had desperately kept hoping that his religious rituals would vindicate both him and his son in the eyes of the world.

Vikram’s eyes followed the increasingly irresponsible Veer – who had gone back to his eccentric lifestyle with a vengeance – to many wild vacation places where Veer immersed himself in the nadir of hedonism.

When Veer had been taken into custody, his father – who implicitly trusted his son – had not been in the least perturbed knowing that justice would soon set his son free. But he had been shocked to the core of his heart when he had come to know that his son

was an alcoholic who had purchased a gun without his knowledge. But he was a fair person who blamed himself equally for letting Veer have his own idiosyncratic ways since his childhood. He had therefore lobbied hard and long against his son's imprisonment and the analysis of his sub-consciousness within the White Room. Once Veer had been released, he had treated him as a man who would be able to fight his own demons and come clean. He knew that time was a great healer and had allowed Veer complete freedom in the path that he took towards ultimate redemption. But lately, Veer's father – who had his own spies keeping an eye upon his son and his activities – had become increasingly despondent about his son's chances of recuperating from his trauma on his own.

Vikram regularly followed up on Fazal's academics and found him lagging behind in a fashion which exposed deliberate malfunction on the part of Fazal rather than a dearth of intelligence.

Fazal's parents who had tasted the bitter experience of hobnobbing with the rich and the famous had come to the conclusion that their son had been innocently caught in the coils of his wealthy and powerful friends' escapades. But they could not complain as a result of having accepted the gifts of the people of a higher strata of society which had enabled their son to continue his education. They were therefore extremely happy when Fazal was acquitted and he went back to his studies once more. They then relaxed with a prayer hoping that their son would once more rise up to his abilities.

No questions had been asked of their sons by their parents. No explanations had been given by the three young men who had suddenly matured through the disaster. No mutual accusations had flowed between the parents of the accused. All everybody wanted was a modicum of peace and respectability after the fiasco which had destroyed their lives eventually came to an end absolving all the three youngsters of a grievous crime.

The three young men's innermost circles of sub-consciousness had been left tainted by dark and ominous shadows cast by their previously bright major circles of sub-consciousness related to the others and Anna.

Vikram, who was trying to redeem himself in his own eyes, and whose recent adverse circumstances had taught him the virtue of patience, watched and waited until the first anniversary of Anna's death arrived with a pall of gloom which had not yet been lifted from the minds of the four live men whose lives had descended into hell – a living hell from which Vikram was trying to extricate the innocent.

On this tragic anniversary – at an early hour of four in the morning – Vikram reached the pristine graveyard in which Anna had been laid to rest. He then silently posted himself in a dark corner of the graveyard and waited for the dawn. The dawn of this tragic anniversary soon came and revealed magnificent coniferous trees dotting the lush green landscape of the cemetery along with immaculately ordered white crosses which seemed to jut out from the beyond.

Vikram did not have to wait for long, for just after dawn had made its presence felt, Bhiksh, attired completely in white, entered the final resting place of many and solemnly approached Anna's grave holding a bunch of exquisite white flowers in his hand. He then knelt at her tombstone and tearfully placed his flowers by it. He then stood

up with great difficulty – for his knees had started trembling – and silently stood by Anna’s grave contemplating with great grief and gnawing regret at what could have been.

Bhiksh did not seem to mind, or even acknowledge, Vikram’s presence as Vikram came and stood by him with a bowed head paying his respects to the young soul which had departed in suffering.

Somehow, it came to be understood by Bhiksh – who had a sort of a sixth sense which had not yet been completely dulled by his recent trauma – that he was to wait with Vikram until the rest of his triad made their appearance. Bhiksh silently acceded to this unspoken requirement.

Fazal came next, and after paying his respects to Anna’s memory, morosely stood beside Bhiksh and Vikram – he too understanding that his presence was needed further.

Not a single word was exchanged between the three men. Silence reigned supreme. It seemed as if even the early morning birds had stopped chirruping in reverence to the departed soul and the sorrow of her friends.

Veer was the last to arrive. His handsome face was flushed a deep red with alcohol in stark contrast to the black suit he was wearing and was in direct correlation to the bunch of red roses which hung limply in his hand. As he staggered towards Anna’s tombstone, his alcoholic legs gave way and he fell flat on his face as his red roses splattered across Anna’s grave.

Revelations

During his fourth cup of black coffee, Veer came back to his senses and found himself sitting in a coffee house with his two friends and Vikram who were looking at him with concern. He immediately discerned the emotions on their haggard faces and burst out into a raucous laugh while throwing away the remnants of the coffee in his cup.

He then delved inside his immaculate black suit and unearthed a slim and polished vessel whose contents he poured in to his empty coffee cup. After taking a huge gulp of the new contents of the coffee cup, his features restored themselves into a semblance of normality as he looked towards Vikram and asked with sarcasm tainting his alcohol enlightened tone of voice:

“To what do we owe this dubious pleasure of your presence Inspector?”

Vikram, not responding to Veer’s barb, replied in even tones:

“If my divulging the fact helps you in any way, I’m no longer an Inspector.”

Veer immediately rose from his seat and said bitterly:

“Then if you are not here to destroy the sanctity of our dreams and hopes once more, why the hell are we sitting here together? Let us all be back on our separate ways.”

Vikram got up, and replied in a tone of voice which seemed to be a mix of misery and anger:

“Sit down Veer.”

Veer, who was caught unaware by Vikram’s emotions, hesitated for only a few seconds before he relented to Vikram’s command.

Vikram went on with the same tone which had managed to subjugate Veer:

“It is high time that all four of us get rid of the crap engulfing us and come clean. My life, like all three of yours, has ground to a disastrous halt in the past one year owing to the mystery surrounding Anna’s death.”

The moment Veer opened his mouth to express dissent, Vikram cut him off before he could speak and continued:

“Don’t try and lie to me that your lives have been even remotely comfortable after the disaster, for I have been watching each one of you slipping into a perpetually deepening nadir day after day – right from the day you were pronounced innocent.”

Veer was not to be silenced this time as he burst out:

“So...you have been spying on us. You are still the same jerk even without your title of Inspector.”

Vikram was not to be put off as he regained his composure and calmly replied to this accusation of Veer’s:

“Yes. I have been spying on all of you three. But if it still means anything, I have been doing so not only to solve the case, but also to make sure that the innocent ones amongst the three of you – if there are any – will be able to lead normal and productive lives once the mystery behind Anna’s death is cleared for good without even a speck of doubt tainting the final result. So I think that more than enough harm has already been done and it is high time that all three of you came clean instead of looking like psychopathic killers coming back to pay their respects to their murder victim.”

Bhiksh, who from the moment he had laid his eyes on Inspector Vikram standing forlornly beside Anna's grave, had started contemplating about the events of the past year during which one of his closest friends had died a horribly unnatural death, and the remaining two, along with him, had already set one foot into their collective graves, responded responsibly to Vikram's initiative.

Bhiksh had had enough as he spoke forth:

"I did not kill Anna."

Vikram and Bhiksh's two buddies were startled out of their wits, but somehow with a great deal of self-control managed to wait with a heightened silence as Bhiksh calmly continued with barely a pause between his radical new stand and his reason behind it:

"How can any man think of killing a woman who loves him with all her heart? I went into Anna's apartment at a late hour the night she was killed as I had been extremely busy the whole day and had not been able to spend time with her – a duty of mine which was essential to Anna's day to day well being. I found her dead with Veer's hand gun lying beside her body. It was immediately apparent to me that Veer, after getting sloshed, had finally killed Anna in a fit of jealousy which had its deep roots in the fact that Anna had always loved me in a sexual way and not him, Veer – a Veer who after womanizing almost the entire population of beautiful females who had crossed his path had failed to get his sleazy claws upon his most cherished prize, Anna."

Bhiksh paused after his scathing attack on one of his closest friend's morality – waiting for a bitter backlash which to his shocked surprise did not come. Instead he was faced by a wall of silence which seemed to emanate from the deepest pores of Veer whom he had blatantly accused of debauchery and cold blooded murder.

But nevertheless, Bhiksh continued on with the calm recitation of his deeply held views:

"But it is not because of Veer that Anna is dead. The blame rests entirely upon me as I failed to return Anna's love in the way that she wanted me to – all simply because my religion and my holy duties towards it had fettered me to an already lost cause.

"I confessed to the act of shooting Anna as I hoped that it would lead to a just punishment of my religiously doctored inaction. But now I have found that my action of wiping Veer's fingerprints from the gun and confessing to the shooting of Anna has only resulted in two more souls being dragged through this unholy mess, which Veer, and primarily myself, are guilty of."

Bhiksh then fell silent.

Fazal, who had been a mute witness to his friends' shenanigans over the years, finally burst out with a heart rending speech:

"I knew that it was Veer who had killed Anna out of jealousy as she had been getting more close to Bhiksh than she had ever been during her short unfortunate life.

"But you have to understand the circumstances under which I confessed to the crime. You have to realize that my life has been one endless series of obligations – more so towards my friends and especially Veer.

"Therefore, that terrible day when Inspector Vikram – after having battered me into submission with the help of his subordinates – vividly explained to me the facts of the case, I found a perfect opportunity to rid myself of the obligations which had started to degrade my self-respect to the extent of choking the life out of me.

“But I never realized that by trying to redeem myself in this fashion, I would become a party to the lynching of innocent Bhiksh.

“I’m sorry.”

Nobody dared to look at Veer – who after polishing off the remnants of the drink in his slim polished vessel, looked anew at his old friends and Vikram with a strange glint in his eyes.

Veer, then allowing his eyes to stray away from his old chums and Vikram, asked with a faraway look in them:

“Bhiksh... did Anna ever express a desire to marry you in the near future?”

Bhiksh replied with an emphatic no and spoke no further.

Veer continued as a glistening film born out of withheld tears glazed his eyes:

“Well... on the night she died, she – for the umpteenth time – expressed her desire to marry me in the near future. But I, like a fool that I am, unfortunately brushed aside her deep set longing with a harshness which exceeded that of all my previous rejections of her pitiful plea. I then went back to my apartment without even a second look at her teary eyed begging face – without realizing that I had set the wheels of disaster into motion.”

Disregarding the incredulous looks of his three companions, Veer continued on with a tenacity which belied his appearance:

“When – on that most hideous morning of all days – you, Vikram, forced into my fuzzy brain the mind numbing facts of Anna’s death, I, like my genius friends Bhiksh and Fazal here, immediately jumped to a conclusion.

“I concluded that Bhiksh – being the genius that he is – had finally come to know of Anna’s true feelings with certainty that night, and feeling betrayed after almost a decade of unconditional love for her on his part, had become jealous to such an extreme extent that he threatened her life.

“My mind then re-drew the last horrific moments of Anna’s short tragic life with a terrible clarity. I saw her brandishing my gun in the face of an enraged Bhiksh – a gun which I had given Anna to help extricate herself from precisely such situations. I finally saw –with mounting horror – the beast of a Bhiksh wrest the gun from Anna’s trembling hands and shoot her at a time when even his calm mind was unable to restrain his animalistic emotions.”

As tears finally broke through his alcohol fueled barrier, Veer sobbed out:

“But I’m the one who Vikram is hunting for and not Bhiksh – for I was the person who instead of providing Anna with the physical and emotional security she asked from me, looked at only the physical part and gave her my gun so that she could protect her body, while I myself stayed aloof from her emotional needs in my fools’ paradise of hedonism.”

After having purged his angst, Veer, during his last words, still managed to bring out his embittered appreciation of his friends’ actions:

“Thank you Bhiksh for being such a conscientious friend. You have tried to save me in spite of your conviction that I have been a disastrous failure in keeping up with your high and mighty moral standards.

“Even your deep conviction as to my guilt has failed to prevent you from falsely accepting your responsibility – although in the end your ego driven moral responsibility

has proven to be nothing more than the hollow conviction of an extremely egoistic holy man.

“Thank you too Fazal, for having tried to save me on account of your misplaced understanding of your benefactor and your reckless endeavor to save him from a guilt which you had managed to mistakenly and morbidly apply to him inside of your brain. You have managed to destroy almost everything I have done and tried to do for you.”

A deathly silence ensued as all the three old friends – for the very first time – came to understand each others’ stance on the grim episode which had altered their blissful lives forever. Their intense friendship of a decade lay in ruins after these nerve shattering confessions of theirs, as each finally came to realize with a sinking heart as to why the others had also pleaded guilty to the crime.

But Vikram had had enough of these recurring silences on the part of the three chums – for there were still certain areas of the occurrences of the previous one year which needed clearing up in his mind. He therefore brutally confronted the three young men with a blistering attack:

“Ok, I admit that all three of you went into a deep unshakable shock when faced with Anna’s death and its facts for the first time and didn’t know about the others confessing to the crime until after we had used the White Room’s procedure on the three of you and finally set each one of you free. But pray tell me what made each one of you fail to confront the others once all of you had been set free after being informed about the full facts of the case?”

Bhiksh as usual was the first to grasp the attack by its sword and replied in a hurt tone:

“I thought that Veer had finally seen the sober light of the day and confessed to his crime of having actually pulled the trigger on Anna. I knew without a doubt that poor Fazal had confessed to the crime in order to save Veer’s hide. I thought it best to leave the two alone to themselves and let the matter pass as I was physically, mentally, morally and spiritually drained out by the ghastly procedure that I had been put through and wanted nothing more in the world other than my solitude. I therefore went into a shell out of which I have emerged for the first time today as a result of poor Anna’s death anniversary.”

Fazal on seeing Veer keep mum realized that it was his turn and pitifully answered Vikram’s question:

“When I was finally set free, I could understand Veer having confessed to his crime. But I could not for the life of me fathom out why Bhiksh had also confessed to the crime. And having confessed to the crime myself, I could not gather enough courage to confront Bhiksh and ask him as to why he had pleaded guilty to poor Anna’s murder. Moreover when he himself didn’t approach me after we had been released and immediately went away without bothering to even look at me once or leave a message, I thought that he suspected that I had pulled the fatal trigger on Veer’s orders. Meanwhile, Veer upon being released had suddenly and mysteriously vanished without informing anybody as to where he was going. I did not get to see Veer’s face even once after we had all been released. But then I found out that Veer had put enough money in my bank account to enable me to pursue my studies. I therefore immersed myself in my studies in

order to forget completely the terrible past forever. Unfortunately for me, nothing has worked out since then.”

Veer, realizing that he was the last piece of the puzzle in Vikram’s reconstruction of the crime, finally spoke out with defeat resounding in his every word:

“At that time I couldn’t care less as to who else had pleaded guilty and why. I just performed my duty of loading up Fazal’s bank account and then vanished into my oblivion. I just wish I hadn’t come today as it would have spared me my friends’ honorable impressions about me and my character.”

Veer and his friends once more lapsed into a painful silence as the bare facts of reality hit them square in their solar plexus’ without giving a damn about their pitiful excuses or their ill thought out juvenile confessions which had managed to destroy more than one life.

Conclusion

Time, as always, flows, either through or around personalities. It depends upon the concerned personalities themselves as to whether they want to be a part of time or slip by it unnoticed.

This time around Vikram was finally satisfied by the responses given by all three of his previously accused and even seemed to appreciate their troubled silence as he softly outlined the facts of the case both to himself and the three free young men – his tired brain finally having managed to make sense out of a plethora of nonsense which had managed to obfuscate the case:

“According to the statements given by the top notch security personnel whom you had employed to guard your building, nobody ever entered or left your building except for the four of you. So we can rule out the hand of a fifth party in the death of Anna.

“Furthermore, according to the results of the White Room procedure which was carried out upon the three of you, none of you can be held guilty of shooting Anna.

“Adding to these facts have now come your statements in which each one of you has done a volte-face upon your original statements by stating that it was not you who had literally pulled the trigger on Anna.”

Vikram then gave a deep sigh indicating with finality the resolution of the case in his mind at long last. He then took one long good look into the melancholic eyes of the three hapless young men and calmly spoke out:

“Well... it looks like the person who actually pulled the trigger is the one who can't defend herself anymore on account of being in a realm beyond the grave.”

Vikram then paused for what seemed to be an eternity. But none dared to disturb the deathly still silence which Vikram's analysis had brought into being.

Vikram, after easily digesting the silence which he had anticipated from his previously accused, continued on with his explorations into the dark side of human nature:

“With three prime candidates for the murder of Anna confessing to the crime, I had totally disregarded the possibility of Anna having committed suicide.”

Vikram then continued as each one of them felt an intense chill wrapping around their insides – chilling them into thorny icicles which pierced deep into each one's innermost being:

“Your egos, insecurities, and moral prejudices resulting in each one of you blindly judging the others, compounded with my stupidity and eagerness to solve a crime at long last with finality, has led to each one of us putting one leg into our collective graves with a deep propensity towards jumping into it altogether.

“It is high time that we got on with whatever is left of our lives.”

Vikram then rigidly stood up – as befitting his stature of Inspector – and turning his back to the coffee table marched away from the remnants of the coffee table discussion.

The deep and dark shadows within the innermost circles of sub-consciousness of the three remaining victims started to disappear as the light of a bright new sun started to shine with a brilliance which managed to root out and disintegrate even the last specks of darkness left within the nooks and crannies of each young man's sub-consciousness.

This newly shining sun enabled the three young fools to tear free of their premature graves.

The three remaining members of the previously wholesome foursome then started hugging one another repeatedly as tears cascaded freely down their cheeks in a flood of long withheld emotions.

Anna had finally made way for her three best friends to try and get rid of their collective moral guilt.

The major circles of sub-consciousness relating to one another once more came into a subdued existence within the psyche of the three old friends and started to rebuild themselves with a maturity born out of disaster.

The End