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HALF A DOZEN QUIRKS

Presenting the sixth edition of Quirk. This time we showcase “Comfortably Dumb”, and what better way to do so than being comfortably dumb. Berated as the ‘dumbest’ of all literary forms – the short story is perhaps thus labelled because of its popularity among lay readers. This however, has not prevented such names as Maupassant, Conan Doyle, O’ Henry and Chekhov from being equated with genius for their short works. Through these pages, we celebrate the short story, giving you six quirky attempts at this difficult literary form. And thus, still comfortable in being dumb, Quirk completes a year. Our mission remains the same: to spark a literary renaissance, college style. A time for introspection, it is time to look back at our evolution since January 2005. We are still close to the bottom of a mighty mountain but now, we have been walking for a year, attempting to create an articulate, expressive community of young South Asians. Where there was hope last January, now there is confidence. We thank you for quirking along. Contribute. Criticize. Abuse. Praise. Write in to quirk@nls.ac.in. And here’s wishing all our readers a very happy new year. Watch out for our anniversary edition in two months.

Miss Warden tells me four times a week I’ve got no memory (she’d tell me oftener, except she doesn’t see me but four times a week, which I guess is one of the things I’m supposed to be grateful for) – but that’s not true, because I remember everything clearly from the time before they brought me here. I told her so, one day when I’d “got up on the wrong side of my bed” (she told Mrs. Teralaw, and she called me up and told me I’d “got up on the wrong side of my bed”) – and dropped a dirty cup in the pantry, because it was too dark to see properly what I was supposed to be washing (it’s always too dark in the pantry) – and then Cook was angry and kept at me till when I got away to the table there was only Broomstick turning his tail away from the crumbs. She’d kept at me all through history, I mean Miss Warden had, about Henry IV who had six wives and cut their heads off after making them tell tales, and then got his own head chopped off: it was Henry IV I think, and I should have felt sorry for him, except why did he have to make it so people would have to sweat over him in history-books? She pulled me up about Henry, and then flew at me and told me then I’d got no memory – and I told her maybe not for history, but I did for other things, as I remembered a lot of the things from when I was small, before they brought me to this place. And I told her, for I couldn’t stop then, how I remembered one of the first things from when I was home; remembered so clearly me and Tom standing by the water leaning against the cherry-tree behind the old mill, and trying to see who could spit up highest at a patch of sky smiling down at us through the dancing pink blossom.

I saw she didn’t want me to go on, and so I did, what with getting up on the wrong side and all, and I told her everything I remembered from home. The words came so fast I was startled, because they’d been telling me here I mustn’t remember what it was like before, that it would do no good and that it was ungrateful to brood over the past – and when you hear a thing said often enough by everybody, and nothing never said opposite by nobody, you sort of grow used to it. I thought I had forgotten, mostly, but now the words came fast, all that I was supposed to have forgotten, and I couldn’t hardly speak as fast as I thought. And I saw she listened all the while, with her jaw dropped, and the other girls listened too – and then she left History all in a fit, and they said I was to go up to Mrs. Teralaw. And Mrs. Teralaw said I’d been a bad, ungrateful child, and didn’t know my blessings, that there were others who were worse off and would be more grateful for my good, and I must learn my lesson the hard way, as I seemed to like it so: and all about the wrong bed and everything. So that night they said I was to have no supper, and sent me up to the attic in the old wing. It was all black there, with a funny smell, but when I sat down on a creaking trunk I could look up at a small, decrepit window high up in the wall, and through the cobwebs I could see a patch of black sky, grimacing down at me without a single star.

I didn’t mind being up alone in the dark, for back at home, a-mornings, before Tom slung his sack over his shoulder and set off down the way, behind father, we played hide-and-seek; and often I crept into the great outhouse, where I had to hold the door close, and be still and sure no shadows fell across the slit of day below the rotten door: because Yap was sure to be lurking near, and if I stirred he was off at once yapping to Tom I was hid in the outhouse. I didn’t like that much, but Tom laughed and said not to mind: because Yap loved me just as well, but he guessed he knew Tom was master, and I agreed, for he was Tom’s dog really. When he didn’t bark I would be in the outhouse for a long time (hours I thought, except when I came out it wasn’t but a few minutes: which is how I guess the night seems so long, and we wake up and feel we’ve slept ages, and couldn’t sleep more for trying), and so I wasn’t at all afraid of being by myself up in the funny attic.

Missing supper wasn’t so bad either, seeing what they gave us to eat. Back noonday baking, and cream fresh from the dairy, and bits of moist cheese: and there was usually jelly and preserves, and plenty of whey: and, if Tom could get away from school early enough, we filled a basket with grapes and raspberries when we went picking the firewood. On Sundays Aunt Mabel and Uncle Jeremy came over, with little Rachel and meat-pies: then Sally brought us white butter, and pa poured out the fragrant mead as ma watched: and we children had our little cups filled with sweet ale. We never supped indoors, unless it was foul, or winter, but carried the tea-table and our stools to sit beneath the willows under the stars. I told Mrs. Warden how I remembered it all, sitting under the murmuring boughs, all ghostly in black and silver, and the breathing black over the curious forms of the country, all merged in sleep: with my knees drawn up, and shivering so slightly and pleasantly when the breeze playing with the boughs rose up a little, so that I didn’t know if it was fine, or just a little cold: and listening at the murmuring between ma and aunt, and pa and uncle: and listening for the first little snore from Uncle Jeremy’s chair, and nudging Tom whether he’d fall off (Uncle Jeremy sometimes forgot to lean up against a willow); and for the soft little sound that told me pa’s pipe had dropped sleepily from his fingers. And I remembered sitting

with sleep, not knowing quite if I was asleep, as well, and in danger of falling: and gazing up through the ghostly silver branches at a patch of black sky, smiling down at us with a sea of winking lights. The sky looked beautiful over our cottage at night, but I liked it best just when dawn was breaking, before there rose light enough to make things out quite clearly. I remember one day, when I’d been ill and in bed early, I woke up and felt I couldn’t sleep longer if I tried: so I crept out of the window, and tiptoed on the brown leaves down to the water’s edge, where the solitary yew stood at the river’s bend. The breeze kissed me so softly, timid but gathering cool strength among the rocking reeds, and there was such a soft fullness in the bright air, of birdsong far away, and rustling of murmurs, and distant laughter: that I thought I must be still in bed, dreaming of the daybreak. But the palest of pink blushes now broke over the blue yews and the steeple of Suito Church, and grew like a stain delicately over the vanishing gray. Then a single ray broke in gold from the corner of the world, and spread over the few star-shadows that were paling before the blush: and after it came the soft and radiant sun – and before I knew it, I stood in the new day, wide awake. The quivering fullness broke, too: the lark burst out somewhere close above me in the yew, the reeds laughed their sleepy heads free, and the river leaped up with a start and caught, with a thousand shimmering gleams of gold, the fainting wind in its arms, to carry it, laughing with the wonderful tales it brings from the

A Patch of Sky

red mountain, to the great sea, and to love. I wandered among the yew, and gazed up beyond all the greens: the green of the ripe cornfields, the green of the long-grassed meadow and the weedy bog behind it, and the greens of folks’ gardens, down by the green river-bank – up, up at the patch of sky, smiling down at me through the net of leaves come alive again, all peacock-blue, with the fleecy clouds, shadowed with crimson-gold, idling across its pretty face.

I remembered the sky as it looked when I lay with the feet in the dew that never quite left the thick grass under the chestnuts, down by the ruined mill, with a book folded open on my skirt: lying so still, like the heavy-eyed summer noon, while ma sat sewing and talking to me: until her voice became soft and slow, and as sweet as the honey that seemed ready to drip – oh! so slowly from the still branches above me. I remember pulling open my eyes, once, twice, before they were really open, and closing quickly again: and I saw the river and the fields lying hot and white and breathless, and felt ma run her fingers through my hair: still speaking, speaking ever slower, ever lower, until the golden honey dropped secretly through the steaming boughs above, from the patch of sky smiling at me, in the last lost moments, clear and mercilessly bright through the windless white flowers.

And last of all I remembered the sky as it looked as I skipped from the dairy, when Sally said she wasn’t likely to need me any more, and across the stone bridge towards the fields: until pa’s lovely brown mare came plodding through the daisies, all dark under the lengthening shadows, and pa threw up his cap as I cried to meet him. I remember skipping across on the shiny stones, while the big horse plunged into the river where the water was so low the weeds glanced up, as through a mirror, and pa trotting high above me, watching me bite my apple: but sometimes he pretended he’d forgotten, and go chatting on and on, ‘till I grew quiet, and he laughed when he peered into my face, and tossed me a plum or a peach (I loved the peaches best, ours were the sweetest in the country): and then he shouted after me, as I leaped off into the hedges, and he followed the path up the cottage, not to stray too late, else I’d miss Sally’s gooseberry tart. But I didn’t care so much for tart when I had a peach, and I went to stand under the cherry-tree, so grave and sober from the hide-and-seek mornings, to watch the sky as the stars came to chase the last rays of sun into the far woods.

It happened very slowly, the colours first falling, and then lingering for a while in shades of pearl and gray, which the rippling water was quicker to catch up, as it threw the last fragments of its forever-unfinished tale up to the dropping wind: then it was swift, for the birds came home, and as the swifts circled and the geese cackled in midair, they paused for a moment in my grove, to bid good-night, before they tucked their heads under their downy wings, and fell fast asleep: the bluejays came, and the redbreasts came, and the swallows and sparrows came, and the cuckoo and the lark (I liked the lark best, he was first by my window a-mornings). And when they fell quiet, so suddenly all at once, I looked up and saw the day was fled: all the country dyed in the pallor of before-starlight, so strange and softly radiant, so clear of outline and so dark in detail: that magic sort of light, changing so slowly you never could say if it was still day, or if now it was time to bring out

the candles and stir the fire, and feel a little chill: but when the owl strutted out, and the nightingale stirred in the spruce above, I knew it was time to jog in. I turned slowly, as in an early-morning dream, from the patch of sky, smiling down at me through tangled fragrance: all the colour of silk, as I think the Ice Princess’ blue-gray gown must be: almost breaking, then, with the stars, already winking about our supper.

I told Mrs. Warden all I remembered, and told her she wasn’t right to say I had no memory, for I remembered all these things clearly, and many more, which I couldn’t speak fast enough. I can look up at the attic window and see it all again, as I see the patch of starless grimacing through the cobwebs down at me. That sky is so unlike what it was before, it makes me wonder if there’s still a real sky outside. I remember the night they brought me here, after the funeral, there was a sky, with a star or two winking through the gathering rain. I haven’t seen the sky since then, for they never take us out (they have chapel inside, and they tell us it’s bad for little girls who’ve got nobody in the world, to get used to too much freedom). That night, as Mr. Phaytle rushed me in, we passed through a corridor in the new wing, where the mistresses have their bedrooms: I saw gauze curtains in those bedrooms, and the gray moon looking through: but here where they keep us there are no windows, except the ones boarded up at the end of the schoolroom. But sometimes they forget to draw the bolt of the pantry-window quite secure, and once or twice when I’m busy scrubbing and Cook is scolding the maid I’ve edged the window a little, and I think there was a sky outside.

Maybe I can get them to send me up to the attic more often, so I can look at the patch of sky from there, and remember how it was at the cottage, by the river. I did a foolish thing and told Mrs. Priss at breakfast I rather liked going without supper, for then the crumbs didn’t taste so burnt, or the treacle so bitter, and the attic wasn’t a bad place after all: and Mrs. Teralaw called me up and told me all about ingratitude: and I’ve heard Miss Warden say little girls who aren’t grateful for their blessings, and will perversely remember things that can’t be of any good to them, and not try to bear in mind there’s nobody they matter to anymore, except to those who are good to them and prepare them to find a humble way in the world, such little girls shouldn’t be let to take their blessings for granted, for there were others who should be more grateful in their place. So I think, I must be careful not to be sent up too often, else Mr. Phaytle might take me away somewhere else.

But then, if they took me outside, I might see after all there was no sky left in the world. I shouldn’t like that, for then I would forget all I remember from before they brought me here, and it would be so strange. I can’t imagine the cottage and river with no sky above them, even such a sky as I can get to see here.

No, I can’t let them take me away! I’ll just come up to the attic once in a while, so I don’t forget there was a real sky long ago, and it shone over my home, and my folks, and me. I’ll sit on the creaking chest, and look up at the decrepit window, and see the patch of sky grimacing down at me through the foul-smelling spider-webs – black and empty, without a single winking light.

AMITA BASU

Comfortably Dumb

(Consolation: it took a while before it became Comfortable.)

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‘Raised Hand is not enough?
There must be Agitated ‘Raised Voices too?
Seat occupied must be in the Centre ‘Row’s?
Then, ‘Decline to Make a ‘Point.

Initially Conscience pricked: initially
‘Parallel ‘Perspectives pleaded to be presented.
Gradually, impact of the what’s-the-Point ‘Doctrine
And so: Another Opinion. how does it matter?

Second round of pricking Conscience.
However, now unable to ‘Express.
‘Need to, ‘Desire to, ‘But, cannot kick ‘Habit.
Something to Say but ‘Pluck on ‘Holiday.

‘Wondering, ‘Deconstructing: of no use now.
‘Worrying then ‘Resolving: of no consequence.
Hope that a Just--Do-It will come along.
‘Until then, Comfortably ‘Dumb.

The Big Bear had recently lost much of its paunch, and seeing their papa so slim the cubs grew sad that they couldn't use his belly as a toy-pillow anymore. The Big Bear though was happy to shed some weight, at least now he could carry himself through the dense pathways easily. The Big Bear happy at this thought, stood up under the giant mango tree and called his playing kids who scrambled through the bushes and huddled around him in a compact circle. It was nice for the Big Bear to have his children together, and he decided to take a walk with them through the banana undergrowth, which lay on the other side of the cave.

The Big Bear broke a long, leafy twig from the mango tree and began to walk holding it high above its head.

'The undergrowth is very dense and you have to keep together. If anyone of you gets lost, just look up and follow this twig, okay?' said the Big Bear as the cubs scarcely caught up behind him.

The foliage was new and fresh, and the Big Bear had a look at its face in a broad leaf filled with crystal-clear water. His face puffed up with an excessive beard looked wonderful, and he troubled his head in deciding whether it was the water, which was so alluring, or really his own face.

The cubs were like small woollen balls, and they rolled on between the thorny thickets, skillfully managing to evade the thorns from brushing against their pelt. It was a nice game for them as long as they kept together, but if lost, the game could have turned into a nightmare, and the cubs aware of this, tried to have fun without breaching the limits of the game.

Having squeezed themselves through the thickets the cubs were now in an open area where a gurgling brook flowed thinly, between wet, shiny boulders imbedded there, sinking slowly over the years. The Big Bear stepped into the water first, and felt the depth with its toe, then feeling it sufficiently safe, crossed across, and motioned the cubs to hurry up, standing on the other side.

The cubs splashed into the water one by one, and were hauled up by the strong arms of their father. The last cub was fortunate to have a black, stout fish passing across, and snatching at it with both hands, jumped onto the other side with its bounty.

The Big Bear was happy at this, though he thought the cubs too young to be encouraged to take up such adventures. But he patted the back of the

cub all the same, as it shared morsels with its brothers, keeping a big fistful for its own.

'Come on now, hurry up!' the Big Bear shouted, seeing them waste so much time on eating. 'We have still a long way to go to reach the banana plantations,' he said, and the cubs promptly followed him.

Now they had to pass through a broad wooded area filled with the rat-tat-tat of woodpeckers and the chirping of crickets. 'Walk slow and keep guard. There are many hyenas here,' said the Big Bear flourishing the twig for them to

Big Bear Remembers Kako

walk ahead. But the cubs didn't know the way and asked their papa to lead them from the front. 'Okay!' said the Big Bear. 'But no one should lag behind - clear?'

A few stray deer were grazing faraway and watching the Big Bear attentively they broke into a panicked gallop and vanished behind the trees.

'Ha ha ha - hu ho ho!' Guffawed the Big Bear. 'Saw them running, crazy fools!' The cubs didn't find anything amusing in the gruff mirth of their father and followed him politely, listening to the woodpeckers and the crickets.

Leaves: fresh and scarlet, fallen across the ground stuck to the flat, fine feet of the Big Bear, and it was fun for the cubs to watch the foot of their father every time he lifted his legs. The Big Bear had stepped over a honeycomb that had made its feet sticky, but the cubs were simply awestruck when they found that the leaves didn't stick to their feet.

Don't try, it will not work on you, it happens only to him, that's why he is our papa,' said a cub to its brother trying to stick a leaf to its foot.

'Yes,' said the cub at last, throwing the leaf away. 'It works only on papa.'

Walking out of the wooded region they came to a huge crumbling mountain, and the Big Bear stopped and turned to his children.

'Seeing the mountain I remember a very sad story, it had really happened - to a friend of mine.'

The cubs were curious and nodded eagerly. 'What happened, papa?' a cub asked.

'You want me to tell the whole thing? No, we would be late. But let me tell you in brief. There was a close friend of mine called Kako, and we both studied in the same school beside a big mountain, just as big as the one you see before you. Kako was very ambitious and was always first in class. But because he was so intelligent and ambitious he was never satisfied with what he achieved. So one day he decided to climb the mountain beside our school. It was a most daring and wonderful decision, and I got so excited that

I told it even to our science professor. But the science professor, instead of getting excited, was horrorstruck. "Bring that Kako here, quick!" he cried and when I went with him he explained at length that the misty peak so alluring from here was nothing but an airy mirage, which could never be reached. "Moreover," he said. "It can never be reached, because the mountain is crumbling, and you know what an impossible thing it is to climb a crumbling mountain!" Kako listened to all this silently, and thanked the professor for his kind advice. "But," he said. "My mind is made up and I am going to climb it. And the peril that the mountain has for me makes my decision stronger, because it makes my purpose grander and much more significant." The professor couldn't say anything to this, and went away saying that he had said all that he could and the decision was left to him. But Kako was fanatically determined and very enthusiastic, and prepared for his ascent from the very next day. He climbed from behind our school compound, and climbed for two whole weeks. I could see him climb, through the classroom window, and sometimes I would come on cold starry nights and make a bonfire beside the mountain, just watch that tiny speck called Kako conquer the mountain bit by bit. Sometimes when it snowed I felt sad for poor Kako for he had not taken anything to keep himself warm in the chilly weather. And this went on for about a month, and I saw that dark speck called Kako had actually descended lower and I wondered whether he had given up and was returning. But no, he was climbing, slowly, and it was only after days that I realized the crumbling nature of the mountain: the big boulders rolled down every time Kako managed to ascend a bit higher, and avoiding the rolling rocks and falling stones, Kako kept on sliding in spite of himself. This went on for so long that even our science professor, who had completely forgotten about Kako, made a comment in the class about children growing disobedient, and suffering because of that. I kept a watch on Kako for the next few days, hoping that he would change his decision and come back



November-December, Bangalore 2005

to us. But fanatical as he was, he persisted on for a few more weeks until one fateful night I heard a deafening sound shatter the silence of the moonlit darkness. I came out of the house and the mountain was collapsing. There was no trace of Kako anywhere, and next morning I went to the spot to see, my friend forever vanished beneath the ruins of the crumbled mountain.’

The Big Bear sighed and looked up. ‘What do you boys make of Kako?’ he asked.

The cubs looked at each other doubtfully, they were confused. Most of them thought Kako great, but his death was something very unexpected and sad, so they didn’t say anything, and looked at their father expecting him to continue.

‘People called him crazy and they still do,’ the Big Bear said. ‘But the interesting thing is they haven’t been able to forget him. They still remember him as if they would an enigma and try to convince each other that he was crazy and foolish. What I understand from this is that they are not sure of their opinions, and it is this uncertainty, which makes them condemn and pity him so often.

‘What do you think of him, personally, papa?’

‘I respect him,’ the Big Bear said. ‘He was like a symbol of our collective wishes which lay suppressed beneath our cowardice which had taken the respectable guise of commonsense and sensibility. Kako, more than all of us, knew that the mountain was crumbling, but he didn’t want to go against the spirit, for that would have killed him, made a lesser bear of him.’

The Big Bear scratched his beard and sniffled.

‘The mountain was his home,’ he said briefly, and added. ‘He felt an outcaste everywhere else.’

There was a minute of silence filled by the quick, thoughtful breathing of the cubs.

‘But the thing is that it all came to nothing. All the efforts of Kako went waste!’

‘Who says so?’ retorted the Big Bear almost immediately. ‘The purpose wasn’t served, all right, but the purpose isn’t always important. It is the spirit, which remains and survives all achievements, not the achievements themselves. Kako’s spirit remains alive in all of us, and this spirit can inspire hundred Kakos leading to hundreds of successful adventures. And don’t you feel that it’s Kako’s spirit which smiles in every winner’s face?’

An amused silence greeted the expectant face of the Big Bear.

‘Spirit,’ a cub said. ‘Isn’t it too insubstantial a thing to live upon, papa?’

‘Yes son, that is the law of this earth, all substantial things depend upon the insubstantial spirit to survive, and we often need people like Kako to keep this spirit alive and save ourselves from decadence and cynicism. Or else the world will be full of smug, sour-faced pigs, guarding their litter and teaching commonsense to the world.’

Faraway they could see the banana plantations, but the cubs, tired, rested for a while below an almond tree, and thought of queer Kako watching the huge crumbling mountain before them. And when the Big Bear asked them to move they still weren’t ready, and grumbled excuses to be let alone.

ANKUR PRAHLAD BETAGERI.

MIn the distance you see something vaguely grey of undefineable shape. As you fly closer the amorphous mass sorts itself out into separate buildings, more than you can count. They are not all grey, some are of brick, some are glassed and mirrored, but the general image is one of greyness. This is the city. Between the buildings you travel, still high above the ground. She extends in every direction, up, down and around. There is never enough room. Ahead, you see green.

HThis is the park.

AThe park is the city’s sole link to nature of any kind – no one’s quite sure why it needs such a link, but everyone knows they couldn’t do without it. It’s a nice park. Not very large, but it has plenty of trees, and no “keep off the grass” signs. It is mostly empty at this hour of the day; people are at work or at school. But there is one man by the duck pond. This is Harold.

AHarold is deaf and dumb. No one ever taught him to write or sign either. It’s very hard to communicate with him. Harold is very lucky though – at least he is not blind. He has a wonderful sense of humour, too. He’s always laughing at something. No, he’s quite sane. I always get the feeling that if he wanted to tell us what was so funny he’d find a way. A lot of people agree, and think Harold must be laughing at them. They say he must be a horrible man. He isn’t, though. He’s very poor, and yet every morning he buys a loaf of bread and he comes down to the pond to share it with the ducks. That is what he is doing now. He breaks off little hunks of bread and tosses them lightly into the pond. He giggles a little. After every few mouthfuls for the ducks he breaks off a bigger piece for himself. Now he breaks off a chunk and lets it fall at the very edge of the pond, just on the grass. A duck makes its way to the edge, and eats it. This is the duck. I know very little about it. It isn’t really a very interesting duck at all.

The village of Fodos has a huge house called a hotel where the foreigners may stay. The brothel in Erel is cunningly built on many levels to offer the men privacy. And in Feidh (the neighbouring village to ours) there was a huge building called a Library to store books. My home is on the coast that is the southern border of our country. It is a beautiful region. Every year many come to bathe in the sea, to walk along the shore, to look at the houses. For the houses are very curious, so the visitors say. I myself know no different. Sand is not a good foundation on which to build a house, especially since the waves can reach so far up the beach during a storm. So the houses rest on high wooden pillars, and the pillars are driven deep into the rock below the thick layer of sand. All along the coast are houses built in this manner.

The Doctor lived in Feidh. He collected these books and allowed a few (a very few) foreigners to visit and read them. He also collected other things – precious stones, flowers from other parts of the country, insects and butterflies dead and preserved. They say he was one of the most learned men in the world. They also say that he was proud.

No one goes to Feidh anymore.

They tell us there is water only on the surface of the Earth. Inside there is fire. Rivers of fire explode sometimes from mountains and flow down to the cities, destroying them. Trapping them under layers of molten rock. In the north there is a plain where once was a city. It is a wonder now. The Fire came, and the plain is smooth and still and shines like black onyx. And then there are the fires that are not made by nature.

We have a legend in these parts that in a cave beneath the sea is the temple of Orannon, the God of Fire. The foreigners laugh – a god of fire beneath the sea? But are we not told that beneath the sea, at the very heart of the world there is Fire? They may laugh, but we know.

The Doctor was greatly interested in the legend. He was convinced that there was indeed such a temple. And if a man so wise, with so much book learning thought it true, then must it not be so? He would often go out into the sea wearing a strange suit of rubber and with a huge tank full of air. He would carry with him strange instruments of measurement. Some people were afraid; Orannon is known to be a quick-tempered God.

The Legend says that the temple of Orannon is deep beneath the sea. There is a rock wall, and in that wall the mouth of a cave. Upon entering, a passage slopes upwards. (Some say there are stairs. Others say that no God would make the path to his temple so easy to follow.) At the end of this passage is a huge hall. Miraculously, no mention is made of water in the passage or the hall. The hall is of black stone and on each wall torches burn eternal. In the centre is a huge brass bell on an iron chain.

The devout place their offerings beneath the bell and leave. Or they wait and pray that the God will appear before them and reward them for their devotion. To see him would be reward enough. But no one must ring the bell, for Orannon regards this as a challenge. His wrath aroused he will fight (and kill, for he is immortal) the challenger.

All my countrymen worship Orannon, though we have not known the way to his temple for years. New temples have been built, paintings made of a huge man of fire. The people visit the temples to pay homage, but they know that it is not the same. The new temples are mere shrines to the fire God. The Temple was Orannon’s home. They say the Doctor found the temple.

It was at night, as stories of this nature always are. The Doctor had studied our area well; he knew exactly where to go. He must have stood on the beach for hours, maybe studying his maps for one last time. And then dived in and swum towards the area where the temple must be. We do not know, there was no one to see him. But we heard the sound of a bell. Then came the roaring and the white hot light. I was only a child at the time and I remember shutting my eyes tightly and shivering in my bed. I thought the roaring would never stop.

In the morning men were called to guard the way to Feidh while a high wall was erected around the village. Huge rocks were piled up on the Feidh coast – as if anyone would have dared approach that place by sea! The men who built the wall were from the city, and they refused to answer our questions before they left. Now the visitors are told that there is a dangerous pit in Feidh and they must travel around it rather than risk falling in.

But I know what lies behind the wall. A year after that night (I was a boy of twelve) I took advantage of the laxity of the guards to climb

over it. There was no deep pit. The ground was hard and smooth and clear. Embedded deeply in it were the Doctor’s possessions as well as those of the other inhabitants of the village. His flowers and butterflies and precious stones along with their tin plates and human bones. And everywhere his books, perfectly preserved. Some of the books were open and near the surface. In those I could actually make out the words, though they were in a language unknown to me. Not a single page was even slightly charred. I trembled and fell to my knees.

We do not go to Feidh. It is a holy place.

AISHWARYA SUBRAMANIAN

The Library

November-December, Bangalore 2005

It was raining in the decrepit tenements of nowhere. The staccato tap of raindrops on a rusted tin roof permeated the air, already saturated with a blatant sense of wrong. A candle flickered, casting occasional light on the unholy darkness, momentarily revealing a figure ensconced within it...a face, devoid of emotion, eyes hinting at an eerie malevolence, revealing zilch.

Marty was back...Marty, his pal, his teacher, his lover; Marty, who he hadn't seen since his childhood days. It felt so damn good, after all these years.

'Where ya bin, Mart?'
'Bin around, kid...bin around...'

Images buried long ago flickered into view. Memories long forgotten came back...Marty...He had been eight years old. He had a new dad. At last, a person he could count on; a person who he could call his friend, even if he did smell funny at times. Sure, Marty was there all the time. But he was scared of him, plenty scared. He was afraid Marty might hurt him. Mama had told him so, and he believed mama. He loved mama more than anything else in the whole world. And mama seemed to fall down quite a lot after she met dad. Maybe love did this to you.

'Come here, weirdo...'
'Leave him alone'
'You stay out of this, bitch!'
'No, you can't do this to him'
'Screw you, you can't tell me what I can or can't do'
'Get out of my house. Out, out, out!!!'
'Why you...'

He had run away then. Mama wasn't falling down, it was a lie. Dad smelled worse than ever now. He ran into the kitchen, and there was Marty. He turned away, afraid to look into those eyes, afraid of the leer that seemed to be on his face perpetually, teeth glinting in the light. He found his gaze being slowly riveted towards Marty. They were face to face. Amazingly, there was concern in those eyes. The wicked grimace seemed to be an understanding smile. At that moment, he fell in love. Marty was there. He would take care of him, as long as he was alive. He felt safer than he had ever felt before. He smiled back – he, who had, until that moment, never expressed any sort of emotion. For those few moments, he was beautiful.

'Your dad again, huh?'
'Yeah'
'I'm sorry, dog'
'...'

The silence had been shattered by screams of agony; and then, more silence. They had rushed into the room. She lay on the floor, bleeding, motionless, at his feet. Dad was taking a huge swig from a bottle. The smell...he turned towards her. His eyes said it all. Marty had stepped in. Mom would have died had it not been for Marty. He watched as Marty took care of business. Then, weak, he had rushed to his mom. She was unconscious.

'Is she dead?'
'No, she's breathing...barely'
'I can feel a pulse'

He had laid her on the sofa and called an ambulance. 'She's gonna be ok, son' the doctors said, and he believed them. Doctors wouldn't lie, they healed people. He went back home to get her something to eat. There was a lot of blood. He had cleaned up and then left.

Mom had been in the hospital for a week. When they got back home, Marty was nowhere to be seen. He had asked his mom about him. She said Marty had gone away to live with his family.

'Will he be back, mom?'
'No, I don't think he will'
'Why not?'
'He's happier living with his family'

He had gone up to his room and wept, not eating until it became painful. But it didn't bring Marty back...

1984. Graduation day was around the corner. He was top of his class, as usual. He was walking towards his class, ignoring the outstretched legs in the hallway, ignoring the sneers and the mock-acting. This was nothing new. It happened every day of his miserable school life. 'Vomit' entered the classroom to loud, unconcealed imitations of someone puking. The teacher wasn't in the class as yet; they wouldn't dare do that while she was around. The hatred in the air was so thick it was like walking through tar. But he was used to it.

'Hey shitface'

That was Brad, the most popular guy in college; but not because anybody liked him. Like isn't a term you'd

associate with a feeling towards a guy who was 6'4", 290 pounds, and let you know it.

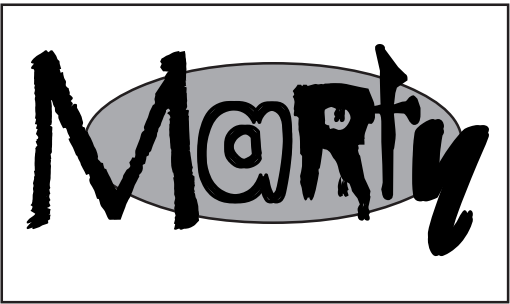
'We got somethin' to settle, man...c'mon guys...'escort' vomit over here to the bathroom where we can get some privacy'
'Stop it, Brad! I'm warning you...'

That was Helen, the most popular girl in college, the love of his life. She hadn't looked twice at him before the day she first told Brad to leave him alone. He had smiled and thanked her. At that moment, they fell in love. He because he hadn't imagined anyone would do such a thing; her because she had never seen anyone as beautiful as him, when he smiled.

He saw Marty again, in a bargain basement. Marty looked as though he had been through it all. He paid the bill. Together, they went back to what was left of his old home.

He and Helen were to be married the next day. He decided to drop by Helen's place after work. He climbed up the stairs to her apartment. He took out his key and stopped.

'Babe, you don't want him, you want a real man.'
'You're drunk, Brad'
'I've loved you ever since I first saw you. You know that'



'This conversation is over, Brad. Now get out of my apartment before I call the police'
'You bitch! If I can't have you, I'll make sure no one can'

THUD

He crashed through the door, too disoriented with rage. There she lay, bleeding, motionless. Brad was standing over her, barely, eyes glazed over. His knuckles hit solid bone just as Brad was about to turn around. He collapsed in a heap, with only the rise and fall of his chest to show he was alive, just about. He took him back to his house – to Marty. It was late when he got there. He dragged Brad's body out of the car and took him to the kitchen. Some water would wake him...he kicked him in the face.

Brad woke up to blood filling his windpipe. Coughing and sputtering, he sat up, spraying blood all over the kitchen floor. He looked around him; he was in some sort of condemned building, looked like. He sat there, surrounded by detritus, trying to figure out where the hell he was, when he heard someone coming. He turned towards the footsteps and froze. It was him – he hadn't even bothered to remember his name – and he had a kitchen knife in his hand, gleaming in the moonlight that filtered in through the rusted tin roof. He was talking to it, calling it Marty.

'There he is, Marty...just as I said. You'll take care of him, Marty? Sure, you go ahead and do that. You took care of dad, didn't you? He never came back again. I didn't thank you for that, Marty. Mom could've died if you weren't there. I love you Marty. I'm glad I found you again. Now you can be my best man tomorrow, Marty. Isn't that great?'

Brad was scared, shit scared, more so after hearing this bizarre dialogue. He was still talking to the knife; it was too low for him to hear. But his eyes said it all, glittering maliciously in the light of the candle. He was insane, and insane and a kitchen knife didn't mix well – hell they didn't mix at all. He had to get away, but he couldn't. That knock on the head had seen to that. He did the only thing he could do...he prayed. He prayed that it wouldn't be too painful. He prayed that he'd die quickly. One look at him told him otherwise. At that point he would have sold his soul to the devil to be somewhere else. Fool, the devil was already there, and he was in no mood to grant wishes.

He felt a white hot stab of pain in his back. Tears stung his eyes. He made to wipe them off, but he couldn't move his hands. It had begun...he found his hands and feet being tied up.
'Whatcha gonna do, Marty?'
His clothes were torn off him. Lightning flashed above. He could make out the faint patter of the first raindrops on the roof. A cold wind rattled through the building, making him conscious of his nudity.

The blade cut his ankle first, tearing through flesh and vein. 'Marty' was soaked in his blood. There was no pain then, amazingly. Nobody was there to hear the screams anyway. He would bleed to death in this anechoic shithole.
'I wanna see the bone, Marty. I've never seen one before'
Then the pain struck him. He screamed like he had never screamed before, the blade cutting through tendons, exposing his ankle,. The veins on his neck were straining to break through his skin.
'Can a knife scratch bone, Marty? '
The screams turned into muted moans of sheer agony. The bone was wrenched out of its socket with a dull popping sound. Awareness struck him when the blade got to his knee. It was shoved in behind his kneecap, where it got stuck. It wouldn't budge. Brad felt the knife being kicked out of his knee. He was beyond pain at that point. The moans kept growing in intensity. He could do nothing else. Then all was black.

It was done with. 'So that's what a spleen looks like...EW...' He stared down at Brad's severed head, mouth twisted in a rictus of pain. Marty was sticking out of an eye-socket. He pulled him out; it barely required any effort. It was raining hard. The precipitation was a sort of baptism, cleansing Brad's sins. God was with him. The blood, mixed with the rain water was starting to flow out through the doorway. Marty had blood all over him. He wiped him on Brad's clothes. He performed the last rites. The candle had burned out long ago. The door was closed, slammed by the wind. He opened it and stepped out. He was smiling as he closed the door.

'C'mon, Marty, let's go to your new home...'

GANESH

Clues:

- Across:
- 1. Prisoner 9 in Venice can cause discomfort. (13)
 - 2. Sane person? Might be a drifter. (5)
 - 8. Assistants follow fatherless painter with poles. (7)
 - 10. Spruce up best man at the wedding? (5)
 - 11. The Earl turned into a shoemaker? (7)
 - 13. Sumit bends around casualty wards to get expenses. (13)
 - 15. Boss ran game perhaps. (7)
 - 18. Piper heard to be more mature. (5)
 - 20. Air India ran for foreign currency. (5)
 - 22. Bangalore University is surrounded by bulls, or birds maybe. (7)
 - 23. Scientific compatibility check? (9, 4)

- Down:
- 1. Its heard I hum like a piece of cake. (5)
 - 2. Lime and lemony? (7)
 - 3. Rub gem and run for trial location. (9)
 - 4. Lease out frame for artist. (5)
 - 5. Entrance sign on public house maybe? (3)
 - 6. Priam's hymn for the young maiden. (5)
 - 7. Dee runs and tolerates pain. (7)
 - 12. Daily tram to the Naval High Command? (9)
 - 13. No medic can be like Loki for e.g. (7)
 - 14. Heavenly body rules over the waters. (7)
 - 16. Racket could be white in the age of the television. (5)
 - 17. Loot operation theatre to procure machine. (5)
 - 19. Reorganised trees? (5)
 - 21. California has a prize fighter. (3)

There he lay ... on the edge, but not quite ... flirting with the precipice...

He blinked at the winking stars from under heavy lidded eyes ... Cozying up to the starlight moonless sky so near, yet so far away ...

13 floors high on the parapet, he embraced the deafening silence of the night. He breathed in the velvety expanse blended with carbon monoxide and dimethylnitrosamine. The smoky haze made the stars look different, almost ethereal, smoke ringlets merging and clashing with star patterns lending a nebulous palpation to the canvas.

The first one always did that to you ... a heady feeling, a rush more powerful than cocktails, Molotov or otherwise. 1st of the day 59th of the week and nth since he started ... The 20 pack was almost over and the new one in his other pocket had to last the next 2 days ... a daunting prospect ...

But that was at the back of his mind ... nothing could take away from him this intoxicating kick, a double whammy of spiraling smoke and towering heights. Far from the maddening crowd the solitude lent succor. It was weird the way this fire taming stick was like an amnesia inducing knock on the head.

The half eaten sandwich lay beside him, but his appetite, like always, seemed to desert him. These days it never seemed to stay for long, his appetite that is, like she never seemed to stay for long, his Amora that is. Nicotine appeased his hunger ...or at the least eased his pangs temporarily, for both that is ...

The stub had shortened. It was time to go. He walked 3 steps and looked back at the sandwich ... "Good lord, why can't I ever get this out of my system", swearing lightly he made his way back to the sandwich and picked it up. Maybe it was the magic of the night or his melancholy mood, but something echoed in his head, a picture of his mother came swimming into view, that sunny Sunday morning ...

"Mark, did you just throw your milk down the sink?", asked his mother towering over him, her eyes flashing.

"No, mama, I didn't , promise!"

"Wear your shoes, we are going out right now."

She picked up her wallet, walked down the stairs clutching his hand tightly. She hailed an auto and asked for Bombay Port Trust Land. He didn't understand what was going on or why she wasn't talking to him. It was a just a glass of milk.

Specters of the past never stopped haunting him ... Amora was imprinted on every cell of his sense and sensibility...

His mind slipped into a strange reverie as he remembered her smiling on the hospital bed holding his hand with her frail limp ones...her fingers entwined in his, the long painter's fingers which held many a cigarette in between them ...

He suddenly felt a frisson of cold run through his body and

AMORA AND THE ASSASSIN

Suddenly they entered a road on one side of which was the sea abound and the other side shanties... a sea of shanties. They got down there, she yanked his hand and took him inside one of the narrow lanes. It smelt horrible inside and he saw a boy half naked crawling through garbage outside the municipal dump ground beside the hutments. His ribs were prominent and he was definitely malnourished. Rummaging through the rubbish he found a packet of half eaten chips and started eating them. Mark almost belched. His mother gently put her hand over his head and said, "Sonny, you think of 1 glass of milk as a burden and throw it away like water, while this boy and millions others like him don't even get that everyday let alone food. It's your decision, Mark..."

To this day that lesson stuck to him and he couldn't shake it off. He just could not leave that burger there... He picked it up and took it with him down to the apartment on the 9th floor. Unlocking it he entered and unzipped his heavy bag. Just as he was about to open the leather case kept inside, the phone rang. He put it on the table and switched on the loudspeaker. A heavyset voice electronized by the speaker came out. "Mark, 10 minutes for the car to reach. You have exactly 2 minutes before he can enter the building. We are counting on you. I want him dead... tonight." The line went dead for they didn't need an answer. Mark was a man of few words. And yet till a few years back he had been the jester of the party and waxed eloquent while courting his amber eyed Amora. He looked at the phone and saw the date ... 30th January ... it had been a year now...He refused to let this mind slip again and concentrated on the job at hand. He unpacked the case and looked fondly at the metal beauty encased in velvet lying in front of him. His precious sharp shooter gun... He caressed its shiny barrel with his finger and remembered ...

forced himself to go back to the task on hand. He loaded the gun and put it in position to shoot...

He focused on lamppost. He saw a man there wandering about. "This is not good, he has to leave soon", he thought to himself. The man spit his pan out and threw a gutka wrapper on to the road and walked on in his stupor. Mark heaved a sigh of relief, but unbeknownst to him, his mind slipped back again...

"Ice cream for 10, Ice cream", the tinkling of the ice cream wallah made him tear his eyes out of his "Wizard of Oz" and look out of the window. He ran to the garden and tugged at his mother's sleeve with all the might of a feisty 10 year old, "Ma! Take me out! Ma! Ice cream! Pleaseeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! You promised last week after my throat would be all right I would get ice cream!"

His gusto made her relent and she took him out. He unwrapped his favourite chocobar and was just about to throw the wrapper when his mother held him back and said, "Child, that's not the right way. Put it inside the dustbin." Impatient to finish his ice cream he said, "But ma there's a pile of trash outside the neighbour's door what difference will one more wrapper make?" His first lesson in civic sense was just about to begin, and he was just 10...

Police sirens brought him out of his stupor and he became alert at once. The target was here. The car arrived along with 2 men on motorbikes and a police car. The pot bellied man got out... now was the moment. But something snapped inside him ... Voices started echoing in his head ... "My bonny lies over the ocean, my bonny lies over the sea, my bonny lies over the ocean, Oh bring



back my bonny to me....” Amora! Ah! His brain started hammering at the remembrance of their song just then when all he wanted to do was pull the trigger.

Ma ... Ma... Ma... His brain reverberated with her soft voice and he became paralyzed... He had been pulling triggers for so long now, but today something held him back ... It was overpowering, this feeling of guilt ... his longing for Amora ... his remembrance of Ma...

He pushed his conscience away and pulled the trigger ...

He dialed and spoke into the receiver, “Job done. Transfer it to account number 13013.” The phone went click and the line went dead. He carefully packed the magnificent weapon into its velvet case, slung it on his shoulders and lit the last cigarette in the packet. Inhaling the deadly vapors he opened the back door. He paused, and turned to look at the empty packet he had left at the table. He picked up the packet and put it into his pocket, closing the door behind him. Sandwich in one hand and the cigarette in the other something powerful knocked the breath out of him and he fell down on his knees in reverence. He smashed his fists over the walls again and again till blood covered them. He shouted in anger ...” MA...MA, why Ma why? Why didn’t you give me a lesson in this. Why didn’t you stop me from being a monster, why Ma why? If only u had told me that this cigarette will take away my life from me, MA! If only you taught me a lesson on being trigger happy “ His anguish was a terrible sight and the noise in his head competed with the confusion outside down below in the street. He remembered once again...

His Amora lay pearly white on white bedsheets, peaceful and almost wraithlike. She had a knowing look on her face. She cupped his face and looked into his eyes and said, “Baby, I love you ...And I know am going to die, just promise, that you’ll never again touch a cigarette. Its taken me away from you forever. Please Mark, please. Promise...” She had died later in the night in his arms. Died of terminal lung cancer and he burnt in her memory forever ... She had died one wintery 30th January ... And it was that time of the year again. He felt numb with pain. It had hit him after so long, this blinding, searing feeling in his heart.

He heard the police jostling below the street making their way towards the lift. This would not do. He would escape... Ma wouldn’t want him to escape; Amora wouldn’t want that cigarette in his hand... He took a long drag and stubbed the cigarette out. He walked towards the bookshelf and took out the blue books in the centre. Hidden behind, was a small door. He opened the door, replaced the books and made his way down the secret stairway to the ground floor. He turned up his collar and slipped away unnoticed from the back gate into a deserted alleyway.

He put his hand in his pocket and opened a 20 pack. He lit a match and shot one last glance towards the 13th floor. He would live and love all his life. This was his redemption, this torture everytime he lit a cigarette and pulled a trigger. This searing pain was his purgatory. He would be Lucifer,but he would burn... His Amora was up there, He had taken her away ... He readjusted his bag and looked ahead.

The assassin walked away into the dark swirling mist and after a few meters the only sign of life on the desolate pathway was the bright orange-red glow of his cigarette ...

PIXIE

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Quirk: Unveiling Edition 6

A new edition of Quirk releases every two months, with each edition showcasing a particular theme of relevance to the university community. We introduced ourselves with 'Why Literature' in January, gave expression to 'The Indifferent College Student' in March-April, grappled with 'The Artist and the Critic' in May-June and showcased 'My Place in Anarchy' in July-August. After 'New Moralities' in the previous edition, this time we are "Comfortably Dumb".

Writing for Quirk: The January-February Edition

We really do appreciate new writers contributing to Quirk. Apart from pieces exploring the theme, we encourage contributions of all other kinds - articles, poetry, stories, prose, visual art, crosswords, quizzes, trivia.....the list goes on. No restrictions on content or style or form. Go ahead, and surprise us with your literary offerings - you meet our quirky quality standards, we're good to publish!

The theme for the November-December edition of Quirk is 'Luxury's Lap.'
The flexible deadline for submissions is February 25th, 2006.

Email your submissions to quirk@nls.ac.in . For postal submissions, send your contributions to (please mark the envelope with 'Attn: Mr. Suhas Baliga'):
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Solution to Quirk Crossword 2

1	M	E	2	T	A	3	M	O	4	R	P	5	H	O	6	S	I	7	S
	A			U			E			A			Y		L				T
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