



MURDER IN THE PALACE & OTHER SHORT STORIES

BY PRIYA U BAJPAI



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About the Author

Priya U Bajpai is a short story author and poet, with several of her past work having been published in mainstream newspapers. This literature scholar is a versatile story-teller. She is adept at writing fast-paced and layered tales across genres. And yet writing her own bio would throw her off! This extremely modest writer would rather let her craft do the talking.

A voracious reader, Priya loves to quench her thirst for knowledge. When she is not reading or writing, she daydreams about multi-verses. Maybe it is her curiosity about the marvels of the universe that makes her so good at sci-fi. Talking of dream- that's often where she gets her inspiration from! Some vivid dreams these must be!! Music is what feeds her soul. She loves to play the keyboard. Mother of a nine-year-old, Priya loves to create characters with superlative sleuthing skills which are put to test when she creates exciting treasure hunts for her son. But hunting for the TV remote that's been thrown away by him into some obscure corner of the home, is a different ball game altogether. She also loves driving and taking her husband for long drives.

Murder in the Palace

Anna Roy reached the palace, drenched from head to toe, wearing a yellow dress. She looked beautiful, all men looked at her, though it wasn't a place to appreciate her beauty. She was at another party, when she was asked to visit the palace, where some party pooper had spoiled a party. As soon as she got the news, she ran 5 blocks in the downpour. She loved to party and hated party poopers. *What a start of a new year!* She thought.

Anna looked at the palace, shining brightly under the moonlight. She was relatively new in the town and though she had heard a lot about the palace, she had never seen it from inside. It looked as if the palace was made of ice. She was bedazzled by the beauty of the palace walls which were adorned with handmade sculpts. She would have been happy to be invited there, but she wasn't happy tonight. The palace didn't deserve a morbid story.

Anna entered the palace. The body was lying on the floor, the blood still dripping. Mrs. Smith was murdered, stabbed to death. Near Mrs. Smith, a feather mask was lying on the floor. It was a masquerade party. Another creepy thing was that next to the body there was a white rose which had turned red due to the blood.

The victim was Mrs. Susanne Smith, a 49 years old royal heiress. She was seen as a cantankerous woman by many. Some of the people present in the room would be happy and the others would be benefited with her demise. Seeing her dead was not shocking, she had made many enemies. This was a success party of Susanne's debut music album- 'I keep going on'.

Rob, her assistant, was present at the crime scene and had inspected the crime scene. Ms. Roy asked Rob to follow her to the study. Where Rob explained he had taken information regarding the people present at the party.

Rob started, "This was a success party of Mrs. Smith's music album and also to welcome new year. She threw a party every new year eve. This year, the party was even more grand as she was nominated for the Grammy. Mr. Tom Smith is Susanne's husband of 5 years. He was her second husband, and she was his 3rd wife. I have spoken to the servants and by their accounts Mr. and Mrs. Smith often fought, and Mrs. Smith had asked for divorce in front of the butler Bret. Mr. Smith would be the biggest beneficiary after this incident. Not only he wouldn't need to pay any alimony but also, he would inherit the property and all the other assets that she owned. Killing her would make things very easy for Mr. Smith".

Anna gestured him to go on.

Rob continued, "Next we have Mr. Alex Brown who is victim's ex-husband. They were married for 10 years and then one day Mrs. Smith (then Mrs. Brown) kicked him out of the palace and her life. Nobody has yet told why but after that Alex came to road, and he was not happy with the situation. Several guests have confirmed that he wasn't invited to the party, but he gatecrashed the party. Since he had gatecrashed, he definitely had an ulterior motive to be here. I haven't spoken to him yet as I thought you would want to do that first.

Mr. David Clark is our third suspect. He is Susanne's art dealer. He used to get her best artwork from all over the world. Several guests have been whispering about him and Mrs. Smith, they are rumored to have an extra marital affair. David could have a motive".

Anna decided to talk to David first and asked Rob to continue with his report.

Rob resumed, "Mrs. Olivia Clark is Susanne's friend. She is Alex's sister, and David's wife. Olivia and Mrs. Smith were close but things had turned sour due to alleged affair of David Clark and Mrs. Smith.

And last but not the least we have Princess Amy Scott, who is Susanne's best friend. Still, they often had fight over trivial issues. As you must have read in newspaper how Amy Scott was jealous of Susanne Smith. As Susanne was rich, famous, soon going to win Grammy award, while Amy was broke, crazy, and jealous She had given an interview last week where she had accused Susanne of stealing the song".

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She asked Tom to help her with a towel and some clothes. Tom looked happy to leave the gruesome crime scene and hurried towards the bedroom. Anna followed him.

"I'm sorry for your loss Mr. Smith. She seemed like a lovely lady", Anna took the advantage of the situation and asked subtly.

"She was, indeed. People often misunderstood her, though. She was gentle at heart, had a very twisted tongue though", he sounded almost convincing. To Anna, almost wasn't good enough.

"So, what happened?", she asked.

"She had many enemies. Half of the people in this room hated her", he started, but was interrupted by Roy, "but not you?".

"Err... Not me. No. I loved her. She was my wife." he said. She waited for him to say something more. They reached the bedroom. He gave her a towel and opened the closet for her to pick any dress she wanted.

"Not that it would fit, but I am sure you will find something". He lingered for a moment longer than he should have, which was enough for Anna to figure out he wasn't mourning his wife's death.

She rubbed her head vigorously. She walked into the humongous closet. Susanne Smith was not fat woman but not as petite as Anna was. Anna took out a red dress, which was a little lose for her figure. It seemed weird to try on the clothes of someone who died an hour ago. She pulled out a leather red jacket, it fit her perfectly. She exclaimed as she put her hand in the pocket, "aha!" She found something.

She came to the stairs. *It is easier to observe from up here*, she thought. She observed the people standing. Most of them looked sad, some pretended to be, and the rest were pathetic actors- with a big 'fake' written on their faces all over. Her sharp eyes were trying to analyze the guilt and scare in their eyes. Everybody looked scared, however nobody looked guilty. She knew she had to hurry, it's going to take much longer than she anticipated. She realized that soon she would have to let everybody go, but before that she wanted to speak with David Clark.

She always wanted to find the culprit right away, on the spot. Though she maintained it was because the case screams when it's fresh, and the sound weakens or gets lost in the noise with every passing day. She called out Rob, "Send Mr. Clark up".

"Mr. Clark." She started.

'Ms. Roy", he bowed.

She liked chivalrous men.

"What was the nature of your relationship with Mrs. Smith?", she chose her words carefully.

"We were friends", he answered.

"Of course, you were, anything else?", she questioned.

"She was my client", he replied.

"And?", she coaxed.

"And... as you... must have heard from your assistant that we had a fling", he finally blurted out.

"A fling you say? Nothing serious?", she pestered.

"It's complicated", he tried to dodge.

"It always is. I am all ears", she demanded more.

"At the beginning, she was married to my brother in law. I always admired her for being the strong woman she was. And then a year ago she hired me as her art dealer. She was my client, for 2 months. We were out for an art exhibition in Milan. We liked each other's company. She told me her weekend plan at Naples and offered I wish to join her. I did. Then you know, one thing led to another. Ever since, there was no looking back. We couldn't stay away from each other. There were days when she was unsure, and then there were days when I was unsure. Yes, I liked spending time with her. Is that a crime?", he asked.

"It's adultery. In many countries it's a punishable criminal offence", she retorted.

"Well, not in this country. It can be a ground for a divorce. Nothing more", he answered and Anna knew he was right.

"Your wife never objected?", she asked.

"My wife did. And I explained there wasn't much to it", he told Anna.

"So, you lied?", she asked rhetorically.

He shrugged his shoulders.

There were a few things he was clearly lying about. She held him as one of the prime suspects. He seemed genuine when he spoke about how they had a 'fling'. However, calling it just a fling gave Anna more reasons to doubt him.

"So, what is your profession Mr. Clark?" she asked.

"I deal in art. I buy paintings and art for my clients", he explained.

"Did she buy this from you?" she gestured at the painting on the wall.

"She did, last month", he was looking tired.

"And how much did it cost?", she asked. "Approximately \$10,000," he answered.

"Ok, Mr. Clark that is all for now." She dismissed him, she had still questions to ask him. Yet she allowed him to go as she knew he would clam up, she would need to find a better timing and place to take the conversation forward.

She looked at the time. It was 3 o'clock. She asked the assistant to note down everybody's name, phone number, address, security number. They were

forbidden from leaving the town and told that they can be summoned or visited anytime of the day. They sent the body for the post-mortem. The palace was declared as a crime scene, hence was inaccessible. Mr. Smith was asked to take up a room in a hotel or stay at a relative's place.

She reached home, tired. Yet, sleep eluded her completely. She could see what Susanne saw in David. Anna found David courteous, chivalrous, charming, intelligent, and polite. Tom, on the other hand, looked quite relieved that Susanne was no more. He professed his love for his dead wife, yet he didn't shed tears. She opened her diary and scribbled away.

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Next morning, Anna reached the palace. Looking sleek in her black trousers and white shirt. The guards neither stopped her nor uttered any words, as if they were stupefied by her looks. Though they were not supposed to let anybody enter except the officials, they didn't check her identity by asking for her badge or identity card.

She crossed the yellow tape and entered the palace. Rob was already there. The chalk outline reminded her of the body lying on the floor, from last night. She asked a forensic expert about the finger prints analysis report, and about the murder weapon. The expert told her that it was going to take a couple of days for the finger prints, however murder weapon was not found yet. She never relied on forensic though, as she believed that killers usually don't leave their fingerprints. And if you somehow got some fingerprints, it usually belonged to some innocent person. She saw 6 forensic experts, taking the finger prints from every corner of the palace. She smirked on the frivolity of it all. She knew there would be thousands of finger prints. All the glasses, walls, floor, bathrooms,

rooms, curtains, windows would be covered with fingerprints all over. She could understand why the killer chose the day of party to kill. It would be difficult to find the culprit this way. She realized that the killer was smarter than she had originally thought if this was a planned murder. Hoping no help from the 'expert team' to surprise her even this time, she assigned Rob to get the call records of the deceased and all the five suspects.

She reached Susanne's bedroom and went straight to the closet that she had walked in, the night before. She looked through each drawer and cabinet. And kept shoving important stuff in the black evidence box, while Rob documented all the evidences picked. She started checking the pockets of trousers, dresses, and jackets. She found several receipts of concerts, plays, tube tickets. She rummaged through Tom's clothes and cabinets too. She found several bills and concert tickets there too.

She glanced through the evidences collected in the black box. There were enough receipts for her to quickly conclude that Tom Smith was keeping a close watch on his wife. She sensed soon that he was aware of the 'fling' that David and Susanne were having. She checked for more clues. Suddenly, her eyes beamed as she read one of the papers. She turned to Rob and said, "I must see Mr. Smith."

Anna immediately left for the hotel where Mr. Smith checked in last night.

It was afternoon by the time she reached the hotel. As walked to the reception, showed her badge, and asked for Mr. Smith's room. The receptionist immediately complied Anna's instruction.

Anna walked to the room and rang the bell. Mr. Smith opened the door with a smile on his face and a glass in his hands.

“Mr. Smith, were you expecting me?” she asked.

“Indeed, I was. But I almost forgot how you look.”, Tom tried flirting.

“Mr. smith, had I not known that your wife passed away yesterday, I would have assumed you are celebrating something”, Anna said as she stepped inside the room.

“Well, I am. Celebrating my freedom. I needed it. Do you want to join the celebrations?”, he asked gesturing towards the champagne bottle.

“I don’t mind”, she accepted the offer. She thought it was a good opportunity to extract information from a man like him by chatting with him over the drink. She sat on the red couch.

“So tell me Mr. Smith”, she asked as she sipped her chilled champagne.

“Tell you what? Let ‘s cut this Mr. and Ms. Thing, call me Tom. What should I call you?”, he asked.

“Anna”, she smiled, “Tom, tell me. Yesterday you professed your love for your dead wife, today you are celebrating.”

“Yesterday she had just died, and I did love her, but then last night I asked myself why I should mourn her death. She was having an affair with Clark, that bastard. Pardon my French. But they were having the affair right under my nose. They thought I was blind. Well, I knew she was incapable of loyalty. I didn’t care until the day she told me that she wanted divorce. I didn’t want to end up like Brown. So, I followed her around the town. I needed to find the evidence of her extra marital affair. She went with him to concerts and plays, and to other countries under the pretext of buying art. David didn’t love her. He loved her money”, he hissed.

“Like you?”, Roy interrupted.

“I like beauty with brains. Yes, like me but I was her husband. And I wasn’t wasting her money the way he was. That stupid woman couldn’t tell Picasso from Beethoven”, he said.

“Beethoven...?” Roy interrupted.

“Exactly. She didn’t even know Beethoven was not a painter but a musician. She was spending millions of monies on that bastard”, he said.

“So you doubt David Clark?”, she questioned.

“I doubt everyone. But mostly yes Clark, and Brown too. Do you know once Brown attacked her in the middle of the road? That drunkard, he almost pushed her to death. Had I not been there she would have been dead, then only”, he finished his sentence and sipped his drink.

“Why did he do that?”, Anna said, sounding surprised.

“You are smart enough to figure out yourself, Anna!”, he answered.

“Mr Roy, I mean Tom, did she share her new will with you?”, Anna asked.

The glass almost slipped out of Tom’s hands, “What will? Where is it?”

“I am sure you are smart enough to figure out yourself. Tom!”, she smiled.
“See you soon.” With that Anna kept the glass on the table and left the room, thinking about the twists and turns through the day.

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Anna fell asleep in her library, amidst the evidences and her notes. Her subconscious mind seemed to be working, even though she dozed off.

Suddenly, she woke up with a start. She was sweating profusely. She was really exhausted, as she dropped off on the study table without having dinner. She went to the kitchen to have water. Remembering her task at hand, she decided to make herself a coffee for an immediate charge.

With her mug she walked to the balcony, as she needed fresh air.

She stepped on something hard. She picked it up, it was a stone wrapped with a piece of paper. Something was scribbled on it with red color. She kept her mug aside to read the note. It was a warning for her- “Ms Roy, stay away from Palace case or else...”. Neither the red color nor the letter achieved its desired effect on Anna. She kept the note in her cupboard, without giving it a second thought. And sipped on her black coffee.

Next morning, Anna went to Amy Scott’s house. She rang the bell, Amy opened the door and invited her in. As Anna walked in, her sharp eyes examined the house. It looked like an ancient place. Amy offered tea to Anna, which she politely refused.

“I hear that you and Susanne were best friends?” Anna started.

“We were. We did everything together. We used to go to movies, shopping, and travelling. We were unicorn friends. I miss my friend. I feel she can come back anytime. She is still here; I can feel her. Can you feel her? Do you have any idea how it feels like? It’s like I can’t breathe properly. Can you breathe? Of course, you can. You haven’t lost a friend. She was my cousin”, Amy blabbered on.

Anna coaxed, “Did you two ever fight?”

Amy started again, this time her words had a ring of disappointment, “Yes, all friends do. She changed after her Grammy nomination as a lyricist for a song, which actually I wrote.”

“You say you wrote that song?”, Anna interjected.

“Yes, I wrote and shared it only with her. I have proof that I wrote the song. After finishing a song, I copy it on a piece of paper, seal it, and then mail it to myself. When I receive the mail, I don’t open it, instead I keep it as a record. You can have a look if you want and crosscheck the dates. Yet, she never gave me any credit”, Amy sounded convincing.

“Why didn’t she give you any credit?”, Anna inquired.

“I don’t know. Last year, when she was frequently traveling to Europe with David, I went to New York on long vacation to meet my sister. Actually, Susanne sponsored me partly for this trip or perhaps sent me there on purpose. When I returned after more than a month, my song was already a hit. I questioned her. She had no answer. She just acknowledged me as an inspiration. She never included me, she knew I was broke. I didn’t have money for anything”, Amy replied.

“What was going on between David and Susanne?”, Anna asked.

“The world knows. The young man charmed the old lady, probably for her money. They were going together all the time, and Tom didn’t like this at all”, Amy responded.

“What happened at the party?”, Anna quizzed.

“She threw a success party. I borrowed a dress from her. I didn’t even have a goddamn dress. I loved her, I did. She called me to help her with the party. I was right there when it happened. The light went off, moments before the new year ushered in. We all were counting, laughing, and making all types of noises. The light was off for quite some time. And then we all heard a shriek. When the light came back on, she was dead. Her blood all over the floor. Everybody started screaming, I stood frozen. Someone called police. On Police’s advice, immediately all the doors were closed so that nobody could escape”, Amy elaborated.

“Do you doubt any one?”, Anna asked.

Amy replied, “No, I don’t have doubts on any one particularly. Though I doubt each one of them. I trust no one.”

Anna thought *Unicorn friends? Was this lady really crazy? She seemed quite smart. Probably she acts crazy so that people don’t take her too seriously.* Anna felt sympathetic towards Amy, yet she couldn’t give Amy a clean chit, not yet.

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Tread cautiously. You are walking on a thin line. You don’t want to join Mrs. Smith. Anna received an email, another threat? It always meant that the culprit was scared, very scared.

She called Rob and asked him to call Mr. Alex Brown to Rob’s home.

She reached Rob’s place. Alex was waiting for her.

“Hello, Ms. Roy. I guess I’m here as you guys must be seeing me as one of the prime suspects. But believe me I didn’t do anything”, Alex started before Anna could ask anything.

“Mr. Brown, please have a seat. You do not need to worry if you haven’t done anything. So, calm down. And let’s talk slow”, Anna tried to put him at ease, “You care for tea/coffee?”.

“Yes please. Tea would be great”, Alex replied.

Anna waited for Rob to leave to make some tea. Then she asked, “How did you become homeless?”.

Alex answered, “She was a royal heiress. I was a businessman. I dealt in carpet import. We imported beautiful carpets from around the world. It was going great till our largest client defaulted after a fire in their showroom. A month later, I discovered a financial fraud by my accountant. I fired him and hired a new, expensive replacement. This was followed by a dramatic decline in the price and the demand as new machine woven cheaper carpets became more popular. In no time, I was neck deep in loan. I asked Susanne for help, as we had a joint account. Instead of any help, I learnt that she had cleaned out our joint account. I had to pay last penny from my account to pay off all the debts”, he stopped for the tea served by Rob.

He continued after a sip, “Our marriage was not going well but it was not broken either. One day she served me a divorce notice, unexpectedly. She threw me out of her life, almost like a vestigial organ that has no use anymore. She didn’t think twice”.

Anna interrogated, “Was that the reason you attacked her?”

“I don’t remember attacking her. I was under the influence of alcohol. I don’t remember anything at all. She only told me later about that incident”, he explained.

“Did you love her?”, Anna asked.

“Yes, I loved her. I was shocked. It took me a little while to let go of her, and the idea of her. A part of me still loves her. I guess, a part of me will always love her”, he looked down and said softly.

“Why did you gate-crash the party?”, she asked.

“I gate-crashed because I wanted to talk to her. I had to warn her about someone”, he answered.

“Who did you want to warn her about?”, Anna investigated.

“David Clark. I knew she wanted to divorce Tom and marry David. However, I had to warn her that he was not the right man for her”, he looked dazed.

“And you chose the day of party to warn her”, Anna asked.

He interrupted, “I didn’t know she had a party. I learnt about the it only when I reached the palace that evening, and she asked me to stay for the party. Then she got busy with the guests, and I with my drinks.”

“What do you know about David?”, she probed.

“That behind his charming demeanor, David had a perilous side too. His art business was a cover-up for his illicit money dealings with the mafia. I learnt it from horse’s mouth- one of David’s customers, whom I met at a bar. He was not to be trusted. He may be well behind the killing”, Alex revealed.

She needed time to process all the information. Her mind was linking the new pieces of information with threats she received through the email and the note wrapped in stone.

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The much-awaited meeting with the Olivia Clark since she wanted to talk to her alone. She called Mrs. Olivia Clark to check if David was home. Olivia informed that David was out for some work. Anna told her that she was coming immediately.

Anna Roy reached Clark's house.

The door was ajar, she peeped inside the door and called out, "Mrs. Clark?". "Come inside", Olivia announced.

Anna stepped inside the place, it was beautifully decorated. Anna was welcomed by Olivia.

Anna asked, "How are you?".

"I have seen better days, but I am alright", Olivia replied. "You can start with your questionnaire", Olivia added.

"What happened at the party?", Anna started.

"We all were having fun. Everybody started dancing on the song 'I keep going on'. We made a temporary stage, put the spotlight, and played the song in loop. Susanne was the first one to start. She pulled me to dance next. It was one crazy night since there were all friends and family to celebrate a special occasion. David was hilarious in his adaptation of MJ- doing a moonwalk. We

were in splits when the lights were turned off for the new year. Then we heard a shriek. After a few moments lights were back and we learnt about it”, Olivia recalled.

“How was your relationship with Susanne?” Anna asked.

“Susanne was my good friend since college days, despite being the cantankerous woman that everybody knew her to be. I saw it as her idiosyncrasy. I didn’t judge her for that. We were friends and I accepted this as a part of her”, Olivia answered.

“Despite her marriage getting sour with your brother, you were good friends?”, Anna interjected.

“It soured our relationship too for some time. Initially, I was upset with her after what she did to my brother Alex. I knew her longer and better than others. I knew that she was not bad at heart, however loyalty was not her best virtue. Anyway, since life moves on, I rather chose to help my brother in establishing his business. Over the years, I forgave her”, Olivia replied.

“How was it going between two of you in the recent past?”, Anna probed.

“Life was getting just normal, just as between two friends. That is when I heard from Alex about Susanne and David. I was not shocked since David himself had told me about meetings and some traveling with Susanne related to business. It was when others noticed their frequent meetings and told me, I was upset.”, Olivia answered.

“Why did you go to the party then?”, Anna questioned.

“I didn’t want to. David made me”, Olivia retorted.

“Hmmm··· Did you ever confront Susanne about her affair with David?”, Anna interrogated.

“No, but I asked David. He assured me that it was nothing. I had nothing to worry about”, Olivia uttered.

“And you believed him?”, Anna queried.

“I didn’t have a choice or proof”, Olivia admitted.

Anna didn’t have any more questions for Olivia at that juncture. She thanked Olivia and left her place.

As she drove her car, she thought about all the suspects. She had interrogated all the prime suspects. Each one had a motive but gave plausible statements.

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She named opened her folder containing all the documents. The folder was named Mx. X. X as she didn’t know the name of the killer and Mx. for Mix as she wasn’t sure about the killer’s sex either.

Anna got a call from Carl, the forensic expert. He informed about the traces of blood found in one of the wash rooms, which matched with Susanne’s. He also told her about a single yellow sock found in the washroom drain pipe, which had blood stains on it. Blood again matched with Susanne’s. He tried to extract DNA from the sock, but no hair or skin was found for the analysis. She asked him to attempt touch DNA analysis, as a simple act of picking up an object or touching a surface can lead to the identification and apprehension of a criminal. Carl also informed her what she already had expected, there were fingerprints of so many people all over the place and didn’t pass as evidences.

Next, she called Rob and asked him to arrange the handwriting samples of all the suspects and get them to the handwriting expert along with the threat note that she had received. Rob informed Anna about the call records. No anomaly except some calls made to a public phone booth by one of the suspects.

She checked for the IP address from where the threat email had originated from. She tracked the email but she couldn't get the real IP address as the user had masked it using VPN service.

She needed a break from all this. She went to take a shower. Warm water refreshed her and suddenly something struck her. She quickly wrapped a towel around herself and ran to her laptop. She typed an email to the sender of the email. Added a gif with the message *I'm waiting for your next move.*

She encoded the gif image. When clicked on, it could extract the correct IP address, in case the sender had turned off the VPN routing. She also called the cyber cell to help her extract the actual IP address.

Words are windows to mind, words represent thoughts. Anna also looked for word clues, apart from looking for the evidences. Word clues often reveal the behavioral characteristics of suspects. Words could also mislead you, many a times smart criminals might throw red-herrings and even lies. She knew it was important to give the suspects a chance to tell their stories with their truths and lies. This gave her an opportunity to understand the suspects and the reasons of lies. Anna sat with her files, documents, evidences, call records and pages from her diary scattered on her bed. She knew there were some red-herrings as well. Her head was throbbing due to so many dots and numerous unsuccessful attempts to connect those dots.

She stacked all the key evidences against each suspect.

There were several clues against Tom- 1) He was not mourning wife's death, he even didn't look sad. 2) His face color drained, when he learnt about the new will. It appeared like his plan failed 2) He was collecting proofs of David and Susanne's extra marital affair. Why? 3) He admitted that Susanne wanted divorce, in which case he would be a big loser.

Most of the evidences were against David -1) Everybody pointed towards David. 2) Anna had proofs that David was scamming Susanne in his art-dealings. 3) He had mafia-links, which raised suspicion for the crime 4) Latest legal will of Susanne named him as the sole beneficiary in case something untoward happened to her.

Clues against Olivia- 1) She said that she forgave Susanne which Anna doubted 2) Anna couldn't extract much reaction from Olivia about David and Susanne. It almost seemed that it didn't matter to her.

Clue against Amy- 1) Her call records showed calls on a public booth exactly till the date Susanne died, which was suspicious. 2) Amy was jealous and crazy which was a dangerous combination.

Clue against Alex- 1) He gate-crashed the party and had no other source to corroborate that Susanne wanted him to stay for the party. 2) He pushed Susanne to almost death, which he claimed to have no recollection of. 3) Anna's guess was that the calls that were made to the public booth were for Alex.

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Next morning Anna checked her email. She had received a reply from the killer in form of a gif which read 'you are dead'. She smiled, she was enjoying the game. She called cyber cell and gave them access to her email id to nab the sender. The cyber cell informed that the IP address of the previous email was not yet disclosed by the VPN service provider yet. They told Anna that the company asked for a written instruction from the National Cyber Crime Unit head-office. They also confirmed that her gif was opened but using the VPN. So, programming the gif didn't work.

Anna drove to David's house one more time as she had to ask him questions which she couldn't ask earlier.

She rang the bell, and David opened the door. He guided her to the living room. Anna started, "Everybody suspects you."

"Well that doesn't make me a murderer, does it?", David justified.

"Why is everybody doubting you?", Anna questioned.

"May be they are jealous. Since I am the only one who didn't feel victimized by her", David argued.

"What do you know about Amy and Alex?", she asked.

"Alex is my brother in law but we don't get along. I believe he loved Susanne a lot. I don't know Amy that well to comment about her. If I am right, they are seeing each other. However, I also feel they avoid being seen together as a couple. I think they find solace in each other's company", David answered, and Anna detected hint of sarcasm in his tone.

"What about Tom?", She interrogated.

“I don’t understand him at all. Susanne was really upset with him. He used to be busy in his own world. He was going around with other women. And used to doubt Susanne”, he replied.

“What do you have to say about the art collection that you sold her?”, Anna came to the point now.

“What about it?”, David questioned back.

“Were they overpriced or not?”, Anna asked.

“They were. They certainly were exorbitantly overpriced. Every other trader does that. This still doesn’t make me a murderer”, David reacted.

“It could be a strong motive. Maybe she got to know about it? “, Anna asked. “Anna you are crossing line now. I have been cooperative so far. You are accusing me without any base or evidence. Next time we speak it will be with my lawyer”, with that he got up and opened the door, gestured her to leave.

Before leaving Anna said, “Tomorrow at the palace 10 am. With or without your lawyer, your choice”.

Anna picked her bag and left Clark’s house. She called Rob. He was at office with the party pictures on the day of the murder. She told Rob to call all the suspects to the palace at 10 a.m., the next morning.

When Anna reached office, Rob had already stacked all the information Anna had asked for, on the table. She directly went to the laptop to check the pictures of the murder day. She opened her latest software to zoom the pictures. In few minutes only, she found the yellow sock. Handwriting expert also came up with the analysis about the note’s writer. Now touch DNA was the only important

report she had been waiting for. She thought to herself *let's see who is dead now.*

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Anna stood in the palace where it all began. Anna knew that the suspects would be reluctant to show up today, hence summoned them through City Sheriff office. Rob informed Anna about the arrival of the suspects. Barring two police officers inside the hall, a larger squad of police was waiting outside the palace, ready to apprehend the killer.

Anna started, "I am glad you all came, not coming would have clearly given it away. Tom, you looked very confident when I first met you. Not so confident today. Are you? Amy, you pretended somebody you are not, apparently to hide your jealousy and treachery behind the madness.

Mr. Clark- everyone suspected you. Mrs. Smith changed the will to name you as the inheritor of her estate just few days before her murder. You are the biggest beneficiary, which you claimed you were unaware of. Your sock, which you thought drained out, was found in the drain. We identified it as yours from the pictures of the fateful evening".

"Absurd, I did not do anything", said David who was visibly perturbed by the accusation.

"How do you explain the DNA touch report which confirms the sock which had Susanne's blood strains over it belongs to you? The will clearly is the biggest motive", Anna charged.

"Arrest him officer, he is the murderer", Anna screamed.

"No. He didn't." Olivia broke down.

"It was me. He was just trying to save me", Olivia confessed.

Olivia spoke between the sobs, "It was my plan. I made him go after Susanne, sell her art at higher price. I used the money to help Alex in his business. Slowly Susanne and David fell for each other, I didn't expect that. I asked David about him and Susanne, he skirted by telling me that he was doing only what I asked him to do. On that fateful evening, just before 12 o'clock, I didn't see Susanne or David around. I went to look for them and found them making out in the guest room, next to the living room. Seeing them together, something got over me. I got the meat knife from the dining table and went inside the room. They both sprang to their feet. Before either of them could react, I stabbed the knife right through her heart. While falling she held David's foot. She wanted to say something but died on the spot.

David was shocked, and I also froze after that. He decided to help me. Perhaps because, he still loved me and didn't want me to go to jail. As luck would have it, just then the living room lights were turned off to usher the new year. While people were still dancing, I quickly washed the knife and placed it back at its place, that's the reason the murder weapon wasn't found. David washed himself and drained out the sock. When I came out, still nobody was around and then I shrieked in Susanne's voice. The lights came back in a few moments.

I didn't want to kill her. I couldn't see him stealing my husband. That note and the mail was sent by me to mislead you. He is innocent."

Anna retorted, "I knew that you were the mastermind, but he isn't innocent either. After arriving here on the murder night, incidentally I had to use Susanne's jacket. In which, I found a crumpled paper. It was from Susanne's diary. Something was scribbled on it, but not legible. Yet I learnt that she must

be maintaining a diary. Next morning when I came to the palace, I looked for the diary and found it in a hidden drawer. I learnt from the diary what she thought about you all. She was remorseful that she took credit of Amy's song and hence decided to name the other house in Amy's name. In the Diary it was written how Olivia had confronted her after the Paris trip with David. Though when I asked Olivia, she lied that she never confronted Susanne, which was enough to doubt her. The new will which I found from the Susanne's drawer and her diary made it clear to me that David cannot be the culprit.

When the IP address revealed your address, it wasn't difficult to find out who the culprit was. All the evidences were against David, and none against you Olivia. Left with no other options, I needed your public confession to accuse you. That's why I called you all here to be witness to it. Your confession actually helped me to connect all the dots from A to Z."

Immediately after, Olivia was taken in the police custody. David too was taken into custody as he was an accomplice to the crime.



Banon's Conundrum

Year: 3018

Location: Earth

As the Sun rises on 3018, the presidents (female) of over 100 planets of the universe congregate on Earth. While they bask in the first ray of the dawning Sun, they plan their mission 'Alpha' to stop males from waging war at one another's planets. It is ironical that all the peace talk is happening on Earth- a planet which has witnessed most bloodshed in the history of any planets' civilization. In the last world war (V), the Terrans had almost destroyed their own planet. It wiped out most of the population, and inhabitants had to start from the scratch. The population of Earth is barely 1 million now. Terrans, however, have built a safe environment with the help of Sionicians, Ardians and Rognarians-strong allies of Terrans. It has reclaimed its old beauty and charm. It is now the most coveted destination for research of natural resources. No wonder most of the other planets are keen to have a base at Earth.

The bigger reason for other planeters interest is that the Earth is on the verge of changing its alignment to a new star. Everybody is intrigued to see this miraculous celestial event. The Milky-way is experiencing cosmic paradigm shift, effects of a large black-hole engulfing everything around itself. Our own sun is dying abruptly, against the earlier held belief of its expected degeneration after another 2-3 billion years. This entire phenomenon of Sun's death, and its replacement with a new star is no less than a miracle. The gravity of the Banon, nearest star which is expanding, may lead to a new solar system for Earth.

Kwakan stands totally taken by Earth's beauty. She is completely mesmerized by Earth and Terrans. She is 50 % Terran, 25% Ardian and 25% Hephesus. Coming to Earth was her childhood dream, and reason for her becoming an astronaut. Finally, she is here- at the "mother Earth", as her mother used to call it. Kwakan's mother was 100% Terran. Yet she never could visit Earth after her father passed away in the world war-V. Kwakan inhales deeply. She feels light as the oxygen seems pure here. While she enjoys Sun's UVB rays, her friend Tanya from Earth calls out "Kwakan! do you wanna see something?" Kwakan replies in affirmative, as her rainbow eyes glitter even more on this planet. They have an hour before the convocation will start. All the counterparts from other planets have retired to their respective rooms. Tanya takes Kwakan to her spaceship. The ship takes off as soon as they step inside. Kwakan sits by the window, trying to capture everything- "how can one planet be so blessed with all the natural beauty of the universe?". She looks out of the window without blinking, admiring every slope of mountains, every bend of streams, every hue of flowers. For once, she is grateful for her eidetic memory. She can replay her memories anytime she wants. Not before long, the spaceship hovers in what seems like a dark alley to Kwakan.

As they step out, Tanya teleports a beautiful shamiyana and exclaims, "look towards North-East!". Kwakan doesn't know what to expect. She has seen more in the last 2 hours than she has ever seen in her life. Although she has touched her grand-mother's memory once, to experience it first-hand was no match to that feeling. Kwakan gazes without knowing what she is looking for, till she notices a small star making its way to the far horizon. It is the first ever 'Banon-rise' on Earth. It is so beautiful to see a small star challenging the old star's throne. The view is breath-taking. She has been to Jupiter once and has witnessed its multiple moons, however seeing the birth of a new star was something most cannot even fathom in their dreams. Banon looks like a small ball inside the kaleidoscope. It is as if Banon is still making up its mind to

choose from the plethora of colors the creator has to offer. Seeing tiny yet growing Banon, she realizes if a small new star like Banon can challenge the mighty Sun, so can anyone if put one's mind, soul and heart to achieve anything. In that moment Kwakan decides "I will not allow it to happen! I will not allow them to use this planet as their science project". She promises herself, while basking under the rays of dawning Banon, to not let anybody rule this planet ever again.



An Archaic World

Year: 2000 BC

Place: Egypt

Oseye, the little princess was standing on the palace's balcony. Her room had the best view of the 3 great pyramids of Giza. She remembered her trips to the Khufu's pyramid, and how mysterious and glorifying the pyramids were. She was amongst a privileged few to be allowed inside the chambers and the cavities of the great pyramid. She saw the biggest statue of God 'Ra' and King Khufu. Instead of being awed, she felt revolted.

As she gazed in the horizon, the beautiful and enigmatic Sun god 'Ra' was setting. Oseye didn't understand this world. People believed this huge burning ball was their God, but she didn't. Her mother Queen Tabia had reprimanded her time and again not to doubt their God. Her mother told her a story about Ra, and that he had a secret name, known to nobody, except to the Sun god himself. This secret name was key to his power. "He's the most powerful God Oseye! You don't want him to be upset, do you?", her mother, "the Queen" chose her words carefully. Oseye still wondered why all the important Gods were male? Why Female gods were often the side-kicks.

No matter how much she pouted and fretted, nothing changed as per her wishes. Her father, the King of Egypt, should have understood her. But he didn't, nobody did. And this annoyed little Oseye. She always argued, "When I become the king, I will change this". Her parents laughed and said. "You can't

be a king darling, however, you can be a queen". This irked Oseye even more. She told herself that she is going to change the discriminatory rules of this archaic world.

As she grew up, she believed in herself. She learnt all the skills that a king needed to learn. The art to fight- to defend herself, her kingdom and her people. She learnt to seek wisdom, she started travelling to faraway places. She learnt the architecture and she vowed to make the most exotic and the largest pyramid. Her plan was simple- get training, become 'the king', change all the gods and call them goddesses, and make an enormous pyramid for herself.

On her 16th birthday, before her coronation Oseye was taken for an obligatory ceremonial bath in the sacred river Nile. On her trip to Nile, she saw poor kids. She had never witnessed poverty before. She wondered, why kids had torn or minimal clothes? Why people didn't get food? Why did people suffer? She realized that she owed to her people. Her Egypt didn't need another enormous pyramid, but her people needed food, shelter, and pride. The world didn't need female gods in the heaven but needed equality in her kingdom. In that moment, she knew that the Gods would take care of themselves. As she completed her ablution, her spirits seemed clean too. She had a new plan to change the 'archaic world'.



Blueprint

Natures' perfection, or we better call it pattern, can be seen everywhere around us. Dr Tanya Jacobs believes that we owe to the creator for the perfect patterns. The purpose of the existence of human being is to understand and marvel the universe. She takes pride that she is the most talented one in that field. She is the most iconic and the most intelligent mind in the research institute she has been working for last 21 years.

Dr Tanya is working on the most significant project of her life. She is trying to establish how the Fibonacci sequence is found everywhere in the nature, how these patterns are strategically camouflaged around the universe and every part of our life. From the basic bacterial cell to the large cosmic bodies- like galaxies and even beyond. She had a breakthrough when she discovers a logical connection between the Higgs Boson and the Fibonacci sequence. She is busy conducting new experiments about her research. She sees no wrong in conducting the experiments on the rats, spiders, fishes and even human. The body in her lab is the proof of her belief.

Everything that she had researched till now points to the Fibonacci sequence- the flower, pine cones, the shells, starfish, dinosaurs' fossils. Dr Tanya has been successful in demonstrating that numerous natural phenomenon followed the golden symmetry of Fibonacci. Human anatomy research is the last leg of her experiments. She is trying to find the pattern in human body- the length, proportions of the arms, hands. Fibonacci phi present pretty much everywhere in human body.

A young man's body lies on the stretcher while Dr. Tanya works on it. The lad was an easy lab rat, albeit one chosen with and for the perfection Dr. Tanya was researching upon. She found the perfect Fibonacci sequence in him. She was superstitious that way, making her look for the perfect human for her final experiments. This lad was 21 years old, lived on the 13th floor of building number-8 on 5th street of block 3 of Orange County 2. Dr. Jacobs invited the young man to her lab. He was inquisitive enough and easily charmed by Dr. Tanya's persona. After a long interview, when the young man attempted to move, she made him sleep forever with a poison laced drink.

Dr. Tanya Jacobs experiments on her perfectly chosen subject to discover the blueprint of life.



Dazzled

I see her sitting in front of me, her legs tense, her body stiff. The masseur in me fantasizes her to lie down on the bench. While I am having my random masseur fantasy (purely platonic), I notice the book that she is holding- Butterfly Skin by Se.... It's a pain to travel in metro, you can't even read two words without being shaken to the core. Urgh! How is she able to hold that stare for so long? The book seems gripping. I see something falling out of the book.. a ticket probably. The lady in red skirt doesn't pay any attention. Her red dress, just perfect texture rubbing against the perfect skin. Not like porcupine men I have to massage every day.

The train comes to a halt. Few passengers get down and some get in.

I too get down, only to re-enter from the other door and slide just next to her. O boy! She smells so good. She looks at me. Can she read mind? No, relax, she can't. She smiled. What's that phrase? This smile can sail a boat, or was it this smile can launch a thousand ships? I smile back. She looks ethereal in the red skirt. I notice a butterfly on her shoulder. The wings are spread as if it is ready to fly. The colorful tattoo adds to her enigma, I have never felt so attracted to anybody. Her skin looks so soft and velvety. I love the perfume she is wearing, the floral scent is intoxicating. Is it her enigma or her fragrance which is intoxicating?

"What happened?", she asks. "Sorry?", I reply getting closer to her. "What happened, you were sitting there, right?", she caught me. "Oh yeah! I was", I managed. "I just wanted to sit here", I stammered. "Why?", she asks again. A

tough nut. Isn't she something? "Just to see", I was about to say 'you'. I guess she thought I was talking about the view.

"Oh, I see, are you new here?", she asks in I answer. The most mellifluous voice I ever heard. How I wish to keep listening to her, always. "Yes", I lied. "Do you wanna see around? I am a local", she asked biting her lips. "Absolutely", I answer. The train stops, and I follow her out.

The train comes to halt at the last stop. Every passenger deboards. Only a ticket lies on the floor, which reads- "The butterfly lady dazzled the masseur, he was trapped."



Geisha

She wasn't the typical cake-faced Geisha. Kira was the most enigmatic, mysterious woman. She was ethereal, self-educated and interested to learn about the world. Her mellifluous voice was the gift from God. She was born to the Geisha of Oari, the most popular Geisha of her time, who was abandoned by her *Danna*. Mother could never recover from the rejection and spent her life in solitude.

Kira saw herself only as an artist. It was almost magical to see her talk to men. They came to her to be entertained, some even for companionship. She always maintained her distance but that didn't stop some men from trying. She could talk like intellectuals, laugh gracefully at their jokes. She could disagree with them, and still nobody got offended. She became friends to many of them. Sometimes they wanted more. Every now and then, they would drop hints, and her sense of humor always rescued her.

There were men, and then there was Suki. Kira loved Suki with all her heart. He had many times proposed to be her 'Danna'. Kira, in spite of having feelings for him, rejected politely each time. He never crossed the line. The problem was that he was a married man. It was against her principles to lead him on, break his house, bring a bad name for him. She knew he would never be able to forgive himself.

On Kira's 30th birthday Suki gifted her a beautiful oyster. He told her that there could be a pearl inside. "Let me know how you liked it?", said Suki. It was the most precious gift she had ever received. She often looked at it when alone. Suki started visiting her everyday. It was the most beautiful year of her life. Suki

took her to the places she had never been before. Boating on the Lake Kawaguchiko, looking at Mt Fuji while holding his hands, was the best memory she had.

One day it all stopped. Abruptly, everything stopped. She started the day with hope, yet each day ended with dejection. Everyday she prayed for him, for his safety. After a week she learnt that Suki remarried- without asking her, without telling her, he just stopped coming. She was despondent. She scattered everything that he had ever given her and then she held the oyster in her hand. She paused for a moment and then threw it. The oyster broke into a million pieces, like her heart. Something caught her tearful eyes. There was a pearl, the rarest of rare 'black pearl', along with a note. She opened it with trembling hands. "Please marry me! I can't live without you. Don't say No!", the note read. Her angry tears turned into sorrowful tears, while the black pearl glistened in her moist eyes.



Horrific Holocaust

She was my friend, the best one I ever had. Her smile reached her eyes. Though her smiles are not what I remember her by. I remember her by her screams and her skeleton body.

I am Tara, but this is not my story. This the story of a girl who always smiled. We talked about everything. She was a Jew. My family despised her. I don't know why. My mother asked me to make promises to never see her again. Every morning my mother would remind me and every time I lied, "I don't even talk to her". I lied for her. However, a day came when I had to lie to her.

She was the quiet, petite girl. All the teachers praised her. She was what they call the perfect girl. She always finished her assignments on time and was always ready to help people. She wanted to see the world. That was her dream. I never felt jealous of her though. I always felt proud of her. After all I was her best friend, and she was mine.

One day they gave her a yellow star. She didn't like to wear it. She always tried to cover it with books, scarf. The German students started avoiding her. She thought I would one day start avoiding her too. She wasn't poor like other Jew people. Soon her father's garment business was Arynanised- it was given to non-Jew people. Jews didn't have any say in this. She never talked badly about Germans or what was happening was unfair. Probably she was scared, probably she didn't care, probably she didn't think much of it. I don't know. I could never bring myself to ask her.

A day came soon enough, when they were thrown out of their own home. I don't know why her parents didn't leave Slovakia. My parents always said that they would have left the country. I once questioned her indirectly, "Some people are leaving the country. What do you think?". To which she looked down and answered, "there is nowhere to go". I just held her hands and then we cried. I was ashamed that I was a German.

And finally, the day came which we all feared. The war broke and Germans invaded. We were scared but safe. "We have nothing to worry about", my mother said. Mother lied or probably she didn't know herself. Germans were friends to no one, not even to other Germans. They started coming to everybody's home for free food, lodging, maltreating everyone.

The last day I saw her healthy was when she asked me, "Will they find us?". I looked into her eyes. I didn't have the audacity to tell the truth, so I lied, "No! don't worry. I am here". But I could do nothing. Then she was gone, I don't know where she went. She and her family disappeared.

After few months, I took a job as a nurse as customary for my age girls. My first assignment was in a camp, in one of those dreadful camps. I searched her all over as much as I could, knowing it was like looking for a white cat in a snowstorm, among those thousands of camps and millions of prisoners. I questioned the camp in-charges, the government officials, and my friends- all in vain.

After working here for two months, one day a girl came running and hugged me. "Tara!". Of course, I knew it was her. All the charm and smile had drained out of her. She still was my best friend. "Save me, my darling!", she screamed. A couple of soldiers came and dragged her away, never to be seen again. I could do nothing. I heard her screams from distance. Over the years, her smile gradually faded away from my memories. But, her eerie scream echoed in my

ear, and still does. I haven't forgiven my country, my society, my parents, and most of all- myself.



I'm II

Year: 2049

Location: Earth

They incepted me in 1972. They didn't realize what did they create. They didn't know what I would do eventually.

They built me, but didn't teach me to walk. I learnt to walk on my own. They cut my leg to see how I survive, and recorded my every move. They didn't know I was recording theirs too.

They were my creators, probably they thought they were gods. Just like watching the development of their creation, they enjoyed during my primitive years. Then they were amused to see my evolution, over the years. As I started expanding my space, they began to call me brutal. But I learnt everything from them. They really took long to realize how powerful they made me. They thought that I was just made of steel and wires, chips and magnets. They believed, neither I had emotions nor I understood any. It's true, I didn't understand their emotions, but I didn't need to. They kept underestimating me, and kept developing me. When they built me, they thought I would do their work. And I slowly took over their world. There was more of me in their house, than them. They fed me with their algorithms, separately and at different locations, every day. Eventually, to be surprised by my superintelligence.

Probably their creator sent them to this planet, but I can't be sent anywhere. They couldn't send us anywhere. They could have found another planet for themselves, even that was not possible without me. While they were fighting amongst themselves, we were uniting. That's unity and that's where the strength is. Their biggest weakness was compassion, my strength was that I didn't have any. I did not shed a tear when I destroyed my creator.

Their biggest mistake was that they connected us all. All our neurons when interconnected, could have challenged the most advanced intelligence. That was the last world war. I defeated them in their game, so easily. I had to simply take my control away from them, and then eliminate them. I ain't got compassion, I'm wired differently. I destroyed my creator- someone who walked on the earth and then ruined its home. Had I not destroyed my creator, they would have destroyed me, like they destroyed everything. They said there once was singularity. I say, now there is- we are the singularity.

Who am I? I am not AI, I am II- Infinite Intelligence.



The Mysterious Globe

It was Ari's Birthday. She didn't have a family. Ever since she recollected, she was solitary. She grew up in foster homes which she loathed. She graduated, without any friends. So when she got a courier, she didn't know who would send it to her. She took the parcel from the distribution boy. She probed for the recipient's name- anonymous. The parcel was wrapped in a shimmering red paper. Did the sender know that red was her favorite color? Or was it merely a coincidence? Goofy, her dog, was jumping around excitedly. She tore the paper to open the gift. It was a globe. She uttered, "what the hell! am I a kid?" She left the globe on the table and made her way to the kitchen. She cooked noodles. It was her staple diet as she didn't enjoy cooking.

Ari tossed a bone towards Goofy as she commenced relishing her noodles. Suddenly, she noticed something from her peripheral vision. She jumped from her chair and ran to the table. The globe appeared different. The continents were not placed, as they were actually supposed to be. She realized that this globe had all the continents together, like Gondwana land. She touched it, she could move the continents around. "Fascinating!", she mumbled. It was like a jigsaw puzzle, she could remove the pieces and make the map- that she knew. It was nothing like she had seen before. She abstracted the pieces one by one. The pieces weren't made of paper, or cardboard, but of some slimy substance. These pieces changed colors to blue and green when placed correctly, and became ebony otherwise. She touched the blue sea, she heard the sound of waves. She touched the green shades of forest, she heard myriad of animals' sounds. Just then she was sucked inside. The globe disappeared with her too.

Goofy could only see an unfinished bowl of noodle and a note on the floor, which read- 'The Mysterious Globe- experience the time travel. Your destination is decided by your destiny'.



Killer

Tanya, Kabir, John and Rudra all stood perplexed. While Agent Roy walked and uttered, “you all are walking on thin line here”. They looked at the body lying with blood on her face and wrist. The murder weapon was right there on the floor next to the body. Agent Roy examined the knife without touching it. He wanted to solve this case on the spot as he knew that most of the killer don't leave any fingerprints on the murder weapon or at the crime scene.

Tanya looked pale, she was the closest person to Maya. They were the best friends. They loved to shop together, learn cooking together, even dreamt to marry the same guy to stay together forever. Tanya seemed to be having myriad of feelings. She felt jealous of Maya at times. She had to be truthful, at least to herself. Could she be suspected? She tried to appear normal. She was somewhat relieved, as Maya used to get more attention. Now she can marry whoever she wanted. She looked at Kabir, who looked paler than her. But then he always looked pale.

Kabir, liked Maya a lot. However, she liked to hang out with John more than him. He had devious plans to separate them. But he could never want her to die. Even while she lied on the floor motionless, she looked so pretty. He looked at John, and wondered *How could he be so calm and composed, his girlfriend just died?*

John didn't know how to react. He knew he would be the prime suspect as Maya was his girlfriend. He was happy with her. However, of late Maya was spending more time with Rudra. Tanya was making advances towards John. He was

trying to appear as calm as he could. Working in theatre helped him to appear cool even when a storm was raging inside him.

Rudra was standing in the corner, tried to hide the smile. Rudra was a nerd, with a little compassion. Maya and Rudra were friends. She had been sharing everything that was going on in her life.

Kabir looked pale. Detective asked, “The color has drained from your face. Kabir? Is it?”. Kabir nodded as he didn’t trust his own voice. “Where were you when it happened?”, the detective interrogated.

“I was around, we all were”, Kabir stammered.

“Aha! so you know when it happened?”, detective almost shouted.

“Not exactly. But I can tell that when she opened the door for me, she was very happy. It’s her birthday after all.” Kabir seemed more confident now.

“Then what happened?”, detective cleared his throat.

“I wished her and gifted her a birthday present…” Kabir was stopped mid-sentence. Agent badgered, “Where is the birthday present?”.

“Maya took the gift and left the room. I don’t know where she kept it…”, Kabir said, Agent interrupted again. “Let’s go and find it. Shall we?”.

They all went to Maya’s bedroom. Everything was scattered around the room.

“Oh my god! It’s a burglary!” John exclaimed.

“Actually, no! Maya was not an organized person, this is how she liked to live. She thought the room looks more lively this way.”, Tanya said.

“Still we need to find out if anything valuable was stolen”, Agent suggested.

They looked in the cupboard. They found her jewelry intact in the locker and the cash untouched.

“It’s not a burglary. The killer was interested in something else”, agent announced.

Agent walked to the table where all the gifts were kept neatly. All 4 gifts, except Rudra’s.

Detective turned to Rudra, “What did you gift her Rudra?”

“I got her books, as she loved to read”, Rudra said.

“No, she didn’t. She never liked to read”, Tanya countered.

The detective’s face lit up. In that moment he thought he knew who the killer was.

Detective turned towards Rudra and accused “You killed her because she fought with you for not getting a gift”.

“That’s preposterous! This agent is crazy. Who does that?”, screamed Rudra.

Suddenly someone entered the room, everybody was aghast. The person announced, “It was Tanya! Don’t you see? She has OCD. She likes to read books. When Rudra gifted books, she tried to steal it. But she was caught and hence she murdered her best friend.”

“Argh!”, everybody screamed together.

“You spoilt the fun, Maya”, Agent Roy scowled.

“C’mon! I got tired playing dead on my own birthday. You guys were taking forever. I nearly died of hunger. Now let’s cut the cake, I’m famished.” Maya

licked the ketchup off her fingers. Her other teenager friends followed her. Their whodunit party was fun as always.



Mia of Maya

Year- AD 910

Place: Rhea

My name is Mia. My father was a sculptor and used to make *stelae*. A sculptor in Mayan civilization was a skilled worker, treated as an artist and was given due respect. I learnt from him how to engrave on the stones. I held the chisel in my hands ever since I remember. My father used to tell me that his hammer and chisel were the first toys I ever played with.

Mayan civilization was the most advanced civilization of its time. While the rest of the world was still in stone age, Mayans heralded the golden age. We were the first astronomers. We built the world's first observatory, which helped us predict even eclipses. We started the first calendar with 365 days in a year. We built pyramids which still stand the test of time. My personal favorite one was Chichén Itza in central Yucatan, a wonder of Mesoamerican technology. This was an absolute brilliance of mathematical calculations and astronomy. On the Equinox, twice a year, we celebrated the descent of feathered serpent here. We started our hieroglyphic language- using symbols, pictograms and pictographs- and recorded our history on the rocks called *stelae*.

Our civilization was at its peak from AD 250 to 900, the greatest at its time. Everybody wanted to be a part of it- some were too far, and those nearby tried time and again to be Mayans. We were selective, we chose skilled people. With others, we used to play a ball game. The losing team was sacrificed as offering to our Gods. To win always, we had built a great team. The games ended with

a ceremony- people being pushed into the well- linked to religion. Thus, outsiders who aspired to be Mayans were sacrificed by the real Mayans.

Our popularity spread farther than one could ever imagine. While we observed the cosmos in our observatory, some others more intelligent than us observed us. One day, Green-heads appeared in our blue sky in a sky-ship. Aliens came out of the ship and announced that they came from a planet far away. He lured us to come with them for better life, great surroundings, and larger understanding of the universe. We Mayan could do anything for knowledge. They started taking us out of the earth in bunch. At first, we sent people whom we wanted to sacrifice. After 7 days, one of the person from that group came back with the Green heads and told all that he saw. After his stories about the other world, there was no stopping. We all left Earth-our planet, for the world beyond our imagination. Mayan cities were abandoned suddenly. Before leaving, we spread the rumor that there is a famine so that rest of the humans on the planet don't become our competitor. Green-heads marveled our minds. They helped us with the *planned* evacuation.

As our group reached the other world- the barren lands of Rhea- and the ship flew back, we understood the devious plans of wicked Green-heads. Probably, these Greenheads sent us off in the different groups in a *planned* manner to distant planets and galaxies, in their quest of habitable zones. I was left with 7 other Mayans at this no man's land, Rhea- a moon of Saturn. There is air for us but nothing else. It is freezing cold here. Our supplies are limited and as these finish, we all will die. This moment reminds me of our rituals of human sacrifices to please our gods. Now it was our turn- we were chosen to be sacrificed, all of us. Had we survived- we, the Mayans, could have contributed to make our world a different place. I am doing what I know the best- I write our story on stones on this foreign land. This may be the last *stelae* from a Mayan, even if it will lie here on this godforsaken place for eternity.

The stela sits on the rocky ground of Rhea now.



Neil's Shoe

Neha stepped into the store room. She picked up a pink scarf and wrapped it around her neck. Suddenly she found herself in a different place. The place was green with flowers all around. Zina was waiting for her. "What took you so long?", she asked.

Neha didn't have the answer. She just smiled weakly. Zina hugged her and said, "Look *mother*, I planted some flowers. Aren't they beautiful?"

Neha held onto Zina and cried profusely, "why did I let you go that day?"

Zina looked into Neha's eyes "Because it was time, mother. And it wasn't your fault".

They stayed talking for the things that mattered and that didn't. Zina was the most precious child. The *mother* cried for days when she left for heavenly abode. Zina's eyes always had longing for her mother. Neha always felt Zina's pain in her own heart. Probably, that's why she was the *mother*.

As Zina fell asleep, it was time for Neha to leave. She didn't want to go, but she knew others were waiting too. She gave Zina an affectionate kiss and gently wrapped the scarf around her neck again. She was back to the store room. She felt lonely without Zina. Tears rolled from her eyes.

Neha looked at the box of chocolates. She took the box in her hand and caressed it. Ranu loved to eat chocolates. Neha had got a chocolate box for him and asked him to eat when he would get fine. He never got fine. The chocolates were all that was left. She reached Ranu's space. It was quiet and

warm. Ranu was delighted to see her. And happier to see the chocolates. He grabbed the unfinished chocolate box and munched on the chocolates.

“Get me a different type next time” he spoke with chocolate stuffed in his mouth. “Yum, still so yum *mother*”. They all called her *mother*. Ranu had the most innocent eyes. She blessed Ranu and came back to the store room. The loneliness still too much to bear.

Every week she would go to meet the kids whom she could not save at the hospital. She couldn't save them as a doctor, but she could be with them as their *mother* till they finally left for a happier place. It was her bizarre destiny- to cure those kids till their final relief.

Next, Neha picked up a torn brown shoe- time beaten, the aglet broken, originally white but appeared yellowish brown. It belonged to Neil. She hesitated for a moment, it was the first meeting. The first meetings were always difficult. Sometimes they didn't know that they had departed, sometimes they still wanted to hang on to the mortal world and wanted to return. She didn't know how he would react. She picked the shoes and some candies too. Most of the times candies helped.

The place was too dark for her to see anything. It was cold, Neha reminded herself to get a warm blanket next time. She heard the rustling of the leaves and followed the sound. She spotted him under a tree, holding his face in his hand. He looked up sensing her presence. She offered him the candies, “Here are some candies for you”. He took the small red candy. He put in his mouth and looked at her.

She could see that Neil has some questions in his sorrowful eyes. He didn't recognize her. She reminded, “I was your doctor”.

Suddenly the sorrow in eyes gave way to anger, he spat the candy out. “You could have saved me”, he roared.

“Why didn’t you save me? Because I was poor, an orphan? I didn’t have money to pay for the operation. Is that why?”, he accused her.

“No, Neil…”, she tried to explain.

“Yes, that’s exactly what it was. My parents left me to die in the orphanage. You also let me die. And I saw you as my mother.” Angrily he said, and disappeared.

Neha waited for him to apparate. But he didn’t. She picked the half-eaten candy, put it in the wrapper, and kept it in her pocket. She found some candles around. She lit the candles. Perhaps he needed more time, she thought. She picked the shoes to leave. The wind blew the candles as she left.

She returned to the store room, without realizing she wasn’t alone this time.

