

GEORGE OF THE JUNGLE

“Chapter 1, Introduction to Miracles

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Each day should be devoted to miracles. The purpose of time is to enable man to learn to use it constructively. Time is thus a teaching device, and a means to an end. It will cease when it is no longer useful in facilitating learning.”

- A Course in Miracles

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George removes his helmet, his greasy orange coveralls which he wears over the office uniform when he works on-site, and washes off soot from his hands and face in the bathroom. The power plant he works at provides for this – for bathing soap, washing soap, cleaning clothes, protective gear, water, electricity, mess food, even two jute bags full of jaggery, for jaggery, it is believed, soaks inhaled coal dust. What an employee need own here is his hours. After eight-nine hours of field work, there is your largely empty room in the Bachelor’s Hostel and there are your remaining hours, your space and time, unless you are a married man and are living with your family (there are those who have their wives and kids live as paying guests in the nearest city, at a six hours drive, for better schooling options). Then it’s too late.

George changes into loose clothes, picks up his pencil box and the thick, hardbound ‘Executive Year Planner – 2013’ in one hand and one of the two foldable iron chairs in another, and goes to the building’s roof, latching the door behind him. The Bachelor’s Hostel is located at the farthest end of the township, farthest from the lone *official* entrance adjacent to the power plant, so, on one side

is visible the complete settlement: A to D blocks of the housing colony, the shopping complex with a bakery and confectionary store, a pharmacy, a hair salon and a general store, a newly built four-storeyed junior school which will commence its first session this year, a park with a small temple, a church, an under-construction Executive Club where the few senior executives play extremely competitive badminton in the evenings, and the boiler and chimney of the power plant, perpetually burning, perpetually smoking, purporting to light bulbs in every fifth house of the state. There is a group of small villages to the left of the plant, of labourers and milkmen and others who depend on the plant for living, invisible in day but dots of yellow in dark.

And right behind, is a hill. Round, formidable, dense with undergrowth and stillness. George places the chair facing it, on a marked position. He goes through recent notes, singles out a tree and, with a ruler held strategically across his nose, first horizontally then vertically, marks the tree's coordinates. Then, he *gazes* at it.

One hour later he returns to his room with a bleeding nose.

When such things happen – when there are bleedings or nightmares or sudden illnesses that keeps him to bed, – when suffering overwhelms him, suffering which is a physical repercussion of his personal endeavours, George wonders if he really has gone too far. George's best friends think his way, of austerity, is of sainthood, a necessary preparation for a modern Gandhi or Thoreau, and George is going to end up doing something big, while George's mother thinks he is hiding in the jungles, running away from responsibilities of marriage and family, and also possibly from competition, for he could easily have been making much more of himself in the US or Bangalore. George laughs away at these notions. He can see how, from what is visible of him to them, these notions can come to form. There is the life of his classmates – wedding a working girl, hunting for a decent apartment, calculating EMIs and maintaining monthly budgets, planning a kid, cheering

for an IPL team and jeering at speeches of aging politicians, gearing resumes and interviews to land at higher paying jobs. A life too systematized, given shape and trend by powerful outside forces. A life curious on google, loud on facebook and almost mute offline. How far can this life be from anybody's reach?

But then, what would be inside him that will make him reach out for such a life? That which would be dead – both reason and magic killed it. What remains now is subtle, elusive, hard work, time and again it succeeds in planting seeds of doubts and longings in him, but it too will be removed. What else is there to do?

George takes a bench next to the temple in the park and observes kids making palaces out of mud. After sessions of *gazing*, he likes to be out, watching people. Most of the faces are familiar. The confluence of housewives and kids in the park is large as such, but it only highlights the sparseness of the population. In another five years, when a second unit of 500 MW will become operative, there will be heavy recruiting (George will have left by then), so the township will develop rapidly. There will be more things to do. Swimming pool, basketball court and an auditorium that can serve as a cinema hall on Friday nights. These are the anticipated promises. Invitations for tenders for a family restaurant and for broadband internet are already in newspapers. Things are going to change drastically but George suspects that people will still be complaining. They want out. They, like his classmates, want a city life, in the city. They feel left behind, perhaps correctly so. Whether you overhear them in the boiler maintenance room or at the park bench, men and women, their conversations are a roster of complaints. Too much ash. Too much dust. No McDonald's. Takes three days to reach home... What if these people secure a life they desire and then start to miss the life they have here, in Sonbhadra? What if their reminiscences become a litany of lost perks - the comfortable routines, the country peace, the entitlements and privileges of a field posting, the two jute bags full of jaggery?

Only the kids here are happy, busy as they are making mudhouses. Contractors, department supervisors often say to him, Sir, you seem to be the only executive happy to work here, only one happy to squander his youthful years for nothing. How come? George shrugs. Firstly, because it is not for nothing. Secondly, because: what is this matter of happiness? There is the matter of fixing the machines and there is the fixing of them.

But, sir, you must be lonely, they ask, all alone in your room all day. You don't even party (they wink at the word 'party' or make a sign of drinking with their closed fist and raised thumb). How do you fill your hours? To this George smiles and replies mysteriously, in good humour: I don't.

George gets a call from the control room. The evening shift in-charge is confused about today's entries in the log book. George explains that new logics were installed to bypass the primary ID Fan and run the standby, so that the unit does not trip if the oil pressure drops within the new margin. Once the primary fan runs at full capacity, tomorrow morning most likely, the old logics will be reinstalled. The shift in-charge does not appreciate the fact that circuits are changed. Change means coping, learning, but this is a matter of one shift; and what George does makes sense more often than not. He asks George to keep his phone on & charged, in case there is an emergency. George says he will.

George remembers a line from this book he was reading last year:

Suddenly, without any warning, at any time or place, with no apparent cause, it can happen.

It may not. It may. By his assessment, there is time. By his assessment, a lot of work remains.

George listens with some delight the intermittent whistles of an unsighted bird with some delight. It is a new, original tune, never before sung in the universe and never to repeat. A tune for this evening alone. The tune stops playing after a while, and George figures he won't be able to hear it

again because the recitals from the park temple will be loud. It is twilight, time for prayers, worshippers are gathering in the shape of a ‘U’ around a priest. In Calicut, in the church of St. Peter’s Senior Secondary School where he studied for fifteen years, prayers were less enthusiastic. Emphasis was on grace not devotion. Though George is labelled an atheist (when they ask him *the* question, he does not say I don’t believe in God, he says what do you mean, he plays Socrates), George has always been drawn towards places of worship. Mosques and synagogues, some from the times of Portuguese and British, over three hundred years old, were within a cycling distance from his home in the inner city. They served as milestones in his cycling routes, and he would turn his head as a rule and gape at them, intrigued by their mysterious, very still presence, but would rarely go inside. In the college in New Delhi he studied at, most of his batch mates did not even know what a synagogue was. They were Hindu and had never been to mosques either, and the churches they had visited were part of sightseeing spots in tourist places, churches that were ancient and empty and echoing. The chief concerns of youth it seemed were the two ungettables: good grades and good girls, not answers to the big philosophical questions, not the pursuits for an authentic life. It was then that George immersed himself in self-inquiry, missing classes, skipping get-togethers, resorting himself to his room for days on end, emerging only to eat and walk. George often thinks the initiation into *gazing* was a natural culmination of this phase.

He notices a girl in violet looking at the park, at him, from the terrace of her house. Somebody new to this place – somebody’s cousin or niece, spending a short vacation here. For some reason, her mere presence makes him think about sex. Had George not known how dangerous this mistake can be, to counter his unwated thoughts he would have risked *gazing* at her. Trees, plants, dry leaves are benign; not people, not animals, not even bugs, – be it shamans from Mexico or tantriks from the Himalayas, the early *gazers* are advised to strictly stick to flora alone. Once, on a whim, he tried *gazing* at a squirrel climbing down a sewerage pipe. He was looking out from his room’s

window, the squirrel could not have seen him, but it stopped in its track and turned its head in his direction, responding. It hung completely still. Slowly George began to see the throbbing skin of the squirrel's neck, could feel the tremendous tension in its muscles that enabled it to hold steady in a magnificent posture. But it was the eyes of the squirrel, black and impenetrable, that absorbed most of his attention. He *gazed* directly into them until they became much too fierce for him, inducing a fright in the pit of his stomach. He broke the trance abruptly and drank water straight from the tap. That night he had a nightmare which featured an enormous squirrel, the same one perhaps. The dream was a sort of slideshow of things he might have seen in his waking consciousness, things that had momentarily struck him as strange or intriguing but which he did not stop to examine in his preoccupation with thoughts. All those images inspired awe and fear, but the squirrel's image was horrifying, and it remained stuck in his head for a long time, making him consider giving up the whole *gazing* endeavour altogether.

Another call from the control room. George explains the changes all over again to the night shift in-charge. The night shift in-charge jokes to him about spoiling their sleep, and he too asks George to keep the phone on and charged. He won't be needed alright, they have got the thing covered, but just in case.

George leaves the park and, upon reaching his room, steps into the shower. Bathing is a kind of necessity after an evening stroll. It is said the architects took adequate care to plan the power plant such that winds flow towards the Ash Dyke, not blow from it towards the township, but over the years the winds have behaved circularly, or whimsically, especially in late summers. Surrounded on two sides by hills and on one side by a large water body (on which the power plant feeds), no one knows what mechanisms govern the drafts in that season. What everybody knows is that they are inhaling a bit of dust and ash with air. Since the hazards take years to show as

greying hair and bad digestion and pain in joints, they are tolerated. Nobody believes they will stay here for a lifetime.

He applies shampoo on his scalp thoroughly and rubs the overflowing froth on his underarms and groin. Briefly, he is overcome with the temptation of arousing himself. His hands move to his nipples, his eyes close, but there is no prompt response from his body, no immediate fantasies in his mind. George splashes water on his face and stares at himself in the bathroom mirror. He reminds himself the rule considering this matter: if he has to indulge he must see the thing as it is – not an act of making fantastical love, but an act of self-love to the self. Not a future possibility, not a travel through time into a distant past, but an act performed in these very moments, in this 7'x5' bathroom, right next to the stained potty.

How about now?

Time for dinner, but George decides to skip the meal. He feels his body will do better by fasting tonight. He mounts himself naked (but dried) in front of his desk and makes today's entry in the planner.

July 29, Tuesday

- 21x, 11y, Dhaora. Typical ethereal white aura, about 5mm thick. Stable.

Denser above the trunk. I could be wrong but the tree seemed to be injured near its base, the aura wavered there and shifted to lighter shades. Also, a curious film of fluorescent-green around a rain quail perched on one of its higher branches... what the fuck. What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck. What the fuck are you writing, what the fuck are you doing. And WHY? There is no way round this, George: the futility of this whole exercise has never been more obvious to you. Okay, so it does may you see through the apparent solidity of the material world-visible some aspects of the physical existence that most human eyes are trained to overlook (you are clever with language, George!). It is a, or was a, natural progression in your inquiry - to experience firsthand what the great seers professed or promised. Alright. Conceded. But: what now? How do you go further? Wherefore? There is infinity to explore but what do you make of all that you see?

Why persist? This matter may fall outside the peripheries of intellect (you agree this assertion is debatable) but there has to be some way to determine its usefulness to the self?... Now that you can see more do you know more? And does that knowledge make you any wiser? What is that you seeking through it?

You are stuck. You are stuck in a cave you are mistaking for a tunnel - the light at the other end is a reflection of your own light. You cannot wait to hit a wall to be sure. There is no going back of course, but that doesn't make the status quo (nice word!) acceptable. Your time here is over. Is over. Is over no doubt. Find others. There have to be other gazers, many more. There are books - books that are elementary or mythic but books that have been written nevertheless, and published and sold and read and understood. There must be those who understand when you talk what you want to talk about, those to whom you can communicate what gazing does to you. There must be those like you who have seen mysteries lurking in every inch of space, who have known their terror, who have been stuck where you are and know the way out, or ahead.

A reminder (from November 08, 2012): Peace cannot be a matter of rationalization it has to be a matter of fact. If my peace is in seeking, without a path or hope, I must seek still.

Hmmm.

-(Nose bled – held the breath for too long. Again, more on that later)

-Saw a girl in pink, at Sarma Sir's house. Her hair reminded me of X. Denial of loneliness only makes one deluded, but the memories of X, my desire for X – aren't they just residues of reality? Real only as residues? If they don't mean less, they shouldn't mean more either.

George mulls over what to write next, then, not feeling anything rising inside him, switches off the lights. There is no TV in the room, no internet, no radio. On the desk, besides a couple of notebooks and the year planner, is an old, grimy copy of Hesse's *Knulp*, read twice, and a recently purchased copy of *Doors of Perception*, discarded midway owing to a distrust for Huxley's over-enthusiasm. Even if George feels like indulging in

some activity, right now, there is essentially nothing to indulge in.

He sits quietly on his chair, waits.

At around midnight, when most of the bachelors have confined themselves to sleep, George picks up his wallet and cell phone (kept on silent) and strides out. The dark and deserted road behind the Bachelor's Hostel, fancily called The Ring Road, connects nothing to nothing - it circles around the township, along its boundary wall, and serves no practical purpose even if upon conception it served a theoretical one. George walks along it for a while, then, from a big enough pass in the boundary wall he squeezes himself out and trudges along the foot of the hill. The real danger - the only real danger in this venture - is of stepping on a snake; snakes would be awake, hungry, sniffing rats; but they are too few in number to pose a real mathematical danger. Nervousness still grips him. A primal nervousness, engendered by darkness. To calm himself down, he remembers the three fundamental axioms he believes to be true:

a) *Nothing real can be threatened* b) *Nothing unreal exists* c) *Herein lies the Peace.*

The effect is immediate.

George walks on to a hut on the far side of the hill, visible by the single oil lamp hanging from the hut's porch. George pays obeisance to an old lady sitting under him. She offers him a pipe of cannabis (which George accepts) and leaves. George is inexplicably nervous again. He turns off the oil lamp. From under the porch, wrapped up as if in a thick darkness, he peers at the night sky with his shining, unblinking eyes. The stars appear truly countless from here. Each star singular, alone, each pair millions of light years away from each other, but they are closer in ways mind cannot comprehend. They share the same space. They weave it. There is no space if there are no stars, no time if there is no light. Nothing if nobody is *gazing*.

George is sweating despite the cool breeze. He closes his eyes and

reclines on the ground. The absolute stillness of the place, broken only now and then by cries of jackals, is doing something to him. He feels as if the land beneath him is breathing with him, as if the sky is pulsating within his ribcage. He is going in, in - sucked as if by an inner vortex.

He wakes up to the soft touch of a hand on his forehead, to the familiar whisper of a young girl whose name he cannot recall. “George?” she is saying. He turns to see her and finds around her face a faint glow.

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