

To the Moon I go and Other Stories

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Abstract

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What an astronomer or a physicist imagines is not what an astronaut or a spacecraft finds. All prominent astronomers including Aryabhata, Brahe, Kepler, and Galileo were astrologers too as at the time, astrology was a discipline tied to the study of astronomy and mathematics. I'm extremely interested in astrology: the study of the movements and relative positions of celestial bodies for the way that they influence human affairs and the natural world. I find it fascinating how we have modified the precious technology of astrology, by refusing to look at it in depth, for mere entertainment purposes in the recent past. With the Moon that tugs at our tides, Jupiter that constantly deflects asteroids from us, and the Sun that sits in the right spot to protect the Earth from becoming a molten rock or an icy ball, it's hard to dismiss the power of the planetary influences on both the animate and the inanimate. 'That the sky does something to man is certain, but what it does specifically remains hidden,' said Kepler. Doesn't all that is hidden conceal itself within us also? What is interesting to me are those intangible aspects of planets, those planetary properties and archetypes that 'get inside a person'.

Rocks, silicates, orbits, methane rivers, diamond rains, supersonic winds are all elements of outer space. Of these, some we know to exist while some we imagine. One cannot fully know through explorations or observations as their inferences always change with time and technology. For the ancients, studying the movements of celestial bodies, was a question of survival. It was important to keep track of their positions relative to the Earth and understand how to prepare for a season and predict future events. As a result of their observations over eons, we have a complex, empirical, intuitive technology for forecasting that is used to this day. Such a tool is the birth chart — a snapshot of the sky that shows the position of each planet at the moment of our birth. A typical birth chart starts with the ascendant or the rising sign and illustrates which planets, constellations, and signs occupy the twelve houses that it's divided into.

The country that introduced me to astrology is India and for the same reason, my short stories are set there. In India, I find a wide variety of interesting characters from different strata of society and I see a drastic difference in culture, beliefs, and customs, from state to state. The inspiration and ideas for my stories come from my study of NASA explorations, missions, my research on astronomy, specific planetary positions in birth charts, mythology, planetary mediums, compositions, and visible features of planets, stars and other celestial bodies. I'm sharing my dreams, emotions, fears, and thoughts about celestial bodies in this collection. My stories invite dialogue about questions from the planets' perspective. How would a planet feel being in a deserted orbit? How would it feel when it comes in close contact with another? How would it feel when a spacecraft encroaches on its privacy? If astronomers develop emotions and cry for spacecraft they sent out to space, and if astrologers can find ways to worship and appease the planets, why can't we all feel for planets too?

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Sun



Fall of the Sun

Why don't we build temples and churches for our immediate ancestors? Does somebody have to be long dead to be revered? Perhaps that's because on Earth, we don't have as much room as in Outer Space. All dead stars glow, don't they? But they glow for a while and then disappear. Except for those that are cursed with an unfortunate dark fate. Some die young, some die when they get old. If alternate universes exist would there be a replica of me in that universe? Or would my energy just merge onto that body in that universe? If the events in both universes are similar with slight changes, then would I carry my errors in the current universe with me when I go someplace new?

I oversleep a lot these days. I start dreaming when I'm half awake. I see myself near a carousel in a crowded theme park. It's fully alive with rides for children, food stalls, and costumed characters. I pick the carousel because I want to see people circling about me, chatting, and having fun. I choose a purple pony and climb onto it. The view from atop the moving pony makes my head reel. I am full of life. The Sun shines through the clouds and casts a circular light on my pony. The spotlight makes the pony feel so special that it jumps higher. We go higher and higher, and the pony asks me to stretch my hands to reach an orange cloud. As soon as I touch it, the orange turns purple, the color of my pony, and then turns gray. My handlebar, the one I was holding on to breaks off my pony and I hang in the air and I'm tossed about by the wind only to land on the base of the carousel. I lay there, unable to move. The pony, my pony, falls into the base of the carousel, and disappears into it. I lie there on the base of the carousel, still.

"How did you manage to fall from a pony?" a man asks me.

I wake up when a cold wind blows through the window next to my bed. It makes me feel small and hollow. From what I hear, it whispers in wind words, "Enough for now. We'll come back later." Who is the wind talking to? I cry, not knowing what else to do. I call for my mother.

She doesn't respond. Perhaps she's gone away to another universe. What will I do left alone? A few minutes later, I hear my mother's footsteps. She's next to my bed so I take my face off the pillow to look at her with complaining eyes. But it isn't my mother. It's a shadow assuming my mother's form. It's looking at me with sympathetic eyes.

"Please, may I have something to hold on to?" I say.

No response.

She, the impostor, circles around my bed, goes up to the wall and draws a black dot on it.

If she drew it, why don't I see it? My bed moves towards the invisible dot. I hide my head under the pillow. My blanket is torn off me and the pillow fights hard to get away from my grip. I finally let go and it starts to revolve around the dot.

I see the dot now. It gets bigger and bigger.

I look up and see my bed, another bed, another me in my room safe under the pillow. She isn't breathing. All the cotton from the bed explodes and I go down with the bed and the pillow.

The girl in the room is dead.

I go with earth shattering speed into another world. I hope to enter the body of a newborn or a womb. But I enter my own body, again, and I lie in the same room. This time my mother, in flesh and blood, walks into my room, hearing my cries.

Sun in Leo

The Sun represents the soul in astrology. It's the strength or willpower used to deal with difficult situations. It also stands for the father, fatherly figures, authority or government. It represents fame, what is seen from far, mountain peaks, enlightenment, and spiritual progress. The Sun symbolizes the rise and fall of a person as the sun itself rises and falls from east to west. When it is in Leo in a birth chart, the person is attracted to bright, well-lit surroundings, prefers to be outdoors, or to wander in places around people. They are especially fond of the sunlight and dislike the darkness and are often even secretly afraid of it. It's not uncommon for them to sleep a lot, and not stick with the clock. When they fall sick, it's usually a temporary but intense ailment, rather than a lingering one, and when they're attacked, the opponents' moves are also sudden. These people are generous, independent, and if they put their mind on a goal they usually reach it. Only treachery, disloyalty, and other dark deeds can crush their spirit. They are highly susceptible to the environment and they have the tendency to take on the habits and conditions of others. They also feel a strong need for attention or to be witnessed – they feel like if something isn't seen by others, it doesn't have the same impact.

When Black Holes Call Stars

Imagine, you're swimming in a river, and as you swim, the speed of the medium through which you move, which is water, increases, and then at some point, the river's speed overcomes your speed in such a way that you're not able to swim back. Just so, if the Sun or any ordinary star were swimming in space, it wouldn't know that it were going into a black hole until it crossed the event horizon, which is the border of a black hole or the point of no return. Beyond this point, all matter, even a particle of light that's trying to go upwards will be pulled down into the black hole and stretched unceremoniously. The speed at which this happens is faster than the speed of light, but as the black hole also spins, and rotates spacetime itself, halfway or further into it the speed of the falling matter reduces due to the repulsive force produced by the rotation. At this point, the matter that rebounds from inside the black hole tunnel collides with the matter that falls into it producing ridiculously high temperatures, much hotter than inside of a star, hot enough to vaporize all matter.

When matter is infinitely condensed in a region, a black hole is created. Some black holes are ten times as big as the Sun; some others are a million times as big. The term black hole is quite misleading as it reminds one of vacuum or a space with no matter, but a black hole is nothing but matter imploding or falling into itself at a high speed. According to the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, our Milky Way galaxy has a few hundred million black holes. Astronomers can only observe the event horizon of a black hole, and even that only when a star orbiting it starts bleeding or shredding itself, particle by particle. Dwarf stars, like the Sun, crush Hydrogen atoms into Helium releasing a tremendous amount of energy. This energy in the form of radiation, pushes against gravity, maintaining a delicate balance between the two forces, and keeps the star burning for much longer than bigger stars. This means that in a star, as long as there is fusion happening in the core, it remains stable, but for stars much larger than our Sun, the heat and pressure in the core fuses heavy elements until they become iron. The problem with this is that the fusion process that generates iron doesn't release any energy. Iron

builds up in the center of the star until it reaches a critical amount that breaks the balance between radiation and gravity. This causes the core of the star to collapse or cave in, within a fraction of a second, moving at about a quarter of the speed of light, feeding even more mass into the core. This results in a Supernova explosion, the eventual result of which is a neutron star, or in the case of massive stars, the entire mass of the star collapses into a black hole.

What would happen if you fell into a black hole? Physicists say that the experience of time is different around black holes. From the outside, as you approach the event horizon, you would feel like you're slowing down. At some point, you'll freeze in time and disappear. From your perspective, it's like seeing into the future — you can watch the rest of the universe in fast forward, seeing into the future. Nobody really knows what is inside a black hole, or what becomes of the matter that goes inside. The diameter of the largest black hole we know so far is 47 times the distance of Pluto from the Sun. No matter how powerful or massive black holes are, they will eventually evaporate due to a process called Hawking radiation.

Mercury



Mercurial Worries

I was on the flight from Abu Dhabi to Calicut on Air India Express. After the regulars: banana chips in a tiny packet, the stale samosa, bread and cheese, and Appy Fizz, I decided to introduce the topic to my mother.

“I want to go see an astrologer.”

“An astrologer? Why? What ails you now?” said my mother.

“I just want to go.”

“But you just went to one last year.”

“A lot of things change in a year.” When the time was right, I pestered my mother again and she agreed to take me to another astrologer my grandmother knew. I had been secretly studying astrology and I knew my birth chart by heart now. I’d learnt the properties of all planets and houses thoroughly. On the day we were going to the astrologer, my mother was alarmed by my excitement.

“Listen, please don’t irritate this astrologer as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean don’t ask too many questions. Is that understood?”

“What’s the point of going then?”

“I’m in no mood to argue. Do whatever. Try not to embarrass me.” A narrow road next to a grocery store led to the astrologer’s office. It read, ‘Mani Panicker’, ‘Mon-Thu 7 AM to 7 PM’. We sat in the Mani Panicker’s office lounge which was a narrow corridor furnished with a long bench for clients to wait. There was nothing entertaining other than a copy of the morning newspaper and occasional squirrels on coconut trees in the front yard. We’d heard from my grandmother that Panicker was more famous for his arrogance than his predictions. People waited for hours at his office even with an appointment. While we waited, my mother put her glasses on and started racing through the newspaper. How was I to start talking to the intimidating astrologer? Perhaps he would start speaking as soon as he took a look at my birth

chart. I clasped my birth chart written in Palmyra leaves close to my heart. After an hour and a half, the astrologer's assistant called us in. My heart started to race again and I hurriedly put my chart back in the envelope. I practiced saying Namaskaram on the way to his door. My mother shot a glance at me which was a signal to remind me of her earlier advice. The astrologer's build was disappointing - a frail, shirtless man with a sacred thread on his body like a sling bag. He had two lines of sandalwood paste on his forehead and a red dot in the center. His stoic expression showed that he had no more questions for the universe. The intense smell of incense sticks overpowered me and I forgot to greet him.

“Namaskaram, Panickerey!” My mother said with hands folded.

“Please sit,” said Panicker, unable to bring his lips to a smile.

“Thank you,” my mother said. I still had the same smile pasted on my face. We handed over the palm leaves envelope that had my birth time, place, the planetary positions during my birth inscribed on it. He took it, put it to his head and chanted a prayer. After this, he took some cowrie shells out of a small pouch and put it on the chalk-drawn chart gracefully, still chanting. After 10 minutes or so of chanting mantras to the Universe, he finally decided to break the ice.

“I see you are studying Arts.”

“Yes”. I said, grinning to initiate more dialogue.

“Born in Ketu-Venus-Saturn dasha. Shukla paksha, Sukarma Yoga, Magha nakshatra... hmmm... pada one... Yoga at birth, Atiganda at 37:46 ghatas. According to the Karakamsha lagna, Venus rules your fifth house, sits in the tenth house of Pisces receiving the aspect of Jupiter and Mars. Your entire life pattern will ultimately settle in fields of arts.” He makes the verdict. He moved around some cowrie shells counting the number of years I had lived. The shells showed the present state of the planets on my chart. “It's an auspicious chart. Have you come for a marriage consultation? Marriage will be...”

My mother sat forward as soon as she heard the word, ‘Marriage’.

“No, no. I wanted clarity with some of my problems.” I interrupted him.

“Really! Clarity with what sort of things?” said the astrologer said looking at me down his nose with a smirk.

“So I have read some books on planets and houses and I’m satisfied with the explanations of all the planets and houses in my birth chart except one.”

“What books?”

“Lots of them! I even follow this one astrologer on YouTube...”

“Ha! YouTube! Then why have you come to me? Has your internet gone bad?” said the astrologer and laughed awkwardly.

My mother stamped my foot with hers and glared at me.

“So you were having some issues, you say?”

“Yes. Umm...”

My enthusiasm started to diminish under the questioning eyes of the astrologer and the hostile air in the room. The fumes from the agarbattis were now suffocating me. I had half a mind to flee the place but I wasn’t going to get another chance with any astrologer.

“Yes?”

“I want to know more about my second house planets.”

He looked at the chart on the table and said, “The second house is clean! No issues there.”

“Sun, Saturn, and...” I said

“You mustn’t worry about Sun and Saturn being in the same house! Saturn moves to the first house in your Bhava chart.”

“I am not concerned about Sun and Saturn.” I blurt out, feeling rather stupid.

The astrologer seemed aghast at this remark and leaned back in his chair in a dramatic fashion. “Oh! I see I see...you are not worried about the two most important grahas in astrology!”

My mother's face flushed with embarrassment and said, "Kids these days have lost all their senses to their computers." She was making it clear to the astrologer that she had washed her hands of me. But the astrologer had bigger concerns.

"Look, you have no problems in the second house. Studies are good. You have support from family too. I don't see a problem." Panicker looked at me to see if I was satisfied.

"What I really want to know is about Mercury. Could you say something about that?" I plead.

"Oh...did I not tell you earlier? You have Buddha-Aditya yoga. Your Sun illuminates Mercury. It makes it shine."

"No-no... you're mistaken! I don't have Buddha-Aditya yoga. Buddha-Aditya yoga is when Mercury is not combust but my Mercury has been burnt, right, Panicker?"

"Listen, I have been doing this for twenty-five years now. Some people who come to me are not happy with my predictions but I will not change my readings as per their whims and fancies," said the astrologer giving a tug at the sacred thread he was wearing. "If that is what you wish I suggest you go back to your modern YouTube astrologer."

"Yes! This is exactly what happens!" I respond frantically. "People always misunderstand me! When my boss is about to give me a raise, I ask for a month's vacation and he changes his mind. When I try to make a request, I never do it at the right time. This is exactly my plight!"

"What are you blabbering!" said my mother, "I am really sorry...forgive her, Panickerey...she must be tired after her long flight."

"So are you suggesting you have communication issues?" The astrologer asks me ignoring my mother's apology.

"Not exactly. I think a lot about unnecessary things."

"What sort of unnecessary things?" The astrologer asked with a hint of boredom in his voice.

“All sorts of petty, unimportant stuff but that’s not what bothers me.”

“Then?”

“By the time I think through these things for hours and decide to act on them, the time has passed, you know?”

“So is your problem that you think too much or that time doesn’t wait for you? Because if it is the latter, I’m afraid I won’t be of much help. It’s all in God’s hands.”

“What I’m worried about is the proximity of my Mercury to my Sun,” I said woefully.

“Mercury being close to the Sun is not a rare thing. I see that in 90% of my clients’ charts,” said Panicker.

“I mean, from what I read the Sun should have completely burnt my mercurial skills of communication but it doesn’t feel that way, perhaps because my natal Mercury is retrograde too?”

“I think the reason that you are troubled is that you don’t pray and read way too much on the internet.”

“Umm...my retrograde Mercury makes me think too much about everything and when it’s time to use those thoughts, they become stale and I end up irritating everyone. Like I am irritating you, now!”

“I am not irritated. Don’t go on assuming stuff!” The astrologer scowled.

“So if my Mercury is both retrograde and combust, it means the Sun can’t really burn my Mercurial skills of speech, perhaps, because of the retrograde?”

Panicker wiped the sweat from his forehead and switched on the fan. “Did your YouTube astrologer say this?”

“It’s something I read,” I lied, “that a retrograde mercury reverses or cancels combustion and makes it better. Is that true?”

“Look. There are 10 grahas and 2 nodes in your birth chart and they all work together, unfortunately for you, since you’re only interested in one. Your Mercury sits with the Sun in the second house which is a great house for it.”

“Yes, but aren’t they are too close degree-wise? My real question is...”

“Hmmm...let’s get to that now so that we can wrap up your consultation.” Mani Panicker now looked at his watch with a worried expression. Perhaps it was time for his lunch.

“The fact is, Panicker, having a retrograde planet in your birth chart is not so easy especially during a retrograde period.”

The astrologer made a dismissive gesture with the wave of his hand, “If you blindly follow astrology websites and things without learning it from a teacher, you’ll become a fool.” I went on. “For instance, during the last retrograde, my one-year-old laptop froze. I took it for repairs and the repairman said that the motherboard blew. Just like that! Can you believe it?”

“If one starts to blame their planets for all their acts then there will be no end to the argument.” The astrologer puts a hand to his head as though he was nursing a headache. He shot a pitiful look at my mother.

“Thank you for the reading, Panicker. It is very accurate,” said my mother, trying to put an end to the discussion.

“But...but...there is one last thing that I want to ask.”

“Spit it out.”

“Um...so, as I said my Mercury is both retrograde and combust-”

“If you are talking about communication issues, then it’s perhaps because of your age and not the planets.” Saying this the Panicker rang the bell to call for the assistant.

“I have been anxious about this one thing about my Mercury. I am starting to think perhaps that I am--” I hesitated not knowing how to put my thoughts into words – a real retrograde issue.

“Perhaps you are? Speak up!” demanded the unkind astrologer

“Perhaps, I am...errr-”

Mani Panicker sighs. “What is it?” He looked at his watch again.

The assistant came in and my mother rose from her seat and pulled me by the hand.

“I’m wondering!” I cry, “I’m wondering if I’m a genius!”

The astrologer and my mother look at each other and share an inscrutable blank expression.

“Please pay at the counter,” said Mani Panicker.

Combust and Retrograde Mercury

In astrology, Mercury represents intelligence, the nervous system, the ability to memorize or absorb information, communication, media, and skills of hands. A well-aspected Mercury gives an independent type of thinking and comprehending, helps a person understand the information they read and store it well. Mercury is a very flexible planet so any planet that sits with Mercury in a house can influence it. Mercury retrograde is the apparent motion of the planet with respect to the earth. It speeds past the Earth around three or four times a year and people born during this phase are said to have a retrograde Mercury in their birth chart. Such people want to make sure that they are communicating with clarity. When they have an idea, they reflect a lot more on it than those with direct Mercury in their chart and explore it further to back up their stand. Perhaps this is why a lot of writers and philosophers are born during a Mercury retrograde. Mercury is said to be combust or 'agitated' when it's close to the Sun by a few degrees. This impacts Mercurial abilities like talking, making requests, and communicating. People with Sun and Mercury in the same house, only apart by a few degrees are said to have a combust Mercury. This could also mean that a powerful authority figure or a father could have been too strict or dismissive of their opinions when they were a child. The combination of a combust and retrograde Mercury in a chart cannot be understood without analyzing all the aspects of Mercury.

The Chameleon of Planets

“Is Mercury’s core solid or liquid?” is one of the top three questions that the BepiColombo mission addresses. Even after Mariner and Messenger, we haven’t gotten a closure on the state of Mercury’s core. BepiColombo is a future mission, to be launched into Mercury’s orbit in 2024, planned by the European Space Agency and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and would send two satellites, one from each party to circle Mercury. Being the planet closest to the Sun, and having erratic properties, planetary scientists believe that delving into Mercury can give great insight on the origin of the solar nebula, and the planetary system, which is also one of the focus points of the BepiColombo mission. The hypothesis is that the nebula, which could be imagined as a disc-shaped cloud of gas and dust left over from the formation of the Sun, began circling around it forming grains, then clumps, and finally planetesimals and planets, as we know today. The information obtained from future missions to Mercury thus can tell us more about not only the origin of the solar system but also about life on similar stellar systems.

Missions to Mercury are increasingly difficult because it’s very hard to get a satellite to orbit around the planet due to the risk of it being pulled into the Sun’s orbit. Also for a satellite to catch hold of Mercury’s orbit, it must resist the acceleration caused by the Sun’s gravity. To slow down and revolve around Mercury, the spacecraft would need a considerable amount of fuel and expensive rocketry. This is why planets beyond Earth’s orbit are much easier to explore where the satellite can work against the pull of the Sun. Even using a telescope, Mercury is not easy to sight. Copernicus, the great astronomer, who even vouched for our fairly new outlook of heliocentrism (planets revolving around the Sun rather than the Earth), never got a chance to see Mercury, because of its small size and closeness to the glare of the Sun.

Due to its weak atmosphere, Mercury loses the credit of being the hottest planet to its neighbor, Venus whose thick blanket of atmosphere is better equipped to trap heat from the Sun. The day side of Mercury heats up to 800 degrees Fahrenheit whereas the night side

remains chilly with temperatures as cold as minus 290 degrees Fahrenheit. Mercury's surface, much like the Moon, is heavily cratered but it also has wrinkles which perhaps formed when the planet shrank rapidly by 3-4 km, upon partial solidification of its molten core. What came as a surprise was not the wrinkles, but the magnetic field around the planet discovered by Mariner 10. For a planet to have a magnetic field, it should not only rotate rapidly but also have an electrically conducting liquid core like in the case of Earth. Speaking of liquids, there are rumors that in parts of its poles, in deep shadowed craters, deep enough to escape sunlight, one could find ice. Ice of water or sulfur, who knows!

Venus



The Taste of Tea

The yellow-and-black signboard says 'Kozhikode' and the train screeches to a halt. It is raining heavily outside, so I fish for my umbrella in my backpack for about five minutes. I manage to squish my hands through books, clothes and other knick-knacks and take it out. Even the man sitting on the berth opposite me heaves a sigh of relief as I pluck the blue-and-white polka dotted umbrella out of the abyss. I shut my bag tight as quickly as possible worrying if the train will leave the stop before I get down. I squeeze myself through the many sari-clad women that are waiting to leave the train, taking in a whiff of coconut, jasmine, and sweat. When I finally get down, I realize that I forgot to open my umbrella. My mustard-yellow oversized leather jacket invites a few questioning eyes. It is the only thing I own that was close to a raincoat.

I drag my suitcase along the station, my sneakers squishing the wet mud that peep through the gaps between the concrete tiles. By the time I find shelter in the cover of a waiting stand, I am half drenched. The unopened umbrella grins at me. I sit on a bench in the stand gathering my thoughts for a while. What am I supposed to do? I search for my phone in my backpack's side pocket and check my messages. My mother has left about five voicemails. I play every one of them but all I hear is the sound of the wind on her side. A text says, 'Call us 20 minutes before you arrive. We'll send a car over'. I leave a message on my mom's phone, 'Arrived. No need to send car. On my way.'

Five years ago, when I was about 18, I suppose, there used to be a stall of comic books right here near the stand I was at. They sold all kinds of books, but I used to spend hours there looking through volumes of Amar Chitra Katha and Champak. There are so many volumes of Amar Chitra Katha at home, all of which I got from this railway station. Every time I used to come to pick someone up from the station or drop someone off, I'd buy at least five volumes. Perhaps, now my bookshelf would be full of spider webs made by tiny spiders who create their empire using the bridges of books. I wonder if the books are still there. When I get home, the

first thing I want to do is look for my bookshelf. But I will not be able to do that, of course. My uncles and aunts will be there, waiting for me. The neighbors too, I'm sure. They'll say, "Don't be sad. It's good that you finally got out of that marriage! It must have been terrible." What would be the most appropriate way to react - would it be rude to simply shoot them a smile and scurry upstairs?

All of a sudden the rain stops and the Sun comes out. A small boy comes running to me from a distance of about three meters saying, "Coolie, Madam, Coolie!" I check my phone again. There is no reply still. It is on low battery and I forgot to get my charger. It will die anytime now. He, the boy comes to me and touches my bags, and tries to lift them. I wag my finger at him and shake my head sideways. The boy and I, we play a game of tug-of-war for a moment. I give up. Something about the clarity of his eyes makes me ask, "How much?" The boy takes my suitcase and backpack on his back which will collapse into a heap of bones any minute. I follow him, looking at the shiny brown skin that shows beneath his torn shirt. We keep walking along the platform and are soon out of the railway station. It is as though a heat wave bound the boy and me together. Not that I am thinking of the heat. I just follow him as though it is the most natural thing to do. I hear the sound of engine hooting faintly behind me. Between the train station and the auto stand, there is a tea stall that hardly fit the tea seller. With a quick action of his arms, he pours the tea from a huge tumbler to a tiny glass without spilling a drop. The tea in the glass now has a thin layer of dying foam. The boy stops at the tea stall just as fascinated by the sight as I am.

"It's very hot, don't you think?" he says. The sun is directly above our heads but I don't feel it. I buy him some tea and a pack of Parle G biscuits. He puts my suitcase and backpack down and sits on them comfortably. For a moment, he forgets about my existence. He wipes the sides of the glass tumbler with the cloth he had around his head, holding the glass with his tired, bruised hands. He blows into the glass and takes a small sip to see how warm it is. It seems bearable to him. His cheeks cave in as he tries to drink more of it. He tears the Parle G packet

open and finishes all of it in one go. His pace alarms me and the squirrels that are climbing down a Peepal tree nearby. It is as though the whole world around is frozen and only his munching sounds are heard. They keep ringing in my ears. My eyes are on the boy but I can sense that the squirrels are perfectly still. His cheeks, which are nothing more than a layer of skin on thin slices of flesh, go in and out as he eats. It is such a beautiful sight that I'm losing track of time. When he is done, he lets out a sigh of satisfaction and walks up to me without showing any guilt of having wasted my hours.

“Would you like some tea, too?” he asks. I nod and give him some money. I watch a drop of sweat trickle down from the side of his brow fall into the tea glass he gets for me. I take it from him and have a small sip. It doesn't taste like the tea I drink at home which is also warm but not as sweet. It isn't at all like the tea I would buy at a store. It is also not the kind of tea I fill in my thermos flask on the train. I close my eyes and indulge in the aftertaste of this tea. The tea that makes me look at squirrels, the tea that makes me stare at a boy as he hungrily gobbles up all the biscuits. The flavor of ground ginger, crushed cardamom pods and mint leaves in the tea are enveloped in that one drop of sweat from the brows of this tired, hungry boy. The only ingredient that makes all the difference. I wish I could turn the clock back and bring the wheels of time to a stop.

Just then, I get a call from Mom. I pick it up and say, 'Arriving in 20. In the auto.' The boy walks with me to the auto stand, crouching under the weight of my backpack and gives me a full-toothed smile as I pay him fifty rupees.

Venus in Pisces

Venus in a birth chart represents happiness, love, and creative expression. It also represents one's spouse, their female friends, beauty, luxury, and all things that please the senses like fragrances, or fine wine. It governs a person's approach to relationships, their desires and expectations when in love, and the kind of person they are attracted to. Pisces is a sign of universal love, creativity, imagination, spirituality, and a depth of one's soul. When Venus is placed in this position, it finds ultimate unity with love – loving everybody equally. Such people want to break boundaries and provide to those that are marginalized in society. An exalted Venus in Pisces has a personality that runs deep, much like a river due to the influence of the water element of Pisces. They are dreamy, sensitive, experience moodiness, and have a tendency to suffer in silence. Their sensitivity is not just directed at their near and dear ones but to all. People with Venus in Pisces are attracted to suffering and to those that they feel are underprivileged in some way. They enjoy taking up the role of saving someone who society thinks of as an underdog. They have trouble seeing things in black-and-white and have the tendency to stretch the truth a little to avoid hurting someone they want to protect. They accept their partners or dear ones for what they really are, and they look for a spiritual connection with their partner.

The Stubborn Planet

Scientist and science fiction author Geoffrey Landis presented a paper called 'Colonizing Venus', in which he said that the atmosphere of Venus 50 km above the surface is the most Earth-like environment in the solar system. With Venus' breathable air working as lifting gas (oxygen-nitrogen mixture 21:78), floating colonies seem like a probable idea: to live and work in floating stations that help us study the planet from above. Landis talks of permanent settlements that could be made in the form of cities designed to float about 50 km altitude in the Venusian atmosphere. Venus is the hottest planet in the solar system with a 20 km deep blanket of atmosphere that pours acid rain onto the surface. The sulphuric acid droplets can be highly electrically charged, and so they offer the potential for lightning. Quite different from the representation of Venus in astrology (fine things), the planet is a world covered with volcanoes, ancient lava, and is highly acidic. It rotates in a clockwise direction, unlike the other planets and covers itself with a thick blanket of clouds that make it impossible for curious earthlings to figure it out. Perhaps it's the right way to be. Even the strong hearted Venera 13 that managed to get to Venus' surface didn't get a chance take a long hard look at it. In 60 minutes under its glare, the ship melted and broke the hearts of the Soviets.

Venus is quite stubborn for a planet. Not only does it not follow the regular counterclockwise motion of planets, it takes a long time to rotate about its axis for an inner planet, as though it's continuously contemplating something. But what is it constantly thinking about? There is a moon formation hypothesis which says that the Moon belonged to Venus before it started orbiting the Earth. The Earth pulled the Moon into its orbit as if it was waiting for the Venus-Moon relationship to strain. Now Venus is moonless and it turns out that the Earth was our Venus' evil twin and not vice-versa! Perhaps, as the Sun grows older and expands, the Earth will start to look a little bit like Venus too.

But the thick clouds, the acid rains, the lava flows, and the high surface temperatures and pressures on Venus's surface seem ominous.

Moon



The Orphan Fantasy

It was almost time for the afternoon siesta at Raman's house. Mother was cutting vegetables in the kitchen and Father was reading a newspaper in the living room. Raman hung about in his room for a while and, when he could take it no more, he ambled into the kitchen.

"I know the truth," said Raman with a woebegone face.

"What truth?" asked Mother. "That I'm an orphan."

"I've told you not to say things like that!" Mother shouted.

"It's okay. You can tell me which street you got me from. I'll quietly go back there."

"How many times do you need to be told? I had you in my womb for nine months! You are my child!"

"Sigh. The truth will come out eventually." Raman was about to make a heroic exit to his room when father interrupted him by surfacing at the door.

"Look at this boy! He says he is an orphan," said Mother in a fretful tone.

"What kind of idiot are you? How many times do you need to be told the same thing?" said Father. Thanks to mother's encouragement father has got a reason to harass him. One moment she pretends to be reassuring him and the next, she drags father into his business on purpose. She could have closed the chapter there, but no, the fine lady has not an ounce of sympathy in her. Raman was writhing in embarrassment, seeing his father's face in close up, regretting having brought up the topic.

"I just thought I was being too much of a trouble for mother. Just offering to go back where I belong," said Raman like a mouse, showing his milk teeth. Father pinched his ear affectionately and said, "Go get your books and I'll make you forget about this orphan business." Raman was off from the spot like a squirrel.

Back in his room, Raman was picturing himself mud-covered, in torn shorts, walking alongside buffaloes, and pigs, having meager food from a small Idly shop. The owner was a generous fellow and liked Raman for his clever ways so he was giving him free Idlis. Every day,

after work, he went back to his hay hut with his cow and pig...was it a buffalo? ... and lay down on the floor for there would be no bed. He shivered all night and got all sorts of ailments by morning but he still woke up before the Sun rose and went to sell tea, or work in a factory, whichever required more muscle. Then one day, a nice lady saw him work hard in the factory, had pity on him, and filed a case against the owners. She then acknowledged his greatness and offered to take him to the orphanage. He, of course, protested out of loyalty to his employer but eventually went with the nice lady. Then, one day, when he was not expecting it at all, a man and wife (his current parents) arrived at his orphanage, in a Maruti Esteem, and picked him up from a long queue of other children. All of them cried not because they weren't selected, but because they knew they would miss Raman. He consoled them, gave them great advice and reluctantly followed his parents. Then they-

“Started studying, boy?” His wonderful dream was interrupted by father. Father was now looking down at him through his specs. “Good, good.” Raman didn't realize he had the chapter ‘The Earth's Moon’ open before him. This was not yet taught in class.

Good thing father didn't know. As father walked out, he noticed his walking style, head raised, his one shoulder slightly higher than the other. Raman didn't walk like that. Even if he was looking up, he had a drooping posture. Do genes affect these things? Did he look like either of his parents? Raman thought he'd take a look at his reflection in the mirror. He kept staring at his face until all his features started to move around, blend together and he started to look like a wide-eyed alien. It's Mother who's the clever one, not Father, said the otherworldly reflection and he agreed. Perhaps she had another child? Raman would follow her secretly the next time she leaves the house alone. If she had a child, he would break his head and bury him under this house's foundation.

No, he wouldn't do that. That's a terrible thing to do. What was the use of making foolish plans? Wasn't it better to know the truth first hand and produce it in his mother's face? Then he would stride out of his house throwing the letter at the embarrassed mother's face. If father

threatened him, he would go to the police...but what would he say? Perhaps he should write a letter of disappointment to his mother and leave without saying anything. Now all he had to do was find a proof but where would he go to find it? 'I can no longer respect you, mother, for you've been lying to me' would be a good start. Raman took an A4 sheet, drew a margin and wrote the first sentence, ended it with a majestic full stop. What next? He couldn't think of anything else so he folded the letter and placed it between the Earth and Moon. Tomorrow was the day, Raman would bid a temporary goodbye to that lousy old building which they called a school. He would go to his grandfather's house packing all his play tools, papers, and pens. After lunch, he would sit in the woods by the rivulet and stare at red-headed woodpeckers digging for bark beetles in coconut trees and nobody would interrupt him or ask him to study. He thought of all the lovely games he would play with his cousins who would be arriving in a weeks' time.

On the last day of school, he walked towards the school bus, enjoying the tranquility in his heart. Just then, at a distance, he saw his father waving at him. He had come to pick him up. Oh, how wonderful!

"Hi, father! How come you're here?" said Raman and ran towards him.

"Rama, your grandfather is very sick. We're going to meet him." Father held his hands and walked him to the parking lot. He could see his mother feebly smiling at him from the car.

"Oh, what happened?" asked Raman.

"Nothing serious, hopefully. Anyway, don't ask your mother any questions. She's upset as it is." Raman quietly got in the car. He peeped into the car's trunk. Only suitcases – he was sure they must not have packed his toys. As if they would have an idea what he would want to take. Just a while ago, he was in such a lovely mood. Some god who read his thoughts must have been jealous of his plans and sent Father to him. Anyway, it was just like Father to appear from nowhere and ruin it all. What a wretched day it turned out to be!

When Raman reached grandfather's place, he quickly ran to greet him but he was asleep, and there was a doctor next to him touching him with a stethoscope. Father and Mother came in

after him and Father shooed him away. Having nothing else to do, he decided to explore the sleeping grandfather's treasures. He directly went to the storage where he had been asked to not go several times as it was full of cobwebs and lizards. This would be a good chance to look into the storage for things he wanted to keep.

What caught his eye was an antique olive-green trunk. Fortunately, it was unlocked. He opened it and upturned it onto the floor – papers with seals on them, an ink bottle, a dead cockroach, and colored paper. He pocketed the dead cockroach which he would dissect and examine later, and also the ink pen, but put the colored paper back in the trunk after a moment's thought. He would take it another time.

As he was trying to put all the papers back, an old, coffee colored one with a fancy elephant-shaped seal caught his attention. It must have been the dead cockroach who chewed its edges. It must have stopped chewing when it met the elephant on the seal. The paper read thus.

Calicut,

18 July 1960

To Whom It May Concern

It is my pleasure to recommend that a baby is placed with Mrs. and Mr. Ramanujam for adoption.

When I heard that they wanted to adopt a child, my heart was filled with joy. No couple I know deserves to be parents as much as these two. They are loving, patient, attentive, and thoroughly committed to one another. They are also financially secure with Mr. Ramanujam holding a high-level job at Kerala State Electricity Board and Mrs. Ramanujam established as a homemaker.

Please know that if Mrs. and Mr. Ramanujam are able to adopt a baby, not only will they treasure this precious gift, but the child would also be blessed to be a part of such a loving home.

Sincerely,

Manager,

Providence Home Orphanage

Raman was named after his grandfather Ramanujam. His heart was brimming with guilt for having taunted his mother repeatedly when it was she who was the orphan that he had been imagining. A tear dropped down his cheek onto the letter. He put the paper back in the trunk with all the papers he had taken out and pushed it back in the storage where it belonged.

He went to his mother who was now sitting woefully next to grandfather and hugged her tightly.

Moon in Leo | Moon in the 8th House

The Moon represents one's emotional well-being, one's relationship with their mother, or a person that nourishes them. The eighth house represents dramatic or sudden events, secrets, and the supernatural. With the placement of the Moon in the eighth house, one's mother is seen to go through ups and downs in their life as the Moon's behavior in this house leads them to experience sudden events through their mind. Most of the time, there is a secret kept for a long time either regarding the mother or kept by her. A person with this placement goes through sudden harsh events that impact them deeply and their mother is an important part of their emotional makeup. When the Moon is in Leo, one is satisfied or at rest only when they or their work are admired. They have an innate need of being in the limelight and being in control, especially at home. Creators and entertainers are seen with this placement. The mental balance of such people come from appreciation by those around them for their deeds in day-to-day life. A Leo Moon person is warm, generous, and innately confident. They crave to be independent and dislike being ordered around. They are loyal and they expect a certain level of respect from those around them. They constantly need reassurances and affection, especially during their childhood. They are selfless when it comes to protecting those who they hold dear and near and would go to any extent to make sacrifices for them.

Apollo 11 and Moon People

How delicate the Moon seems here from the Earth! It's not a surprise that many writers and poets have been inspired to describe it as full of craters made of cheese or milk. In reality, the moon is just as delicate or impressionable as having no atmosphere makes it prone to impacts from all over. Even as a low-albedo (0.12) body (albedo is the reflectivity of a surface, planet, moon or asteroid) compared to the bright Venus (0.75) whose thick atmosphere reflects almost all of the sunlight, the Moon has gained a lot of attention from all sorts of creatures from the wolves to frogs because of its proximity to the Earth. For us, the most brazen of all creatures, going to the moon was merely a matter of competition at first. The journey started with the Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) that was the lander portion of the Apollo spacecraft which was to carry two astronauts from the moon's orbit to the surface and back to Earth. This project took more than the work of several designers, and architects, astronauts, and engineers giving their sweat and blood to problems like - Do the astronauts sit or stand? Do the windows have to be so heavy? Why not add more legs to the lander for stability? Finally, when the LEM was ready to go, the astronauts stood and looked out through the small triangular window that gave them just enough view of the landing site. The suspicion and the mystery around Moon landings were far more surprising than the landings themselves. "If you really went to the moon so many times, why don't you do it again today?" is one of the many ridiculous questions asked to the poor astronauts who were asked to swear on the bible that they went to the moon by some reporters. Some experienced filmmakers brush off the moon landing conspiracy theories by saying, 'Back then it would have been easier to go to the moon rather than fake it' as the state of video technology in 1969 was really poor.

After the moon landing, samples, and celebrations, the next question was 'Is there any water on the Moon?' Although 5 of the 12 men who walked on the moon were water signs (Pisces: Cancer: Scorpio = 3:1:1), one cannot dream of finding liquid water on the moon. Water vapor is decomposed by sunlight and hydrogen is quickly lost to outer space. It's for the same

reason that liquid water cannot persist at the Moon's surface. The Moon Mineralogy Mapper M3, a spectrometer sent by Chandrayaan -1 confirmed the presence of ice and water vapor, and sheets and blocks of ice in the moon's polar regions. In many ways, our Moon still remains a mystery despite its proximity to us.

Rumor has it that NASA is planning on going back to the moon a few years from now.

Mars



A Shield in the Mind

“Here’s where you are,” says Dad.

I nod my head.

“Where?” he says.

“There,” I say pointing at the bottom-most line on the whiteboard.

“Yeah,” he says, looking satisfied.

“There are two things you need to know about. One is IQ and the other is EQ. IQ is Intelligence quotient, and EQ is-”

“Emotional Quotient,” I say. I know where it’s going.

“From your grades in school, you’ve proved that your IQ is okay.” He sees a tinge of happiness on my face.

“But it’s not good enough. Don’t think it’s great,” he says.

“I don’t think it’s good,” I cut in, almost regretting the words that left my mouth. Can I pull them back inside?

From his face, the slanting of his mustache, I could gather that I’d made a mistake. Here it comes, I think.

“You are at the bottom. Your grades, and what you study in school is nothing great. I agree it’s required to pass exams. But what you need to know is how to behave,” he shouts.

“Okay,” I say, I force my mind to not take it personally. I force it to stay detached. It becomes unaware of what’s happening, for the moment. He draws a ladder from the bottom-most line to the topmost line on the whiteboard. Then he makes a dash between them, somewhat closer to the dash that’s supposed to be me.

“That’s where Yashwant is. That’s where he stands.” Yashwant is between me and greatness, I think. Yashwant was a relative of mine, back in India, whose life my father often used as an example to belittle me. He was poor and didn’t have a lot of resources to study, yet he was worldly-wise, street smart, and did great in academics. I was a frog in a well, since I was

living in an apartment, far away from India, away from all the company, and the atmosphere that makes you understand what hardships are, and how to tackle various issues. Yashwant was a frog whose home was the sea and knew quite well that the sky wasn't a circle. My mind jumps back to its earlier state and it's no longer detached. He is going to put me and him on the same scale and show me graphically how far behind I am. My ego takes the better of me. I become defensive within a fraction of seconds.

"He was poor. Look at where he stands now," says the all-knowing Father, as he darkens the line that is Yashwant's territory. "I mean it's easier to get where you want when you have all the resources growing in a tree next to you. But it's hard for those who have to struggle for the very things that you don't care for."

This lecture was supposed to be about the difference between IQ and EQ and so far, we haven't even dabbled in the topic. I look at my father, into his eyes. I try to communicate with my eyes. They tell him, "Dad you're deviating from the topic."

But he doesn't receive my signals. Perhaps we are different kinds of people. After a while, he gets there on his own. My head feels heavy from all the thinking and dreaming between then and now.

"Well, anyway, what I'm trying to say is that you're still very close to the zero line. Do you get that?"

"Yes," I say, biting my teeth and fighting back my tears. But a disobedient tear drop decorates my red cheek. My father sees it.

"The very fact that you're crying shows that you haven't understood a thing," he concludes. I don't say anything.

I wipe my cheek clean with a sweep of my hand, the same sweep of the hand a warrior princess makes to lift her sword and shield. I'm now wearing a gold armor. My horse is galloping furiously. Towards the enemy's territory, of course! I hold my sword tight and swing it across the horse's neck. The swish of the sword, the cries of my enemies, and the rhythm of my horse's

hooves fill my ears completely. I'm in the center of the battlefield amidst the fallen heads that I sliced.

After an hour into the lecture, my father is happy that I've been attentive throughout the lecture.

We leave the room for dinner.

Mars in the 6th House

Mars is the planet in astrology that gives courage, positive aggression, intensity and force in a person. It is the planet that represents one's will and drive to get what they want. The sign and house that Mars is placed in a person's natal chart symbolizes their ability to take initiative or action in a situation. It also determines a person's fighting style. When Mars rules the sixth house in a birth chart which is the house of enemies, debts, difficulties, and the ability to overcome them, it gives the native a warrior/soldier-type mentality when they encounter enemies or adversities in life. They tend to be aggressive, easily irritated, and for the same reason, they might be prone to having bitter relationships at work. This person can invite unnecessary worries or troubles at the workplace by being confrontational or too aggressive. At the same time, this person can be really active at work and can emerge victorious from all sorts of troubles.

Moonless Mars?

The Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli was the first one to discover mysterious straight lines on Mars' surface that he called 'canali'. By this, the man meant 'channels' which didn't suggest anything unnatural, but something made by the watercourse. However, 'canali' was mistranslated to English as 'canal' and the idea was stretched by the much excited Percival Lowell, who founded the Lowell Observatory in 1894. He single-handedly popularized the notion of canals as proof that the planet was once inhabited by life and made a large number of sketches on this subject. This inspired a lot of science fiction writers who then took their freedom with the channels on this red planet and created Martians.

This terrestrial planet has fantastic canyons and mountains and channels that is evidence for the presence of liquid water or rivers that had flown in the land in the past. Mars has a thin atmosphere composed of carbon dioxide but otherwise is similar to the Earth in many ways and because of this, its exploration by spacecraft is still a high priority in space programs. Although water is present in Mars in the form of permafrost and water vapor, at this time, Mars has no potential for life. Current missions, however, are focusing on its future potential for life.

Also, at the moment, Mars has two moons Phobos, and Deimos both of which look like asteroids but their origin is unknown. In the next twenty to forty million years, it is proposed that Phobos might be torn apart and might either crash into the surface of Mars or form a ring around it. The other moon of Mars, Deimos, is predicted to escape from Mars' orbit due to Jupiter's strong gravitational pull and go into the asteroid belt. Both these moons are not spherical due to their low gravity. Due to Mars' uncooperating Moons, Phobos, which will kill itself and Deimos which will leave, Mars is destined to be moonless.

Jupiter



The Holy Father

Why don't these waters that support fish, starfish, blue whales, seahorses, squids and creatures of all sizes and paces carry me in their arms into another world, a better world? Not a world where I feel utterly helpless, a space within four walls that don't move like these waters. Am I destined to eat rice and bean soup all my life? Will I ever be dining in a moving house? A house that will walk on its wheels or one that will undergo metamorphosis and turn itself into a giant squid when the concrete was becoming too much. These underwater creatures have everything in common with me, except that they can choose to not see the sun when they want to. For days! I paddle faster, racing with the tortoises that become sloths on the shore. Even a tortoise has no escape from the invincible shore. Yes, I'm not meant for the shore. I'm for the wind, the waters, not the earth.

The blue waters call me to fall into them unlike the reddish-brown brick walls at home. Oh, how I wish a storm started now and took me in its arms, into the eternity of the sea? Why don't storms come when we call for them? Is a sea storm anything more than the thunder and lightning we have during heavy rains? Perhaps the water will move up and down, the poor humans on the boats will cry begging for mercy, as lightning and thunder teased them, playing 'I-pick-you-next' games. I want to be in a storm, but unfortunately, there is nothing but calm all about me. I throw a stone into the waters hoping to perturb a fish beneath my boat that will care to respond to my undying need. 'Can you give me a storm, fish?' I say to a sardine that swims by the edge of my boat. Yes, this is my plight, even in my old brick house. Whether it's at home, or the sea, the calm surrounding me puts me on the edge, making my nerves hurt, and makes my existence undesirable, even for me. What a wise sardine! The ceiling fan that runs in the living room of my house has been running for years. It works on a single-speed despite having a control switch that moves from zero to five. My life has turned into the life of a ceiling fan that rotates on one speed. If I were the ceiling fan, I would fall off the ceiling and crash into a side wall or rather, just rotate with a speed fast enough to bring down the calendar, and posters stuck

on the wall, to sway the curtains and to make people beneath me shiver. The same sardine comes by again and goes underwater. The sun is going to set which means my bean soup is waiting for me at home. I have to get home as fast as I can so I don't break my routine, a routine that I'm a slave to.

When I get home, a storm has already passed. There is no bean soup on the dining table, no rice. The fan is off and a calendar that had stuck itself to our old tarnished wall has managed to pluck itself off of it. A china bowl is lying on the kitchen floor broken with bean soup all over. I go into the bedroom to find a crying Mother. What's the matter? Of course, it is the sardine that broke my fan and turned my house upside down. The first sign of a fight in an otherwise calm house where the man and his wife are in perfect agreement. Too bad I didn't get to witness the fight. Mother lies in the room weeping like the pallid waters after a treacherous storm. Some days go by and I realize Father has left us for good. As we look for him in the streets and everywhere else, I find the storm that I'd been wishing for. There is a fire inside me and turbulence, and I feel that my life is worthwhile. My father is an atheist - he had always told me not to go up to saffron-clad yogis who sat eyes closed under Banyan trees, or seek help from sisters of my Christian school. I wasn't taught the methods of any religion so I didn't have an inclination to any. Growing up, my friends would ask me: "So you don't have to fast during *Dussehra* or attend hour-long masses - isn't that great?" In high school, nobody liked being part of a traditional cult so I thought I was lucky. I did feel left out during some discussions about rituals, or stories of gods, but I didn't mind it all that much. So naturally, I never prayed out of fear before an exam or gave thanks before a meal. I could eat four-legged animals and never had to keep fasts. Yet I wasn't excluded from festivals. I had my questions for my father. I would always ask him, "Didn't anyone try to make you believe in God?" At home, whenever we saw something on the news about a flying yogi or a person possessed by Holy Spirit speaking foreign languages, he mocked them. Whenever I told them about the stories that I read or the prayers

that I learned at school, all he would say is, “Don’t take anything to heart. It’s foolish to do so.” I would agree.

My uncle is the oar to my boat after Father’s disappearance. It is another bright day in my late 20s when he gets me a ticket to cross the seas. He promises my mother to get me a job after my studies at the Theology and Religious Studies School he runs in Washington. I bid farewell to my mother and thank the seas and the sardine which made my father go away and bring the much-needed storm to my life. With the massive Pacific Ocean to its left, Washington doesn’t let me miss the sea. This sea is different from the sea I know, always trembling with the incessant raindrops that fall on it. At university, I befriend people who are as nervous as the sea, those with the same sort of void in them as I have. The hunger for something to overpower me only grows in their company. I study religions laboriously and research various texts with a fire in me that I hadn’t kindled before. When the time came, for my thesis, I decided to gain practical experience in the Hindu religion at an Ashram in India. My professor was surprised.

“But you’re from India! Don’t you have enough experience already?”

“My parents are atheists, sir.” That line alone is a very powerful statement of purpose for a theology student, and perhaps, that’s why my department agreed to sponsor my trip. I spend a few days with my mother back home and went to the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry where I ate in silence, did gardening in silence, and practiced meditation with ascetics. I was given a mat to sleep on and lived on simple meals like the bean soup at home.

I enjoy the routine and the silence that seemed so unsettling years ago. I have faith in me, my life now and nothing can stop me from growing. One peaceful afternoon at the Ashram, I go to the waterfront just to have a dialogue with the sea. I walk into the waters and float for a few hours. The salty taste of the water and the strong waves lashing against my face thrill me. I lie like that for hours till sunset. When I reach the Ashram that evening, the hostel warden takes me to a special class taken by the head of the Ashram. They walk me to a large hall where the meditation had already started.

“What do you remember from your childhood?” the teacher says. This echoes in my head which starts to throb. Something about this question is familiar. “Close your eyes and think of a happy you in the past.” I think about the moment my father took me to the fish market. I held his hands and pointed at a sea urchin not knowing what it was.

“What do you see?”

What do you see? I bring my hands to my temples and rub them to soothe the aching head, as I hear this line. There is something off about it. It doesn't sound proper. The teacher says, “Are you happy now?” Of course, I am. Am I not? Meditation was over in about ten minutes. And whoever wanted to pay respects to the teacher were free to meet him. I go up to him hoping to ask what spirituality meant to him. He looks sort of odd, in a saffron robe, like an impostor with a fake beard – just like the ones my father asked me to stay away from. Yet there is something familiar about him. Is it his eyes? They look just like my father's. I don't remember what my father looked like but those could be his eyes. Why! Yes! Those are his eyes. It is my turn next. Too late to back off. I hesitate. My throat is dry and my eyes start to fill up involuntarily. I sit beside the teacher and he says, “Everything will be alright, my child,” and stroke my head. I take his blessings and walk off.

I get some water from a clay pot outside and drink it in one breath. My throat still hurts and my eyes are still welling up. I try another glass. It doesn't help. So I go out of the Ashram and run as fast as I can, beyond the gardens, and further onto the road. When I finally stop, I sit on a bench and cry as long as I want to.

That day, I packed my bags and left the Ashram.

Jupiter in the 9th House

Jupiter is a philosophical planet, the symbol of wisdom that continuously contemplates the meaning of life. It represents a teacher that leads you to enlightenment, a virtuoso in a subject, a religious or spiritual preacher. Jupiter also rules over the law, symbolizes beliefs, ethics, and growth through them. Jupiter is the natural ruler of the ninth house so its power is enhanced in this house, but it could give positive or negative results depending on the native's belief system. The ninth house can show how much you believe in religion or if you don't believe in it at all. It's also the house of long distance travels, pilgrimage, and philosophical learning. It is also the significator of how fortunate a person feels in life regardless of how rich or poor they are. This placement makes a person love learning and here, one sees a person who learns all through his life. Like Jupiter radiates twice as much heat as it receives from the Sun, here the person gives back to the society, by becoming a professor or mentor of some kind. For them, the big picture or the broader sense is more important than thorough study in a single field. Learning becomes a hobby, and a lot of gains are observed from universities, spiritual people, or the law. They can influence belief of the masses and might engage in writing and publishing. Endowed with natural curiosity, their goal is to share their beliefs, and thoughts with other people.

All Gas, No Core

If one were to map the relative sizes of the planets in the solar system, and list the top 100 objects in it, the top 99 positions would be occupied by the Sun leaving only the 100th position for Jupiter. The large planet would merely be a speck compared to the size of the Sun. Galileo Galilei was the first to discover the magnificent moons of Jupiter which are far more interesting than an average planet in the solar system. These moons orbit around the stormy electrifying Jupiter that definitely looks like a star that somehow failed to reach its potential. Jupiter's colored bands are cylinders of jet streams that go 3000 km deep, as the Juno spacecraft discovered. Further below, Jupiter rotates like a rigid body without the jet stream. Jupiter is the largest planet in the Solar System with more than 60 known moons but the first moons to be discovered were the Galilean moons: Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto – in order. Io's orbit is the closest to Jupiter and is the most volcanic object in the solar system with up to 400 active volcanoes. Io has the least amount of water of any known astronomical object and a lot of its erupted material is sulphur. Europa, the smallest of the Galilean moons has an entire ocean of water sealed up under a solid crust of ice several kilometers thick. It has a surface lined by cracks and streaks with fewer craters. Ganymede is the largest of these and also has oceans of salty water. It has a diameter between that of Mercury and Mars. Callisto is in the farthest orbit from Jupiter and is too far to gravitationally interact with the other 3 moons. Whether a failed star or a planet of clouds, Jupiter's great red spot is a vortex that's big enough to swallow Earth. Since Jupiter is said to not have a solid core and its atmosphere constantly changing, it must have a rather superficial and chameleon-like personality.

Saturn



The Uninvited Fly

June 30

I am sitting in my study going through my research paper for the umpteenth time when a bad feeling creeps in me. Perhaps I am overdoing it – the lamp on my study has been on all night. I turn it off. I go to the kitchen, grab a bottle of beer and sip it slowly. I open the fridge and start my nightly forage for food. No chips, no bread, no cheese, nothing I can have without engaging in the holy act of cooking. I pull a cutting board out of the kitchen shelf and cut tomatoes and cucumbers in the dark. I prepare a salad of it with lemon and some spices. I carry my salad bowl to my study. My stomach starts rumbling as though it has seen the bowl in my hands. I take a big curved soup spoon and dig into the bowl. As I chew my salad, I taste something juicy-bitter in my mouth. I run to the toilet and spit it out. I spit out a green something. Are the cucumbers spoiled? I switch on the lights to take a look at my bowl. How disgusting! It is full of tiny wriggly green worms. I empty my salad bowl into the trash. I feel something rise up my throat and puke it out into the basin. It is the posterior of the worm that I just ingested. I feel sick. This is the end of my hunger. Even my rumbling stomach has had enough. I finish all the beer in one gulp and collapse on my bed. As I sleep, I see a big shadow on me but I'm unable to move. I can feel tears flowing down my face. I'm now part of a nightmare where the wriggly worm plays the lead role. The worm, in this dark story, is half as big as me and it rises out of the toilet bowl, dripping dirty water in the restroom. The worm runs after me. It follows me out of the apartment, and I keep looking back but I don't see it. Then suddenly, it's in front of me.

August 5

There's a call from my mother. I have just turned the key to my apartment, and am about to step in. I shut the door and run to pick up my cell phone.

"You said you'd call back! I've been waiting," shouts my mother.

“What? When did I say that?”

“Just about thirty minutes ago!” she screams back with unparalleled might.

“How can that be? I had forgotten my phone at home and I just stepped in.”

“How would I know? You said you’ll call back in ten.”

“Strange. Must have been a cross connection of some sort.”

“Anyway, I just wanted to tell you I sent you a parcel. Let me know when it comes.”

“What is it this time?”

The phone dies. I hate it when mother sent me gifts that invariably, were of no use to me. A coffee machine for someone who doesn’t drink coffee. A pack of protein powder that was to be had with milk, like I was a child. It won’t surprise me if she sent a lawn mower this time. My head is throbbing now, as I wonder all sorts of things. I grab a beer from the fridge and put an end to some of my worries. My head feels better now. Whom must she have called? I’ll call you in ten is what I usually say when I get her call at work. How could the guy from the crossed line have said the same thing? Perhaps my mother was hallucinating. I feel lonely as I always felt after arguing with Mother. It is because she is the only relative that I am in talking terms with. I put the bottle down and weep my heart out. I start to cry out loud, beating my chest rather dramatically and then suddenly, not able to stand my show of misery, I laugh like a madman. It is when I hear my laughter that I realize I am possessed. Something is disturbing me. There is something in the apartment. Something that wants to abuse me. I go to sleep.

September 15

I have made up my mind to go see a psychiatrist. I already made a list of all the clinics nearby and noted the names of doctors with good ratings. It is clear to me that I can’t handle what I’m going through by myself. I need to talk to someone about it. But not anyone who knows me, because then it will be impossible for me to get back to my normal life. Just the thought of having that option to talk to someone about my strange experiences soothes my heart. I will

listen to music today because, in so many days, today is the only day I'm feeling worry-free. There is a rocking chair in my bedroom. I drag it to my study and swing without a worry listening to a collection of songs from anonymous singers. That's what the cover of the tape says. I found it at a discount store. I move to and fro in my rocking chair. When I feel a sudden pang of hunger in the pit of my stomach, I ring up a local fish and fries place and order pan-fried fish, rice, and sweet corn soup. I gobble up all the food as soon as it arrives and sit in my rocking chair again and fall asleep. Someone knocks on my door and I drag myself out of the chair and open the door. There is no one at the door. Someone knocks again. This time the knocking continues. At first, I think I'll open the door and teach the imbecile a lesson, but as the knocking goes on at an inhuman pace, I start to sweat. I am afraid to open my eyes. I see darkness all around me. From nowhere a fly comes and buzzes around my ear. I wave it away, but it comes back again, like a persistent suitor. My blood boils, and I can't control my anger, so I rise out of my bed like a warrior and chase after the fly with my file. I am determined to swat the life out of it. The fly makes me run around the apartment. It is in the kitchen now. I shut the kitchen door and go back to the bed. I lie there in the bed exhausted from the chase and relieved to have finally gotten rid of the fly. Not more than a minute passes, and I hear buzzing sounds again. Am I imagining this? But it is getting louder and louder. I know that the fly is coming for me. I quickly put the blanket over my head and look around from the inside. Now the fly won't be able to come in — my blanket is made of tough fleece so it stands on the bed without moving its spine too much. I look around only to see the fly in the blanket with me, looking at me fiercely from near my feet. For minutes, we stare at each other, and it isn't moving but the moment, I move my toe by an inch, it flows straight into my ear. There is nothing I can do.

I get out of my bed, shake my head sideways in the hope that the fly would fall out but it holds on tenaciously to my ear walls. It buzzes in my ear incessantly. I am going mad. I cry and try all sorts of things. I poke the fly with an earbud, and pour water into my ear. Nothing deters the fly. It is protecting itself with my ear wax. I go to the rocking chair and sit absolutely still.

The fly goes round and round my outer ear cavity as I break down from anxiety. Is it going to chew my ear walls? At this precise moment, I know what the bad feeling I had all these days was about. The fly is a spirit that had been after me for a while. Now the fly goes from my outer ear cavity to the inside. I groan and pull my hair out. And then suddenly I don't hear it move. It dies in my ear.

I shake my head again and it falls out. I take out my lighter and burn the oppressor. At least I know I don't have to go to the psychiatrist anymore. Just then the bell rings again. It is my mother's parcel. Guess what it is? It's an electric fly swatter!

Saturn in the 2nd House

Saturn judges a person, teaches them lessons and discipline. It represents fear, and the things they are doubtful about. Through circumstances, they face limitations and restrictions from achieving the things they want. Saturn also represents duty, commitment, service, and structure. The sign and the house that Saturn is placed also defines a person's relationship with their father or authority figures. The second house represents one's family environment, their speech and intake of food. It's also the house of wealth, savings, and properties they own. Saturn in the second house experiences deprivation – such a person is deprived of food. It also takes them away from family. From the second house, Saturn aspects the fourth house of motherly nourishment, peace of mind, and home, and the eighth house of sudden events, and secrets, the eleventh house of goals, dreams, and network. Saturn restricts the peace of mind of a person in this placement and makes them feel undernourished. Being a slow-moving planet, when it aspects the eighth house, it delays sudden events or death. The second house restricts a person's social circle and gains as it aspects the eleventh house of incoming gains. In the ascendant, the second, and the third house, Saturn delays success more than in other houses. The second house also represents self-efforts so a person with this placement has to work harder than usual to achieve what they want. They might have to work for organizations or fields that wear them down. Their work might even feel punishing to them at an early age.

The Cassini-Huygens Mission

What to do after Pioneer II, and Voyager 1 and 2? Some scientists of NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory scratched their heads over this question and decided to put all their efforts into building a spacecraft that would do different things than their predecessors. This time they would fashion the spacecraft to stay at one of the planets that had a lot of scope for exploration. Saturn, with its extensive ring system consisting of particles ranging from micrometers to meters, seemed to be their best bet. It also has 62 moons, 9 of which scientists in NASA are itching to name. Thus, started the Cassini-Huygens mission.

The new smart spacecraft that I'm talking about was no ordinary orbiter. It's name is Cassini. It had senses better than our senses. It could see in wavelengths of light and energy. Can one do that with their eyes? No. It could feel things about magnetic fields and tiny dust particles. Can one do that with their hands? Not at all. What's more, it had a probe in its stomach which excreted itself onto the enticing lands of Titan, one of the most charming moons of Saturn. The probe wasn't any lesser than its mother in its capabilities. It had a hard shell around it that protected its interior from high temperatures during the 2.5-hour journey through the hazy atmosphere of Titan. It had a set of sensors that sucked up all necessary information it wanted about the moon's atmosphere. It was even designed to survive a liquid landing. NASA scientists designed the lander to float because they knew that Titan must have a global ocean of hydrocarbons. But they didn't sterilize the probe thinking that their chances of finding life on the moon would be insignificant. It was only 'after further investigation', which means after the probe landed on Titan, that they realized that the chances of life on Titan are higher than expected. The Huygens probe stayed alive on Titan for 72 minutes and kept feeding NASA with data. But did it contaminate Titan? A few YouTubers have their views about it. Would you be interested to read them? See them below.

View YouTubers' Views on the Cassini Mission @ <https://tinyurl.com/ycd36t6u>



Bill Kerman 1 year ago

5:02 but didn't the Huygens lander already contaminate Titan with bacteria?

👍 140 🗨️ REPLY



Thomas Mason 1 year ago

It was very heavily sterilized first but I think the real problem is that people didn't realize how promising Titan was until we got there. However it must be said Enceladus would fair far worse than Titan from contaminants because such contaminants have such a high chance of surviving on Enceladus. Titan is covered in hydrocarbons, earth based life just can't handle that very well.

👍 4 🗨️ REPLY



My3dviews 1 year ago

+Bill Kerman You are right. Huygens was not sterilized. Here is a quote from the following site "The Huygens probe which landed on Titan was not sterilized as the chances of finding life were considered insignificant. From further investigations it is evident that chances for life on Titan are higher than initially thought. Although forward contamination in this case is still considered unlikely, it reinforces the need to ensure we protect extra-terrestrial
Read more

👍 3 🗨️ REPLY



Haag Johnson 1 year ago

Thomas Mason why is contaminating another planet such a bad thing? If life truly does only exist on earth, why not allow it to thrive and evolve somewhere else? Humans are bound to wipe out the species anyways

👍 1 🗨️ REPLY



Thomas Mason 1 year ago

Because I don't think it's ethically right to cause a mass extinction because we can. We are not talking about contaminating a desolate wasteland but introducing invasive species into an already existing ecosystem. There is a BIG difference.

👍 6 🗨️ REPLY



Copydot 1 year ago

Haag Johnson: Because those microbes from Earth could kill off indigenous life before we even have a chance to discover it.

👍 5 🗨️ REPLY

Uranus



Was It A Dream?

I finally wake up shooing away the sleep that has been persistently holding me victim for so many hours. I'm fully awake now perhaps. I am overwhelmed with weariness and an intense pain starts to knock at my temples. What disturbance is it? I stretch my hand to the bedside table to get my water jug. Where is the damn water jug? The phone starts to ring and the sound of the phone enters my hollow head as though it's coming from within. I crawl out of my bed using the side of my belly, like a wounded snake and inch towards the phone from hell.

"Hello," I say putting an end to the ringing noise. It is my mother. She wants to know why I didn't call her last night.

"But I called you last night," I say. "No, you haven't called me in a long time," she complains, and my head starts to throb again. "What time is it?" I ask.

"6 O' Clock!"

"AM or PM?"

"What do you mean AM or PM? PM of course. Is everything okay? How long have you been sleeping?"

How many hours have I been sleeping?

"Looks like you're working too much these days. Why don't you take a day off tomorrow?"

Off tomorrow? Isn't it a holiday tomorrow? I glance at the date on my landline. 'SUN' for Sunday. How is it Sunday evening? I press my head with my other hand.

"I'll see about tomorrow. I'll call you back," I murmur and hang up. Every word I utter is stealing strength from me. I look for the water jug again. I sway from side to side trying to balance my body weight on my feet which have been lying frozen horizontal for three days now. The entire weekend was wasted in slumber. Was it?

All of a sudden I start to feel blue. I feel like I'm possessed by something. I gulp down some water and close my eyes. I shudder when I see something white flashing before my eyes

like a blinding light. What was that? It's a white ghost-like figure that I had seen before. A familiar figure moving past me. Was it standing before my car? Yes, it was something white in front of my car that I had missed. A person? Was that last night? Does anyone know? I had raced past him. No...no...I had driven through him. Petrified, I open my eyes. An inscrutable uneasiness fills me up from below up to my throat. I rush to the mailbox, like a madman and collect the unread newspapers that were going to tell my future. I run back inside hoping no one has seen me. I try to read and understand but I only see dancing letters. I realize my eyes are watery, and troubled. A vague fear dries out my throat.

I walk back and forth in my living room till my breath slows down. I look over every line in the newspaper for references to this person. There is no news of a dead man hit by a car in the city. Oh God! Are the police coming for me as I'm reading this? Am I to be taken down the streets in handcuffs? Please tell me if they are going to come for me. Please! I don't want to be dragged down the streets like a dog. There is nothing I can do except kill myself. I scramble to the store room to find a rope. I throw away all the things on the shelves and scatter them all over the floor. I run about still trying to find a rope. I climb onto the topmost shelf in the storage and I slip and roll down onto a brass plate. I have pans, crockery all around me. Then bam! The rope falls down on my head and onto the floor. I ignore the clutter around me and make a fine loop in the rope at one end. I would hook it to the fan in a minute. I close my eyes and see this man, this man I saw for two seconds - was he crossing the road? Was he crossing the road? I tried to rewind my thoughts to the time before the two seconds. If I hit him, and he flew off, could he be on the top of my car? Why didn't I stop? I just drove off. How heartless of me! The police are definitely not going to spare me for driving off on purpose. Is this for real? I wiped the sweat off my brows, and walked out to the garage. My car showed no signs of being in an accident. I checked the tires, I checked the top. No blood. Where there's an accident, especially a horrifying one like this, there is always blood. No accident. How is it that I get flashes of this man before my car? What if it's just a nightmare? It's a nightmare, of course! I remember clearly now. I had

come back from work Friday evening in my car. How stupid of me to think that I could have killed someone! Phew! I was home making pasta, and I slept, too tired to even eat. I ran back to the kitchen. The pasta was still on the pan. I slept off Friday evening and slept through all of Saturday and didn't wake up till a few hours ago. Who isn't prone to nightmares when sleeping for so long at a stretch? How silly of me to think up such an elaborate story from a light point in my closed eyes! It's that work of the broken reflective plates at the lab. I had been staring at it all day Friday. Perhaps it's the blinding light that tired my nerves out. The wretched telescope project! I will resign from the project and if they don't let me off it, I shall get out of the company itself. For a man like myself, peace of mind is of utmost importance. Peace of mind is everything! I should call the boss and tell him about my worry this instant. My mother is right about him making me work too much. I pick up the receiver, dial my boss' number and cut the line. How stupid of me! Such matters are to be discussed in person. I will go meet him at his house now. He will know my plight only then. I must get this worry out of my system and become a sane man again.

I drive to my boss's place, in the dark. It's cold and dry outside. I can't bear the sound of the wind so I close the car windows. What if he refuses to take me off that project? I can't take these thoughts out of my head. I must meet him - I drive faster.

There's something white in front of my windshield. It's a man in a white shirt. I drive off as he bounces off my car!

Uranus in the 12th House

Uranus is a forward-looking planet with electric energies. Both, unpredictable, and innovative, it produces quick, liberating results. It is seen as a more intense version of Mercury, and a well-aspected Uranus can make a person strongly objective and give them a highly scientific mind. It can also give a person the power to understand others' viewpoints better. The purpose of this planet in a particular house or sign in a birth chart is to break free from whatever that house or sign represents. This intuitive planet motivates a person to think and act outside the box. The twelfth house is the house of institutions, detachments, and freedom from the material and the advent to the spiritual. Uranus being in the twelfth house makes a person live in fear of judgment, metaphorical boxes or rules of the society. This can make a person push things to the edge, without being aware of it. Although embracing their own quirkiness or weirdness is difficult for such people, they are highly tolerant and open-minded when it comes to similar ideas or suggestions by others. Uranus in the twelfth house has the power to manifest a person's dreams into reality. Such a person downloads a lot of information while asleep and might have futuristic visions or dreams. They have ideas striking down at them like lightning bolts and on further contemplation, they are able to understand the meanings hidden behind their sudden ideas or visions.

The Eccentric Planet

Uranus is a planet that rolls on its side instead of revolving like the others. It's Uranus' orientation with respect to the Sun that gives it the appearance of lying on its side, with its poles almost on the line of orbit and the equator on a plane perpendicular to its orbit around the sun. The Earth's stable magnetic field is what protects us from solar winds but Uranus has a constantly changing magnetic field due to its weird rotation and because of this, it's unprotected from solar storms and thus uninhabitable. Its moons align themselves to the Uranian system, this means they are in the plane perpendicular to its orbit too. The hypothesis is that Uranus was whacked onto its side due to collision with a big object.

A German musician, Friedrich Wilhelm Herschel, at the age of 35 acquired a copy of James Ferguson's book on Astronomy, and Robert Smith's Opticks and began constructing a telescope by applying what he had read with the help of his sister. What he created became one of the most powerful telescopes of his time and doubled the size of our understanding of the solar system overnight. It was by observing through this telescope, that Uranus was discovered. The solar system, until March 13, 1781, was thought to extend only as far as Saturn.

Physicists believe that Uranus has sparkly hailstones of diamonds falling onto its mantle as the pressure inside the planet squeezes the carbon in methane molecules tight enough to form diamonds. The planet could also have an ocean of liquid diamonds where solid diamonds float like diamond bergs. The atmosphere is said to make it dark and cold with the lowest temperatures of negative 428-degree Fahrenheit. Methane is what makes Uranus look aquamarine as it absorbs red light which means that most of the light reflected from it is blue. Since its clouds are made of methane, ammonia, and hydrogen sulfide, there's a probability that its atmosphere smells like rotten eggs. So even if you somehow manage to get there to grab the falling diamonds, don't forget to carry a mask!

Neptune



Tears of A Forgotten Sorrow

My cheeks grew hot as Anantha Krishnan, my Machines professor went on and on about the differences between a Salient Pole rotor and a Cylindrical rotor. He was one of the better professors in college. He was normal and audible. Yet, as he was explaining, tears were welling up in my eyes. Was it hunger? No, that can't be it. Did I not like motors? A strong wind was swirling about me and my tear ducts were iron-willed on embarrassing me for no fault of my own. So the moment Anantha Krishnan turned to look at the board to illustrate the rotors, I grabbed my Bob Marley sling bag and quietly slipped out of class. My hands were trembling as though I'd seen a ghost in daylight. I walked as fast as I could through the corridor and went to the library. I sat in the corner-most cubicle. The sun was streaming in with full might next to the cubicle window so I closed the curtains shut. I lay my tired, hungry head on the desk with my left cheekbone resting on my palm. I was looking towards the curtain. A teardrop fell on the desk, making a nice shiny hemisphere. The convex of the drop was faintly lit by the stubborn afternoon sun that was still slipping in through the curtains. I let my tears flow freely and the dull pain in my head subsided. As it subsided, I felt disassociated with the emotion that caused me to cry. The tears that resulted from anger, the anger that was kindled by the monotony of a life that I didn't feel part of. I was mad at the Sun for having colored my morose teardrop and for having stripped me of that very feeling I wanted to indulge in.

Why was my life so revolting? It was a life meant for someone else and yet I'm here in their place! The strong wave of emotion that caught me earlier was now slowly coming back, making me feel intense pain again. I could feel my heart thumping in the tip of my ears. The dreams that I thought I had, those dreams I had promised myself I'd get to, were withering away before my eyes, like water lilies on dry land. Someone was scratching an old unrecognizable photograph of me in a jungle that was the only mark of a beloved memory I had in that world. It burned me. I was feeding a spotted deer and stroking its head when a leopard pounced on it and carried it away. I closed my eyes trying to follow the leopard in my dreams and saw the deer's

spots on the leopard now, who was glowing in the darkness. The spotted leopard belonged to the jungle too, like the deer. Where did I belong? I saw myself sitting on an ornate chair in a wooden house looking down on the floor. At once, the forests were turning into monstrous and authoritative buildings that couldn't be distinguished from one another. The leopard had shrunk to the size of my palm now, and it was looking at me with its watery eyes. I understood the meaning of its tears and I was willing to help but a cacophony of noises circled around me like buzzing bees that obstruct your thought process. This is not a jungle but a library! Why isn't it quiet? I saw the students in my machines class walking in the corridor with books, pens, and bags leaving for the day. A wave of people and machines were now revolving around me crying out indecipherable formulas, making me dizzy. I closed my eyes but the structures kept accumulating, there were offices, asylums, prisons, and institutions. They were so similar and made to look different with mere signboards that play with one's perception. It's not too different from the various masks I wear to blend in and disappear. My throat was beginning to ache with a string of emotion that I gulped forcefully. The dull pain had moved from my head to my throat and I could feel it swell up like I had the goiter. What was the cause of goiter? I hadn't been eating well or I hadn't been eating anything. When I woke up it would be past 8 AM and I'd have to rush to my first class. As I would rush past the mess hall, I would catch sight of soft pillow-like *Idlis* and smell the fragrant *Sambhar*. I would bite my teeth and run, convincing myself that the meager choices of Maggi and coffee available near my class was much better than the delicious *Idlis*. Is there any iodine in *Idli*? I was angry at the institution for making me miss breakfast for class and squeezing out all the desire to eat. I looked at some boys through the window walking about without a care in the world. They weren't troubled like I was. Why would they be? One could survive in any surrounding provided one didn't feel too much. I felt way too much, from this world and the worlds beyond. Feelings of others, both repressed and dominant, came to me, like a wave of music and shook me out of my skin till I lost the sense of what is mine and what's theirs. What's left is a creeping melancholia. I pity the ones that cannot experience

such misery. Flashes of a beautiful ancient house that I don't remember, appear before my eyes. Something I wasn't able to keep, something that got lost in the tornado inside my head. What does one do to catch hold of those wistful images that come to them? I cannot grasp them physically with my hands. Tears flow again, incomprehensible tears! Why was it so hurtful, the world around me, the careless world, the universe that refuses to tell me the truths about itself. The world that lives one day, dies the next. When I'm living breathing in an organized setting learning about things that do nothing to help me realize what it is that I want? Why does this suffering give me so much joy? When are my dreams going to come true? Was this my dream? Perhaps it's the consolation for those like me, who look for trouble. A way to soothe the agitated hearts so they can go on living with the rest of the world, seeming unperturbed.

“Why didn't you attend class?” My classmate surprised me with a pat on my back. She hadn't noticed me sitting in the class for the first half. Which is better? Someone who notices and observes you because they are naturally observant and are curious about you or someone who is less attentive to you but cares about you when they happen to meet you or know something could be wrong?

“A headache,” I said.

“If you're going to bunk classes like this, God knows what will happen! You want a 'W' or what?”

“No, that won't happen. I'll talk to the professor.”

“Hmm.” My friend gave me a bowl of noodles. “Here! We can share.”

“Thank you,” I said. I'd been hungry.

Neptune in the 12th House

Neptune is abundant with dreamy, inspirational energy and its beauty more pronounced than that of Venus in astrology. It represents all things to do with water, large sea animals, water levels, underwater creatures, and sea travelers. This planet raises beauty to a spiritual level. It rules over dreams, illusions, fantasies, and all things that have to do with the subconscious. The twelfth house in a birth chart is the last house – the house of detachments, and solitude. It symbolizes freeing oneself from legal, social, political restrictions, leading to liberation sooner than later. People with Neptune in the twelfth house often have a childhood where their expression is shamed as not realistic, productive, or fitting in. Such people face criticisms for being thin-skinned and for their tendency to dream and wander. This placement makes a person's dreams symbolic which gives them clairvoyant and psychic abilities. They open the gates of their minds way too far, absorbing the energies of others. They are able to see through people as if they were made of glass. This can make a person hypersensitive and can also attract the suffering of others. Such people sometimes can have trouble telling their dreams, ideas, or feelings from those of others. Their dreams can sometimes include symbolism that can be later decoded. Artists, Musicians, Psychologists with a natural talent at hypnotizing or putting others in a trance are seen with this placement.

Blue, Deep, and Mysterious

Neptune for all its dreamy behavior and right brain connotations was discovered with Mathematics! After Uranus was discovered, astronomers observed the planet and found something off about the planet's orbit. French mathematician, Urban Le Verrier concluded that this was due to an unseen planet, and was able to use the mathematics of orbital mechanics to find the position of Neptune. Neptune is the only planet that was discovered by using Mathematics and not by observation because it's hard to catch sight of the blue planet from the Earth.

The deep blue peacock-like planet is one of the ice giants. From Neptune, the Sun appears as a mere dot. The heat from the Sun is only one thousandth of what we get on Earth. Neptune is well known for its disappearing acts and tricks on the innocent. As Voyager 2, the probe launched by NASA to study the outer planets, passed by Neptune, it captured images of Neptune's wispy clouds and fierce spinning storm called the 'Great Dark Spot' that surprisingly vanished by the time the Hubble Space Telescope imaged Neptune five years later. Neptune's deep blue is something of a mystery as it has the same levels of methane in its atmosphere as Uranus. The wind speeds on Neptune are about 1500 miles per hour, which is faster than the speed of sound.

Voyager had seen a great dark spot on Neptune as it passed by the planet but a few years later when Hubble observed the planet, the spot was gone, and other vortices had appeared. Neptune's rings, unlike Uranus' are clumpy and inconsistent, and this must be because of the matter in the rings being controlled by moonlets or moons. Neptune has over a dozen moons with Triton as its largest. Neptune, the planet with the strongest sustained winds in the solar system, is the farthest away from the Sun as Pluto crosses its orbit once in a while.

Pluto



To the Moon I go

I overheard them saying I had delirium. But I would not believe them or the psycho quack who walks around with a pseudo certificate in his pocket. I had no delirium. If at all I had anything, it was great foresight. I had nothing but pity for them. "Hah, they're at it again", I'd scoff when I eavesdropped on my parents' conversation. The gang, my parents and the quack, had pointless discussions about my 'medical' condition, which always culminated with a sumptuous meal. What also worried them, was that I never ate much of it. In fact, I never ate anything on a daily basis but at the table I'd take a slice or two of bread, chew it and keep it in my mouth. Then I'd spit it out.

I have a younger sister and a red frog with icy spots on its forehead. Of the two, I prefer the latter. My sister is growing up to be like my parents and in her pretend-games she always does the things my parents do. I don't talk to her much as she doesn't interest me. The red frog with frostings on his face, is a friend I got from a pond nearby only last month but it feels like we've known each other forever. We stare at each other all day, my eyes locked in his, both trying to dig deeper into what the other's soul is made of. It feels like a small calculation went wrong and it's standing in our way of mutual understanding.

My delirium, or enlightenment, which is what I believe it is, happened with a pen that flew in through the window with a note. It said, "Dear friend. I'm crazy for you. Drink this ink and come with me to a better world. But don't dare open your eyes when you do so. - Tombaugh. I was skeptical about the letter and the pen because I thought it was the frog who was playing a trick on me. At first, I thought I wasn't going to try it. But that night, when I slept, I dreamt about a happy me - I was cycling in the air. It was a unicycle and I was carrying a white lace umbrella. I was going to the moon. I had beautiful icy red eyes and dark red hair.

When I woke up, I rushed to the mirror to check if the dream had come true. A sudden pang of grief took over me and I felt weak. Why did it have to be a dream? Just as I was going to fall down, my reflection looked straight into my eyes and said, "You've got to do what you got to

do". Although I didn't care about my little sister all that much, I wanted to tell her about my dream, to give her a chance. She was naive, so I knew making her believe it would be no trouble.

"What would you do if I go off to the moon?" I asked her while she was playing with a stuffed toy.

"Pshaw! Rubbish" she made the stuffed toy say.

"Well...I guess you'd have to find somebody else to play with then." Her face turned from joyful to plaintive in a matter of seconds. She bit her lip, looked at me with brimming eyes full of curiosity and adoration.

"I'll come with you to the moon."

"We'll see. I don't think you 'd be able to make it." I said. She dropped the stuffed toy and hugged me.

"Please, can you take me too?" I stroked her hair like I had seen mother doing. This was the first time we were having an intimate conversation.

"Hmm....okay, if you wish. But you'll have to listen to what I say." I said

"I will ...I will."

"If you don't you'll be in the soup." I went off to experiment with the pen in the parcel. I opened the back cover of the pen, lifted the refill out and observed the color of the ink which I thought was the most wonderful color I'd seen. The color was also shifting. It was an emulsion of light red, like the color of the eyes in my dream and dark red, like my hair. I closed my eyes and sucked on to the end of the refill and tasted the ink. It tasted terrible and I had a stomach ache for eight hours straight. The next day, when I woke up and looked in the mirror, there was no visible change, really. I pulled out a magnifying glass from my drawer and looked into my eyes up close in the mirror. I saw two small red dots in the iris of my eyes. I was delighted. I continued to suck ink from the pen. Gradually, I could see the color of the iris change a little from black to dark red. My hair also got color on the tips. This would have caused me trouble if I

had met my parents anywhere else except at meals. Whenever it was time for food, I kept my eyes fixed on the plate. I tied my hair in a bun so they wouldn't notice its color either.

But at night, my little sister came up to me and lied down next to me in my bed. I had a sudden burst of affection for her so I switched on the reading lamp and showed her the colors. She was delighted.

“I want to try it too,” she insisted when I showed her the pen.

“It could be dangerous if you don't do it right.” I said. I asked her to close her eyes and suck the refill.

While doing so, she winked at me.

Then suddenly she stopped breathing and her eyes popped out. A body that was so full of life, my sister's body was now dead next to me. I was more disappointed with her than terrified. I hadn't killed her. I had warned her to not open her eyes. Had I not? I pushed her eyes back in and closed her eyelids. I carried her to her room and laid her on her bed.

I woke up to my mother's scream in the morning. I quickly rose from my bed and latched my door. It's time to go to the moon. I took the pen out and sucked all the ink from it at one go with closed eyes. My mother had started to bang on my door. She was wailing like a madwoman. I turned to the mirror and woke up to see the 'me' I had seen in the dream. My hair was dark red and eyes, light. Out the window, the unicycle came for me and I got on it.

They forgot the lace umbrella.

Pluto in the 11th House

Pluto destroys things for us, but by consequence, it also leads us into regeneration. This planet's original sign, Scorpio, reminds us of everything that's sudden and chaotic. It rules obsessive behavior, secrets, hidden or buried things, and undercover operations. It removes something in your life to make room for other things. Although the energy of Pluto may be subtle, this doesn't mean one can undermine its ability to bring change. The change brought by Pluto in a person's birth chart can be seen as uprooting a tree, or as the physical destruction of a tall structure which represents a destruction of the ego or being. When Pluto sits in the eleventh house of a birth chart, it produces a rebellious personality, a person who fights against the labels that are given to them. The eleventh house is the house of friends, siblings, and gains from the social sphere. Pluto in this house develops an aversion to cult mentality or group-ism. If at all a person with Pluto in the eleventh house becomes involved with a group, it would be for a transformative experience or healing. They would encounter power issues within the social sphere and wouldn't enjoy marginal roles or appreciate becoming just one among many. They are often loners as they have high standards and criteria for their friends. Pluto in this house can't really accept acquaintances, as their relationships with people tend towards extremes.

The Accidental Planet

Pluto was discovered accidentally by Clyde Tombaugh in 1930 at the Lowell Observatory. Tombaugh put a lot of hard work into observing the images of the night sky, switching the images of the same portion of the sky taken at different times, and switching them back and forth quickly using a blink microscope. In 2006, Pluto was reclassified to a dwarf planet.

Pluto is usually the farthest from the Sun but its orbit crosses inside of Neptune's orbit for 20 years out of every 248. The last time Pluto overtook Neptune, was from 1979 to 1999. It is as though Pluto and Neptune have a code of understanding between them because even though they cross each other's orbits, they never come close enough to collide. Pluto's is the least circular of all planetary orbits and it sometimes crosses the orbits of inner planets too. Pluto's biggest moon is Charon and both of these bodies spin facing each other around their common center of gravity like fighters in a ring.

Through spectroscopic studies, it was understood that Pluto's atmosphere is abundant with methane. The surface temperature of Pluto is near - 369-degree Fahrenheit which is much below melting temperature of methane, so the planet's surface is a mixture of solid methane and other ices. Pluto has an odd orbit unlike other planets and is made of frozen gases, and due to its peculiar properties, it was tempting for astronomers to classify it as an asteroid or a comet.

Summary

In this collection, the short stories work as a link between two different data-driven worlds - astronomy and astrology. This work includes short stories and short essays on the Sun, Mercury, Venus, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. It doesn't include the Earth as these stories are my imaginations of where we are not already.

Astrological influences of planets in birth charts inflect the characters in my short stories. Astronomical essays raise other questions to think through. Although astronomy and astrology are beyond human, there is something decidedly human about the way we think. How does Saturn feel when a spacecraft gets inside its rings, or what's the reason Venus has such a thick blanket of an atmosphere? Is it its refusal to open up to us?

To know a little bit about something feels nice. To think that one knows a little bit about something feels nicer. To stretch these little things and to imagine new things about them is a wonderful activity to engage in.

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