

June 11

Breakfast things and leftovers on the table. Cups and saucers, jelly and marmalade bottles, bread crumbs and butter smudges... and in the midst of all these, sitting like a meditating Buddha, is my Sir — he is not my Sir really; he used to teach mathematics in the college where I once read, and I read English literature. But I am drawn to him as a flotsam is drawn into a vortex, because he is the Enlightened One. He talks to me about Mathematics, and of late, I have found my release in the study of mathematics.

Sir is busy this morning, as he has been for all the mornings in the past several years, with a 350-year old problem: Fermat's Last Theorem. 'Mathematical problems', he said long time back, 'are my bread and butter.' This morning it is the exponents of number 6 that have drawn all his attention. He scarcely noticed my arrival — it was a little past nine; and I drew a chair and sat down quietly to stare at his meditating face, with its crow's feet crease-lines and loosely hanging folds of dry flesh and skin, and his bald head that shone like a mirror. Drops of sweat lined his forehead. He sat tentatively on the chair, on its very edge and put the whole weight of his torso on the table, supported by his drenched hands. The chair looks too big for him, the table looks too big for him. But he dominates the scene, nevertheless, breaking the silence once in a while with a loud word of praise for Fermat or a mumble that is not intelligible to me.

I heard he once had black hair that covered his head. But his habit of running down his fingers across his hair (when he is despairing mostly) and pulling at them diminished the crop. Now he is stone-bald; but the old habit still works in him. Only, this morning his hands got sweaty.

I see him bring down his head to where his plate would have been, if his daughter had not removed it a few minutes back. He sinks it in despair. His specs come loose, and tumble into the forest of glass and china things before hiding behind a place mat. I too have thought long and heard about Fermat's Theorem, but it was not for a mortal like me to solve any of its puzzles. Pierre de Fermat was a French mathematician, who in 1637, proposed that in an equation $x^3+y^3=z^3$ if z is a full digit of more than 2, then there is no solution for it in positive integers. Mathematicians have known, since the time of ancient Greece, that $x^2+y^2=z^2$ will hold if x , y and z are replaced by full digits, like $3^2+4^2=5^2$. This is not without exception though, but that exception has a rule. However, if one puts cubes in place of squares, things will go haywire, like $3^3+4^3=5^3$ is a joke. Fermat had a definite idea, it seems as to why the cubes won't do, for in the margin of his notebook he wrote, 'I have found a truly wonderful proof which this margin [i.e., his notebook] is too small to contain.' Fermat died a good 18 years after he wrote that gloss on the margin, but there seems to be no record of his ever explaining or writing down in detail his 'wonderful proof' anywhere. I still believe Fermat was a conman, who took the mathematical world on a ride. But, Sir says, 'He might have written it somewhere. We simply don't have any means to look. Maybe somebody stole his notes.'

'Or maybe his wife sold them to a trash dealer,' I said disdainfully.

'Or maybe the thing was in this head, growing, branching out, becoming more complex every day and he let it grow like that instead of writing it down.'

Then, lowering his head, he would say, 'Writing is a limited exercise; it is always a matter of choice so you keep some and drop some.' But in the head — he gives a rap on his bald head with a pencil, 'things are infinite.'

'Most often, you see,' he said one day, 'the most important things we write down inside our head.'

I sighed, I realized this was another of his equations — writing down and keeping it infinite: equals what?

I sighed because I have been doing the same. I know of a friend who is writing a novel. Every time I see him and ask, 'What about your novel?' He says, 'Oh, I've finished it. Cover to cover.'

'Give it to a publisher, then,' I admonish him. 'How can I do that? How can I take my head off and put it down on a publisher's desk? My novel is all here,' and he raps his head like Sir with his long forefinger.

June 12

Same setting, only Sir is wearing a thin, white cotton *punjab*. Today he looks like a giant onion.

Fermat himself experimented with the exponents of 4 to prove his theorem. The Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler proved it with the exponents of 3 and the Frenchman Adrien Legendre did with the exponents of 5. Sir has been spending his energy and time for the exponents of 6 onward. Most of what he has succeeded to prove, honestly, goes over my head. Many of his star students, most now members of the illustrious Mathematical Society, also fail to comprehend what Sir has to say. One of them once grabbed my shoulder in a seminar tea-break and breathed down these words with the finality of a soothsayer: 'Most of what Sir has proved will not stand the test of time.'

'I don't see why,' I protested, 'they are sound.' They may be sound', he said, releasing his grasp on me, 'but Sir is not. There is something wrong here.' He tapped his head with his thick forefinger.

Sir keeps sitting precariously on the over-size chair. His only grandson, his daughter's only issue, a small boy of three, makes several appearances, attempting to strike up a conversation with his *nana*. 'Nana, nana', he calls softly, and not caring for his response, narrates a thing or two to his meditative audience. *Nana* looks at him absently, but smiles. His smile appears conspiratorial, as if he alone understands what the boy has to say. Some equation he solves, it seems, that the boy's half sentences form for him.

I am out of it. Sir's daughter has forbidden her son to disturb the meditative *nana*. And she is quite particular about it. He is thinking important things, she tells him. Her husband, however, gives a dirty smile from the door. He can deconstruct his wife's words which actually mean: don't go near my father. He is crazy. There is no knowing what he can do.

I know, because I can read her face. It is not the members of Mathematical Society alone who think Sir is a case for the funny farm, but his daughter too. I know Sir is a bit difficult to understand. Maybe he is not quite normal. But Mad? Come on. His daughter is paranoid.

Her name is Luna. I have noticed that she never allows forks and knives to be left lying on the table. She keeps them locked up in a cupboard, safe from Sir's reach. She also keeps a close watch on her son. But the boy slips into the room every so often, defeating his mother's vigil. Luna's husband calls his son Bitu. What a name! That man has no taste, and he does look like a bloated donkey dead for a week.

The man works in an NGO — a non-government organization that thrives on mediocrity. Good salary, I guess, and a car for his own use. But the hateful things about the donkey are his glittering stone-rings on almost every finger. The rings flash spears of light every time he moves his hands.

Sometimes he asks Sir, 'How about the solution, *baba*, is it coming?'

What solution, you son of an illiterate ass? But Sir remains strangely distant and cool; as if the man is supplying a possible missing step which he must carefully review before giving the answer. So the answer is a very polite 'no', which brings an obscene smile in his face. Sometimes when Sir is not in his chair — he too has to go to the toilet! — the man approaches our table, drinking huge gulps of water from a big jug, and makes snide remarks about Sir. He apparently gets a huge kick out of it.

One day he said, between gulps of water from the jug, 'I hear your Sir is heading for the Nobel prize.' His eyes were smiling obscenely.

You heard right,' I said. 'And that's a lot of money he's sure to get, which incidentally, will be up for you to grab, as you have grabbed this house of Sir.'

The eyes of the man — his name is Basit — became smaller and obscener, until he looked like a snake down from the sewer pit. He wanted to take me down to that pit, too.

I looked for an exit. But Luna was standing there. Luna!

July 18

Again Sir's struggles with Fermat's Theorem. But this time he has seen some light at the end of the tunnel. He was working with Tanyama's Conjecture, he said, when he felt that if Hilbert's theory of irreducibility is applied here, well, it might lead to something.

A few A4 size sheets lay scattered on the breakfast table, heavily written and sketched over. I knew from their look that Sir was reducing elliptic curves into their line properties for an understanding of the Conjecture: he was into the monads, as the last page showed, and I became interested. I picked up the next one; but it was an art piece done by Bitu, his crayons running wildly across the page in search of an image. An elder person's hand had tried to bring some order to the forms with a pencil outline.

I am sure, Sir wasted a whole hour with Bitu this morning.



A Life Of Days

A Short Story by Syed Manzoorul Islam

But how? I know Bitu's obscene father was out — he is usually out by 8:00; but where was his mother?

Bitu was nowhere to be seen, nor his mother. I cannot ask Sir. I have to wait, I guess.

Sir noticed my interest in the joint art-piece. He leaned forward, and gently took the page from the table. It fluttered in his hand as he said, 'I have some work I must do. See you tomorrow.'

Has Sir become tired fighting with Fermat? His eyes looked glassy and his head drooped unusually. Maybe he missed some sleep last night.

November 10

I now know how much Sir loved his wife — how much indeed, that he can afford to forget his 30-year preoccupation as soon as a whiff of evening air blows her name into his little room.

The breakfast table this morning is the scene of frenzied activity — by ants, hundreds of them. Bread-crumbs are moved, jelly-drops are sucked, water-puddles are negotiated — all with great military skill. Winter is not far away.

As soon as I sat on a chair, Sir pushed a sheaf of A4 papers towards me. 'Don't put them on the table. They might crush the ants. They are my clues to the solution.'

It was always 'the solution'. I tried to relate the orderly movement of ant armies with the scribbling he had done on the exponents of 13, and wondered what new insight the ants had given him. In accepting the papers, I had only played the game that had, by too long a practice, become an acceptable ritual. Frankly, I had no idea what Sir was after. It was all higher maths: I had indeed lost track of his thought ever since he brought Tanyama's Conjecture into the scene.

I was about to give the customary, perfunctory look at the papers when my eyes were caught by two pages of doodlings. Plain and simple doodles. He had written the word 'Sigma' again and again, then yet again on every available space on the two pages. The Greek word Sigma is a mathematical symbol — I know; but this Sigma that he had immortalised in those two pages is something else. Or, someone. She was his wife.

Sir's father-in-law was a famous man; it was also said of him that he was born before his time. He was a *zamindar* who also taught history at Bombay University. In 1931, he was sent by the Aga Khan to attend the Round Table Conference in England where Gandhi and Jinnah sat to talk about the future of India with the British. He gave his daughter the name Sigma, little realising the irony that was in store; for she was to be the life-partner of a mathematician. And how the irony continued! Sigma's first daughter was born on a moon-lit night, so the mathematician father named her Luna; but what a moon she turned out to be, drawing into her orbit an obscene space junk called Basit. The irony continued; the second child was born on a day Sigma also died. She died without being able to give him a name, so the child grew up with a lacklustre name, Masud, given by the night nurse who overlooked the affairs of the cabin where Sigma breathed her last. That Masud eventually completed his education and left for

USA. He now works in Boise-Cascade Paper Company in Idaho as a chemical engineer. He proudly uses paper and stationery his company produces when he writes to his father, which happens about twice a year.

Sir said, long time back, 'You see, I can never cross the road that runs in front of Holy Family Hospital in the city. The road had such splendid *bokul*, trees once, now they are all gone.'

Deconstructed, this means, 'My wife died in that hospital. I can't take that road.'

Sir was looking at the ants — his glistening eyes following each movement the ants made. I quietly shuffled the two pages in the deck of other A4 papers on the shelf behind me. 'I've to go someplace, Sir, if you excuse me.'

Outside, I felt as if Sigma had followed me; as if she had some urgent message to give me. This has happened before; but this morning Sigma came on quite strongly. She was concerned about her family, her daughter. I looked back, there was nothing but sunlight playing hide and seek with trees. I knew it was going to be a problem. When old ghosts are raised, it is difficult to order them back to the graves. Like the truant shadows, they keep following you until you drop down and resign, tired overmuch.

I knew it was going to be a problem. When the night is half gone and the clock is ticking away phantom hours in a merciless procession, and the unseasonal rains drench the locked up memories until they troop out for warmth and comfort, I feel terribly alone and shelterless. I feel naked.

Who am I?

January 26

Sir asked me, 'What is an NGO?'

I was surprised by his sudden interest in anything outside numbers. I started to explain but he stopped me to shoot his second question.

'Are the jobs transferable as with the government?'

'Yes Sir, if the NGO is big and they have many activities.'

'I see', he said absently, then fell silent.

After some time he said quietly, 'Basit has been transferred to the city.'

I remembered, some days ago Sir went out for a walk with Bitu. Luna was either having a nap, or was out shopping. Sir is not a man to go out for a walk for health reasons, but if Bitu presses him he can hardly refuse.

The road in front of the house is a private one, therefore no street traffic, so the neighbourhood children use it as they want. Bitu was ecstatic to be out, so was another boy riding a bicycle. The two met, and Bitu was thrown out into the bush. A few cuts and bruises — that's all. But that was, for Luna, the last straw on her camel father's back.

I am sure it was Luna who engineered the transfer.

Sir said, 'The house will become terribly empty.' He sounded unspookably sad, although his face had no apparent change. The air in the room suddenly turned heavy. It was difficult for me to breathe.

Sir kept looking at the ants, whose number has dwindled, and so have their activities. The A4 papers in his hand fluttered like penants.

February 5

Luna and company have departed. Have they taken the ants with them? On the breakfast table this morning, Sir has piled up old papers and files. A cousin from the village has turned up to look after Sir; he is watching TV in the family room. Sir has, of late, shifted his attention to Middleton's Law; and we are supposed to do the coordinates today. 'Let me give you a once-over before you start with the coordinates,' he said, and began to talk. His talk turned out to be not about Middleton's Law, but about the school he first went. 'Gyan Babu was the kind of Maths teacher who could teach you numbers even while you slept,' he said.

And the village-cousin broke out into a huge laughter. He was watching 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.'

'Altav' — Sir called him.

But village Altav was some place else, I knew, for the moment he was the eighth dwarf.

So Sir told me, 'Let's go to my room. I've to tell you about the coordinates.'

I could see his face turning long. If Bitu were here, nothing could have drawn him away from the breakfast table, even if the room were on fire. Bitu's favourite hunt was the breakfast table. He was forbidden to enter Sir's own room.

In his own room, on his oversize bed, Sir sat with his legs stretched, leaning against the wall. He pulled the counterpane over to cover his thin, bony, pathetic legs. He looked hopelessly old, frizzled and dry. He looked like a phantom that has no business on earth except to haunt people.

He looked like the ghost of Fermat or Middleton, here to put an obsession in my head. That obsession was not numbers, but a figure, a figure that thrives in its absence.

March 19

Sir sat clumsily on his bed, and told me a story. I was surprised to see how tidy his bed looked today. There were no books, no files — not a single leaf of paper on the bed. He was there to tell me a story, a

story coming straight from his head. He had started to despise writing. As if, writing is always inadequate; it can never bring the image in its wholeness.

'Writing is like ploughing a field. You can only grow a certain crop,' he now says.

Sir started his narration. He was in the city, for a week, to settle some problems with his old-age pension. I have seen other old pensioners getting terribly upset if they had to travel to the city, but not Sir. I suspect he was happy to be in the city which saw his marriage, his first posting, the birth of his children....

Maybe he was sad too, because his wife died there.

Sir had got down from the train in Kamalapur. He was to stay, as usual, with a younger cousin who lived nearby. Sir never liked to take a rickshaw or an auto; instead he walked. He preferred walking, which he thought was something man had a pair of legs for.

Sir was crossing a busy street just outside the station. The road was dominated by ominous looking Route No 6 buses that had their terminals at one end of the street. One of these buses knocked down a man who, Sir says, was either crossing the street or contemplating doing so. Anyway, the man was lifted clean about 10 feet from the ground, then fell face down on the pavement. Sir said he heard a 'thwack' or a 'twang' and looked at the unfortunate source of the sound. The man was lying motionless.

The rest in Sir's narration:

A crowd quickly formed around the unfortunate man. Myself was debating whether to cross the road, my legs froze or went dead. Still, the road lay there, to be crossed. I wanted to see if the man were alive.

But that's long shot. He was lying face down — there was hardly anything left where his face was. Blood was coming out from every pore of his body, so it seemed, like mad. I could hardly believe how fast blood can flow. Then there is the other thing. The road where to man had fallen after the bus sent him to the sky was a bit sloped towards where his legs were, but there it evened again; so there was a kind of a depression, hardly perceptible though to a casual onlooker. All the blood of his body rushed towards the place where they formed a great pool. One could shortly see the shadows of his twitching limbs in that pool. One could even make out the outline of his legs in one of the shadows. People watched intently. Many had beaming faces, as if they were mighty glad something like that accident had happened on their street. Maybe people are mighty pleased when someone dies so awkwardly, giving them chance to talk about it, better still fantasise about it, for days on end. People kept coming, and leaving reluctantly — those who had things to do. Others formed a permanent press.

Was obscene Basit there, in that gawking crowd? But then, came the dog. You see, the dog came sniffing the trail of blood that stretched a good ten yards. The dog was not smiling; it looked quite serious. It had things to do there, namely drink some blood, if it could. A man threw a stone at the dog though, and it bolted out.

Sir was not squeamish or anything, but he had to leave — he had things to do. But after about a week, when his business had been taken care of, and he was returning to the station to catch a train home, Sir, on an impulse, decided to see the place of the accident. 'Why?' 'I don't know,' he said, 'I felt very bad for the man, the way he fell from the sky and lay on that pavement with no bone in his body intact and no life in any of his limbs. I felt very bad.'

Finding the place was not difficult. I had marked the place well — it was near a flower shop; on the other side of the road was a restaurant. I don't know why, but I had a faint anticipation that I'd see the place still stained by the man's blood, and that dog sniffing at those stains. What a surprise though. There was not a single stain, not even the faintest. Imagine as hard as you could, but death had not left behind any sign — visible or invisible — on the street.

You see, the thing really upset me. There should have been some sign, something to remember the man's death by. Then I realised how effectively and clinically a road erases all signs of death from memory. A road leaves no evidence of any death, even the bloodiest. It wipes everything clean. As if you never existed. Or your death never took place.

Sir speaks with more intensity nowadays than ever before. He is nearing the solution of Fermat's Theorem. Maybe that has put that extra loudness in his voice. But it has drained his energy, too. He looks drawn out, tired.

But why did he tell me the story which ended with the moral 'Stand on the road, and you can get lost without a trace?'

June 2

I knew that Sir's death was just a matter of days. If I am allowed to sentimentalise (who is stopping you?), I may say that he was being emptied off his precious life-force drop by drop ever since his wife died. Sensationalism apart, Sir had 'serious renal problems which marked him off for death in the summer of the year.

However, he died not from a renal failure, but from tetanus infection. He was shaving with a rusted old blade, it seems, and a cut in the chin developed into a huge infection; then he had fever and then other symptoms, and finally breathed his last in a bed of a city hospital.

His cousin Altav told me, a few days after his death, that Sir's last wish was to eat a mango.

But he was off solid food. The mango had to wait.

July 2

I too have different ideas about writing. Why should one write? Is not writing down your thoughts a kind of self-deception — cheating yourself plainly? When you write, you become a slave to the language your tribe uses. You have to condition your thoughts in terms of what your tribe dictates. Anyway, that's a complicated issue, too big for this diary.

I have discovered that what I think, and if I can somehow listen in to my own thoughts, without disturbing myself, makes more sense. In our thoughts, we are our own masters. That too is a bit complicated for this diary.

I am standing now on the same spot where the man in Sir's story kissed the world goodbye — in front of the flower shop and the restaurant. The street is continuously pounded by ominous looking Route 6 buses. The day is overcast, there was a big shower in the morning. So my feet are really in an inch-deep puddle.

I have nothing to do. I am in no hurry. Although the street is busy like hell. It is 11 am.

Time, Sir used to say, is the fourth dimension of matter. What an observation! But today, as I speak my thoughts, I find everything in a mess — what is time, what is duration? But when I think, time seems indeed to be like a curtain that, even slightly parted, reveals strange sights.

Like Sir sitting at the breakfast table with a sheaf of A4 papers in his hand, lost in thought, and Luna asking me, in her eternally sweet voice, 'Can I give you another cup of tea?'

Yes, yes. Pour me a cup of tea. And stay. For a No 6 bus is coming fast towards me. This one it seems means business.

I may stay where I am, or I may step back. For the moment though, I am on the road.