

Though he thought he had already died, the old poet found himself stumbling around a shady drugstore. Exhausted, as though from a long descent, the poet fell to the curb in a heap.

A scent in the air told him he was back to the City of Crows. But he could not say what year it was. He didn't know how he got there, or where exactly "there" was.

"Gooface"—read a billboard across the alley. A tagline below explained that two social-media giants merged to gave birth to Gooface. In smaller print, it said that the Realm owned Gooface and everything on it. As the old poet tried to make head or tail of these lines, a clicking sound alarmed him.

Unbeknownst to the poet, the billboard had snapped his photo, sent it via Gooface for cross-checking and informed the Realm Protector Battalion (ReProBate).

Soon, two ReProBate officers were seen approaching him cautiously. When they were close enough to see the poet's tattered clothes and defeated jaws, they relaxed.

"Brown male," the larger officer called out, "we're ReProBates. How are you today?" he asked in a rehearsed tone.

"Well... my hemorrhoids are acting up, but I don't think you two care much for that kind of a thing..." the poet chuckled.

The officers suddenly seemed alert. "Brown male—there is only one acceptable answer to the question 'how are you today?' —and that is 'I am fine. Hope you are too.' Surely, you know this?"

"Yes," the smaller officer barked, "you can't just take the law into your own hands and make up new answers."

"It's the law to be well?"—the poet was surprised.

"It's the law to say one is well. How you are is immaterial."

"But my hemorrhoids..." the poet began to protest.

"As irrelevant as the moon landings!" the ReProBate officer snapped.

"Listen to us. Our High and Charming King has outlawed all diseases and all reports of it. You may not be ill."

"But I am a human being—and humans..."

"We can't yet confirm that you're a human," the smaller officer said, "Do you have a natives' microchip?"

"What?" the poet floundered. "I... I have eyes that see, a mind that thinks and a tongue that speaks... does that not..."

"Brown male—you have no chip, no Gooface and no respect. That makes you a criminal."

Seeing the poet's deathly pallor, the bigger man tried to be the bigger man.

"Brown male," he said, "there are no records of you... strange. How old are you?"

"Last I checked, I was 55 years old."

Now the officers sighed and looked disappointed.

"What you are, criminal," the smaller officer hissed, "is a criminal."

"Everyone knows that only the High King is 55 years old. And no one else! How dare you compare yourself to his majesty?"



ILLUSTRATION: OISHIK JAWAD

POETIC JUSTICE

ADNAN R AMIN

"Well..." the poet stammered, "my SSC certificate age is 53 years..."

"Sir—you are clearly lying about your identity. I am afraid you must come face the Gooface Judge."

The ReProBates put the poet in a tiny Pico brand patrol-car. In fact, it was so small that only one person could fit inside. So, the officers activated auto-drive mode, and proceeded to walk alongside the car. The smaller officer complained that their neighbouring nation deliberately made the Pico so tiny.

As they moved along, the City of Crows seemed happening, with glowing Gooface billboards, bonsai trees and digital trashcans. Construction of flyover-flyovers (fly-overs that fly over fly-overs) was on in full swing. "1984: the Action Comedy" was playing in cinemas. On one end of the city, young activists were

demanding that—for the sake of Decolonisation—the city be renamed 'City of Krows'. ReProBates were trying to arrest them in the name of a colonial-era law.

As they drove (and walked) down to the outskirts, the poet was engulfed by that familiar, foul smell. Here, shanties lined the narrow road and hundreds of thin, dark figures stomped about in fetid, floodwater pools.

"None of this is real," the large officer offered promptly, "it's only a preservation of how things were before the High King arose."

The smaller officer chimed in, "This is a realm-wide, curated exhibit. Only this city is real. You can visit our website greatestrealm.com if you don't believe us."

The poet didn't feel so inclined. The midsummer breeze was hot and humid,

and suddenly he felt drowsy. Watching the officers huff and puff to keep up with the car, he drifted off.

When he awoke, the poet found himself in front of a building. The officers escorted him into what seemed like a studio or theatre. They made their way through the dark aisles and took a seat.

There were three characters on a stage—arguing amongst themselves. Soon, the poet realised that the actors were reenacting his own encounter with the officers. The play ended with a ReProBate officer saying, "You must come face the Judge." And then the lights came on.

The poet squinted his eyes. As his eyes adjusted, he realised he was sitting in a witness stand of sorts. Around him were audience, cameras and screens.

Then a programme host came out on stage.

"Welcome to this episode of Judge," he began jovially, "brought to you by Gooface."

A round of applause followed. "Natives—you've seen this brown male's audacity. In the name of our High and Charming King (HaCK)—launch your 'Judge' app and choose your verdict. Remember: to vote you don't need to know the Law, or anything at all... as long as you can use a dropdown menu.

"Also," he added, "please give the app a good rating. Go!"

The audience got busy clicking and tapping away on their devices.

"What is this?" The poet demanded, "what voting? Where is the judge?"

"Task... there are no judges anymore," the host said, air-quoting the second last word. "Human judges are prone to human errors. So, now we crowdsourced verdicts, and crowdfund punishments."

Continued to page 6

| POLITICS |

COMMITTED TO COMMITTEES FOREVER

OSAMA RAHMAN

Cracking down on time theft by government officials using the excuse of "sitting on committees", the government yesterday decided to form a committee to oversee all other committees.

"Our ministers waste too much time sitting on committees. They even form other committees to do the job of the original committees, wasting tax payers' money," the minister of the newly formed Ministry of Committees said.

"Some committees take money. But they take too much money. So we are forming a committee of bribes to oversee that the amount of bribes taken is not too much," he said, adding that everyone in the country is a thief including him.

When a reporter asked him why he was blatantly encouraging crimes, the minister said he was only joking and that it is not his fault that reporters don't understand his "words". "I wasn't even speaking in English. It's an entirely different language," he said, referring reporters to the committee on excuses, another newly formed committee to oversee the bad excuses ministers make to get out of trouble.

The role of all committees came to light following the recent encroachment of canals around the capital. "Take the case of the Dumni canal. It was earmarked to be 120 feet wide but now stands at only 10 feet wide in places," Srinath Mondol, chair of the Committee of Canals, informed. "There is a real estate developer, very rich, very connected, who actually uses the earth dug from another place to make an artificial canal, to fill the natural canal a few kilometres away," he explained.

Mondol alleged that the real estate developer in question created many problems impeding his

committee's work. "He made baseless allegations of corruption against us," he said, while wiping his face with the tissue of the real estate developer's tissue company, sitting on a chair from the Real estate developer's furniture company, all the while in his house which he recently "won" in a lottery in the locality of the real estate developer in question.

After the filling of the canal flooded the Pink City residential area, a new committee was formed to oversee irregularities. The new committee met so irregularly that by the time they decided to go check the spot, they said that the city's committee of development had built a bridge over it.

"When you make things, sometimes you make them over other things. The fact is, it will not harm the flow of water and even if does, it's just water. The Pink City that we have flooded can now act as a canal," the chair of the committee of development said at the time.

After this, another committee was formed, one comprised of only ministers. The Committee of Ministers on a Mission was also ineffective as the ministers met only to praise our supreme rulers and decided to narrow the canal further. "We honestly did not know what we were supposed to do. We heard canal and development so we thought we must develop the canal, as things go in this country," a minister said, asking not to be named.

The newly formed committee, though, promises not to waste time and get to work. In order to ensure this, the Committee of Time Theft will be formed to oversee the work of the committee that oversees the work of all committees. But who will oversee the work of the Committee of Time Theft?

"We will form a committee to discuss these matters," another minister said.

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IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

| DIGITISATION |

POETIC JUSTICE

After page 7

In seven minutes, the poet's fate was sealed. By powers vested by the High King, the audience smilingly handed down a sentence of death by border-crossing.

"What manner of justice is this?" the poet stammered, "I demand to see the High King!"

The entire hall shuddered at the thought.

"Treason!" shouted a ReProBate officer.

"Blasphemy!" cried a young conservative.

"Ignorance," the scholars shook their heads and murmured to themselves.

But the poet was adamant. "Where is this High King? I will seek justice from him."

The host scratched his head. Elderly council-men looked baffled.

"Well... the thing is... the fact of the matter—well, the HaCK is not accessible like that."

"I don't understand—can no one reach the king?"

"Stop talking about our King, criminal..." the smaller ReProBate officer's scream was heard from the gallery. Enraged, the audience began tapping away again, and soon the poet had been sentenced to 21 deaths, and one

exile to Pico land.

Finally, an elderly councilman stood up and spoke with composure, "when the HaCK eliminated the meddlesome, old system, and launched his app... city-people were happy. They were told that it was 'progress'. But soon, thousands of ghetto-people from the 'exhibits' began downloading the app, and turning decisions their way. The High King felt compelled to intervene," the councilman stopped to sigh.

"But digitalisation is hard to reverse. Eventually, in a landmark judgment, the HACK was defeated and sent to the border-crossing to die. In his place, a paid app named 'High King' was launched..."

The host added, "High

King'—brought to you by Gooface..."

"Shut up, brown Seacrest!"—the councilman snapped. "So, you see—all the king's ReProBates couldn't put the HaCK back together again... and that's why you can't meet the High King."

Some minutes later, a single voice rang out, "Are we killing the criminal or not?" Days later, the poet was released at the Pico border-crossing, and was promptly shot to death. Happily, this caused him no harm—since before returning to the City of Krows, he had already been dead. As he ascended, he thought he saw a stream of thin, dark figures wading their way up to the glowing city.

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