

Samar

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"Is it just me, or are the days getting hotter by the day?" I ask myself as I get into the shower for the third time today. The temperature outside must be ball-parking at 40 degrees Celsius, surely. I am living up to the title my ex-wife used to call me: a cold-blooded sadist. Cold-blooded, yes, as my core body temperature is less than the outside temperature. Sadist, just say I do not turn the other cheek. I live by the mandate that everyone is given one chance in life.

All these people who condemn others who splurge on themselves with niceties in life can go to hell. They talk about lowering greenhouse gases and lowering carbon footprints. All these are to prevent an uncertain catastrophe that may not happen to a future generation that gives rat's ass to their ancestors, i.e., besides remembering them on Cheng Beng or offering prayers on Deepavali morning. I have one life. I want air conditioning. I cannot live without the room temperature set way down low.

Ah, this is life. Sipping on my 18-year-old Macallan whiskey in the comfort of my Bukit Bandaraya bungalow, I realise that getting rid of the bitch was the best thing I did in my life. I was drained out of all my life juices trying to meet her never-ending selfish needs. All those meaningless parties with all her fake friends and hours of pretentious tête-à-tête were a pure waste of time. Indeed, the Maker must have made us for more meaningful reasons.

Love is blind, they say. Marriage is a miracle, then. Miraculously, the blind can see after marriage. Once the ember of lovemaking became dim, it became a chore. I had to get out. Get out, I did. There was nothing a private investigator and sex-deprived wife could not fix. It was an amicable farewell, nevertheless.

I take everything like the jolts the universe goes through as it traverses time. I look at my experiences in my former life as life lessons given by the School of Hard Knocks. I was too bright for her and her equally pea-brained circle of friends.

I find my purpose in my new life. After dwelling on so many new interests, I am now obsessed with this obscure website that picks up weird radio signals from the remotest land on Earth. This could be an extension of my fascination with the ham radio during my secondary school days. My

friends and I had built an amateur radio from scratch. It won us a prize in the state-level science competition.

As I was scrolling down websites one day, as a curious person would do on a Sunday afternoon, I stumbled upon this experimental project by a Midwest American university. They were working on a project on picking up frequencies, just like ham radio, but with a brand-new digital approach. I signed up for their beta project.

Days went on. I keep picking up signals from all over the place: Kazakhstan's mountainous regions, the Sahara Desert, Patagonia plains, and even the sunny samba-filled Caribbean. I know precisely where the transmissions come from as the website came with on-the-spot translation and transcription of speeches.

Twiddling its touch dial, which is really me touching my computer screen and making controlled small dialling finger movements, I come upon a hypnotic voice. It is not the generic radio voice that I had heard before. It has an androgynous vibe to it, something between a grandmother's elderly shaky voice and one coming from a chronic smoker's phlegm-paved vocal cords. The background is surprisingly quiet, with no white noise typical of most frequencies the website picks up. The language... must be a cross between an East European language and a singsong attenuation of a Far East lingo, Korean, maybe. I just cannot put my finger on it.

"Greetings, Earthlings...!" the voice says. "Going on further, our seers see a black cloud of moving wings sweeping across Portuguese Guinea to clip down the flapping wings of a roaring bird. Nothing anyone can do..." The Golden Samar has spoken. Then it goes silent.

The message stuck in my mind like a leech sucking on its prey. Only a few days later does the actual story manifest in the papers. A Boeing plane plying the Durban to Mozambique route had gone down like a pole. Forensic air crash experts say that a wreck of migratory birds had been sucked into its engines, causing all engines to fail simultaneously.

Looking back, Golden Samar's message makes a lot of sense. The 'black cloud of moving wings' refers to the migratory seabirds. 'Portuguese Guinea' is the old name of Mozambique, whilst 'the roaring bird' is, of course, a plane.

I keep on going at the same frequency. Curiosity creeps in. I take time and effort to get a proper reception. Sometimes the sounds come out muffled as if an air bubble is escaping from an

aquarium; sometimes, it is like the squealing of seals. Sometimes it is just buzzing, or is it what the Hindus describe as the sound of the universe - Om?

On the occasional days I pick up transmissions from the mysterious radio station of the Golden Samar, I continue getting cryptic messages. Who could say 'wrath of Mother vomits pelting fire' to mean giant volcanic eruptions? Or does 'falling of cold white petals in a furnace' imply snow falling on Arabic deserts?

This continues for months, with me periodically picking up signals and trying to interpret their meanings. Like my daily Wordle and Sudoku challenges, Samar's riddles constitute my armamentarium against Alzheimer's.

My obsession with Samar grows as months go by. I updated my router, decluttered my computer to minimise, and upgraded my internet line to get the best reception a telecommunication network can offer. My research apparently pays off. There is a noticeable difference in the reception clarity. I am getting regular transmissions from Samar now. He gives a nightly 10-minute appearance and then disappears for good. There is no particular scheduling of transmission. Maybe they are using a different timeline, one on an alien planet or a different universe. Of course not; this is the internet, not some intergalactic shortwave radio transmission, for heaven's sake!

It is a few days before my 50th birthday. No, I have no parties planned to celebrate my newfound freedom. Parties are not my thing and birthdays are just days to me. These days, every day is another day in paradise, left to my own devices and vices. A person does not mature overnight, from one who cannot drink to one who is licensed to drop dead drunk after the stroke of midnight on his 18th birthday or from a political ignoramus to a political pundit at 21. It is no big deal to keep oneself alive through the years. If fate had it that you were to be born in an affluent country or at a time when most infectious diseases can be kept under wraps, you would survive. They are no particular reasons to flaunt it and expect others to feel happy that you survived this long. As if they care. Even a dog can live to 15 if it is not a stray but cared for and vaccinated. To me, a birthday is a non-event.

It appears that fate had other plans.

It is one of those nights when I am tinkering with the frequencies. Then it comes on.

"Greetings, Earthlings, wherever you are," the Voice returns.

"This message goes out to the person born in the umbrella of Seven Twin Sisters."

"Celebrate life all you can like it is your last day on Earth...," it goes on.

"...because it is!!! The Golden Samar had spoken," and the transmission goes into dead silence.

Now that is going to be a tough one. Why the hell should anyone deliver under an umbrella? Who are the twin sisters and seven pairs of twins anyway, on top of that? Finding a family with a couple of twins is challenging enough; seven of them? There must be something more than what appears at face value.

I leave that thought in my mind to ponder.

People are also born under astrological signs. Now, which zodiac sign has an umbrella? None.

Born under the umbrella of seven twin sisters... The umbrella could mean protection or umbrage. Taken under protection... could go well with a guardian angel, or born to a mob family with twin sisters... Nah, outrageous.

I shut my computer to hit the sack. Everything looks better after a good night's sleep.

"I'll just do that!" I give myself a break from Samar and his mind-bending prophecies. Sleep is a cheap commodity for the pauper but becomes increasingly difficult to purchase once wealth accumulates. I must be rich, as slumber does not come easily. Those mystifying puzzle me as it keeps on playing in loops.

I wake up to the buzzing of a 5 o'clock alarm. My research showed me that a couple of hours before sunrise is supposed to be when our brains are most responsive to stimuli. It has something to do with our biorhythms. The Hindus call it Brahma muhurta. I get up early to do my yoga asanas.

It dawned upon me as I stretched my left leg, arched my back, and pointed my folded hands in a Surya Namaskar pose. My brain goes on overdrive again.

For aeons, Hindus have believed that the Sun has been providing us energy and some kind of guiding light... mmm, guiding angel, guardian light. They also think that the positional coordinates of each star, which are given names, control our destiny.

During my wedding with my ex-wife, the conducting priest told me to observe a binary star which rotated in a rather peculiar fashion. That's it. Samar must be referring to the astrological stars.

I stop my yoga moves. I fetch my laptop and quickly type in 'seven sisters astrology' and 'twin astrology'—a few scrolling and explorations there.

In Indian mythology, the time Lord Muruga was brought alive corresponded to the star constellation called Kartikeya. It is a formation of seven stars. Sages compared to this an infant cared for by the six celestial nymphs.

In many cultural zodiac beliefs, the twin icon refers to Gemini.

Oh shit! I was born under the two signs, the twin Gemini and the stars of Kartikeya. Am I the intended recipient of Samar's cryptic messages? Is it meant for me?

It cannot be. I am only going to be 50, and that too, tomorrow. Oh no! Celebrate tomorrow like there is no day after.

I dare say I am a man who is quite careful with my health. With confidence, I can be assured that the possibility of dropping dead from a cardiac event or stroke is quite remote. Infectious diseases? Cancers? Not possible. I am in pink of health now, unlikely to collapse in two days.

Oh no. I have forgotten road traffic accidents, freak accidents, and occupational hazards. There are simply so many ways to die.

Is it really me he is referring to, or am I just overreacting? Are these my last few days of life on Earth? My God.

I decided to err on the side of caution. All of Samar's predictions have come true thus far. So, why shouldn't this? At least, I think they have so far.

Pull yourself together, I tell myself. Let me put down a contingency plan. I need to put myself out of any potential hazard.

I call my secretary to cancel all my appointments for the day. There will be no going out today. Will have to dine at home today. Off the main home power, just in case of a short circuit. I turn off the gas outlets, no cooking for me. I decide to stay put, crouched in the corner of my sitting room, which must be the safest in the house. Going up the stairs and even a shower may risk a

fall. No sleep for me, either. What if I die in sleep? I should just draw the curtains and sit still in darkness for the rest of the day till midnight.

I disconnect all electric appliances. No TV, no air-conditioning for me and definitely no cooking.

Okay, my mobile phone is fully charged. It should last till the end of the day with the power bank. I will just eat bread spread with butter and jam. There are enough water bottles to go around. It is 9 in the morning. I have to stay alive till midnight when the day officially ends to disprove Samar's prediction.

I station myself in the sitting room, the safest. The door is nearby if I have to exit if my house is on fire. It would be easier for people to rescue me if I had to be saved.

I sit in a foetal position grasping myself for the life of me, hanging to my dear life. I still cannot find any peace even though this position is said to be the most reassuring one. Under extreme anxiety, Man is supposed to recoil into the position that much comfort in the womb of the mother. With all the raging stress proteins, it gave me anything but zen.

Time ticks on slowly.

My mobile buzzed loudly, scaring the living daylight out of me. Ah, it is my mother. She must be calling me to wish me for birthday.

"You know," she went on without bothering with the usual pleasantries. "... the water pressure in my house is bad. Call Ah Tong to look into the water pump."

With that, she just hung up. No hello. No birthday wishes.

That's my mother. Even since father, after tolerating years of her whining and complaining, died, I am now her new punching bag. Right in the middle of the day, with any rhyme and reason, she would call and ask for this and that to be done. One cannot expect too much from an 80-year-old brain, so I can forgive her.

Just like turning 18 or 21 and maturing, showing filial piety is not a single-day event like Mother's Day or Father's Day; it is a process. Compassion is shown via unspoken words, not merely through the public display for validation.

My mobile rings again. Then again and again. This friend and that colleague call asking for this thing and that thing from me. With the possibility of death hanging above my head, nothing seems

particularly worthy of the cost of the call. So what if he had giddiness, and I could recommend my personal physician. Who cares if he had hard stools, and I could suggest a good elixir? I had had enough. I turn off my phone altogether. Funny, nobody wished me greetings for my birthday or asked me how I was. Nobody actually bothers about each other; everyone is worried about themselves. Definitely not about me.

It must have passed 3pm. Time ticks really slowly when your adrenaline is churned at full throttle. Drawing all the curtains, devoid of sunlight and detached from all devices, orientation to time is difficult. The hourly cuckooing of the grandfather's clock is the only hint at the time of the day.

My mind goes into a tailspin yet again. Why do I deserve to get in a situation like this? Hugging myself in a foetal position wrapped in darkness with my life hanging on a thread, wondering whether the Grim Reaper will swing his scythe today is not my idea of success.

My whole life flashes in front of me. I remember all the little naughty things I did here and there as a child. Nothing cruel really popped up. Undoubtedly, packing garden snails in a plastic bag and pounding them with a stone does not deserve this. Drowning the house rat I had trapped for science class could be okayed by the gods. After all, they are just pests.

With the raging hormones in the spring of youth, fooling around arousing forbidden pleasures cannot be really so wrong. Can scooting off when emotional attachments get too overbearing be so bad?

I have been a good son. I did my part of filial duties. No Indian parent is ever satisfied with his offspring, but still, I did my share. In their eyes, their kids are forever incapable of thinking for themselves. Everything they do is wrong or self-defeating. Their puppet strings were cut when I tied the nuptial knot, but apparently not for them.

My ex-wife had tried to continue where my parents stopped, controlling me in her passive-aggressive ways. She knew there was nothing a little crocodile tear and raunchy activity would not melt my heart away. Was I unkind to her, exposing her extramarital trysts out in the open?

My catecholamines must be riding sky high, burning enough fuel for today, for I have not eaten anything today, but food is the last thing on my mind. It is 9 pm, another three hours to go before the day ends, and I know I have dodged the Reaper.

I notice the shadow of an occasional twirling of blue light around the four walls of my living room. Trapped in the dead darkness of the unlit, it is not difficult to identify and speculate where such a light was coming from. It was the characteristic siren of a police car. They must still be looking for the elusive cat burglar who was reported to have escaped custody last week. Then it stops.

The police must think that criminals are idiots. After escaping from them a week ago, the escapees must have crossed the borders by now. Fat chance that they still loitering around playing peek-a-boo with the men in blue. All they know, their superiors must have paved them with a clear passage. I read from the papers that the accused escaped from the toilet window when he requested to ease himself. Ease himself, he did, to the wide, wide world.

Nothing much happens. As I gazed intently at the illuminated dials on my wristwatch, I could see that the end was near. Ending to all the anxiety, I mean, not the end of me.

One minute to go.

The police stroboscopic light is back. This time it is brighter and is accompanied by a blaring horn. Don't tell me the suspect is around my neighbourhood. I become curious. I tiptoed to the full-length glass window of the sitting room to peek into what was happening outside.

Bad mistake.

I see silhouettes of two men, probably police officers, from the outline of the cap they don, stepping cautiously along the road in front of my porch. A figure flashed a hundred metres before me, running across my garden. I hid behind the curtain and lay on the floor.

"*Henti, polis!*" shouts someone. It goes on with a few exchanges of words, and bang! The sound of gunfire does not sound loud like the MX cinema's exceptional FX-enhanced sound of firecrackers, but it gives a deep eerie sensation that goes down the spine. A thud, probably of an earthen pot in my garden. Then the sound of footsteps. Suddenly, a high-pitched piercing sound just zooms past my body. I can almost feel the heat that comes with whatever passes me by. Crash comes down the glass of my living room. Damn, it must be a stray bullet from the police gun. Slash. What is that, the ache at my shoulder as if someone had tackled me down at a rugby game? I turn towards my left shoulder. There it is, a linear gashing wound at the ball of my shoulder. The stray bullet must have hit me.

I keep still, even not daring to breathe. Silence. There is not a single sound. Nothing. Then, as if to signal the end of all the melee, the grandfather clock chimes. Every strike of the bell reduces my heart rate by a notch. It is finally midnight.

Is this it? Did I dodge the Grimm Reaper's scythe? But the prophecy...?

Midnight. The end of the day and the beginning of a fresh new day. But then, wait. In some old traditions, particularly for those who delve into astrology, a new dawn marks a new day, not midnight. 12 midnight as the end of the day is just a human construct, not Nature's. So technically, I am not out of the woods yet. I have another six hours to kill. Perhaps, kill is not a good word to mention in this instance.

Wait. All Samar said was that this was my last birthday. He did not say I am going to die on my birthday. He just said it was my last birthday. So are the next 364 days going to be like today? Oh damn. I shudder as I sit lonely and clueless in the dark of the night in a house too big for one person.