

# The Ageing Beaver

*by Ajay Nair*

Sajid scrunched his nose as he peered at the crossword puzzle in front of him, placed at a slight angle, as he preferred. He had to lean forward, bending down, to see the clues clearly. For some time — a year? two? — he had known that his glasses were inadequate aids for his current level of long-sightedness but as with most such things, he had not bothered to replace them. The perpetual ache in his mouth due to teeth that were rotting rapidly was another reminder of this personal callousness. He liked to think that he did not care for these things because there were more important things to worry about; the truth, as he well knew, was that he was just lazy. As his wife Samina used to say, his body was on the verge of coming apart, piece by piece, and he would end up like the rag doll that his daughter Noor Jehan had once dismantled and which now lay smiling through its decrepitude in the closet in the bedroom.

Noorie, as everyone called her, was twenty now, and studying to become an architect. Evidently, she had decided that building things was better than breaking them. Sajid was proud of his Noorie.

The clue, to fill in 8 across, was 'An ancient weapon is mixed up with all the spare parts'. Easy, thought Sajid. Spear. They don't design these nearly as well as they used to. A distant explosion faintly rattled the glass window. He could hear the faint rumbling of the chants. He cocked his ear, and as he did, he caught himself in this aspect, in the mirror. He looked at himself — the reflection reminded him of Safoni, a dog that Salma had owned for exactly three days. She had picked him up from the street, and brought it home one evening, and in her childish loud voice proclaimed that this was the dog's home and anybody who had a problem with it could leave. Salma used to raise her voice when she knew that she had done something impetuous, and possibly inappropriate. The dog had enjoyed a warm welcome during its brief stay. It had then run

out on to the street, and in all too stereotypical fashion, was run over. Sajid had remarked that it was a dog's death for sure, and Salma had not talked to him for a week. Salma, his first wife, had died a year later from a broken heart, which had nothing to do with the dog or Sajid, but had been passed on as a birth defect by her mother. Noorie, then two years old, had cried incessantly for fifteen days. As far as Sajid remembered, she had never cried since.

As Sajid was filling in the squares with his precise, neat handwriting, he was distracted by another explosion. This time, the firecracker was closer. The chants were louder and he could distinguish, if he listened carefully, two different chants. 'Jai Shri Ram' and 'Har Har Mahadev'. He stood up, walked to the window and slid the glass panels shut to keep the noise out. He pulled the fine, translucent curtains together, and the sunlight was replaced by an artificial rose-tinted glow. He felt a certain piety in the atmosphere, and his mind recoiled at that. He had no use for piety or devotion or spirituality. He only needed his words. He went back to his crossword.

Sajid was forty five years old. He had a thick, neatly cropped beard which he had maintained for close to five years now; his face had become increasingly pock-marked and the beard helped prolong his vanity by covering the worst of the effects of his bad skin. He had narrow eyes that seemed vaguely querulous at all times; as if he had been asked a question to which he knew the answer but he could not remember it at that moment. His glasses were always pushed down to the tip of his royal nose, but it somehow defied gravity even when he leaned forward or bent down. He was a tall man, and well-filled out, but lately, his muscles had finally lost their battle with fat. He had married Samina two years after Salma's death. Unlike Salma, who he loved unreservedly from the moment of their marriage and till her death, Samina was someone he had to get used to. She had not made it easy. She had been invariably kind to Salma's daughter, and had never treated her differently than her

own daughter, Abida, when she was born a year after their marriage, but with Sajid, she had maintained a cool distance. He felt that she was sizing him up; sometimes he thought that she was convinced that he had something to do with his first wife's death and she was wary of him. In any case, after four years of marriage, she had finally thawed, for no apparent reason other than that she felt like it. Since then, they had enjoyed a cordial marriage; no fiery passion or undying love but a deep understanding that withstood most things that came their way.

'A deer that belongs to the family, caught in the dirt'. 12, down. Four letters. Slightly tricky, but nothing that he hadn't seen before. It would come to him. The shouts for Mahadev were now reaching a crescendo. From the edge in the voices of the group, he knew that they had crossed over to becoming a mob. A mob is an interesting organism, he thought. It is less than the sum of its parts, and often stands for nothing but elemental violence. He had faced mobs before and sometimes faced them down. There was always some key to doing that — sometimes, it was a gesture, at other times, it was a few words. But it was never a simple proposition and was fraught with risks. This mob, invoking that great, destructive god, was not going to be easy for whoever wanted to disperse it.

Sajid was fond of Hindu mythology. He admired its richness, its variety and its depth. Of all its gods, he preferred Shiva. Shiva did not have time for subtlety; he was strength personified, but for all that, there was a certain childlike pliability about him. He was accessible to Ravan as much as Arjun. For a super god, he was angered easily and pacified easily. Sajid rationalized that he liked Shiva more because he was nothing like him. Rather, he imagined he took after the more nuanced, the infinitely complex Vishnu.

Muck. That was it.

The chants had a certain frenetic quality about them now. He doubted whether the crowd any longer had control over itself. Nor was it particularly tuned into the contents of its loud payers. This was just noise now — pure, raw noise, grabbed from their throats and flung high by some sharp claws of violence buried in their breasts. Even from his third floor apartment, they sounded like they were right outside his window now. It was if they had climbed on the ladder of noise they had created and were knocking on his window pane.

He wanted a cup of tea and he called out to Samina, but the name was hurriedly pulled back from the air as soon as he uttered it. Samina had left with Abida the previous evening to go stay with her mother. It was a scheduled trip, one on which he was supposed to go as well, but as usual, something had come up. Abida had rowed with him furiously for not accompanying them and refused to talk to him as she was leaving. Samina had smiled at her petulance, as she conferred an additional hug to Sajid while taking leaving, to make up for her daughter. He would have to make tea himself, but that was a chore he didn't particularly feel like doing.

Fourteen down, 'An ageing beaver reversing, beginning to cough'. Six letters, the fifth letter, 'e'. He pulled the paper closer, revealing another newspaper under it, opened to its editorial page. A younger picture of Sajid smiled at him. He hated that picture, and had several times tried to get it changed, but despite submitting several replacement photographs, the newspaper had never got around to it. The picture always reminded him of the first few years of his career as a journalist. Back then, he was a passionate, opinionated young buck, using words to wound and attack. Over time, he had matured into a respected senior professional. Sometimes, he regretted that change. He missed being able to see things in black and white; this grey shroud that now covered his world-view was an uncomfortable reminder that things only got worse with time. Each

new act of violence was now a personal injury; each turn of diplomacy, a new lie.

He abandoned the clue and went on to another one. 'Rambo had no time to talk; he just took on the lion; but it lacked something in the end'. Six letters. 5, down. This looked interesting, a challenge. His cousin, Kamaal, sent him old cryptic crossword puzzles from the US every month. Once he completed five grids, he would send them back, and get the next batch of puzzles. Kamaal was professor in a top university, teaching students the rich concepts of Oriental philosophy. He had married another cousin of theirs, Mumtaaz. He had no children and had not returned to India for six years now. Kamaal and Mumtaaz had been his best friends growing up. Their marriage had acted as a barrier of exclusivity, and since the wedding, Sajid had felt left out. They continued to be friends with him, and were always there as confidants and benefactors, when needed. But it was not the same. '

Ramble. Only five words to go now.

The picture was embedded in his most recent editorial. In it, he had denounced the political party in power. It was a measured, penetrating attack. Most of all, he had laid bare the hypocrisy of its leader through a thoroughly researched, well-constructed set of arguments. Subsequently, he was invited as talking head in one of the numerous evening news shows to debate with this leader. It had not gone well for his opponent. Sajid had, with remarkable ease, and despite an obstreperous attempt at self-defence, steadily chipped away at him, till he was reduced to a loud, boorish tirade that showed him in poor light. The video had spread virally, and the leader's performance had become the object of much ridicule. A lot of the ideology that propped up the party and the leader was supposedly built on the bedrock of Hinduism. Sajid had used his extensive knowledge and understanding of that same religion to expose the leader. Sajid had never been a believer in god. But he

understood religion with an objectivity only available to an outsider.

This time, there was a real knock on the door. In fact, several knocks. He could hear the imprecatory language outside the door as he walked to open it. Four young men, wearing t-shirts with the picture and name of his debating opponent from the other evening, were standing. Each had some weapon or the other — a sword, a chopper, a stick. Sajid had been expecting this since the day the interview aired.

He looked at the would-be assailants with a calm that he didn't feel. They looked back at him with the beginnings of confusion — now that they were here, and Sajid was in front of them, some element of doubt crept into their mental make-up. The murderous frenzy of the mob below seemed distant, and separated from it, their individual identities valiantly tried to emerge. The oldest of the boys demanded that he come down with them.

“What for?” asked Sajid. His tone was polite and with effort, he prevented his voice from trembling.

“What do you think? You have insulted our leader, our party and our country. You will have to pay for it.” The words seemed to be echoing from some faraway chamber inside the boy. He must not have been older than nineteen.

“And how do you propose I pay for it? In your religion, is violence the suitable remedy?” Even as he said, he realized that all is words were wasted on these boys. He felt a terrible tiredness overcome him. He did not want to say anything more. He was tired of words, the endless stream of words that didn't achieve anything.

As the boys fell upon him with their weapons, he struck upon the answer to the earlier clue.

Coffee.

