

## When He Sat Down to Study for the Test

**Bharat Shekhar**

She wrote 'Procrustes' on the board and underlined the word. The chalk squeaked, the board screeched, the children cringed at that soul scratching sound. Madam Bindu Amrit Kaur Vasvani smiled.

"Who can tell me who or what this Procrustes was—who, what, who, who?"

B.A.K. Vasvani's (bakvas vani, or meaningless voice the children called her) voice was shrill and with every 'who', her head dipped down and then came up again quickly. The bobbing action pushed out her thin lips. It accentuated her sharp little nose and rounded, rimless spectacles to give Madam Vasvani an unmistakably owlish look. Not the wise owl of proverb, but the predator of reality. A predator that hunted with words, wounded with sarcasm and killed by humiliating.

"So come on! Tell me who this Procrustes was?" Madam Vasvani repeated impatiently.

After a pause, one of her pets (a term she reserved for those *obedient* children occupying the front benches) risked a guess that took him along biological oceanic pathways.

Madam Vasvani was ecstatic, not because he was correct (he wasn't), but because, in her opinion, it was such an intelligent attempt. Even among her favourites, Sandy occupied a special place.

"Great try Sandy. But no dear, it is not proto or crustacean. Anybody else has any idea?"

With that question, her eyes raked the class pests. The hard stare threw a challenge to those no gooders who preferred or were pushed to the anonymity of the back-benches. Madam Vaswani's often joked that the missing links in human evolution could be found right in her classroom, amongst those pests. According to her, these 'clods' hands rose, not in response to any educational inquiry, but when they wanted to be excused to use the WC, or when they needed to yawn, stretch and scratch their underarms. But, she was about to be proved wrong, that too by her LFP (Least Favourite Person), Bhagirath, who in her mind, she called *the run away rat*.

"Yes Bhagi *rat*, don't tell me *you* are about to enlighten us about the meaning of Procrustes? Answer only if you are sure. Please do not waste the class's time through one of your silly word plays. I warn you Pro-crust-es isn't somebody in favour of hard bread, as I'm sure you must be imagining." Her front benches tittered dutifully, though of course they had no idea about the answer or the joke.

It was not that Bhaghirath was a rebel or that he was deliberately disobedient. He was just a dreamy escapist, whose spirit just could not be captured because it was always elsewhere at the time of attempted apprehension.

But what she hated above all was that the boy had imagination. He read poetry. He answered questions from a perspective entirely his own.

“Procrustes was a Greek bandit. He wanted everyone to fit the size of his bed. So anybody who slept on the bed was cut up or stretched to fit that one uniform size.”

Now, at this stage, if Bhagirath had just kept his mouth shut, he would have walked away with grudging accolades from Vaswani. But something of great import had just struck Bhagirath.

“Come to think of it ma’am, aren’t many teachers like Procrustes? Always looking for that right sized answer and cutting or stretching things that students say to fit their...”

“How dare you say, you, you...” The hooting owl swooped down on the rat and gave him two resounding thwacks on either side of his head before marching him off to Procrustes senior, the Vice Principal.

## II

Madam Vaswani's father had been a Non Commissioned Officer in the army, a Sargent major- Hawaldar Subsai Vaswani. He was a man of few words and a single saying, ‘Don’t save the rod for a rainy day, use it in sunshine, use it in darkness, use it in every way’. Her mother had taught the art of dramatics before her marriage. After wedded bliss curdled, mama dear practised at home, what she had earlier preached in class.

The double helix of Madam Vaswani's DNA, curled together the somewhat contradictory traits of her parents and bundled them into every cell of her being. She adored authority and doted on drama. She fawned on the familiar and comforting atmosphere of discipline, rank, and respect for the chain of command. At the same time, her sense of drama insisted that she be the one who imposed authority and 'apexed' the chain of command. Perhaps that was why Vasvani was the English teacher at a private school in a suburban town.

This Kaleidoscope of contradictory patterns worked blunders for Vasvani's brain and being. Consequently, she invested something as trivial as a daily roll call with the drama of a 'swearing in' ceremony. And any deviation from what Vasvani considered the norm became a heinous crime against obedience, a dereliction that required an officious, dramatic court-martial.

Above everything else, V loved the ceremony and scandal attached with the handing back of the weekly test papers. Her 'pets' were returned their papers with pomp and show that is usually reserved for the highest gallantry awards. In sharp contrast, her 'peeves' (those *pests* who preferred or were pushed to the anonymity and notoriety of the back-benches) were made to feel as though a stiff sentence (if not a firing squad) awaited their miserable results.

Bhagirath, who inhabited the darkest depths of that very dark last bench, did not need an astrologer to tell his immediate future. *He knew* that Miss Vasvani would begin crinkling her nose as she neared his desk. *He knew* that she

would not give the marked test paper in his hands but drop it off from a distance. He was resigned to the fact that the paper would have more red marks on it than his original answers in blue. What Bhagirath could not predict were the exact words with which he would be tormented.

"Guess who has got the lowest marks, who, who?"

And the predator owl was circling, just waiting to swoop down at the running rat. 'Run', thought Bhagi, 'Bhag, run rat run'. But the solid desk blocked his way, and the owl's talons closed with a death grip on his wrist.

Miss Vasvani snickered sarcastically as she threw his paper at his face. "Of course it is Bhagi *rat*, or should I say James Bond." Turning to the class, she announced, "Boys and girls, a big hand for Bhagi *rat*, for *achieving* a new low. He gets all of 007 out of 100. Like Bond, he now has the licence to kill, R-A-T-a-T-A-T-a-R-A-T, the licence to kill English."

Bhagirath felt the weight of her words settle heavily around his shoulders, shoulders already weighed down from lugging his huge school bag day after day like a near permanent hump on his back. Then he remembered. And he no longer cared. He smiled.

### III

Our actual story begins one week earlier with Bhagirath sitting at his desk in a half-hearted effort to convert incomprehension into understanding.

He rinsed his head with the ink of the textbook's words. Nothing. He filtered the black smudges of the letters from

the white background with his eyes. Nothing. He tilted at the windmills of meaning with his pen-a-lance. He tried penance. He tried reading backward. He tried pacing forward. He kept still. He fidgeted. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Finding meaning was turning out to be as futile as the alchemists' attempts to transform base metal into gold. About to shut the book, Bhagirath stopped quite abruptly.

It was the 'ps' and 'qs' that started it. Their curves seemed to be puffing up! Up, up, up they went as though someone had sprinkled the underside of the page with yeast. Then abandoning the two-dimensions of the printed page, they plopped out with little tearing sounds. Soon snakelike s's, d's with their daggers drawn, one eyed 'es', rippling 'rs', 'ps' minding their 'qs' were running all around the page.

Bump!

A very thin and stiff 'I' was pushing a makeshift trolley that carried a fat bellied 'b' with stumps for legs. Both the 'I' and the 'b' looked very faded, as though they were in the process of being rubbed out. As they trundled about, Bhagirath heard the 'b's' blubbery voice raised—

*'We don't ask for blood,*

*We don't ask for water.*

*We don't want your cent,*

*We don't want your quarter.'*

B's cries continued. The ditty went on about not wanting mink, or drink, but only ink, not asking for bread, or butter spread, but only to be read. A pompous looking 'p', pigeon chest out-thrust, threw them a pouch containing some black liquid and then hurried away on its spindly legs, muttering something about being needed to 'fill the *pees* for the president and the p.m.'

Nearby, a gaggle of 'gs' were manufacturing other 'gs'. The process involved precariously perching one miniature gegg (g egg) on top of another with a piece of string in-between to separate them. Among sounds of crashing, and a mess of yolk and broken shells, some new 'gs' were brought into being. They wobbled into orderly formation. A capital 'G' addressed them, 'Gentlemen, *greedy guts* is dining in *goose and gander*. His gobbling and groaning may be disgusting to the world. But for us gs' they are great employment opportunities. So let us go forth and gratify.' With that rousing speech the gs' set out for a trek across the page to seek greedy guts and be typed in as one of the number of 'gs' that were being written about him. .

Bhagirath turned his gaze away from the g gyrations to another section of the page. He saw a 'u' that was rocking back and forth with both hands upraised. Mid-swing, the 'u' suddenly stopped, and became a 'c' that tried to right itself up. It tumbled upside down instead. The new 'n' groped blindly for support, which it found in the form of a stick lying nearby. It hobbled away with this prop sticking next to its side. Bhagirath could have sworn that he heard the 'u'

turned 'c' turned 'n' turned 'h' mumble something about having a 'hidentity crishes'.

Then as Bhagirath gazed awestruck, the letters crawled to exchange places, hexgance calpsec. Meaning dislocated. It blurred. It stretched into senselessness se-nnnss-e-lessness. It crnchd tghtr. Words turned back in time, to their beginning when they had just been formed in liquid ink. The ink then leaked to the edges of the page and fell off it...

And at the end of the hour he found himself staring at a little black pool that lay superimposed on the conundrums.

#### IV

With a practised flip, Mrs Vasvani's threw the paper. Like a dart it flew at Bhagirath's face. But the letters of the black and blue cursive words, the red scratches and crosses of Vasvani's malice stayed behind. They remained hanging in mid-air along with the faded blue lines on which they were written.

The paper landed in a harmless little heap at Bhaghirath's feet. The letters and lines reversed direction and galloped towards the teacher's face.

A big, fat red-cross splush-crashed in the middle of Vasvani's forehead and stuck there like a bizarre bindi. Two zeros unhinged their tops and attached themselves to her nostrils like nose rings. They elongated and pulled down painfully so that Mrs. V was forced to bend forward. Then

the zeros shortened and smashed back into their original position like pulled rubber bands being released.

Random letters formed themselves into a curve and settled on V's upper lip. From left to right, they read (if anyone cared to) 'ProudProrustean' The faded blue lines joined together. They twisted, knotted, corded like a cat o' nine tails whip, and swung in an arc towards Vaswani's ample hips.

Bhaghirath raised his hands and said 'ENOUGH. STOP!'

### EPILOGUE

The psychiatrist looked gravely at Vice Principal Genda Mal and thought how much some people resembled their names. Earlier in the day, he'd encountered a terrible screeching banshee called B.A.K Vasvani. And now he was talking to Genda Mal who looked like a rhinoceros who'd been rubbing himself in muck.

Genda had thick lips that protruded out from a puffy jaw. As a result, he had little spittle or speech control when he spoke. "Dhokhtor, what has happhenned to Madam Bakvas, I mean Bhasvani?"

The psychiatrist sighed as he wiped off from his face, the leftovers of the Rhino assault. "Can't really say anything. Bak... I mean Vasvani, to use a very unscientific term, seems stark raving mad. When she was brought here, we found that Vasvani's face was covered with strange symbols.

There was a great red X mark on her forehead, some inverted letters on her lips and ink smudges on her cheeks

and nose. She kept babbling about some Maharath or Bhaghirath who must not be angered lest he unleash the lava of letters born out of the wreckage of words and meaning.

Totally mad. I thing she must have fallen asleep while correcting some papers. Her face must have fallen into some page that she was correcting. It is a hot day. The sweat must have mixed with the ink and smudged the face. Meanwhile she must have had a deep, upsetting nightmare that sent her spinning off the edge.”

The psychiatrist suddenly brightened and sat up straight, “What do you know about Vasvani’s early life Mr. Genda Mal. Please tell all you can.” He took out a Dictaphone from his pocket and put it in front of the Vice Principal. He pressed the On button and moved discreetly out of spit range.



**Bharat Shekhar** lives in New Delhi, India, and started out his career as a researcher and then lecturer in history. Somewhere along the way 'his tree' shook and dropped him in the IT field as an Instructional Designer.

His stories and poems have been published in several journals and anthologies including 'Words, Words, Words', 'Inscribed', 'Here and Now', 'Being Boys' and 'Pens on Fire'. Two others have become picture books. His latest release is a collection of short stories for children titled 'Talking Tales'.

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