



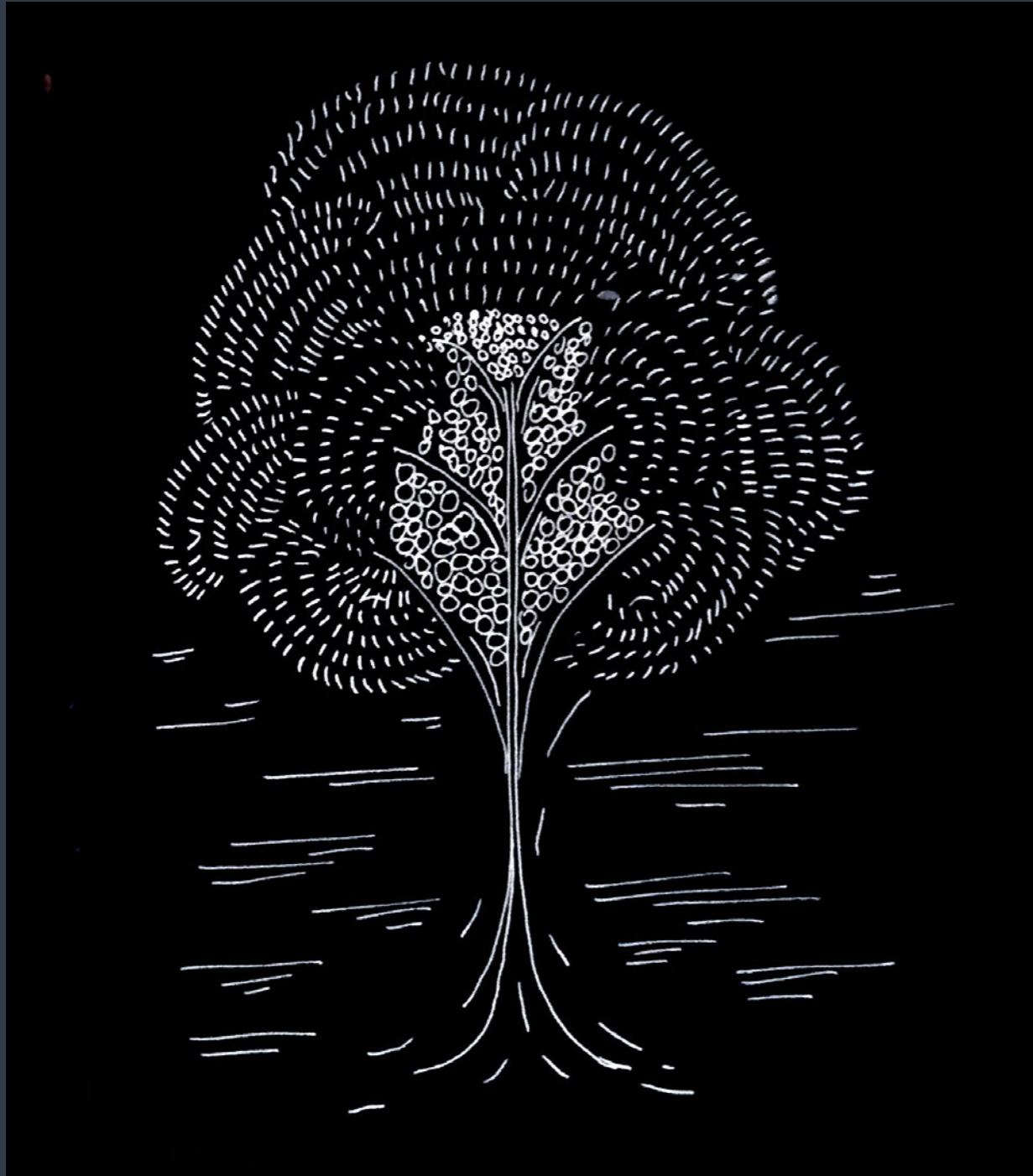
The Idiot and I

A story about will and choice

Naga Nandini

‘Somewhere in the mind a lunatic shuffled a pack of snapshots and dealt them out at random, shuffled once more and dealt them out in a different order, again and again, indefinitely. There was no chronology. ... The idiot remembered no distinction between before and after. The thirty five years of his life made themselves known to him as a chaos – a pack of snapshots in the hands of a lunatic. And who decided which snapshots were to be kept, which thrown away?’

-Aldous Huxley in Eyeless in Gaza



We're driving back from a holiday. I'm 8 years old. I have a fever. My warm cheek rests on my mother's lap. All around me there is the rush of wind. And the voices of my sisters and father. The voices mix and become a soothing hum as I close my eyes and breathe.

Cut.

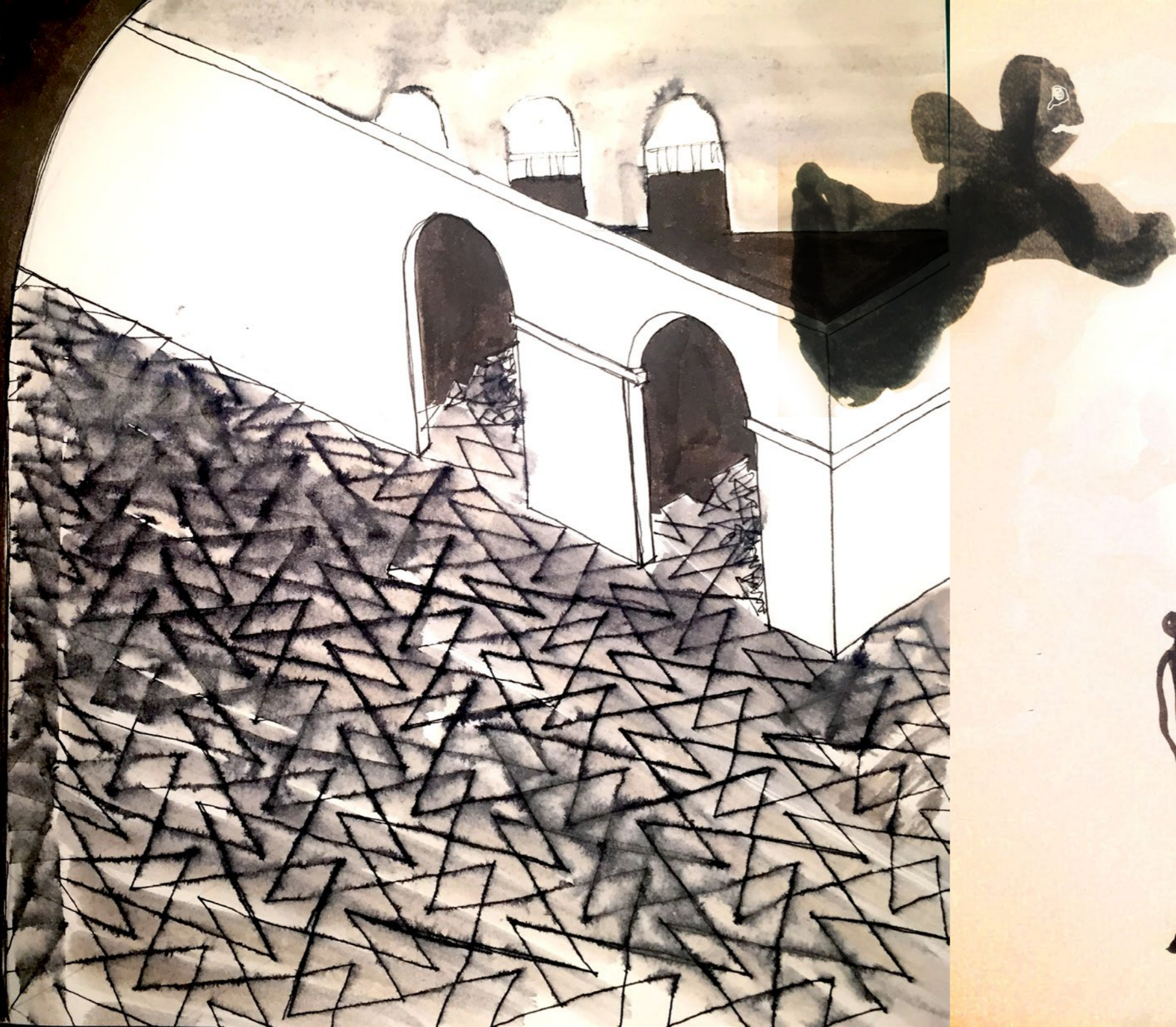
I'm in an ambassador car, it is midnight. We are driving to a small village in Orissa to take part in a tribal dance festival. I look out of the window. The moon has just risen. There is a tree like a dancing God.

The landscape is from a miniature painting.

Cut.

I'm sitting at the back of a hearse. My father has just died and we are taking him home from the hospital. The hearse stops. My mother who is in another vehicle asks to join us with my other sister. It takes a few minutes for everyone to settle down. My sister passes around some juice. It's the last time we will be together.

Cut.



What does this mean? Who is telling me these things? Why do these moments stay preserved in my mind and why do they come together in this absurd way? Sometimes when I have decide between something, even if it is as absurd as choosing between boiled eggs or scrambled for breakfast, some surreal meaning that is built by these juxtapositions makes me decide one way or the other. I've thought about this for a long time and there can be only one answer.

There is an idiot who lives inside my head. [And it's not me]

Have you ever seen the inside of my head? It's a vast place, unending, full of complex construction, often crumbling and sometimes very splendid. It is vast and mostly unpeopled, though its not a natural landscape. Some parts are in good shape, well made and in good order and others are in ruins. It's a maze with no discernible pattern and it feels like I almost never come back to the same room. I wander through the unending landscape of my mind.



The idiot randomly shuffles these cards of memories, both of the past and the future and deals them out to me. And in these strange juxtapositions I make meaning and decide how I must act. This idiot has been the manipulator of my will, the controller of my action and has been responsible for all the right and wrong turnings I have taken in the journey of my life and also all the future right and wrong turnings. And frankly speaking I have a bone to pick with him. Who is he to decide what I should or shouldn't do? Is he actually deciding, are his choices really random or is he being carefully careless? Or carelessly careful?

Sisyphean - this term for a task that is endless and ineffective comes straight out of Greek myth. In Greek legend Sisyphus was punished in Hades for his misdeeds in life by being condemned eternally to roll a heavy stone up a hill. As he neared the top, the stone rolled down again, so that his labour was everlasting and futile.

"If there's no meaning in it," said the King, "that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any."

On Tuesday morning, an 18-month-old boy was allegedly beaten to death by a neighbour in Madhya Pradesh's Sagar district after a tussle over public urination.

I decide I want to meet this idiot. I want to ask him what he means, what everything means. Where does he get his cards from? Does he make them himself? Can he perhaps share with me his method? Is there even a method?

Time passes, it could be years or weeks; in this landscape it's hard to say. The idiot becomes aware of my awareness of him. How do I know? Awareness is a strange thing. You are not aware until you are aware, something shifts imperceptibly and then you know. So he knows that I know that he knows and all the rest of it.

The idiot throws his cards at unexpected times and I see them in flashes as I make my way around. Most of the time I'm coasting along, responding to the world around me quite spontaneously, without thinking. Sometimes it takes years and sometimes I'm transported to the next space in a second. Actually time has no meaning here and I don't know the chronology of events. All I know is what I feel. And it annoys me that the idiot is controlling even that. Often I'm contemplating the pattern of the tiles, and musing abstractedly on nothing at all, and down comes a flurry of cards, completely disturbing my happy blank state of being. I start trying to make meaning where there is none.



He thought I didn't know, what an idiot! I see him, though not really, I almost see him, when I see my reflection in the water I'm about to drink, when I'm suddenly about to turn a corner, when I'm looking at the clouds on the horizon.

And soon he starts playing a game with me. Appearing at odd times in odd places, lingering for that infinitesimal moment longer, so that I almost see him. Just now I was walking along a parapet wall on a balcony, focussing to keep balance, to see how long I can walk without falling. Suddenly he appears in the extreme left side of my vision. I'm distracted, I teeter and then fall off the wall. I begin to feel infuriated. Does he think I'm an idiot? He's cunning, capricious and he's toying with me. How dare he?

I plot and plan for some way to catch him out. Surely one of these days he will fumble. I decide to ignore him. I ignore the cards he throws my way. I train my thoughts to avoid the images he keeps showing me. He is puzzled at first and then becomes anxious. He begins to stay longer in the periphery of my vision. Its difficult but I learn to look away and pretend he doesn't exist.

A quantitative analyst (or, in financial jargon, a quant) is a person who specializes in the application of mathematical and statistical methods to financial and risk management problems. The occupation is similar to those in industrial mathematics in other industries.

*On the day when
The weight deadens
On your shoulders
And you stumble,
May the clay dance
To balance you.*

After weeks (or months or years or minutes or seconds) of playing this game, one day, he stays too long and my eyes dart quickly towards him, pinning him under my gaze. He is frozen. He is an unspeakably ugly creature. He is amorphous, his shape is not fixed. He is the colour of damp dark wool, uncomfortable. A live gargoyle. His eyes are shifty, his mouth doesn't have a firm form. His cunning eyes and drooling mouth disgust me. Nevertheless I smile warmly and we sit down together.



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Idiot: Hello

Me: Helloooo!!! I've been wanting to meet you for so loong!

Idiot: Oh. I dont know...

Me: (ignoring him and rushing on) I think you're so fascinating, the way you move around my head. You really help me you know!

Idiot: But the thing is...

Me: You are so agile! You dart around like a fish. And you know sooo much, you just pull out the right things at the right time! (as if!) You are a magician, a sorcerer, a wizard, and yes, I can say this, you are a genius!

[Am I laying it on too thick? Maybe, but I can see him begin to thaw. He stops fidgeting and becomes calmer. His eyes are not darting around so madly. I continue along these lines, until his eyes start focussing on me and I can tell he's actually listening.]

Idiot: Actually...

Me: Yes, tell me what you're thinking about, right this moment, I so want to know.

Idiot: Really, its hard to speak of this, but there's no one else around in this benighted place. I have only you to talk to. I just feel so alone...

Me: I know, please think of me as your friend...

Idiot: Friend? you? O god! This is what I've come to?

Me: (swallowing my indignation) I realise I'm not much, but I really do want to help.

Idiot: (breaks down) I'm so unhappy, I hate this place, I just want to cry all the time. Why am I trapped here? I'm worth much more than this. If I could just get out, I would be so much more. Every time I turn around, all I can see is your ugly face.

And the idiot goes on in this vein.

Indignation builds as I slowly realize that he thinks I'm disgusting too! Has he ever looked in a mirror? He is unhappy because he is as stuck with me as I am with him. I reveal nothing of my feelings and I continue to be warm and sympathetic. And he continues to be petulant and irritating.

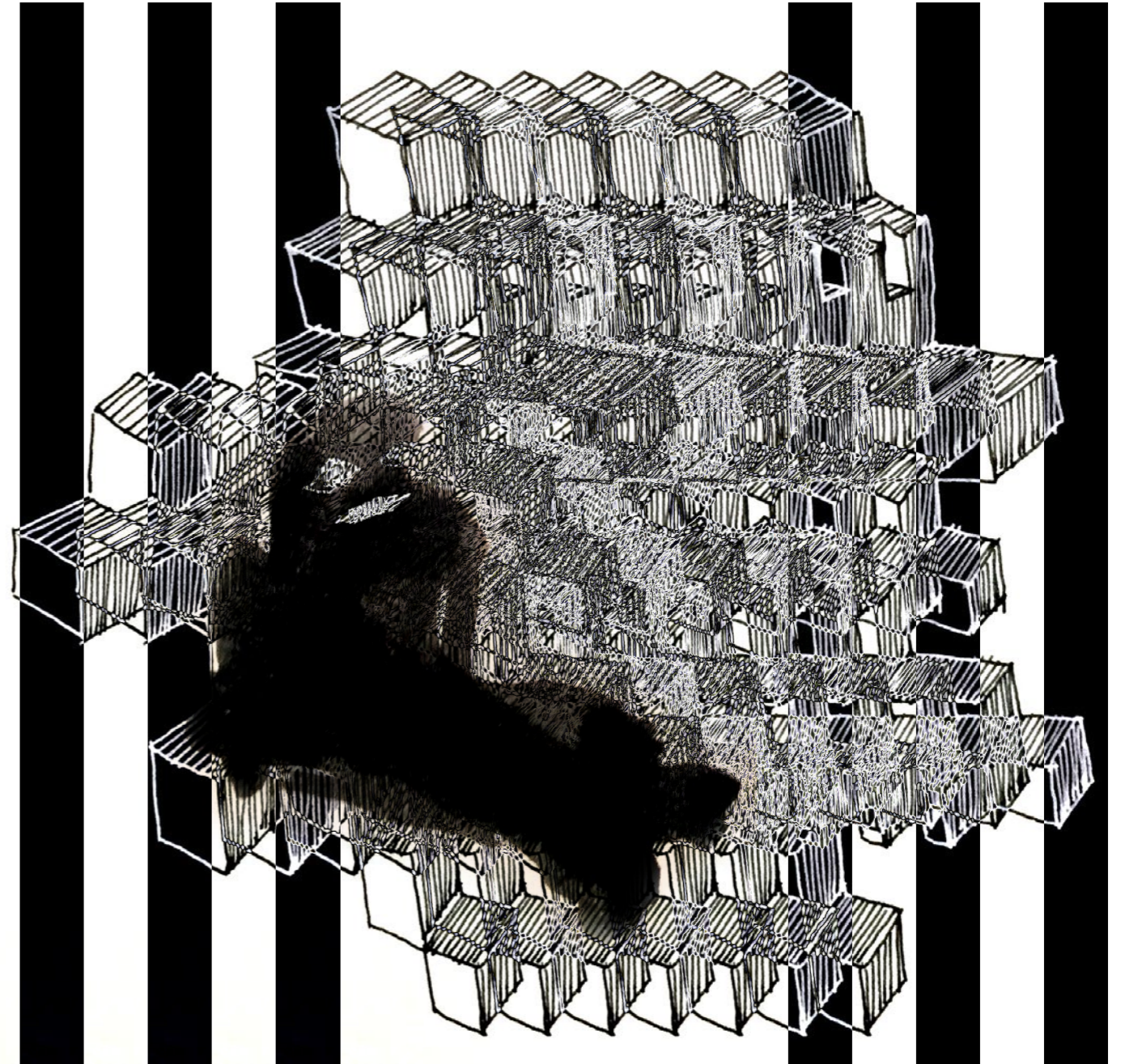
He wants to leave this place. He feels trapped in this landscape. I tell him I will help him escape. But of course by now I've decided to kill him. Or help him kill himself. With him gone, I can be captain of my own ship, master of my soul. I will not be tainted by his ugliness anymore. I will not be guided by his randomness. I will have true choice and will. I will actually KNOW if I want scrambled or boiled eggs for breakfast.

My mind races as I decide what to do next. I will take him to the furthest point I know of this land, where there's a waterfall. I've seen it through a window, though I've not actually gone outside. I will lead him there and push him over the edge. He will be smashed on the rocks below and will be washed away forever. My plan is hastily made, but I'm rock sure this is the way forward.

I will be rid of the idiot one way or the other.

I make friends with him. I pretend to be impressed by his cunning ways and laugh at his feeble attempts at humour.

As we spend more time together, I begin to realise that there is something in him that is cute, might even be endearing. The slight shake in his head when he thinks of something, that is if he even thinks. The little gleam in his beady eyes before he makes a joke. The slight stammer in his voice when he's excited. He disappears for long periods; who knows where. And then suddenly appears by my side. I'm almost tempted to let him be, to let go of my plot, when he giggles in his maddening way about something I've said and my resolve hardens.





And so at long last we are both standing at the edge of the waterfall.

It's a beautiful day and the air is moist and fragrant.

I take him closer to the edge and lean forward as if to show him something. Predictably the idiot leans forward eagerly and I use all my strength to push him from the small of his back.

He goes over.

I wait for the splash, but hear nothing. I hear a rustle and peer down to see a beautiful creature flying upwards.

It is the idiot, but without the cloak of idiocy! He's shed his skin and become a beautiful flying swan.

"I've finally escaped!" he yells down joyously. "I've been trying to find this waterfall for so long and now you've shown me. I'm free of you finally, you hideous creature. I can now roam the skies."

I watch as he disappears into the clouds. I trudge back to the palace alone. I wonder who has escaped where and what. The fact remains that I'm finally free.

"There are two kind of men," said Ka, in a didactic voice. "The first kind does not fall in love until he's seen how the girls eats a sandwich, how she combs her hair, what sort of nonsense she cares about, why she's angry at her father, and what sort of stories people tell about her. The second type of man -- and I am in this category -- can fall in love with a woman only if he knows next to nothing about her."

Centerless grinding is a machining process that uses abrasive cutting to remove material from a workpiece. In centerless grinding, the workpiece is held between two grinding wheels, rotating in the same direction at different speeds.

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The question pops up in my head - am I really free?

If the idiot was responsible for all my actions, then I was not responsible for anything I did. When he chose the cards based on which I acted, the first choices were his. I could kill someone and claim that it was not my fault, it was the idiot who made me do this.

But how could he know, how did he choose, how did he know which of the billions of neurons in my brain he needed to stimulate? Did he actually live inside my head, or was he manipulating me from outside? Was he really the idiot he pretended to be or was he the genius I told him he was?

If only I could understand his thought processes and mimic them, I would be actually free. There are some things I do because I have to - I eat, I drink, I sleep, I drive, I nurture, I stretch my body - I do these things almost without thinking.

I remember when the sunlight pours into my balcony on a winter day and I go outside to curl my toes in the splashes of sun. I watch the birds busily do something that I can't be bothered to analyse. I feel the warmth of the world and just be, for a moment. The idiot was not there in that perfect moment. He too may have been just existing, without any plot or plan.



But these moments are rare. Most of the time, I have to decide, I have to choose, I have to think of consequence. Is there already a blue-print of my life printed inside my head? Is the landscape my blueprint? Maybe the idiot is more benign than I thought. Maybe he too is caught in the same trap as I am, the trap of this maze, of trying to find my way around, of, dare I say it, escape.

What does it mean to be free?

Who made the blueprint?

Can I change it, redraw it?

Do I have that choice?

I think not. Just like I can't change the physical world around me, I can't alter my interior landscape, except in small parts. Except of course if I hire earth moving equipment or a bomb and blow up parts of it.

Or I could be constructive and sculpt parts of it or grow a garden. Maybe the idiot will actually help me. Doing anything comes from the necessity to do it, and so freedom is rooted in necessity. I plant a garden because I want a space to just be. How is necessity born? What makes us yearn?

Is there a choice in what we search for or our desires?

Consciousness and freedom are closely intertwined. I became conscious of the idiot who was my freedom. But just being conscious did not help me to control him. Just knowing or being aware of my actions don't help me choose. I become more myself when I'm able to work on my blueprint, when I'm able to say, ok, this doesn't look right, I need to make a change here. When I can strategize. When I become more aware of the processes inside my head, when I watch the idiot shuffle and pick the cards, I feel as though I'm more in control, even if I'm actually not.

Who is the conductor of the grand orchestra of my life? The orchestra is largely independent, the musicians are competent and know what they are playing. If one goes too fast, then the others signal to him to slow down.

I like to think it is me, but it is actually the idiot who held the baton. Or a best case scenario is that both of us worked together. If the music became discordant, if one of the musicians went seriously off key, it was normally the idiot who signaled and brought the music back on track.

But I'm not sure if he was paying attention all the time and if he was able to discern and respond to the false notes. Maybe if I stayed more with him, spent more time together, we could have shared this

burden of watchfulness. We would have take turns to control and listen. We could even have composed new music together.

As long as things were progressing well, I was happy to let the idiot do his work. The music flowed smoothly.

It is only when things went wrong, whatever the scale of the wrong may be, that the idiot and I had a problem. I normally opt for drastic action to get things back on even keel, while the idiot was conservative. He resisted anything too outré, too digressive, he sent me many signals to make me stay on the course he's charted.

I have no choice but to live this life that I have been given. I'm born in a particular place, to a particular family and I have been shaped by the people I have been brought up with, studied with and work with. Seemingly everything in my life is predetermined.

But actually there are large bits that are malleable, that I can change. If I know and understand the various valleys, mountains, walls, windows and doors in my interior landscape, some of which were already built for me and some of which I constructed, if I am honest, then I do have room to manoeuvre. I can select or ignore, I can break walls or construct them.



I can plant a beautiful garden and watch it grow. I will never know the whole world, I will never be able to explore every nook, and even if I did, I may never understand every part, but I can cultivate some parts, I can work with the idiot, I can help him and gradually he will help me too.

The idiot has flown away, but he will be back soon, I know it. He needs me as much as I need him. Maybe this time it will work.

