



Dreamtamer

and Other Short Stories

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Survival Spirit

It was neither the steadily intensifying heat in his room, nor the hysterical screaming outside his front door that informed Sarvesh of the immense danger he was in...

...it was the explosion.

As the floor shook beneath him and the very structure of the already flimsy building in which he lived spasmed in agony, he was jolted off his feet and flung onto his bed. For one wild moment, he lay flat on the mattress - body perfectly still, mind stunned into silence. Then, as he slowly began to recover from his initial shock - and as half-thoughts began fluttering through his mind - he wondered if his sudden collapse had been brought about by his legs giving way underneath him (after all, he had been halfway through his fourth set of squats at the time, so the idea was not completely implausible). However, a cursory examination of his miniscule one-room apartment quickly offered enough clues to suggest that his ending up on his bed had not been due to any failing of his body...

...forks lay on the floor in disarray, his alarm clock lay on its side on his bedside table, his office shirts (that had been hanging on hooks behind his front door) lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, and there was no missing the large crack that had appeared on the wall behind his desk.

Then, just as Sarvesh was about to lift himself off his bed, still confused as to exactly what had happened, he felt the unnatural heat.

In the minutes before the explosion, he had been exercising vigorously; and for this reason, he had attributed the beads of perspiration on his forehead to his efforts toward combating the extra inches that had recently appeared on his midriff. Now, however, he could clearly feel that the heat in his room was abnormal, intense...and *stifling*. This was no heat born from physical exertion; and neither was it caused by the harsh Sunday afternoon sun beating down on his apartment building. No, this was a scary heat; and his feet, which he had lowered onto the floor, quickly confirmed that it was emanating from the equally tiny one-room apartment below.

At this point, Sarvesh pulled his earphones out of his ears - and almost immediately, his heart went cold as he heard what sounded like panicked screaming coming from all around him. Some of the screams, he heard through his window; the rest came from behind his front door. And all the panicked voices seemed to be yelling the same thing...

...*Fire!*

In a flash, Sarvesh jumped off his bed and rushed to the door. Already, he could begin to smell smoke - which understandably frightened him - but he knew he needed to keep his cool and assess the situation first, before deciding what action he needed to take. And so, with a short prayer on his lips, he grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and opened the door very slightly.

Immediately, he was hit in the face by a wall of smoke, which induced an involuntary bout of coughing. Then, when the smoke cleared somewhat, he carefully craned his neck outside his room to see if he could spot its source.

The usually poorly-lit staircase of the building (which was immediately in front of his door) was bathed in an eerie orange glow - a glow that seemed to originate from a point beyond where the stairs descended and then turned left and out of sight. Also, there was a crackling sound coming from the floor below...much like the crackling of a bonfire.

And finally, there was the heat again - only now, it was far more intense than what it had felt like in his room. Fearing the worst, Sarvesh stepped outside and hurriedly made his way down the staircase to check the extent of the obvious calamity for himself.

And when he reached the turn in the stairs and cautiously looked around the corner, he felt a heart-stopping, mortal fear...

...for ahead of him was a blazing orange fireball - a fireball that appeared to have already consumed the entire first story of the building. Flames licked the ceiling; the smoke was thick and choking; and the blaze burned with such ferocity that the resulting heat made his eyes water. For a moment, Sarvesh stared at the conflagration in shock...as invisible, hot waves slowly rose up from it and gently baked the skin on his face. Then, he quickly drew his head back around the corner and took a couple of seconds to process the situation.

Almost instantly, he surmised (accurately, as he would find out later) that there had been a fire in the room beneath his; and that the jolt he had felt had been due to an LPG cylinder exploding, when this fire had heated it beyond its tolerances (a highly likely scenario, as almost everyone in his building used poorly made, illegally procured LPG cylinders in an attempt to save a few rupees)...

...and after that, the fire had probably spread fairly rapidly due to how compact their building was: a four-story structure that housed ten miniscule one-room apartments - two per story, and a further two on the ground floor.

Whatever the reasons for the fire and its quick spreading may have been though, the fact was that the entire first story of his apartment building was now ablaze. And Sarvesh knew that if he had been out that Sunday afternoon, and had returned to find the first story in flames, he would have been distraught, worrying about the occupants of the two rooms on that floor. After all, he knew them personally; and they were both nice, kind people...roughly his age...who, like him, had moved from their hometowns to Gurugram for work.

However, at that moment, Sarvesh was *not* returning to his building from someplace outside; he was very much *inside* the building. And for that reason, he had neither the time, nor the inclination to worry about the *nice, kind* people on the first story. Right now, there was only one desperate thought on his mind:

‘How the hell am I going to get out of here?’

Trying his best not to panic, he carefully peered around the corner once more to get another look at the fire. He had hoped to spot a narrow path that would take him safely past the raging inferno and down to the main entrance on the ground floor, but was out of luck; the fire burned with such intensity that it seemed to have near-physical mass - pushing his head back with its heat and rendering any plans he had of escaping down the staircase implausible.

And that meant, Sarvesh realized, that there was only one path open to him for escape - the terrace.

Quickly, he rushed back to his room and hurriedly stuffed whatever valuables he could save on such short notice into his backpack. Then, he slipped the backpack on his shoulders, slipped his feet into his sneakers, and hurried back out onto the staircase.

Knowing that he did not have a moment to spare (for there was every chance that the fire would ignite the second, cheaply-made cylinder on the first story soon), he then sped up the stairs to the building's terrace - passing by the open doors of the abandoned, tiny apartments of his neighbors on the third and fourth stories...

...and as he rushed by these apartments, he wondered if any of his neighbors had banged on his door to warn him of the fire before fleeing themselves. Of course, he had heard them screaming on the staircase when he had pulled his earphones out of his ears - but those had been panicked screams, not screams to warn others of danger. And naturally, even if they had banged on his door in an

attempt to save him, it would have made no difference - as he usually listened to music quite loudly when he exercised and, as a result, would not have heard them...

...but still, he hoped that they had tried. He did not want to imagine that they had abandoned him to his fate without even trying...

‘...*just like how you’re abandoning Gaurav and Shrey?*’ a sly voice in his mind suddenly inquired of him - reminding him of how *he* had made no attempt to save the residents of the first story either...before Sarvesh mentally shot back that the fire had made it impossible to do so.

And anyway, now was not the time to think of all this; for by now, he had reached the metal door of the terrace... and, shoving it open, he broke out into the blinding light of the midday sun. Instinctively, he shielded his eyes; and after they had adjusted to the harsh brightness, he spotted a group of eight-or-so people ahead of him, standing next to the ledge. Three of these people, he recognized as being his fellow tenants - and the way they guiltily looked away when they saw him provided Sarvesh with the answer to his earlier question...

...no, no one had attempted to warn him of the fire.

As for the rest of the people, they all seemed to know each other and were talking in high-pitched, panicked voices with one of the tenants. Clearly, they were this tenant’s guests, and had obviously chosen an exceedingly unfortunate day to attend a party in their building.

At this point, one of the guests called out over the ledge, “Move, I’m jumping now.” And Sarvesh, rushing over to where the group was standing, looked over the ledge and saw - to his immense consternation - that a few people who he did not recognize (probably more guests) had jumped from their terrace, to the terrace of the building in the adjacent plot. This other building was only three stories tall and had shorter floors, meaning that the effective drop was about one-and-a-half stories. But that was not what worried Sarvesh...

...what worried him, was the fact that there was a good twenty feet in horizontal distance between the two terraces - meaning that if he jumped, he would have to propel himself forward by *twenty feet* in the short time that his body would take to drop a story-and-a-half. And while this might have been easily achieved in a school gymnasium - jumping off a platform onto a trampoline or some sort of padded mattress - here on the terrace (with a drop to near-certain death if he miscalculated his jump), his nervousness made the task almost impossible.

And if that was not enough, Sarvesh was scared of heights as well.

And so, he decided not to jump. Instead, he would wait for the fire brigade to arrive and extinguish the flames; after which, he would walk back down the staircase and out the main entrance without risking smashing his body on the ground below. And as he looked around, he saw that one of his fellow tenants, as well as one of the guests, had edged

away from the ledge - their faces as white with fear as he assumed his must have been. Clearly, he was not the only person who was terrified at the prospect of jumping.

And so, Sarvesh and his small like-minded group watched in horror as one-by-one, the remaining people on their terrace climbed up on the ledge and jumped with all their might to the next building. Some loudly invoked their Gods before flinging themselves across the concrete chasm, while others merely screamed as loudly as they could before jumping - in order to give themselves as much of an adrenaline surge as they could manage. Three of them landed precisely where they had intended, one overshot his mark and hurt his ankle on landing, and the very last person to jump launched himself with insufficient force - and the tips of his shoes clipped the ledge of the other building, which sent him tumbling across the terrace. Sarvesh and his two companions had watched this person's botched landing; and the sight of the blood on his shins and forearms as he had been picked up by his friends only strengthened their resolve to stay put.

After this, the party of guests that had made it across to the other building began calling out to their friend,

"Praveen, bro, you've got to jump!"

"Jump, man...jump!"

The guest, though, called back, "No, guys. I can't do it! I'll wait for the fire department to come."

At this, one of the friends agitatedly screamed back at him, "Bro, you don't have that much time. We don't know

how long they'll take. And if there's another explosion, the entire building could collapse."

Hearing this, Sarvesh, Praveen and the other tenant (Sarvesh knew that her name was Neha, though he had barely ever spoken to her before) looked over the ledge and down the side of their building. Below them, they could see that the flames had, by now, climbed to the second story. Smoke was billowing out of the windows (including Sarvesh's windows); its thick blackness broken only by the occasional orange tendril of fire. And beyond the smoke and the flames, on the road below, they spotted a large crowd looking up at the building - staring at the frightening spectacle, while warily keeping their distance from the structure.

Desperately, Praveen then called back to his friends,

"Guys, get some help from somewhere. Ask someone in that building to help us."

The answer he received was far from comforting.

"Bro, Rahul's checked already. This entire building's empty. Everyone who lives here is in the crowd below. They're scared your building will collapse and crash into this one. Please man, just jump. Then we can get out of here too."

Praveen then turned to look at Sarvesh and Neha; and all three of them had fear deeply etched on their faces. Just then, there was a sound of tremendous creaking, shattering, snapping and rending that came from beneath them - and then, the entire building lurched to the right.

Praveen and Neha both uttered cries of unbridled terror, while Sarvesh dropped to the ground, screaming. Fortunately, though, after a few moments, the still-intact sections of the building's structure arrested its movement - so that all of its four stories were still left standing, though the whole building now tilted down to the right by a little more than a foot. At this point, Praveen quickly called out over the ledge,

“Okay guys, I’ll do it...I’ll jump.”

Hearing this, Neha turned to Praveen - this man who she did not know at all, but now regarded as being her ally - and stammered,

“You’re...you’re going to jump?”

“We all have to,” Praveen replied morosely. “You felt the building move, didn’t you? We have no choice. Otherwise, when this place collapses, we’ll all be killed.”

With tears in her eyes and fear almost choking her, Neha then turned to look at Sarvesh; and as he lifted himself from the floor of the terrace, he nodded that he concurred.

“You think we should do it too?”

“...yes,” Sarvesh managed, despite the lump in his throat.

“Okay, then. Let’s just do this,” Praveen then broke in. “Let’s not overthink it; it’ll only make it worse. Come on... on the ledge. We’ll jump on three, okay?”

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