

THE GOOD, THE BAD and The Silly

A Jigneshbhai and Swami story



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Athena Creations

The Good, The Bad and The Silly

Ranjit Kulkarni is a writer based in Bangalore India. Born and brought up in Mumbai by a police officer and a housewife, he was educated at NIT Warangal and IIM Lucknow. He spent 22 years in the Technology and Consulting Industry selling and implementing software and analytics solutions with firms like IBM, HP and Oracle before taking up writing books.

Initially writing on his blog on investing and various topics at <https://www.ranjitkulkarni.com>, Ranjit Kulkarni produced over 200 articles. He created Swami, the confused bloke with a heart of gold and Jigneshbhai, his wise friend and advisor. They have featured in many of his articles and books with their discussions and exploits, pursuing a world of their own. Other characters like the wealthy old man and Deja the spiritual dog add a flavour of comic wisdom to Ranjit's writing.

This book is about the unexpected and unintended discoveries of Jigneshbhai and Swami after an innocent health check-up. A funny set of coincidences leads them down an alley of silly characters and uneasy trickery. As they manoeuvre their way, the confusion makes pinning the thugs down easier said than done.

Ranjit married Kshitija on the last day of 1997 and, with their son Parth, they live in Bangalore India. Ranjit is reachable by email at ranjit@ranjitkulkarni.com.

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Chapter 1. Fridge Hunt

"You have to buy a 5-star rated fridge with a built-in stabilizer. If you don't buy a 5-star rated fridge, then it is better you don't waste your money on a fridge," the salesman warned Swami. I never knew buying a refrigerator was such a complex activity. But I knew that day when we went for a fridge hunt with Swami, Jigneshbhai and their families.

"Do you mind if we drop into the electronics store? My wife wants to check out a refrigerator," Swami had asked. An innocent request after the movie turned out to be quite an adventure.

"Sir, bags in the shelves," the security guard stopped us. "Sir, bags in the shelves there," he repeated and told us to keep our bags in the shelves near the entrance. "What kind of logic is this? Stupid rules everywhere," Jigneshbhai complained. "We can't steal a TV or fridge in this bag," he muttered. "And the mobile phones and cameras are all bound by some wire to their desks. So why keep the bags here?" He asked me. I gave a blank stare. "Why can't you follow simple instructions?" I asked and continued following the rules. Jigneshbhai and his logic - why get it everywhere, I thought.

The showroom had rows of TVs of different sizes on the wall all showing the same program. When the picture in one TV changed, all pictures changed. "Why can't they have different programs on different TVs? At least we can entertain ourselves," Jigneshbhai complained again. He wasn't ready to give up yet. "How will you compare the pictures on the TV screens then?" Swami explained. It seemed logical to me, but we left it at that. Why argue about why TV screens in a TV showroom show the same program? Especially if you aren't planning to buy a TV. In fact, if you aren't planning to buy anything actually.

But the salesmen didn't know that Jigneshbhai and I weren't planning to buy anything, at least yet. Every few steps a salesman walked towards us and asked us, "How may I help you?" Jigneshbhai and I smiled but didn't tell them that we were here only to while away our time. And that Swami and his wife were the real prospective clients. We soon concluded that they figured it out themselves. Because after the TV, mobiles and camera sections, no salesman approached us. We walked towards the domestic appliances section which was at the far end of the showroom. We passed through huge washing machines and refrigerators taller than us. We finally reached the place where the fridges were more aligned with Swami's height and budget.

Jigneshbhai and I walked past the fridges. The intricacies of fridge selection had grossed Swami and the three wives. As in each of our respective three wives, I meant. I never knew there were so many features to check in a fridge.

"This one doesn't have enough vegetable sections," Swami's wife declared. "The ice section here is too large. Who needs so much ice?" Jigneshbhai's wife observed.

Why do they make these side shelves with 12 eggs? I can't put anything else there, as they take so much space," one of them continued. It was true. I remembered my fridge at home. Those empty egg shelves ended up with lemons and spices. And sometimes even small leftover chocolates. Not that I had any problem with the chocolates. But the shelves per se were quite useless for the eggs, when they were not there, that is the eggs. Well, they are meant to be useful when the eggs are there, but you get what I mean. "Madam but these shelves are removable. See, like this," the salesman argued and removed the shelves to prove it. "But where do we keep them after removing? Now, we have to find space to keep these empty shelves? What kind of stupid design is this?" She asked, to which the salesman had no answer. I could make out that he did not have this experience. He looked too young to have a wife that would make similar complaints.

"Hold this tape, come here," Swami called Jigneshbhai without warning, asking him to hold one end of the tape. "It is 28 inches, fits well in the kitchen," he told his wife. They had come well prepared. "But the colour doesn't match our kitchen wall," Swami's wife said. "Do you have a maroon colour in this model?" She checked. Now bear in mind that maroon is not an easy colour for fridges. There were ample whites, blacks and greys, but not many maroons. The salesman shook his head which meant that this model had lost the race to Swami's home. Swami folded the tape

and put it in his pocket. The call for the next measurement came soon.

"27 inches," Jigneshbhai read out. This time the zero side was in Swami's hand. The funny thing about these folding measuring tapes is that you could easily misread the inches if you don't know which is the zero that is your reference. Because there is a centimetre zero on one side and an inch zero on the other. And the measures run in opposite directions, if you understand what I mean. And this tape doesn't stay straight and gets twisted over a reasonable distance. So initially Jigneshbhai saw a largish number but quickly realised that it was the centimetre number from the other side. Then he checked the other side. Seeing 27 there, and having heard 28 inches earlier, he used his native intelligence to logically conclude that the reading was 27 inches. Well, this may seem like an unnecessary explanation, but if you are new to measuring tapes, it is important to have your fundamentals right.

"It's smaller than the earlier one, but 8000 rupees more," Swami proclaimed pointing to the price tag. "But this has more features Sir. Plus, it is 5 star rated, so you will save on electricity," the salesman pitched in with the explanation. We are used to getting more size for more money. In fridges, to Swami's dismay, it didn't work that way. I guess he realised or was made to realise his folly by none other than his wife.

"Do you think it's a wardrobe? It doesn't sell on inches," I could hear Swami's wife whispering to him. I pretended I hadn't heard it, but my acting performance was not upto the mark.

Swami looked at us, realising we had heard it, becoming meek as a lamb. Jigneshbhai preyed on Swami's temporary docility. He handed over the measuring tape to Swami at the first opportunity. He didn't want to be involved in the inches and centimetre confusion anymore, at least for now.

The entire gang now moved to the next alley which had more fridge models. A touch button which let users control the temperature attracted everyone.

"But how do we know what temperature to set?" Jigneshbhai asked what seemed like a logical question to me. His logic was back.

The salesman came up with a booklet. "Sir this has a list of indicated temperatures based on what is inside the fridge. "A company representative will come to install and explain," he assured Jigneshbhai. He did not know that when Jigneshbhai asks a question, it doesn't mean he is buying the fridge. It only means he is curious. With his curiosity satisfied, he neglected the salesman.

But Swami was not curious, he was evaluating features as they presented themselves. "It's too complicated. What if I put ice cream first, and then someone comes later to put vegetables and lowers the temperature?" Swami didn't like the idea. I wanted to point out that ice cream goes into the freezer and vegetables into the fridge generally. So, this situation will not arise under normal sane circumstances for sane people. But I refrained. Counter arguments aren't advised when a buyer has decided against something. Especially when the buyer is Swami.

The wives were anyway not interested in this feature, so this fridge had lost out in any case. We moved further.

"This is nice. The food shelves are on top and the freezer is at the bottom. So, we don't have to bend every day," Swami's wife observed.

"But I have to bend my back," Swami said. "Look at the price," he pointed at the tag. This fridge lost out.

"Why does this fridge offer 10 years and this one offers 20 years warranty on the compressor?" Jigneshbhai asked what seemed like a pertinent question again. His curiosity was slowly reaching its known peak. He had once asked an English teacher why curiosity is spelt with an 's' and electricity with a 'c'. The whole class had spent the next 20 minutes playing tic-tac-toe while the two argued.

The salesman, thankfully, had an explanation. He gave an awkward smile. "Sir this is a local company, that one is German-made," he explained. That satisfied Jigneshbhai who again moved elsewhere while the salesman explained further. "But we have an extended warranty program Sir from our side. At a nominal price, you can cover the compressor beyond company warranty even for the local one." He was about to bring us more details, but we indicated to him to hold on. How had he not realised that Jigneshbhai's questions didn't mean he is buying anything? Everyone learns, I thought.

Meanwhile it looked like Swami's wife had shortlisted another model. It seemed to tick all the boxes. This time Swami asked me

to hold one end of the tape and said, "28 inches". I didn't have to take the reading. I just held the zero end. The colours matched, the features were fine, the measurements aligned. The pricing seemed ok. It was also 5 star rated with built-in stabilizer and had a 10-year compressor warranty.

Swami was fiddling with his phone when his wife whispered again "Are you checking for it online?"

The salesman who was standing some distance away seemed to have heard it. He sensed the threat of a customer with whom he had spent so much time ending up buying online. "Sir, charges for installation charges and extended warranty are higher online. Plus, you won't get future customer service," he said. He was well-trained and knew customer behaviour well.

"No, I was doing something else," Swami told his wife, irrespective of what he was doing. I suspected that he was doing what his wife suspected but be that as it may. He directed the salesman to get the exact final pricing with any discounts.

"Ok Sir, I will check and get it," he said and walked to his billing system, presumably to get a proforma price.

Meanwhile, Jigneshbhai had lost interest in refrigerators. He was now busy walking around the TV wall. Next to that were the home theatre and other sound systems. Jigneshbhai said, "Now I get it. This is the reason security wants us to keep the bags outside." He had a small earphone in his hand. "There is some logic, after all."

Jigneshbhai was in a world of his own. He seemed to be on an exploratory mission to understand the logical fallacies in an electronics showroom. I had long forgotten about the security. The entrance seemed far away, and it seemed like we had spent almost as much time as the movie in this showroom.

Swami and his wife seemed to have made up their mind to go ahead with the shortlisted fridge model. They were discussing the modalities of payment and delivery. "Check with him when they will deliver, and will they take our old fridge in exchange?" She instructed Swami.

The salesman was walking back towards us. Swami was ready with his questions. But the salesman didn't have any paper with him and had a dejected look on his face. Jigneshbhai detected this first and shared his observation with me. "He is coming empty-handed. Looks like he doesn't have the pricing," he whispered. His attention was back on the fridge hunt.

"Sorry Sir, this was the last model. It has sold out," the salesman said when he came closer to Swami. That explained the dejected look observed by Jigneshbhai.

The news disappointed everyone. "When will you get another piece?" Swami asked.

"Sorry Sir, the company has discontinued this model from this month," the salesman said.

Swami was about to lose his head on the salesman. Jigneshbhai and I saw that his head was slowly reaching the point that milk on a gas reaches just before spilling over. "Why did you waste so much time showing us a discontinued model? Do you think we are fools to waste our time checking out a discontinued model?" he thought. But these were still within the mind. Before it spilt over, he saw the wives in a chit chat.

He noticed that the wives had reconciled to the non-availability. They had already moved on in their quest for the fridge. That was like the gas was switched off just in time so that milk in Swami's angry head suddenly went down. They were already thinking of going to the next store. "There is an electronics store 2 kms down," said one. "Yeah it is a good showroom with good variety of models," agreed another. Swami's wife looked at him and said, "There is parking too."

The plans were already made. Jigneshbhai said "alright" and was cool as ever adjusting to the new reality. Swami said "dammit" and looked irritated still. Swami gave me the keys, "Will you drive?" I took the keys. "Fridge hunting does lead to cool heads," Jigneshbhai chuckled as we walked out. We headed to the next showroom, the hunt ended there, and we went home after that.

It was another day in the life of Jigneshbhai and Swami.

Chapter 2. Origins...and Deja

At 9 in the morning, the door of A13 Vrindavan Park opened, and a happy man in his mid-forties stepped out. "Good morning," he said to the familiar traffic constable at the crossing. The policeman acknowledged the greeting. He continued using his whistle with skill to guide the traffic. "Move fast," the traffic constable shouted at the driver of the Honda City. The driver was listening to the radio in the comfortable confines of his vehicle. With a business newspaper in one hand and a mobile phone in another, the portly gentleman from the flourishing Gujarati community of Ghatembur smiled at the familiar face in the Honda City and started walking past the honking traffic. "It's bright and sunny," he remarked to the pedestrian on his side. The pedestrian gave him a smirk and continued walking to the nearest bus stop. The beggar trying to evoke sympathy in drivers waiting at the red signal shared his optimism. "Haven't had food for 2 days Sir," he got on to his job on seeing Jigneshbhai. He gave the beggar a generous 20 rupee note from his wallet further fueling the beggar's optimism.

Jigneshbhai Patel had been following this happy routine for over the past 10 years. His was a life free from worries. His was a head full of ideas. His was a day full of freedom.

Ranchoddas Patel and his wife, who then lived a few blocks away from today's Vrindavan Park, had a son over four and a half decades back. "Let's call him Jignesh, my grandfather was called that," Ranchoddas told his wife who readily agreed. In time, Jignesh went to the local convent school though he did not grasp English till he went to college to study commerce. "We should speak in English at home," he insisted but to no avail.

As far as can be ascertained from school and college records, he did not succeed a great lot in studies. His family didn't mind that. "I didn't take my boards seriously and the boards also didn't take me seriously," he told me over his uproarious laughter after his results. But he was extremely successful in running a textbook business in school, and a clothing business in college. For both of them, his school and college mates were his primary customers, and both of them he closed later. "The returns on investment weren't great," he told his family and returned the capital.

His grades and articulation may have belied it, but Jignesh was an extremely intelligent boy with a rare breed of sagacious wisdom. "Where will I use calculus later in life?" He once asked his maths teacher. His penchant for logical but seemingly out of place questions was well-known. "I would rather invest my time in learning English than studying Calculus. It is more useful," he had mentioned, when he initiated his friendship with Swami many

years back, but we will come to that. There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom, and Jignesh had the ability to gain knowledge in any area he chose, but his forte was in grasping the wisdom with ease. Not many have this ability. I have seen a lot of knowledgeable unwise experts in lots of areas. "The sign of true expertise is to understand the limitations of your knowledge," Jignesh the kid once told me.

As the years passed by, this wisdom turned Jignesh to Jigneshbhai. I heard a lot of friends ask him "Jigneshbhai can you advise me what I should do here?" in various situations. He realised that, his degree in commerce wasn't particularly useful in getting a job, plus he did not particularly like working for anyone else. "It's too painful to keep following instructions when there's no logic, plus there's no freedom," he once told me. He also realized that, with his intelligence, acumen and smart money management, he could run a business of his own profitably, only if he could take some calculated risks and show some patience - both of which he had in plenty. After a few experiments, he found that, for his relatively introvert personality and strengths around wisdom and clarity of thinking, investing advisory and brokerage were his best bet. "It's a nice mix of analysis, risk taking and making money work for me," he had explained once to me. He has been engaged in that since then. That is the reason he stepped out at 9 am from A13 Vrindavan Park to walk to his small office around 500 metres away.

The other part of this story has its origins a few blocks away. A serious, studious man in his early forties stepped out in a hurry

walking fast to his car. "I need to get there on time for a meeting," he said. He had a laptop bag and a lunch box in his hand. One of his neighbours said "Good morning" on his way to the car, but he hardly noticed it. As his Honda City made way through the traffic, he checked his mobile to see if his driver could find a shorter route. "I hope this policeman knows what he is doing," he said to his driver when he heard the whistle. "I will be late. But it's another nonsensical meeting with another useless boss," he muttered to himself. He waved and smiled at the familiar face of Jigneshbhai walking to his office. As he stopped at the signal, the beggar came to his window. He felt sorry for the beggar. He opened the window and gave him a generous 20 rupee note. "What's the use of earning if I can't use it to do good deeds," he said to himself.

Swaminathan Ramakrishnan had been following this hurried routine for over the past 10 years. His was a life full of worries. His was a head full of thoughts. His was a day full of activities.

Close to four decades back, just a few years after the Patel family, a South Indian cosmopolitan family was blessed with a son. Swami went to the same local convent school, albeit a few years junior and, unlike Jigneshbhai's family, Swami's expected him to do well in studies. "Focus on skills, science and engineering will have good scope," his father and, often, members of the extended family advised him. His command over Science ensured that he got the grades to get into engineering, and his eloquence in English helped him survive in the hustle and bustle of corporate life. "My science teacher liked my English, and my English teacher liked my

knowledge of science," he often told me. "Honestly, I knew both just about enough to impress the other."

He was not particularly interested in engineering but took it up because "intelligent kids did it" and that it was "a safe option" that would get him "a decent job". "We have to earn a living and an AC office is comfortable, plus salary isn't bad and they send you places sometimes for work," he explained his four-point logic to me and Jigneshbhai then. There was no deep logic as such, it was basically what he felt more secure and comfortable with. But that was Swami's way of taking decisions going with what felt good, unlike Jigneshbhai's more dispassionate, logical and rational way going with what made sense.

Most people in his family and social circle thought Swami was very intelligent, very ambitious and very accomplished. "Look at Swami Anna. How brainy he is and what marks he gets," was an oft repeated line at family functions. But deep within Swami always had doubts whether it was truly the case. Jigneshbhai was sure that Swami didn't have much of what he called 'life intelligence' but he knew that Swami had a heart of gold. "He is the kind of guy, who you can give a loan blindly without any documentation. He will be more worried about repaying it than you," Jigneshbhai once told me.

Over time, Swami survived the corporate life, but he constantly complained about the problems with it. "Another useless meeting, more politics" was a frequent one. But it did give him a decent life, so he kept on with it. "Now I have seen America, I think I will take

a job that lets me see other places," he used to say. Most of his decisions were driven by what Jigneshbhai called 'short term feel goodness' and social, family and similar considerations. "AVP is a decent title plus the office is close to my house, so no stress. I can easily attend all family functions and take care of my health. Good work life balance," I once heard him say during a job change. Jigneshbhai always felt Swami's work-life balance was imbalanced and was always more in favour of life than work. But such considerations of how to choose a job were in plenty in Swami's 'logic feeling basket' as Jigneshbhai often called it. At the end of the day those drove him enough and that's what mattered. "Be that as it may," Jigneshbhai often said.

I have known the two of them for close to 25 years now. I think the origins of their friendship lie in that English elocution competition that Swami won in school. Jigneshbhai was so impressed and so interested in learning English that though he was a few years senior, he approached Swami to ask if he could teach him English. Swami, proud that he was, had then wondered and asked me "what kind of weird guy can go to a junior asking to learn English! Why doesn't he learn science and maths?" He added, "you better help me teach him English," because I was the one who had written the speech which he had simply learnt by rote. That's when their association started, in a local convent school.

Swami's yearning for security matched up to Jigneshbhai's penchant for risk taking and freedom. Swami's impulsiveness matched up to Jigneshbhai's composure. Swami's heart matched up to Jigneshbhai's head. Different strokes, like chalk and cheese they

were since then, and still are. But all of this is just to let you know the origins of a story that started many years back. Experience brings with it some wisdom and it also brings with it some regrets. It brings superficial modifications, but very few changes in core personality. At the core, nothing much has changed in Swami and Jigneshbhai. Swami's tendencies to get into trouble due to the machinations of his fickle mind remain. Jigneshbhai's abilities to overcome situations due to his wisdom and temperament stay intact. I have been an audience in many such instances, and I should know. So, I will not take you back into history. While the origins might be over two decades old, this is a story well entrenched in today's Ghatembur.

In their neighbourhood of Ghatembur today, slick cafes have replaced the small tea shops of yore. That is what we frequent now to have our regular cup of coffee, and, sometimes, the chocolate muffins with it. "The sweetness of our life" Swami calls the double chocolate muffin that the cafe is famous for. While Jigneshbhai calls it "the meaning in our meaninglessness."

Enough of the past. Now let me come back to the present. That is more valuable. That's why the present is called a gift, or something akin to that. I heard Deja say that sometime. Let me come to that.

"It's a nice afternoon to go out for a coffee," Swami called Jigneshbhai that day a few weeks back.

"Yes it is, but every day is," Jigneshbhai retorted.

Swami's definition of nice afternoons changed every afternoon. While for Jigneshbhai, afternoons were more or less nice unless something drastic happened.

"See you there at 4.30," he decided the program. Not that I or Jigneshbhai had any objections. It was a good time for coffee and a muffin.

"Alright," both of us said in unison, and turned up at the cafe for a nice cup of hot coffee as usual.

We had been meeting at this cafe for the past many years. It was like every other coffee conversation. But it was not the same.

There was some topic that we started a discussion on. I don't want to get into the details of the discussion now because something much more important and astonishing happened that evening.

The wealthy old man was sitting at the table next to ours. He had come much earlier today.

The wealthy old man lives in a sprawling bungalow in Ghatembur's posh locality, not too far from Jigneshbhai's and Swami's homes. He hasn't told us much about himself. Swami often says, "What he says goes over my head, unless I ponder over it." I must admit that I agree with Swami on this count. Jigneshbhai seems to get him though. He told us once to be kind and polite to the wealthy old man. "Now he has retired, but he is very wealthy with the right connections and still quite influential. He has been there and done that all in the world of business during his youth."

"Who is speaking?" Swami asked Jigneshbhai out of the blue.

Jigneshbhai had not uttered a word. Swami looked at me. I was also silent.

"What is this new prank you guys are upto?"

Jigneshbhai and I looked at each other in a bemused manner.

"Don't pull my leg. Why are you telling me to shut up and listen when you aren't speaking?" Swami continued. He was so used to being made fun of that he felt it was more of the same, and as usual, we were the prime suspects.

But we really hadn't spoken. Jigneshbhai and I started wondering whether Swami was hallucinating.

Swami looked at the wealthy old man who was sitting at the next table. He had his normal cryptic expression. He was silent too.

But next to him today was a small cute dog. The dog was sitting next to the old man. He was staring at Swami.

What happened thereafter none of you will believe. But believe me, it is true. Swami asked for a pen and paper in a hurry.

"He is asking me to fetch a pen and paper," he declared, pointing at the dog.

Jigneshbhai and I thought Swami had gone crazy. What happened shocked us beyond words. "A dog asking you to get pen and

paper? What's next? A dog reciting poetry? What did you have for lunch?" Jigneshbhai asked. But Swami neglected us and called the waiter to get a paper. After about ten minutes, Swami gave us the paper which had this written on it.

"I am a dog but pay attention to what I say, I used to be a yoga and spiritual teacher in an earlier life

I died and my soul got this dog's body, Now I see the world of humans from this body

It has given me a new perspective, I can understand humans and dogs, though dogs are easier

Swami, you are the only one who can hear me, your friends can't

That's because you were my favourite student in an earlier life

Next time order some bread for me with your coffee. You can call me Deja"

"What the hell is going on?" Jigneshbhai asked. "Don't make up stuff. This doesn't make sense to me."

Swami had his eyebrows raised. His palms and forehead had sweat. "I don't know what's happen.....wait a sec," he said. "He is saying something." And Swami started writing. He showed it to us.

"Tell Jigneshbhai to believe you, this doesn't happen often, but it has happened before and will not make sense

But it is true, my name is Deja Vu, I am a spiritual dog and, I repeat, you can call me Deja”

I don't know when was the last time I saw Jigneshbhai and Swami with their hair standing vertical. But that day, I did. I also saw their mouths gaping open, hands on their heads, eyes almost round.

"Ok. We will call you Deja," both of them said in unison.

That is how Deja the spiritual dog came into the world of Jigneshbhai and Swami. And not to forget the wealthy old man.

Chapter 3. Flying Colours

The one thing Jigneshbhai likes is a quiet life. He is not the kind who gets restless and worked up when there is not much happening. Give Jigneshbhai his daily freedom, his daily work and his daily food, and the company of a few loved ones and friends to talk with, not all the time but off and on, and he will be happy for days on end.

So, when he called me with a lot of trepidation, which is rare for a person like Jigneshbhai, and said, "tomorrow we meet at Swami's house", I couldn't stop myself from asking him what the matter was.

"Swami needs to be home as he is getting his house painted," he replied, sounding rather colourless for a generally cheerful man.

Painting can be a fairly messy affair as all of you might know. With Swami, generally even the smallest of things can assume epic messy proportions. It was no wonder then, that Jigneshbhai was worried that his quiet life might undergo some short-term turbulence.

At the entrance of Swami's house, we were welcomed by a bunch of chappals indicating that there were visitors before us already inside. We saw a few boxes of paint lying on the floor. Next to them were a few brushes. I could see a big can of what looked like white paint and another with some white paste. There was a big wooden ladder and lots of waste papers and plastic sheets lying on the floor. There were three people who themselves looked painted and we gathered that they were the painters. Swami had a big catalogue in his hand and was standing in the middle of this mess.

"How will pearl organza look on this wall?" He suddenly asked. Jigneshbhai and I wondered if he was asking us. We leaned forward to check the colour Swami was pointing to.

"It's nice and sober," Jigneshbhai remarked. "But it's almost like that white paint," he said, pointing to that big can on the floor.

"That's not white paint, Jigneshbhai. That's the primer, and next to it is the putty. They will put 1 coat putty, 2 coats primer and 2 coats paint on the walls and 2 coats putty on the ceiling," Swami explained with finesse.

Swami described putties, primers and paint with the familiarity of idli, vada and sambar that he has for breakfast every day. I don't know about you, but I have noticed that there is something about painting one's house that makes one an expert in all things related to paint. It takes over your life. Swami was no exception. Primer, putty, emulsions, enamels, textures all became commonplace terms as if he had been painting houses for years.

"But pearl organza is not white. Come look here," Swami called us. He opened a set of colour shades from his catalogue and held them up, presumably so that we can see them in the light. Apart from pearl organza, there were winter mood, oatmeal cream, eggshell mist, bone charm and various such shades. Jigneshbhai briefly whispered, "Why does white have such exotic names?" But I left his question at that for the moment. All of these shades seemed more or less like white to me and Jigneshbhai. But people who paint their houses probably get a third eye which enables them to see invisible tinges in shades that other mere mortals can't. You have to have the eye for seeing them which is revealed to you only after you spend a few hard days of penance with putties, primers and shade cards of paint.

"See, this one has a tinge of ivory, this one has a light biscuit shade, and this one has a slight coffee shade, very light, not like our strong filter coffee but the milky coffee we get up North," he explained with a rarely seen passion for colour combined with an often seen passion for coffee. I could sense that, given the late afternoon hour, Jigneshbhai was thinking more about real coffee and biscuits than the ones whose tinges Swami was pointing out in the colour. But he said, "Yeah you are right, so that's pearl organza with the slight coffee shade, it's not white".

"Yeah it seems to have a mix of ivory and coffee shade," I added, not to be left out. Actually, I hadn't seen any coffee or ivory there. But it would look bad that we didn't get it after such passionate explanation. So, some participation is a sign of decency. But it turned out that both of us were bad students of colour.

"Actually, the other one with the biscuit shade is pearl organza," Swami corrected both of us.

Our colour vision clearly left a lot to be desired. Thankfully the real coffee and biscuits arrived, saving us any further embarrassment, and Jigneshbhai and I got some relief. We focused on the real thing and let Swami continue.

Swami's explanations in detail continued, followed by Jigneshbhai's single word exclamations.

"We are using luxury emulsion on the walls and premium oil enamel on the windows and doors."

"Amazing."

"One of the living room and bedroom walls will have texture paint. We are thinking of some shade of gold rust and roast saffron."

"Wow."

"One is going to be canvas and the other is going to be ragging. What do you guys think?"

Jigneshbhai and I looked at each other blankly wondering what is canvas and ragging. It was like the surprise quiz question in a class you aren't paying attention to. Listening to this medley of colour standing in the middle of plastic, paper and paint felt a lot like ragging to us. But these were relatively minor inconveniences for Swami who was lost in the world of painting.

"See they have provided us with this visualization. This is how canvas and ragging textures will look," Swami opened his laptop and showed it to us. He had developed a nonporousness that his walls had developed after 2 coats of putty. No amount of failure to answer questions on our part shook him from his mission.

Canvas and Ragging were names for texture paint, Jigneshbhai and I deduced.

"Wonderful technology," Jigneshbhai remarked continuing with his encouraging exclamations. "The gold rust looks good," I added with a tone of positivity too. This time Swami smiled indicating that I had got the colour right.

Our interest in visualization triggered further explanations from Swami. As I said, he was a man on a mission.

"On every texture we get 3 colours, 1 base coat and 2 topcoats," Swami began. We thought he had finished but clearly he was not yet done. "So first they put the putty, then the primer, then the base coat. Then the topcoats are put in a manner that the output is textured. Like this," he showed us and opened a demo video.

Swami told us the recipe for textured paint with more gusto than the recipe of his favourite death by chocolate sundae. It almost sounded like one brownie at the bottom, then add vanilla ice cream, finally topped by layers of hot chocolate sauce and whipped cream. Or probably Jigneshbhai and I were just hungry.

We watched the demo video with as much keen interest as we could muster at that late stage of Swami's painting education class. Our approach was similar to students paying sincere attention in the hope that the professor will finish the lecture fast. One eye on the class and one eye on the clock waiting for the bell.

It seemed to have paid dividends because Swami closed down his laptop after the demo video ended. Jigneshbhai knew that lecturers get it. He was an expert at giving the right signals. Jigneshbhai and I had finished the coffee and thought it was the right time for us to make a move. We told Swami who agreed, sounding satisfied with the paint talk and our attention so far. We started walking to the door. Swami got his car keys and joined us on the way out.

Jigneshbhai and I were happy that Swami was joining us, so we can now have our regular coffee at our regular cafe. The wealthy old man and Deja must be waiting, I told Jigneshbhai. We thought we had come through with flying colours. That's when Swami announced, "Guys, I think we have some time. Let's go to the curtain store now as I need to choose matching curtains for the new wall colours." He must have been truly encouraged by Jigneshbhai's and my attention in his class as he added, "It won't take long, now that you guys have also seen the colours." As we stepped out, he told his wife that she needn't worry, as his friends will help him make the right choice. The presumptions that friends make, Jigneshbhai and I thought, but let things be, for the moment.

So that was that. I told you that Jigneshbhai was right when he worried about turbulence in his quiet life.

Chapter 4. High Counts

"And I think to myself, what a wonderful world....!" crooned Jigneshbhai. Swami joined in, "I see walls of white and pearl organza too, some gold rust bloom for me and you,..." Jigneshbhai completed it. "And I think to myself, what a wonderful world...!"

"What a jolly good morning!" Swami said.

"Indeed, it is," agreed Jigneshbhai.

We were sitting in Swami's house after he had finished painting it. The effort was worth it. It truly looked good with the new shades on the walls and the windows. The paints and curtains brought a lot of colour into Swami's life. But that was a week back.

Life has a way to throw surprises at you when you least expect them. Not that I know anyone looking forward to those kinds of surprises, but Swami is least likely to be that anyone. Let us just say that handling surprises is not one of his strengths. Unlike Jigneshbhai who seems always prepared for them. Not just for the ones that life throws at him, but also for the ones that Swami throws at us.