

*From the window  
of his house*



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## FROM THE WINDOW OF HIS HOUSE

Staring out of a window from his cosy little house, Gabriel, a retired Civil Servant, could see that the morning scene was unusual. An atmosphere of ghost town. A cotton-wool silence. Everyone was staying safe at home. They must have listened to the news on the eve, especially the update on coronavirus pandemic known as " Covid-19 ". A hit list was opened, no one would doubt about that. You did not have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that the invisible enemy was around.

What particularly arrested the attention of Gabriel was an undertaker's van. It was stationed near the house of Lindsay, a friend of his. His mind instantly flashed to the demise of Lindsay's grandmother, who was known as ' *Matante Didit* '. ' *Matante Didit* ' was a popular figure in the neighbourhood. Her death had spread a mood of sadness, not only among her siblings and other relatives, but also among those who had attended her ' *ti lecole* '. In a remote past, she ran an infant school at her place, then a small building made of wood and corrugated iron sheets. She had a handful of children and she taught them with all her heart. In this regard, she would not always confine her class to the four walls. When the weather was fine, she would assemble the pupils under the shade of a big flamboyant tree. From the flamboyant tree, many of her pupils had literally started a bright journey in life. They grew up to become professionals and landed in responsible posts in the civil service. But, unfortunately, no one of them could be present to say an adieu to their former dear ' *miss* ', they had to observe the lockdown rules. Gabriel was one of them.

It was already nine. The funeral cortege had left for Bigara cemetery. Gabriel had barely lifted his eyes from the mournful scene when he heard the sound of a siren. On the spur of the moment he stepped back to the window. " *O my God, what has happened again?* ", he mumbled. A SAMU van had stopped near the house of Kavita, a Hindi teacher. What could have happened to Kavita? Gabriel had met her a few days ago at the supermarket, she was struggling with a trolley full of products – that was going in series of zigzags, most probably, due to the heavy load. It was only when he found Kavita helping the nurses to seat Hema, her daughter – in – law, into the SAMU van that he could figure out what was happening. Hema was pregnant, most probably, at a late stage in the pregnancy. Hopefully, she would bring a light in her family and that would make the joy of her husband on his return from Bombay. He would not be at home to celebrate the event, in that case he would have to toast in a virtual drink.

At that point of time, Gabriel recalled the words of Shakespeare:

*" All the world's a stage*

*All the men and women merely players; "*

He waxed somewhat philosophically, his hand on his chin, looking thoughtful like the great American writer Ernest Hemingway at his writing table.

The school of the locality broke his concentration. The school was as silent as a graveyard. The palm trees were standing like sentinels in the school compound. Their leaves were dancing to a breeze. The birds were hopping from one tree to another as never before. They were chirping. Their chirpings were faintly audible to Gabriel, who missed the joyful cries of the children, especially during the recess.

On the other hand, the children were happy to be on vacation, this time not owing to torrential rain, but to coronavirus, something that neither they nor their parents had known before. However, they were altogether in the same boat. So, they had to respect all lockdown rules. In this connection, Gabriel thought of his granddaughter, who was suffering from asthma. He would now and then inquire about her health. Just thinking about her made him anxious.

Gabriel was also feeling uncomfortable. He passed his hand through his hair. It needed a cut. His wife, Lise, did it once, but after the hair-cut he was afraid of looking at himself in the mirror. He did not want to have another bitter experience with the scissors of his wife, preferring to wear a Beatle's hairstyle until the end of the lockdown.

Lise had given Gabriel a good training in cookery. She would often ask him to prepare her favourite dish – *bryani*. It was a sour pill for him to swallow. However, he did not complain; he would manage to satisfy the strong sense of taste of his wife. No sooner said than done.

" I have already prepared lunch. For dinner, it will be your turn. I wish to have *farata* and *carri laviande dan masala* , a chutney and salad," said Lise loudly.

" Oh, my God. Stay safe at home does not mean that you have to eat a lot, " replied Gabriel, with a slight smile.

" We have an invisible enemy around. So, let us enjoy our lives. Life is short, " added Lise in a soft voice.

It was noon. Gabriel and Lise took their lunch while listening to the radio. It was announced that there would be a reopening of supermarkets.

Gabriel heaved a sigh of relief and walked up to the window. No sooner that he had taken his usual position that the aroma of a *bryani* wafted his nostrils. It was emanating from Islam's house, which was opposite to his. Gabriel kept silent and continued looking.

Gabriel was surprised to see Yulia, a Russian woman married to a Mauritian doctor, with a water hose in her hand. She was there standing in the street, apparently looking for Madhoo, the errand boy of

the locality. Madhoo used to wash the car for her. Actually, she would have to do that herself as Madhoo was unavailable, in this case, owing to lockdown, otherwise, for drunken fits. He was usually found at Bar Chacha , giving the impression that he had signed some agreement with the owner of the bar.

Bar Chacha was not far from Gabriel's house. It was famous for its *gajacks* such as *corned frite* and *piments carri* . People from all walks of life would gather there for a few shots in the evening before going home. It was an occasion for them to socialize or relax. Now the doors of Bar Chacha were closed. The habitual customers were indirectly forced to *sip sirop d...* instead of alcoholic drinks for the time being. " But for how long? " thought Gabriel.

Time passed. It was nearly two o'clock, time for tea was approaching. Lise had chosen to drink tea with lemon or ginger, following a prescription from her mother-in-law. She would have tea and biscuits too. Gabriel was anxious, there was no biscuit at home. Conscious of a dispute that could arise, Gabriel cast a glance at *La boutique Roger* , a Chinese shop. Gabriel put on his spectacles to view the distant shop. There was no sign of a soul in its vicinity.

Gabriel took his mobile and rang the shopkeeper, Mr Roger, asking him to bring two packets of cream crackers as quickly as possible.

" The price has increased, you will have to pay a little more this time, " Roger replied unhesitatingly.

" Really! " exclaimed Gabriel.

" Yes, it will include fuel cost, risk allowance, etc, my dear."

" All right, please bring them, " Gabriel said, placing his mobile phone on a bookshelf.

Roger did not take time to arrive. He was present at the gate, his motorcycle still vrooming. He was well protected, his mouth covered with a green mask. Gabriel took the biscuits, handed over the money and thanked Roger.

" Don't forget to wash the .... biscuits, " Roger said jokingly.

The latter whisked away and disappeared behind a bamboo hay, maybe for a call of Nature. No. A police patrol car was coming in the opposite way.

Gabriel joined his wife at the table for the afternoon tea. They had taken some more time than usual at the table, visible from the number of *biscuits cabines* left in the tray lying on the table. After the

afternoon tea time, Lise felt sleepy, so she went to bed. The atmosphere was quiet, soothing for a good rest. Gabriel followed suit.

Darkness had cropped up outside. Lise was still lying on the bed, like in a trance.

Gabriel closed the window.