

We Have Already Happened.

By Malreddy Pavan Kumar and Niven Kumar

The afternoon we were told that it happened, N. and I bundled into the York Lanes aimlessly. But the incident, a cosmic world apart from the commonplacency of our waking lives, withheld from us the flesh of the story. “The TV is mocking me”, said N. in a trembling tone with the abjection of coming face to face with one’s own uncanny double. I looked at the television set, its silence, blank stare, its huge eye mocking us with the images of two columns sinking into the bowels of the earth so noiselessly and effortlessly, images which were sequestered, hidden from us in the box of infinite symbols, like an Aleph. Its big fanged screen which seemed to disperse into molecules, millions of tiny circular fiber-optic molecules, each with an assigned color and shade all forming an image, like an impressionist painter’s palette, millions and millions of deft touches, dots, skillfully positioned, a seemingly haphazard collage of colors.

Technological impressionism.

And they beamed these images across the world into every home, shop window, every distant attic, every street corner, wherever there was a television set. These images played and replayed themselves till, long after we saw them, they lingered in our minds, like the spirits of the days gone by which hover and watch over what we breathe and see and do and think with the envy of scorned lovers, their almost ruthless repetition in our minds compelled us to believe in its real-ness, as real as if we had been there when the incident happened. The event: an abstracted, image-based, fiber-optic construction of an incident. Are we to believe that the images that had been fed through our television sets actually did happen? Of course, like Descartes, we can only believe in their validity because we cannot disprove them.

The camera gave shots of the event from different angles. There were overhead shots of the falling columns, from a helicopter, perhaps, or even from the top of another building. Behind each shot was a need to get to the every essence of the event. Unrelentingly we were being fed a constant stream of perspectives. There were close-up shots of the firemen, the City Mayor, live spectators of the event, some of whom carried their children over their shoulders, in their arms, some others had tears in their eyes, their

faces contorted in sheer anger which, one suspected, could, at any second, turn into anguished incomprehension. Such shots, alternated, first overhead, then close-up, then over head again, all in an attempt to provide the spectator with a real-life picture of the event, to make it as real for the viewer as it was for the participant of the fiery drama. People swarmed all over. The noise was deafening, it seemed, for the masquerading journalist strained to give voice to the image at that moment. Only the at-that-moment had been abstracted from time and space. It was ephemeral, existing, happening at every place and in every time-zone all at once. In that one moment, the bellboy in hotel Crown Plaza and the black street kind in Harlem and the Dalailama were one, conjoined by that at-that-moment, a shared humanity made palpable through the “live” coverage of the tumbling icons of the free world. Both N. and I were forged into a voyage of anti-history. In a sense, that one word, live, defied all our notions of time. It defied time as a continuum, in effect, mocked and put an end to it. For in that one moment, everything we ever were, everything we ever had been, everything we ever wanted to be, were rendered meaningless, mere indulgences.

Close-ups of some of the onlookers showed them crying and we, sitting on the other side of the spectacle cried along with them. Our tears, however, were of a different nature. Indeed one sees differently in different realms, and the meanings and realities we perceive also differ. Their tears were the tears shed from the sudden realizations we have when we are at the brink of history. Our tears were shed from the realization that we were nothing in the greater scheme of things, that, like the images we saw, we were meaningless, cut off from the living. Yet, for N. and I, these televised images had special significance. We were being carried through a passage of time-space-wrap sorts, pushed into another realm, to see the world through the eyes of strangers. It struck us, then, that we were all caught within a prism. Only this time, instead of diffracted light, there were diffracted images and meanings. In a sense, we were all prisoners of a way of seeing. The images being projected belonged to a brand of morality which was just another way of seeing. Could we have seen the images of two falling towers, smoke bellowing from its flanks and its roots, could we have seen the buffeting specks of those who jumped out of the windows, could we have seen the ashen faces of those on the ground, their faces turned skywards, smokewards, could we have seen these images through the eyes of a

cold bystander? What was evident from the moment N. and I saw the first scripted images – for they reeked of an immense staging, a Nabokovian re-enactment of a beheading, a Pirandellian unmasking of a pretender to the German throne, or a cataclysmic dreamscape of a nation being obliterated on independence day – was not the immediacy of the event, that is was happening now, just then, at-that-moment. What was evident to us was the birth of a new form of justice. No longer was it the era of dialogue and greater humanity which believed in itself and the powers of Reason. The Age of Reason, so pompously and grandiloquently achieved because of the mad genius of Adolf Hitler had now given way to an uncompromising revolt of perception. What we were witnessing was the birth of the age of redemption. With hands to their mouths, tears streaming down their cheeks, everyone watching the unfolding magic trick, the disappearing act, a David Copperfield extravaganza, was mouthing the self-same questions – What do we do now? What is going to happen? What is to be done? Nikolai Chernyshevsky's immortalized question, which precipitated a whole national revolution in 1917 was again unleashing the terror of righteousness. The images were no longer mere images. They were now stimuli, spurs cutting into the flanks of a hurtling steed, steered by an headless horseman into the depths of a dark, dense forest. We were caught in a morality that required a dignified reply to the catastrophe. We could not turn away from this, avert our eyes, go back to our coffees, our books, our next holiday, our pet charities, our Sunday arts bazaars, in short our little palliative doses of simple everydayness. That was denied us Now as we both sat there glued to the horrific spectacle, the smoke, the as-we-were-watching urgency like a noose around our necks, we felt implicated in this human cataclysm, guilty by association. For, where now are we to place our allegiances – on those who will have died in vain, or for those who will have fought to save the honour of those who died in vain? Could we forget these images? Would we be allowed to? Suddenly, the crime that had been perpetrated was now ours too. The television screen was like a chain, heavy and unwieldy, that tethered us to a similar fate of redemption. These images would long remain with us as badges of our humanity, as marks of our membership to that family of civilized beings, for weren't we human because we remembered? Were we not civilized because we erected monuments to mark the passing of our heroes and comrades? Were we not sane because we were all

guilty of the same mistakes, perpetuated over a lifetime of erroneous ways of seeing? And now another crime, another mark, another notch in the bark, another turn of the screw. The history books were already being written. I could already hear the scratch of the scribe's pen on parchment, like Kafka's harrow upon the back of the voiceless. The more we stared at the screen, the more resoundingly did we feel the guilt, the denser the silence between us, the more profound the proximity between ourselves and the event. A strange feeling of vertigo gripped us. For as we were now condemned to remember for all eternity, always running at the heels of this bi-pillared image, which was always already receding, the abyss gaping like a Vesuvius, almost as if the event has already happened. Every look N. gave me was an indictment, a needle scratching on a parchment of guilty skin.

N. began to cry, her tears streaming down in torrents across her brown cheeks. I turned to look at her and saw she had become pale, ghastly pale. But I could say or do nothing to allay her moment. I began to cry. But even as I cried, I could not understand my tears. I saw then in these televised images, a sort of capitulation, a suicide which, for Camus, was nothing but a collaboration of the forces that oppressed every sense of our reality.

N. and I walked through the York Lanes. *Good morning*, some faces smiled to us; *have a nice day*, still others exclaimed after us; *Beautiful day, isn't it?* came the earnest cry from all sides. Quietly, we walked, side by side, and yet, so irrevocably estranged. The gardens radiated their many faces, the sidewalks were remarkable signatures of humankind's common bonds. On we continued to walk, a police patrol car pulled up alongside us, slowly, prowling, like a shark, its terrifying fin slicing the taut surface of the water. We glared at the two burly men in the car. They glared back at us from behind their dark eyes. *You folks ok?* one of them asked. We nodded our heads silently. *Can't be too careful these days*, he said, a trace of a smile emerging from the corners of his mouth, and then slowly, the car moved off, the eagle eyes of the two policemen taking every detail in. Every movement was recorded. A man was showing his neighbour his gun collection while from the depths of his fortified basement came the gleeful shrieks of their children shooting bad people on the playstation. Somewhere else, a woman was hoisting the Flag of Stars high up on its shiny pole in the front lawn, its fluttering shadow

shading the little girl who was cloyingly hugging her little pet dog. Then came the war! Everyone was fighting the war, children, fathers, like a witness to our one-ness, our common humanity, for there too, in the Land of Torpid Creatures, the soldiers, dressed in their latest desert wear, fought for the glory of their fallen god, their twin-headed totem, their fallen Quetzlcoatl

We walked, and walked, until we were regaled by the deathly sounds of heavy traffic. There it was, at last, the mundane, the routine ebb and flow of sounds, smog, blaring horns, the daily struggle for peace, the constant movement in order to stand still or any other state this confusion we call life. This was the physicality we were looking for, a total refusal, a denial of the Borgesian Kingdom of Mirrors.

As we watch, a man battled against the oncoming traffic in order to cross the busy road, his body coiled, ready to spring to life at the first sign of a lull. A woman, waiting for the lights to turn green had to hold down her skirt lest she be exposed by the sudden gust of wind. Another woman, also at the lights, was anxiously glancing at a man who seemed intent on her. Such was the physical reality of the living. This was a realm divorced from the rubric of the image-event.

Was I being carried aloft by my idealism? Was I indulging in the physicality of this un-eventful realm? Perhaps, the mocking blank stare of the screen still hovered over me. Throughout our walk into the city, N. had been extremely quiet. Now, in dismay, I watched as N. scrambled her way towards a television set. I was compelled to follow her. We needed life, needed to feel the palpable essence of our bodies, our connectedness with the world and its many forms. People, noise, smells, the burning tumult of heaving bodies.

By now, the outer limits of our bodies seemed to disappear, and we were beginning to lose substance, to dissolve, become one with the insistent sublimity of a reflected truth. Deep within myself, I could sense the slow burning of meaning, and within those depths, like Meursault's dark wind, I felt a rising fear for my own life. I understood then, that the possibility of my own unreality was a real one, that somewhere, somehow, my own complicity with this world – I walked, paid my taxes, watched the news on television, went to the cinema, in short, lived a life of modern conveniences – had made me, made N. an Everyman. We were Everyman, and no-man. The images that constituted our human-ness were everywhere around us – the image of a woman reading

a book over a cup of coffee in a Café, the car that will take us to work, the bowl of cereal we consumed every morning, our ideas of right and wrong, our unanimous indignation of the occasional madman at the marketplace. *People, noises, smells, the burning tumult of heaving bodies*. Now, more than ever, we craved for a glimpse of these.

Then the war, the soldiers, and their manoeuvres, the glazed looks of Bearded Men, their naïve mouths articulating silence. We moved away and walked as fast and as far away from the shop window as possible. Suddenly, we began to find television sets all along that one street alone. In shop windows, in the convenience store in the corner, in the banks as you queued for your turn, in the barbershop. There was no escape. People, who a second ago were rushing past the window, stopped to look at the images on the screens, spellbound for a few minutes, listening, looking, at times laughing, or shaking their heads, or else, staring blankly, then, just as suddenly as they had stopped, moved on again. All seemed to be driven by an insidious motion, like the planets compelled to keep to their orbital tracks. A man in a dark suit stopped in mid-stride to study what had always seemed to me to be nonsensical figures, a jumble of numbers, sequences, trends, projections, like some secret code, an algorithm of prosperity. He called someone on his mobile, barked into it some curt instructions, took one more look at the screen and then moved on into the sea of moving backs.

N. laughingly said, “a pit-stop of meaning.” I moved along, exasperated by her untimely witticism, pulling her with me. My eyes scoured the street for more signs of the palpable. The old street urchin rummaging through the rubbish bins, the averted eyes of passers-by, the man behind the counter at the news-stand scrutinizing the teenage boy who hovered around the coca-cola bottles – these things made me happy, made me feel whole, sane, entrenched in a community of sensuous bodies.

As I moved along, I was beginning to feel that all this corporeal immediacy was a lie, a mirage, or a hologram, an empty kernel from which issued mere images. The proliferation of TV sets in one street alone was disconcerting, for it meant the slow and steady demise of difference. Image and experience were being slowly driven together. The union of this unholy alliance gave rise to the Event, the Spectacle, the Grand Parade of Apparitions. I had to believe in the sanctity of the Real, because I could feel myself being sucked into the vortex of desert landscapes and burning totems and shadowy

figures in Khaki, into a realm of the Mirror, the eternal kingdom of refracted meaning. If nothing existed outside the unreality that surrounded us, if everything we did – all our corporeal existences, the sinking towers, Bearded Men, and the nameless other events that would come after us – had already happened, then, our physical existences were no more significant than the homes of nameless.

The great David Copperfield act was complete. Our new existence lay not in acts of kindness or in the daily physical grind of living, but in the redemptive morality of the event. Looking at the TV images, I knew that N., I, and the event never really happened, that we had always already happened.