

After more than a month in the cardiac care centre (CCU) and a private room in AIIMS, I am discharged. My wife, Suparna, has performed a modern-day Savitri-Satyavan, aided by the skills of the doctors. As time goes, a month is fleeting. But being virtually wiped off the face of the earth is not. I manage to get the daily limericks going from the hospital. So people don't necessarily notice. My frequent co-author, Aditya Sinha, keeps some of the columns going. More people don't notice.

For me, the external world is restricted to a thin sliver of a window (in the room). I can see a pipe in the building outside. A monkey religiously clambers up every morning. It is restricted to counting the IV drops as they pass through the cannula. Drip, drip. It is restricted to requesting Harish to bring the urinal or commode. Sometimes, the bed gets soiled. Just a lump of flesh stretched out, stripped of normal norms of shame and modesty. Sometimes, in a wheelchair or a hospital trolley, I am carted from one building to another, passing through the melee, through the sun shining, through the birds chirping on the green trees. There is a world outside that exists. What if I am not there? What indeed?

"A new book has arrived. Would you like to read it?" asks Suparna. The book happens to be "100 places to see after you die," by Ken Jennings. We smile at each other. How singularly inappropriate! I don't feel like reading, even when I can. I don't feel like watching TV, even when I can. The same boring news, the same boring high-decibel debates. It all seems so transient and puerile. But so am I, transient and puerile, a dot that might have been wiped off. In that event, what would have happened? A few condolences, perhaps even from important people. "Irreparable loss." Perhaps a posthumous Padma Bhushan or Padma Vibhushan. A few obituaries. What will they mention? Trade work of 1980-s, law reform of 1990-s, State work of 2000-s, railway reforms of 2015, even resignation from Rajiv Gandhi Institute in 2005? Who remembers? Nothing seminal about such work. Had a role in the rat race, was temporarily read and passed into oblivion, buried in journal archives.

Perhaps the Purana Project, left incomplete. Manmatha Nath Dutt was reborn, to finish the Purana work. I will be reborn. But I hope not for this. Irreparable loss at the age of 70, when life's productivity is as good as over? In another ten years, what social value will I bring? Can it be measured, quantified, imputed for? I give up the thought, too complicated. There are lives my life has touched, improved, even bruised. If they get to know, they may remember, with fondness and bitterness. Such people don't write obituaries.

No social loss, not much. Private loss is possible. To whom? My sons have been abroad after graduating from school, more American now than Indian. "Will I hop onto a plane?" For what? You know precious little about India. You will be less of a help and more of a hindrance. There will be a time to hop onto the plane. Not yet, not now. Not in time for the last hug, but in time for the funeral rites. At best, send money, if needed. It was no different for my parents and me. However, that was spread across different cities in India. This is transcontinental. That was physical photographs. I will leave a digital imprint. Where is that old black and white photograph of my parents? Haven't seen it for a while. Once in a while, they will look at those digital imprints. Some remembrance, some childhood memories, some nostalgia. No permanent loss. None to friends and colleagues either. A few drop in. However, a month is a long time. People get bored and forget. Why do they drop in and want to hear about what happened and when? Weak and withering, why am I supposed to repeat every trivia? Genuine interest, or a vicarious pleasure in death and disease? I want to put everything down on a piece of paper. I can offer it to them to read. Suparna vetoes the

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idea. Very rude. In the event, the only personal loss will be Suparna's. It matters nothing to anyone else.

I think of Yayati. I have been unfair to him, interpreting it as desire for sensual pleasures. It is deeper. It is hankering after control over the physical body, the craving. Will I trade my life for that of Harish? Will he? Was "prayopavesa" such a terrible idea? Some animals still practise it. I spend my time with such conversations in solitude, thinking about Salman Rushdie's "Knife" and "Ashtavakra Gita," recently co-authored with Hindol Sengupta. "O Janaka! Give up attachment." That's easy, easier. "O Janaka! Disassociate yourself from your body." Impossible. Except when, under local anesthesia, some surgical process is going on. The sub-conscious mind or hallucination? For a fleeting moment, amidst a blaze of lights, you seem to be whirled around the stellar system, separate from the body. A delirious moment of bliss. A moment you would like to recreate and replicate, but can't. It is not time for erasure. The body will heal in due course. I am not sure about the beating the mind has taken, I think for the better.