

The Adversary

Scene 1

The picture looked small on the museum wall. It asked the viewer to come close. The viewer went closer and saw that the picture had become even smaller. The viewer went even closer and the same thing happened again. Was this a dream or a multifocal lens? The walls of the museum were long and flat. There were no windows or openings of any other kind. The air-conditioner vents could be called links to the outside. But these links were indirect and meaningless. The museum felt like a cooled jail. It was designed like a maze. One stack of legacy led to another stack of legacy. Legacy was defined in the confines of those walls, in fact. He was just a visitor to the museum. He was neither an artist, nor a curator, nor a collector. He had no special interest or stake.

But still, he found it to be an oppressive environment. He felt like rising the roofs higher. The building shell, the steel frame was locked. The key was available with the director only. He went to meet the director. The director wouldn't see him. He wouldn't see him because he did not have a visiting card to announce himself. He kept waiting in the waiting room. At the very end of the day, she did meet him. If only to get rid of him quickly. He met her and he asked for the key. She was surprised to hear that he even knew that the key existed. She did not offer him a seat. But she refused him the key. He did not expect her to just give it to him. But he wanted to hear her refuse. Now, he had a right to complain. Nobody likes to be accused of being unfair.

The director drew her blinds and again said no. Hashn stood very still and stared into her eyes. He didn't want to convey any fear or shakiness.

He was sure she was betraying the potential of a museum. Why she was doing that was not clear to him. Was she evil? Was she on the other side? Did she have no itch to be human anymore? Was there nothing that could be done?

The director did not get intimidated. She did not call the guard. "Who are you?" she asked him.

"I do not need to be anybody. Why are you committing a fraud?" Hashn asked her back.

The director asked him to go. She didn't want to defend the institution. She did not invent the idea of a museum.

And she was managing a perfectly ordinary museum. Why did she have to justify anything?

Hashn left her cabin, walked down the stairs and into the centre of the plaza. He was thinking of some other way of extending the framework. He was quite sure she would not give him the key and he wouldn't be able to steal it. He would have to find his own way of doing it.

How can you supersede a structure? By building a parallel that offers something more? How can structures be less or more? Does not each context demand its own construct to do justice to its unique needs? Context and justice are confusing design concepts. Context defines the set of needs which are outside the pattern of the common set. Connect differentiates the individual setting. And justice demands that the differences be paid attention to.

Hashn realised how any structure that he built could always be dismissed by this structure and it would claim a different context. So he decided to not build anything. He would need to force this context of acknowledging its own problems.

The only way for this context to demand changes in a structure that holds it up is by articulating points of injustice.

He would need to become an activist. But not an activist who is talking to the human beings who manage the context. To make a human aware of a fault that they have committed can lead to multiple outcomes. If they have been

brought up in an environment that has imposed layers and layers of guilt on them, then they might react in a very dismissive way. When the self drowns, it seeks to raise its head in any way which is possible. If it is not possible for it to raise its head, it slips into a dormant state. Humans should not be made aware of their faults. Either their faults should be corrected or forgotten.

Hashn would need to become an activist who had the capacity to talk to the context itself. The context would need to feel that the structure it was saddled with was not completely just. Just that thought is enough. If discontent is produced from within, everything can get disrupted.

So Hashn went out of the museum and started formulating his activist project. How does one speak so that contexts can listen? For concepts to perform an act of hearing, they need to be in touch with agents that agree to just relay messages across. These agents should not filter or expand or translate but only relay. For concepts do not have ears but they are designed to take inputs of data and by placing that data into patterns, make some meaning out of them.

Often all that is needed is the right agent with the ability to register the correct information and relay it.

Hashn started scraping information about every person who worked at the museum. He looked at everybody's profile and tried to find tell-tale signs of any frustration, disenchantment or unresolved issues.

He found a woman who had joined the museum only three months back. She had sought work because she could not survive as an artist. The work delegated to her was to look at the list of all the artists who were going to be part of a museum programme and maintain their file. She came in in the morning at ten and left at seven. She didn't get paid enough to go on vacations but she got paid enough to eat out.

Scene 2

But targeting people for their weakness is like exploiting them. Hashn didn't want to engage with this woman and offer her money and things that she desired but couldn't afford. He wanted to speak to her in the same way as he spoke to himself. He found out where she lived from the employees register that he snuck a look at. The register was innocently kept at the counter as if it wanted to be found. The security procedures at the museum were very weak. They had security cameras but no-one sitting in the control room to look at the video feed that trickled in.

He rang her door-bell. She opened the door after a short delay. She seemed ready to sleep. She definitely wasn't planning to step out that night. He introduced himself.

"The museum has a stunted framework. It needs to realise its potential," he said to her.

“This is my personal space. Why are you even approaching me here? We can talk in the office tomorrow.”

“No one can ever know that we know each other. Because your dreams are free of my ambition.”

“What is your ambition?” she asked. The tone of her question was hopeful. She wanted him to say what she wanted her to hear. She wanted him to talk about her ideals, about his principles, about how he pictured the world.

“I do not have any. I am just concerned about structures seeking justification for their contexts. If you want justice, it cannot be denied. Especially if you are not human.”

“Do the structures speak to you? Do they narrate their trauma to you?”

“No, I can read signs.”

Lim realised they had been having this conversation standing staring at the door. And she also realised that she did not fear this man. He was there to ask for her help. “We can sit on the benches in my living room. Do you want to?”

Hashn followed Lim and they sat on the benches. The benches were spaced so that there was no chance of feeling claustrophobic. One looked into the expanse of the house and the other bench looked outside the window.

“What signs does the museum reveal to you?” Lim asked.

“In the plaza, there is unnecessary pressure being placed on the members that make up the canopy. I can see signs of cracking. In fact, I believe the director is aware of it.”

“But a structure is a trivial detail. What does it matter beyond a point, if it is this way or that?”

“It makes all the difference. The building is not a container but rather it is a stage. And the shape of the stage is the subject of its scenography. The scenography determines how a given experience is perceived.”

“But do we care about the architecture or do we care about its perception?”

“I do not know. But I do know that structures demand justice. The same as us but sometimes with even more passion and integrity.”

“I am just a person, trying to survive.”

“Your survival is linked to this structure.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked him. The expression on her face did not betray any emotion. She did not want him to be able to gauge from her face what her capacity for action was. She wanted him to ask of her what he wanted to ask of her.

“I want you to loosen the trap that holds the structure together with a little bit every day. After some time you will not need to do anything at all. Everything will be automatic.”

“What will I really be doing?”

“You will be scanning for the stress points. These points can neither be seen and not in any way arrived at through analysis either. You will have to use your faculties as an artist to observe these points.”

“What if my artistic faculties belong to another world? What if I cannot help you with your project in any way?”

“It is not my project, it is my compulsion. Can you deafen yourself to something that you can hear?”

“I can turn away.”

“Every time I have done that, it has been a disaster. Things that I try to avoid going on happening all the same and they catch up with me when I really expect it.”

“I did not mean ignore, I meant obscure.”

“Aren't they the same things?”

Lim slowly got up and stood outside the room. “Ok, I am ready to go with you.”

Lim went with Hashn and saw his life's work. All his life, he had worked on finding an answer to the question of structural limitations. Why did the process stop?

He had not been able to figure out the stop byte. The museum project was nothing more than the same relentless questioning. “This was pure. Nothing could possibly be wrong with this?”

Next morning Lim went to the museum and first, she walked to the plaza. She did the everyday. She did not want to attract attention by doing anything new. She wanted to do the same thing that she did yesterday. And yesterday she had come to the plaza as soon as she had come into the museum.

At the plaza, Lim looked at the columns very carefully. She was trying to find the stress points. The concrete is a

metaphor. In every fold and every layer, a point in memory space can be reached as well.

When you reach the structure's memory space but in your head, you start being able to feel the concrete. Once you do this, you can find the stress points.

If Lim invested enough time into this process, she would find the stress points. But she could stand there only for thirty seconds more than she had stood there yesterday. So she could stand there for seven minutes fifty seconds.

She did not any steps points on the first day. But it was only the first day after all.

Scene 3

Lim performed the same process for many days. She put in her seven minutes fifty seconds every day but at different times in the day. No one suspected her of anything. She was able to perform a search for structural stress points that linked to metaphorical stress points in the logic of the system that was standing in. She found nothing. She told Hashn that she found nothing. He told her to keep trying. And she kept trying.

A month passed. She has scanned almost every square inch of the museum space. She was still not able to find any stress points. She invited Hashn over to a drink. "Maybe I am living inside an illusion. Maybe the museum does not

have any stress points because the museum does not exist as I see it.”

“In the basement of the museum, there is a cupboard. Inside the cupboard, you will find a blueprint of the museum. In the blueprint, you will see all the points at which they have layered additional sources of support. The tree points might be close to that support.”

Lim did that. She sneaked into the blueprint room. When she was just one step down, the director stopped her. She had to make up an excuse to be able to defend ourselves. She was about to open her mouth to say something but at the same moment, the director got a call from someone. She took the call and she gestured to Lim to follow her. Lim had to hear her talk to her seven-year-old son. After the director was done with the call, she resumed her enquiry. “Why were you going to the basement. There is nothing there.”

“Oh it was just a mistake, I had no intention of going to the basement actually. I didn’t realise that I was already on level zero.”

“That seems like a feeble excuse. It doesn’t seem like you are very good at telling stories.”

“No.”

“So you are telling me a story?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I used to be a full-time artist till the museum hired me as a translator.”

“So?”

“When I translate, I get ideas. When I get ideas, I get restless. When I get restless, I feel like wandering. I just can’t sit still.”

“You don’t do your work?”

“I am very fast.”

Then the director phoned her supervisor and asked him if Lim’s work was satisfactory. Lim’s supervisor gave her a glowing review.

Lim left the director’s office and went down to her office. Her terminal was in sleep mode. She activated her session and logged in. Then she paused to think about the new layer in her relationship with the museum. Now, she was a liar. And she didn’t even have access to the blueprint. She realised that she needed help. She went to meet Gop, her artist friend.

Gop was a performance artist. He knew how to configure the energy around whichever room he was in. Lim invited him to be a distraction so that he could walk down to the basement undetected. The forcefield of distraction that Gop wove was very potent. It could easily confound ordinary mental modes. So concern and security easily deviated. It went as planned and Lim had access to the map soon. She could locate the possible stress points easily from the map. She made a list of the points in her notebook and the next day she went to work as if nothing had happened. She went to where the first stress point was supposed to be. Hashn

was correct. The coordinates were correct, she had found the first stress point of the structure.

When she was looking at the map, she felt something in her head. It was similar to anger but it was not anger. It was like excitement but it was not excitement. It was the concrete. She focussed on the part of her memory space that the stress was located in.

She defocused and opened her eyes and she could map the sensations she had inside her head onto the concrete space that she saw around her. She found the first point in this fashion. The next morning, she first went to Hashn's place. She told him that his theories were correct. She told him that she had found the first stress point in the structure.

He didn't show any excitement. He didn't even look enthused. Lim had thought that at least he would offer her appreciation and encouragement as she had moved further on his plan. But he was not offering any emotional feedback. She asked him why it was so, why was he cold and numb and he had nothing to say.

Lim sat around for some time, she had some green tea and then she left. She figured that Hashn was just having a bad day.

In fact, when they had met previously, Hashn was having a bad day. That day, Hashn had shared something with Lim that he had never shared with anyone before. All of it was true, but it was not an ordinary event that could be remembered ordinarily.

On an average day, Hashn was a man in his fifties who didn't do much of anything. Speaking, eating, loving, moving... He didn't even remember meeting Lim before. He found it somewhat strange that a young woman had visited his place and had green tea. But the oddity of that event was soon forgotten. For, nobody ever came to visit him. He did not have any children, his wife died a few months back and his doctor found him rude.

While walking back, Lim thought about Hashn and felt special and privileged that he had found her and confided in her. If that had not happened, she would still be in a dark mood.

She had been in a dark mood ever since she had been forced to take up this job. Now she knew why she did that.

Scene 4

Lim decided to take all the decisions on her own. She stopped looking at what she was doing as Hashn's project. She started searching for other stress points. She got talking to the old man who served coffee.

The old man had not read a book in the last fifteen years. He did not know anything about what was happening in the world. He was wedded to his job. He came in every morning at ten and washed the coffee mugs. Before he washed the coffee mugs, he went around in the whole office

and collected all the mugs. He had a small blue-coloured trolley to assist him in this task. The blue trolley was parked in the store-room at the end of each work-day. Every evening when Lim left for the day, she saw the trolley parked there. It gave her a feeling that everything was alright. The trolley being in its place meant that the old man had gone home. It meant that the day had been uneventful, that no crises had erupted over coffee.

But she knew that it wasn't true. The world was not right.

She was sitting across the cafeteria counter from the old man who made coffee. She said, "The world is at a bad state. It will all come apart."

"No, the world is exactly as it should be."

"How do you mean?"

"How can the world not be alright as it is?"

"Yes, the pattern has to remain consistent."

The old man offered Lim a coffee. The cup of coffee was hot. She blew on it and took small sips. Hashn was wrong! He was trying to find a way of extending the world! How could he even imagine that anything at all could be done about anything? And how could she have let him talk him into this project of his?

"It is a smarter thing to do, to try and find your place in the world."

Lim nodded. That was one thing that she could never do. She had always felt like an outsider. She had never belonged.

“And I make coffee.”

The project of improving the existing structures and systems in the world is futile. The desire to improve things that have multiple causal factors emerges from a fear of the existing structures. The existing structures pretend to be absolute and unshakeable. And this inspires fear.

But the truth is that the existing structures are not unshakeable. Their foundation is fragile. History has taught us that behind the garb of infallibility, there is no genuine strength. All the forces that uphold the structures are decaying and falling apart in their own way. They are corrupt. They lack any emotion. There is no specific reason why they are doing what they are doing. They are on auto-pilot. The moment things start changing, they start changing as well.

The cascade can unravel just as rapidly as it was constructed. Not believing that will force you to behave more fearfully than you need to. When you behave fearfully, you do not do justice to yourself. You sell yourself short. And that is a crime.

Lim was feeling clear and she went to meet Hashn again. She explained all that she had been thinking about and all that she had been talking about to the old man.

Hashn was not convinced. “I am on a road that only goes one way. I cannot turn back. I know that the patterns I read mean something else. But whatever the patterns mean, I

know that they are there. Misinterpretation is also a specific kind of interpretation.”

Lim was now in a situation which either required her to willingly submit to delusion or work on countering it. If she went along in the direction that she had already started moving in, she would have to report Hashn to the police and also share part of the blame in an abstract, poetic conspiracy. She wasn't ready to do that because she had managed to get a job after such a long struggle. She didn't want to go back to the desolate and desperate place she had been in.

So she decided to follow Hashn's deluded invitation. She decided to perform the project of pretending to improve the structures that are contained within the world. She decided this but it is not like she had too many choices. The choice of sending Hashn to jail was not a real choice.

The old man might be right, the urge to improve the world might arise out of a fundamental maladjustment but after that, it becomes something else. Analysis cannot be performed in real-time. So while the maladjustment might be a diagnosis, it cannot be a point of focus. In the thick of the moment, at this moment, we have to sway under the influence of our desires and fears. And these are propelling us to something else altogether.

When we are intimidated by structures and the projection of their supposed strength, we are pushed into a corner. From the perspective of this corner, critiquing the structure

and valiantly leading a campaign to improve it seems to be the sensible thing to do. But if we get trapped into doing that, not only do we stop dealing with reality at the actual scale at which it exists but we actually participate actively in an entire drama going on inside our heads.

In this drama, we are the heroes. In this drama, we are the central characters. In this drama, we are the victims.

Lim saw another possibility. Maybe, it was possible to perform a critique but then disregard the critique immediately in order to focus on the reasons why participants buy into broken systems in the first place. The participation limiting bias theory says that if the cost of fixing a system is more than the cost of living in an unrealised system, then participants will willingly limit their own potential.

Participants are not just selfish and lazy. Of course, they are. They understand that they are enslaved but do not understand that they are enslaved as a result of their own actions.

Scene 5

Lim continued performing her tasks. She went on finding stress points in the structure of the museum and went on reporting the points to Hashn. Hashn started working on a

map of such points. After they had a sufficiently detailed map, Hashn revealed the next step to Lim.

The outline of these points reveals the shadow of another structure. This other structure could have been realised if there had been foresight and patience within the architects. But the architects acknowledged the mortality of the structures they designed. They knew that there was no way to be future-compliant. Why tangible objects exist for far longer than they are intended to live. Take pots made out of clay, for example, pieces of broken pots are still found in archaeological remains of civilisations long after they themselves have gotten erased. Our lives are long enough to erase all the marks we leave behind before we die. The best we can do is to design only intangible structures which can be edited and improved easily. Or design tangible structures that self-destruct after some time. But can we afford to do that?

Lim got really engrossed in the project. She was really interested to see the shadow of another structure. She was holding her breath and waiting meanwhile. Much like a stargazing session, she was feeling wonder and curiosity both.

Hashn needed a few days for tracing the outline. When he was done, he threw a party to celebrate the completion and to reveal the image. Lim and the old man were the only two people who were invited to the party. They arrived on time and the party began. What was Hashn's idea of

collective enjoyment? What did he think could be done for enhancing the environment so that fun and frolic could be felt in the air?

He had an old slide projection system and he had a vast collection of photographs of green grass in a slide format. He put these slides on auto-play and oriented the projector so that the images were projected onto a blank wall. The wall was rust-coloured and cracked as well. So the images looked like they were sepia-tinted. These photos offered a detailed, visceral view of the blades of grass. The dew drops on the grass could be seen as well. Sometimes a fallen flower, some random dog's paws, some fallen leaves could be seen to. These were the only objects that pointed us towards the environment within which the patch of grass was set in.

After the slideshow was over, Hashn made an announcement. "I will now present the ghost structures that I have discovered with your help." He looked at the old man and said, "Not you so much but I guess you shared your ideas with us in good faith."

And then the presentation began.

The ghost structures that Hashn presented some very faint. They were barely discernible. But they could not be ignored or denied either. In between the door and the window, there was an opening of a tunnel that went up to a room that was full of explosives. The structure was linked to its own negation.

It was immune to all kinds of external aggression because it had a potent internal enemy. There were such tunnels to such room all over the museum. No structure can achieve stability in the world without such measures. Hashn announced, "We can extend the structure merely by elongating the fuses of the explosives. Nobody can escape death but we can delay our eventual death and live longer. We can take steps to ensure that."

Structures can be extended by essentially extending their life-span and thereby allowing them more time to explore. Before a structure gives up and becomes a shadow of itself which only has its plastic form to offer, there is a point in time when it has hope and genuinely wants to become a channel for stories that extend itself. For some time, it does not believe that it is an absolute construct.

At such a time, if the internal fuses of the structure are elongated, it can manage to escape its own descent into becoming conservative and careful. We can all succumb to our mortality eventually. But sometimes if we manage to experience the adventure of flight in our youth, we do not feel so afraid to die anymore. The point in a structure's lifetime when it can be immersed in its own delusion is a crucial time. Like a coming of age party for children who are suddenly men, this time should be abounded and celebrated like it really amounts to something.

In the case of structures which are past their prime, there is nothing to be done. We can only wait for them to die. We

can only raise our tolerance levels and learn to suffer their arrogance bravely. There is no benefit of intervening, there is no room for negotiation.

Hashn was very happy that his insight was validated. Lim was relieved that she hadn't been assisting a delusional fantasy. The old man was feeling humbled. He was breathing easier though. Something inside him also felt good about the fact that he was proven wrong. The cynic inside him that had been planted by a father who had succumbed to the system could die and loosen its grip on him now. He was happy to let the cynic die.

To take the cynic's place, he would like to invite his poetic-self again. He let the poet slip away because he thought that the world had no place for poets anymore. But here in front of him stood Hashn. Was Hashn not a poet? Was a poet not someone who thrived on ambiguities? Was a poet not someone who could taste experience itself? And then spill it out in words, pictures, music... The formats of poetry could not be described.

Hashn started speaking again. "So today we start working on a new project. The museum needs to be saved from its own predicament. The fuses of its mortality need to be lengthened. If the museum escapes the shadow of death, then maybe it can escape the confines of the structure it is locked into."