



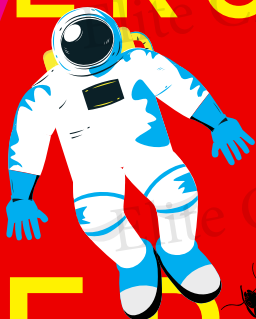
WHISPERS

FROM
THE

OTHER
WORLD

STORIES

ANCHALEE
VIVA



Whispers
from the
Otherworld
Stories

By
Anchalee Viva

Publisher's Foreword

Anchalee Vivathanachai, known by her Thai pen name Anchan and her English pen name Anchalee Viva, has garnered a significant following in Thailand for her exceptional writings across various genres. Her versatility and boundless creativity have been evident since her first collection of Thai short stories, *Jewel of Life*, which earned her the esteemed Southeast Asian Writer Award in 1999—a testament to her profound influence on Thai literature.

In the early 1980s, Anchalee and her parents made a life-altering decision to move to the United States. This transition, which occurred after she completed her Bachelor's degree in the Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, was a pivotal moment in her life and writing career. The experience of living abroad for the first time, coupled with a sense of loneliness, shaped her perspective and fuelled her creativity. During this time, she found solace in writing, especially in the form of short stories, which allowed her to express her ideas in a compact and meaningful way. She has been a Thai-American resident of the US ever since.

Since 2017, we have had the privilege of publishing Anchalee's exclusive English short stories in *Elite+* magazine. This platform, widely read by diplomats, entrepreneurs, think tanks, and expats in Southeast Asia for the past decade, has been a testament to her

ingenuity as a writer. You are now holding the first of three pocket-sized short story books written by Anchalee, consisting of nearly 40 stories spanning ten different genres, offering a reading experience that is both unique and diverse.

Anchalee's interest in the science fiction genre is apparent in her short stories, which demonstrate her out-of-this-world imaginative thinking. This is evident in *In a Petri Dish*, which tells the story of a three-headed boy secretly examining his six-headed scientist father's petri dish through a microscope. In *The Visitor*, one follows an extraterrestrial life form identified as X, urgently seeking help from an attendant in a hospital morgue to find a way back to its world.

That Thing is a gripping narrative of an expedition worker stranded in an otherworldly landscape, stalked by a colossal alien entity. *When the Whistle Blows* tells of a young boy's dream to ride a train, inspired by incredible tales from a mysterious wanderer. In *He Who Comes Alive*, we experience the supernatural journey of a man who awakens bodiless after an accident, discovering a new form of eerie existence beyond physical form.

We hope that you will be pleasantly surprised by Anchalee's foray into playwriting, as seen in *The Last Bullet*, featuring two men's dramatic struggle to take their own lives with only one bullet.

Readers will appreciate the depth of the writer's realism, expanding into the realm of magical realism as brilliantly as in *A Tree Reincarnate*, which tells the beautiful, touching story of a young woman who shares

how her mother's previous life was as an oak tree.

The Witch follows a group of foreign students in San Diego befriending an enigmatic elderly Mexican woman, Aunt Isa, who possesses an extraordinary ability to perceive colours without sight, leading them to suspect she might be a real witch. The story, told in three chapters, is intriguing for its rich blend of folklore, mystery, and emotional secrets revealed, giving a sense of otherworldliness and connection beyond the ordinary.

She is a poignant narrative about the emotional turmoil a woman faces when her brother passes away after a fatal accident. In confronting her brother's death, she grapples with guilt and grief while facing a surreal experience of mourning that forces her to revisit the concept of death she has both feared and been fascinated by throughout her life.

A Small World Where Big Things Are takes the reader on a nostalgic journey through the memories and imagination of a woman reflecting on her vibrant childhood. The story is vivid and enchanting, capturing the essence of family bonds and the profound wisdom left by her mother and grandmother, highlighting the bittersweet realisation of life's fleeting beauty.

Lastly, *The Portrait* is a story about a young artist's encounter with another artist who challenges her perception of art and self through his unconventional methods, leading her to an eye-opening experience.

We are excited and proud to introduce Anchalee's original English short story collection, culminating nearly a decade of her work from 2017 to 2024. We invite all readers to take their time to savour every page, as each

of her contemporary short stories promises something intriguing and distinct, making it a timeless, compelling read for our esteemed readers for years to come.

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The Visitor

**An unearthly traveller must learn
how to navigate human senses to survive**

I still remember it. The whole thing occurred one stormy night amid flashes of lightning and the roar of thunder outside my bedroom window.

In my sleep I heard a voice in my head begging me for help. That voice introduced himself as X, who had been travelling across the cosmos to widen the scope of his experience beyond his distant home. Somehow he had lost his way, pulled to this mysterious planet whose existence was not on his cosmic survey map. He had no idea how to survive in this unknown habitat called Earth, which shared nothing in common with his own.

I chose to call the owner of that voice “he” instead of “she” or “it” for my own convenience, since I had no idea about the voice’s gender, let alone his real identity.

“I’ve come to ask for help,” that voice kept pulsing

in my head.

“But ... Why me?” I was too dumbfounded to believe I wasn’t in some wild dream.

“I can’t survive here with a mind alone. Until I find my way out, I need an earthly body as a shelter to shield me from the earth’s gravity. My mind told me you have things to do with men whose body has ceased to function. I can work on it if you just give me one.”

He was right. I worked as an attendant in a hospital morgue, hauling corpses on the gurney every day from the ward down to the morgue, which was located in the basement tucked in a far corner out of public sight.

“Please help me before I’m smashed to nothingness,” the voice lamented.

“You can’t be real. You just can’t... Go away!” I yelled, trying my best to ignore the begging voice vibrating in my head.

Although I had woken up I still heard that voice bothering me non-stop. So I hadn’t imagined things. Aliens actually existed. To stop the repetitive *I need a body ... I need a body*, I finally gave in and tried to design a rescue plan for the sake of ... um ... a lost and desperate alien, or whatever it was.

I set a plan for him to follow me to the hospital. Although I wasn’t able to see him, I could sense his presence tagging along as I walked down the narrow corridor and entered the morgue room to a row of refrigerated drawers. I opened one and rolled out a large aluminium tray. On the tray lay the sheet-covered body of a newly deceased patient. It was the body of a middle-aged male who had died of a stroke the previous

night. Of course I had been the one to roll him into the room after he was pronounced dead. Poor guy, I hoped he wouldn't mind being given the unprecedented honour of handing himself to a homeless alien.

I froze, unprepared for the eerie scene in front of me.

Right before my eyes the corpse lying on that tray sat upright, eyes wide open, looking straight at me. Then the mouth began to quiver and move. I was all alone in the morgue, and my sole companion was this creepy body. At least the familiar voice relieved me somewhat. It was him. Whatever I had brought here had entered that body on the tray.

It was the first time he made verbal contact with me from outside my head. It was quite an apparent effort for him to utter through the throat.

"I'm trying to take control of my host's body. I can force the optic organs to open, but I can't see anything around me. Your existence is completely absent from my sense of awareness. Where are you?"

To confirm my presence, I touched the corpse's hand, still stiff and icy cold as the dead were supposed to be.

"I'm right in front of you. Do you feel my touch on your hand?" I asked, but his answer came out negative. He felt no pressure from my squeeze. He didn't even sense my presence.

"From the other side where I come from, physical existence is unknown to us. We are only a field of living energy with a consciousness and a mind, life under a different law of nature. It's still a life just like yours

except, for better or worse, we never have a body. But since I need to survive in the world of matter and material, I need to learn how to operate a solid body so I can connect to whatever belongs to this world in an effective way.”

“I think I heard footsteps outside the room. We have to sneak out now. Imagine if someone pushes the door open and catches me chatting with ... a corpse.” I gulped. “Don’t worry about how to see. All you need to do is try to stand up and walk out with me. Nothing’s simpler than that!”

Those eyes looked like two deep voids, vacant and expressionless. *Oh my God!* It reminded me of newborn babies in the paediatric ward born into this world with zero idea of the unknown world they had been delivered into.

“Try to generate kinetic energy. Focus your mind on your two feet so you can move them forward. C’mon, do it now!” My voice became more desperate due to his complete ignorance.

Those two feet didn’t move an inch. Oh! Probably he needed time to practise. I made a quick decision to carry X off the tray, and dropped him onto a wheelchair and rolled him out of the room as fast as I could, as if he were a regular patient returning to his room. As I wheeled the corpse (with him inside) past all walks of human life, up the main floor and out the side door, I prayed the corpse’s relatives wouldn’t pass by and, of course, scream.

I couldn’t just wash my hands of him and dump that poor thing somewhere, giving someone else the

opportunity to claim possession. So I brought him home in my car and kept him in secret in my small apartment, hoping he could learn to use the human body in time, preparing himself to be declared to the world as the Earth's most famous figure, second perhaps only to Jesus Christ.

I never imagined basic things every human was capable of, like seeing and walking, would become the most challenging tasks for him.

"Now, listen." I began to educate him on the subject of human anatomy, after leaving him alone for 24 hours to get familiar with his new body.

"Our body, including the one you possess now, is designed to serve its owner, us. In order to be aware of whatever is outside us and to connect to that, you depend on the sensory organs of your body that carry sight, sound, smell, taste and touch to your brain. Then you wait for your brain to recognize, identify and interpret them into their true identities. Your brain will stimulate certain sensibilities for you to respond to each individual object in accordance with its command."

"What?" he cried. "What if the brain leads you wrong? Can you alternate this process?"

I never expected such a question but replied patiently.

"I'm afraid not. All feelings known to us – love or hate, happiness or grief, joy or fear – are the result of the brain's interpretation. Say if someone is nice to you, you feel love, happiness or delight. If not, you feel anger or hatred or fear."

"So the brain sets up 'feelings' for you to follow

fixed patterns? You don't have freedom to choose otherwise. Let's say, if the brain doesn't allow you to feel happy you just can't on your own."

"Why!" I was again baffled by his odd remark. "It's fine with me. Don't you think it's convenient to live under this system?"

I was prepared for more argument but he slowly bent his head in surrender at that fact.

His ability of speech improved very fast, almost overnight. I had to admit that his intelligence was staggeringly high. His peculiar view of us Earth creatures was so otherworldly they stirred and provoked my own thoughts. There were positive signs that he was grasping the concept of movement. His motor skills started to kick in. He was learning to use his legs to balance his body weight with the support of a crutch. I even set up a bar like the one in a hospital rehabilitation room so he could improve his walking skills through regular exercise.

To stimulate his visual and hearing abilities I introduced him to all of the TV channels, the best and fastest means to learn human behaviour, social interactions and cultural activities from a safe distance without getting involved.

But a few problems remained. One was his failure to see images as well as we humans generally perceive. Substance and mass were terms absent from his sense, not so different from our unborn blind humans. His description of "seeing" as he had begun to experience it through his borrowed human eyes struck me as both bizarre and intriguing. All solid objects – from buildings

to cars to men to animals and trees – were perceived roughly as vertical or horizontal columns of different sizes and without fine details. (At least he could distinguish men from animals since men were vertical whereas animals were horizontal.) Apart from that, he couldn't detect the presence of objects smaller than a dog. (Cats, mice, ants, teacups and needles, for instance, simply did not exist to him, more or less the same way our naked human eyes fail to see single-cell organisms.)

It shocked me once when X mistook me for my closet. (Why, he even denied it was his fault since I and my closet happened to be both vertical objects of the same height!) In other words, it was beyond his capacity to tell things apart if they roughly shared the same height and shape. To temporarily solve this headache, he had to escape the body he possessed and use his more familiar energy form to comprehend some of the things around him.

It was impossible to get him to see the significant difference between the state of beauty and its opposite: ugliness – two fundamental elements from which sprang the whole gamut of human emotions. If he couldn't adapt to our mental standard due to an inability to understand human senses, it would be a waste, a complete void of a taste of life. I believed he would never find such uniqueness in life anywhere else in our infinite universe than on Earth.

Another problem was the concept of breathing and food consumption for sustenance. He was in disbelief at his first dinner that animal meat and plants, two other forms of living things, were sources of energy for

humans. We needed their life to maintain our life.

At that point, X began to bombard me with questions and remarks.

“How strange! You eat other lives for your energy. Everyone eats everyone else to stay alive. What a negative way to exist. It means no one can be at peace with one another. Something is wrong somewhere. Back home, we load energy directly from our solar generator, not from each other, without undergoing an unnecessarily complex and slow process of eating. And yet the energy we receive can last a long time.”

His tone sounded matter-of-fact and objective, without criticism or mockery, just genuine curiosity. I tried my best to shed light on the way of nature.

“This unique way of living is inevitable. We have only two choices, to live or let die. The earth is made entirely of rocks and metals. But our body system can’t break down inorganic substances into energy.”

“I remember you said your body demands energy at least three times a day.”

“Of course, otherwise a body will lose its strength and die. In order to live, we must take care of our body at all costs.”

“Do you have a higher purpose in life besides caring for your body? That task alone consumes most of the time of your brief lifespan. You use up most of your energy to get more energy, like chasing a thing in a circle and nothing else is left. It doesn’t make sense to live such a pointless life!”

“Excuse me, I’m afraid I need to go to the toilet now.”

I found an excuse not to answer his existential question that would need a lifetime to answer. Then I realised I had probably made a mistake. A hint of “faeces” to him could show more of the disadvantages to being human. What if he asked how many times a day we had to go to the toilet to release our waste?

The last problem was the most critical one. X did not breathe continuously and steadily because he often forgot to exhale after he drew in oxygen. Sometimes he let minutes go by, completely unaware he was neither breathing in nor breathing out. He nonchalantly let his brain be deprived of essential oxygen and was not aware of the consequences.

That took a toll on the body he was lodged in, leading to an unthinkable disaster.

Since the temperature had been hot for several days in our apartment, raw meat spoiled fast if not in a refrigerator. No wonder why I freaked out after I returned from work one evening and opened the door to my apartment.

Yes, I freaked out at the sight of a bloated body lurking behind the door to greet me with a smell as putrid as 10 dead rats. That sight scared me out of my skin.

X was literally in a decomposing human body. As if he had stepped out of a nightmarish scene in a horror movie. My career involved dead bodies, so I knew he was advancing into a second state of human decomposition, with a bloated body, ruptured fluids and the most intolerable odour on earth caused by sulphur gas inside the body.

“What’s wrong with you, my friend?”

Although he was incapable of tracking my facial expressions, he could detect something was not right from the sound of my hair-raising scream.

“Oh my God! Look! Don’t you know you ... you are rotting?”

“Why is it such a big deal? Just let it ... what you just said? Oh, let it rot. It’s all right with me,” he assured, with a smile that looked like more of a grimace.

It was amazing that neither his hideous appearance nor his awful smell bothered him. His mental power was still in control of this decaying corpse. While speaking to me he pushed one of his dangling eyeballs back into its socket with the calmest composure. All this detachment from fear and panic was due to his void of human temperament.

Before I decided one way or another, my next door neighbour knocked on my door to complain about the stench that had begun to emanate outside. Her suspicious eyes swept across the room, probably expecting a murder scene. It was fortunate that X had hid himself in the nick of time, though he let his smell linger mercilessly.

The next day X dragged whatever was left of his body to my room. One leg and one hand had gone missing along the way.

“I come to say goodbye to you. My kind finally found my whereabouts and sent a signal that my rescue is underway. When I went missing they didn’t know where I was until they found long-lost information about a single planet among all the trillions whose

inhabitants are still trapped inside their solid life forms, with a false reality created by their own brains, whereas the rest of us in the cosmos have already advanced into living energy. That's why there is no record of planet Earth on our interstellar map. But, my friend, let me tell you something important before my departure. Though your body is made of crude substances, your heart has proved otherwise. Thank you for the human kindness you gave a visitor from far away..."

His heartfelt gratitude could compensate for all the trouble caused by the rotten body he left behind.

In a Petri Dish

It's such a boring afternoon for the boy.

Today he cannot go to school because he's not feeling well. His new head starts growing from his neck. It causes him a mild fever and a headache as his new head's emerging. He hates it but his father has assured him more heads means more brains. He has three heads so far, and his parents expect him to have more. His father has six all together while ordinary men have four maximum. No wonder his father is far more intelligent than most of his peers.

Both his parents are still busy at their work and will come home late evening. Now, he is home alone, giving him an opportunity to pry into that forbidden corner of the house: his father's lab.

Luckily, he remembers the secret code to open the lock of the lab door. His father has never allowed anyone inside except his colleagues teaming with him

on some confidential project.

So little does the boy know about his father's work. He merely knows that his father is well respected for his invention of a super microscope with an incredible ability to magnify things as small as a quark particle up to a trillion times its nano size. That breakthrough happened when the boy was born a million years ago. Now the boy is waiting to celebrate his eight millionth birthday that will be coming soon.

He doesn't have much time to explore. His father will come home soon. However, the boy can't resist his own temptation. He finally decides to tiptoe inside that room in anticipation. In his disappointment, he finds nothing interesting inside the spacious laboratory, only some instruments here and there such as test tubes, vials, titration flasks and so on, which are not different from what he finds in every lab.

Then his eyes catch sight of the huge blank screen on the wall at the far end of the room. In the middle, under a powerful beam of light from the ceiling, stands an enormous instrument; its size takes up half of the lab's entire space.

He jumps in there and curiously inspects it. The immense size makes it look more like a telescope to him. Oh, how he loves to gaze at the ocean of stars in the infinite sky. Yet, all parts of this instrument are similar to a regular compound microscope, composed of one eyepiece, several objective lens, two focus dials

and a platform to insert a petri dish to observe some specimen.

He doesn't find anything in the petri dish. It doesn't make sense that his father put an empty petri dish under the gigantic microscope for no purpose.

Then he realises that some mysterious thing in the dish must be far, far, far beyond the ability of his eyes to see. It has to be some nanoscopic object one can see only through the microscope that's able to magnify things up to a trillion times their original size.

So, he bends down one of his heads and looks through the microscope eyepiece. At first, it's so blurry he has to rotate the objective lens to increase the power and adjusts one of the focus dials for an invisible thing on the dish to become clear.

That is when something under the lens becomes by degrees visible to his eyes, not only from under the microscope, but also simultaneously on the huge projector screen on the wall. Once the image appears in full view on the screen, the boy gasps in real shock. What's before his eyes is the last thing he expects to see.

No one will believe that what he's looking down at in that small petri dish appears to be an entire universe.

Lately, his father has spent most of his time in this lab, sometimes alone and sometimes with his team. He is so preoccupied with his work, he doesn't want anyone to knock on the door even to remind him dinner is ready

or it's time for bed. So, that petri dish must be the experimental project his father has spent days and nights on.

Imitation of the original universe is the project.

Now, the boy knows for sure. He remembers that in class his teacher recently showed a diagram of their universe. He listened with awe and wonder while his teacher explained that this map started from their home planet and spanned millions of light-years to the assumed edge of the universe—from their solar system to their own Milky Way galaxy to all the other galaxies which are connected together to form a single cluster and then more clusters that combine to become super clusters of galaxies all the way across countless light-years to the farthest cosmic webs assumed to be the edge of the observable universe.

Once the boy's able to figure out the mystery in that dish, it becomes great fun for him. He still has a few thousand years (which to his time scale takes about fifteen minutes) before his father arrives home. So, he must hurry up. Instead of rotating the lens for a wider view, he chooses to zoom in and focus all his attention on one particular bright blue dot that captures his attention.

He starts to expand the image of that blue dot. To his amazement, it now looks like a round shaped blue sphere surrounded by other similar spheres of different sizes and colours floating in a dark void. He excitedly increases the lens power to enlarge the image of that blue sphere for more details.

With the closer look, he finds that it is a self-rotating

sphere with white swirls around its edges. Some parts on the sphere are brown, some green and yellow, whereas the poles are white.

However, most parts on the sphere are brilliant blue. It all makes the sphere so strikingly beautiful. How odd. This blue ball looks like a twin to the home planet where the boy lives. His father must use their home planet as a model to create his mock-up nano-world to float in the nano universe in this petri dish.

The terrain of this world appears closer as he zooms in for a close-up—the immense bodies of water surrounding plains, plateaus, deserts and mountains, all no different from his home planet's landscape.

He is surprised it is not an empty planet. This nano-world is teeming with life. His father must have created those lives to inhabit this world. But to his eyes, they look like colonies of ants scattering to all the different parts of that planet. So, he zooms in until he's able to see how they look as an individual.

This even surprises him more. Who could believe they are in human form, just like himself but with a few exceptions. He finds that they're staying in groups according to the colours on their bodies that vary from white to yellow to brown. All of them have only one head and only one pair of arms and legs, making them look incomplete and incompetent if human. With only a single head to think and limited organs to live with, the boy wonders how well these creatures can survive.

Now, the microscope reaches its maximum capacity. He can't zoom in any more than he already has. However, at this distant range, it's good enough for him to watch these terrestrials of this nanoscopic planet.

But he starts to feel something is wrong with these creatures.

As he observes them, he sees chaos happening at every place these creatures inhabit. He can't believe they are trying to wipe out one another from the face of this planet. They live on the same planet, but they are apparently far from being at peace with one another.

In the panorama picture, the white creature group are killing the dark brown creatures and in turn being annihilated by the group they are intending to terminate in equal acts of violence, whereas the yellow ones are attempting by every means to take over the whole planet. The boy sees wars erupting everywhere. And if this killing on such a large scale goes on, all these creatures his father has created must fall to complete extinction. It's so bad that these mass calamities aren't caused by an outside force, but by whoever is living on this planet.

That beautiful blue planet will absolutely be on the brink of obliteration if he just looks on and doesn't help. But he has enough sense to know if his hand goes down into that petri dish, it will *zap* that entire universe instantly, not to mention the tiny blue dot he means to help.

He must tell his father right away, the only one

who's able to put a stop to this impending catastrophe.

As he is about to phone his father to rush home and save the planet from its savaged inhabitants, he glimpses at the projector screen one more time, only to gasp at what he is witnessing.

The most massive fireball begins to suddenly erupt, creating an incredible mushroom cloud and columns of smoke that begins to spread out over the entire blue planet, shrouding everything under a dense white mass. In the blink of an eye, he finds this blue planet has come to a state of vaporisation.

And the last image he witnesses is a void where the planet once was.

Before the boy cries out in panic, he feels his father's arms pulling him out of the lab.

His father quickly locks the lab's door and brings his son into the kitchen where they sit down for a serious conversation.

"Stay away from that microscope, young man," his father tells him in his stern voice. "It's not children's stuff or a playground. It's way, way more dangerous."

"Father, it's too late now," he cries out in alarm. "The blue planet just exploded. It was destroyed by the savage creatures living on it. In killing one another, don't they know they destroy themselves as well? At the end, none of them remain alive. I don't understand why they did such an insane thing; for what?"

"I knew this would happen. But I didn't think it

would come so soon,” his father sadly says. “Yes, we knew from the beginning, something would go wrong in our project.”

“Can’t you fix it, Dad?” the boy asks, puzzled. “You invented those things in that petri dish. So, you must know how to make it right.”

“We’ve tried to fix it for so many, many millions of years. But we always fail. And this time it seems to be the worst. You’ve just seen the entire planet blasted away, haven’t you?”

“Why did the planet explode, Dad? Was it those ant-like creatures?” the boy asks incredulously.

“With an atomic nuclear bomb they know how to make. It creates super heat as hot as the core of the sun, and then comes a blast wave that shatters the planet into pieces.”

The boy gasps at his father’s answer. He has learned in his class about the inconceivable force of nuclear power, the god-like power that can give birth to the whole universe as much as destroy it in one instant.

“Please Dad, let me know the whole thing. I can’t wipe that apocalyptic image out of my mind if I don’t know what has happened.”

“Alright, kid. I hope, at least, you can learn something from this.”

“After a ground-breaking success in creating a universe in a petri dish, we thought it would be barren and meaningless without adding some life...”

“But why do you create it in a petri dish?” the boy interrupts. “And keep looking through a microscope all the time?”

“This is just our experiment. We can’t keep unknown things in close range. So, for safety, we have to keep it at the farthest distance. That’s why it has to be on a nano scale. If some mistake happens, it won’t impact our world.”

And his father continues with a steadier voice.

“The primordial specimens in our first try didn’t last long. The problem was we didn’t input a life-stimulation system into their head. They completely lacked the impulse to stay alive. Imagine you neither want to sustain your life, even eat or fight in self-defence. To be alive or dead means nothing to you. That’s why those first set of creatures existed for only one instant before we found them all extinct.”

“Oh, I’ve never imagined that...” the boy cries.

“Then, we tried again. This time, we input an impulse into our new set of specimens that could stimulate their desire to live,” says his father with a heavy sigh.

“But you don’t sound happy, Dad.”

“Yes, this time we were successful—very successful. In fact, we were *too* successful,” his

father says, shaking all his heads in regret. “We then realised that we thoughtlessly stimulated that desire to excess. Their greed for life and fear for death grew so extreme, they became out of hand. That fear pushed them to harm and kill mainly to ensure they would have the most secure lives at the cost of the others’ losses.”

“They’re just like toys I play with.”

“Don’t forget they are only specimens in my lab. However, I mean good for them.”

“You must have some way to curb their behaviour...”
the boy mumbles.

“Well, we’ve tried,” his father says weakly. “When we knew merely fear and greed took control of their mind, we tried to add another head to them and input reason and logic into the new head to set a good balance, hoping reason would create a harmony among them.”

“But...how come I still found them one headed, Dad?”

“Our technology today isn’t yet advanced enough. No matter how we have tried, their extra head never appears. Instead, what grows is some sort of deadly cancerous disease. It’s our failure.”

“So...”

“To curb their out-of-control fear, I tried one more alternative and hoped this time it would work. I took the chance to reveal myself as their creator who always watches over them if any dangers appear to calm and comfort them. But, the differences in our dimensions, time and space became the greatest obstacle for us to communicate. Somehow, while I began to interconnect with them, the communication apparatus failed due to some technical problem. As a result, those creatures only acknowledged that their creator existed somewhere up here. But they knew nothing more.”

“So, you can’t save them...”

“No, this became the worst...the worst mistake I’ve ever made. Why? It triggered the never-ending wars

and annihilations. All the groups of those creatures had so little idea about me. That blindness plus greed and fear stirred each group to fight fiercely to claim me as their own God.

When his father finishes, the boy has never seen him so upset and hopeless.

“Isn’t it ironic? I am the cause of the last apocalyptic war that wiped out all of them from existence.”

That Thing

What I remember earlier is the storm out of nowhere suddenly blew our team off the site where we were working. It then dropped me down here on a hard terrain where the surface is flat and slippery. I now have to plant my feet carefully for every move I make.

“To the crew. I’m lost; repeat, I’m lost. Please come rescue me. Can you trace where I am now by the scent I left? Over to you.”

I call my crew, but what I receive from them is crackling static before that hissing turns completely silent. Though all parts of my body are miraculously intact, one of the two antennas installed at the top of my head is broken from the impact of that strong wind.

Now, I am all alone in a barren, otherworld-like desert landscape that is stretching as far as my eyes can see. No way to contact anyone. Within the vicinity, everywhere is smooth and hard and dry and lifeless. I

begin to feel exhausted from trekking for some time on such a slippery terrain in the middle of nowhere that seems without an end.

Fight or Flight impulse kicks in as I'm suddenly aware that in the distance there is an enormous vertical object looming. Its height seems immeasurable; its body is obscuring half of my field of vision. As an expedition worker, when my eyesight doesn't work well, I have been trained to use my body senses to detect light, heat, humidity, scent and vibration for my survival.

If we stumble onto an alien place like this one and inevitably encounter a strange, unknown thing, to handle each circumstance, we must classify what we are facing as either living or non-living. I don't detect any motion from it. Therefore, that thing is not a threat. And therefore, it should be safe to go on exploring this place. I hope I am going to find water somewhere soon, before I exhaust all my energy.

Finally, I approach that towering thing. It must be a mountain with a very strange and unique shape. My senses detect humidity from high, high above. It means up there I will find water, the source of life.

I have been well trained for vertical climbing at high altitude. So, I safely make it to the top where it begins to spread out into another vast and flat terrain with unidentified objects of odd shapes and sizes scattered all over. Fortunately, I detect no movement and heat from any of them. Therefore, they are classified as non-living.

As I venture past, I feel as if the vast space around me is shrinking me into a mere speck. To avoid a drop

and fall into one of those hazardous, huge things, I wander around in circles while looking for water, which becomes more urgent to revive my failing strength. But no sooner do I stop and start to rest than I suddenly sense a strong tremor beneath my feet and all around.

I turn my head on high alert and find the source of that vibration coming from a super, colossal entity appearing out of nowhere. Now, it is looming over me and immediately obscures almost everything in my visibility.

That thing is different from the rest I found earlier. That thing is *moving*; an alarm goes off as I believe I am now encountering *a living entity*.

But the worst has yet to come because it is a living thing whose size exceeds a mountain top and whose height is soaring to infinity.

My impulse is sending a loud scream to me: Danger! Flee for your life!

But the fear freezes me from moving. All I can do is watch as the entire horizon appears to lower from where I am standing. Then, I realise I have mistaken that colossus for the horizon. Indeed, it is that living thing that has created the tremors stirring under my feet.

It must see me now because it starts moving one of a pair of enormous tentacles towards me. Suddenly, I find myself being lifted off the ground by a cluster of hooks that protrude from that tentacle. It carries me up, up, up in the midair.

Then, suddenly, it drops me to land on an enormous paw.

Its face next appears right above me in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. But because of the monster face's immensity, it is impossible for a small creature like me to capture a full view of its entire face which lies beyond my peripheral vision. So, the most I can see is a fraction of its face, a small facial part on which two gigantic eyeballs are glaring at me.

I try to run from that paw but find no way to do it. Just one clench of that paw and my body would be squished into pulp in an instant.

I brace myself, hanging in there until I find it beginning to lower its tentacle and finally let me slide down onto the same spot where it lifted me up. The squeeze of that mighty paw not only caused another of my antennae to break, but also bruised one side of my body, making me wrench with pain.

Even though it has let me go, I know this alien monster is still stalking every step I make. Although it can kill me on a whim and in just an instant, it seems to be waiting for the best moment. That monster seems to be having fun playing a predator chasing its puny prey. I can see my body being tossed off the ground like a speck of dust by a single blow from its mouth.

Finally, I can sense water not far from here. But it is down below. I have to risk climbing down a deep canyon to get some water before I die from dehydration.

I start to climb down, down the steep wall of the canyon, aware that that thing is still stalking me.

The bottom of the canyon has high walls all surrounding it. I come across large, round boulders scattered all over the canyon floor. Those boulders are

hollow and filled with water. Some tilt and the water inside leaks down in rivulets to the ground and disappears into a dark and huge sinkhole. They must serve as reservoirs where water has been collected. And the only access to the water is to climb the wet and slippery boulder to the top.

Climbing up and down nonstop since I became lost in this place has weakened me to the core. But I have to put my last ounce of strength into climbing up to reach the water.

That tentacle tries to pounce on me again while I am climbing up one of the boulders. But this time, I am at an advantage because I can hide behind the curbs between the boulders whereas there's no way for any mammoth size to penetrate the tiny space and pull me out.

I finally made it to the boulder's edge. But while dodging the tentacle that never stops its attempts to snap me, I suddenly slip, losing my balance and falling headlong into the deep water.

As I plunge under the water, somehow, I begin to float up to the surface. But what I've seen now terrifies me to the core. That monster is frenziedly churning the water into a whirlpool using a cluster of hooks from its tentacle, causing my body to be tossed and spun in the fierce whirlpool it has created.

Before being drawn and sucked into that vortex and drowned, that thing is snatching me out of the water. And with my last faint awareness, I feel my whole body is being squeezed by the deadly force of those hooks.

What a boring afternoon. The storm has stopped me from playing outdoors.

While I'm looking around, hoping to find some fun in the kitchen, my gaze falls on a moving speck on the ceramic white floor.

After I squint down and focus my eyes on that moving speck, it turns out to be a lone ant.

It is now crawling all the way up the kitchen floor onto the white marble countertop where I am sitting by myself. What an amazing creature! That must be like climbing the sheer face of a mountain cliff for us humans.

I begin to wonder why a single ant is straying up here. I always see a whole colony of them marching along the ground in an endless line like soldiers on the warpath. And since I just studied *Formicidae* – a scientific name for ants – in my class, I turn all my attention to that little creature now apparently roaming aimlessly on the centre of this messy countertop. It would be great fun to examine a live ant - eye to eye - and use that for my school project.

It's nearly impossible to see ants with naked eyes because it's just literally a dot. So, an idea comes to mind. I take Mom's magnifying glass from her desk then start trailing behind that tiny creature, watching it crawl to and fro along the length of this countertop. (Of course, all ants seen outside their nests are barren female ants whose job it is to forage for food and guard their queen.) For a closer look, I picked up that critter from the countertop using the tips of two fingers and very carefully put her on my palm while peering

curiously at her body through the magnifying glass in my hand.

Under 3x magnification, I'm pretty sure this little critter must be a fire ant. She has a glossy reddish body rather than black or brown. Oh, no, I will never forget how painful a sting of a red ant can be. I'd felt that fiery pain when I poked a stick into their nest under the sidewalk and the whole army of red ants rushed out, stinging my hand until I howled with pain and ran off. But this particular one looks so defenceless. Looking through the glass, she has only one antenna left on her head. The other antennae is missing. That's why while she is lost, she can't communicate with her clan and send signals to them for help.

Nestling on my palm, that poor ant starts to panic and scurry all over it. I am afraid she will fall out of my hand and get injured. So, I carefully put her back on the countertop and watch her crawl away from me. Yet, she seems so tired and exhausted she can't move in a straight line. Sometimes she moves in circles and other times staggers left and right as if looking in desperation for something she really needs.

I have no idea what mission she is on and what destination she is heading to. But one thing is for sure; she is lost and left alone in this wide world. No one in her clan knows where she is. I've become the only one to know. The forlorn feeling for this little thing suddenly urges me to help make her journey home safe and sound. But it's still raining outside. I have to wait until the rain stops before bringing her outdoors so she can find her way home.

Meanwhile, my eyes keep following that ant like a faithful guard. I see her wander on and on until she comes to a stop at the kitchen sink. Then she starts to act strangely like she's discovered something is wrong. So, I hold the magnifying glass over her to enlarge her tiny body and find another antenna gone from her head. Oh, no, that critter is now as good as a blind. This means she has lost her ability to make sense of the world around her.

When I first found her, only one antenna was missing. Did the other break off when I put her on my palm for a close look? Poor thing. I need to handle this living, microscopic thing with extreme care.

When I peer down again, the ant has disappeared from my sight. My eyes scan the entire countertop, but I can't find any trace. I move a stack of placemats and a few more things and check under them with no avail. At last, I bend down and peek in the sink. With some relief, I find that little dot is meandering down along the bottom. She is scrambling her way among a heap of dirty soup cups and coffee mugs scattered inside - all waiting to be cleaned.

Of course, this critter never realises that she is in real danger. All the cups and mugs are filled with water dripping from the faucet. No way to alert her that those cups can topple and tumble down and spill water that can drown her. Had she been able to understand my goodwill, she wouldn't have been frightened of me and would have let me lead her to safety.

But, I started to realise that saving a life no bigger than a dot needs not only extreme caution, but also

much patience. To an ant, I must be humongous beyond her awareness of my coexistence with her in this world. Or, in the worst case, even though she's aware of my presence, she would take me for a monster whose towering height means a life threat.

And yet, this poor critter's life is now at stake; saving her must be my first concern over everything else. Carrying her back to the safe countertop seems the best idea to get her out of both immediate and ambient dangers. But as I was afraid, she sees me as a predator. Instead of yielding to my help, she fiercely resists it. She begins to dodge my fingers. In a flash, she disappears between the mugs; no way for me to squeeze my fingers into that tight space to bring her out without tilting those mugs and spilling some water over her.

A minute later, I catch sight of her slowly emerging on the rim of one of the cups. This is the right moment to catch her. But I'm too late. The little critter has become aware of my hand

coming to grab her and take flight.

In haste, she loses her footing and falls, tumbling down into that half full cup.

Thank heavens, I find her tiny weightless body afloat in water like a shipwrecked man floating in the middle of the ocean. Yet she may drown shortly if I just leave her there. Not only is that cup too slippery for her to climb out, but she also lost most of her vigour roaming back and forth to find her way home.

With all my strength, I frantically grope inside of that cup until I find a little dot bobbing on water. I hastily picked her up with the tips of my thumb

and forefinger. *I got you now, little one*, I announce out loud with pride. I've never felt so exuberant for committing such a great thing. I saved a life. Yes, I did.

Before placing the ant that I've rescued on a soft and dry napkin, I take a look at her one more time. But what I see is sending me into shock. I find that fragile body is being crushed into pulp by an incautious squeeze of my own fingers.

It's not fair. It's not fair for me at all.

I made that ant die after all my efforts to save her. I want to cry, but I am too old to cry.

After my initial shock, I rush to Grandpa since he can simplify everything that's too complicated to understand.

"Fair or not fair, I can't say," my grandpa replies with a smile that always makes me feel better. "Life is full of surprises. And worse, more than half are bad as you have just learned. Now come with me. I'd like to show you something."

Then he walks to the window and points up above our heads. It looks like he has seen something.

"What are you gazing at, Grandpa?" I wonder.

"I'm looking at what I can't see and will never see," he answers.

"What?"

"Don't you think a hand wants to lift you out of your bad time? But maybe the presence of that thing is so obscure it is unintelligible to us. That's why we always turn from what we need the most."

"What?" I repeat.

“Why, we are ants in the eyes of the Universe
above” he then says softly to me.

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