



Veena Prasad is a crossword maker, an aspiring writer and a voracious reader. A computer engineer by training, she has since dabbled in finance and teaching before embracing writing, her true calling.

VEENA PRASAD'S
story captures the
desperation of a
jobless man.
It impressed the
judges with its
surprise ending and
original theme.

“What’s the difference between the hunter and the hunted?” The pretty lady in the desk opposite him looked up blankly and reached for her notebook.

“No, no, you don’t have to write it down... I just made up a joke,” He explained irritably. She put the notepad down and examined her bright red fingernails. He sighed. “One masters his prey; the other prays to his master,” he finished lamely. Abruptly, he assumed his brisk manner. “Get to work then,” he snapped. “Has he picked up the clue yet?”

His secretary checked her monitor screens. One was receiving a CCTV feed from the Fourth Dimension, a new mall in town. The other showed a map of the city. There was a blinking red dot on the bottom right corner of the map.

“He is in the mall but that suggests nothing. We have to wait till he leaves the place,” she patiently mouthed what he already knew. “Of all the eccentric fools...” she thought contemptuously, but was careful to keep her face impassive.

The man started drumming his fingers on the table. He got up and walked over to the window of his 12th floor hotel room. It overlooked the racecourse. He was not looking at the horses on the green, or the magnificently laid racetrack, although at one point in the past he had looked at little else. “How long? How long?” he muttered, nervously running his fingers down the blinds.

Halfway across the city, a young man of dishevelled appearance was walking purposefully across the main lobby of the mall. The glitzy designer shops all around failed to catch his eye. He was intent only on one thing, now that he had figured it out. It was all he could do to stop from running towards the bookstore. At the door he hesitated for just a moment before walking over to the café side of the bookstore.

“Has he picked up the clue?” The pretty lady stopped filing her nails and checked the CCTV feed. “He has zeroed in on target,” she reported, “but has not picked it up.”

The man came over to her desk. The camera feed showed an oblique view of a man seated at a table sipping a latte. The man in the black suit was disappointed. “Has he misunderstood? How could he... after getting this far?” He turned away from the monitor screen, frowning. “He’s walking,” called out his secretary. The hazy feed on the screen showed the young man walking towards the bookshelves. He unhesitatingly picked up *The Time Machine*.

The man in the black suit heaved a sigh of relief and smiled wolfishly as the red dot on the map began to move. He reached for his phone and dialled. “I know,” said the voice on the other end with the air of a man who had just become poorer by 80,000 rupees.

The young man had found an envelope in the book, just as he had expected. But what surprised him was the lightness of the contents. He fought away a feeling of disappointment. He didn’t open it right

Headhunted



away, but instead boarded a bus and headed home. He needed some privacy, given the nature of the contents, or what he thought they would be. Again he felt the envelope — so thin! Maybe there was a cheque?

There wasn’t. What fell out of the envelope was a note. A message typed on expensive stationery on the corner of which was taped a tiny electronic tracking device. He ignored the device and looked at the writing. No cash, no cheque, no gold, just another verse. And a badly formed one at that.

*Back to square one, where all was lost,
An eagle watches from above
Twelve flights to climb, five doors to cross,*

Turn left, and knock on wood. He was too tired to think. He extracted six verses from various pockets and laid them out on the bed, all on the same kind of stationery, with small trackers on the corner. “What an idiot to go chasing ridiculous rhymes,” he cursed himself. His entire world had been yanked out from under his feet that morning. His bank balance was wiped out, he had no job, and his life was a mess. Instead of trying to get it back on track, he had spent the day chasing a rainbow...

The events of that morning played out before his eyes. It had been a gloriously sunny day, the kind of day when fortunes are made. The racecourse was buzzing with activity, the mood was upbeat and it was catching. The 10.30 race had just begun. Perfumed Talc was a certainty — the statistics, those expert assurances, newspaper articles, his own research...all pointed to one thing — the beautiful black stallion was the foregone winner. He finished third from last.

The young man’s entire life’s savings was on Perfumed Talc and it had bitten the dust. That was that. He walked around dazed and blinded, uncomprehending, unbelieving, hoping that if he just carried on like that he would wake up from this terrible dream.

Someone pinched his arm. “How would you like to make a lot of money quick?”

A seedy man in dirty clothes was making this suggestion. Zombie-like, he found himself accepting an envelope from the stranger. “Open it. Read the message. Just do what it says.”

He read the note vacantly.
Will you chase a rainbow to find the pot of gold?

*Start with violet,
Turn to brown-
A beverage in which
Your sorrows to drown*

He looked up, but the man was gone. “Nonsense.” He crumpled up the paper but did not throw it away. Almost of its own volition it found its way into his pocket.

He was not sure how long he walked, or where he was going. Turning heavenward, he thought in despair, “Have I really lost everything?” The streets were spinning around him, neon signs dissolving into each other. He looked around wildly, trying

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WAS WIPED OUT, HE
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INSTEAD OF TRYING
TO GET IT BACK ON
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CHASING A
RAINBOW...”



to get a grip on himself when suddenly he stood transfixed. He was staring at a glowing shop front that said, “African Violet”.

Start with violet...he walked into the coffee house. Still in a daze, he found himself with coffee in hand. Turn to brown. This was unreal. He sat down and searched his pockets for the piece of paper. He hoped he hadn’t thrown it away. There it was, crumpled but readable. Now what? He read the verse again but didn’t learn anything. He turned the paper over, saw it upside down and held it to the light. That was when he noticed a small electronic tracking device stuck to a corner of the sheet. Someone is playing with me, he thought. He shrugged. No harm in playing along. It was as if he had suddenly been yanked out of despair. He had something to do now. A purpose. He looked at the note again. Clearly it was a clue to a location. Now that he had reached the location, there must be another clue here. A treasure hunt? He finished his coffee and looked around. Where might the next clue be?

A waiter materialised beside him. “Would you like anything else?”

“Umm... no...”

He reappeared a few moments later with a folder containing the bill.

The man opened the folder and a note fell out. His heart skipped a beat as he picked it up; he recognised the expensive stationery.

*Hidden within the cosmos great
Lies the key to your fate;
You must know where to look-
Every cranny, every nook*

This was not going to be easy. The riddle was asking him to search the cosmos for... a key?! The key to your fate. What did it mean — search the cosmos? Who could do that? Every cranny, every nook. Every nook. Nook! The Nook! He jumped out of his seat and raced out of the coffeehouse. On a monitor screen in a hotel room overlooking the racecourse, a red dot began to move. The man in the black suit sat back with satisfaction. His phone rang. His friend on the other end said, “Well, looks like you won the first round,” and wired 80,000 rupees across. The wager was for a nice round sum of one lakh rupees, but the players had agreed to offset 20,000 towards incidental expenses, such as paying off waiters and loiterers in racecourses. The estimate was a generous one because between them, the two friends owned half the malls in the city anyway.

The young man didn’t stop running until he was outside The Nook, a bookstore in a mall in the heart of the city. Hidden within the cosmos great. He made towards the ‘Popular Science section’ and pulled out *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan. He had first read it as a 14-year-old and it had changed his life. Was it going to, once again? He was hardly surprised when, as he flipped the pages, an envelope fell out.

That bizarre day was spent hopping from cafés to malls to bookstores, gulping caffeine, solving clues he knew not who left him, nor where they would lead. He was in a frenzied state, getting sucked into a vortex almost as if his will had deserted

him. He had solved six riddles so far, and the sun was setting when he came out of the bookstore with *The Time Machine* in hand. That riddle had taken him a long time to solve.

*Cogs, levers, springs and knobs
Make up a clever contraption
It serves you well, saves you time
Through the Fourth Dimension*

The location was easy enough — the Fourth Dimension was a mall. But the rest of the verse made no sense. No book that he recognised, nor a shop in the mall whose name he could trace back to the verse. He had walked past every store in the mall, reading the signs, trying to get a clue. Cogs, levers, springs and knobs. Any

of these could be the name of a boutique, but not one in the mall fit. His legs ached, and he was hungry but he desperately wanted to finish this game as if his life depended on it. Saves you time. Ha! He had spent the most time on this one riddle. Then it struck him — time is the Fourth dimension, and contraption is the machine. He was left in no doubt when he noticed the author’s name woven into the third line of the verse. The only bookstore in the mall was at the café, and he had made straight for it.

On the bus back home, he told himself this would be the last. No more chasing rainbows. He felt the thin envelope. He had not expected an actual pot of gold, but a wad of cash would have been nice. Would it, really? Was this all about money? Or was it simply an escape? A way of delaying the unpleasant task of picking up the pieces of his ruined fortune and figuring out what to do with his life. He got off the bus clutching the envelope, along with six others in various pockets, and walked wearily into his tiny one room apartment.

He looked at the clue.
*Back to square one, where all was lost,
An eagle watches from above
Twelve flights to climb, five doors to cross,*

Turn left, knock on wood. Where all was lost. Where else but the racecourse? The memory of the race brought him crashing back to reality. He had been on an artificial high and the slide down made him sick. The right thing to do now would be to throw that paper away and go look for a job. Who but a sadist would make up silly verses that sent a fool racing all over the city in quest of he knew not what. He had always had his head in the clouds. A regular job was not for him. But this — this was just mad. A flight of fancy. An eagle watches from above. He cursed. He could not get the verse out of his head. Wait a minute. Eagle’s Lair. That was the high rise hotel building opposite the racecourse! Where all was lost...

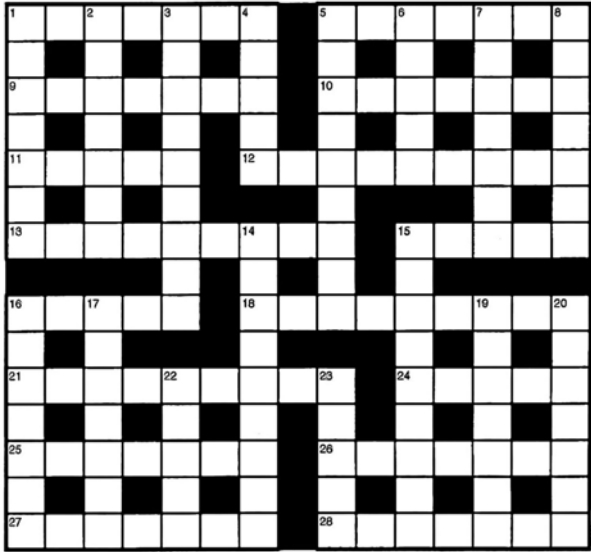
Up in room 1205, the man in the black suit let out a whoop as the red dot on the screen moved closer. “He is in the hotel,” his secretary announced. “Tell him to wait,” he instructed and moved into the inner room that served as his office. His friend had made himself comfortable on a sofa by the desk.

“I am gracious in defeat,” he smiled, “although I never dreamt you would win this insane bet. Beats betting on horses any day!”

The man in the black suit was beaming; he felt like a child with a trophy. And why not? He had lost this type of wager four times in a row to his friend who was equally insane, but slightly richer owing to the winning streak. “Trust you to mix business with pleasure,” continued his friend. “Offering a job as the pot of gold! I’d like to see this man’s face!”

“Resourceful, well-read and an ability to follow instructions. What more could I want in a secretary?” he said as the pretty lady walked in to announce a visitor. “Besides,” he remarked, “she never did get my jokes.”

CROSSWORD 1970



Across

- 1 Inconvenience (7)
- 5 Currently in progress (7)
- 9 Surpass in stamina (7)
- 10 Coagulate (7)
- 11 Gruesome fiend (5)
- 12 Accordingly (9)
- 13 Seek shelter from attack (4,5)
- 15 Quick-tempered (5)
- 16 Eccentric (5)
- 18 Baltic country (9)
- 21 Produce results (4,5)
- 24 Amount in number to (5)
- 25 Take prisoner (7)
- 26 High ecclesiastical dignitary (7)
- 27 Tasteful (7)
- 28 Nonconformity (7)

Down

- 1 Consideration (7)
- 2 Mental point of view (7)
- 3 Slogan (6,3)
- 4 Country of northeast Africa (5)

Solution to crossword 1969



- 5 In succession (2,3,4)
- 6 Semblance (5)
- 7 Tedious (7)
- 8 Science of artillery (7)
- 14 Round puff pastry case (3-2-4)
- 15 Impeccable (9)
- 16 Fiasco (7)
- 17 Trudge wearily (7)
- 19 A fertiliser (7)
- 20 Minor illness (7)
- 22 Region’s animal life (5)
- 23 Unenthusiastic (5)