

Rajiv's Fire Drill

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Rajiv Witherspoon-Li was preoccupied one evening with abducting domestic cats and dogs for the less scrupulous pharmaceutical labs, so at first he did not realize someone was trying to kill him.

"Pss, pss, pss, pss." He twiddled his outstretched fingers invitingly. The overstuffed Persian watched him from the unlit backyard, and didn't approach. "Hello, puss, puss. Puss-y! Want to say hello?" Rajiv tried to look dumb and innocent and harmless, which was how he usually evaded trouble, but the cat evidently wasn't buying it. "Maauw?" Rajiv said in falsetto. That didn't work either.

Rajiv was squatting, rather than kneeling, and now he lost his balance; his ass smacked the broken alley pavement and he went "Oof." At that moment something went V-W-W-I-I-P past his forehead, right through the space his head had occupied. Rajiv flailed his hand around, trying to brush away what he thought was a mosquito. He didn't see or hear the hole that appeared in the fencepost beyond him. The Persian had vanished when he looked up again.

Rajiv sighed, got up and dusted off his jeans. Tonight was obviously a bust. He wasn't going to have any experimental subjects to call in on his cell, not from this borough anyway; the most gullible and vulnerable pets must have been hunted out here already.

Turning, Rajiv spotted a gray, foreign-looking vehicle moving out of a cross-street into the alley. He froze for a second, then relaxed. City people usually ignored each other, and if someone actually inquired what he was doing, he could say quite truthfully he was on his way home. If they asked about his overtures to the cat, he could even say he was trying to make friends, which was even true.

Rajiv shrugged and turned to go.

It was three or four blocks later, standing at a darkening bus stop, that Rajiv saw the unfamiliar vehicle's outline again. For a paranoid second he wondered if a plainclothes outfit was tailing him; then he shrugged it off.

When he saw the same gray vehicle a third time, after getting off his bus, Rajiv was certain.

Without a change in step or a turn of his head, Rajiv marched past his street and back to the nearest commercial zone. It had more than a mini-mall and convenience stores; it actually had a supermarket, bookstore, cafés and a single-feature movie house, unusual in a suburban neighbourhood, and therefore a high-traffic area. Rajiv walked into a café as if it were his original destination. He spent a half-hour there pretending to read his textbooks, then went to the movie house and bought a ticket he couldn't afford. Halfway through the movie slipped out, intending to zigzag home.

They caught him in the first alley he entered.

Rajiv never knew why he ducked. Something spanged off the bricks above him, and fragments stung his neck. He sped behind a dumpster and tried to spot the shooter. No movement; no sound.

He counted to fifteen, then tried to dash for the man-high recycling bins. V-W-W-I-I-P – no luck.

Rajiv thought fast, harder than he had ever done. Then he called “I'm coming out! I surrender!” and inched up slowly, putting his hands up first. No shots yet ... nothing yet ...

V-W-W-I-I-P – and he was crouched behind the dumpster again. He didn't even remember getting there.

“Stop that!” he yelled. “I'm unarmed!”

“Sure you're unharmed,” an accented voice called, “if we got you you couldn't talk!”

“I'm NOT ARMED, I said! Who are you, anyway, and why are you shooting at me?!”

“Never you mind, just come out of hiding!” a harder voice commanded.

Dark as it was, Rajiv thought he could spot the shooter now, on a fire escape ... and then he spotted two more man-high figures, one standing in shadows at each end of the alley.

So this was it. Rajiv felt more pissed off than anything, because this end was *pointless*. That faintly surprised him.

He stood up and stepped out, not bothering to raise his arms until the nearest figure stepped up to pat him down. Rajiv saw a husky figure dressed in drab black clothes, wearing black gloves and a balaclava; his partners looked just the same. The big man pulled out Rajiv's wallet, pulled his knapsack off his

shoulder, then stepped back to examine the contents with a penlight. The shooter approached. Rajiv didn't recognize the weapon, any more than he had recognized the make of vehicle.

"Tempus fugit, guys," the remaining team member called.

"Yeah, yeah ... it's him ... funny! Don't see the notes for his paper here." The penlight turned and glared in Rajiv's face. "What are you studying?" the hard-voiced man demanded.

What was he *studying*? Rajiv knew this kind of heat couldn't be motivated by his catnapping; so what *did* ...? "Uh ... sociology, mainly, since I quit Fine Arts. Some make-up courses in hard sciences ..."

"Found'em," the hard-voiced man said. "Applied logic, and a psychology elective. But none of his theory yet; we're just in time."

"In time for *what*?" Rajiv was bewildered. He was almost ready to be killed, but not ready for this craziness.

The hard-voiced man silently produced a plastic bag containing a switchblade. As he opened it, the shooter said conversationally, "To stop you from inventing –" and the third man growled, "Shut up!"

Rajiv felt flooded with relief. He said, "Oh, you mean that crank theory about sociology? I burned the manuscript."

There was silence for a time in the alley.

The hard-voiced man said furiously, "Jesus, I *told* you to transpose us –" and the third said "Shh!"

"It doesn't matter," Rajiv said. Ridiculous as the situation was, he knew where he stood. "You thought I was going to originate the first rigorous theory of human behaviour, did you? You thought I would explain, and predict, and even control behaviour, from mass actions right down to individuals, at least within limits of tolerance? Hell, lots of people have had the idea, but almost everybody discounts it ... and I sure as hell can't get it together."

The hard-voiced man said, "Oh yeah? Then what about your courses?"

"That was my brother Ari's idea," said Rajiv. "I had to make up my course deficiencies somehow."

The shooter had lowered his weapon at this point. He said doubtfully, “Hang on. You said *lots* of people had this idea ...?”

“Sure,” said Rajiv. “Look it up in any science fiction section.”

There was a somewhat longer pause.

“Science fiction section’,” the hard-voiced man growled. He cradled his face in one hand. “I wondered if we were at the wrong address.”

“*Time*, guys!” the third man said insistently.

“Are you worried about the cops?” Rajiv said brightly. “I think you’ve got a good half-hour’s wait. We haven’t made much disturbance, and even if anyone *has* noticed us, this is a quiet, relatively upscale neighbourhood. The cops in this city take a while to believe that shootings or knifings happen here.”

The third balaclava-face asked, “And you know this because ...?”

“I’ve been working with the police for a year now,” Rajiv said simply. “I’m infiltrating a catnapping and dognapping ring, posing as a dirt-poor student trying to work his way through college. I joined the force just to work as a clerk-typist, but because I *am* a dirt-poor student working his way through college, I got reassigned. While I was still at the precinct, though, I overheard a lot from their dispatch centre.”

The three men groaned with disgust and turned to their vehicle. The one with the weapon and the one with the switchblade practically threw them into the back. The third man silently handed back Rajiv’s possessions.

The third member of the team entered first, and put his head out again to announce, “Yeah, we’re off our coordinates. We’re at –“ and the hard-voiced man said “Shh!”

The man who had been designated shooter paused, and turned to Rajiv. “We can leave you alone,” he said, “partly because you burned your manuscript, and partly because you report that your theory is a science-fiction idea ... but mostly, because you’re working with the police.”

“My cognates don’t do that, eh?” Rajiv said interestedly.

The shooter froze.

“You found the name you expected on my ID,” Rajiv said. “and outside of the arts community, who’s going to have a name like mine? You found the course materials you expected in my pack. You were assigned to eliminate a threat,

though I hadn't done anything threatening ... yet. So I had to conclude, 'time travel'. And *still*, I wasn't the Rajiv you were sent for. So I have to conclude there is more than one timeline, and you aren't in quite the right one."

A police siren began to emerge from the urban background noise.

"I shouldn't pursue my crank theory again. You know where to find me," Rajiv added. "And I can't say anything about time travel either, for the same reason. Is there anything you *would* prefer that I do?"

The man in front of him relaxed, and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "You could have helped to create a slave society, and destroy all the chances and choices people could have. Or you could open up choices and opportunities." He nipped into the vehicle and closed the door before Rajiv could respond.

Both the vehicle and Rajiv were gone when the squad car arrived.