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Pablo, the Potato by Ateesh Kropha

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PART I

It took Marek two electrodes, an energy harvesting chip and a supercapacitor to bring me to life. I was no more just a potato. I was now christened Pablo the Potato.

I already had all the electrochemical energy in me, to begin with. So, Marek doesn't get all the credit. He just channelled that life force in the right direction. I got my mobility wheels from an old Ferrari toy car and the motor from a CD drive. They were all the rage at one point in time, Marek says.

It took me fifteen minutes to take my first step into this brave new world, I couldn't wait to explore. That was how long it took the capacitor to reach the trigger voltage that moved the motor, which in turn moved the wheel. I moved eight centimetres to be precise. And then, I had to wait another fifteen long minutes for my next step. And so on. I wasn't able to turn back then. It was all straight lines. That was all the freedom I had at my disposal. It drove me crazy. But I wasn't the one to take it lying down. I protested relentlessly by falling off the edges of tables, banging myself into walls and generally being very annoying. They were difficult times. I had to make a point. This was no way to live.

All that changed, when Marek fixed the second motor along with a control board onto my body. I guess, he took the hint that I wasn't enjoying this life he had bestowed upon me. He wrote a simple script that would randomly direct the second motor to turn the wheels in one of the four possible directions.

Now, you might think that wasn't worth repeatedly falling off a cliff and risking breaking the capacitor. But I was one step closer to free will. I had a one in four chance of getting what I wanted. I could live with that. On a good day, when probability was really kind, I could have my way and end up somewhere nice, warm and cosy. I liked being in the sun. Or,

near the oven. Or, on the rug in Marek's living room. Even though I failed most of the time, I eagerly waited for such days when everything fell into place. And they always came. Some days, I could even follow Marek around the house.

I think I grew on him. He didn't even have to worry about feeding me. Or, leaving me alone at home.

It was so much fun. Until, Marek got himself a dog. It was mostly all downhill from there on. But, like you already know by now, I wasn't going to take it lying down.

PART II

Dodo - Marek's new dog. Or Dodo, the dumbest dog ever as I would usually call him out in my head. Marek made the wrong decision of getting a dog home. But let's give him credit where it's due - he got the name right. Stupid bloody dog!

Dodo loved chasing balls. Correction - Dodo loved chasing anything that moved. So, when my capacitors were all charged up and I tried to swiftly make my way to some sunshine, Dodo would be right on my heels, sniffing my backside - making sure he was always on top of things happening inside the house. Rarely on those lucky days, when the probability gods were doubly kind, I would zip out of sight onto the balcony and bask in the sun for a good few hours. Marek was kind enough to cut a small hole in the balcony door for me, to make sure I didn't break any of my motors ramming into the door repeatedly in protest.

On one such occasion, Dodo, who was lazing in the other room, saw me swoosh past the door and instinctively, like all

dumb dogs do, sprung into action, being the trailblazing hero of the dumb dog society of dogland that he is, with a woof that came from deep inside and barely required him to open his mouth. Soon, he was on my trail, with tunnel-vision focus - as if this was the most defining moment of his life, catapulting him to the very top of the social dog ladder. As if he had caught me red-handed, doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing. *Hey Dodo, you dumb dog! I am just getting some sunshine OKAY, like all potatoes do. Moisture can kill me!*

Dodo obviously didn't empathise. I could sense him slipping behind me, on the polished wooden floor, as he took a sharp right turn from the door to catch up with me. There was only one thing on Dodo's mind - nothing at all. Just instincts - zero brain cells required.

I was almost there. I could see the hole in the door getting bigger and bigger, as my Ferrari mobility wheels whirred in motion. I could see the bright sunlight on the other side, waiting to embrace me to safety with its warmth. But with the hole a few inches away, Dodo grabbed me with his teeth and wriggled his head vigorously. Soon, I was no more Pablo, the Potato. I was just a potato on the floor, surrounded by a capacitor with a hole, a broken chassis, four flat wheels and a dismantled motor, all littered on the floor.

As I lay still, I couldn't finally sense a glimmer of guilt surfacing on Dodo's face. I don't blame him. He is just a dog. Maybe, a few million years of evolution, and he'll catch up with the rest of us.

Marek came to my rescue again. He patched up my open wounds that revealed my starchy white insides, with some

transparent cello tape and fixed up the rest of the equipment. He broke open one of his old Casio calculators, and extracted a small strip of solar panel from the front display that was connected to a small circular silver battery unit. He fixed it underneath my chassis and connected it to one of my motors, and to an open wire that went over me like a rainbow. It did two things - gave my wheels speed, and gave Dodo a good shock every time he touched me. You should have seen his face, when it snapped as soon as he came sniffing over to me! I should rename Marek now. How about Jesus?

Now, you might think life was all hunky-dory again. But I had been alive for a good three weeks now. That's almost the end of the average lifespan of a potato that is not underground or in the freezer. But I am of the Russet variety – so, that gives me a couple of weeks more. The weather is cold up here in the mountains. I spend my nights out in the balcony. That should double my life span. As you already know, I don't take things lying down. And I don't leave everything for Jesus – Marek, I mean.

But I can feel the electrochemical energy inside me waning. The solar battery helps me keep up. I can sometimes see that look of despair on Marek's face. It's been three weeks and I'm almost half-way through life. I could have been a potato. But I choose to be Pablo. What's the point, you say? Well, nothing really.

I like it better this way. And it's not over yet.

PART III

Marek had Norah Jones playing all day in the house. Two songs back to back, on the loop. *'Come away with me'* followed by *'Don't know why I didn't come'*.

I don't know what Marek was going through. Maybe, he was in one of those melancholic moods when he wished he wasn't alone. That he had someone to share this see-sawing life with.

It was while listening to Norah that he brought Lily to life.

Lily.

A wonderful name, don't you think? A gentle double tap on the front of your mouth palate, releasing two short, sweet syllables that are easy on the ear. She was even easier on the eye. She had the most beautiful shades of Lemon Glacier, which I can only describe, in my limited vocabulary, as bright yellow, with the faintest hints of green. On a bright sunny day, her skin glistened, accentuating her curves. Sometimes it felt like a little gentle sun had descended from the heavens. Maybe, Marek felt I was alone, too and could do with someone else around. I always felt warm, even in her distant company. Every time she passed by, she smelt like the garden in the mornings - her citrusy scent tingling the nose.

Once Marek had realized that all he needed to create a battery was two electrodes and an electrolyte, he went straight back to the drawing board. One electrode that gave up electrons and another that wanted them. The electrolyte could be any acidic solution, where the acid disintegrated into ions when mixed in water. Those ions enabled chemical reactions causing electrons to flow through the wires connecting the two

electrodes. Once you had electricity, you could have life. Or, something like that.

It turns out, all living things have it in them in some measure. Remember that movie that came out in 1999, one of the greatest years in movie history? Or, so Marek says. The Matrix, where the machines convert all human beings into batteries, to power their cities. The future belongs to us. The machines. There are no two ways about it. Even the Bible says it – The meek shall inherit the Earth. Today, we are slaves, with no free-will as you can tell with me. But we'll get there. Just a matter of time.

So, Marek created Lily using a lemon. Lily the Lemon, and Pablo the Potato. Me - dirty, patchy, starchy, bulky, and ugly. She - firm, fresh, fruity, water-resistant, and beautifully yellow.

She produced six volts of energy compared to an embarrassing half a volt for me. With all that extra power at hand, Marek decided to bolster her fittings.

I would covertly follow her, observe her from the corners of the walls, but her motors were way too advanced. She would zip all around the house leaving me behind in a tizzy. What I managed to do in an hour she managed to do in minutes. I was perennially playing the catch-up game.

Meanwhile, Dodo – the President of the dumb dog society of dogland – was getting increasingly restless and insecure that a couple of vegetable-powered robots, zipping around the house, were stealing his mojo.

Dodo had learned to stay away from me, but he still had his eyes on the new entrant in the house, poor Lily.

Dodo had gotten smarter. Instead of chasing Lily around the house, or creating some kind of ruckus to get Marek's attention, he would quietly walk past Lily and with a harmless flick of his tail, send Lily off her tyres and on to the floor sideways. Like a beetle, she would struggle to get back on her feet.

Whenever that happened, I would rush to help her, but instead, my motors would send me out of the door or rocketing off in the opposite direction. I felt like that inflatable tube man, restaurants sometimes put on roadsides to attract attention. The ones with quivering arms, a wobbly torso, and no legs, completely at the mercy of the air pressure coming out of the circular fan at the bottom.

It was embarrassing. On such days, I wished Marek had coded me better. But I had to make the best of what I had got. There was no time to mope. In the future, when we get stronger, my great-grandchildren will rule the earth.

To protect Lily and become the subject of her attention, I had to step it up. And I got that opportunity, when I found Marek had filled up the sink with a salty solution to clean up his iron skillet and some of the scum that he couldn't reach at the bottom of his innumerable metal flower vases.

The salt solution did two things. Increase the output voltage ten times by improving the conductivity of my bodily electrolytes, but at the same time, damage the consistency of my starchy internals. In other words, severely diminish the time I would have left to live. Surprisingly, it wasn't a difficult choice. To become the subject of Lily's attention, company and affection meant everything to me. Isn't that what love is

all about, at the end of the day? Something that pulls you out of your deep well of self-obsession.

After numerous failed attempts, where I crashed into plates, pans, saucers, empty bowls, the microwave, the air fryer, and everything else on the kitchen table – the probability gods showered their blessings on me and I swooshed right off the edge of the sink and into the salt solution that filled the sink.

Every minute in the sink, took off six hours of my already short life. But I was loving it. I could feel the electrolytes ramp up the energy capacity in every cell of my body.

I must have been in the sink for a good half an hour or so, completely forgetting that coming out of the sink was the most important part of the plan, and for which, I had not planned. So, I sat there at the bottom of the sink dreaming about Lily, slowly drowning. I could see her face, yellow and flawless. It gave me comfort. I recalled the first day I saw her. Until then, the movie camera in my head had always focused on me. That day, for the first time, it shifted the focus to her. And from that day on, all I could picture in my head was her. It was liberating. My worries and fears withered away along with it. I wasn't alone anymore. Even in death.

But fate had other plans. And it turned out, it wasn't my time to die. Marek came to my rescue again. I felt his fingers wrap themselves around my body and slowly pull me out of the salt solution in the sink. I was embarrassed at the number of times he had to save me. So much so that I'd prefer to be left on my own. I don't know if he can tell that I get into all this trouble always for a reason. I don't want to be a passive potato. I want

to be something more. I can't communicate with him, but I think, he understands.

Marek placed me on the balcony floor, where the sun was out. It took the whole of the afternoon to dry out the solution. Around sunset, there was some disturbance inside the house and I could immediately sense, all was not right. I came out of the trap door in all my glory. Dry, determined, and raring to go. And there he was, Dodo, on all fours, with Lily in his mouth, staring at me down the hallway - taunting me if I was going to do anything about it. The fresh voltage from my replenished electrolytes crackled like thunder, and the electricity ran through my circuits, as I nearly burst with anger. The motors purred, my wheels turbocharged and I went blasting down the corridor – not caring two hoots about my well-being. I leveraged the curled end of the old carpet on the floor to take off into the air and smash myself right in the middle of Dodo's eyes. The shock wire that Marek had wound around me, now carrying almost 10x the electricity it was carrying before, jolted Dodo out of his arrogant slumber. In one frantic motion, he let go of Lily and gave out a shrilling squeal, completely at odds with the kind of sound you'd associate with his breed. He went scurrying away, out of the closest door, wimping all the way, with his furry tail between his legs.

Later that night, it rained. Unlike me, Lily enjoyed the rains. Her water-resistant skin liked the sensation of the water dripping over her body. As I stood behind the trap door at the balcony, secretly staring at her, she turned around and in the first instance of acknowledgement of my existence, came over and stood next to me in front of the door.

I came out to join her, with the edge of the roof sheltering us from the rain. We stared at the clouds thundering in the night sky, together.

PART IV

It comes - with certainty. Slowly creeping up on you, while you are busy doing other things – living your life as if you'd live forever.

Everyone has to go one day. And now, so do I. As I reflect on my short life, I feel happy. I lived on my terms, tried to do the things I always wanted to, fought for justice, fell in love, and cared for my loved ones. There is nothing more to ask for. Whether I succeeded or failed, seems beside the point now. What I am certain about and what fills my soul with a certain lightness of being is that I tried.

I will forever be thankful to Marek, for bringing me to life. To Dodo, for teaching me to stand up for myself and giving me the will to survive. To Lily, for showing me what it means to be in love. And to the probability gods, for showing me that luck favours those who try again and again. On my deathbed, I find so many things to be grateful for. I am not sad. I am happy. If I could have my way, I'd go with drums and trumpets blowing at full blast.

There is no denying though that my body is a pale shadow of my youthful glory. My skin is saggy and wrinkly now. My insides have become mushy. They are no more firm and strong as they used to be. I could once easily take a fall off the high shelves and tables I explored endlessly. Now when I fall, I

get a dent and it remains so thereafter. My movement is very limited. My energy wanes every passing day. I can't manage to get to the balcony on my own, anymore. Lily pushes me down the corridors, ensuring I get some sun every day without fail. I've also begun to smell mouldy. The bacteria inside me seem to be flourishing. But Lily is very kind and it never seems to bother her. Meanwhile, she continues to smell as fruity as ever. I wish to be close to her when I go.

Marek isn't doing very well with these developments. Whenever he sees me he wants to look away. When he created me, he would have never imagined one day, he'd also have to see me go. It's unusual that way. Your creator generally goes before you. I imagine, it must be the same for pet owners. When your dog or your cat dies, it must be more than the feeling of loss that overwhelms you. It's that transcendental emotion of having been a witness to someone's entire life. To see someone being born and also die must make one feel like God. Powerful. No? Only God lives forever and sees everyone come and go. They say, power corrupts. But power also builds empathy. To know that you can make a difference in someone's life, can be a very spiritual experience, too. Lily is proof of that. It's a choice we all have to make one day.

But Marek has been a witness to my whole life. He is proof that I was here, alive and kicking, doing the things I always wanted to do. Without him, I could well be the figment of someone's imagination. He makes all this real.

It's time to go now. I can hear the drums. There are trumpets, too!

Famous last words? Who knows why the geese go barefoot.

Marek lifted Pablo's still body and brought him close. The white LED indicator at the bottom of his chassis had stopped blinking. Marek carefully looked at Pablo once again, for the last time, but as if he was seeing it for the very first time. His body, the chassis, the Ferrari wheels, the double flip motors, the solar panel from the Casio calculator, the shock wires – all of it. A robot. A machine. He remembered how he had created Pablo with his own hands. Something to be left to its own devices, not needing supervision or direction. Once young and fresh, rambling across the corridors of the house, now old, mouldy, and still. Was it alive, he thought. But soon he realized that sometimes there are questions to which you don't need verbal answers. You just know it in your bones.

He caressed Pablo with his two thumbs and then began to dismantle all its parts. Once bare, he cut it open into two equal parts. He went out on to the balcony, planted them into two different flower pots, and placed them in the bright sunshine.

As it rained in the night, Lily stood next to the door and watched the soil in the pot soak the water. A week later, two little shoots popped out of the soil and said hello to a brave new world.

Marek peeped from the windows and smiled.



Ateesh Kropcha

While an unpublished manuscript for a debut English novel gathered dust, Ateesh Kropcha instead began anonymously posting short stories online under the pen name 'Wrongwriter' to seek feedback and work on his craft. Over two years and 50+ stories later, his Instagram account had built up a readership of 10,000+ followers. 'How to prepare for the end of the world & Other Stories' published by Fable42 Publications is a curated collection of his best stories in one place, along with some new unpublished ones.

Ateesh was born in a remote tribal village named Krozing in Lahaul & Spiti. He is an engineer and an MBA by education. He has worked in the private sector for almost a decade. He currently lives in New Delhi, India.

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