



The Chain-smokers

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R was born to rule. The only son of an ageing couple, he did not ever know the harshness of a frown or a raised voice. Surrounded by soothsayers, a dark *tika* on his forehead and the pleading voice of his worshipful parents, he grew up like a full moon. The astrologers predicted an unusual future for the boy.

The enchantment of growing up was witnessed by old aunts, his withering parents and starched school masters. The school was funded by the family from its inherited money, which was believed to be protected by black, hooded snakes.

Days, months, years slithered rapidly culminating in the growth of 'the full-moon'. The old parents and toothless aunts were extinct by then. But the inheritance remained. And the moon-like man straddled the world in gigantic steps. Most of the people were awed by his statuesque presence. But with the passing of time, parents and childhood protection, R felt like a moon shining at the beginning of the world; desolate and lonely.

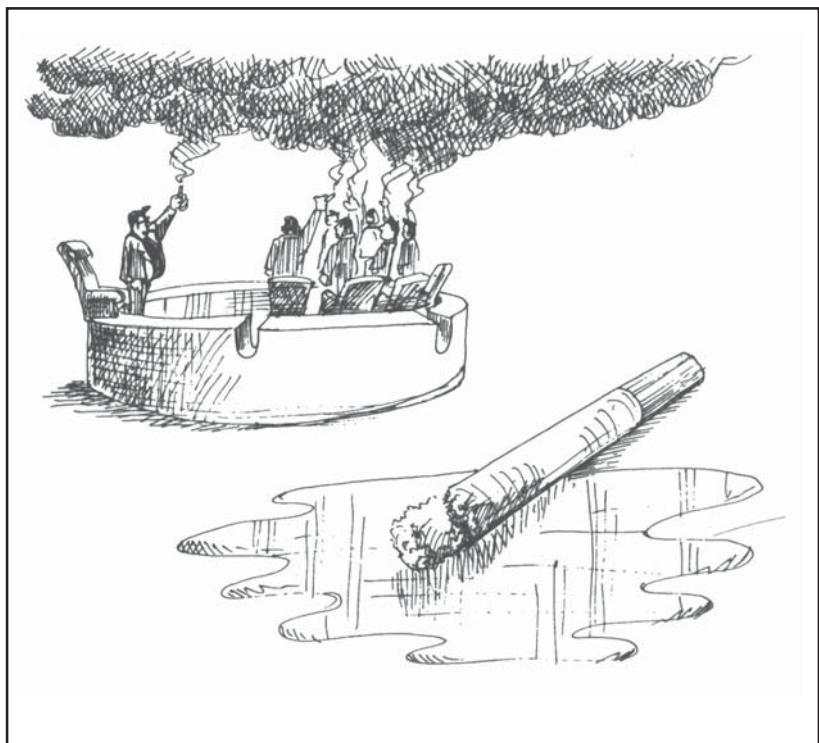
One day while going through the streets of the neon-lit city he saw a large poster of a cowboy with a large brimmed hat and a cigarette. Desolate and lonesome, he went to the fancy

supermarket and picked up a carton of cigarettes. The hat could not be bought because his job as the head of a robot firm did not allow freedom of dress. To keep his authority intact he had to wear synthetic suits; cowboy hat and jeans were out

In the plush air-conditioned conference room, R looked very impressive with a cigarette perpetually dangling from his mouth and smoke bellowing from his ears and nose occasionally. So impressive looked he, that all the management cadre began to smoke in their respective offices. The robot company was doing very well especially in the field of 'man power efficiency'. In every kind of work place, they would send their

experimental robots to help replace inefficient workers. For the first time in the history of independent India, a locally engineered product was making inroads in the international market. The nation was truly proud of this heroic feat.

R was in due course of time tipped for a Padma Bhushan. On hearing the news all the subordinate managers assembled in the managing director's conference room to share the glory of this achievement. Each one filed in the conference room with a burning cigarette dangling from his lips, letting them light up the occasion. Reverently they sat in their numbered chairs waiting for the managing director. Finally like a colossus he



entered the room puffing a cigarette. The smoke from all the cigarette made the atmosphere ethereal. Everybody had tears glistening in their eyes when they heard R talk about the difficulties in creating robots that would fit in complex structures of Indian institutions. With his usual technical finesse he described how once a prototype was ready they could finally fit in these requirements. A breakthrough was expected. The new robot could do exactly what it was expected to do. Apart from set mechanical tasks, it had well-developed pre-recorded cassettes

inserted in order to verbally acknowledge the given orders. So obedient and efficient were these machines that even the Japenese and Americans wanted them.

The joy of international recognition flooded the minds of research scientists, marketing managers, advertising experts and other administrators of the company. So great was their appreciation for the boss that invariably they repeated every gesture of his. Like an ideal establishment where only like-minded people exist, their faces, hands, clothes, cigarettes were

identical. At the end of the chief's speech such was the crescendo of emotions that when he finally said with a raised hand unmindful of the burning cigarette and the gently falling ash, all hands were raised, and all educated mouths uttered the pious words. Suddenly, choked with emotion, R rushed to the gent's room; but alas it was locked. The old childhood habit just couldn't be controlled, gradually the synthetic pants turned wet. The hypnotised junta was so tuned that all the pants turned wet, turning the occasion into a true carnival of freedom.