I

T was a mildly nippy January Sunday evening – an ideal evening for a long walk to warm up the body and work up a good appetite. But here was Amit engrossed in surfing the Internet, deeply immersed in the virtual world and oblivious to the golden allurements of the sun outside.

“Look at this boy! He does no physical exercise and is always engaged in playing computer games or watching television,” Amit’s father complained to his wife.

Mr Roy was a fitness freak. Although on the wrong side of forty, he relished his all-weather daily five-kilometer walk. To see his son turning into a couch potato was, therefore, a matter of great concern for him.

“Do you know what atrophy is?” Mr Roy asked his son. The son was in the midst of guiding a racing car to negotiate a dangerous bend and was, therefore, in no mood to reply. Getting no response from his son, Mr Roy deemed it fit to answer the question himself.

“Atrophy is the wasting away of an organ or tissue from lack of use. If you do not use your legs, they are going to grow weak and by the time you reach my age, you will be forced to use a walking stick. Get up now and go for a walk.”

Despite all care and caution, the hairpin bend proved to be the car’s nemesis and it overturned and burst into flames. Amit turned off the computer rather unwillingly. This had been his tenth try, but the hairpin bend always got the car!

“What are the father and son discussing?” Doctor Uncle, a family friend, had just entered the house and heard the last part of the conversation.

“This boy is inert. He doesn’t do any physical exercise and spends all his time before the computer,” father was glad to find someone who was willing to listen to his complaints. Mrs Roy had become so accustomed to the grumbles that she no longer listened to them.

“Don’t worry, I will give him an injection that will boost his energy,” Doctor Uncle said while giving Amit a sly wink. “Today’s youth spend a lot of time before the computer; they have severed all connection with nature,” Dr Sen added on a serious note.

After finishing his studies, Amit picked up the “Time Machine” by H.G. Wells, which he had brought from the library. But the Time Traveller’s explanation that time is simply a fourth dimension had Amit’s head swimming. Amit was quite comfortable with programming and algorithms but all this talk of dimensions was a little too much for him. Adding to his woes, he saw Doctor Uncle standing before him with a huge injection.
"Here, I have come with the injection as promised," Doctor Uncle smiled menacingly at him. Amit was scared of injections.

"No Uncle, I hate injections," he mumbled. "I promise I will start doing physical exercises from tomorrow," Amit said. Doctor Uncle looked thoughtful.

"Okay," he said while putting back the syringe in his bag, "let us take a walk."

"Walk, now!" Amit was aghast. It was past 10 pm.

"Better still, let us take a ride," Uncle smiled mysteriously. "I have a time machine waiting outside and it will carry us into the future. Let us find out how people would live in the future."

Amit was about to protest but Doctor Uncle made as if to withdraw the injection from the bag once again.

"Okay, Okay. I am coming," Amit said hurriedly. "But what about Baba and Ma?" he asked.

"We will come back within a few hours and your Baba and Ma would still be sleeping. They wouldn't even know," Doctor Uncle replied.

Outside, Amit saw a saucer-shaped vehicle. It was a two-seater. Inside the vehicle were all sorts of levers and knobs. Doctor Uncle turned one of the knobs to point the indicator at 200 on a speedometer-like gadget. "This will take us 200 years into the future," the doctor said while pulling at a lever. All at once, there was a whoosh and they were off.

Within seconds, the time machine landed on the banks of a river. The river looked familiar. A river just like this one coursed through the city where Amit lived. Amit looked around him and saw glass structures everywhere, just like the fancy glass houses that were offices of the Information Technology companies in the IT Park near his house. But the difference was that the IT Park had just a handful of offices but here there were only glass structures as far as Amit could see. It appeared as if even dwelling places were built of glass. There were no concrete structures anywhere.

In spite of this, Amit felt as if he knew the place well. Amit lived in a cantonment locality and there was a hill where soldiers practiced firing. He could see a similar hill here. Then there was a banyan tree near his house and he could spot one here too although this one looked ancient!

"Uncle, it seems as if we have not travelled at all. Although everything is different, yet the landscape appears familiar!"

"You are right! We have travelled in time and not in space. We have landed just near your home but 200 years into the future."

"This glass structure behind you was the very place where your house was situated. It must now be occupied by your descendents, or may be your ancestral property was sold off and the place is occupied by complete strangers now," Doctor Uncle said.

Amit was curious to find out how his descendents looked but the house was locked, indicating that the occupants had gone for an outing. Dr Uncle had no such desires. He was a 70-year-old bachelor and his lineage would end with him. Although Doctor Uncle and Amit had set off in the night, it was a bright sunny day here. Of course Amit was not bothered by such trivial matters. He was more interested in observing the things around him. At first, Amit thought that they had landed somewhere near a hospital because he could see patients moving around in wheel-chairs.

"Uncle there seems to be a hospital nearby, but I can't see one," Amit remarked.

"No, No. There is no hospital nearby. In fact, we have come to a sports stadium and a cricket match is about to begin," Doctor Uncle said while pointing to a poster.

"But, all these people ..."

"Atrophy," Doctor Uncle replied without waiting for Amit to complete his sentence. "This entire generation appears to have been born with weak legs because the earlier generations had neglected to use their lower limbs. But they do have strong arms and that is owing to constantly pushing their wheel-chairs."

It was strange that although Doctor Uncle and Amit were talking quite loudly, no one took notice of them. Amit pointed this out to the doctor.
They can neither see nor hear us," Doctor Uncle replied.
"Remember, we are from the past and the past is dead and gone."

"Then how can we see and hear them? We, too, should not be able to see into the future," Amit was confused.

"Oh! This is not real, only a projection. An image of the future," Doctor Uncle replied.

All this was too confusing and Amit's head began swimming once again. He thought it wise not to pursue the subject any further. But a sudden thought struck him.

"Uncle if they have weak legs, how can they play cricket?" he asked.

The doctor, who had a ready answer for everything, only scratched his head this time. He too appeared at a loss.

"Let us find out," he said and both of them followed the spectators into the stadium.

The stadium was chock-a-block with wheel chairs. Suddenly there was loud cheering. Amit saw the fielders taking their positions. There was something queer about the players; they somehow did not appear to be real people. Then, Amit realized that they were robots! Two batsmen walked in. They too were robots. So, that was it. This was a match between two robot teams!

"Oh, how I wish I could play cricket," Amit heard one spectator whispering to his neighbour. "That would have been great fun instead of watching these robots," the man continued wistfully.

The voice of the two spectators sounded very unnatural; it was like listening to interactive voice messages on the phone. This generation has even lost the art of conversation, Amit realised. By now the match had started and the first ball was bowled. Since the robots were programmed to play good cricket, the bowler bowled a good ball while the batsman too played the correct shot. There was bound to be no entertainment since the game was as good as automated and there was no natural element to it. Yet the spectators continued to watch and cheer at the right moments.

Amit felt very depressed. There was a rip-roaring cheer across the stadium now. The reason, a mechanical fault had led the bowler to falter in his steps. The batsman, or rather the batsrobot, made no mistake and hit the ball so high and wide that it was sure to be a six.

"Come on, brush your teeth and get ready for breakfast," his mother was saying.

Amit got up and the first thing that he did was to feel his legs. They were intact. Amit was relieved. It was a dream after all, a frightening one at that.

"Where are my jogging shoes?" Amit asked his mother.

"Well Ma, please buy me a pair of jogging shoes today," Amit requested his mother. "I have decided to go for jogging every morning henceforth."

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