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A Visit to Cambridge

Before you read

This is the story of a meeting between two extraordinary people, both of them 'disabled', or 'differently abled' as we now say. Stephen Hawking is one of the greatest scientists of our time. He suffers from a form of paralysis that confines him to a wheelchair, and allows him to 'speak' only by punching buttons on a computer, which speaks for him in a machine-like voice. Firdaus Kanga is a writer and journalist who lives and works in Mumbai. Kanga was born with 'brittle bones' that tended to break easily when he was a child. Like Hawking, Kanga moves around in a wheelchair.

The two great men exchange thoughts on what it means to live life in a wheelchair, and on how the so called 'normal' people react to the disabled.

Cambridge was my metaphor for England, and it was strange that when I left it had become altogether something else, because I had met Stephen Hawking there.

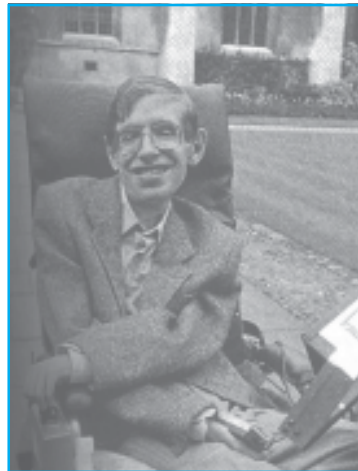
It was on a walking tour through Cambridge that the guide mentioned Stephen Hawking, 'poor man, who is quite disabled now, though he is a worthy successor to Issac Newton, whose Chair he has at the university.'

And I started, because I had quite forgotten that this most brilliant and completely paralysed astrophysicist,

astrophysicist:
scholar of astrophysics — branch of physics dealing with stars, planets, etc.

the author of *A Brief History of Time*, one of the biggest best-sellers ever, lived here.

When the walking tour was done, I rushed to a phone booth and, almost tearing the cord so it could reach me outside, phoned Stephen Hawking's house. There was his assistant on the line and I told him I had come in a wheelchair from India (perhaps he thought I had propelled myself all the way) to write about my travels in Britain. I had to see Professor Hawking — even ten minutes would do. "Half an hour," he said. "From three-thirty to four."



And suddenly I felt weak all over. Growing up disabled, you get fed up with people asking you to be brave, as if you have a courage account on which you are too lazy to draw a cheque. The only thing that makes you stronger is seeing somebody like you, achieving something huge. Then you know how much is possible and you reach out further than you ever thought you could.

"I haven't been brave," said his disembodied computer-voice, the next afternoon. "I've had no choice."

Surely, I wanted to say, living creatively with the reality of his disintegrating body was a choice? But I kept quiet, because I felt guilty every time I spoke to him, forcing him to respond. There he was, tapping at the little switch in his hand, trying to find the words on his computer with the only bit of movement left to him, his long, pale fingers. Every so often, his eyes would shut in frustrated exhaustion. And sitting opposite him I could feel his anguish, the mind buoyant with thoughts that came out in frozen phrases and sentences stiff as corpses.

"A lot of people seem to think that disabled people are chronically unhappy," I said. "I know that's not true myself. Are you often laughing inside?"



buoyant:
intensely
active and
vibrant





About three minutes later, he responded, “I find it amusing when people patronise me.”

“And do you find it annoying when someone like me comes and disturbs you in your work?”

The answer flashed. “Yes.” Then he smiled his one-way smile and I knew, without being sentimental or silly, that I was looking at one of the most beautiful men in the world.

A first glimpse of him is shocking, because he is like a still photograph — as if all those pictures of him in magazines and newspapers have turned three-dimensional.

Then you see the head twisted sideways into a slump, the torso shrunk inside the pale blue shirt, the wasted legs; you look at his eyes which can speak, still, and they are saying something huge and urgent — it is hard to tell what. But you are shaken because you have seen something you never thought could be seen.

Before you, like a lantern whose walls are worn so thin you glimpse only the light inside, is the incandescence of a man. The body, almost irrelevant, exists only like a case made of shadows. So that I, no believer in eternal souls, know that this is what each of us is; everything else an accessory.

“What do you think is the best thing about being disabled?” I had asked him earlier.

“I don’t think there is anything good about being disabled.”

“I think,” I said, “you do discover how much kindness there is in the world.”

“Yes,” he said; it was a disadvantage of his voice synthesiser that it could convey no inflection, no shades or tone. And I could not tell how enthusiastically he agreed with me.

Every time I shifted in my chair or turned my wrist to watch the time — I wanted to make every one of our thirty minutes count — I felt a huge relief and exhilaration in the possibilities of my body. How little it mattered then that I would never walk, or even stand.

torso:
upper part of
the body

incandescence:
inner glow or
light

accessory:
not essential
but extra,
though
decorative

inflection:
rise and fall of
the voice in
speaking

I told him how he had been an inspiration beyond cliché for me, and, surely, for others — did that thought help him?

“No,” he said; and I thought how foolish I was to ask. When your body is a claustrophobic room and the walls are growing narrower day by day, it doesn’t do much good to know that there are people outside smiling with admiration to see you breathing still.

“Is there any advice you can give disabled people, something that might help make life better?”

“They should concentrate on what they are good at; I think things like the disabled Olympics are a waste of time.”

“I know what you mean.” I remembered the years I’d spent trying to play a Spanish guitar considerably larger than I was; and how gleefully I had unstrunged it one night.

The half-hour was up. “I think I’ve annoyed you enough,” I said, grinning. “Thank you for...”

“Stay.” I waited. “Have some tea. I can show you the garden.”

The garden was as big as a park, but Stephen Hawking covered every inch, rumbling along in his motorised wheelchair while I dodged to keep out of the way. We couldn’t talk very much; the sun made him silent, the letters on his screen disappearing in the glare.

An hour later, we were ready to leave. I didn’t know what to do. I could not kiss him or cry. I touched his shoulder and wheeled out into the summer evening. I looked back; and I knew he was waving, though he wasn’t. Watching him, an embodiment of my bravest self, the one I was moving towards, the one I had believed in for so many years, alone, I knew that my journey was over. For now.



cliché:
phrase or idea used so often that it loses its meaning

claustrophobic:
very small and suffocating (‘Claustrophobia’ is abnormal fear of being in an enclosed space)

gleefully:
very happily

FIRDAUS KANGA
from *Heaven on Wheels*

Comprehension Check

Which is the right sentence?

1. "Cambridge was my metaphor for England." To the writer,
 - (i) Cambridge was a reputed university in England.
 - (ii) England was famous for Cambridge.
 - (iii) Cambridge was the real England.
2. The writer phoned Stephen Hawking's house
 - (i) from the nearest phone booth.
 - (ii) from outside a phone booth.
 - (iii) from inside a phone booth.
3. Every time he spoke to the scientist, the writer felt guilty because
 - (i) he wasn't sure what he wanted to ask.
 - (ii) he forced the scientist to use his voice synthesiser.
 - (iii) he was face to face with a legend.
4. "I felt a huge relief... in the **possibilities of my body**." In the given context, the highlighted words refer to
 - (i) shifting in the wheelchair, turning the wrist.
 - (ii) standing up, walking.
 - (iii) speaking, writing.

working with the text

Answer the following questions.

1.
 - (i) Did the prospect of meeting Stephen Hawking make the writer nervous? If so, why?
 - (ii) Did he at the same time feel very excited? If so, why?
2. Guess the first question put to the scientist by the writer.
3. Stephen Hawking said, "I've had no choice." Does the writer think there was a choice? What was it?
4. "I could feel his anguish." What could be the anguish?
5. What endeared the scientist to the writer so that he said he was looking at one of the most beautiful men in the world?
6. Read aloud the description of 'the beautiful' man. Which is the most beautiful sentence in the description?

7. (i) If 'the lantern' is the man, what would its 'walls' be?
(ii) What is housed within the thin walls?
(iii) What general conclusion does the writer draw from this comparison?
8. What is the scientist's message for the disabled?
9. Why does the writer refer to the guitar incident? Which idea does it support?
10. The writer expresses his great gratitude to Stephen Hawking. What is the gratitude for?
11. Complete the following sentences taking their appropriate parts from both the boxes below.
 - (i) There was his assistant on the line ...
 - (ii) You get fed up with people asking you to be brave, ...
 - (iii) There he was, ...
 - (iv) You look at his eyes which can speak, ...
 - (v) It doesn't do much good to know ...

A

- ◆ tapping at a little switch in his hand
- ◆ and I told him
- ◆ that there are people
- ◆ as if you have a courage account
- ◆ and they are saying something huge and urgent

B

- ◆ trying to find the words on his computer.
- ◆ I had come in a wheelchair from India.
- ◆ on which you are too lazy to draw a cheque.
- ◆ smiling with admiration to see you breathing still.
- ◆ it is hard to tell what.

working with language

1. Fill in the blanks in the sentences below using the appropriate forms of the words given in the following box.

guide succeed chair travel pale draw true

- (i) I met a _____ from an antique land.
(ii) I need special _____ in mathematics. I can't count the number of times I have failed in the subject.
(iii) The guide called Stephen Hawking a worthy _____ to Issac Newton.
(iv) His other problems _____ into insignificance beside this unforeseen mishap.
(v) The meeting was _____ by the youngest member of the board.
(vi) Some people say 'yours _____' when they informally refer to themselves.
(vii) I wish it had been a _____ match. We would have been spared the noise of celebrations, at least.
2. Look at the following words.

walk stick

Can you create a meaningful phrase using both these words?

(It is simple. Add **-ing** to the verb and use it before the noun. Put an article at the beginning.)

..a walking stick

Now make six such phrases using the words given in the box.

read/session
walk/tour

smile/face
dance/doll

revolve/chair
win/chance




3. Use **all** or **both** in the blanks. Tell your partner why you chose one or the other.
- (i) He has two brothers. _____ are lawyers.
(ii) More than ten persons called. _____ of them wanted to see you.
(iii) They _____ cheered the team.
(iv) _____ her parents are teachers.
(v) How much have you got? Give me _____ of it.

4. Complete each sentence using the right form of the adjective given in brackets.
- My friend has one of the _____ cars on the road. (fast)
 - This is the _____ story I have ever read. (interesting)
 - What you are doing now is _____ than what you did yesterday. (easy)
 - Ramesh and his wife are both _____. (short)
 - He arrived _____ as usual. Even the chief guest came _____ than he did. (late, early)

speaking and writing

1. Say the following words with correct stress. Pronounce the parts given in colour loudly and clearly.

camel	balloon
decent	opinion
fearless	enormous
careful	fulfil
father	together
govern	degree
bottle	before

-  In a word having more than one syllable, the stressed syllable is the one that is **more prominent than** the other syllable(s)
-  A word has as many syllables as it has vowels.
man (one syllable)
ˈmanner (two syllables)
-  The mark (ˈ) indicates that the first syllable in 'manner' is more prominent than the other.

2. Underline stressed syllables in the following words. Consult the dictionary or ask the teacher if necessary.

artist	mistake	accident	moment
compare	satisfy	relation	table
illegal	agree	backward	mountain

3. Writing a notice for the School Notice Board.

Step 1

Discuss why notices are put up on the notice board.

What kinds of 'notices' have you lately seen on the board?

How is a notice different from a letter or a descriptive paragraph?

Step 2

Suppose you have lost or found something on the campus.

What have you lost or found?

You want to write a notice about it. If you have lost something, you want it restored to you in case someone has found it. If you have found something, you want to return it to its owner.

Step 3

Write a few lines describing the object you have lost or found. Mention the purpose of the notice in clear terms. Also write your name, class, section and date.

Step 4

Let one member of each group read aloud the notice to the entire class.

Compare your notice with the other notices, and make changes, if necessary, with the help of the teacher.

or

- Imagine that you are a journalist.
- You have been asked to interview the president of the village panchayat.
- Write eight to ten questions you wish to ask.
- The questions should elicit comments as well as plans regarding water and electricity, cleanliness and school education in the village.

A Crooked Rhyme

There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile,
He found a crooked coin against a crooked stile;
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse,
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.