



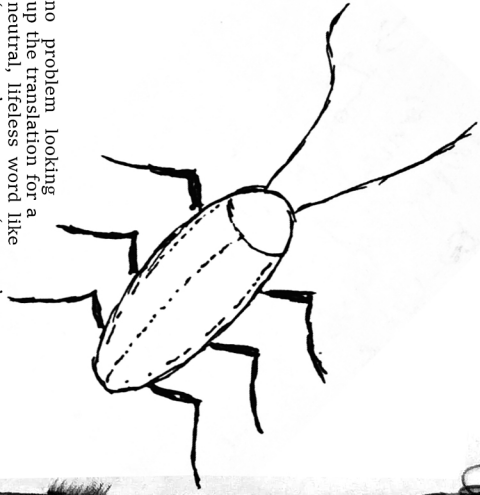
"One of us lies, the other tells the truth. As to which of us does which, that's a mooooooot point."

Editor's Note

I like rational fears. The reasoning behind them is within arm's reach, leaving little need for explanation. You'd barely be halfway through telling someone about it and they would immediately understand it for follow-ups. Irrational fears have the same benefit, but obviously for different reasons. It is taken for granted - and for good reason - that unjustifiable, unfounded fears fit very well into the human experience; no one questions a phobia of ghosts because the answer's right there - they're ghosts. Why would you not fear them?

It's the ones in between that really get my goat - the ones that are statistically likely to come true, and are therefore rational, but still have such an outside chance of befalling you that they are borderline - with the odd incursion - irrational. These cannot be left alone. They demand a backstory. And much as I like to talk, explaining how I hyperfixated on a fleeting moment that would have otherwise passed under my radar and decided to carry it around for the rest of my days isn't in my top 5 conversations to have.

I am currently 21 years of age. If the next nine years or so pass without lasting physical damage to my body, a load will drop off my shoulders; I will successfully have crossed the rough onset age of muscular dystrophy. Until then, however, I will live in fear. Every time my legs feel weak for no apparent reason, or I trip going up the stairs,

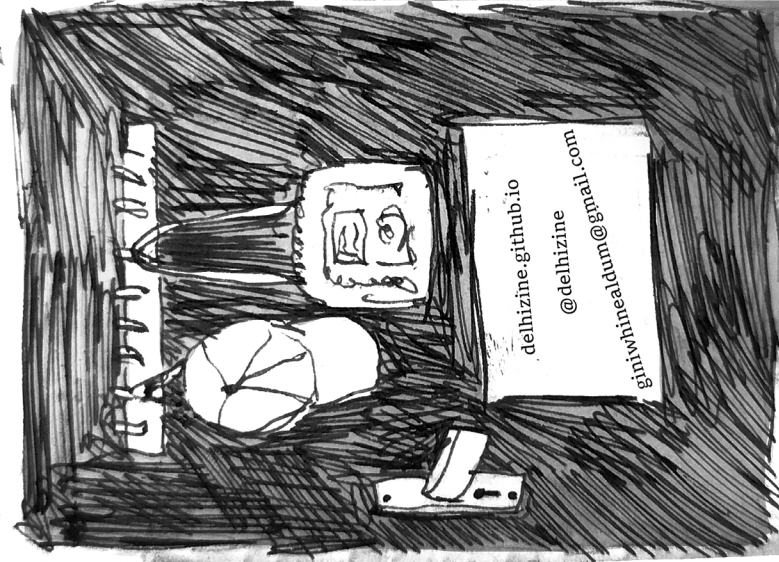


no problem looking up the translation for a neutral, lifeless word like 'aneurysm' or 'camera'. However, words that are meant to have strong emotion behind them must, I feel, be learned organically. I nearly did so too, a few days ago. I was watching *Court*, and halfway through, it turned out that part of the plot involved - surprise, surprise - a cockroach. I waited with bated breath throughout the rest of the film, literally everything was said in Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati or their various combinations. Everything but the word cockroach.

I feel momentarily terrified. There's that split-second panic that the clock's struck twelve. Of course, I conveniently lose sight of the fact that I haven't slept in so many hours. I am much less afraid of the (far more real) dangers of sleep deprivation. Worringly so, perhaps.

Every time we learned about a new autoimmune or genetic disease in class 10 biology, I would frantically scan the textbook for the age of onset. In most cases, I would be relieved - the danger was past. There were a few I wasn't yet clear of, however, and the risk of even one was too many. None of them scared me as much as the disease that ended with my cardiac and lung muscles slowly and irreversibly grinding to a halt. The juvenile variant - Duchenne muscular dystrophy - I was safe from. But the other would haunt me till my 30s. Tests exist for it, but it's not exactly like I can go get one with nothing supporting my theory except the fact that I read about it. If people started testing themselves for every single such disease with no symptoms besides awareness, we would run out of tests for valid cases. There's also the fact that it's a stupid thing to do, but this is the more practical drawback.

I knew someone in my French class, a few years older than me, who had Duchenne. This was a few years before 10th grade, so I didn't know what exactly he suffered from at the time; all I knew is that it was terminal and affected his muscles. He was fifteen, and had by then already lost the ability to walk. Even so, he brimmed with irresistible positivity. He was also genuinely one of the smartest people I've ever met. These days, he's doing an M. Com he will likely never be able to get much out of - at best, he's probably got five to seven years left, only part of which will be of use to him. I cannot begin to imagine the drive and the strength of will it takes to do something like that. I struggle to get myself out of bed if the temperature's a little off. I don't know how he does it. And as selfish as it sounds, I hope I never find out.



adog*

I share a fairly cordial relationship with insects. The credibility of this statement is held just in place by the fact that spiders are not insects. I would also argue that my issue with venomous insects is the fact that they are *venomous* and not that they are insects. That applies to other classes of organisms as well. Venomous beings - their necessity, to be more specific - are a mystery to me. I don't particularly understand justifying their existence by calling them God's creations; I can think of at least six other creations, just off the top of my head, whose teeth I'd very much like to kick in. But I digress.

As established above, I have no problems with insects unless they pose a distinct threat to me (which is generally not owed to their insecthood). Cockroaches are the singular exception. I do not feel threatened in their presence, and yet I detest them for how dumb they are. Idiocy is not a crime, or so I've been told - but I reserve the right to show my irritation. The yardsticks we use to determine intelligence are based purely on humans and therefore prove inflexible when applied to other species - this I agree with. But the average cockroach is so phenomenally stupid that it is almost an achievement. There cannot possibly be a metric that grants them any degree of erudition. I'm not saying this because of, say, their helplessness when lying flat on their back. That is a physiological deficiency, not an intellectual one. I am instead referring to their sheer lack of coordination. It is fascinating just how directionally challenged these poor beasts are. They run towards a threat instead of away from it, and that too in a genuine attempt to escape. They scuttle about

* Pronounced pea-ta. 'a'/'aa' as in 'car' and 'dark'. 't' as in 'matter', NOT as in 'what'.

with no regularity, no predictable path, no coherence - the more you try not to step on them, the more determined they seem to get stepped on. Compare this with ants or mice. These are delightfully logical beings, having a structure to their movement that allows them and us to navigate our respective paths safely. Cockroaches and human feel, on the other hand, are doomed to engage in pitifully one-sided games of Russian roulette.

The issue is, their motion is so *maddeningly random* that you cannot even pin it on their (perhaps) being suicidal. Pigeons and deer are often described as such for the way they respond to oncoming traffic, which is understandable. All they do is stand still, as though they want to be hit. Not so the case with roaches. They are definitely not prone to self-harm, for they make obvious attempts to evade trouble; they're just very bad at it. And that's just whilst on foot. There is no creature as undeserving of the ability to fly as the cockroach. Giving these cretins wings is like handing a four-year-old a combat drone. It's just as well that cockroaches are as durable as they are - they'd have gone extinct long ago if not for that.

Cockroaches are quite the menace back home. After we moved house, it took us the better part of a year to get their population under control. Every so often, we still see one whizz around dim-wittedly. After coming to Delhi, however, I never saw one for ages. Slightings were so rare (well, I say rare, I mean nonexistent) that I realised, two weeks ago, three years into college, that I don't know the Hindi for cockroach. It's a bit of a handicap, to tell you the truth. I realised as much two days ago, when I finally saw one here for the first time. Just saying the word 'cockroach' doesn't quite encapsulate my opinion of the thing. Hence my fondness for adog - the utter contempt balled up into those two syllables. Googling the Hindi word for it did not seem to me the right solution. I have