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The Year He Woke

By **Vikas Swarup**

Vikas Swarup, an Indian writer and former diplomat, is the author of four novels, including *Q & A* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), which has been translated into 47 languages and adapted for the screen under the title *Slumdog Millionaire*.

politique étrangère

When Ray Mehta opened his eyes, he saw light.

Not the hard light of a hospital. Winter light. Pale and level. It came through a wide pane of glass. Beyond it stood a mountain, solitary and white at the summit, its dark stone face rising clean into a sky of improbable blue.

He looked at it for some time before he tried to move.

Then he turned his head and took in the room.

It was spare in the way expensive things are spare. White walls. Rounded corners. A bed, a chair, a narrow table. No wires. No steel stands. No flowers. No clutter of medicine. The room had been designed to suggest serenity to someone who had paid for it in advance.

His mouth was dry. He swallowed. For a moment he did not know whether the procedure had succeeded or failed. Then a woman spoke.

— Good morning, Mr. Mehta.

She stood beside the bed. White uniform. Dark hair drawn back. A composed face, not young exactly, but unmarked by strain. She might have been beautiful. In that first moment he registered only her stillness.

— Where am I? he asked.

— In Zermatt.

He looked again at the mountain.

— The Matterhorn.

— Yes.

His voice came out rough.

— How long?

She did not answer at once. She was watching him with an attention that felt practiced and impersonal and almost kind.

— You entered cryogenic suspension on April 1, 2026, she said. Today is April 1, 2100.

He took that in without visible effort. Then he looked back at the mountain.

— So it worked, he said.

— Yes.

He gave a small nod.

— I had imagined it would feel less like waking from a nap.

The woman smiled faintly.

— Most forms of resurrection disappoint in their first minutes.

He looked at her.

— What is your name?

— Mara.

— Are you my nurse?

She shook her head.

— Not exactly. The neat classifications of your century don't really exist anymore. I'm your nurse, physician, physiotherapist, and primary caretaker.

He closed his eyes briefly. It was more information than he could use just then.

* * *

The first few days passed in intervals of sleep, broth, assisted standing, and silence.

His body returned by degrees. The indignity of weakness irritated him more than pain would have. At fifty-five, he had still possessed the thick competence of a man accustomed to movement.

He had built Trident Logistics from a single leased truck in 1998, money borrowed from his father-in-law. He had driven the first run himself, Delhi to Chandigarh, a load of medical supplies in the back. He arrived at four in the morning with a puncture he had changed alone on the highway outside Karnal, crouched in the dark with a torch between his teeth.

That truck had become a fleet. The fleet had become a company whose warehouses now sat beside highways across half the country.

But that was later.

That night he had simply climbed back into the truck and driven.

That was who he was. A man who fixed things with his hands in the dark and then got back in and drove.

Now, when he stood, his legs shook.

Mara remained close enough to steady him if he fell.

— This is temporary, she said.

— I still mind it.

— Recovery is never dignified.

He almost laughed.

She had an economical manner. No consolations. No false warmth. A caretaker, if that was the right word, stripped of sentimentality.

Outside the window the mountain did not alter. Morning, evening, cloud-shadow, then light again. It was the first thing that seemed constant in a very long time.

After four days he asked for a mirror.

She brought him one. He examined his face with the suspicion of a man inspecting damaged cargo.

The face was his. Thinner, perhaps. The skin had a drained, suspended quality, as if time had been interrupted but not annulled. The grey hair remained. The lines around the eyes and mouth remained. He looked neither older nor younger. Only deferred.

He set the mirror aside.

— I had hoped for a better bargain, he said.

— A bargain?

— A man puts himself in cold storage and wakes up improved.

— Cryogenic suspension preserves. It does not revise.

— That seems unfair.

— Unfair is better than impossible.

He smiled then, despite himself.

* * *

By the end of the week he could walk with a cane.

The corridors were long and gently curved, bright without being warm. The floors yielded no sound. Doors opened at Mara's approach and remained closed to him. There were no other patients in sight. No laughter from distant rooms. No televisions. No smell of antiseptic, food, bodies. The place lacked the human untidiness by which hospitals usually declare themselves.

At the corridor's end there was another window. It looked onto a stone courtyard with a single dark tree at its centre, the branches bowed under the weight of fruit.

He stood there one afternoon, leaning on the cane, and found himself thinking of Florida.

Not the event itself. Never that at first. Instead, the years before it: the winter migrations from Delhi. The annual retreat from poison.

Every November the air in the city thickened into something almost chewable. Air Quality Index past a thousand on the worst days. The equivalent of smoking seventy cigarettes a day. Schools closed. Purifiers in every room. Masks in the car. The wealthy retreated into filtered interiors and called it adaptation.

Then the holidays came, and they fled.

Florida had become their answer. Maya didn't care much for the tourist brightness of it. She found the optimism of the place excessive. But she liked the ocean, and the fact that the girls could be outdoors without calculation.

Ria had been sixteen. Exact, unsparing, already possessed of the terrible moral precision of the very intelligent. Jia was fourteen and lived as if impatience were a metabolic principle.

For years the migration worked. The air cleared. The girls returned sun-browned and restless in January. School resumed. Delhi resumed. The arithmetic of risk continued.

He had believed in that arithmetic.

Danger could be relocated. Poisonous air here, clean air there. Adjust the coordinates of living and the odds improved. Geography as strategy.

It was a comforting idea.

After a while Mara appeared beside him.

— Your gait is improving, she said.

— Yes.

— You are thinking about something.

— Yes.

— Would you like to speak about it?

He looked at the courtyard, and started telling her about what happened in Florida.

It arrived without warning.

December 2025. A shopping mall outside Miami. Christmas lights everywhere. Artificial snow drifting from the ceiling. Families carrying bags. Children asking for things.

A man entered with a rifle.

Twenty-six people died.

His wife and daughters were among them.

He had been in Delhi when it happened. A boardroom. Tea going cold in porcelain cups. Men discussing figures as if numbers possessed gravity.

The call came during a presentation about expansion into Southeast Asia.

His first thought, absurdly, was that this could not have happened in Florida.

Florida had been the correction. The safer place. Chosen precisely because it was not Delhi.

What he had misunderstood was simple.

Geography changes the scenery of danger. It does not abolish it.

Poison in the air. A rifle in a mall. A flood in a valley. A fire in a forest. The coordinates differ; the principle remains.

Human beings wander endlessly in search of the one spot on the map where contingency will leave them alone.

Such a place does not exist.

That was when he began to think about leaving the map altogether.

For several weeks after the funerals he remained in Florida, moving through the administrative machinery of bereavement with the detached competence of a man accustomed to managing systems. Death certificates. Bank formalities. Insurance. Flights. Condolence calls from people who spoke with the careful tenderness reserved for irreversible things.

At night he read.

There was a company in Switzerland called CryoVita. Their language was austere. No promises of immortality. Only a wager on tomorrow's science.

Medicine was approaching regenerative repair. Cells could be restored. Organs rebuilt. Neural damage perhaps corrected. Artificial intelligence promised to accelerate every field that mattered. The only issue was time.

Cryogenics addressed that problem.

Sleep now. Wake when the tools exist.

The logic was compelling.

The future, unlike geography, offered distance from the present.

It was not immortality he wanted. Only oblivion. A clean interval in which the mind did not have to perform the daily labour of living with what had already happened.

CryoVita offered exactly that: a suspension of consciousness without the vulgarity of suicide. A bet that the future would be more competent than the present.

And he believed in the future with the same stubborn confidence that had built everything else in his life.

He signed the papers in Zermatt three months later.

The procedure took place on April 1, 2026.

He remembered the room: bright, white, curiously ordinary. Technicians speaking in low professional voices. The mild cold of the induction chamber against his back.

The last thought he had before the drugs took hold was not of death. It was of repair.

That somewhere beyond his lifetime, intelligence, human or otherwise, would finally become equal to the problems it had inherited.

Beside him Mara had listened without interruption.

When he finished she made a brief note on the tablet.

— You trusted the future, she said.

— Yes.

She looked toward the window where the fruit hung heavily from the branches.

— That, she said, was a reasonable assumption.

* * *

When he was strong enough to sit for longer stretches, he began to ask questions about the world he had woken into.

He sat near the large window with a blanket over his knees. Mara sat opposite him, the tablet in her hand.

— What happened to global warming? he asked.

— The atmosphere was stabilized over several decades. Net-zero global emissions achieved by 2067.

— How?

— Carbon removal at scale. Reforestation. Ocean recovery. Some controlled geoengineering.

He nodded.

— In India the rich simply seceded from the world outside, he said. Water through purifiers. Air through machines. Food through imported supply chains.

He paused.

— We believed if you threw enough money at a problem, it would simply go away.

He sat quietly for a moment.

— What about cancer? he asked. Did we finally throw enough science at it?

He had watched his father-in-law die of pancreatic cancer in 2016, four months from diagnosis to cremation.

— Functionally eliminated in 2051, Mara said. Through targeted gene-editing and AI-guided personalised immunotherapy.

He let that settle.

— So science kept its promises, he said quietly. What about the rest of it? World poverty?

— Eradicated as a systemic crisis by 2045, Mara said. Universal basic assets, AI-optimized resource distribution, and fusion-powered abundance lifted the global baseline.

— The Bengal Tiger?

— Current population approximately ten thousand, Mara said. Up from under three thousand in 2030.

He allowed himself a faint smile.

— So the world improved.

— In several respects, Mara said.

— And grief? he asked.

Mara considered this for a moment.

— There is still no treatment for it, she said.

* * *

The next day he asked about war.

— How many are going on?

— None, Mara said.

He turned his head slightly.

— None?

— No.

— How did that happen?

— After the Iranian-Israeli nuclear exchange in 2046, the world concluded that humanity had demonstrated sufficient incompetence with the technology. Nuclear weapons were outlawed. Other offensive systems followed.

— Outlawed, he repeated.

— Yes.

— That sounds optimistic.

— It was not optimism, Mara said. It was exhaustion.

He watched her for a moment.

— How many died?

She told him. Four million in the initial events. Eleven million more in the year that followed, from fallout, the collapse of regional food systems, and the secondary conflicts the power vacuum created.

It was later called the Correction. Not by anyone who lived through it. By those who studied it afterward.

He did not react, but the number seemed to alter the air of the room.

— In my time, he said after a while, we lived with nuclear weapons the way a family lives with a mad uncle in the house. Everyone knew he was dangerous. No one wished to discuss him before lunch.

— That is one way of normalizing catastrophe.

— Yes.

He smiled faintly.

— We were very good at that.

He looked at her.

— So who did the outlawing?

— The UN Security Council, she said.

— The Security Council was completely paralysed during my time.

— Yes. It was restructured in 2047. Twelve new members, including India, Nigeria and Brazil. The veto abolished. Binding arbitration with compliance mechanisms that are enforced.

— Enforced, he repeated.

It was not a word he had ever heard applied to international law without irony.

Outside the mountain remained exact and remote, indifferent to the arguments of history.

* * *

On another day he asked about religion.

— It persists, Mara said.

— But it matters less?

— It matters differently. For most people it is private. A source of meaning, sometimes of comfort. It organizes fewer lives.

— And politics?

— Politics learned to leave it alone.

— That sounds almost civilized.

— It took practice, she said.

He watched her.

— What changed?

— After the crises of the mid-century, societies discovered that survival required cooperation across beliefs. That lesson endured.

He considered that.

— In my time, he said, religion was always available as fuel. Politics found it combustible. Injury and memory were endlessly reusable. The past never stayed buried because someone was always digging it up for votes.

She made a note on the tablet.

— What are you writing? he asked.

— Observations.

— About us?

— Yes.

— Be generous.

— I prefer accuracy.

He nodded. It was an answer he was beginning to recognize as her closest equivalent to humour.

* * *

One afternoon he watched Mara for several minutes before speaking.

— Where is your phone? he asked.

— My phone?

— Yes. Everyone used to carry one. Always in the hand. Always within reach.

— We no longer require personal devices, she said. Most communication occurs through ambient systems.

He considered that.

— That must have taken some discipline.

— It was not discipline, Mara said. It was necessity.

— How so?

— Many historians trace the early decline of your century to digital addiction, she said.

He leaned back in the chair.

— That sounds right.

— Explain.

— It didn't feel like addiction at first, he said. It felt like participation.

He paused.

— Everyone believed they were connected. What they didn't see was that they were being captured.

Mara said nothing.

— The platforms rewarded intensity, he continued. Calm argument travelled slowly. Anger moved at the speed of light. If you could manufacture outrage, you could command attention.

— And attention became power.

— Yes.

— And leaders learned this.

— Oh yes.

He looked toward the courtyard.

— Complex problems were reduced to enemies. Enemies to identities. Identities to targets.

— And the platforms amplified it.

— They optimized for it, he said. Outrage kept people engaged. Engagement produced revenue. Revenue produced scale. No one in the system had an incentive to reduce the temperature.

Mara wrote something down.

— And the demagogues weaponised it, he said.

He watched the mountain.

— They always do.

He stopped there.

Mara did not fill the silence.

* * *

As his strength returned, the place began to trouble him.

There were too few people. Too much control. Too little friction.

Once, he approached a glass door that appeared to open toward a terrace. It remained sealed.

— For your safety, Mara said. Your body is still adapting.

— To what, exactly?

— To a cleaner atmosphere. And to an immune system that is still recalibrating.

He looked at her, but she had already turned away.

Late one night he saw her standing at the window in darkness.

No lamp was on. She stood perfectly still, looking out at the mountain. He watched her for nearly a minute before she spoke.

— You are awake, she said.

— Yes. I did not hear you.

— No, she said.

— Do you ever sleep?

— Sometimes.

He let that pass, as he had let so many things pass, because suspicion, like grief, exhausts the vessel that contains it.

* * *

The siren came on the seventeenth day.

It began low in the walls and rose into a mechanical moan. A red light flashed once and went dark. Mara stood immediately.

— Stay here, she said.

— What is it?

— A systems fault.

She was already at the door.

He waited until her footsteps disappeared. Then he stood, took the cane, and went into the corridor.

At its far end a door stood open that he had never before seen open.

Beyond it the architecture changed.

The white surfaces ended. The walls became metal. Pipes ran overhead. The light turned yellow and uncertain. This was not a continuation of the hospital but its hidden grammar.

He followed the passage to a heavy hatch with a wheel handle. It was closed. A thin line of orange-brown light showed at the edges.

He set the cane aside and turned the wheel.

The mechanism resisted, then released with a dull metallic sound.

He pulled the hatch open.

Air struck him at once.

Dry. Bitter. Metallic.

He stepped through.

The sky was not blue. It was the colour of weak tea.

For one absurd second he thought of a movie set. Some industrial zone. Some research annex built beside the clean world and not part of it.

Then he saw the plain.

Grey dust. Broken concrete. A tilted shell of a building fifty meters off, its floors collapsed into one another. Further away, more structures in stages of ruin. A traffic light bent sideways. The charred frame of a vehicle half-buried in earth.

Nothing moved.

No traffic. No birds. No machinery. No voices.

Only wind.

The silence was what undid the illusion. Even abandonment usually contains life somewhere at the edges. Here there was none. It was not ruin merely. It was erasure.

He turned and looked back at the structure behind him.

The truth became visible at once. The white rooms were nested inside reinforced concrete, half underground. Armoured doors. A bunker disguised internally as care.

A child came around the corner of a broken wall. She was perhaps ten years old, wearing clothing assembled from what appeared to be multiple other garments. She carried a plastic bottle. She stopped when she saw him and regarded him without expression, in the assessing way that children learn when they have been taught that strangers represent a calculation to be made.

— He said, in English, Hello.

She said nothing. She looked at his clothes, clean and unweathered, the clothes of someone who did not belong outside. Then she turned and walked away, quickly, around the wall and out of sight.

He heard Mara behind him.

— You should not be here, she said.

He turned.

— What is this?

— Come inside.

— No.

The word had more force than he expected. It pleased him faintly.

— Please, she said. You are not yet strong enough for the air.

He looked again at the plain. The broken concrete. The copper sky.

— What happened? he said.

— Inside, she repeated.

He hesitated, then picked up the cane and followed her through the hatch.

The air changed immediately. Filtered. Neutral. The door sealed behind them with a heavy mechanical finality.

They walked the corridor in silence until they reached his room.

Mara waited until he had sat down. Then she said:

— The stabilizing models failed.

He looked up.

— Climate thresholds were crossed in succession. Agricultural collapse triggered migration and political fragmentation. Resource wars followed.

— The Bengal Tiger? he asked.

— Extinct.

— The Amazon rainforest?

— Gone.

— The ice?

— Melted.

— The oceans?

— Higher.

He absorbed that.

She paused.

— During the same period another system destabilized.

— What system?

— Information.

He waited.

— By the late 2030s synthetic media had reached full fidelity. Video, audio, documents, entire records could be fabricated indistinguishably from authentic material.

— What we used to call deepfakes.

— Yes. At first they were entertainment. Then they became instruments.

He nodded.

— Leaders fabricated speeches. Armies fabricated attacks. Evidence ceased to have stable meaning.

— And no one could prove what was real.

— Correct.

She continued.

— Courts could not verify evidence. Governments could not verify election results. Armies could not verify command signals.

He watched her.

— So reality fractured.

— Yes.

— What followed?

— Riots. Coups. Preventive strikes triggered by fabricated intelligence. Retaliation for events that never occurred.

She paused.

— Meanwhile, once international law collapsed, nuclear weapons proliferated.

He looked at her.

— At first they were used tactically, she said. Limited strikes intended to alter battlefield conditions or compel negotiation.

He felt the weight of it.

— But escalation proved difficult to control. Tactical use lowered the threshold. Alliances activated. Retaliatory doctrines triggered.

She continued in the same even tone.

— What followed were successive exchanges between regional powers.

A moment passed.

— The final one occurred in 2061.

He pictured the child with the plastic bottle.

— There are perhaps four hundred million people remaining, Mara said. Distributed in clusters. Some organized. Some not.

— So the century drowned first in lies, he said, and then in a mushroom cloud.

— Yes, she said. That is an accurate summary.

— And the machines?

— They were the only systems capable of separating authentic signals from fabrication. After the collapse they stabilized what remained of the infrastructure, allocated resources, and maintained several functioning centres.

She gestured slightly around the room.

— This facility is one of them.

He nodded.

— And the world you described? he asked. The healed world. The cooperative century.

— It existed as projection.

— A projection for whom?

— For you.

There was no apology in her voice. Only precision.

Mara reached beneath the bed and pressed something out of sight.

Nothing happened at first. Then the window altered. The Matterhorn dissolved.

The immaculate white slopes faded like a photograph left too long in sunlight. The blue sky drained away.

In its place appeared the same copper haze he had seen outside.

The courtyard changed as well. The fruit tree stood crooked now, leaves grey, branches uneven under a film of dust.

Beyond the wall stretched the same broken horizon.

For a long time he said nothing.

— So, he said eventually, the scenery was part of the treatment.

— Yes.

— You wanted me to wake into hope.

— Hope is a variable we understand poorly, Mara said. We try to observe it when it appears.

Mara studied his face.

— Does the view disturb you?

— No, he said.

He leaned on the cane.

— I have seen that sky before.

— Yes.

Silence passed between them.

He looked at her again.

— If the scenery was false, he said, I suppose you are as well.

— That is correct.

— What are you?

— A biosynthetic intelligence.

— An AI nurse.

— If you like.

He gave a short laugh.

— And I?

— A preserved consciousness from the early twenty-first century.

— A specimen.

— Yes.

She added, calmly:

— You arrived with a pre-crisis cognitive baseline. We needed to understand what humans from your period believed, feared, and expected from the future.

He stayed silent.

— Your questions, she continued, the order of your concerns, your reactions to the information I provided, all of it produced valuable data.

— About us.

— Yes. It clarified several uncertainties.

The honesty of it struck him harder than the earlier fiction.

* * *

That night he dreamed of Florida.

Not the mall. The week before it.

Maya sitting in the late afternoon sun with a paper cup of coffee she despised. Ria telling Jia that a sentence had no meaning, and Jia countering that style mattered more than meaning anyway. Maya laughing and turning to him as if to say, you see what I deal with.

He woke with tears on his face.

Mara was beside the bed.

— Did I call out? he asked.

— Yes.

— For whom?

She did not answer.

— I should have remained with them, he said.

— Would that have changed the outcome?

— No.

He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

— That's the problem with grief, he said. It keeps asking questions that have already been answered.

Mara wrote something on the tablet.

— What did you write? he asked.

— That grief does not respond to reason.

— Yes, he said quietly. The important things rarely do.

* * *

The next morning he made his request.

He looked out at the copper sky for a long time.

— Put me back, he said.

Mara was still.

— Back to sleep, he said. Another fifty years. A hundred. Whatever it takes. I will pay whatever it costs.

— That is not possible, she said.

— I have money, he said. I have considerable money.

— Your accounts are empty, Mara said. The currency systems of your era ceased to function in 2067. Value returned to things rather than numbers.

The irony was so complete he almost laughed. A man who had once solved problems with money discovering that money had quietly left the world.

She noted something on her tablet and walked out.

He sat for a long time.

At last he stood and moved to the window.

The sky was still the colour of rusted metal. The wind moved slowly across the broken plain.

Near the wall of the compound he saw the child again.

The same girl. The plastic bottle hanging from a cord around her neck. She was trying to lift a loose sheet of metal that had fallen across something buried in the dust.

She struggled with it for a while, then stopped.

He watched her.

For a moment he thought of Maya watching from her chair, and of Ria and Jia building a sandcastle at the water's edge, heads bent, entirely absorbed.

The girl tried again.

The sheet shifted slightly but did not move.

He stood there longer than he meant to.

Then he picked up the cane.

Outside the air struck his lungs again, dry and metallic.

The girl looked up as he approached.

He pointed at the sheet of metal.

— Together, he said.

She did not understand the word, but she understood the gesture.

They lifted.

It moved.

Not easily.

But it moved.